# 1 Introduction

Human sacrifice continues to fascinate. The apparently purposeless violence and death inspire awe and horror alike. Sacrifice has at least as many variations as cultures that have practiced it, and there are few universal elements to the practice. But one universal that can be stated with a fair degree of certainty is that sacrifice was in fact never perceived as purposeless by those performing it. The people involved kill – or die – for something they believe in. This is not so very far from modern ideals of dying for one's country. Ancient sacrifices may have been performed with all the fanfare of an Olympic Games opening ceremony, in many cases a carefully calculated and staged event, perhaps to induce horror, to impress, to negotiate or to maintain identities, power, and authority. However, such shows would not be effective without the underlying beliefs of the ritual act. Whatever one might think of the act itself, it has its own logic, much of which could only be read by cultures now lost to us. Left to us are traces in the ground, in images and on pages that we may try to piece together to simulate what once was.

Much of the material presented here will appear gruesome (and therein lies our fascination). However, a judicious comment on Mayan glyphs and art is applicable to everything discussed here: "As we decipher the writing system and decode the imagery, we are learning to understand this message, which, since it is not addressed to us or our sensibilities, is sometimes disturbing" (Schele and Miller 1992: 41). The purpose of this work is not to judge whether or not the acts represented by the material are gruesome, cruel, or immoral. Rather, it is to investigate this particular religious practice in some of its characteristic variations through time and space, as represented in the archaeological record. To attempt, as far as possible, to determine the actors involved, the manner of sacrifice, and most importantly, the kinds of contexts where it occurred.

It will be noted that the discussion throughout is marked by a cautious rhetoric, with words like 'possible', 'may', 'likely', 'appear/seem', and so on. This is of course due to the inherent uncertainties of the archaeological material, but equally to the controversial nature of the subject.

Typically, more stringent criteria are applied for sacrifice to be accepted as an explanation over others. One commentator has gone so far as to drag the material to a modern court, where it would not call for conviction (Briggs 1995). Much as this is a fair point, very few archaeological explanations would be able to pass through such a strict needle eye. The analogy of a modern court is a useful illustration for how the evidence for sacrifice is required to be stronger than alternative explanations. In other words: for a 'conviction' of sacrifice, the data has to be strong enough to prove this unequivocally, while other explanations do not usually need the same strength because they do not even require a trial. A revealing misunderstanding in this analogy is the idea of sacrifice as a crime, which also serves to show the inappropriateness of placing ancient contexts in such a modern setting. Conversely, it also happens that an eagerness to detect sacrifice leads to hasty conclusions as to its certain presence in some instances.

Be that as it may, nearly every example presented in these pages has met with alternative interpretations or outright denials. This is not simply due to the difficulty of unequivocal identification. Archaeology does not exist in a vacuum. It is part of the histories and identities of many peoples, and has been used for political, national, colonial, and racist agendas (most famously as part of Nazi propaganda, but also in more subtle ways even today – see, e.g., Fagan 2006; Pollock and Bernbeck 2005). As some of the material also relates more directly to living populations, especially in Mesoamerica, the issue can become a very sensitive and personal one (Mendoza 2007a).

Sacrifice has been the focus of many a grand theory, and the literature on these is far too extensive to do it justice here. Some of the most influential

writers include Edward Burnett Tylor (sacrifice as gift, 1971), William Robertson Smith (sacrifice as communion, 2002), Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (sacrifice as mediation, 1964), René Girard (sacrifice as controlled violence, 2005), and Nancy Jay (sacrifice as male substitution for blood relations, 1992).[1] Elements of all of the theories proposed by these authors and others can explain part of the material that follows, but no single theory is so far a good explanation for all cases. This is more than anything a testament to the diversity of cultural contexts and types of sacrifice, and the importance of attempting to understand each example within its own context first of all.

