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THE SACRIFICIAL RITUAL IN HOMER

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SUMMARY: The paper discusses the model of interpretation of the Greek sacrificial ritual and proposes some changes and adjustment in the currently accepted paradigm. The main suggestion presented here is that the ritual slaughter of animals, as described in the Homeric poems, can be treated by protagonists as the practice of great practical impact (it provides the heroes with food) rather than that of a symbolic value.

The following paper proposes some adjustments to the accepted model of interpretation of the Greek sacrificial ritual. As a starting point it takes an analysis of Homeric descriptions of the rite and of the sacrificial vocabulary used in epics. The data under examination shows a clear dichotomy within the phenomena described by the word *hiereia* and its cognates. They may refer, on the one hand, to a ritual of primarily religious meaning and, on the other hand, to the common practice of butchering animals. The latter, although regulated by the rules of ritual, had a moderate symbolic meaning and a much more palpable practical function. So far this has been almost completely ignored by scholars, who have concentrated mostly on the solemn sacrifices performed at public festivals.

The ritual slaughter of animals is one of the most frequently discussed issues of ancient Greek anthropology.[1] In the second half of the 20th century two alternative models of interpretation were proposed by Walter Burkert[2] on the one hand and by the French structuralists on the other.[3] Within the works of these scholars, and some others who developed and modified the two paradigms, the ritual slaughter is described as intrinsically related to some other phenomena such as the origins of tragedy, mystery cults, and even the rise of democratic polis.[4] No wonder then, that the way in which we understand ritual slaughter has become central to our perception of Greek culture in its whole complexity. And, in whichever way we modify the interpretation of this single phenomenon, it should affect the whole image of ancient societies.

Recently, the two paradigmatic approaches have undergone severe criticism, especially in the most recent monograph of Greek animal sacrifice by Fred S. Naiden (2013). Above all the author objects to the reductionism of the scholars whose psychological or sociological inclinations made them almost completely ignore the religious aspect of the sacrifice. Indeed, they hardly mention the gods to whom animals were sacrificed and with whom people tried to initiate contact. Walter Burkert, Marcel Vernant and Jean-Pierre Detienne understood the sacrificial rites as a means of providing the communities with meat, essential for festivals, banquets and feasts, the symbolic value of which became the core issue of scholarly interest.[5] This approach became even more rigid in the works of Richard Seaford who describes the ritual as tripartite. He divides it into the preliminary phase, the central one, in which the animal is being killed, and the feast, understood as the final stage of the sacrifice[6].

In one whole chapter of her book Naiden (2013: 232-275) develops a strong argument against such a view: not all of the meat consumed

[1] For the bibliography presented in details and discussed at length, see Petropoulou 2008: 1-25.

[2] Above all in Burkert 1983.

[3] See the essays contained in the volume Detienne, Vernant 1982.

[4] Burkert 1966; Burkert 1983; Seaford 1994; Seaford 2004: 39-67; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 141-196.

[5] E.g.. Detienne 1982: 9-10, 18-19; Vernant 1998: 61-77; Seaford 2004: 39-67.

[6] See also Lambert 1993: 294, 298, 306.

by ancient Greeks – she argues – came from the sacrificed animals. Not only, as it was assumed previously, did fish, venison and birds come from different sources,[7] but also those domestic animals that were often sacrificed to the gods, were liable to be slaughtered in a non-ritual way.[8] This is indicated by some literary sources in which meat markets and the meat trade are occasionally mentioned. It also seems that too little meat was produced during sacrifices held at great public festivals to cover all of the consumption, whose level can be approximately deduced from available data. What is more, very often the slaughter is described by vocabulary, such as the verb *sphatto*, which does not indicate the ritual character of the act.

