

RESEARCH PLAN

Religious ‘Stuff’: The Cognitive Science of Ritual Props in the Romanisation of Britain and the Christianisation of Iceland

LUKE JOHN MURPHY, 090187-2019

INTRODUCTION:

Religion today is often presented as a matter of intangibles like sin or *nirvāṇa*, and changing from one religion to another is understood as an internal personal change rather than new material circumstances. Recent scholarship on religious change has moved on from the earlier prioritisation of individual choice (‘conversion’), focusing instead on wider cultural changes introduced gradually over years or generations (‘inculturation’; Gräslund 2000; Bartlett 2007). Nonetheless, most such scholarship remains focused on human actors, constructing anthropocentric narratives of religious change within individual cultural contexts (Nilsson 1996; Nordeide 2011). This interdisciplinary project will challenge these assumptions, analysing evidence for the use of material items in inculturative religious change in two early-Medieval European contexts: the Romanisation of British Celtic culture in the Roman province of Britannia (c. 43-410 CE), and the Christianisation of Germanic Nordic paganism in Iceland (c. 870-1100 CE). The project will analyse a range of textual and archaeological evidence for the ways in which idols, jewellery, costumes, musical instruments, and even animals – so-called ‘ritual props’ – may have been used to heighten the effectiveness of ritual as a communicative medium through which religious ideologies could be transmitted (Rappaport 1979; Bell 1995, 61-83). In doing so, it will break new ground by applying theory developed in the Cognitive Science of Religion to early medieval material (Schjoedt et al 2013), and its comparative nature will enable the drawing of both abstract methodological and localised empirical conclusions. This interdisciplinary project will thus contribute to a range of scholarly discourses at the University of Iceland and abroad, including History, Archaeology, and the Study of Religion.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The project will address the following research questions: 1) what role did ritual props play in Iron-Age Britain?; 2) how did this change during Romanisation?; 3) what role did ritual props play in pre-Christian Iceland?; 4) how did this change during Christianisation?; 5) what comparative conclusions may be drawn about the role and effectiveness of ritual props during inculturative religious change? Each of these RQs will be addressed in a dedicated work package, WP1-5, forming the core of a new sole-authored monograph.

METHODOLOGY:

Theoretically, the project combines **cognitive resource depletion theory** and **actor-network theory** to examine the active roles played by artefacts and animals in ritual contexts (Latour 2005), which have previously been considered primarily as passive bearers of human symbolism (e.g. Gräslund 1992; MacLeod & Mees 2006). The active roles played by such agents in the conduct of religious ritual has received almost no attention to date, and none

of what scholarship there has been has looked at Iceland, Britain, or abstracted a general paradigm of religious change (Choyke 2010; Bintley 2015). **Cognitive resource depletion theory** builds on the long-accepted status of ritual as a communicative medium, suggesting that ritualised behaviour deliberately limits the ability of individuals to construct idiosyncratic understandings of religious experience, thus heightening acceptance of collective ideologies (Rappaport 1979; Bell 1997; Schjoedt et al 2013). The combination of this with **actor-network theory** should prove highly productive, as resource depletion theory has not yet been applied to a flat ontology, and ritual props can clearly deplete cognitive resources in a ritual setting: costumes and masks could heighten participants' physiological arousal, jewellery or precious objects might increase the pathos of a ritual specialist, and the management of artefacts or non-human animal actors would reduce the capacity of human agents to encode their own subjective impressions.

Empirically, the project will draw on a range of textual and archaeological evidence. While interdisciplinary work is not without its own potential pitfalls, the employment of multiple corpora for each context under study will alleviate the (sometimes severe) source-critical issues of the individual corpora, such as the interpretive difficulties of archaeology (Ellmers et al. 1992; Price 2006) and the transmission difficulties and temporal disconnects that plague textual material (Gísli Sigurðsson & Vésteinn Ólason 2004).

WORK PACKAGES & TIMELINE:

The project's research and outcomes can be broken down into the following WPs, addressing the RQs outlined above:

WP1: Iron-Age Britain will examine textual accounts of pre-Christian Celtic ritual (such as Cassius Dio's account of a hare-based prognostication in 60 CE; 1914-1927, 90-93) and finds of potentially-ritual objects like the Dinéault goddess statue (Green 1995, 33-39) in order to study the role of ritual props in Iron-Age Britain (Green 1997; Ritari & Bergholm 2015). Its results will be presented in a monograph chapter.

