

**Some comments on *Underground Religion. Cult and Culture in Prehistoric Italy*.
by Ruth Whitehouse**

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Underground religion. Cult and Culture in prehistoric Italy forms an important synthesis of the research carried out by Ruth Whitehouse in Italy. Her involvement with Italian archaeology began in the late 1960s, and during the last decade she has concentrated on the study of the social, ritualistic and religious structures of the prehistoric populations living in the Italian peninsula. This recent publication provides a good summary of her work.

Before starting the review, I would like to comment on the circumstances in which this book has been published. Due to the recent closure of the Department of Mediterranean Studies at Queen Mary College, where the author and the Accordia Research Centre were based, the final production of this book, not to speak of the other activities of the Centre, has suffered various setbacks (cf. the last paragraph of the Preface). With the retirement of archaeologists such as Nicholas Coldstream, John Evans and James Mellaart, who were deeply involved in the study of Mediterranean archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, a serious gap in the research of this area within the University of London has been created. If we consider that the archaeological activity of this University owes its world-wide reputation also to the research carried out in the Mediterranean, the closure at Queen Mary College means that we will lose another important opportunity for continuing the study of this historically important area, at least for what the central and western parts of the Mediterranean are concerned.

Ruth Whitehouse's main concern in this book is the study of the cults, rituals and religious beliefs of the communities living in the Italian peninsula and in Sicily during the Neolithic and the Copper Age. As the book's title suggests, the majority of the evidence relating to these aspects has been found in caves and natural or artificial rock-cut structures or, in other words, in hidden places. This, as we will see later and as is made clear in the last chapter of the book, is in contrast with other contemporary European cult complexes, such as the well visible megaliths of central and western Europe.

In support of her theories and interpretations, Ruth Whitehouse refers mainly to evidence from southern Italy and Sicily. Frequent references, however, are also made to central Italian data. Very few are the northern Italian cult sites mentioned in the text. This is not due to a personal preference for southern Italy, even though it is the area where Ruth Whitehouse has carried out the greater part of her research. Rather the bias reflects the actual availability and quality of data so far available.

The book is divided into two main sections: in the first part the evidence is presented within its cultural and chronological framework, while in the second the data are discussed from various interpretative points of view. The author suggests that the reader might approach the book in two different ways. The first is to read it traditionally, chapter by chapter from the beginning to the end. Alternatively, Whitehouse suggests to start directly from the second part, using the first only as source of references.



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In this review, however, I prefer to divide the work into three parts. In the first one the theoretical and methodological approaches used are analysed. In the book this discussion forms the first chapter. The last two parts refer to the author's original division.

"The challenge is to find the right methodological and theoretical tools to let us into this world [the religion and the ritual] and to gain some insight into the way of living and thinking of the communities that created it" (cf. in the volume p. 1). With this statement Ruth Whitehouse begins a preliminary analysis of the theoretical tools used throughout her analysis. Before presenting such approaches, the author gives a series of definitions, taken from the archaeological and anthropological literature, for those essential words which will appear in the book more frequently. These include terms such as cult, religion, cult complex, symbolism and ritualism. The important work on the field of ritualistic and symbolic interpretations by the anthropologist Victor Turner and by Ian Hodder are then considered. Through this analysis, the author defines the four methodological approaches used for the discussion of the evidence. These include structuralism, functionalism, an historical perspective and, quite unusually in archaeological texts, a psychological critique of the data.

Ruth Whitehouse is well aware of the possible criticism of choosing four different approaches in order to provide her explanations. She prevents this by answering that "a multi-faceted approach will, I believe, get us at least a little nearer a total interpretation of social phenomena than any single restricted approach" (cf. p. 4). This 'multi-faceted' method is a rare but desirable perspective in archaeological interpretation, which is normally restricted to one approach or another. Recently, however, more archaeologists have tried to 'contextualise' their theoretical perspectives (see Hodder 1986). In other words, there are now more attempts to use the very complexity of the archaeological evidence, looking at this from various points of view, in order to better understand its meaning. Further support in favour of the adoption of this methodology, it comes from the work of the scientific philosopher Paul K. Feyerabend, especially when he asserts that "...the world which we want to explore is a largely unknown entity. We must, therefore, keep our options open and we must not restrict ourselves in advance" (Feyerabend 1975: 12) or that "A scientist who wishes to maximize the empirical content of the view he holds and who wants to understand them as clearly as he possibly can, must therefore introduce other views; that is, he must adopt a *pluralistic methodology*" (Idem: 21).

