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Navigating Dichotomies and Labels: Identifying and Interpreting Ritual Artefacts in Prehistory*

Abstract: Ritual artefacts are reported in most archaeological excavations from the Epipalaeolithic period of the Levant onwards. However, the topic of ritual remains a contentious issue in archaeology, especially regarding what it means for an artefact to be labelled as “ritual.” On the one hand, there is a pervasive sense that there is a shared, largely implicit, idea of what is expected from such artefacts. On the other hand, there is extensive archaeological theory devoted to ritual practices, which often falls short when applied to the archaeological record. The aim of this paper, which uses examples from the Levantine Chalcolithic period, is to bridge this divide by applying the concept of ritual technology, which offers tangible ways of discussing ritual behaviour in relation to the material record it leaves behind, without drawing a clear line between the concepts of ritual and utilitarian in the sense found in contemporary cultures.

Keywords: ritual, prehistory, archaeological theory, ritual technology, Levant

Introduction

Ritual artefacts, or, more precisely, artefacts interpreted as having been used in ritual practices, are reported in most archaeological excavations from the Epipalaeolithic period of the Levant onwards. It is a common jest among archaeologists – and, as such, a clear exaggeration – that when someone does not know the function of a particular artefact, they label it as ritual. However, even sceptics would likely agree that people of the past did not necessarily practice ritual behaviour and that archaeologists do not typically find remains of such behaviours.

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What makes ritual a contentious topic in archaeology is that such labels are often applied without much theoretical consideration regarding what “ritual” actually means and, especially, how such a notion is attached to a particular artefact. On the one hand, there is a pervasive sense that there is a common, mostly implicit idea of what such artefacts are expected to look like. On the other hand, there is also a vast body of archaeological theory devoted to ritual practices.

It can be argued that there are two opposing, yet unarticulated, approaches to the subject of ritual artefacts in prehistoric archaeology. The older of the two, arguably as old as the discipline itself, can be described as a practice of designating objects lacking a clear practical function as ritual or ceremonial artefacts (Aldenderfer 2012, 28). Typically, these are objects that stand out: they may be relatively scarce, require more effort to produce, have a geographically distant origin, etc. What is crucial, this approach offers little or no explanation for why they are designated as such: the classification is often assumed without question. This is not to say archaeologists lack understanding of the reasoning; rather, the designations are intuitively assumed based on a shared cultural context. Thus, artefacts are designated as ritual because they somehow resemble ritual artefacts in contemporary contexts.

The second approach devotes extensive attention to understanding the ritual from the perspective of social theory, often related to theoretical approaches to religion, but perceived as more amenable to archaeological knowledge due to its material aspects (Rowan 2012, 1). More accurately, it is not a single approach, but rather multiple approaches (e.g., Bradley 2005; Bradley and Nimura 2013; Brück 1999; Fogelin 2007; Insoll 2004; Renfrew 1985, 1994). However, their commonality lies in the extensive scrutiny of what ritual practice and behaviour are and whether they can be universally defined, and how they are interpreted from material remains, against a vast body of social theory.

This paper argues that while the first approach fails to explicate its interpretative reasoning, the second overcompensates by devoting excessive attention to various theoretical concepts and discussions pertaining to ritual and its connection to religion, down to details often unattainable in the prehistoric context, rendering it challenging to apply these discussions to the interpretation of archaeological material in any meaningful way. The aim of the present paper is to offer an alternative approach to understanding ritual artefacts in their archaeological contexts by focusing on their production and use – essentially the practices that define and enforce their ritual quality.

Ritual and Archaeology

The difficulty of defining a ritual artefact stems from the difficulty of defining the concept of ritual in the first place. Although there is doubt that scholars

will ever reach an agreement on the definition of ritual (Bell 2007, 283), it is also true for ritual what Rappaport (1999, 23) states about religion: although the term *ritual* is not easily defined, the “vagueness is not vacuity, and we know well enough what people mean by the term to get on with things.” However, once we are tasked with identifying material remains of rituals, this vagueness becomes a liability, and explicating at least a working definition becomes a necessity.

