

# ASPECTS OF ANCIENT GREEK CULT

CONTEXT - RITUAL - ICONOGRAPHY



Edited by  
Jesper Tae Jensen, George Hinge, Peter Schultz  
and Bronwen Wickkiser

# Aspects of Ancient Greek Cult

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Context, Ritual and Iconography

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*This book is dedicated to all the wonderful people who have ever worked on the Athenian Asklepieion on the South Slope of the Akropolis*

*– above all Alexandros Mantis, Petros Kalligas and Luigi Beschi.*

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# Preface

*Jesper Tae Jensen, George Hinge, Peter Schultz and Bronwen Wickkiser*

Near the end of this labor, only one final matter remains. It is the most pleasant of all tasks involved in producing this book. Namely, to thank the people involved. There have been many wonderful people committed to this project; without them this project – both the 2004 conference and the present book – could never have been completed.

First, for making the conference in Aarhus, *Aspects of Ancient Greek Cult*, such a great success, we would like to thank the hosts of the conference, the Centre for the Study of Antiquity and the Department of Classical Archaeology, University of Aarhus. We would like to express our deepest gratitude in particular to Lise and Niels Hannestad of the Department of Classical Archaeology, University of Aarhus, for all their support and for helping to make this conference possible. We also wish to express our deepest thanks to the Secretary of the Department of Classical Archaeology, Lilian Svenningsen, for her constant assistance with all practical matters, and to the technician at the Museum of Ancient Art, Steffen Ledet Christiansen, for his assistance in every circumstance imaginable. To Stine Birk Toft, who assisted everyone before and throughout the conference, we owe a special debt.

Thanks also go to the core of the conference, the speakers, for making the colloquium such great fun. Throughout the conference, their professionalism and good cheer made all the administrative duties much easier for Lilian, Stine, and Jesper Tae Jensen, the principal organizer of the conference. Finally, we are thankful to the participants and the attendees of the conference; without their fantastic questions, helpful comments, and suggestions our papers would not be what they are.

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The completion of this book owes much to the talents and assistance of various individuals and organizations. Thanks to Benjamin Millis, Acquisitions at the Blegen Library, American School of Classical Studies at Athens, for assisting us in finding numerous articles and books.

We would also like to thank Craig A. Mauzy, Photographic Department, Agora Excavations, the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, for providing the photo used in Richard Hamilton's article; to Director, Dr. Nikolaos Kaltsas and Eleni Morati, both of the National Archaeological Museum at Athens for providing the photo used in Michaelis Lefantzi's and Jesper Tae Jensen's article; and to Director, Dr. Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier and Oliver Pilz (Fotoabteilung), both of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, for the permission to use the photo (Neg. Nr. : NM 642) for the cover of the book.

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For financial support of this book we would like to express our deepest gratitude to Concordia College Moorhead, MN, the Department of Classics at Gustavus Adolphus College, the College of Arts and Science at Vanderbilt University, the Danish Research Agency, Ministry of Science, Aarhus University Research Foundation, and the Centre for the Study of Antiquity, University of Aarhus.

Finally, regarding the technical details: We have used the abbreviations set forth by the Guidelines of *the American Journal of Archaeology* (with the exceptions of ARG = *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, ArchEph = *Archaiologiki Ephemeris*, and DNP = *Der Neue Pauly*). There is little consistency among scholars today in the spelling of Greek words and names in English. As a general principle, we, the editors of this volume, have opted for the Greek form (e.g. Apollon, Asklepios, and Strabon instead of Apollo, Asclepius, and Strabo). However, in certain familiar names (like Plato, Piraeus, and Delphi), we have followed the Latin tradition for the convenience of the reader.

This book is dedicated to all the wonderful people who have ever worked on the Athenian Asklepieion on the South Slope of the Akropolis – above all Alexandros Mantis, Petros Kalligas and Luigi Beschi.

