Part 1: Theory

**BETWEEN MENTAL AND MATERIAL: LOOKING FOR THE ORIGINS OF RELIGION IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL**

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**ABSTRACT**

Various definitions of religion stress the supernatural, the transcendent, or the holy as the main characteristic of religion from which it is possible to distinguish religion from non-religion. This is useful when working with texts, and mirrors the source-material from which the definitions were made. Yet, when applying these definitions to (prehistoric) material culture, it becomes clear that they are only of use in relation to the material they were made on – texts – and that they cannot help us in identifying religion in archaeological material. Yet, as Pascal Boyer has pointed out, religion is not a monolith but made up of various components. Some of these have a biological origin and some have a cultural origin (in the Palaeolithic, the Neolithic, the Bronze Age, or later). Some of the components are mental, some of them are material. The question is how many of these elements it takes to make up religion.
WHAT IS A GOD?
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ABSTRACT
The classificatory and/or phenomenological term "god" is used very frequently, but very rarely discussed. In definitions of religion the term is studiously avoided in favor of far more vague beings(?) such as transemipirical powers if the reference to any beings at all is not completely left out. Obviously "gods" are something more than transemipirical powers, and not necessary in a religion. But what is a god? What do we actually refer to, when we use the term? The paper represents a step towards a hopefully more nuanced understanding of the concept.

MATERIAL CULTURE AS AN ESSENTIAL COGNITIVE STIMULUS
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ABSTRACT
One of the greatest obstacles facing researchers dealing with religion is the failure to confront the difficulties ordinary humans have in mastering abstract thought. Although abandoning the concept of belief and turning to discourse may be the only reliable means of understanding religion, this actually heightens the importance of abstract thought as an essential feature of the discourse. For academics this is not a serious problem, but actually increases the challenge of understanding religion as a human phenomenon, since it imposes a discursive character on religion whereas ordinary humans are not ordinarily capable of mastering such discourse – and yet religion is assumed to be a human universal like language.

I thus propose to take the opposite approach – starting with material visual stimulus and suggesting that this is the key to understanding the origins
of abstract thought, and indeed arguing that the physical paraphernalia associated with religion plays a far greater role than is generally allowed in studying religion as a discourse phenomenon. Physical objects played a crucial role in influencing the earliest stages of human thought, but I argue that this continues up to the present.

In fact, architecture offers one example of a phenomenon which has a strong impact on the human mind and human behaviour, and was associated almost exclusively with religious traditions until quite recently. Temples, churches and mosques dominated urban and rural landscapes before the appearance of banks, department stores, etc. The decline of religion in the West can thus be traced on the urban skyline, in the same fashion that the dominance of religion in Ancient Mesopotamia was reflected in the urban skyline, dominated by the ziqqurets.

Drawing on such examples, I propose to approach not only the origins of abstract thought, but also the relevance of material culture to the very understanding of culture (aside from religion).

**BUILT POWER – FOSSILIZED AUTHORITY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Architecture and spacial planning have been (and still are) amongst the most powerful instruments to represent, or, quite the contrary, to hide the ruling order in a given community. Keeping the traditions or daring the new was one of the critical questions that those in power had (and have) to reflect carefully when designing the public space – and especially when designing places of worship. Keeping up the tradition was the basic principle of the corporate identity in the Ancient Near Eastern societies, influenced strongly by religious customs. Albeit – situations emerged (and still emerge) when adhering to the tradition would hinder those striving for power to realize and achieve their political aims.

My reflections concerning “Religion and Material Culture” will be dealing with a corresponding situation, where those striving for – or already disposing of power served the gods (as well as their own interests) by building places of worship that transgressed all rules of the local building traditions.

My theoretical framework will be based and closely connected to the discourses occurring in the fields of sociology, history and science of religion,
politics of power and in those studies dealing with nonverbal communication via material remains.