In order to provide some guidance as to what is meant by the concept, I follow the same usage as previously, with sacrifice referring to a religious ritual where a living being is deliberately killed in the process for the purposes of the event and usually in honour of a supernatural entity (Recht 2014: 403 n. 3). Defined as such, it should be noted that sacrifice in a sense is an artificial category. That is, it is a modern construct. While I here consider both the deposits at the Teotihuacan Moon Pyramid and the Xibeigang cemetery at Anyang cases of human sacrifice, the people of Teotihuacan may not have thought that their actions were the same or even similar to those of Shang period Anyang, and vice versa. The term 'supernatural' is used because the entities to which sacrifices are made, or in whose name/honour they are made, do not always fit neatly into concepts such as gods and deities. Other out-of-this-world beings include ancestors, spirits, and possibly demons: the main point is that they are perceived as *agents*, still in some way able to influence the world of the living or requiring attention from this world to act in another one.

[1] For an excellent reader with excerpts from the most important theories of sacrifice, with introductory comments for each, see Carter 2003.

The term *killed in the process* is also important. While the death of the 'victim'[2] is part of the ritual, it is not necessarily the highlight or the reason for the act – on the contrary, the killing is a means to an end, whatever that end (gift, mediation, etc.). Thus, a communion (generally more applicable to animal sacrifice), or the manipulation/display of bones following the killing, may in fact be more important than the moment of death.

## *Identifying Sacrifice in Archaeological Contexts*

Another step altogether is moving from theoretical definitions of sacrifice to identifying it archaeologically. To do this, it is necessary to identify the two main features: signs of a violent cause of death and signs of a sacred/religious context. These are very general criteria which must be placed in the broader context. In some cases, signs of both may not be sufficient, while in others, one or the other may be enough when combined with other, less direct data.

Cause of death is most explicitly determined by evidence of trauma, which can include stab wounds, cutmarks, fractured bones and, in the case of soft tissue, groove marks from a rope or stake. For the trauma to be related to the cause of death, it must be associated with the time of death. That is, it must be *perimortem*. Perimortem injuries can be difficult to differentiate from postmortem injuries, because in both cases, limited or no healing takes place (as opposed to antemortem injuries). One possible way of differentiating them is through the type of cut on a bone – whether it is consistent with known patterns of decapitation, scalping and butchering, or rather with later interference, such as from looters. However, in

[2] I do not like this term because it implies an asymmetrical relationship where the human/animal dying is always inferior and helpless, and the sacrificer superior and powerful. This is too simple a view for much of the material. However, I have not been able to find a better and equally effective referent.

many cases, the cause of death would leave no marks on the bones (in fact, such marks may represent the actions of a non-expert), so this direct evidence is not available to us.

Beside this, several suggestions have been made for more specific archaeological signatures of sacrifice for certain areas (Schwartz 2012: 13; Tiesler 2007), which bear repeating in a more general format because they are in fact what arguments for human sacrifice are very often based on. Thus, possible indications of human sacrifice in archaeological contexts include

- human skeletal remains in sacred contexts
- patterns in the skeletal remains suggesting a selective process, based on, e.g., age, sex, or bodily deformities
- simultaneous burial of several people, especially with either overall equal status or with one individual apparently treated differently; also signs of 'staging' the interments
- evidence of violence (cause of death, binding, other types of submission)
- human skeletal material associated with the construction of structures (especially foundations or later additions)
- similarity in treatment of animal and human skeletal remains, especially where sacrifice is suspected for the animal remains
- abnormal context/treatment of body in relation to the area and period[3]

None of these signatures is very strong on its own, and can in several cases be confused with other activities that leave similar signatures (e.g., 'secular' violence or actions related to ancestor worship). The combination of those related to violence and religion makes a stronger case, but still

[3] Some types of sacrifice will almost never be detectable archaeologically, and it is therefore not possible to say anything about their existence or nature. Sacrifices thrown into the sea or placed in the open would leave no traces, for example.

needs to be assessed individually and combined with analogous or contextual material from the area and/or period in question. For example, we can identify the northern European bog bodies of the last centuries BCE as abnormal burials because inhumation was not the common burial practice at this time and place. Without this context, the argument for sacrifice weakens significantly.