It is not my intention to defend the authors of paradigmatic works on the subject matter. What I intend to suggest in this paper is that it is possible to deconstruct not the theory itself, as Naiden did, but its premises, namely the descriptive model of the ritual structure. As this is a preliminary work in which my only aim is to sketch the outlines of possible future research, I will limit the sources analysed to the Homeric epics. The use of this type of data as a starting point in research is justified by its central position in Greek culture. In spite of what the scholars criticised by Naiden had read in the epics, and in spite of what she implicitly assumes, I would like to argue that (1) the ritual slaughter happens to be described by Homer as an almost meaningless part of daily routine. (2) Its structure may be much less rigid than in scholarly descriptions and (3) the so called *sacrificial feast* is not a part of the sacrificial ritual itself.

The third hypothesis, especially, seems to be justified in light of the Edward Evans-Pritchard description of the treatment of sacrificial meat in the Nuer culture:

> The carcass is cut up and skinned as soon as the animal falls. In most sacrifices the meat is consumed by members of the family and kin of the person on whose behalf it was made. In marriage and most other collective sacrifices it is divided among relatives, both paternal and maternal, in traditional portions; and the age-mates of the owner of the beast and representatives of lineages collateral to his may also have rights to shares.

[7] Detienne 1982: 14-15.

[8] For the traditional approach see: Detienne 9 and 17; Vernant 1982: 30-31.

> If the principal officiant is not a member of the family or of the close kin but a master of ceremonies of the family or a priest or a prophet, he also receives his share. This part of the proceedings is of general interest and not merely for those directly concerned in the rites. If it is at all a public occasion people, whether they are concerned in the matter or not, gather round to watch the meat being cut up and handed to those to whom it is due, and there is often much shouting and argument as the distribution is goodhumouredly disputed and men tug at the carcass and snatch or beg pieces of meat. Even outsiders who get in the way and beg persistently enough are likely to receive pieces of it. According to the circumstances those who on such an occasion receive meat take it to their homes, maybe in different villages, for cooking and eating, or it is cooked by women of the homestead in which the sacrifice took place and eaten there by groups, according to sex, age, and kinship. The meat is cooked, served, and eaten as would be that of a wild beast slaughtered in hunting. It is boiled, though tit-bits may be roasted in the embers of a fire. I want to make it clear indeed that the cutting up of the victim, the preparation of its flesh, and the eating of it are not parts of the sacrifice. To regard the eating of the animal as part of the sacrificial rite would be like regarding a wedding feast as part of the marriage service in our own country. But if it does not form part of the rite and has no sacramental significance it forms part of the whole ceremony in the broader sense and has a social significance (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 214-215).

I do not intend to use the description quoted above as evidence in this discussion, as I am far from the evolutionary way of thinking of the Frazerian school, nor am I trying to prove the existence of any historical connection between the Greek and Nuer cultures.[9] The parallel, however, is useful as it opens a conceptual space for new categories. Some of the Evans-Pritchard's passages[10] show that we cannot simply assume that the Greek sacrifice was always performed in rigidly structured manner. The paragraph quoted above suggests that the feast might not have been an integral part of the ritual structure.

[9] Also Lambert in his recently published essay (1993), quoted examples of African ethnographic material in order to prove that Burkert's sacrificial model is not universal.

[10] See especially Evans-Pritchard 1956: 197-230.

THE SACRIFICIAL VOCABULARY

As the scholarly tradition requires, apart from hunting, Homer does not mention any non-ritual practice of killing comestible animals. The only apparent exception to this rule seems to be false: in the *Odyssey* 11.411, the spirit of Agamemnon tells Ulysses that he was killed by his wife *like an ox by a monger* (ὥς τίς τε κατέκτανε βοῦν ἐπὶ φάτνῃ). According to Naiden (2013: 237) this figure of speech indicates one of other possible, however uncommon, ways of slaughtering animals. However, it is considered an unusual practice among all peoples. Not only because of its symbolic, culturally specific value, but mainly because of practical reasons as it is necessary to separate the places where animals are slaughtered from those in which they are fed. The simile used by Agamemnon is based on paradox and it describes very well his own fate: instead of dying, as one might have expected, on a battlefield or while sailing or hunting he was killed at home. His death occurred then under the most unusual circumstances.

