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Human Sacrifice: A Brief Introduction

JAN N. BREMMER

After the dramatic attack on the Twin Towers on 9/11, reports admirably related how firemen ‘sacrificed’ their lives in order to save people, and how many people had become ‘victims’ of this atrocious crime. Both English terms, ‘sacrifice’ and ‘victim’, eventually derive, via the French, from Latin sacrificial language.¹ Even though most of us no longer condone or practice animal sacrifice, let alone human sacrifice, these metaphors are a powerful reminder of the practice of offering animals or humans as gifts to gods and goddesses, a practice that once was near universal, but nowadays becomes increasingly abandoned. Undoubtedly, the most fascinating and horrifying variety of sacrifice remains human sacrifice, and a new collection of studies hardly needs an apology.² Serious studies are rare in this area where sensation often rules supreme. New approaches to the sources (below), new anthropological insights and new archaeological discoveries, for instance those in ancient India to which Hans Bakker draws to our attention in Ch. IX, all

¹ For Roman sacrifice see most recently Bremmer, ‘Opfer 3: Römische Religion’, in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, fourth edition, vol. 6 (Tübingen, 2003) 578-80; J. Scheid, *Quand faire, c’est croire - Les rites sacrificiels des Romains* (Paris, 2005).

² The more so as the most recent overview by K. Read, ‘Human sacrifice’, in the authoritative *Encyclopedia of Religion*, second edition, vol. 6 (New York, 2005) 4182-85 is wholly unsatisfactory. Much better, I Taloş, ‘Menschenopfer’, in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 9 (Berlin and New York, 1999) 578-82.

enable us to take a fresh look at old problems, but also to start thinking about areas that have long been neglected in this connection, such as ancient China, as Tim Barrett reminds us (Ch. XII).

Human sacrifice was sometimes combined with cannibalism. This was the case among the ancient Celts,³ the ancient Chinese (Ch. XII) and the ancient Greeks, as Jan Bremmer (Ch. III.3) argues in his discussion of the secret initiatory rites of the Arcadians, where a novice had to taste the entrails of a slaughtered boy. Although recent decades have recognised that cannibalism is far more often the subject of myths and stories than of real practices,⁴ the one-time existence of human sacrifice is beyond any doubt, even though here too we regularly find the practice ascribed to innocent peoples, tribes or groups, as we will see presently.

The ideal analysis should always pay attention to the question of who sacrifices what to whom, where, when, why and with what kind of rhetoric. To begin with the sacrificers, it is clear that human sacrifice was already practised in the Stone Age,⁵ and it is therefore not surprising that it occurs in one of our oldest surviving religious texts, the Indian Vedas, as Asko

³ K. Strobel, 'Menschenopfer und Kannibalismus. Neue Erkenntnisse zur Kultpraxis und Kultur der Keltenvölker in Kleinasien', *Antike Welt* 33 (2002) 487-91.

⁴ For the most recent reviews of the debates around the reality of cannibalism see P. Hulme, 'Introduction: The Cannibal Scene', and W. Arens, 'Rethinking Anthropophagy', in F. Barker *et al.* (eds), *Cannibalism and the Colonial World* (Cambridge, 1998) 1-38, 39-62, respectively.

⁵ R. Thurnwald, 'Menschenopfer (C. Allgemein)', in M. Ebert (ed.), *Reallexikon der Vorgeschichte* VIII (Berlin, 1927) 145-154; J. Maringer, 'Menschenopfer im Bestattungsbrauch Alteuropas. Eine Untersuchung über die Doppel- und Mehrbestattungen im vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Europa, insbesondere Mitteleuropa', *Anthropos* 37-40 (1942-1945) 1-112.

Parpola demonstrates (Ch. VIII). This volume can only present a selection of important cases, but the literature shows that human sacrifice was once widespread. It was practised not only among the ancient Germans, whose practices are the subject of one of the earliest books on the subject,⁶ and other early European peoples,⁷ but also in the Ancient Near East,⁸ among the Arabs,⁹ the Turks,¹⁰ Indonesia,¹¹ West Africa,¹² native Americans,¹³ and Polynesia¹⁴ - just to mention more recent investigations. In many of these cases we have only scattered notices that need to be carefully sifted and analysed before we can reconstruct an outline of the rituals involved. Unfortunately, a 'thick description' of the practice, as we would expect from modern

⁶ G. Schütze, *De cruentis Germanorum gentilium victimis humanis liber unus* (Leipzig, 1743); see most recently A. Hultgård, 'Menschenopfer', in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, Vol. 19 (Berlin and New York, 2001) 533-46.

⁷ K. Dowden, *European Paganism* (London and New York, 2000) 179-88, 280-90.