# Introduction

*Jesper Tae Jensen*

The articles in this volume are based on an international conference entitled *Aspects of Ancient Greek Cult*, which took place 9-10 January 2004 at the Centre for the Study of Antiquity and the Department of Classical Archaeology, University of Aarhus, Denmark. The conference was organized as part of my Ph.D. program in the Department of Classical Archaeology at the University of Aarhus. Nine scholars working within the fields of architecture, classical archaeology, classical philology, history, musicology, and religion participated. The broad title for this conference reflects my intention to bring together innovative and diverse approaches to the study of ancient Greek cult, particularly those that combine the study of material culture with both textual and epigraphical evidence.

The purpose of the conference was two-fold. First to establish a network among young scholars who deal with ancient Greek cult from different disciplines and countries. Second, to let these young scholars discuss their ideas under the guidance of Professor Richard Hamilton, and then develop these discussions as articles.

The present volume contains revised versions of seven of the papers given at the conference. The paper by Hedvig von Ehrenheim, "Incubation Areas in Pagan and Early Christian Times," will be published in the Proceedings of the Danish Institute at Athens, volume 6. The addition of the article by Vanda Papaefthymiou, archaeologist of the Athenian Asklepieion, was an obvious one since her work encompasses material discussed in several of the conference papers.

Each participant was given free rein regarding the length of their papers, and the editors have not altered their arguments. It is, of course, the editors' hope that these eight articles will offer a fresh look at various aspects of ancient Greek cult.

This book begins, as did the conference, with Lisbeth Bredholt Christensen's penetrating article, "'Cult' in the Study of Religion and Archaeology." Since cult was to be the focal point of the conference, I asked assistant professor Christensen to explore the definition and use of this term within various branches of scholarship. Whereas 'Cult' is not a term widely used in the field of Religion, it is popular and proliferate in the disciplines of Ancient History and Classical and Prehistoric Archaeology. Christensen

suggests that the divergence in its use is due largely to the social focus of ancient history and archaeology in contrast to a focus on texts and literature in the study of religion.

The article by Richard Hamilton, "Basket Case: Altars, Animals and Baskets on Classical Attic Votive Reliefs," uses a statistical approach to analyze the relationship between altars, animals and baskets together with worshippers and deities. He demonstrates that groups of worshippers can be found in two-thirds of all the votive reliefs, and altars in almost half, while animals on votive reliefs can be found in only a quarter, and baskets in only an eighth. Hamilton concludes innovatively that the basket is an attractive visual complement to the animal but in no way essential to the offering represented by the votive.

The next four articles present new material and ideas about individual sanctuaries. The first three investigate the Greek healing god Asklepios and his sanctuary on the South Slope of the Athenian Akropolis, followed by a detailed study of the Philippeion at Olympia.

Bronwen Wickkiser's article, "Banishing Plague: Asklepios, Athens, and the Great Plague Reconsidered," questions long-held assumptions about why Athens imported the cult of Asklepios from Epidauros in 420 B.C. Although ancient sources are silent about the cause, scholars have long argued that plague in the years 430-426 B.C. was the most immediate factor prompting the importation. Wickkiser points out, however, that the lag between these events renders a direct cause-and-effect relationship dubious at best, and goes on to argue that the nature of ailments Asklepios is known to have treated – chronic ailments, not fatal ones like plague – also makes the god an unlikely candidate to have cured Athenians of this epidemic. These observations open the door to the possibility, if not the likelihood, that in the context of the Peloponnesian War, factors unrelated to physical health alone prompted the importation.

In "Der Altar des Asklepieions von Athen," Vanda Papaefthymiou gives a brief overview of the Asklepieion and a history of its investigation. Her focus, however, is the results of new excavations conducted during summer 2001 in and around the so-called altar. Papaefthymiou presents the pottery from nine small pits and suggests that some of these pits were used for planting.

Michaelis Lefantzis and I re-study the architectural history of the Asklepieion in "The Athenian Asklepieion on the South Slope of the Akropolis: Early Development, ca. 420-360 B.C." We argue that the original Asklepieion of Telemachos was founded on the east terrace and was designed around a central monument that scholars today identify as an altar. We, unconvinced that this monument is indeed an altar, date the earliest phase of this structure to 418/7-416/5 B.C., and identify at least four distinctive phases of construction. In this article the first two construction phases

are investigated in depth after a careful description of the foundations belonging to Phases I-IV.

