The Religious Fact Through the Lenses of Archaeology.

Religions - Cultures - Identities

Colloquoim - debates. 26-28 november 2025
Musée de l'Homme, Paris (France)

Call for contributions

A relationship with the sacred is universal et has appeared probably very early in the history of humanity. Human and Social Sciences have been from their inception engaged in that question that resonates no matter the period with societal problematics. **To approach the religious phenomenon from a scientific angle is to approach symbolic thought through evidences located outside of the strict field of conceptions and practices.** But what meaning can we give to the religious fact in space and time in various territories and environments, in different humanities and societies? In what measure do its observable traces (such as parietal art for one instance) relate to an eventual "spirituality" or a will to attract the favours of a superior or immaterial entity or to an intent we identify as religious. These questions will be at the centre of an International and interdisciplinary colloquium "**The Religious Fact Through the Lenses of Archaeology. Religions, Cultures and Identities**" that will take place from the **26th to the 28th of November, 2025, Musée de l'Homme, in Paris**, France.

The observation of the act, transient by nature, calls for the anthropologist, ethnologist or sociologist, while the recourse to textual sources calls for the historian. In its early days, with an approach favorable to historicity, Ethnology was interested primarily in the origin and the nature of religions while locating them in the field of collective thought. With a different orientation, Social Anthropology took religious facts as a component of the core of individual lives in the context of the whole system of social relations approached through the notion of structure. That is the domain of religion in the largest sense of the term, including belief systems, myths, spiritualities, rituals; and of symbolic thought that may imply a codified social practice (including rites) intended among other things to provoke a divine intervention or to establish a sacred connection.

The attention brought by archaeology to the religious fact has remained more discreet. Historically, It came as a support for other sources of information. For periods preceding history that is, without witnesses, direct evidence, or written sources, interpretation had to occupy a larger role. Archaeologists, who have to construct their research on material data, remains and other traces, are not really in a position to demonstrate the existence of acts that one could identify as religious or of

a religion. At most, they can reflect on the reconstruction of series of material evidence and the long duration of practices.

The objective of the colloquium is to cross disciplines so as to apprehend at the same time the material and the conceptual dimensions (therefore the symbolic dimension expressed in textes, images, architecture and other sources) of the religious fact in the depth of time: Can such data (in the wide sense of the term, including spaces, structures, furniture, symbolic expressions…) throw some light on the religious fact moving along time ? and what could an archaeological discourse on Religion [an archaeology of the religious fact] bring to our contemporary world? To appreciate the continuities and the heritages, as well as the discontinuities, of the religious, and its place in the lives of human societies from prehistory until today, or to evaluate its cultural mutations or the polymorphic presence of the sacred within its past and present frames of references, are questions corresponding to major scientific stakes we would like to consider during our discussions.

The question of "definition" or 'definitions' will allow us to open this colloquium by a trans-disciplinary discussion on the terms, concepts, rules/norms, associated to archaeology, leading to a questioning of sources, meanings, and historical variations of the leading value system framing research.

The colloquium is organised in **4 sessions**, each devoted to a different theme; each session will include conferences, papers and debates.

Session 1: Identifying the religious fact. Whether religions are considered as normative belief systems, escaping the limits of scientific studies, or as world views, they still translate into concrete manifestations. Is it possible to identify evidence that would allow us to consider that an object or a site has a religious function? In domains where many contingencies are coming together, {as, for instance, the funerary world) how do we frame the religious fact? Non-ordinary evidences, the arrangement of artefact and gestures with no obvious practical finality, can suggest a religious interpretation in various contexts: from craft and domesticity to trading ports, and commercial centres. To this day, to determine the presence of the religious, we had to rely on images, inscriptions, offerings, and the like in dedicated sites.

Session 2: The religious fact and space: landscapes, sanctuaries and cult. A relationship with the sacred is a universal phenomena that appeared probably very early in human history. To approach this theme in archaeology brings us to symbolic thought through the spaces it informs and through which it embodies beliefs and practices. Archaeology locates and identifies their traces, and can in some cases propose models linked to specific cults or beliefs systems. What can be revealed by archaeology that is not addressed by classical sources? What about "religious" or sacred landscapes? We could also question the juxtaposition or superimposition of sacred and profane usages in the same space (caves, constructed spaces, open spaces, etc.)