⁸ A.R.W. Green, *The role of human sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Missoula, 1975).

⁹ J. Henninger, 'Menschenopfer bei den Arabern', *Anthropos* 53 (1958) 721-805.

¹⁰ S. Vryonis Jr, 'Evidence on human sacrifice among the early Ottoman Turks', *Journal of Asian History* 5 (1971) 140-46.

¹¹ R. Jordaan and R. Wessing, 'Human Sacrifice at Prambanan', *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde* 152 (1996) 45-73.

¹² C. Wright, *Superstitions of the Ashantees, especially those which lead them to sacrifice on certain occasions, thousands of human victims* (Troy, NY, 1848); J.D. Graham, 'The Slave Trade, Depopulation and Human Sacrifice in Benin History', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 6 (1965) 317-34; R. Law, 'Human sacrifice in Pre-Colonial West Africa', *African Affairs* 84 (1985) 53-87.

¹³ S.B. Ross, *Das Menschenopfer der Skidi-Pawnee* (Bonn, 1989).

¹⁴ A. Schoch, *Rituelle Menschentötungen in Polynesien* (Ulm, 1954); G. Obeyesekere, *Cannibal talk: the man-eating myth and human sacrifice in the South Seas* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2005).

anthropologists, can be given only rarely, and the analysis of the Konds by Lourens van den Bosch (Ch. X) is a welcome exception to this rule.

These cases and those that are analysed in this volume have made increasingly clear that human sacrifice is not something that is typical of marginal and minor tribes. On the contrary, as a regular practice on grander scale, human sacrifice seems to belong to agrarian societies and larger empires that could happily dispose of criminals or prisoners of war without the community suffering a disastrous loss of members, as was the case among the ancient Aztecs, whose sacrifices are illuminated by Michel Graulich (Ch. I). The connection of human sacrifice with more developed cultures was already seen by one of the pioneers of anthropological fieldwork, the Finnish sociologist, anthropologist and moral philosopher, Edward Westermarck (1862-1939). In the language of a century ago he observed that human sacrifice 'is found much more frequently among barbarians and semi-civilised peoples than among genuine savages (!), and at the lowest stages of culture known to us it is hardly heard'.¹⁵ In a similar vein, the later Regius Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge, Stanley Arthur Cook (1873-1949), noted that 'human sacrifice stamps relatively advanced and especially decadent peoples'.¹⁶ It is not surprising, then, that cultures that practise human sacrifice usually have a strong government.¹⁷

Given that human sacrifice is a nasty business, it is perhaps not surprising that people often tried to minimise its emotional and financial costs. That is why the victim was often

¹⁵ E. Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*, 2 vols (London, 1908-1912) I².436f.

¹⁶ S.A. Cook *apud* W.R. Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London, 1927³) 631.

¹⁷ As was already observed by E.M. Loeb, *The Blood Sacrifice Complex* (Menasha, 1923) 8f.

very young or old,¹⁸ a criminal, a stranger, a slave, or a prisoner of war. Modern biological research has now also shown that the Moche, the dominant culture on the North Coast of Peru (200 BC – AD 750) and avid human sacrificers, sacrificed not their own members but those of a number of competing Moche polities.¹⁹ In other cases, such as among the nineteenth-century Indian Konds, the victims were always treated with great kindness before being sacrificed. In turn, the Konds expected them to offer themselves voluntarily for their well-being (Ch. X). The Swiss historian of religion and folklorist Karl Meuli (1891-1968) has termed such behaviour of the sacrificers a ‘comedy of innocence’.²⁰ He showed that the idea of voluntariness goes back to the world of the early hunters, who pretended that their game had offered itself voluntarily so that they would not be guilty of their deaths. The idea lasted a long time and could also be found in Greek representations of human sacrifice (Ch. III).

As the victims of human sacrifice were often strangers to, or marginal members of, the community, the practice seems rarely to have been challenged internally. Two brief notices from the Pacific suggest, though, that not every participant was

¹⁸ For old people see S. Silva, ‘Traces of Human Sacrifice in Kanara’, *Anthropos* 50 (1955) 577-92 at 586.

¹⁹ R.C. Sutter and R.J. Cortez, ‘The Nature of Moche Human Sacrifice: A Bio-Archaeological Perspective’, *Current Anthropology* 46 (2005) 521-49. For Moche human sacrifice see also C.P. Popson, ‘Grim rites of the Moche’, *Archaeology* 55 (2002) 30-35; P. Gwin, ‘Peruvian Temple of Doom’, *National Geographic* 206.1 (2004) 102-17; E.K. de Bock, *Human sacrifices for cosmic order and regeneration: structure and meaning in Moche iconography, Peru, AD 100-800* (Oxford, 2005).