The Terms Ritual, Religion, Magic

Ritual, religion, and magic, although defined in various ways, are often hard to clearly distinguish and are frequently described in relation to each other – it is, for instance, common to talk about religious and/or magical rituals (Durkheim 1995; Malinowski 1948; Tambiah 1990). Therefore, for any artefact deemed to be ritual, the question arises: What was the meaning and purpose of the ritual? Was it religious? Was it magical? Are these different, and so on? Thus, alongside exploring what the term ritual means, we must include religion and magic. It is noteworthy that the scholarly literature on both religion and magic is vastly more extensive than that on ritual, and what follows is a brief overview.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ritual as “a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order.” Ritual is typically viewed as a practice (Segal 2010, 378). Much scholarly attention has been devoted to its meaning and function, with rituals explained as the practice or expression of belief, as a way to alleviate fear and guilt, reconcile contradictions, and so on (Segal 2010, 388–393). If we consider that ritual has been understood as a religious practice, or a performative aspect – a manifestation of religion – it is hardly surprising that less theoretical effort has been devoted to it and that it is frequently defined in relation to religion. Functionalist definitions of ritual are flawed in the same way as functionalist explanations of religion. Functionalism essentially argues that rituals serve a social purpose that performers are usually unaware of (Bell 1997, 28–29). Explanations of ritual provided by people who practice it are, in the view of functionalism, largely irrelevant; however, it remains unclear what motivates participants to perform the rituals that fulfil a functionalist purpose they are supposedly ignorant of (Hamilton 2001, 115–117). Just as the general definitions of religion are lacking in post-modern theory, so are the general definitions of ritual.

It is essential to note that material remains of ritual practices are the primary resource for studying prehistoric ritual behaviour. While our ability to fathom concepts of prehistoric religions is very limited, any attempt to do so inevitably relies on the material evidence of religious rituals. Ultimately, the significance of ritual for understanding ancient societies necessitates a definition that sets the framework for future discussions of the concept in terms of material remains.

Rappaport's definition, which states that ritual is "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers" (Rappaport 1999, 24), is adopted here, which warrants some clarification of its assumptions. The "more or less invariant sequence of formal acts and utterances" part acknowledges that there is both a degree of conservatism and potential for agency in how ritual is performed. Rituals are learned practices, and even with the establishment of a new religion and practices, the performative aspect draws on existing practices, meaning that whoever is performing the ritual did not invent the whole sequence on their own, all at once.

Defining religion is not an easy task, and reviewing the scientific literature on the subject is beyond the scope of this paper. Different definitions from the late 19th and early 20th centuries are found in the early evolutionism of Tylor (1913) and Frazer (2009), as well as in the strong functionalist perspective of Durkheim (1995), which was subsequently developed by Malinowski (1948) and Radcliffe-Brown (1952). Radcliffe-Brown begins his discussion on religions by describing them as "bodies of erroneous belief and illusory practices" (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, 153). Durkheim and the functionalists explain religion through its function in society. Alternatively, attempts have been made to qualify religion by what it is. Tylor's definition of religion as a belief in supernatural beings (Tylor 1913, 424–425) both illustrates this line of thought and highlights its main problem: it is, if not impossible, then very difficult to devise a definition that would include all world religions. Consequently, a trend emerged, best exemplified by Horton (1960, 211), to specify the nature of religion as generally as possible and to emphasise the relationship believers have with religion, thus defining it as an extension of social relationships beyond the borders of purely human society, where humans play a subordinate role.

Both phenomenological (e.g., Eliade 1959; Westphal 2010) and hermeneutical approaches (e.g., Geertz 1973) to the anthropology of religion rely on descriptive methods. Geertz (1973: 87–125) considered religion a cultural system built of meaning embodied in symbols. What he saw as problems with most functionalist explanations is that they skip a step in the inquiry aiming to understand culture-specific symbols (Geertz 1973, 125). In other words, he believed that social functions are culture-specific and symbolic.

Geertz appears to have foreseen the critique that followed, which was mainly directed at the work of Eliade and other great synthesisers of religion, deemed unsustainable in light of complex cultural data (Alles 2010, 45). Critiques were followed by detailed anthropological studies of religion, focusing on specific geographical, temporal, and cultural contexts, alongside diverse modes of critiques, including post-modern, post-structural, post-colonial, and feminist ones. Crucial for the development of the latter were the works of Derrida and Foucault (Alles 2010, 46–47), and while neither one of them dwells specifically on reli-

gion, their approaches have a broad application in the study of religion. However, neither post-modern, post-structural, post-colonial, nor feminist studies aspire to provide a definition of religion, reflecting a general view that diverse cultures have varying worldviews, thereby preventing a definition of religion applicable to all (Shaw 2013, 1). This attitude is echoed in the post-processual reluctance to create similar definitions in archaeology in regard to both religion and ritual.