Session 3: The religious fact and its representations, practices and rituals. While written sources bring explicit evidence, representations, images, practices and rituals are more difficult to characterise and interpret. How can we identify them? How can we recognize their symbolic dimension? When can we interpret a change in the evidence as a change in the religious paradigm? Can Archaeology respond to our hope to reach the Religious and something of the mental representations that support it by relying on material traces left by some practices, as for instance the funerary rituals. And what is a religious symbolic behaviour?

Session 4: The religious fact and the question of Identity. The diversity of religious systems together with the kind of adhesion they demand of individuals allows for identities to develop. Specific choices of practices and symbols result in groups differentiating themselves or merging. Still, if the adhesion to specific principles may lead to a different identity, the manner to envision their expression may also distinguish identities. And what about the social classifications suggested by gendered spaces, public inscriptions, variations in the values of offerings, and other signs of social status?

This call for contributions is directed at all the sessions. The contributions, 20 mn maximum, in French or English, will have to be registered in one of the sessions, and must target at least one of the questions raised in the above argumentation of the session. **Your proposals are expected before the 30th of May 2025, with title, keywords** (maximum 5) **and summary** (max. 1500 characters including spaces) to be sent to the following address: **ColloqueFaitReligieux@proton.me** Please identify in your email the session you have selected.

This colloquium is organised in the framework of the cultural and scientific programmation of the Musée de l'Homme, under the aegis of the Museum national d'Histoire naturelle (MNHN), Department "Homme et Environnement" in association with the 'Institut national de recherches archéologiques préventives (INRAP) and the Institut Catholique de Paris (ICP). To this day, it benefits also from the financial support from the UMR 7206 Eco-Anthropologie and the UMR 7209 BioArch of the CNRS-INEE, from the UMR 7041 ArScAN du CNRS-SHS and from the École Universitaire de Recherche Archaeological Challenges (EUR ArChal) / ANR /Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

Organising Committee

- AVERBOUH Aline, Researcher CRHC CNRS, UMR 7209 BIOARCH, MNHN Paris, France. Archaeologist, specialist in the production of hard materials of animal origin in prehistoric societies.
- BLIN Olivier, INRAP Research Engineer, Head of Research Coordination, Inrap Scientific and Technical Division, Paris, France. Archaeologist, specialist in Roman Gaul.
- BESSON Claire, Conservatrice du patrimoine en chef, Ministère de la Culture, DRAC île-de-France, Service régional de l'archéologie, Paris, France. Archaeologist, specialist in ancient urban archaeology.
- CHAMBON Philippe, Researcher DR CNRS, UMR 7206 Eco-Anthropologie, MNHN, Paris, France. Prehistoric archaeologist, specialist in Neolithic funerary practices.
- CRIBELLIER Christian, Deputy Director, Sous-direction de l'Archéologie, Ministère de la Culture, Paris, France. Archaeologist, specialist in ancient and medieval settlements.
- JAEGGI Sandra, Senior Lecturer in History, Institut Catholique de Paris, specialist in childhood and therapeutic deposits in funerary and cult contexts.

Scientific Committee

- COULANGEON Cécile, Professor *durante munere* in History of Art and Archaeology, Institut Catholique de Paris, Dean of the Faculty of Letters, specialist in architecture, particularly religious (X-XII), of the Middle Ages.
- CHEVRIER Marie-Hélène, Senior Lecturer in Geography, Institut Catholique de Paris, France. Specialist in the spatial study of religion.
- EBNOETHER Christa, Professor of Roman Archaeology, University of Bern, Switzerland. Specialist in cults.
- GUEDON Marie-Françoise, Professor of Anthropology, University of Ottawa, Canada. Specialist in North American Indian religions.
- MECQUENEM (de) Claude, INRAP research engineer, UMR 8584 Nouvelle Gallia Judaica, France. Archaeologist, specialist in medieval religious buildings in Europe,
- REDARD Céline, Senior Lecturer in the History of Religions, Director of the Institute of the History of Religions, Faculty of Historical Sciences, University of Strasbourg, France. Specialist in ancient Iranian religions.
- Sandrine RIQUIER, Head of archaeological research, INRAP, UMR 7324 CiTeres, France. Ceramic archaeologist, specialist in funerary practices in the 2nd Iron Age and Antiquity,
- THOMAS Julian, Professor of Archaeology, University of Manchester, Vice-President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Great Britain. Specialist in the Neolithic and Bronze Age of Great Britain and North-West Europe.