²⁰ K. Meuli, ‘Griechische Opferbrauche’, in his *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2 vols (Basel and Stuttgart, 1975) II.907-1021 at 982-3, 995-7. His views have been much debated, see Bremmer, *Greek Religion* (Oxford, 2003³) 41-3.

happy with the ritual. When in eighteenth-century Tonga ‘[the ruler] Tuku’aho was killed at Mu’a the people came to Hihifo where there was a very beautiful girl, the daughter of Tuku’aho’s tu’asina [maternal uncle]. She was at the beach washing her hair. When she heard the news she went on with her washing, then she straightened herself up, tossed back her hair and went forward to meet the men. One of the men who was to strangle her could not do it, so Ulakai [son of Tuku’aho] took both ends of the rope in his hands and finished her himself’. And when the Tahitian ruler Pomare I (1742-1803) placed excessive demands for human victims upon the commoners of Tahiti in the early 19th century, they fought back: ‘Some time previous to the death of Pomarrie he had ordered a human sacrifice from the next district: the people were so exasperated against him on this account, that they suddenly rose upon him one night, and he escaped with difficulty to Matavai’.²¹ Yet these cases are rare exceptions, and the lack of details and the regular secrecy of the rites makes that we rarely get a glimpse of what those concerned really thought.

The receiving gods or other supernatural beings can be of quite varying status. Sometimes they are left anonymous, as in ancient Greece, where our texts are sometimes extremely vague in specifying the gods to whom the human sacrifice is offered. Yet at the same time, it is not the case that the receiving divinity is always marginal or terrifying. On the contrary, divine recipients in ancient Greece could be found among the most important gods and goddesses, such as Zeus, Apollo and Artemis;²² the ancient Irish sacrificed humans to their ‘chief

²¹ Both examples are taken from M. Filihia, ‘Rituals of sacrifice in early post-European contact Tonga and Tahiti’, *Journal of Pacific History* 34 (1999) 5-22.

²² See S. Georgoudi, ‘À propos du sacrifice humain en Grèce ancienne: remarques critiques’, *Archiv f. Religionsgeschichte* 1 (1999) 61-82.

idol' Crom Crúaich, as Jacqueline Borsje well illustrates (Ch. II.1), and among the Indian Konds the receiving goddess was the earth goddess, who was also often thought to be the founding goddess of the village and the first female ancestor – clearly, the most important divinity of the community (Ch. X). Whatever people may have said, it is clear that human sacrifice is often connected with the most important gods of ancient and modern religions.

In West Africa, on the other hand, the recipients usually were the more prominent recently deceased, whose retinue in the afterlife apparently was in need of enlarging;²³ for a similar reason, retainers were sacrificed in ancient Egypt and Sudan, as Jaap van Dijk demonstrates (Ch. VII). Arab travellers also noted that female slaves were sacrificed at the funerals of wealthy men in ancient Ghana.²⁴ In fact, the great Dutch 'armchair anthropologist' Olfert Dapper (1635-1689) already noted that in West Africa 'nobody important dies without it costing blood'.²⁵ Such sacrifices may have even become 'secularised' into the suicide attacks of the Japanese *kamikaze*, as Kengo Harimoto suggests (Ch. XI).

Where were the victims sacrificed? The spatial aspect of human sacrifice has not always received the attention it deserves. Was such an emotionally loaded sacrifice performed in the heart of the community or did people do it outside? In Greece, a criminal could be sacrificed to Kronos before the city gate (Ch. III.1), but among the Konds human sacrifices took place in the centre of the village (Ch. X.6), and in the case of construction sacrifices, they were commonly performed for public and communal structures, such as dykes, city gates,

²³ Law, 'Human sacrifice', 57.

²⁴ N. Levtzion and J. Hopkins (eds), *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge, 1981) 52.

²⁵ O Dapper, *Naukeurige beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche gewesten* (Amsterdam, 1676²) second part, 125.

palaces and waterworks.²⁶ Each case, then, has to be judged on its own merits.

The occasions for human sacrifice varied widely, but certain moments clearly stand out. The aftermath of war was already the stage for human sacrifice among the ancient Germans, as Tacitus knew,²⁷ and prisoners of war were often favourite victims, from the Aztecs to the ancient Arabs. Secondly, the sacrifices often took place during exceptional circumstances, as was the case in Roman history in periods of crisis, like the wars against Carthage;²⁸ in Egypt, too, human sacrifice seems to have been rather rare, as Herman te Velde shows (Ch. VI), and limited to certain festivals or the well being of an extremely ill pharaoh. In other cases, for example in Tonga, a child was sacrificed in order to avert the wrath of the gods or when the yam crops threatened to fail.²⁹ In other words, human sacrifice was often resorted to when the life of the community was in great danger: extreme situations clearly

²⁶ For example, see R. Wessing and R. Jordaan, 'Death at the Building Site: Construction Sacrifice in Southeast Asia', *History of Religions* 37 (1997) 101-21.

