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Animal Sacrifice: Feeding the Deities

Why did the Greeks sacrifice animals to deities? Existing theories are inadequate for several important reasons, and, worse, they become repeated by authority and entrenched habit, without discussion of alternatives. Burkert's odd view has fed into twentieth-century notions of violence at the heart of civilization. Vernant and Detienne stress the formation of community through feasting; J.Z. Smith suggests "a meditation on domestication." But in current accounts nothing goes to the deity and the actual sacrificial gesture remains unexplained. A glance at a standard reference work quickly reveals that we do not understand the reason for animal sacrifice in the ancient world: R. Parker concludes demurely that we cannot understand "the institution by reference to the communal feast alone" (*OCD*, 3rd ed., p. 1344).

What is missing? The gods. Burkert *e.g.* expresses aporia concerning "how such a sacrifice affects the god" (*GR*, E.T., p. 58). Even more generally, Greek religion suffers because we are not sure how to study religion, and Western thought has always tried to insulate and protect Christianity from other religions. We thus have the misleading formula that Greek religion consisted of practices, not beliefs.

The rationalization of ritual actions is at issue here. Let us return the gods to metaphysics, as part of an earlier understanding of *physis*, rather than dwell only upon a sociological *techné* of community-forming through otherwise senseless acts.

I wish to canvass and represent from several angles the view of animal sacrifice as nourishing the deities.

Ancient Near Eastern literature provides numerous mentions of the casual fact that human beings sacrifice to feed the deities. The Hebrew scriptures contain numerous explicit allusions to this, although these are often explained away if not ignored (S. Moore, *God's Gym* 1996).

Greek deities have bodies, of course (Kirk notes their "progressive de-incarnation"), they used to eat as mortals do, and they possess a *thumos*, a site of nourishment. What do they receive from the sacrificed animal? "The smoke," it used to be said, inadequately. Gifts, yes, but what exactly?

I speculate that in animal sacrifice, the life-force, the living soul (often called the *thumos*) of the animal nourished the deity. Greek *thumos* is related to Latin *fumus* (Onians 1951). We can try to explain why particular parts of the animal were sacrificed. Thigh-bones are associated with generative powers in ancient biology, as are (Detienne 1979) the *splanchna*. Likewise, we can understand as a corollary (*e.g.*) why murder, "bad blood," was prohibited in sanctuaries.

By restoring the gods to Greek sacrifice, and attempting to explain ancient rationalizations of ritual acts (even where these had been lost by the time of our Greek

written sources), we can start to see Greek religion in a new way, not devoid of beliefs. "Gifts to the gods" can make better sense if we try to explain what animal sacrifice conveyed to the deities and why.

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