WP2: Roman Britain will consider how this situation changed during Romanisation, particularly with the acculturation of 'native' rituals through the introduction of Roman artefacts such as the British plate brooches (Mackreth 2010; Murphy & Ameen fth.). It will also study textual sources and inscriptions recording the assignation of Roman names to local deities (Jones 1987; Derks 1998; Webster 2001), and present these results in a monograph chapter.

WP3: Pre-Christian Iceland studies textual accounts of pre-Christian religious ritual in medieval texts such as the *íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, and *eddukvæði*, focusing on terminology for objects like *stalli*, *blæti*, and *hlaut* (Hultgård 1993; Raudvere & Schjødt 2012). It will compare this discourse to archaeological evidence for ritual props, contextualising Icelandic material with mainland Scandinavian material where preservation conditions require this (Kristján Eldjárn & Adolf Friðriksson 2000; cf. e.g. McCullough 2017; 208; Larsson 2004), and outlining its arguments in a monograph chapter.

WP4: Christian Iceland seeks to highlight the continuities inherent in early Christian ritual, drawing on textual accounts of Christian praxis in texts like the *samtíðarsögur* and

biskupasögur (Boyer 1975, Cormack 1994; Nedkvitne 2009; Orri Vésteinsson 2000; Haki Antonsson 2017). These will be examined hand in hand with archaeological evidence from Christian communities in Iceland (Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir 2010; 2015; 2017), and the WP's results discussed in a monograph chapter.

WP5: Religious Acculturation will set the findings of WP1-4 in a comparative context, drawing on the project's empirical evidence to reconsider previous scholarship on processes of religious change (Bartlett 2007; Derks 1998). It will propose a new paradigm of how ritual contributed to long-term cultural change in a monograph chapter, and include the writing of formal introduction and conclusion chapters for the monograph, as well as its submission to high-status publishers (e.g. Cambridge University Press' *Religion, Cognition and Culture* series).

Two additional WPs will cover work not directly related to the project monograph. **WP6** includes the production of two articles (to be pitched to high-quality OA journals like *Entangled Religions* or *Ethnologia Scandinavica*) covering case studies of the project's work. **WP7** will include non-research work for the University of Iceland, including administration, teaching (such as on the *Viking & Medieval Norse Studies* programme), and the organisation of an international conference at HÍ on the cognitive approaches to the past. It will also cover outreach efforts (both in Iceland and abroad), particularly the organisation of a temporary museum exhibition on the theme of 'ritual props' with Þjóðminjasafn Íslands.

	Year 1				Year 2				Year 3			
	Q1	Q2	Q3 ¹	Q4 ¹	Q1	Q2	Q3 ²	Q4 ²	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
WP1: Iron-Age Britain												
WP2: Roman Britain												
WP3: Pre-Christian Iceland												
WP4: Christian Iceland												
WP5: Religious Acculturation												
WP6: Case Study Articles												
WP7: Admin, Teaching, Outreach, etc.												

Key: Research, Drafting, & Preparatory Work Revision Other

¹ Research stay at Dept. of Anglo-Saxon, Norse & Celtic, Cambridge University (UK) to access library holdings on Celtic culture.

² Research stay with Uffe Schjoedt at Aarhus University (Denmark) to develop the project's cognitive methodology.

The Faculty of History and Philosophy is the ideal host for this project, as it will allow me to collaborate with local experts like Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir (on the Christianisation of Iceland), Sverrir Jakobsson (on historical sources for early Christian Iceland), and others outside the faculty, such as Terry Gunnell and Ármann Jakobsson (on pre-Christian religion). The project will thus not only build on my previous work on both British and Nordic religious praxis (see Murphy 2016; 2018; & Nygaard 2017; & Ameen fth.; Lauritsen et al 2018) to offer new comparative perspectives on inculturative religious change, but will leave a lasting impact on a range of comparative scholarly discourses, the academic milieu at the Universities of Iceland, Cambridge, and Aarhus, as well as on public discourse regarding materialism and religion.

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