The caution against committing to a general, all-encompassing definition of religion and ritual is justified, as understanding the nature and significance of any specific religion is only possible after examining specific traits of the culture where it was practised. However, some guidelines need to be established, and terms should be clearly defined in order to effectively tackle the subject. To that end, we revisit the definition of religion offered by Horton (1960, 211): "... religion can be looked upon as an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society." Rappaport (1999, 23) also refrained from making broad definitions of religion, beyond stating that it "...denotes the domain of the Holy, the constituents of which include the sacred, the numinous, the occult, the divine, and also ritual, the form of action in which those constituents are generated." Rappaport's definition of religion seems somewhat deterministic in relation to the existence of gods or other spiritual beings. It is advisable to remember that before defining religion, he acknowledged the problems encountered in such endeavour and stated that the "concept of religion is irreducibly vague, but vagueness is not vacuity, and we know well enough what people mean by the term to get on with things" (Rappaport 1999, 23). What makes Rappaport's definition convenient is that it links religion with ritual, emphasising religious and ritual practice, instead of abstract concepts and materially intangible beliefs.

Although magic is frequently defined in relation to religion, this relationship varies greatly depending on the author. Durkheim (1995, 34, 40–42) finds magic to be hostile to religion and vice versa, describing it as a form of "professional profaning of sacred things." Tylor (1913) never explicitly discussed the dichotomy between religion and magic, but it is notable that the two are discussed in different chapters and even in different volumes of his major work, *Primitive Culture*, which implies they are separate phenomena (Tambiah 1990, 45). Both Tylor (1913, 113) and Frazer (2009) consider magic a trait of cultures on the lower end of the social evolutionary scale. Frazer (2009, 127–128) further explains that the conflict between religion and magic, along with the resentment priests often felt towards magicians, stems from the fact that religion is devoted to worshipping higher powers and hoping for prayers to be answered, while magic is proactive and focuses on practical techniques for achieving specific goals.

Ideas unconventional for the early 20th century can be found in the works of philosopher Lévy-Bruhl (in Tambiah 1990, 84–87), whose views were somewhat revolutionary and anticipated much more recent developments in social sciences. Essentially, he admits that different societies can, and often do, have an internal logic, a culturally specific way of thinking, and cognitive categories so different from those in modern Western societies that understanding them, if possible, prevents us from applying our social categories directly to other societies. Regarding religion and magic, and the distinction between the two, this means that any attempt to strictly define these concepts and delineate between them in universal terms would take us further away from understanding them within any society.

A problem for those who attempt to define religion and magic as separate entities is that both are anthropological concepts essentially non-existent among the societies they study. Often, what anthropologists deem as magic is, in the eyes of those who perform it, just mundane techniques applied in everyday life – they believe in the efficiency of the method and use it to achieve a goal, without considering it esoteric or symbolical in any way (Hamilton 2001, 40). Douglas (1984, 59–60) strongly criticised attempts to draw a sharp distinction between religion and magic. She regards the definition of magic as a practical means of achieving goals unrelated to religion as false and posits that it has inhibited even the more meaningful studies of religion that incorporate all its facets, including magic. Conversely, Douglas (1984, 73) describes magic as far from purposeless, suggesting it is instrumental in defining and engaging with the world. As for Horton's definition of religion, magic would clearly be classified as a religious practice, since it goes beyond mere human interaction.

The purpose of questioning the division between religion and magic is not to suggest that beliefs and ritual practices are not varied, but that the differences do not support splitting these practices into two distinct groups. Though it might seem counterintuitive, acknowledging that they are difficult to tell apart and not insisting on defining their differences allows more room for interpreting culturally specific ritual practices. The definitions of both ritual and religion provided above are intentionally vague: they provide a framework for the topic of discussion without imposing meanings that are context-specific and not universally accepted. Insisting on delineating the difference between religion and magic, or religious and magic rituals, would be counterproductive.

There is no doubt that some rituals are public, while others are private; some are organised according to a calendar, while others are spontaneous; some are conducted by a religious figure, while others are not. The first option in each of these pairs is often attributed to religious ritual by default; the second is typically attributed to magic, but that is not necessarily the case. Is it not a prayer, one of the most fundamental and revered Christian acts (Douglas 1984, 62), uttered

also by practitioners of magic? It seems that despite all attempts to consider manipulative rituals as magic and rituals of devotion as religious, such distinctions fail upon closer examination. Rappaport (1999, 117) believed that magic underpinned the occult power of words uttered in rituals and was their driving force in general (Rappaport 1999, 149, 368). Returning to Lévy-Bruhl, defining religion and magic as separate, yet universally applicable categories, does not inform us in any way about how a particular practice was perceived and why it was significant in a particular society. As a matter of fact, no ritual seems to be purely disinterested or manipulative (Bell 1997, 109).

