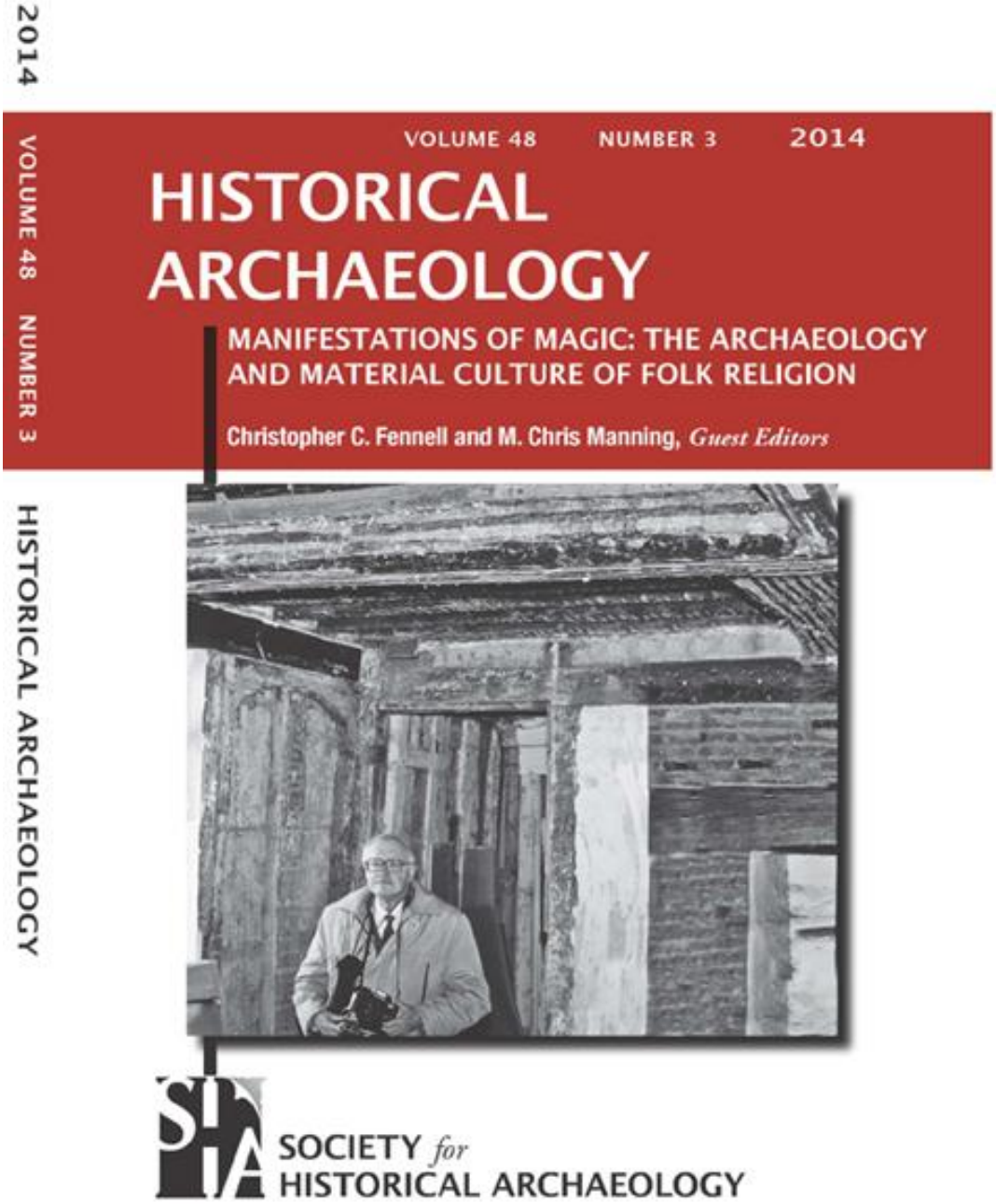
Manifestations of Magic: The Archaeology and Material Culture of Folk Religion



Cover image: Ralph Merrifield in 1989 next to the hall fireplace at Cutchey's Farm, Badwell Ash, Suffolk, UK (Photo by Timothy Easton, 1989).

The authors of the articles in this thematic collection dedicate this publication in the memory of Ralph Merrifield.