In my opinion, another positive feature in this book is that, for once in an archaeological text where structuralism, symbolism, functionalism, etc., are widely used, the text is easy to read and very understandable, without the use of difficult jargon or convoluted concepts. This is something that so far appears impossible to obtain when one is talking about, or using, archaeological theory. It is probably due to the author's effort to apply such theoretical tools to a practical study case. The concrete application of the theoretical 'commandments' is now felt as a substantial necessity, especially following the last thirty years of theoretical discussion and debate, which has been too often detached from what is archaeological reality.

In the following section (chapters 2-5) the relevant evidence for cult and religion in Italy and Sicily is presented. Chapter 2 provides a description of the chronology and cultural contexts considered in the study. Naturally, Ruth Whitehouse draws on her wide knowledge of the material culture for the Italian Neolithic and Copper Age. She structures this general framework according to her personal opinions, about which I do not always agree. For example, she assigns the Sicilian Stentinello Culture to the Early Neolithic (cf. p. 15). We now have enough evidence to suggest the presence of a quite distinctive phase in Sicily, characterised by an archaic impressed ware, that pre-dates the Stentinello Culture. This could be now considered as belonging to the very end of the Early Neolithic and to the full Middle Neolithic (Tiné 1983; Tusa 1985; Giannitrapani 1987). Such general chronological considerations could be considered, however, as irrelevant for the present discussion. In fact, I agree with Whitehouse when she states that the long-term structures are those relevant in order to understand the meaning of the religion and cults of Italian Neolithic and Copper Age, a period covering almost 4000 years. From the perspective of this book and with this long-term point of view in mind, then, the

assignment of a local culture to one period or another, could be regarded as a relatively unimportant matter.

In chapters 3 and 4 the evidence relating to the argument of the book is laid out following two different systems. In the first, 33 sites, mainly caves but also artificial rock-cut structures, are listed in geographical order. A brief description of the material culture is given, including its stratigraphic and chronological position, as well as the main religious and ritualistic evidence. This is not a comprehensive list, as only those sites pertinent to the discussion, or those that provide data of acceptable quality, are considered. In the following discussion, however, the author also refers to data from other minor or less documented sites. In chapter 4 the evidence is presented again, this time not site by site, but according to a three-fold sub-division: the relevant characteristics of the sites, their use during the Neolithic and Copper Age and their material culture. Following this analysis, in which Ruth Whitehouse identifies five categories of possible cult usage for these sites (burials, deposition of food and artefacts, activities correlated with the presence of stalagmites and stalactites, burning within a non-domestic context and wall painting), she draws the first provisional conclusions. The rites that could have taken place in these sites are described as rites of passage and rites of initiation. The author postpones a wider and deeper discussion of such interpretation to the last section of the book.

Finally, chapter 5 provides a very detailed description and interpretation of one of the most, if not the most, outstanding sites of Italian prehistory: Porto Badisco cave, in southern Apulia. This cave is formed by a series of long and narrow corridors, of which the principal three are decorated with fascinating wall paintings, dated to the Middle Neolithic (Graziosi 1980). These masterpieces of prehistoric art are very important for a general understanding of the symbolic and artistic structures of the Italian Neolithic and Copper Age communities. Because they are also important for the book's development, it is worthwhile here to consider such analysis more in detail. For artistic interpretation, Whitehouse relies largely on the detailed description by Paolo Graziosi (Graziosi 1980). The reading given by the two authors to the meanings of some of the wall paintings is sometimes different (e.g., cf. p. 106 and Graziosi 1980: 60). In general, however, Ruth Whitehouse follows Graziosi's artistic interpretation of the different figurative patterns, of their abstract developments in non-figurative categories, of their arrangements according to a deliberate distribution pattern on the cave walls (cf. p. 90 and Figs. 5.1a and 5.1b), and so on. On the religious and ritualistic meaning and function of the cave and of the wall-painting complex, Whitehouse goes one step further than Graziosi's study. The latter limits his ritualistic analysis in the concluding chapter of his book (Graziosi 1980: Parte V, 117-128). Furthermore, Graziosi gives only a very general and vague 'cultural' and religious attribution of the cave and of paintings. Ruth Whitehouse, on the contrary, widens this aspect, giving a series of challenging interpretations of the Porto Badisco cave wall paintings from a ritualistic point of view. These, together with the data previously presented, are used as starting points in the discussion developed in the last part of the book.