In "Divine Images and Royal Ideology in the Philippeion at Olympia" Peter Schultz re-examines Leochares' famous portraits of Philip II and his family that were installed in Olympia after the Macedonian triumph at Chaironeia. Three primary questions sustain the paper. First, what is the chronological relationship between the portraits and the architecture of the Philippeion itself? Second, how were the images arranged and what did they look like? And finally, what can the answers to these questions tell us about the function of the Philippeion and role the building played in Philip's pan-Hellenic agenda. Schultz's analysis reveals a number of startling conclusions.

The final two articles move beyond specific sanctuaries to focus on broader contextual issues such as music and ritual. Tore Tvarnø Lind's contribution, "Music and Cult in Ancient Greece: Ethnomusicological Perspectives," investigates the limits of our historical and musical imagination. The article touches upon theoretical, socio-cultural and historical issues, and argues for interdisciplinary and creative approaches to the study of ancient Greek music, including recorded musical reconstructions. Lind sketches how the field of ethnomusicology is valuable to the study of music in ancient Greek culture and cult; he considers the impact of cultural understanding, identity processes and postcolonialism on modern perceptions of ancient music and ritual.

In the final article of the book, "Cultic Persona and the Transmission of the Partheneions," George Hinge argues that the partheneions of Alkman and Pindar were not written for single occasions. Rather, the personal names occurring in these songs were generic role names, or "cultic personae." Both internal and external evidence indicate that the girls were cast for these roles through the kinship structure. Combining literary testimonies and linguistic data, Hinge demonstrates that Alkman's partheneions were part of a living cultic tradition, and that most of the poems were not written down until the Hellenistic age, presumably during the "Spartan Renaissance" under King Agis and King Kleomenes.



# “Cult” in the Study of Religion and Archaeology

*Lisbeth Bredholt Christensen*

Scholars of religion currently study “religion,” “ritual,” “ritual practice,” “myth,” and “narrative” in different forms, both theoretical and empirical. “Cult,” however, is rarely studied nor is it used as a descriptive term as an object of study. Of the few scholars who do use the word, most are educated theologians. They apply the term to Israelite, early Christian or Hellenistic or Old Norse contexts—in other words, contexts related to the Near Eastern worlds.<sup>1</sup> Among sociologists, the term has acquired its own meaning (see below), not related to a traditional definition but linked to the classification of religious communities. In other academic disciplines such as archaeology (prehistorical and classical) or ancient history, scholars are less reticent when speaking about “cult.” In fact, it is more common to refer to “cult” (or “rituals” or “religious practice”) than to “religion.” In what follows, I will examine how “cult” is used in the disciplines mentioned above. Where, exactly, between “religion” and “ritual,” is “cult” to be found?

## **What is studied as religion?**

In the study of religion, “religion” is usually defined as people’s relation to transcendent or supernatural powers.<sup>2</sup> This concept of religion mirrors the method by which religion is studied—that is, via texts. Supernatural or transcendent beings are only recognizable in language or text. The only reason we know a statue represents Zeus rather than any other older man is because the texts tell us that Zeus’ attribute is a thunderbolt. Using the same logic, however, we cannot know whether the Venus of Willendorf represents a goddess or a “normal” woman because we have no linguistic context. Prehistoric archaeology is thus cut off from working with religion the same way text-based disciplines are.

Like “ritual,” “cult” forms a pair with “myth” in what could be called a binary opposition. Traditionally, religion is characterized as consisting of myths and rituals. Which of the two came first and which of the two is the most important has been the subject of innumerable discussions. Fundamental positions are represented by two of the “founding fathers” of the academic study of religion: Edward Burnett Tylor and William Robertson Smith.

In *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor claimed myth is the most important element, with religion being basically a “belief in spiritual beings.” In his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), Robertson Smith claimed that the performance of rituals is the most important and obligatory part of religion, where-as belief (implied by myth, according to Robertson Smith) is secondary.