Volume overview: Although twenty-five years have passed since British archaeologist Ralph Merrifield published his seminal work, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, the archaeological study of "magic" and "folk religion" in European contexts remains a relatively new field. Bringing together scholars from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, this symposium of articles explores the material culture of magic and folk belief, both above and below ground. An introductory article outlines the theoretical concepts of religion, folk religion, and magic in the context of competing ideologies across time and space. The following articles emphasize the manifestation of magical traditions in Europe as well in various colonial and post-colonial contexts in Australia and North America. The articles also focus on interactions with non-Western magico-religious traditions, and the ways in which archaeologists and scholars in related disciplines engage and interpret material evidence of so-called magical beliefs and practices. A final discussant article explores themes across these case studies and potential approaches for future research.

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Magic, Religion, and Ritual in Historical Archaeology
By M. Chris Manning

Abstract: This introductory article explores the complex and overlapping concepts of magic, religion, and ritual and the ways in which archaeologists' understanding of these concepts informs our interpretation of the material record. An overview of the development of a historical archaeology of ritual highlights current controversies and deficiencies in the discipline, notably assumptions regarding race and ethnicity. An overview of the themes and topics addressed in the articles in this thematic issue and their relevance to the broader field of historical archaeology concludes the paper (pp.1–9).

Four Spiritual Middens in Mid Suffolk, England, ca. 1650 to 1850
By Timothy Easton

Abstract: Deposits of personal objects, chosen for their ritual associations and hidden in buildings, have been reported in England since the early 20th century. This article examines the evidence for particular ritual concealments in houses in central Suffolk, England, consisting of numerous objects deliberately deposited in the chimney areas of buildings. Chronological evidence in the layers of these "spiritual middens" demonstrates continual additions over many years. Interpretation of these artifacts suggests that they were concealed to seek protection for the home and its inhabitants. Because so many different types of materials are found in each location, it is possible to argue for a wide range of reasons for the selection of specific artifacts to target many different fears by the occupiers. The conclusions drawn from this study may help explain the choice of objects found in other parts of Britain and former British colonial territories in North America and Australia (pp. 10–34).

Tracing the Footsteps of Ritual: Concealed Footwear in America

By Jessica Costello

Abstract: Research concluded by the author in 2003 documented 106 cases of concealed footwear in the United States. Patterns associated with these finds indicate that most, if not all, of these items were concealed for ritual purposes. Historical documentation and popular folklore illustrate the important role that the shoe has played for centuries in Western culture. Through concealment, people ascribed elements of popular magic to the shoe, utilizing it to represent the human form. Shoes were concealed to ensure protection of the home from witches and evil spirits, as part of builders' traditions, by shoemakers to ensure prosperity, and by grieving persons to preserve loved ones' spirits. The survival of this practice into the 20th century supports the idea that ritual and magic, instead of disappearing during the enlightened 18th century, were incorporated into modern culture (pp. 35–51).

The Material Culture of Ritual Concealments in the Eastern United States

By M. Chris Manning

Abstract: Research on concealed deposits with ritual significance has been conducted by scholars in continental Europe, the British Isles, and Australia. Similar evidence of the material culture of magic and folk belief in the United States is presented, focusing on ritual deposits hidden within and around domestic structures associated with European American populations. Comparative analysis of three artifact types—witch bottles, concealed footwear, and cats—highlights discrepancies between ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence and demonstrates temporal, geographical, and spatial patterns in ritual concealments that guide the development of typologies for identification, interpretation, and analysis. An overview of other important artifact types found in ritual concealments illustrates the wide variety of material culture employed in folk rituals in European America. The article concludes with a discussion of regional variation in ritual concealments and the importance of family and household structure, geographic and cultural origin, and cosmology and worldview on private domestic ritual (pp. 52–83).

Keeping a Crooked Sixpence: Coin Magic and Religion in the Colonial Chesapeake

By Sara J. Rivers Cofield

Abstract: This article explores the probability that a silver sixpence recovered at the Naval Air Station Patuxent River's Webster Field Annex in St. Inigoes, Maryland, represents an everyday item that had supernatural significance to the individual(s) who once owned it. Between 1637 and 1942, the land that now comprises Webster Field had been home to a Jesuit settlement. Throughout this period, coin magic was practiced in the British Isles and silver sixpences incorporated many of the symbolic properties that made them useful as protective amulets, emblems of vow-making, and other less defined representations of luck. The presence of such a coin at St. Inigoes is indicative of the interplay between folk traditions and Church-sanctioned religious objects employed at the settlement, and similar coin bending practices are examined through archaeological finds elsewhere in the Chesapeake (pp. 84–105).