Ritual in Archaeological Theory and Context

Discussions on ritual have become more common in theoretical archaeology in recent decades, primarily through the work of Insoll (2004, 2011, and references therein), but also in various other contexts, including the Chalcolithic Levant (Bradley 2005; Brück 1999; Gilead 2002; Gošić and Gilead 2015b; Kuijt 2000; Renfrew 1985; Walker 2001). While there are studies of prehistoric religion (Amiran 1981; Mirocshedji 1993), it is advised to focus archaeological inquiry on ritual practices instead of abstract beliefs (Kuzmanović 2020). The following section, therefore, considers the material context and the archaeological correlates of the concepts discussed above.

Although V. Gordon Childe did not define the meaning of the term ritual or discuss its application in archaeology, he regarded the material remains of deeds, i.e., rituals, as the only access to past spiritual experiences, such as sacrifice, mortuary practice, temple activity, and so on (Childe 1944, 78). In his article defining “New Archaeology,” Binford (1962, 218–219) identified religion as a component of the social system through ideology; he regarded it as epiphenomenal. An in-depth survey of Binford’s work shows that the topic of religion and ritual was, in practice, often overlooked (Insoll 2004, 49). With the rise of the New Archaeology, the functionalist approach to ritual became prominent. For example, Flannery and Marcus (in Hodder and Hutson 2003, 25) explain Zapotec rituals and cosmology as a way of regulating the dynamic between humans and nature. In his *Analytical Archaeology*, Clark (1978, 101–110) regards religion as a subsystem of the overall socio-cultural system of human behaviour, which is intelligible through archaeology and functions as a constraint of individual action in most societies. The study of religion and cults received increased attention among cognitive processualists. The in-depth analysis of prehistoric cults was initiated by Renfrew (1985), who simply defined cult as a religious ritual (Renfrew 1985, 15), emphasising the archaeological context as crucial for identifying ritual artefacts. He created a list of archaeological indicators of religious ritual, referring to a wide range of features, including architec-

ture, burials, small finds, different installations, and so on (Renfrew 1985, 19–20; 1994, 51). Although Renfrew's processual approach has been criticised for assuming universal human experience across time and space (Insoll 2004, 95), his work remains of immense importance for the study of ritual in prehistory, as it is the first and still the most comprehensive attempt to develop methods for identifying religious contexts in archaeology.

The central problem of the functionalist approach in archaeological studies of ritual is that it fails to explain how or why certain rituals came into existence, instead only focusing on the function they have within an existing society. After the peak of New Archaeology, the decades that followed were characterised by a lack of interest in the overall perspective of religion and ritual (or, in fact, of other social phenomena), with the obvious exception of Renfrew. It is noticeable that the term "religion" was being avoided, while "ritual" and "ritual practice" became more common. Although Insoll (2004, 79–80, 83) criticises this approach, it is desirable in archaeology to discuss ritual and ritual behaviour, as it is the practice of them that leaves material remains. Moreover, the term "religion" might evoke unwarranted comparisons to major contemporary or historical world religions, or to historical Near Eastern religions in the case of the Chalcolithic Levant (Elliott 1977). As Brück (1999, 325) noted, the most significant contribution of post-processual archaeology to the study of ritual is its emphasis on the symbolic aspect of humans over the practical. It probably signifies the most significant difference between the processual and post-processual approaches to the study of ritual. While the former focuses on functional benefits and practical reasons for why practices were performed (from a rather pragmatic, common-sense point of view), the latter acknowledges that functionality or practicality are not always the main driving forces behind every human endeavour. Hodder (1992, 13, 150) introduced Greetz's concept of "thick description" into contextual archaeology to better understand the symbolism of objects by analysing them within their various contexts. This approach is not limited to the study of ritual, but it is particularly beneficial for it, as interpreting artefacts as ritual when no other explanation exists is not uncommon in archaeology (Fogelin 2007, 59), and thick descriptions prevent unjustified or unexplained attribution to ritual contexts.