Apart from this single and clearly false exception, domestic animals in Homer seem to be slaughtered exclusively in a ritual way even in those few cases when the act is described by the most neutral of possible verbs meaning *to kill*, *kteino*. Usually, it appears in the context of battle between humans. However, on three occasions it refers to animal victims. In one case it describes what happened to the animals killed by the suitors (*Od.* 1.112). From other contexts we know that they ate sacrificial meat. Elsewhere (*Od.* 19.276), it refers to Helios' cattle slaughtered by Ulysses' comrades. The lengthy description of this act leaves no doubt that it was a sacrifice, however strange its form.[11] In the third case the verb *kteino* is used in the description of Achilles' funeral (*Od.* 24.66) referring to the animals sacrificed in his name.

The verb *sphazo* appears 15 times in the Homeric epics, each time in the context of animal slaughter. In five cases it has been used in lengthy descriptions of a sacrificial ritual (*Il.* 1.459, 2.422, *Od*. 3.454, 12.359, 14.426), where it refers to one specific action within the whole sequence, namely *cutting the throat*. In other contexts its meaning is wider: *to butcher*. On three occasions (*Od.* 1.92, 4.320, 20.312, 23.305) it refers to animals slaughtered by the suitors, twice (*Od*. 10.532, 11.45)

[11] Vernant 1982a: 62-63; 1982b.

to a sheep sacrificed by Ulysses to the recently dead Tiresias, and once (*Il*. 23.31) to funerary victims. In three cases only, when the verb *sphazo* is used, the context does not indicate in which way the animal was killed. For instance, in the *Iliad* 24.622 Achilles slays a sheep for a meal for Priam and himself. It is not explicitly said whether he did it ritually or not.[12]

The third and most important verb, covering the semantic field under discussion, *hiereuo/hireuo* leaves no doubt about its religious connotations. It is derived from the Proto-Indo-European **ish1ros*, a *sacred power*. Some of its cognates (as *hieros* or *hiereia*) are used frequently in the Homeric epics. For example the noun ἱερεὺς (ἑκατηβόλου ᾽ Απόλλωνος) describes Chryses (*Il.* 1.370) in his religious function as a priest of Apollo. Although two other verbs whose meaning is somewhat wider, *kteino* and *sphazo*, can be used as synonyms for the verb *hiereuo*, the latter primarily means *to slay ritually*. It may sometimes be substituted by other expressions whose basic semantic field is narrower, such as (*Il.* 1.443-444): ἱερὴν ἑκατόμβην ῥέξαι.

The meaning of the word *hiereuo* is quite ambiguous, which is reflected by the syntactic characteristics of this verb. Sometimes, although not always, it seems to be structurally and semantically analogous to the English expression: *to sacrifice + an animal + to a deity*. E. g. (*Od.* 13.181-182): Ποσειδάωνι δὲ ταύρους δώδεκα κεκριμένους ἱερεύσομεν. A similar structure with the name of a deity (or the dead Tiresias: *Od.* 10.524, 11.32) in the dative case can be found on seven occasions in Homeric epics (apart from the ones already quoted in: *Il.* 2.402, 21.131, 23.144, 23.147).

More frequent is the use of the verb *hiereuo* without an indirect object. Three examples of this may be found in the *Iliad* (6.94, 275, 309), where it refers to the twelve heifers the Trojan women promised to Athena as a thanksgiving gift for future protection of the city. It is exactly the sort of ritual to which Naiden turned her attention,[13] as its function is clearly and primarily a religious one.

The other passages in which the verb *hiereuo* is used without an indirect object (15 times) do not, however, fit this pattern. For instance,

[12] The same may be said about *Il.* 9.467 and *Od*. 9.46.