According to “the myth and ritual school,” myth and ritual are linked in the sense that there is always a ritual connected to a myth and vice versa. Although this view has been criticized as being too rigid, it is still widely assumed that in some way the two complement each other: myth represents “the things said” and ritual represents “the things done.” The study of ancient religion being basically a study of texts, it may sometimes be easier to study the myths (written down in texts) than the rituals (action that is now unobservable). For this reason, much scholarship has been occupied with distilling rituals from mythical and other texts. This was the project of both the British and the Scandinavian myth-and-ritual-schools, which attempted to find evidence for rituals of fertility and sacred kingship in Greek, Biblical and Near Eastern texts. This has also been a declared aim in the study of Old Norse religion.<sup>3</sup>

To sum up very briefly some of the more recent trends in the study of religion: first, myth has been “liberated” from an automatic connection with “belief.” This “liberation” is to a great extent the product of Classical studies, which have labored to show the differences between Greek religion and Christianity. Also, Classical studies have distilled Christian projections onto the Greek world, the concept of literal belief in the wordings of myths being one of these projections.<sup>4</sup> One of the aims of Classical studies from the beginning was that of “overcoming” Christianity, considered to be the last stage of religion on the way to a scientific view of the world, according to Sir James George Frazer.<sup>5</sup> Second, ritual studies have shown that although rituals may be meaningless in themselves, participation in them is not. Thus, Roy Rappaport has investigated how participation in a ritual is tantamount to signing a form of “contract,” taking the ritual seriously.<sup>6</sup> Third, under the influence of speech-act theory (“words are deeds”), the study of religion has become more the study of “religion as practice” or “religion in action” than “religion as belief.”<sup>7</sup> While a “religion of the mind” disappeared with the dismissal of a theological approach, it is, however, now reappearing under the auspices of cognitive studies.<sup>8</sup>

### **Cult in the Study of Religion**

Whereas in the past 30 years both “religion” and “ritual” have been the subject of innumerable theoretical discussions about concepts and definitions in religious studies, the study of “cult” has led a life in the shadow. The discipline, together with many other disciplines in the humanities, has turned

to theory, method and systematics, and is at the same time largely turning its back on particularistic, descriptive, local studies.

Both "religion" and "ritual" have been developed theoretically, as concepts, being more or less universally applicable. The relatively recent *Guide to the Study of Religion*<sup>9</sup> presents a catalogue of articles relating to a contemporary academic study of religion. Concepts and terms such as "religion," "cognition," "gender," "myth," "ritual," "discourse," "culture" and "ideology" are all discussed at length. There are, however, no articles about "cult," and the word does not appear in the index. The same can be observed in the *Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology*,<sup>10</sup> where there are no entries on cult and no references to articles on related topics.

These two works represent a relatively recent trend where "cult" is not an issue in the study of religion. It was not always so. The standard encyclopaedia of the study of religion, Mircea Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*,<sup>11</sup> likewise lacks a general overview of "cult" and likewise provides no general definition of the term. However, the entry "Worship and Cultic Life" introduces itself by proclaiming that it "... surveys the practical expressions of the religious life ... designed to introduce the diverse ways in which adherents of these traditions give concrete expression, both as individuals and as communities, to their ideas and beliefs."<sup>12</sup> Cult is seen as "ritual lived," and the entry proceeds to detailed descriptions of specific religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism and their primary rituals. Characteristic of these individual articles on particular religions is that each religion is described in terms of history and textual criticism, but with no overall comparison or universalist claims. The description as such is loyal to adherents of the various religions. On Muslim worship and cultic life, we thus hear that "... the cult of idols, the scorning of revelation, and the violation of duties all constitute a chronic disesteeming of God. Pagans do not esteem God duly ... By contrast, a true Islamic worship brings to God all that is due from humanity in reverence, awe, submission, and obedience ..."<sup>13</sup> No analytic apparatus is at play when describing "cult". "Cult" is a concept that is used with "emic" descriptions.

Remarkably different is the entry in the same encyclopaedia on "Ritual." In this article, the subject is a category, and as such, the issue is scholarship, its history, and suggestions as to how to classify ritual. The article discusses no particular religion but instead various kinds of ritual—transitory, sacrifice, prayer, etc.—as they have been generalized or defined by scholars: "... those conscious and voluntary repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions that are centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences."<sup>14</sup> Here we have a very "etic" description, perhaps not immediately recognizable to the believers of religions (i.e., outside of scholarly discourse). In this area we can speak of "pioneers" in the study of ritual, such as Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, Arnold Van Gennep, and Victor Turner, all of whom contributed

valuable models for classifying and understanding ritual. In the study of cult, no such scholars can be found.

