

## REVIEW: HUMAN SACRIFICE: ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Laerke Recht, 2018.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 135 pages, 40 figures. ISBN:  
9781108728201.

Human sacrifice probably elicits one of the most powerful emotional reactions among cases of mortuary depositions. Similarly to other atypical depositions it is also a contentious topic, with debates ranging from those who see the concept as a historiographic construct, as was the case of a project led by Elizabeth Graham at UCL<sup>1</sup>, to scholars interpreting this practice as having a social function in the construction of complex societies<sup>2</sup>. Between these extremes sits this short but sharp volume signed by Laerke Recht, a researcher specialised in the Bronze Age in the eastern Mediterranean, religion, gender and human-animal relations in the past. The volume is published as part of a new series, Cambridge Elements, which aims to propose a 'new concept in academic publishing' with concise introductions in arts and sciences related topics<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the reader should view this book rather as a longer essay, which chooses five key areas and time periods to introduce the topic of human sacrifice. Nevertheless, the author goes through the main relevant points pertaining to the analysis of this liminal category of mortuary discovery. At the same time, it approaches the topic by taking an interdisciplinary perspective, which brings together different kinds of data towards the interpretation of such discoveries: archaeological, osteological, taphonomic, textual and iconographic.

The volume is structured in seven chapters: Introduction, Near East, Egypt, China, Northern Europe, Mesoamerica, and Conclusions. At the end, an Appendix lists other cases of human sacrifice found in the published literature. The author opens the study by laying out in the Introduction some important themes for understanding sacrifice in past societies: its meaningful character, decoded in a cultural context, wide variability throughout contexts and time periods, and the importance of methodological guidelines, as well as caution in its interpretation. The definition Recht embraces is that of sacrifice as 'a religious ritual where a living being is deliberately killed in the process for the purposes of the event and usually in honor of a supernatural entity'<sup>4</sup>. She draws an informative list of indices that can suggest the presence of sacrifice in an archaeological context, both in terms of signs on the body (trauma), but also regarding

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1 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/directory/myth-human-sacrifice>

2 Watts *et alii* 2016.

3 <https://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/elements>

4 Recht 2014 *apud* Recht 2018, p.3.

the depositional context (e.g. bodies found in religious buildings, buried in the foundations of various constructions etc.) (p.4-6). The main types of sacrifices Recht discusses are mortuary sacrifices, with the sub-category 'retainer sacrifice' - individuals accompanying a 'master' in death, and construction related sacrifices.

Given the limited space available, the author does not delve further into a methodological discussion, though it would have been interesting to see her opinion on more conservative takes, such as that proposed by Philippe Lefranc and colleagues<sup>5</sup> who do not consider 'peripheral accompaniment' (where one typical funerary deposition is accompanied by several other atypical ones) as sacrifice - in Laerke Recht's terminology retainer sacrifices. In this claim, Recht cites George Basden<sup>6</sup> who sees these bodies just having the role 'to accompany the chief into the great beyond' and not 'an atoning character' like human sacrifice has. Other authors<sup>7</sup> observe the importance and recurrence of the display of extreme violence- 'over-kill' (through dismemberment, mutilation and restraints) associated with sacrifice, a factor absent in some of the discussed case studies in this volume. In other contexts, drawing a line between victims of conflict and sacrifice/ritual killing victims is also difficult, especially as both cases might leave a similar signature through a discard of enemies' bodies in non-funerary contexts (such as ditches and pits). This links to Jennifer Kerner's (2018, p.45) important distinction between funerary depositions which express a 'positive intentionality', and those discoveries marked by 'negative intentionality', refusing one a grave and simply discarding their body. However, as Recht makes explicit from the start, grouped under one modern label of 'sacrifice' would have been a variety of modes of dealing with bodies, and purposes structuring these practices; at the end of the day, researchers choose one interpretation over the other based on the contextual data available.

Following on from this, we delve right into Chapter 1 which comprises evidence from the Royal Tombs at Ur and from four other sites in the Near East, with bodies found in foundation deposits, retainer and mortuary contexts. These are some of the most extraordinary cases where we see a main dead individual and other accompanying bodies ('retainer' sacrifices): e.g. in the Great Death Pit in Ur, six males and 68 females bodies were found, the women 'in mostly neat rows, each in fine dress, with silver or gold hair decorations and jewellery' (p.12). An extraordinary detail is the presence of lyres on top of some of the women, pointing to their role in life, and maybe in death too.