## *A Note on Types of Sacrifice and Terminology*

While the examples of human sacrifice in what follows are incredibly diverse, some 'types' occur again and again. The geographically broadest type is that of mortuary sacrifice. Mortuary sacrifice is here understood as any human sacrifice related to funerals and later ritual activities in the same space, including those related to ancestor worship. If they do not take place within a clearly delimited mortuary space (usually a necropolis or cemetery, but not necessarily so), they may be harder to identify as such. An important sub-category of mortuary sacrifice is so-called retainer sacrifice, a phrase often repeated here. Retainer sacrifices are all mortuary sacrifice, with the further characteristic of being subordinate to some kind of 'master'. That is, they are individuals related to a main deceased (possibly as servants, slaves, family members, or substitutes for these) and sacrificed as part of this relationship.

Another fairly common type of sacrifice is associated with construction activities (much more common for offerings than human sacrifices). Typically, these have appeared in Near Eastern contexts in the foundations of buildings and are therefore often known as 'foundation deposits' (Ellis 1968). However, they are not always found exactly in the foundations of buildings, and therefore the phrases 'construction deposit' / 'building deposit' and 'construction sacrifice' may also be used.

### Human Sacrifice and Archaeology

The current work is focussed on archaeological contexts. However, archaeology does not and should not exist in a vacuum, so where other sources have clear relevance and relation to the archaeological material, they are also discussed. This is particularly clear in terms of Mesoamerica, where iconography and glyphs add significantly to our understanding of the archaeological contexts. What is more, this is by no means a comprehensive survey of human sacrifice in archaeology. The five areas and periods have been selected to offer the most representative, compelling, and diverse examples of human sacrifice. Thus, the Near East is where we begin, and from there to China, via Egypt. Northern Europe's bog bodies will offer a complete change of scenery, as will the final stop in Mesoamerica. No claim is made concerning origins or influence from one place to another. On the contrary, human sacrifice had a local meaning for each of the groups in these places. Even if the idea first came from somebody having viewed the ritual in one place and bringing this back home (purely hypothetical; there is no evidence of this happening), the practice was adapted and fitted to local needs and ideology. For those familiar with the topic, notable omissions not included due to space are the data related to the Incas in South America, the Native American at Cahokia, and the burials at Kerma in Nubia, not to mention the tophets in Carthage and elsewhere. The appendix provides a selected bibliography as a starting point for learning more about these and others.

## 2 The Near East

We start in the Near East, with a place that has almost turned legend: Ur. The name itself evokes a sense of deep history, and still maintains its hold in the German *Urgeschichte* and the English *ur-* as referring to something

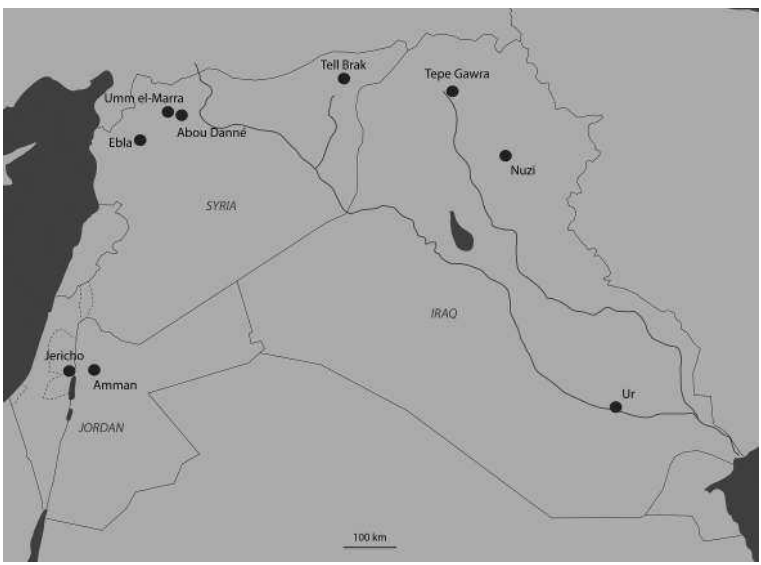


Figure 1 Map of the Near East with main sites mentioned in the text.

original.[4] The Royal Tombs at Ur present some of the earliest secure evidence of human sacrifice, and are almost invariably used as comparison in discussions on human sacrifice anywhere in the world. The largely untouched tombs present a wealth and beauty that have captured the imagination of public and scholars alike since their discovery by Sir Leonard Woolley in the 1920s. By any parameter, they are extraordinary, and although they are perhaps some of the best early evidence of sacrifice, earlier examples have been suggested, in very different contexts.