In the latter Ruth Whitehouse dedicates one chapter to each of the four different approaches used. This 'multi-faceted' discussion is preceded by chapter 6 in which the author summarises the ritualistic and religious aspects of the data presented. Ultimately the author identifies three main ritual themes: a secrecy theme, a hunting cult and a cult of 'abnormal' water. These are considered as parts of a major ritual related to the cult of fertility. These themes emerge quite strongly from the analysis of the evidence available to date, and is important to give a brief account of them here.

The presence of a 'secrecy theme' (considered by the author as the principal of the three, as can be seen in the choice of the book's title) is demonstrated by the fact that all these cult sites share similar features, such as hidden and underground locations, difficulty of access, and restriction of space. This is quite an obvious interpretation, if we consider that these sites are placed mainly in caves. However, nobody has so far explicitly recognised the fact that this could have a specific ritual meaning.

The second theme, the hunting cult, has also not been so far similarly recognised and explained. Ruth Whitehouse has considered the presence of Neolithic wall paintings, not just at Porto Badisco cave

but elsewhere too, depicting hunting scenes, as possible evidence for such an interpretation. The finding of a large number of wild animals remains (fewer but still present those of wild plants) within the various deposits of what have been considered ritual sites, it has been seen as further evidence for the presence of an hunting cult. One must consider that the data analysed are not those from a Palaeolithic or Mesolithic context, where this evidence could be more appropriately interpreted according to such religious perspective, as indeed has been done (see below). It dates rather to a period during which the main economic activities were farming and exploitation of domestic animals. Furthermore, the zoological and botanical evidence available for the inhabited settlements of this period, mainly open-air sites, demonstrates that the reliance of these communities on wild fauna and wild plants was very low. Therefore, the presence of such evidence in cave sites, possibly having a cult usage, has been interpreted by Ruth Whitehouse in terms of ritual meaning.

The third and last theme is the cult of 'abnormal' water. Ruth Whitehouse gives to this a highly symbolic meaning. The abnormal behaviour of water (e.g. liquid water becoming steam or solid, in the forms of stalagmites and stalactites, or bubbling and so on, cf. pp. 132-134), is interpreted here as a symbolic representation of transition and marginality. Such symbolic concepts are better explained and developed in the discussion of the following chapters. In contrast with the two previous themes, this one has already been recognised in the current literature (Tiné 1975; Tiné and Isetti 1982), especially in relation to the evidence from the Scaloria cave. This is also quite a spectacular site, both from a naturalistic and an archaeological point of view. It is also located in Apulia like the aforementioned Porto Badisco cave. Tiné's interpretation concerning the water cult performed in this cave is derived from the association of very peculiar painted vessels (Scaloria Bassa Ware, see Tiné and Isetti 1982) of Middle Neolithic data, with stalagmites and stalactites. The explanation given to this complex is a very functional and dramatic one. In fact, this manifestation has been seen as a final attempt of the Neolithic inhabitants of the Tavoliere region, facing a very severe climatic crisis (Tiné 1983), to win the favour of the Gods and to obtain rain for their vital agricultural activity (Tiné 1975: 189). Evidently the answer of the Gods to these offers was not the one desired by the Tavoliere inhabitants, since towards the end of the Middle Neolithic this area was almost completely deserted (Tiné 1975: 189; Tiné 1983). Now, a preference for one or the other of these interpretations is a matter of opinion as they may all be equally valid.