The definition of ritual behaviour offered by Rappaport, as mentioned earlier, appears to be the most applicable; however, the question remains about how such a practice can be discerned from archaeological remains and, more specifically, how to distinguish it from activities that are not of ritual significance. Therefore, contextual analysis requires us to recognise a ritual context as opposed to a secular or profane one. Renfrew's (1985, 19–20) guidelines for identifying and interpreting rituals in archaeological contexts are helpful, such as those relating to iconography, which reflects ritual performances, the wealth of

equipment and offerings, and designated spaces for performing rituals. Once a ritual context is identified, the task of interpreting its meaning, motifs, and procedures should be approached cautiously. Rituals are often classified according to religious practitioners who perform them and the cultic institutions involved, including mortuary ritual, apotropaic ritual, shamanistic rituals, formal rituals related to specialised priests and temples, and so forth (Wallace 1966, 86-88). Going into detail on all of them is beyond the scope here.

*Recognising ritual remains
through the concept of ritual technology*

In Renfrew's approach and in similar divisions, there remains a possibility that several ritual behaviours go unrecognised due to the ritual-secularity bias. One legacy of the post-Enlightenment rationalism of the early 20th century is the understanding of ritual as symbolic, non-practical, and non-functional, which stands in opposition to technology and practical behaviour (Brück 1999, 17). Although in the contemporary world such an understanding of ritual might seem like common sense, it is not a universal one (cf. Puett 2010). Moreover, for someone believing and living in a different reality, something we consider a non-practical ritual might be a technique or practical way of interacting with the supernatural world, which is why Walker (2001) introduced the term "ritual technology." Walker proposed defining ritual as a way by which humans interact with a perceived extra-natural realm. As such, ritual artefacts can be defined as objects produced and utilised in these activities to achieve specific results related to an extra-natural realm. Thus, theoretical concepts, including that of *technological agency*, *chaîne opératoire*, or *technological style*, used in the analysis of other technologies, such as flintknapping, pottery, or textile production, can also help explain ritual technology. Viewing rituals as techniques for reaching a specific result, as in the case of passage rites that ensure a successful transformation of a child into an adult (Garwood 2011, 265), reminds us that ritual is a meaningful behaviour that often leaves material remains. However, their visibility does not necessarily correlate with the social significance of the ritual.

The concept of technological agency (Dobres 2000, 149–163) is used to discuss how technological practice influences prehistoric societies, which in the prehistoric context could involve anything, from flint knapping to ceramics, metalworking, and even textile industries. Although there are obviously physical constraints within which craftsmen must operate, there are also social factors, and it is they that negotiate the physical with the social, in order to develop and practice technology. Technological agency thus captures all that is context-specific in a particular technology and so differentiates it from other similar technologies in other cultural contexts. By deciding whether to follow

an existing technological protocol or not, artisans can change and manipulate technology. The protocol can be described through a *chaîne opératoire*, which emphasises the sequential nature of both the material and social aspects of production (Dobres and Hoffman 1994, 237). Now, if we return to Rappaport's definition of ritual, we see that ritual behaviour entails an inherited protocol, which can be altered but not completely made up by the practitioner. Thus, in addition to technological agency, ritual agency must also be considered. Ritual agency can be simply defined as the actions of agents within the realm of ritual, and the question remains as to how to discern between technologies that are ritual and those that are not. If both technological and ritual practices are ways of interacting with and changing the world, they are not essentially but contextually different, or at the very least, the dividing line between the two is not clear-cut. Furthermore, no practice has a single meaning; multiple interpretations – economic, ritual, technological, and even functional – can all be true at the same time (Gosselain 2011, 251). This does not mean that every activity has essentially the same significance and impact on the social fabric, but that ritual agency should also be understood as a part of past rationality, alongside other ways of interacting with the world. In other words, to understand past rituals, we should start not by assuming they had no practical significance but by viewing them as practices as important as technologies (Gosselain, 2011: 256). This is particularly significant in the archaeological interpretation of ritual artefacts. Walker (2001, 87) noticed that because ritual artefacts are frequently regarded as non-utilitarian, archaeologists tend to conclude that the ritual “use” of artefacts is, by definition, “none.”