Instead, cult studies have largely been replaced by ritual analyses. The difference between the two consists in social vs. model-orientated critiques. "Cult studies" focus on social, historical, political, and economic aspects of worship: the role of diverse people, priests, expenses, prayers, local meanings. Cult studies may, to a certain extent, be diachronic in their perspective and focused on "the special case." Ritual analyses are model-orientated and focus on the synchronic and general "laws" of the rites in question: the elements, stages and classification of particular rituals (e.g., transition, crisis, etc.).

To take Old Norse literary sources as an example, there is hardly any information on religious practice. The result is that all ritual has to be reconstructed out of virtually nothing. What scholars look for and find, then, are not particular rituals specific to the Nordic culture, but rituals in a "model form," mainly as initiation or sacrifice.<sup>15</sup> Thus, whereas careful research seems to be able to extract a framework of ritual from, for example, the sagas, when it comes to the social organization, participants, economy, and paraphernalia linked to the rituals, these seem much more difficult to reconstruct. Consequently, "cult" is not a central issue for most scholars of Nordic religion. The same applies to scholars of many other particular religions.

In contrast to this general trend in religious studies, the fields of Near Eastern religions, Christianity and Classics have maintained an interest in social history and in the term "cult." Consequently, articles on cult can be found in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (RGG),<sup>16</sup> *Neue Pauly*<sup>17</sup> and the Danish *Gads Bibelleksikon*.<sup>18</sup>

### What is "cult"?

"Cult" stems from Latin *cultus, colere*: cultivate, "tending" to both soil, education and, as in Cicero, the gods (*cultus deorum, De senectute* 56). Thus in its origin the word is not specifically associated with gods; however, via pagan as well as early and Medieval Christian practice, the meaning of the word has been transformed so that today it cannot be understood in isolation from a religious context. Until the 13th -14th centuries the Christian service was termed "cult." About this time, "Gottesdienst" was introduced in German and "worship" in English.<sup>19</sup> "Gottesdienst" and "worship" are today the best synonyms for "cult." Until 1916, Danish ministers for teaching, science and the church were named "Kultusminister," a term still in use, for example, in Germany.

A rather broad definition of "cult" is found in RGG: "die Gesamtheit rel. Praxis im Umgang mit 'spirituellen' oder mit bes. Zuschreibungen versehenen Wesen verstehen (z.B. griech., prot., isl. K)." Cult is here more or less

synonymous with religious practice, i.e., practices legitimized by and referring to one or several transempirical powers. Consequently, what this definition frames are "classical" cults such as those of Asklepios or the Virgin Mary.

The *Oxford English Dictionary*<sup>20</sup> reproduces a popular, but outdated, explanation of "cult": "a particular form of system of religious worship; esp. in reference to its external rites and ceremonies." Cult is presented as an "exterior," opposed to a potential "interior," religiosity. The definition here, contrary to the one in *RGG*, seems also to presuppose that "worship" may take place outside the "cult" (e.g., in more "introverted" forms, such as prayer, the writing of hymns or psalms, or life in correspondence with religious rules).

A somewhat narrower definition of cult is found in *Gads Bibelleksikon*: "the religious acts of a culture at a sacred place" (my translation).<sup>21</sup> In this definition, a prayer during a service is cultic while a spontaneous prayer in a situation of crisis is not. Just as rituals can be both religious and non-religious they can, according to this perception of the word, also be cultic and non-cultic. This definition also excludes from "cult" phenomena such as shamanism (the shaman can operate everywhere) and New religions (most New Age spirituality is independent of locale). Via an emphasis on "culture" and "sacred place," this definition potentially delimits "cult" to particular historical contexts, namely religions where space, locality (and territory) are important. Thus, with this definition we may say that cult arose only with the Neolithic where "place" and "border" became issues.<sup>22</sup>

*Der Neue Pauly* specifies that a "cult" involves (a) an object or a referent of worship, (b) a time, (c) a place, and (d) a group of performers. Contrary to the study of rituals independent of their social context, as a system rather than a lived performance, "cult" in this instance clearly implies that the focus of the scholar is on the social aspects of the phenomenon.