What it is important here is that Ruth Whitehouse has recognized elsewhere in Italy and in Sicily similar manifestation of the same theme, expressed in various different ways. The same is true for the other two themes. Already at this stage, it is possible then to perceive a first insight of a major religious and ritualistic long-term structure. It could be suggested that this is characterised by various different themes, like the three examined here, and by particular and secondary meanings, due to the variability of local cultural developments.

In the following four chapters of the book these arguments are further developed and discussed within the four different approaches. It is not the case here to give a full discussion of these chapters. It will be enough to say, for example, that within the structural meaning (chapter 7) a series of comparisons between religious and secular aspects of the Neolithic culture are carried out (cf. p. 135, Table 7.1). These words, religious and secular, could be equated to the wild and domestic aspects of Ian Hodder's structuralist analysis of the Neolithic period in the northern and eastern Europe (Hodder 1990). Ruth Whitehouse also does a further step towards the understanding of such a Neolithic ritual complex, introducing a third intermediate level. This conceptualisation could be depicted in the form of the following series of three-fold oppositions (cf. p. 145, Table 7.2; Hodder 1990)

this world	secular world	domestic	culture	settlement	the living	domus
liminal zone	ritual world	transitional	transitional	cult site	mediator	foris
other world	spiritual world	wild	nature	afterworld	ancestor	agrius

With the introduction of such third intermediate level, the aforementioned interpretation of the rites performed in cult sites as rites of passage and rites of initiation to the 'other world' acquires greater validity.

As for the functional meaning (chapter 8) Ruth Whitehouse uses this approach in order to explain the social function of the cults. By doing this, she strongly relies on ethnographic analogy. In the conclusions of the chapter the author identifies a series of possible social functions for the Neolithic cults in the Italian peninsula. These could be summarised as: the control of men over women and of older men over younger ones throughout the ritual system; a non-hierarchical society, divided along sex and age; an exogamous unilineal society, where marriage transaction of bride-wealth type and women 'exchanged' over considerable distances (cf. p. 157). All these social functions of the cults could be considered as quite probable, and are not definitely the only ones. It could also be that these are not their real meanings. It is worth taking them into consideration, however, since they are an important contribution to the understanding of the Italian Neolithic and Copper Age cultures and an important starting point for further research and discussion. However, we must not forget that we need to be very cautious when using ethnographic analogy in the attempt to explain prehistoric cultural functions and meanings. To generalise about human behaviour, especially when dealing with this particularly difficult aspect, is sometimes dangerous and can lead to over simplistic interpretations (for a supporting view of this method applied in the particular case cf. pp. 127, 135).

With the third approach, the historical one (chapter 9), Ruth Whitehouse traces the origin of two of the themes here considered (the secrecy theme and the hunting cult) back to the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods. The Franco-Cantabrian wall paintings (in Italy there are a few, but impressive examples), the rich mobiliary art and the presence of wild fauna in the archaeological deposits, have been almost unanimously interpreted as clear evidence of both a hunting economy and of propitiatory rituals related to it. The settlement pattern of this period may lean in favour of the presence for a 'secrecy theme'. The author, therefore, suggests the possibility for a radical meaning change of these two themes within the transition between the Palaeolithic/Mesolithic period and the Neolithic/Copper Age. This change affected only their symbolic meanings and not their physical manifestations. In the Palaeolithic/Mesolithic period this meaning, as already mentioned, has been interpreted as a propitiatory one. From a structuralist point of view again, this could be interpreted as an attempt to bring the natural (=wild) structures within the cultural (=domestic) ones. In the Neolithic/Copper Age there is a separation of these two structures and the introducing of the third intermediate level. This follows the development of the Neolithic domestic-wild relationship that we witness in the rest of Europe (Hodder 1990). To this change of meaning, Ruth Whitehouse gives a precise social, cultural and ideological perspective, analysed and discussed in the two previous chapters.