Ritual Technologies of the Chalcolithic Southern Levant

The Chalcolithic Levant is known for its ritual diversity, with assemblages of various materials that are agreed upon as having ritual significance (Gilead 2002; Gošić 2025; Ilan and Rowan 2012; Rowan and Ilan 2007). To illustrate the possible use of the term ritual technologies, only two groups of artefacts and related practices will be briefly discussed. The selection, however, is not random: metalworking practices are chosen because they are typically not considered ritual, while painted pebbles exemplify artefacts that are often labelled as ritual due to a lack of any clear utilisation. However, it is crucial to recognise that this is not the first time that the ritual significance of metallurgy or painted pebbles has been proposed. On the contrary, there is consensus about the ritual nature of these artefacts and practices. The aim here, however, is to explore how a practice involved in their production and/or use could be interpreted as ritual technology.

Ritualised Metallurgy

The Chalcolithic metallurgy of the southern Levant has been extensively researched, and many details are known regarding the materials used, techniques practised, and the *chaîne opératoire* of production (Golden 2009b; Goren 2008, 2014; Gošić 2015; Gošić and Gilead 2015a; Levy and Shalev 1989; Shalev 1994; Shalev 1991; Shugar 2003; Tadmor et al. 1995). Although the division between ritual and utilitarian metal artefacts that emerged during the Chalcolithic persisted for decades (Shalev 1991), it has also been argued that all metal artefacts and the metalworking practice held ritual significance (Gošić and Gilead 2015a, 2015b). Metallurgy is obviously a technological practice, but understanding its ritual aspects is more challenging. Nevertheless, when considered in Rappaport's terms, the behaviour itself seems ritualistic: it follows a protocol that cannot be changed on a whim, and the accurate execution of each step is crucial for success. Furthermore, metalworking has a pronounced transformative quality, as stone is turned into metal, a process already described as magical in a prehistoric context (Budd and Taylor 1995), but more elaborately explored in anthropological studies (e.g., Eliade 1978; Herbert 1993; Schmidt 1997, 2009).

At this point, it is crucial to examine the Chalcolithic metal artefacts themselves. The previous division into utilitarian and ritual (prestigious, symbolic – various terms were used without clear explanations, with an emphasis on them being the opposite of utilitarian) failed to tackle several points. First, the two most common metal artefacts recovered from all Chalcolithic sites were standards and maceheads, both regarded as ritual in this division (Bar-Adon 1980). Further on, all the artefact types (standards, maceheads, crown, chisels, axes, awls, vessels, horns) were found in same archaeological contexts: most significantly in a hoard in the Nahal Mishmar (Bar-Adon 1980, 40–102, 116–131; Gal, Shalem, and Smithline 2011; Gopher and Tsuk 1996; Rosenberg et al. 2020), but also in smaller caches (Dothan 1957, 220; Namdar et al. 2004, 72) and in a bundle adjacent to the smelting furnace (Eldar and Baumgarten 1985, 136–138). This last example from Bir es-Safadi is particularly telling: two standards, two axes, and a chisel, bundled together by a wide strip of copper, testify to the shared context for artefacts typically considered different. Finally, none of the so-called utilitarian objects have use-wear (Namdar et al. 2004, 81–83; Tadmor et al. 1995, 97). It has been argued elsewhere (Gošić 2015) that less common metal artefacts, such as axes, chisels, and awls, served as symbols as much as the casts adorned by anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs, which are routinely considered ritual.

Therefore, we can reasonably assume all metal artefacts were ritual, as they were the product and thus the symbol of a technology that produced them, which was ritual technology in the sense in which Rappaport defined it. Yet, to truly in-

terpret it as ritual technology, we should try to understand the purpose it served in the past. This is arguably the most speculative part of the interpretation. The transformative quality inherent in smelting technology could have demonstrated control over the material world; the ritual of smelting metal and casting artefacts served as a display of this power, and the artefacts, in their various shapes and forms, in turn served as symbols of this control. The ritual potency of smelting was likely transferred to the implements used in the process as well, not just to finished objects, which is why small chunks of slag are found throughout settlements where smelting took place (Gilead, Rosen, and Fabian 1992, 13; Golden 2009, Fig. 3.6; Shalev and Northover 1987, Fig. 3; Shugar 2000, 48).