[13] About this specific case, see Naiden 2013: 15-25.

in the *Odyssey* 2.56-58, the suitors are described as βοῦς ἱερεύοντες καὶ ὄϊς καὶ πίονας αἶγας, / εἰλαπινάζουσιν πίνουσί τε αἴθοπα οἶνον / μαψιδίως. Telemachus who utters these words does not mention the suitors communication with the gods. He concentrates instead on the feasts during which the meat of sacrificed animals was eaten. Similarly, when Ulysses (*Od.* 24.214-215) asks his son and slaves to slaughter a boar for a meal, he seems to be thinking only of food (ὑμεῖς μὲν νῦν ἔλθετ' ἐϋκτίμενον δόμον εἴσω, / δεῖπνον δ' αἶψα συῶν ἱερεύσατε ὅς τις ἄριστος). Apart from these two passages, the verb *hiereuo* in active or medium voice without an indirect object, always preceded or followed by some reference to meat, appears in Homeric epics 13 times (*Il.* 6.174, 18.559, *Od.* 14.74, 14.94, 16.455, 17.180-181, 17.535 – *med.*, 19.198 – *med.*, 20.3, 20.250-251, 20.391).

Yet another category includes the cases in which the verb is used with an indirect object referring not to a deity but to a human on whose behalf an animal is slaughtered for the purpose of providing him with meat. In Homeric epics there are three examples of such a structure. For example (*Od.* 14.414), Eumaeus turns to his helpers saying ἄξεθ' ὑῶν τὸν ἄριστον, ἵνα ξείνῳ ἱερεύσω. The *xeinos* here, obviously, refers to Ulysses in disguise. A similar structure can be found in two other *loci* (*Il.* 24.125 – *med.*, *Od*. 8.59).

Last, but not least in importance, the verb *hiereuo* appears twice in Homeric epics with two indirect objects, one of which refers to a deity, the other to humans who are to consume the meat of the victim, as it is in the *Iliad* 7.314-315: **τοῖσι** δὲ [scil. ᾽Αχαιοῖσιν] βοῦν **ἱέρευσεν** ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν ᾽Αγαμέμνων / ἄρσενα πενταέτηρον ὑπερμενέϊ **Κρονίωνι**, and in the *Odyssey* 13.24-25: **τοῖσι** δὲ βοῦν **ἱέρευσ'** ἱερὸν μένος ᾽Αλκινόοιο / **Ζηνὶ** κελαινεφέϊ Κρονίδῃ.

THE STRUCTURE

Surprisingly enough, just after Eumaeus' assertion (*Od.* 14.414) that he would butcher a boar for Ulysses to feed him with meat, there comes a lengthy description of a sacrificial rite (14.418-456). It is full of gestures of purely religious meaning and it perfectly fits the tripartite pattern of the ritual. The preliminary phase is not particularly

complex: The swineherd prepared some logs for the fire, while his helpers brought the animal up to the hearth (ἐπ᾽ ἐσχάρῃ). Initiating the rite (ἀπαρχόμενος), Eumaeus tore some bristle from the victim's head and burnt it. He prayed to all the gods for Ulysses' return home and he smote (κόψε) the boar with a log. Others cut its throat, they singed it and cut it into pieces (ἔσφαξάν τε καὶ εὖσαν, αἶψα δέ μιν διέχευαν). Then, Eumaeus placed some pieces of meat and fat into the fire, and he splintered it with barley groats. Then the participants roasted the rest of the meat. Once it was ready, the swineherd divided the roast into seven parts, one of which he set aside for the Nymphs and Hermes, for whom he said another prayer. He divided the rest of the meat between the human participants of the meal. But before the bread was served and before they started eating, Eumaeus burnt the firstlings (ἄργματα θῦσε θεοῖσ᾽ αἰειγενέτῃσι) and he poured out a libation.

