Prologue: Archaeology, Animism and Non-Human Agents

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This special issue explores the archaeology of "animism" with attention placed on the material correlates of interactions with potent non-human agents. The topic of animism—an ontology in which objects and other non-human beings possess souls, life-force and qualities of personhood (Tylor 1958 [1871])—has reemerged in the social sciences with the blurring of formerly taken-for-granted boundaries separating subject/object, self/world, and person/thing (e.g., Bird-Davis 1999; Gell 1998; Latour 1993; Ingold 2006; Viveiros de Castro 2004). Animate objects and non-human beings are active members of many societies today, and presumably were so in the past. Who are these social actors? What do they do? How might we recognize them in an archaeological context? The contributors to this issue explore these questions.

Why should archaeologists take animistic religious practices seriously? First, over 150 years of ethnographic literature documents the significance of animated material objects cross-culturally. Yet archaeologists have not developed methods and theories that embrace these perspectives. Recognizing that objects can and do possess purposeful agency for many peoples can move us closer to developing social models that reflect the primacy others placed on interactions with these important community members. Second, serious consideration of animism and non-human agency challenges inherited cultural categories that limit the questions and interpretations we bring to our research. Western intellectual tradition constructs a series of dualisms that slice apart animistic, relational, and indigenous perspectives, and, in the process, devalues peoples' lived experiences. In using terms such as "ascribed," "beliefs," or "symbolic

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constructs" to describe the agency of non-human persons and things, we dismiss non-Western ontologies while running the risk of overlooking the "real" material implications of interactions with these active agents. Taking animism seriously can provide a framework to identify archaeological patterns not recognized in other theoretical perspectives.

In considering the material implications of animistic practices, the contributors to this issue draw attention to two related ideas: object agency and animacy. Object agency is defined as the causal consequences objects (artifacts, architecture, and landscape features) have on the course of human activity, and includes animate objects as well as the performance characteristics of material things (e.g., the thermal shock resistance of heavily tempered cooking pots). This broad definition allows room for culturally distinct understandings of who and what can act, while acknowledging the agency inherent in the physicality of objects (e.g., Ahern 2001; De Marrais *et al*. 2004; Dobres and Robb 2000; Gell 1998; Gosden 2005; Graves-Brown 2000; Joyce 2000; Meskell 2003, 2004, 2005; Miller 2005; Mills and Walker 2008; Schiffer 1999; Walker 2008). Animacy is closely related to the former in that all animate objects possess agency. Yet this agency is autonomous, purposeful, and deliberate, and arises from sentient qualities possessed by the object, such as consciousness or a life-force. Due to their unique status, animate objects may have distinct life-histories and depositional trajectories making them recognizable in an archaeological context (Walker 2008).

The authors in this issue use various methods and theoretical approaches—agency theory, ethnography, practice theory, ethnoarchaeology, linguistics, ethnohistory, and indigenous taxonomies—to understand the functions, local meanings, and material manifestations of interactions with potent non-human social actors. These articles emerged from a session held at the 72nd Annual Meeting of Society for American Archaeology titled "The Material Signatures of Non-Human Agency." In this special issue, our goal is to further explore non-human agency, animate objects, and the archaeology of animistic religious practices via case studies from the Greater Southwest, the North American Plains, and the Maya highlands.

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