Painted Pebbles

Painted pebbles were discovered at sites Abu Matar and Shiqmim in the Northern Negev. At Abu Matar, three groups were found arranged differently on the floors of rooms (Perrot 1955, 167). In one room, two arrangements were present: a crescent-shaped arrangement consisting of 14 small pebbles marked with broad strokes of red ochre in crossed lines, and another with two rows totalling 37 marked pebbles. Another room featured an octagonal arrangement (Perrot 1955, 168). The wall of the associated house partially covered this arrangement, indicating it was placed before the house was constructed. Additional pebbles were found in the fills of several houses at Abu Matar, sourced from a nearby streambed. These pebbles were reused, as evidenced by traces of earlier painted lines beneath the newer ones. Most were painted on one side, though some were painted on both sides (Perrot 1955, 170). At Shiqmim, an arrangement of 13 painted pebbles was found next to a wall (Levy et al. 2023, 121). Their placement in households suggests they were used in domestic belief-based practices, possibly related to the foundation of new houses (Gošić 2025, 605). From the perspective of the *chaîne opératoire* of their production, painted pebbles represent a relatively simple activity, at least in comparison with metallurgy. Pebbles were collected in the wadi and painted, with noted reuse, which means the pebbles did not necessarily stay in the same place after they were placed in the house. However, much remains unknown: How was the paint prepared? Was the painting of the pebbles and their placement done by the same person? Was it carried out by the inhabitants of the household they were placed in or by a ritual specialist? I would argue that ritual technology, even if rudimentary, exists not only in their production but also in their application: if they were apotropaic or served as foundation deposits, it means that producing them and placing them intentionally was a technique of ensuring the house's stability.

Discussion

The examination of Chalcolithic metallurgy and painted pebbles provides insight into how diverse ritual technologies functioned within prehistoric societies and emphasises the relationship between materiality and practice. Both metallurgical practices and painted pebble arrangements demonstrate that ritual activity was embedded in everyday material production and use, blurring the lines between utilitarian and ritual behaviour. Metallurgy involved transforming and mastering materials, which was reflected in the objects produced. Similarly, painting and placing pebbles in households involved a technological aspect, serving a purpose within the household. In terms of the repetitive quality of the ritual, metallurgy and painted pebbles differ. While cast objects can be recycled, as evidenced by the scrap metal from Fazael (Rose et al. 2023), and painted pebbles were reused, smelting is not reversible – once the transformation is done, it requires new materials to be repeated, which is another quality of extractive metallurgy that emphasises its transformative quality.

Both metallurgy and painted pebbles stress the importance of archaeological context for understanding their ritual significance. In the case of metal artefacts, the Nahal Mishmar hoard in a remote location in the Judean Desert, as well as small caches in settlements, demonstrates ritualised acts of deposition (cf. Garfinkel 1994). Similarly, the placement of painted pebbles under the walls and in the corners of households suggests deliberate actions aimed at fulfilling a specific ritual purpose.

The two ritual technologies presented serve as good examples of how varied Chalcolithic ritual practices are. On the one hand, metal artefacts require complex technology and are made from materials acquired from great distances (Shugar 2001), with final products including anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and abstract motifs (Beck 1989; Gošić 2025, 597–601). On the other hand, painted pebbles are made of locally sourced pebbles with basic painted motifs (Perrot 1955, Fig. 17, 19) and are commonly found. Broadly, these differences testify to how varied prehistoric rituals were and serve as a reminder of how different their material remains might be. In a recent paper, Hornbeck and Barrett (2020) attempted to apply a definition of ritual from cognitive sciences, namely the *ritual form hypothesis*, to predict what form of material remains a particular mode of ritual behaviour could leave behind in the archaeological record. The *ritual form hypothesis* postulates that rituals across different cultural contexts follow two distinct and opposing patterns: high-sensory rituals that occur rarely and are staged in a dramatic way, and low-sensory rituals that are relatively monotonous and happen often, such as daily prayers. Such classification implies two different kinds of remains, with those related to the high-sensory experience being easier to spot. It is clear why they decided to test their

model on an example of ritual from the contemporary Church of England, as the proposed classification is typically indiscernible in the prehistoric record, especially when it comes to low-sensory and low-investment rituals, nor could the roles of persons involved in them be reconstructed in such detail. Nevertheless, their results are an essential reminder that material remains of rituals are likely to be more often overlooked than overidentified – even if it may not seem so due to the considerable ambiguity in identifying and the ensuing popularity of the above-mentioned jest.