The psychological aspect of human behaviour has always been overlooked in the sphere of anthropological research. Historically these two disciplines stemmed, however, from the same source, that of philosophical anthropology, around the middle of the last century. Since then, both disciplines followed, with few exceptions, different lines of development. Recently, a tendency to include this particular aspect in order to gain a better understanding of human behaviour has been noticed, especially within cultural and social anthropology (cf. p. 177, but also Sperber 1984: 9-11). It is quite clear that such a perspective is difficult to apply to archaeological research. The differing personal moods and other psychological aspects of human beings, are unlikely to leave clear evidence in the archaeological record. However, Ruth Whitehouse (chapter 10) suggests that this is an insufficient reason not to include such a position in our analyses. Aware of the difficulties inherent in this position, the author is then limiting her considerations to underlining the importance of individual emotional experience while participating in, or subjected to, ritual. Ian Hodder also agrees with this point of view when he says that "It is only through the emotional experience, through fear of death, joy of life, the comfort of home, the danger of wild, that the structures have any force" (Hodder 1990: 29). In this chapter, Ruth Whitehouse again tests this particular approach using anthropological and ethnographic case studies.

In the last chapter of the book, the evidence for ritual and religious practices is analysed from an European perspective. This is very important, as places the interpretations previously examined within a wider context and, consequently, permits a better understanding of the Italian evidence itself. During this final analysis, Ruth Whitehouse refers to the abundant literature recently produced on this argument. From this perspective, the author identifies three main ritual complexes. All of these have been interpreted as different representations, or in other words having different ritualistic meanings, underlying the same general religion and cult. The latter could be connected with the main economic activity of the European Neolithic, i.e. agriculture.

The first of these complexes is that represented by the megaliths of central and western Europe. The ritual meaning of these impressive and well-known monuments and the cultural world they represent, has been summarised by Ruth Whitehouse as representation of agricultural communities who were in great need of cultivable land to exploit. Furthermore, they were representative of small-size descent and endogamous communities strongly associated with land ownership, although dispersed throughout different settlements. According to this interpretation, the megaliths embodied a strong and central reference point for these communities, in the form of a strong ancestor worship (cf. p. 189).

The second complex analysed is that of eastern Europe. Here the ritual complexes are of a different type to the previous one and are represented by rites and cults performed within the domestic unit, if not at a personal level. This is testified by the overwhelming presence of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statuettes, interpreted as representations of a Mother Goddess and her pantheon (Gimbutas 1980). Also the presence of particular buildings or particular areas of the single domestic units could lead to such interpretation (Hodder 1990). All these features appear within settlements of large size by Neolithic standards. Ruth Whitehouse summarises and interprets these ritual structures as representative of agricultural communities, based on a residential unit, in which the emphasis is not placed on land shortage, but on demographic pressure (cf. p. 192).

The third complex is, evidently, the one of particular interest in this book. According to Ruth Whitehouse, the underground religious world, evidenced by the data so far presented and discussed, is a representation of a fertility cult, manifested through the three themes previously mentioned. From the identified structural, social, historical and psychological meanings of the ritual complexes, the author concludes that the Italian Neolithic and Copper Age communities were based neither on residential nor on descent groups but on gender (i.e., divided by age and sex). Furthermore, the main concern of these communities was neither land shortage nor demographic pressure, as for the two previous cases, but rather fertility (cf. p. 193). This is quite a logical conclusion, considering that southern Italy and Sicily, from which most of evidence derives, are characterised by fertile land, which however is difficult to work (and to dig!), as well as by climatic conditions that even today are quite difficult for a developed agricultural economy.

I recognise that this is a quite long review. However, I believe that the book and the argument treated here were worthy of such detailed discussion. This is a good book, well written, easy to read, well documented and well illustrated. For once, in an English book dealing with Italian prehistory, a full and complete bibliography including both the major English and Italian references, is provided (I can not understand why this is not always the case; the opposite, however, is also true). On a few points I personally do not agree with the author. However, it forms a good starting point for discussion and for further investigation within Italian prehistory.

I would like to conclude this review with a personal suggestion to Ruth Whitehouse and to the Accordia Research Centre. In Italy there is a need for texts such as this one, in order to widen our archaeological perspective (generally a rather restricted one) and to provide more stimuli for discussion and investigation. I would suggest, therefore, a rapid translation into Italian of this book. It would be more accessible to Italian archaeologists and would allow a more alive discussion and debate of those aspects of Italian prehistory.

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