

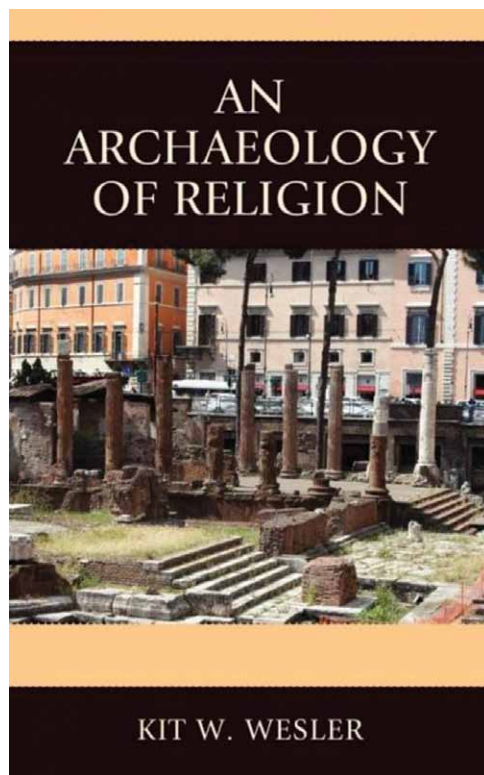
# Wesler, Kit W. 2012 *An Archaeology of Religion*. University Press of America, Inc.: New York, £37.95

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The archaeology of religion is under-researched compared to other sub-disciplines in archaeology, a lacuna that Wesler sets out to address in *An Archaeology of Religion*. It was written with the intent to create a survey of the archaeology of religion rather than providing a detailed case study, and so the book is wide-ranging and deals with a number of key examples in a concise manner.

Wesler approaches the earlier chapters (Grave Issues; Shamanism; Neolithic; and, Gods and Temples) with a cross-religious investigation. His chapter on Gods and Temples, for example, focuses on retainer tombs and temples with an overall emphasis on edifices and monuments. Wesler provides many interesting insights, deftly applying examples from various geographic regions around the world. Roman temples at Pompeii, Shinto shrines, Mesoamerican temples such as Teotihuacan - to name but a few - are all compared. The chapter discussion argues for a parallel development in state and religion as displayed in different retainer and temple civilisations around the globe. Wesler's unique juxtapositions thus provide a new perspective lacking in individual religious investigations.

The book continues with chapters on the archaeology of the current major religions



(Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). In these sections, Wesler focuses on places of religious practice and the use of space. Sections of particular interest include Christianity and Islam. The Archaeology of Christianity starts with a strong and succinct historical overview, covering a range of topics including Constantine, Vikings, Schism, and the Reformation. The sub-focus in the Christianity section is on death, burials, sym-

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bols, and churches. Christograms and the medieval idea of magical objects are briefly covered, as are the various Christian periods of conversion and the archaeological transition between these eras.

The Archaeology of Islam starts with a laconic historical overview, which is followed by a brief explanation of Islam's main tenets. This chapter is particularly helpful to those archaeologists who do not know the basics of Islamic archaeology, but deal with cultures and time periods, such as the Middle Ages and Byzantium, that interact constantly with Islam. Wesler explains the Islamic calendar and the main architectural features of mosques, such as the mihrab, minbar, minaret, and maqsura. Other subsections include the use of urban sites and domestic space. The latter's use is quite different from its practice in Christianity, a comparison that elicits a new approach vis-à-vis gender archaeology in general. The Islamic Urban Sites section is particularly helpful to those who study the archaeological landscape, providing a basic Islamic town layout for Qsar-es Seghir, Morocco.

The final chapters on the archaeology of pilgrimage, regional cults, and world religions provide a further cross-religious analysis of global religions. Wesler does not merely cover the Christian pilgrim way, discussing both Islam's pilgrimage to the Hajj and pilgrimage in Buddhist practice. The archaeology of pilgrimage section defines the landscape necessities of pilgrimage as witnessed in all pilgrimage religions, including infrastructure, souvenir shops, and pilgrim supply markets.

Overall, *An Archaeology of Religion* accomplishes its goal: the work discusses several aspects of the archaeology of religion in survey form. The work furthermore succeeds in its chapter-to-chapter continuity. Whereas previous works on the archaeology of world religions often have different specialists write each section, Wesler's chapters feature the same overall themes in history, landscape, symbols, and architecture. Similar

books typically investigate only one religion, whereas Wesler's cross-religious approach is consistent throughout the work. The book also covers chronological periods together, regardless of geographic location, which is perhaps the strength of his book, as it provides several new perspectives on this sub-discipline. The book is particularly helpful to students who are researching topics with cross-cultural and/or cross-religious interactions, such as pilgrimage, cults, tombs, crusades, wars, and burials. The book easily provides an overview introduction to an alien religion and their archaeology for those students who need a quick reference. The final chapters, specifically on pilgrimage and cult, also apply new theoretical ideas for the more advanced archaeologist.

Although *An Archaeology of Religion* features a wide scope covering the prehistoric to modern periods, it does not address this material in equal depth. The author relies heavily on secondary sources and grey literature, at times only providing limited new insights. To be fair, however, Wesler's express aim was to write a survey of the archaeology of religion, so a shallow treatment is expected. The work is particularly focused on history, landscape, and architecture, which suggests a stronger affinity to anthropology than archaeology. Moreover, the book is essentially marketed for American undergraduate study for several reasons. First, some chapters, such as the Archaeology of Christianity, have specific subsections with particular relevance for an American audience, such as "suggestions for church archaeology in the Americas" or the subsection "North America" in the Neolithic chapter, which features North American archaeology mostly pertaining to the United States. Finally, the image selection also suggests an American college audience. Whilst all the images are helpful and directly pertain to the text, some, such as an open-air church in Mexico used to illustrate the archaeology of Christianity, or a Mississippian platform mound in the Gods and Temples section, suggest an U.S.-centric mentality. Nothing is wrong with this

approach, yet it is worth keeping in mind for those who require a text with more European or Asian reference material.

*An Archaeology of Religion* succeeds in its goal as a survey book. It covers a great scope and provides some new perspectives

on the archaeology of religion. Although other archaeological works will still serve as primers for religion specific archaeologies, nevertheless, this work will emerge as a new foundation book in the archaeology of religion overall.