**Part 2: Stone Age**

**PREHISTORIC ART AND RELIGION**

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**ABSTRACT**

Prehistoric art is providing an immense documentation about prehistoric beliefs and cult practices. In the course of 50 thousand years paintings and engravings on rock surfaces served to prepare the next generation to initiation. They describe myths and beliefs which were the intellectual patrimony of human society, showing details on the worship of mythic ancestors. They display the images of supernatural beings and reveal the cult role of rock art sacred sites and the processes of initiation. Recent studies indicate that in different areas of the world and in different periods rock art had the role of "holy books" of pre-literate societies.

**MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: STEPS TOWARD A RITUALIZED CORPORATE IDENTITY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Since Robert Braidwood's famous phrase "culture was not ready", mental, religious and social factors have often been emphasised as necessary preconditions for the adoption of farming. Brian Hayden developing Barbara Benders thesis of prestige seeking individuals concluded that feasts caused the production of food. In my paper, I will give a brief review of the archaeological
data on which these theories are based and of new discoveries. According to these new data, it will be possible to trace major social changes. In fact, with the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A standardised symbols appear and in the Levant, elaborate burial rites point to the intensified veneration of the dead. Huge communal buildings, like the tower of Jericho or the megalithic site of Göbekli Tepe, were built. Communal labour investigations suggest the emergence of at least a temporal leadership. It seems as if the archaeological data corroborated Hayden’s theory.

However, based on theoretical and ethnological considerations, I will argue that although there is a correlation of increased feasting and incipient cultivation, it is not a direct causal relation, but feasting is rather used as a means to conceal incipient inequalities and hierarchies.

A comparison of 43 recent hunter-gatherer groups shows that one of the most difficult thresholds to cross for a successful adoption of farming is the social norm of sharing or generalized reciprocity. The accumulation of wealth and power is hardly possible within mobile hunter-gatherer communities. Their social and spatial flexibility hinders prestige seeking agents to exert power, but the huger the group becomes, the more difficult it will be to share with everybody. With an increased commitment to one place mechanisms had to be searched for the regulation of conflicts and the cohesion of a group. Sedentism thus caused major social and moral conflicts.

In this socio-ideological frame, feasts become of crucial importance. During feasts it is pretended that everybody is equal, sharing food with each other. Harmony and equality are publicly displayed features. Yet, it is obvious that feasts can convert into the contrary. Concealed hierarchies – although not necessarily visible in the material record – structure the meetings and sometimes fixed rules or rituals reign over loose norms. Feasts can be exclusive, competitive and can even convert into an overt demonstration of power.

As a hypothesis I will, therefore, suggest that according to the archaeological material and theoretical considerations neither a mental, nor a religious revolution triggered the transition to farming. The decline of sharing and the ensuing social conflicts caused by a reduction of mobility, demanded new social structures. By feasting it became possible to introduce new norms and hierarchies; whether these data also reflect incipient religious practices remains a question to debate.

DEATH, DESTRUCTION, AND FEASTING AT EARLY NEOLITHIC SHKARAT MSAIED; SOUTHERN JORDAN
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ABSTRACT
Since 1999 a Danish expedition has excavated the early Neolithic site of Shkarat Msaied, Southern Jordan. Among the finds recovered from the site are the skeletal remains of at least fifteen human individuals, carefully sorted and in different states of decay at the time of disposal. In at least one case, the skull has been deliberately removed from the body. Associated with some of this human skeletal material, systematically selected remains of domesticated ovis/capra were recovered. Finally, there are findings, which indicate the deliberate destruction of housing units. In the present contribution it is attempted to investigate these finds in combination as an indexical field suggestive of (among other things) framed action, associated with major life crises in the Neolithic community, which once inhabited this place. It is argued that, far from being isolated within a discrete sphere of the ‘religious’, such practices helped structuring the Neolithic inhabitants’ orientation, both in the broader taskscape they engaged in, and in the landscape they inhabited through this engagement. This does not merely call for a continued search for archaeological criteria to identify the sacred, but for a reconsideration of traditional dichotomies in archaeology such as sacred/profane and ritual/utilitarian.