Eumaeus was certainly a good man, truly devoted to his master and to the gods. The accumulation and repetition of religious elements in the passage remains, however, somewhat bewildering. There are four sequences of the swineherd's actions that belong to a strictly ritual order:

1) the burning of the boar's bristle and the prayer,
2) the burning of some meat with fat and barley groats,
3) sharing a meal with the Nymphs and Hermes (with a prayer). This is a typical example of *theoxenia*,
4) the libation and burning of the firstlings. The noun ἄργματα used in this context, in Homeric epics is *hapax legomenon*. Apart from this single passage it appears only in later grammarian works (and possibly in some badly mutilated inscriptions). Aristonicus (*scholia ad Il.* 9.219), however, explains that it is synonymous with the more frequently used word ἀπαρχαί.

The same ancient authority suggests (*scholia ad Il.* 9.219) that the description of a feast prepared by Achilles for the Achaean chiefs sent to him by Agamemnon (*Il.* 9.205-221) could be partially parallel to the one discussed here. That case stands out from what is common in Homer, since the meal was not preceded by the slaughter of animals. Instead, Achilles asked Patroclus to roast a goat's and sheep's back (νῶτον), and a pork chine (ῥάχιν). These, however, were not simply

leftovers of some previous feast, but highly appreciated parts from typical sacrificial animals.[14]

When the meal was ready, and its parts divided between the participants, Achilles told Patroclus to make an offering (*Il.* 9.219-220: θεοῖσι δὲ θῦσαι ἀνώγει / Πάτροκλον ὃν ἑταῖρον· ὃ δ' ἐν πυρὶ βάλλε θυηλάς). It is clear then, that the burning of some animal parts could have been normal practice during all feasts, not only those immediately following a sacrifice.

This may explain why Eumaeus repeated the procedure of burning the victim's meat. The whole sequence described in the *Odyssey* 14.418-56 may contain two separate socio-religious rituals: the slaughter and the feast. In Homer the latter almost infallibly follows the former. In a few cases, however, there is a clear distinction between them. For example, after a lengthy and detailed description of a sacrifice which took place at Pylos (*Od.* 3.418-463), the singer informs us that when the meat was being roasted, (τόφρα) Polykaste washed and anointed Telemachus. From the lines 416, 423-424 and 431-432 we learn that he and his comrades were present at the sacrifice. Then Telemachus returns and takes a seat next to Nestor to take part in a feast of sacrificial meat (*Od.* 3.469-472). Clearly he must have left in the meantime. His behaviour, reflected and underlined by the focalization of the narration, indicates a temporal and conceptual gap between the two actions.

Paradoxically, the pattern is also confirmed in the passages quoted by Seaford, who states that "it is in fact a narrative *topos* that an outsider arrives not only during a meal but actually at the point of sacrifice. This regular coincidence has the advantage of allowing relations to be established through the incorporative power of sacrifice, of the communal meal, or of both" (Seaford 1994: 50). Although verbally he distinguishes between the sacrifice and the sacrificial meal, in the theory minted by Seaford these two practices are as inseparable as two sides of a coin. Surprisingly enough, in each of the Homeric episodes he refers to, the stranger arrives too late to take part in the sacrificial rite. In the *Odyssey* 1.96-112, Athena made her appearance before Telemachus

[14] For example in *Odyssey* 14.437-8 (νώτοισιν δ' ᾽Οδυσῆα διηνεκέεσσι γέραιρεν/ ἀργιόδοντος ὑός, κύδαινε δὲ θυμὸν ἄνακτος) Eumaeus pleased Ulysses by treating him with a pork chine.

when the meat had already been roasted. It was being roasted when she arrived with Telemachus at Pylos (*Od.* 3.5-66). Ulysses and Nestor came to Peleus' house exactly when he was at the point of burning the thigh-bones of the oxen he had slaughtered (*Il.* 11.786-780). It is, however, explicitly stated that the two outsiders did not join him in the ritual, instead they remained at the threshold (στῆμεν ἐνὶ προθύροισι) until Achilles asked them inside for a meal.