Instead of a Conclusion

The concept of ritual technology is useful because it provides a framework that goes beyond simple ritual-secular and symbolic-practical dichotomies. It interprets ritual as an integral part of interacting with the world alongside other technological practices, rather than an abstract phenomenon with no purpose other than what functionalist anthropologists ascribe to it. Such an approach emphasises the procedural aspects of ritual behaviours, including both the production and the use of artefacts. It highlights that ritual practices are not merely symbolic gestures and utterances devoid of purpose but are instead embedded in a meaningful way of engaging with and changing the world. This reduces the risk of labelling ritual artefacts as “non-utilitarian” or “symbolic” and instead interprets them within a broader social framework with emphasis on their role in ritual behaviour. However, it would be misleading to think that any theoretical concept or methodological tool can offer a reliable way of telling ritual behaviour apart from everything else. If anything, the concept of ritual technology serves as a reminder that in a prehistoric context, ritual cannot be clearly distinguished from other practices. Instead, it enables us to adopt a holistic view of past practices and understand which aspects were likely to hold ritual significance.

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Snalaženje između dihotomija i etiketa: Identifikacija i interpretacija ritualnih artefakata u praistoriji

Ritualni artefakti pojavljuju se kao kategorija nalaza u brojnim arheološkim izveštajima sa iskopavanja od epipaleolita Levanta pa nadalje. Međutim, pitanje rituala i njegovih materijalnih ostataka i dalje je sporna tema u arheologiji. S jedne strane je sveprisutan osećaj da postoji zajednička, uglavnom implicitna, ideja o tome šta se očekuje od takvih artefakata. Oni se često ikonografski izdvajaju u odnosu na druge predmete u istom kulturnom kontekstu, proizvedeni su od dragocenih materijala, manje zastupljeni od predmeta namenjenih svakodnevnoj upotrebi. Iako se čini da je situacija donekle lakša ako govorimo o predmetima koji potiču iz formalnih religijskih celina, poput hramova, ova distinkcija od male je pomoći u praistoriji gde identifikacija hramova podleže istim problemima kao i identifikacija ritualnih pokretnih nalaza. Mada postoji opsežna arheološka teorija posvećena ritualnim praksama, njena primena u arheološkoj interpretaciji često izostaje. Cilj ovog rada jeste da premosti ovu poddelu primenom koncepta ritualne tehnologije, koji nudi opipljive načine diskusije o ritualnom ponašanju u odnosu na materijalni zapis koji ostavlja za sobom,

bez povlačenja jasne linije između onoga što se percipira kao ritualno i onoga što se percipira kao sekularno, bar u onom smislu u kom ta podela postoji u anglo-evropskim kulturama od vremena prosvetiteljstva pa naovamo. Primeri ritualnih tehnologija uzeti su iz arheološkog konteksta halkolitskog Levanta. Prvi primer je halkolitska metalurgija i metalni predmeti koje je ona proizvodila, a drugi proizvodnja i upotreba oslikanih oblutaka. Budući da je metalurgija kompleksna tehnološka aktivnost koja podrazumeva pribavljanje materijala sa velikih udaljenosti kao i specijalizovano tehnološko znanje potrebno za topljenje rude i livenje predmeta, dok su obluci nalaženi u suvajama nedaleko od naselja i oslikavani jednostavnim apstraktnim simbolima, ova dva posve različita primera odražavaju raznovrsnost ljudskog ponašanja u prošlosti koje je za cilj imalo postizanje rezultata specifičnih za kulturni kontekst u kome je ritual izvođen.

Ključne reči: ritual, praistorija, arheološka teorija, ritualna tehnologija, Levant

*Naviguer entre dichotomies et étiquettes:
identification et interprétation des artefacts rituels dans la préhistoire*

Les artefacts rituels apparaissent en tant que catégorie de trouvailles dans de nombreux rapports archéologiques issus de fouilles depuis L'Épipaléolithique levantin. Pourtant, l'identification des restes rituels, ainsi que leur distinction des objets utilitaires quotidiens, reste un sujet controversé en archéologie. D'une part, il existe un sentiment omniprésent selon lequel une idée commune, principalement implicite, de ce qu'on attend de tels artefacts, persiste. D'autre part, il existe également une théorie archéologique étendue consacrée aux pratiques rituelles, mais son application à l'interprétation des restes matériels fait défaut. L'objectif de cet article, qui s'appuie sur des exemples du Chalcolithique levantin, est de combler cette division en appliquant le concept de technologie rituelle, qui offre des moyens tangibles de discuter des comportements rituels en relation avec l'enregistrement matériel qu'ils laissent derrière eux, sans séparer nettement les concepts du rituel et de l'utilitaire tels qu'ils existent dans les cultures modernes.

Mots-clés: rituel, préhistoire, théorie archéologique, technologie rituelle, Levant

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