²⁷ Tacitus, *Annales* 13.57; Jordanes, *Getica* 41.

²⁸ See most recently B. Twyman, 'Metus Gallicus. The Celts and Roman human sacrifice', *Ancient History Bulletin* 11.1 (1997) 1-11; C. Grottanelli, 'Ideologie del sacrificio umano: Roma e Cartagine', *Archiv f. Religionsgeschichte* 1 (1999) 41-59; I. Gradel, 'Jupiter Latiaris and human blood: fact or fiction?', *Classica & Medievalia* 53 (2002) 235-54; V. Rosenberger, 'Metus und Menschenopfer: Überlegungen zur Gallierfurcht und zur zweiten Gründung Roms', in A. Knepe and D. Metzler (eds), *Die emotionale Dimension antiker Religiosität* (Münster, 2003) 47-64. In the nineteenth century, the problem was even discussed in the highest English circles, cf. Ph. Stanhope, *Were human sacrifices in use among the Romans? Correspondence on the question between Mr. Macaulay, Sir Robert Peel, and Lord Mahon, in December 1847* (London, 1860).

²⁹ Filihia, 'Rituals of sacrifice', 10, 12.

required extreme measures. A third important category seems to have been the construction sacrifice, which is also the type of human sacrifice that has left the most traces in European folklore. It is attested all the way from Russia to France and from Scandinavia to Greece, even if it was especially popular in the Balkans.³⁰

However, we are still at the beginning of a discussion of the deeper-lying reasons for human sacrifice. To what extent can we isolate social, economic and political factors that favoured human sacrifice? Is there a correlation between the violent character of a society and the practice of human sacrifice? Was there an ecological basis? Several scholars have argued that the Aztecs practised human sacrifice in order to combat protein scarcity, but this approach is certainly not generally accepted and no scholarly consensus has yet been reached.³¹ In fact, human sacrifice is often analysed in isolation from the larger issues of a society, and in this respect much work still remains to be done.

Finally, the heated debate around the reality of cannibalism has made scholars much more careful in their handling of the sources for human sacrifice than used to be the case in earlier times. We now realise that we have to be attentive to the discourse of our texts. Do they report 'facts' or is human sacrifice used 'to think with'. In other words, is human sacrifice used as, for example, a means to stigmatise others? The latter usage can already be found in the Old Testament, where it is always the others who are accused of this abominable practice, whereas, as Ed Noort (Ch. V) argues, it now seems probable that at a certain stage and under certain circumstances child sacrifice

³⁰ For an extensive bibliography see M. Eliade, *Zalmoxis, the Vanishing God* (Chicago, 1972) 164-90.

³¹ See most recently M. Winkelman, 'Aztec Human Sacrifice: Cross-Cultural Assessments of the Ecological Hypothesis', *Ethnology* 37 (1998) 285-98.

did indeed belong to the belief system and praxis of Ancient Israel. On the other hand, although the early Christians were, undoubtedly wrongly, accused of child sacrifice, orthodox Christians did not hesitate to use the same charges against numerous splinter groups in their crusade against heresy and, later on, with catastrophic effects, against the Jews, as Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta (Ch. IV) shows. The examples from Israel and early Christianity are comfortably removed in time, but we come much closer when we look at the entertainment scene of contemporary Nigeria. Here the Igbo people of the south-eastern part of the country turn out home videos in high numbers. These frequently portray human sacrifice as a means to fabulous wealth and success. In the end, the success is often only temporary, but the perpetrators are certainly not always punished: actually, their crimes do regularly pay.³²

The ritual of human sacrifice that started in the dark prehistory of *homo sapiens* is hardly practised any longer, but its occurrence in home videos and contemporary horror movies still shows something of the fascination that the practice holds over the minds of many peoples.³³ Its religious significance may have disappeared, but its emotional power still grips us and makes us shiver. Human sacrifice will probably stay with us for a long time still.³⁴

³² J.Z. Okwori, 'A dramatized society: representing rituals of human sacrifice as efficacious action in Nigerian home-video movies', *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 16 (2003) 7-24; see also *Christianity Today* 48.12 (2004) 22.

³³ Many examples of movies with the theme of human sacrifice can be found on the Web; see also M. Pizzato, *Theatres of Human Sacrifice: from ancient ritual to screen violence* (Albany NY, 2005).

³⁴ I am most grateful to Yme Kuiper for comments and to Ken Dowden for kindly correcting my English.