[4] See also Recht 2014: 413–426, from which much of the discussion in this section is adapted.

## Foundation and Building Sacrifices

The deposition of offerings in conjunction with the construction of buildings is a well-known practice in the ancient Near East (Ellis 1968). Such deposits consist of object and sometimes animal remains. From early periods at the sites of Nuzi and Tepe Gawra, children were placed under floors and in association with walls, suggesting that they could also qualify as building deposits (al-'Ubaid to Old Babylonian period – see Green 1975: 59–79). For example, infants were found in walls, below floors, and in a doorway at Nuzi; in a later phase, 11 infants had been placed under the wall in the corner of a room, with a vessel inverted over the remains (Starr 1939: 9–10, 14, 16, 226–227, 267–268, 274–275, 298–299, 510). At Tepe Gawra, the infants were associated with temples: below floors, in walls, and directly in front (Tobler 1950: 57, 66, 100–101; Speiser 1935: 25–26, 140, 142, pl. XII).[5] These depositions are often explained as natural deaths, with a reference to high infant mortality rates. However, the Nuzi infants were all aged 3–12 months and sometimes occur in multiples, which indicates a selective process rather than the randomness of natural death (also more likely to be one at a time). In these cases, the location in liminal places is particularly interesting as such spaces are hotspots for ritual activity, especially sacrifice. If any of these infants were in fact sacrificed, they may themselves have been perceived as liminal individuals due to their youth.

Quite a different kind of foundation deposit may be represented at a later stage at Tell Abou Danné (c. 1800–1600 BCE – Tefnin 1979: 48–49). Here, a circular pit was part of the foundations of the fortifications. A human skeleton had been placed in it, with its back against the wall, along with several dog skeletons, including a very young puppy. This appears to be a fairly

[5] For other possible examples: Kudish Sagir, near Nuzi (Starr 1939: 9–10), Tell Brak (Mallowan 1947: 70; Matthews 2003: 196–197), Chagar Bazar (Mallowan 1936: 18), and Tell el-Kerkh (Tsuneki et al. 1998).

straightforward sacrifice related to the construction of the walls, and given their function as fortifications, the sacrifice may have had a protective purpose as well.

### *Retainer and Mortuary Sacrifices*

When excavating the Early Dynastic cemetery at Ur, Leonard Woolley grouped 16 of the tombs as 'royal' due to shared characteristics that included their larger size, more elaborate construction and wealth of grave goods (often both in quantity and quality) (Figure 2).[6] One of the shared characteristics is also that they contained what he believed to be human sacrificial victims, killed at the funeral of their master and thus an example of 'retainer' sacrifice. More explicitly, human victims are mentioned for tombs PG 789, PG 800, PG 777, PG 779, PG 1157, PG 1648, PG 1618, PG 1332, PG 1050, PG 1054 and PG 1237. All architectural elements are not preserved in all the tombs, but based on the most complete ones, each is thought to consist of a main chamber, holding the body of the deceased or owner of the tomb, and a dromos or shaft with further offerings. Typically, the human victims were placed in this area, to the extent that it is also known as the 'death pit' of each tomb.

PG 789 may have belonged to King Meskalamdug (Woolley 1934: 62–71). The main chamber with the body of the deceased had been looted, but the 'death pit' contained a wealth of goods, animals, and humans (Figure 3). In the dromos were six 'soldiers', with copper spears and wearing copper helmets.[7] Behind them were six oxen, associated with two four-wheeled

[6] For suggested internal chronology and owners of each tomb, see Reade (2001) and Marchesi (2004). Woolley's meticulous publication (1934) still provides the best source and description of the tombs. See also Woolley 1954; 1982.

[7] The skulls and helmets had all been crushed flat: one of these is on display in the British Museum (BM 121414).