THE USE OF FRAGMENTATION IN FORMING OF CULT AND RITUALS IN THE DANISH NEOLITHIC FUNNEL BEAKER CULTURE
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ABSTRACT
It is a bit ironic that we for so many years, have tried to reassemble the fragmented objects from the Neolithic in order to understand them, when recent studies more and more convince us that the fragmentation is one of the key elements in understanding them and the ideology of the Neolithic society.

The ideology of the Neolithic, that involves rituals where humans, oxes, quernstones, axes, pottery are deliberately fragmented and “sown” in different places in order to create or consolidate a common bound - is difficult to fully
understand, some of the questions that arises are, what the fragmentation symbolizes and why some objects are fragmented and others are not.

In this lecture we will try to deal with the concept of fragmentation as an important part of a kind of “primary metaphor” of agriculture and the circle of life, and the way fragmentation has been used to create ties between people and different spheres.

Part 3: Bronze Age

THE RELIGIOUS BIOGRAPHY OF THINGS
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ABSTRACT
As researcher our job is to interpret, understand and preserve the cultural heritage. It is not our duty to qualify and disqualify different kinds of cultural expressions, but on the contrary we have to investigate all the available sources as a part of the cultural context. To exemplify this I use the cylinder seal material from Anatolia to point out the religious or ritual sequences on this specific material from second mill BC. It expresses a central type of the theology, known from the Hebrew Bible, several ritual texts, and inscriptions from the Near Eastern area. The artefact and the textual evidence are woven together to one unit. The artefact, the seal, contents information about the past - like a religious biography.

RELIGION, PICTORIALITY AND MATERIALITY: A HEBREW BIBLE PERSPECTIVE
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ABSTRACT
Religion combines ideas and practices. In its practices, religion materializes its ideas. If these materializations exist in or produce significant lifeless or dead matter, archaeology has a chance to uncover a way into this religion. Such matter is to be taken as a serious witness, in dialogue with textual evidence, a religion might have produced or caused, as the latter may be a more beaten track into the invisible of a religion.

Pictures bridge the invisibility of a religion and the materiality, as pictures share the focus on content with texts and image carriers have their lasting nature as dead/lifeless matter in common with material evidence of a religion.

This paper briefly addresses how the First Testament can be employed as ways into the religions it deals with and their materiality. Secondly, it employs artefacts and images as witness of the religions in the First Testament. Thirdly, it will discuss aniconism and make a case for how imageless images communicate religion.

THE SHAPE OF DIVINE POWERS IN NORDIC BRONZE AGE MYTHOLOGY
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ABSTRACT
Via an analysis of the images on Danish late Bronze Age objects, it seems possible to set up a sequence concerning the myth of the daily and nightly voyage of the sun. In this mythological narrative which can be read on bronze objects, the divine Sun is accompanied by zoomorphic helpers such as the fish, the horse and the snake. Apart from these manifestations or helpers of the Sun, the ship plaid an important role as conveyor of the Sun. This cyclical-mythological system seems to work well without the involvement of anthropomorphic gods. On the other hand, in some cases the Sun seems to be represented in the shape of a human being.

The presence or non-presence of personified deities in the Nordic Bronze Age has been widely discussed. However, this ‘either-or’ discussion may seem meaningless. In fact, the divine powers or gods can in many religions take a lot of shapes such as human form, animal form or mixed shapes. What particularly characterizes a god is this mystical ability of changing appearance. It is argued that the powerful Sun God first and foremost appeared as the very Sun, but it could assume a number of different shapes, at times being anthropomorified, at times manifest itself as for instance the Sun Horse. The Sun could both have the
horse as a divine helper and be the horse. On a couple of razors the imagery seems to show the transformations of the Sun God. Also the souls of the dead could have been actors in the mythological world of the Bronze Age. Even though transcendental beings could take human shape it does not seem possible on bronzes to find pictorial evidence of a parnassus of gods in human form, as we know them for instance from Medieval written sources on Viking Age mythology.

