



## Book Reviews

### **THE POWER OF RITUAL IN PREHISTORY: SECRET SOCIETIES AND ORIGINS OF SOCIAL COMPLEXITY BY BRIAN HAYDEN**

*Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 2018. 398 pp, 64 B&W figs, hb, ISBN 978-1-108-57207-1, £90.00*

A number of secret societies exist around the world today but these were transformed significantly by colonial and missionizing projects, especially in the early periods of contact. In the mind of this reviewer, pre-industrial secret societies are likely more analogous to what in modern policy parlance are often labelled 'dark' or 'shadow' state actors. Past secret societies maintained their power through the control of information and resources. The leadership performed two contradictory roles in that they were at once benevolent patriarchs and orthodox terrorists. As such, members were admired and feared, and existed both inside and outside of society.

The intent of the terrorist is to, 'intimidate, antagonize, disorientate, destabilize, coerce, compel, demoralize or provoke a target population or conflict party in the hope of achieving from the resulting insecurity a favourable power outcome' Schmid (2011, 87). Certainly, the ethnographic accounts of secret societies paint a picture that will be familiar to those engaged in terrorism research. Characteristics that link secret society members to terrorists includes the threat or use of violence to influence an audience, obtain submission, extort resources and mobilise or immobilise sectors of society (eg, Ellis *et al.* 2016).

In *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory*, Brian Hayden makes a compelling case that the secret society, a form of elite, quasi-religious organisation, represents a sort of 'missing link' in understandings of the evolution of complex societies. Given the widespread ethnographic occurrence of secret societies in tribal cultures, which the author collates and presents to the reader meticulously and skilfully, the book recognises the probable centrality of secret societies to much socio-political and religious change in the past.

Even if we accept that the ideas of social evolution and inevitability of progress should be challenged or complicated (Pluciennik 2005), this book is of tremendous archaeological importance. A crucial observation is the routine emergence of secret societies during the transition from kinship-based and egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers to larger, more complex and stratified societies. Secret societies are attested regularly in ethnographies of complex

hunter-gatherers but Hayden asserts their existence from as early as the European Upper Palaeolithic, especially in resource-rich environments.

The book is in three parts of strikingly unequal length: Part I, 'The New World' (five chapter-length case studies); Part II, 'The Old World' (three chapter-length case studies); and Part III, 'Implications for Archaeology' (one chapter). As the author (p.26) notes, Parts I and II provide an examination of a 'good representative selection' of ethnographic accounts of secret societies rather than exhaustive coverage. Understandably, this selection has been informed by the richness of available documentation, in particular from pre-industrial contexts.

Elements explored from the American Northwest and harvested from ethnographies of groups such as the Wolf Society of the Kwakwaka'wakw, for example, include: motives, membership fees, ideology, politics, public displays, initiations and dances, ecstatic states, taboos, sacrifice, cannibalism, power animals, feasting, gender roles and, most importantly for archaeological purposes, material aspects, such as burials, architecture, exotic goods and paraphernalia. Similar themes are interrogated for New World traditions in California, American Southwest and Mesoamerica, the Plains, and Eastern Woodlands.

Old World coverage is focused on Oceania, Chiefdoms in Central Africa, and West Africa. Whilst the level of detail is impressive throughout, the primacy afforded to the coverage of New World examples does make the book feel rather unbalanced. The description is so thick at times that the reader risks forgetting the book is written by an archaeologist and not an ethnographer or historian. Commendably, there is a remarkable amount of information. Helpful in this regard, especially for those readers unlikely to read the full work, is the inclusion of 'grey box' overviews at the end of certain chapters to highlight important observations from respective regional traditions.

The most valuable part of the book is its characterisation of a number of material patterns which could be used to identify potentially the remains of past secret societies and their activities. Prospective archaeological indicators include: mortuary routine (high-ranking individuals were often buried in secret locations); storage architecture (surpluses were requisitioned from community households); cult structures (multi-functional but included locations for ritual, craft and feasting activities); shrines (isolated locations, including in caves and on mountains); monuments (especially in relation to the signalling of esoteric knowledge); iconography (depiction of power animals); sites/ caches for ritual paraphernalia and costumes; and evidence of anthropophagy. By themselves these patterns might, of course, also not indicate secret societies. Nonetheless, Hayden's characterisation forces such interpretations to be considered, even if they are ultimately dismissed.

This is also a book about another thematic staple of archaeological and anthropological debate: power. Hayden challenges the system-serving, pro-social communitarian interpretations of rituals, for instance, and instead favours the self-serving motivations of aggrandisers. In his account, secret societies did not work to ameliorate social stresses, fuse communities or even enhance cooperation as a means of navigating environmental traumas. Simply put, secret societies were created and sustained to further the self-interests of their members, especially those in high positions. Integrative only for their members, they were anti-social, divisive and existed to dominate and increase inequalities and competition in societies.

Hayden recognises that ritual knowledge was the 'superficial rhetoric used by those in power to justify their positions' (p.359) but that the creation and maintenance of power was always underpinned by the 'source of power' (p.351). Surpluses were created and controlled through initiation fees, sale of ceremonial knowledge, levies for rituals and feasts, control of trade, and access to loans and relationships, including with neighbouring groups. Power is not a stable phenomenon, of course, and has changed its character over time (Foucault 1991). It is a relational concept which in addition to domination also involves resistance and constraint. Although resistance to secret societies is difficult to spot archaeologically and with the caveat that defensive secret societies are mentioned, the book missed an opportunity to consider this aspect in more detail. Another gap is that the role of clans is not as prominent in Hayden's argument as this reviewer thinks it should be. Ethnographic accounts indicate that whilst leadership figures usually control resources, it is often the clans and the power they wield that control the leadership.

In short, the book makes available a mass of fascinating ethnographic, historical and theoretical material. This impressive and important work shows not only that secret societies can be identified in the remains of the past but also the interpretive potential of secret societies in contexts associated in particular with a range of complex hunter-gatherers and agricultural societies.

## References

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Review submitted: July 2019

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