Empowered Objects: Material Expressions of Spiritual Beliefs in the Colonial Chesapeake Region
By Michael T. Lucas

Abstract: Pierced and bent coins, quartz crystals and other stones, metal objects, religious artifacts, beads, and mirrors are a few examples of objects used in European, African, and Native American cultural expressions. Associating objects with a particular ethnicity without disentangling the overlapping cultural contexts in which Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans lived, would fall short of understanding the full range of meanings associated with those objects. Cultural interaction and conflict between these groups influenced the material expression of spiritual beliefs in the Chesapeake region during the 17th century. Numerous artifacts recovered from two adjacent sites in Prince George's County, Maryland, dating from 1680 to 1720, have been pierced or intentionally buried within buildings located at the sites. The role of intentionality and the interaction between Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans are examined as key components for interpreting expressions of spiritual beliefs in the colonial Chesapeake region (pp. 106–124).

Double Consciousness and the Intersections of Beliefs in an African American Home in Northern New Jersey
By Megan E. Springate

Abstract: Archaeological investigations within a house in northwestern New Jersey owned by a free African American family from 1862 to 1909 identified at least one ritual deposit within the structure. A concealed iron hoe blade was found in the liminal space between the first-story ceiling and the second-story floor, next to where the chimney from the household's cast iron stove once stood. Two other possible ritual concealments—a shoe and a brass locket—were also found within the structure. This article addresses facets of Christian and folk religious beliefs and practices of an African American family living in a predominantly European American neighborhood in the late 19th century (pp. 125–143).

Irish Immigrant Healing Magic in 19th-century New York City
By Meredith B. Linn

Abstract: This article presents an Irish magical cure for scrofula reported by the New York Times in 1858 as a means to discuss the significance of Irish magical healing in the U.S. and how archaeologists might be able to recognize its material traces. Because of how magic has been historically understood in the West, 19th-century Americans used examples of Irish magic to bolster anti-Irish stereotypes and behaviors. Magical healing, nevertheless, was an important and effective strategy for the Irish who suffered from a dramatic increase in illnesses and injuries in the U.S. It was an integral part of their worldview, and it influenced how they interpreted new healing commodities like patent medicines. This article encourages archaeologists to reconsider the importance of magical healing in the past and the present (pp. 144–165).

Embedded Implication of Cultural Worldviews in the Use and Pattern of Magical Material Culture

By C. Riley Augé

Abstract: The continuing challenge for archaeologists of ritual and magic revolves around recognition of such beliefs and practices in the archaeological record. This is especially true in contexts where material culture functions as both mundane utilitarian objects and magical devices simultaneously or alternatively. In such cases, mere typologies are insufficient to differentiate magical application from quotidian use. Nor is the most oft used criteria for distinguishing between magical and non-magical artifact function—irregularity of depositional location—a reliable predictor if the underlying logic of those locations defies articulation. A critical first step in recognizing magical material culture involves understanding the embeddedness of worldviews, particularly aspects of cosmology, in the use and pattern of magical material culture. This article examines the implicated roles of religious frameworks and doctrine with cosmological constructs on "cultural logic" by using a 17th-century Anglo-European numerology example to illustrate the connection between worldviews and material expression (pp. 166–178).

The Concealment of Written Blessings in Pennsylvania Barns

By Patrick J. Donmoyer

Abstract: Although the history of the Pennsylvania Barn and its migration throughout North America is well-trodden territory in the study of folk-life, vernacular architecture, and cultural geography, few scholars have mentioned the presence of a tradition for the concealment of written talismanic blessings in the barns of the Pennsylvania Dutch. Because of the chance circumstances surrounding the discovery of these documents, only a few examples are known to have survived to the present day. This article will examine six specimens of concealed written barn blessings found in southeastern Pennsylvania, representing a diversity of content, ranging from folk-religious inscriptions to astrological symbols, as well as addressing a variety of intentions ranging from folk-medical concerns for livestock to the banishing of perceived hostile spirit entities. These examples provide evidence for an introductory examination of the background and scope of this ritual practice from the early 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century (pp. 179–195).

Artifacts to Invoke, Direct, and Deflect

By Christopher C. Fennell

Abstract: This article provides a guest editor and discussant's overview of the articles in this thematic issue, points to elements of continuity and contrast across those case studies, and highlights potential avenues for future research and analysis. The analysis includes a discussion of past perceptions of deviant compulsiveness, scrupulosity, and related counter-charms (pp. 196–200).