

Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece: Between Myth, Ritual and Reality

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the controversial topic of human sacrifice in ancient Greece, exploring its complex connections between myth, ritual, and reality. The research centers on the core divide between abundant literary and mythological records and scarce archaeological evidence, analyzing academic debates such as Walter Burkert's functionalist framework and Dennis Hughes' skepticism. By sorting out different types of practices related to human sacrifice, including pre-war sacrifices, building sacrifices, and the pharmakos ritual, and combining archaeological discoveries from the Minoan-Mycenaean era with the specific process of the "pharmakos" ritual, the study reveals the potential functions of human sacrifice in social cohesion, anxiety alleviation, and polis purification. The research indicates that human sacrifice was likely a rare historical reality limited to the Bronze Age and extreme crisis situations. In the Classical period, it existed primarily in myth and cultural imagination, serving as a thought tool for the Greeks to explore the boundaries of civilization, the nature of divinity, and social order. Its cultural significance far exceeded its actual practice.

Keywords: Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece; Myth and Ritual; Greek Religion and Culture

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1. Contested realities: Myths, rituals, and evidence

The study of human sacrifice in ancient Greece centers on confronting a deep divide. On the one hand, there is a rich literary and mythological tradition that frequently depicts such behavior, and on the other hand, there is scarce and highly controversial archaeological evidence. The aim of this paper is therefore to go beyond the simple empirical question of "did they perform human sacrifices" and to place the topic in the framework of historical and cultural studies, exploring the reasons why it has become a source of intense scholarly debate.

Traditionally, the idealization of Greek civilization has caused many "sentimental philhellenes" to be "horrified" by such references to "inhumane behavior." This emotional response reveals a deeper issue: the debate about human sacrifice is, in fact, also a debate about the definition of Greekness. Not only does this debate exist in modern scholarship, but the ancient Greeks themselves often attributed such "barbaric" practices to others, such as the Taurians, or placed them in a distant mythological era. The modern academic controversy is thus to some extent a continuation of the ancient process of cultural self-definition, and its central question is not only empirical but also ideological: what kind of people are the

Greeks? Did “our” cultural ancestors actually engage in behavior that we define as “other”?

In stark contrast to the idealized view, ancient texts and some archaeological interpretations together present a dark picture of Greek religion. Ancient texts recount ritual killings, such as the sacrifice of three Persian captives to Dionysus by Themistocles in 480 B.C. Every year, human scapegoats known as “pharmakoi” were expelled from the Greek polis, and some scholars claim that they were executed; Locrian girls were hunted down and killed. Together, these accounts paint a picture of a “bloody and violent” religious life that lasted from the Bronze Age to the time when texts or artifacts were able to reflect the social situation directly. The paths taken by the two scholars on this topic form a central framework for modern scholarly debate:

- (1) Walter Burkert’s Framework: In his definitive work, *Greek Religion*, Walter Burkert adopts a functionalist mode of research in which he seeks to understand the function of such stories and rituals, linking them to deeply ingrained patterns of violence, anxiety, and social cohesion. For Burkert, the reality of such practices is far less important than the reality of their concepts and their role in religious systems ^[1].
- (2) The Skepticism of Dennis Hughes: In contrast, Dennis Hughes takes a cautious assessment of the evidence. He argues that there are often other, less sensationalized and plausible explanations for archaeological findings, while literary accounts belong primarily to the realm of myth and are not historical factual accounts ^[2].

In order to clearly construct an analytical framework and avoid conflating different phenomena, it is necessary to first categorize the different types of ritual killing in ancient Greek myths and rituals. Each type has its own unique context, goals, and deity associations, reflecting different logics behind it. The following diagram shows the types of human sacrifice in Greek myths and rituals (**Table 1**).