KIVIG RE-VISITED: FAME AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE
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ABSTRACT
The Early Bronze Age Kivig (Kivik) find from Skåne is famous for its long research history (since 1748) but in particular for the rock-carving images on the inner side of the three metres long stone cist covered by a huge cairn with a diameter of 75 metres. Artefacts date the find firmly to the decades around 1300 BC. The images present a carefully composed program encompassing cosmological knowledge, beliefs, social intelligence and political action, including links with the Mediterranean (cf. K. Randsborg, Kivik, ..., Acta Archaeologica 64:1, 1993). The find is discussed anew in light of recent literature on rock-carvings, religion, and a new understanding of the Bronze Age on the move from fancy to basics.

AT THE SCENE OF COSMOLOGY CONSTRUCTION: THE RELIGIOUS EFFECTS OF BARROW BUILDING IN THE NORDIC BRONZE AGE
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ABSTRACT
Monumental burial architecture often enters the archaeological discourse on prehistoric religion as a significant source to ritual practices and with an assumption of an architectural manifestation of cosmological references. However, besides this role as a reflection of various aspects of past religions the monuments may also be seen as playing a more active, generative role in the formation of complex or cognitively costly forms of religion.

The building of the burial monuments generally constituted an extraordinary but still relatively regularly repeated event with particular social and material properties. It involved the assembly of a large group of people in a collective and cooperative effort focused on a materially tangible constructional task, often involving strongly routinized, ritual-like behaviour and performed on a scene where expressions of apprehensions of afterlife were natural. These situational properties entailed an incentive towards an articulation, comparison, alignment, linking and elaboration of ideological and cosmological apprehensions.

The South Scandinavian Early Bronze Age barrows of the early 2nd Millenium BC represent an example of a very marked intensification in monumental construction, which concurs temporally with other indications of a growing complexity in mythology and ritual practices. Recent excavations of barrows provide a detailed insight into the symbols, plans and organisations of the barrow event, which allows the exploration of the potential role of the monument construction in the expansion of religious ideas, organisation and practices.

Part 4: Roman Age

MATTER AND MEANING IN THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS
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ABSTRACT
Literary scholarship on the Dead Sea scroll has always been influenced by the fact that the scrolls were found near Khirbet Qumran; and vice versa, archaeologists’ preference for the idea of Qumran as the residence of a religious, “monastic” community is informed by the contents of the texts. However, the connection between the Dead Sea literature and the material remains at Qumran
is not beyond dispute, and the linkage of textual and archaeological arguments seems methodologically questionable. The theme of the conference is taken as an invitation to consider instead if and how material culture *approaches* can enrich interpretations of the Dead Sea literature; will it change our perception of the texts, their meaning and religious significance, if we analyse them as material artefacts? Ultimately, a positive response to this question may suggest new ways to approach the possible connection between the scrolls and the site of Qumran.

**Part 5: Modern Age**

**STOLPERSTEINE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF PAST AND NATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

The subject of my lecture is the Stolpersteine (Stumbling Stones), a project beginning in 1992 by Cologne artist Günther Demnig, which he himself calls an art project. The stone itself is a rectangular 10 x 10 cm brass-plated cobblestone, and is installed in the sidewalks in front of houses of those sent of to the concentration camps in replacing one or more of the common and often smaller granite cobblestones.

Being Holocaust memorial stones they are placed in the realm of material cultural memory. Although stones have been used throughout Western culture, and in the realm of the profane as well as the sacred, the lines of demarcation between the two spheres have always been clear. Grave stones and churches, houses and pavements are two sets of spheres rarely mixed geographically and certainly not ritually – certain activities are bound for the former, not for the latter and vice versa. The Stolpersteine do not seem to respect these traditional boarders between religion and politics, and seem to provoke the traditional doctrine of respect for the dead, being installed in the pavement having pedestrians walking and stumbling upon the victims of genocide.

I will address the following questions in my lecture: The Stolpersteine are stones whose materiality seem to be both profane as well as sacred, as they are
installed in public space, and at the same time – albeit provokingly – yields for some kind of rituality. However, this cannot be any kind of sacred or traditional rituality. But what is – if any – a profane rituality?