



The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic

Ralph Merrifield

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Like all human activities, ritual customs, intended to gain advantage or avert disaster by supernatural means, have left their mark on the archaeological record. Yet archaeologists are often reluctant to recognize evidence of behavior that has no obvious material purpose. Even where they realize that something unusual has occurred, they will put forward every other possible explanation in terms of accident or functional utility, however improbable.

For the first time, Ralph Merrifield systematically looks at the evidence for European ritual from prehistoric times to the present day. In examining different kinds of ritual, superstition and magic—whether animal sacrifice, offerings to earth and water, spells and charms, or antidotes to witchcraft—he shows how common patterns of activity have continued with little alteration over the centuries. Through fundamental changes of religious belief—from primitive animism to developed paganism, from paganism to Christianity, from traditional Catholicism to Protestantism, and even from religious faith to scientific rationalism—the same kinds of simple ritual have survived to give comfort and a sense of security.

Profusely illustrated, this provocative and readable study will not only be required reading for archaeologists at all levels, but will also appeal to all those interested in folklore and the oddities of human behavior.

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