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Archaeology and Gendered Magic

An Introduction

The Archaeology of Magic and Ritual

More than thirty years ago, archaeologist Ralph Merrifield observed that “ritual and magic were formerly part of everyday life, but by association with fantasy fiction and occultism they have now acquired an aura of sensationalism that has discouraged investigation. . . . [Yet] like all human activities, ritual customs, intended to gain advantage or avert disaster by supernatural means, have left their mark on the archaeological record” (1987, xiii). His assessment of the archaeological consideration of magic and ritual remains surprisingly valid today, especially in the field of American historical archaeology, where few published studies have focused on magic. This lacuna in archaeological investigations, particularly of seventeenth-century America, seems ironic considering the wealth of historical studies focused on witchcraft and its tragic consequences. The paucity of attention to this area of human experience prompted me to research how British colonists in seventeenth-century New England practiced magic and whether women and men engaged in different magical practices.

As gender is a culturally relative construct, it was first necessary to understand what gender meant and how it was enacted in New England in the seventeenth century before I could attempt to make any association between gender and magical belief or practice. The Anglo colonists of New England placed tremendous importance on defining and upholding gender roles and identities, which they explicitly recorded in a variety of written documents. For them, gender was a rigid dualistic and patriarchal system that correlated maleness with superiority, assertiveness, and

authority and femaleness with inferiority, subservience, and dependence. Approaching the study of magic through a gendered perspective leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the spatial and material constructs seventeenth-century people used to negotiate their world.

Contrary to the opinion that magical belief and practice were merely superficial or sensational trivia, Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (2011, 16) summarize the complex and entangled role magic can play in societies like those in seventeenth-century New England. They observe that as “a complex and thorny issue, magic can be used as a form of resistance or retaliation, a means of redressing issues within a group, of defining self with regard to others, or a mode of gaining a sense of security and empowerment.” This book will show how all of these uses of magic were integral practices in the daily lives of New England men and women. Additionally, magic was often associated with religious beliefs (either formal or folk) that determined whether the practices could be overtly enacted or had to be done in secret.

Numerous historical documents and folklore sources describe how British colonists used magical objects in seventeenth-century New England, yet no archaeological study of magic from this time and place has been undertaken to date. What is known about seventeenth-century Anglo beliefs and practices comes primarily from British scholars (Davies 1999, 2007; Davies and de Blécourt 2004; Easton 1999a, 1999b, 2011; Hoggard 2019; Houlbrook and Armitage 2015; Hutton 2015, Merrifield 1987). General studies of the use of magic in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia span broad geographic areas and temporal ranges. They usually focus on a particular behavior such as intentionally concealing apotropaic (protective) objects such as witch bottles, shoes, cats, or coins (Augé 2014; Becker 1978, 1980, 2005; Evans 2011; Geisler 2003; Houlbrook and Armitage 2015; Manning 2012, 2014; McKittrick 2009). As important as these general studies are for establishing the temporal and spatial widespread continuity of traditional Anglo-European beliefs, they provide only a broad cultural explanation for such practices and do not consider gender, age, social relations, or local circumstances. To flesh out the data from these few archaeological studies, I have added folkloristic and historical accounts of the practice of magic in seventeenth-century New England and compared these with archaeological site reports for that time and place. Three sources of documentation of magical belief

and practice enabled me to develop a model of criteria for identifying evidence of ritual activity.

Such research is much needed in the field of archaeology. For decades, historical archaeologists have uncovered seemingly anomalous artifacts that they classified as rubbish or ritual objects or simply relegated them to the category “unknown.” They have often examined and misidentified mundane objects that people may have used as magic and misinterpreted the associated deposition formations of those artifacts by viewing them through a morphological and functional lens that gives primacy to utilitarian explanations over belief-based ones. Some archaeologists may have recognized the potential connection between these artifacts and magical practices but lacked sufficient evidence, resources, or time to pursue such interpretations. Thus, many of these artifacts and the insights they can provide about protective magic may lie hidden in archaeological site reports, unconsidered, misidentified, or misclassified.

Only in the last fifteen years have American historical archaeologists seriously considered the significance of magical artifacts in the United States. Unfortunately, those researchers constitute a very small group and have almost exclusively been concerned with slave or African American contexts (usually plantation settings, slave quarters, or cemeteries). This emphasis may be attributed to a bias on the part of European-American researchers toward focusing on exotic contexts instead of looking at their own cultural settings. In explaining the lack of attention to Anglo-American traditions in archaeology, Robert Means Lawrence (2003, 1) notes that “because of their ubiquity, the British have been an unproblematised category that is frequently the silent ‘other’ in archaeological studies that encompass identity, gender, race, domination and resistance, culture contact, [and] post-colonialism.” If we are to understand the processes of cultural interaction and admixture, it is essential that we give equal consideration to the magical expressions of all cultural groups. Fortunately, the interest in and archaeological consideration of British and Anglo-American magical material culture has gained momentum since I began the research for this work.

Anthropologists, historians, and folklorists have long documented how cultures around the world used magic to mitigate risk or resolve crisis. In fact, many of the anthropological studies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries primarily focused on belief in magic and its

origins, functions, and relationship to religion (e.g., Malinowski [1925] 1955; Mauss [1902] 1972; Tylor 1871). Bronislaw Malinowski in particular underscored how magic functioned as a mechanism for empowerment, control, and security in dangerous and unpredictable circumstances. However, historical archaeologists have virtually ignored this strategy for managing crises in British contexts in colonial New England. Because the practice of magic influenced daily decision making regarding personal safety, identity, and relationships with others in the seventeenth century, it is vital that archaeologists gain a better understanding of the forms and functions of such beliefs. Without recognition of these objects and behaviors, researchers lack critical data that help explain how and why past peoples negotiated and constructed particular spheres of authority and security. For this study, I have surveyed folklore sources, primary and secondary history sources, and reviews of archaeological site reports for evidence of the practice of magic to provide archaeologists with a more expansive approach for reconstructing the lifeways of seventeenth-century New Englanders.

Understanding risk and crisis management strategies through time can provide insight into how people managed their domestic boundaries to define and negotiate their relationships with others. Additionally, because women were most often associated with witchcraft and magic in seventeenth-century New England, attention to how gender related to magic in that time and place can offer new perspectives on how Anglo colonialists used material culture, organized space, interacted with natural and built landscapes, and negotiated social and familial relationships.

People of the past used what they believed were magical objects as supernatural agents to establish protective barriers around their homes, their property, and themselves. Evidence of this concern for negotiating the boundaries between safety and danger by erecting protective barriers around one's home and community is still visible in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century phenomenon of gated communities. Blakely and Snyder (1999, 99) emphasize the continuing "drive to redefine territory and protect boundaries" as a response to perceived rather than actual dangers (Low 2004, 11). This behavior is conceptually linked to the responses to perceived dangers in historical contexts.

My strategy was to identify which dangers seventeenth-century Anglo New Englanders perceived and the ways they used material objects they understood as magical to address those dangers. My approach considers