Within sociology, "cult" has acquired a particular use. Here, it is "characterized by a loose association of persons with a private, eclectic religiosity."<sup>23</sup> Cult has a negative relation to society: it "...does not claim to have the truth, and is tolerant of other groups."<sup>24</sup> Entirely contrary to the forementioned more "classical" definitions, cult is here connected to the private rather than the public. Focus also seems to be placed on experience and the individual rather than on the action and the object of worship, which here is absent. Cult has also been shifted to an almost de-institutionalized context. This sociological variant of "cult" seems rather confusing when compared to the more traditional understanding of the term. Although it is still used by some (e.g. Bell 1997), others avoid the term "cult," considering it to be outdated (from a time when the established church was viewed as the norm and all other factions viewed as outsiders). It is, however, the sociological version that underlies such expressions as "cult movie" (e.g., *The Rocky Hor-*

ror *Picture Show* or *Casablanca*), defined as “films that, in form and content, differ from mainstream films by being odd or ... exaggerated.”<sup>25</sup> The link between the sociological version of cult and the more “classical” definition seems to arise via “mystery cult.” In *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Walter Burkert describes mysteries as being “of a voluntary, *personal*, and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through *experience* of the sacred.”<sup>26</sup>

A final comment on definitions relates to Émile Durkheim who said that cult (1) always includes a reference to supernatural beings, and (2) is periodical.<sup>27</sup> Durkheim thus specified that rituals connected with burials or births are not cultic because they are performed occasionally rather than regularly. On the other hand, rituals connected with ancestors are periodical and therefore considered to be cultic. Durkheim’s point of departure was the religion of the Australian Aborigines, thought in his time to be the most primitive and therefore a representative of Palaeolithic religion or the origins of religion. By emphasizing the Aboriginal worship of ancestors as intense and cultic, Durkheim saw cult as part of the very most ancient layers of religion. Periodicity and concepts of regularity, according to Durkheim, are also found among the most primitive of peoples. These elements are of course obvious when it comes to agricultural and pastoralist societies but less obvious in hunter-gatherer societies.<sup>28</sup>

The convergence between Durkheim’s periodicity and the understanding of “sacred place” in *Gads Bibelleksikon* is important.<sup>29</sup> It puts into question whether we can speak about cult before the Neolithic period. Calendrical systems, and therefore concepts of periodicity, have been demonstrated from the Upper Palaeolithic, dating as far back as 27,000 B.C.<sup>30</sup> Yet, hunter-gatherers are characterized as focusing not on “place” and “territory” but on “markers” and “focuses.”<sup>31</sup> “Place” connotes space, gathering, and social events, characteristic for settled people (or hunter-gatherers influenced by a settled way of life), but not for a Palaeolithic lifestyle as we know it.

Summing up, cult is generally viewed within a religious frame, as a collection of religious rituals, as less than “religion,” but as more than “ritual.” It is question whether cult was introduced already in the Palaeolithic, or whether it must be said to be a Neolithic and post-Neolithic phenomenon.

## Prehistoric archaeology

Prehistoric archaeologists work with and from material culture and do not have linguistic sources at their disposal. From the mid 1950s, Christopher Hawkes’ pyramidal paradigm reigned for several decades in the discipline: archaeology can speak about the technological level of prehistoric societies with relative ease, with less ease about the economic level, and with still less ease about the social level. Finally, prehistoric archaeology is least able to

say anything about the ideological and religious level of an early society.<sup>32</sup> Although it was the specific aim of New Archaeology to work with all levels of prehistoric cultures, in practice interest lay only in the first three levels, and methods and instruments were developed to study these.<sup>33</sup>

In the beginning of the 1980s when Ian Hodder launched postprocessualism, the precondition of this new approach was that material culture is meaningfully structured. Postprocessualism's aim was to study "symbols" and "meaning" in the archaeological record and thereby reinscribe archaeology as an interpretive discipline.<sup>34</sup> Today postprocessualism is time-honored. The interest in symbols and meaning has led to an enormous interest also in the fourth field of Hawkes' pyramid: ideology and religion. Whereas only ten years ago few people worked with this, today the academic market abounds with publications on cult, rituals and religious practice from the Palaeolithic until the beginning of the historical period.