Table 1. The types of human sacrifice in Greek myths and rituals

Category	Purpose and function	Major Deities	Representing myths/rituals
Sacrifice before the war	To secure a military victory; to appease the wrath of God; to serve as a landmark ceremony for the opening of a war.	Artemis Ares	Iphigeneia was sacrificed at Oris
Building sacrifice	Ensure the stability and prosperity of the building or polis.	Poseidon Apollo	Mythological sacrifices of living human beings under the foundations of walls or bridges
Funeral killing	To provide servants for the departed; to appease or strengthen the departed; as an expression of vengeance or extreme grief.	Heroes/Dead Hermes	Achilles kills Trojan captives at the funeral of Patroclus
Purification ceremony	The removal of the collective sinful defilement (miasma) of the polis by expelling or sacrificing a scapegoat, especially in times of crisis such as plague or famine.	Apollo Artemis	The Athenian ceremony of the “pharmakos”
Sacrifices of dishonor to God	Challenging the divine order; blurring the boundaries between man, god, and beast, usually resulting in divine punishment for the offerer.	Zeus	Lycaon offers a human feast to Zeus
Sacrifices associated with the mysteries	As part of the initiation ceremony; symbolic death and rebirth.	Dionysus Demeter	The tearing (sparagmos) of the gods (or their symbols) in the mysteries of Dionysus ^[3]

2. Echoes of the Bronze Age: Archaeological Investigations of Minoan and Mycenaean Ritual Killing

The most compelling and concrete evidence for human sacrifice in ancient Greece stems from its Bronze Age prehistory. These discoveries have sparked a heated scholarly controversy, a debate that has intensified since the publication of Walter

Burkert's 1985 English version of his book.

2.1. The Temple of Archanes

In 1979, the archaeologist Sakellarakis discovered the site of a temple in Archanes, Crete, which appeared to have been destroyed by an earthquake. Three skeletons were found at the site, interpreted as a “priest,” a “priestess,” and a young male “sacrifice” lying on an altar-like platform with a bronze blade was placed beside him. Sakellarakis interpreted this as a human sacrifice in progress that was interrupted by an earthquake. This view is supported by historian Rodney Castledon, who describes him as having “his ankles apparently bound and his legs folded up so that they could be placed on the altar. He was ritually killed by the long bronze dagger with the engraved boar’s head.” However, this explanation has been strongly challenged. Noted scholar Nanno Marinatos then suggested that these men were nothing more than ordinary victims of the earthquake. Walter Burkert himself was careful to point out that the discovery had stirred “heated debate even before it was officially published.”

2.2. The “North House” at Knossos

In 1979, Peter Warren discovered an accumulation of children’s skeletons near Knossos Palace, the so-called “North House” site.

The report describes the skeletons as coming from at least four children between the ages of eight and twelve, with “clear knife marks” on the bones. Warren observed that the flesh had been “carefully cut and stripped in a manner quite similar to that of sacrificial animals” and was found alongside sheep bones, a crucial detail. Warren concluded that a ritual slaughter and possible cannibalism had taken place and that it was probably a “sacrificial ritual to please a nature deity to ensure annual abundance”. Inevitably, this discovery is linked to the myth of the Minotaur, in which Athenian boys and girls were sent to Crete to feed on the Minotaur. The connection, while speculative, is extremely powerful. Alternative explanations have been offered by skeptics, such as that it was ritual boning for secondary burials rather than cannibalism.

These discoveries from the Minoan civilization, whatever their ultimate interpretation, had a profound impact on later Greek culture. Rather than proving that the Greeks of classical times practiced human sacrifice, they provided a “mythic substrate” for the later Greek imagination of Crete. Walter Burkert, in his book, places these discoveries in the chapter “Prehistory and the Minoan-Mycenaean Age,” clearly distinguishing them from the religions of the polis. These discoveries provide a palpable “reality” for the Greeks’ own tendency to place such barbarism in its mythological origins, especially in relation to the powerful Cretan civilization of pre-Hellenic Greece. The “otherness” of the Minoan religion was confirmed by these discoveries and became a foundational element in the development of the Greeks’ own religious identity.

3. Scapegoat of the Polis: The “Pharmakos” and the ritual of excommunication

The ritual of the “pharmakos,” which Walter Burkert considers to be a key piece of evidence in the “heart of Greek civilization” for the possible existence of human sacrifices. It represents a unique type of ritual killing focused on the purification of the polis. Based on Hipponax’s account of the Colophon and its practice at the Thargelia festivals in Abdera, Massalia, and Athens, we can outline the specific flow of this ritual:

- (1) Selection: The victim is usually an ugly, poor, marginalized person, reflecting his social marginality.
- (2) Absorption: The victim is first treated with hospitality and is dragged around the city with the intention of “absorbing” the miasma of the community.
- (3) Expulsion: the victim is then whipped with fig branches and sea onions, then violently expelled after being stoned.