In the next chapter the reader is taken to the banks of the Nile around 3000 BCE (slightly before and after). There, during the Predynastic and First Dynasty periods, Egypt royal tombs contain retainer sacrifices. Of interest are also discoveries from what Recht rightly calls the 'enigmatic funerary enclosures' at Abydos (p.28). These structures containing possible sacrificial victims were built at a distance from the royal cemetery and were enclosed by high walls, maybe serving as spaces of temporary ritual

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5 Lefranc *et alii* 2018, p.103.

6 Basden 1921 apud Lefranc *et alii* 2018, p. 103.

7 e.g. Aldhouse-Green 2015, with other examples in Smith 2017 and Hodder 2019.

activity. In this chapter the author brings together archaeological data, with osteological information and iconographic interpretation.

Chapter 4 looks at China during the Shang period (16<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c. BCE), where we encounter again sacrifices accompanying royal burials. This time though the bodies bear marks of beheading, restraints, dismemberment, or being buried alive (p.48). Besides these discoveries, archaeologists found construction deposits or sacrifices recorded on oracle bones of around 14197 individuals (p.52), most of whom were likely enemies of the Shang people. Compared with the Egyptian cases, mortuary sacrifices seem to point to the importance of an ancestor cult, with the sacrifices and funerary rituals actively turning a king into an ancestor.

From here we are introduced to Northern Europe, to the bog bodies found in the UK, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands and Germany. Suffice to say that these discoveries raise numerous questions, with alternative interpretations ranging from executions and accidental deaths to funerary depositions. In this dedicated chapter we learn about fascinating case studies. These range from a possible Norwegian drowned queen to the bound German Kayhausen boy, including strange customs such as 'nipple cutting' documented in two bodies dated to the 4<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE. It is possible that this practice was linked to nipple sucking rituals and Irish kings. At the same time, the chapter covers methodological problems and the significance of bogs as liminal places. It would have been illuminating to learn more about the cultural practices referenced throughout (e.g. bounding, nipple cutting, places and superstitions), but probably the format of the volume did not leave too much room for details.

Lastly, Chapter 6 deals with Mesoamerica, the place which most people would probably associate with the idea of human sacrifices. Again, iconographic, textual and archaeological evidence are brought together to discuss the role of sacrifice in Mesoamerican cultures. The author takes stops at Teotihuacan and its construction sacrifices, at Mayan and Aztec ball-game courts, and in Guatemala or Palenque where we find retainer sacrifices. A separate discussion is dedicated to heart removal. Most of these cases seem to bring forth the relation between sacrifices, state power, and public and mass display in Mesoamerican cultures.

The Conclusions offer an overview of the themes discussed, with an interesting analysis on the performativity of sacrificial practices and their ideological implications.

In essence, I think this is a well-written informative introduction to the topic of human sacrifice, moving elegantly from small scale case studies to large scale conceptual considerations. Bringing together several cases of potential human sacrifices has the benefit of highlighting the importance of methodological and theoretical considerations for those who encounter 'atypical' mortuary discoveries. The interpretation of deviant/atypical deposits is a topic which challenges interpretation in the scholarly literature, as similar evidence can take different meanings depending on the context: one can find infants who died a natural death under Neolithic or Medieval thresholds or foundations, while other children were ritually killed. Likewise, skull deposits are frequent Neolithic mortuary discoveries throughout the Balkans, possibly linked to ancestors' lineages and place-making strategies, which contrasts with the skulls of the decapitated victims in Chinese contexts, or those belonging to conflict victims in

ditches in certain German prehistoric sites, or of individuals curated in Aztec tzomapanltis. For such reasons, the topic of human sacrifice is one which requires caution, a clear methodological framework, context-based nuanced interpretation, and interdisciplinarity, qualities which are present in this volume.

I think this volume would benefit both students, and specialists, osteologists and archaeologists alike. Given the accessible language, free of scientific jargon, the text would also make a pleasurable read for the general public. And as we are reminded throughout the volume, beyond initial shock or gore, studying the practice of human sacrifice reminds us of times long gone in which liminal places, times and people straddled the line between this world and the next, between the sacred and the mundane, between the world of the living, ancestors and gods. As Irish poet Seamus Heaney beautifully writes about such liminal places, bogs in his 'Kinship' poem:

'I love this turf-face,  
it's black incisions,  
the cooped secrets  
of process and ritual'

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