Indeed, it is a narrative *topos* that an outsider arrives more or less at the point of sacrifice. But his or her arrival marks a distinction between the slaughter and the feast. From the point of view of the narration it serves as a bridge between the two, just as a brief description of Polykaste's services to Telemachus from *Odyssey* 3.464-469 permits the storyteller to fill an idle gap in the action. It is true, on the other hand, that it seems important for the development of the story, that a guest takes part in a common meal with his or her hosts. Certainly, as Seaford claims, it allows *relations to be established.* An outsider's participation in the very slaughter of an animal clearly does not carry such a meaning, since it appears to be irrelevant for Homer (otherwise the Homeric guests would have come an hour earlier).

This indifference towards the presence at ritual slaughter is further confirmed by Ulysses' behaviour. In the already quoted *Odyssey* 24.214-215, he asks his son and slaves to kill a boar for a meal. And having given this order he leaves for several hours to see Laertes. When Ulysses returns home together with his father, Telemachus is on the point of cutting the meat into portions and mixing the wine (*Od.* 24.362-364). Before they start eating a servant washes the old man. Then come Dolios with his sons to speak to Ulysses. And only then do all of them finally sit at the table. This is the last meal described in the *Odyssey* and the last ritual slaughter mentioned. Ulysses clearly did not care for the *incorporative power* of the latter. Apparently, what counted for him was the result of the slaughter, namely the meat he ate with his associates.

CONCLUSIONS

In several Homeric passages the protagonists kill animals and burn their thigh-bones in order to communicate with the gods. This would

have been the function of the sacrifice promised to Athena by Trojan women (*Il.* 6.94, 275, 309) and this was the function of Nestor's sacrifice to the goddess (*Od.* 3.418-463). That the ritual had a primarily religious objective in this specific case, we learn from the *Od.* 3.371--386, where Nestor states it explicitly. After such a ceremony, quite incidentally, there remained plenty of meat, which could have been, and certainly was, utilised by the participants and others.

This is the sort of sequence on which the modern scholarship concentrates. It has been traced in the Homeric world and later in polis festivals. Some of the passages I have quoted above show that the ritual slaughter could also have been a mere part of daily routine in pastoral societies. Thus, it did not take place exclusively during great public feasts. Even the Homeric narration, in spite of its selectivity and idealistic bias, leaves enough space for some descriptions and passing references to ritual slaughter treated by protagonists as a practice of little symbolic value and great practical impact, as it simply provides them with food.

This dichotomy is not reflected by the vocabulary, nor does it affect the basic structure of the ritual. The procedure, however, may be less or more elaborate. Before a heifer at Pylos was killed, Nestor had had her horns gilded. And at the very moment when the animal was slaughtered, the women raised the sacred cry (*Od.* 3.450-453, ὀλόλυξαν). Nothing like that happened in Eumaeus' hut when he smote a boar with a log (probably there was no gold there and certainly no women). Thus, some (important for scholars) elements of the ritual should not be understood as obligatory. They are but niceties that contribute to the creation of a more solemn atmosphere to the ceremony.

As the evidence shows, there is a conceptual gap between the ritual slaughter and the feast on sacrificial meat. Though, at least in the Homeric epics the latter is impossible without the former. Also, a meal usually follows the slaughter and we may imagine that this was so and not only in fiction. We may think of an average Eumaeus or Strepsiades who, with a little help from one or two servants, sometimes killed a swine or sheep. They would do it for the most practical reasons – to acquire some meat for their families and to sell the remainder. The slaughter would be performed according to religious rules: some hair of

the victim would be burnt before the killing and the thigh-bones after it and always there would be a prayer. And afterwards the peasants would enjoy larger than usual portions of fresh meat.

The approach I have presented above makes a simple practice out of what the scholarly tradition conceives as a necessarily solemn and rigid ritual. It outlines a path for possible future research, which, however, may happen to be very difficult. From the literary and archaeological sources available, we can learn relatively much about hecatombs, but little about shepherds killing single animals of their flocks. However, it seems important to bear in mind that the former possibility also exists.

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