The central ambiguity of the ritual is - were the “pharmakos” ultimately killed? Walter Burkert mentions that there are Byzantine documents claiming that the victims were burned and their ashes scattered at sea, but he recognizes that this is controversial. The ritual itself is described as an expulsion, a driving “across the border,” to make the victim a “peripsema.”

This is similar to the Old Testament ritual of expelling a scapegoat into the wilderness without killing it.

The ritual of “pharmakos” is a form of purification (katharmos) that is usually practiced in times of crisis, such as plague and famine. At the heart of Walter Burkert’s analysis is the idea that this ritual is a projection of the collective aggression and anxiety of the community onto a single marginalized figure. This logic of transferring collective guilt onto the individual, which is also linked to political systems such as Athenian ostracism, shows how the logic of ritual is rationalized and secularized. Indeed, the ritual of the “pharmakos” is structurally the inverse of the normative Olympian sacrifice. Walter Burkert describes the normative sacrifice as the creation of community (koinonia) through the sharing of a meal and participation in sacred acts, with all participants standing within the sacred circle. In contrast, the ritual of the “pharmakos” creates community by defining the boundaries of the community and violently expelling a member who carries all the symbols of the “outside” and “filth”. The unification of the community through a common act of ostracism makes the “pharmakos” a powerful tool for reinforcing social cohesion by dramatizing the potential breakdown of the community. Its purpose is not to communicate with the gods, but to preserve the polis itself against internal chaos.

4. The Shadow of the Sacrifice: Substitution, equivalence, and animal sacrifice

Synthesizes Walter Burkert’s central argument for the deep, often unconscious connection between animal sacrifice and human sacrifice. I argue that the elaborate rituals surrounding animal slaughter are best understood as a mechanism for managing the profound anxiety that accompanies the ultimate taboo, the killing of human beings.

Walter Burkert points to the myth’s repeated demonstration that animal sacrifice and human sacrifice of the living can be substituted for each other as the starting point of the analysis. What makes this substitution conceptually feasible is rooted in the biological reality shared by both - blood, breath, organs, etc. The complex rituals that precede animal sacrifice are interpreted by Walter Burkert as a play to deflect guilt. For example, a nod of the head as the sacrifice is sprinkled with water is seen as “consent”; a butcher’s knife is hidden in the basket of the sacrifice; and at the moment of death, the woman lets out a ritualized scream (ololygē). Walter Burkert suggests that these elements are all mechanisms for managing the anxiety of killing. The myth of the doe replacing Iphigenia on the altar is an exemplary case of this substitution pattern in which equivalence is clearly expressed. (There is also the special case of Dionysus. In the myth, he was torn apart by the Titans, like a sacrificed calf, which blurs the line between divine, human, and animal sacrifices.)

Regulated animal sacrifice is a complex multi-stage drama. Why does the slaughter of a domestic animal require such elaborate rituals-purification, prayer, concealment, screaming, careful division? Walter Burkert’s framework suggests that this complex ritual is a response to the deep anxiety that the act of killing itself provokes. This anxiety is most acute when the sacrifice most closely resembles the offerer—that is, when the sacrifice is human. The ritual of animal sacrifice can thus be read as a “safe” and repeatable enactment of a more primitive and horrific possibility. The animal replaces the human being, and the elaborate ritual is used to manage the unbearable guilt and fear that would be present if the sacrifice were a human being.

5. Conclusion

Combined with the above analysis, we can easily see that human sacrifice was probably a historical reality, but extremely rare and probably limited to the Bronze Age and extreme crisis situations. In the Classical period, it existed almost exclusively in the realm of myth and ritual theater. Human sacrifice functioned as a “liminal concept” for the Greeks. It was used as a thought experiment in myth and tragedy to explore the deepest questions of their culture: the nature of justice and the gods; the conflict between the individual, the family and the state; the boundaries between civilization and barbarism, between Greeks and barbarians, between man and beast.

The move from ritual to art underwent a migration from potentially ritualistic practices to powerful motifs in art

and literature. The end of archaeological evidence in the Archaic period coincided with a shift in artistic expression from depicting the bloody act itself to representing the emotionally charged moments leading up to the sacrifice. The idea of human sacrifice was central to the Greek Religion and cultural imagination far beyond its practice itself. Its enduring power lay not in its reality, but in its ability to articulate the ultimate stakes of human existence and the fragile foundations of social order.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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