A quick glance at both the titles and content of these publications reveals, as mentioned at the outset, that relatively few scholars write directly about "religion," whereas many refer to "cult," "rituals" and "religious practice."<sup>35</sup> The orientation towards practice is due mainly to the nature of the evidence; prehistoric material culture limits the study of religion to its expression in action. The terminology is not, however, a reflection of what the archaeologists basically think about religion. Thus, to Sir Colin Renfrew, "... the essence of religion is some framework of beliefs."<sup>36</sup> This attitude means (a) that Renfrew, and others with him, belong more to an intellectualist (Tylor) tradition than a ritualist (Robertson Smith) one, and (b) that when Renfrew studies prehistoric ritual as a reflection of religion, it is not because he thinks this is the essential part of religion but that it is the only part available. Renfrew studies ritual because he cannot study belief. From this perspective, prehistoric archaeology does not consider itself capable of contributing fruitfully to the study of religion; rather, the discipline finds itself in a position of shortfall.

The problem with most of prehistory is that we have no gods. This may reflect the actual reality that there were no gods at the time, or it may reflect our method of research: that because we have no texts we have no means of identifying images or figurines as gods. Although theoretically it is possible to speak about sacredness or religion and potentially also cult without the presence of gods (e.g., Buddhism), the usual way of verifying that something is religious is by the presence of deities or other forms of spiritual beings. On this basis, two decades ago Renfrew attempted to define "an archaeology of cult."<sup>37</sup> Although he did not reach lasting conclusions, his study remains a serious attempt at reconciling archaeological material with religious theory. Introducing a new field of study, it also provides a new basis for criticism. By "cult" Renfrew understands that the belief system has found expression in action: "the system of patterned actions in response to religious

beliefs.”<sup>38</sup> The view expressed again here is that belief is primary and cult or ritual secondary, but also that myth and cult/ritual complement each other.<sup>39</sup>

Renfrew concluded that it is possible to detect evidence of only a very small proportion of all the rituals that actually took place in the past. Significantly, however, his project of defining an archaeology of cult failed. In order to recognize a cultic site, Renfrew considered it necessary that such things as sacred place, sacred building, divine images or expenditure of wealth were present.<sup>40</sup> As such, the project was locked in tautology: in order to define a site as cultic, we need the presence of identified cultic material. Significantly, Renfrew considers “religious ritual” and “cult” synonymous.<sup>41</sup> Their interchangeability implies that “cult” does not refer to a collection of rituals or a specific social focus on rituals; instead, it merely signifies “ritual.” In other words, the use of “cult” indicates a view of religion as divided into belief on the one hand and ritual on the other, and the possibility for archaeology to discuss only the latter of the two. If Renfrew’s view applies to prehistorians generally, it can be said that the reason prehistorians prefer to use “cult” rather than “religion” is that they thereby avoid asserting something about belief systems, to which they think they have no access.

## **Classics**

Both Classical archaeologists and Classical philologists discuss cult, but tend to use “cult” synonymously with “religion” rather than with “ritual.” Thus, characteristically, the title of the seminar in Aarhus was “Aspects of ancient Greek cult” (in the singular!) and not “Aspects of ancient Greek religion.” The preference on the part of Classical archaeologists to use “cult” rather than “religion” should be related to the fields of Classical philology and ancient history more than to archaeology as such.

Where the point of departure of prehistoric archaeology has been the study of stratigraphy, technology and economics, the point of departure of Classical archaeology was originally art history combined with Classical philology.<sup>42</sup> Since material is often scarce for prehistoric archaeologists, they have been forced to include theory in their analysis. The amount of evidence, both material and literary, available to Classical archaeologists, by contrast, is overwhelming and has kept classicists from really entering theoretical discussions until recently.<sup>43</sup> Classicists are now exploring the relation between material and text on both a theoretical and empirical level. Because of the texts available, however, Classical archaeologists naturally rely upon Classical philology and borrow the latter’s terminology when relevant.

It is therefore within Classical philology that the term “cult” should be sought, both in terms of terminology and practice. For instance, Robert