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978-1-107-01112-0 - Greek and Roman Animal Sacrifice: Ancient Victims, Modern Observers

Edited by Christopher A. Faraone and F. S. Naiden

Excerpt

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Introduction

Christopher A. Faraone and F. S. Naiden

In recent scholarship, “animal sacrifice” ranks as the central ritual act of the Greeks and Romans, yet this was not always so. Only forty years ago did two of the giants in the study of ancient Greek religion, Walter Burkert and the late J.-P. Vernant, write the books that gave animal sacrifice pride of place. Drawing on the work of the sociobiologist Konrad Lorenz, Burkert in *Homo Necans* (1972) focused on the act of killing the animal in a sacrifice, which (he argued) derived from a Neolithic hunting ritual, and expressed grief over the animal’s demise. For Burkert, animal sacrifice is marked by duplicity (hidden sacrificial knives and protestations of innocence), by a fear of the close similarities between the human and the mammalian, and by the ease with which animal sacrifice might slip into or become confused with human sacrifice. This book, which highlighted texts and stories from Greek tragedy, transformed the interpretation of animal sacrifice. Many textbooks repeat Burkert’s description of the “typical sacrifice,” with its hidden knives and wailing women who mourn the death of the animal.¹

Vernant, on the other hand, virtually ignored the act of killing in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice* (1989), an equally influential book published with his colleague Marcel Detienne.² They focused on the next stage of the ritual, the cooking and eating of the meat that was produced by the sacrifice.

¹ W. Burkert, *Homo Necans: Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen*, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 32 (Berlin, 1972; 2nd edn., with an afterword, 1997), tr. P. Bing as *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley, 1983); for additional bibliography, see Graf in this volume. See also Burkert’s own *Greek Religion*, tr. J. Raffan (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), the table of contents of which reveals the prominent place given to animal sacrifice. Cf. M. Nilsson, *Griechische Religion*, 3rd edn. (Munich, 1967), a handbook reflecting an earlier state of scholarship and thus comparable to the Roman religion handbooks mentioned below.

² J.-P. Vernant and M. Detienne (eds.), *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec* (Paris, 1979), tr. P. Wissing as *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (Chicago, 1989), accompanied by “Théorie générale du sacrifice et mise à mort dans la θυσία grecque,” in *Le sacrifice dans l’antiquité*, Entretiens sur l’antiquité classique 27, eds. O. Reverdinand and B. Grange (Geneva, 1981), 1–21, tr. as “A general theory of sacrifice and the slaying of the victim in Greek thysia,” in Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays* (Princeton, N.J., 1991), 290–302.

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The chief texts were not Greek tragedy, but Hesiod's two versions of the Prometheus story, which explain the division of parts of the butchered animal between the gods and their human worshipers, and comic accounts of enactments of sacrificial cooking and eating. In contrast to Burkert's ethological approach, Vernant and Detienne drew upon the work of the legal anthropologist Louis Gernet and of the French structuralists. There was also a contrast of tone. For Burkert, animal sacrifice was a tragic deception; for the two French scholars, it was a comedy of errors. Where Burkert discerned violence, they saw the minimization of violence. The German and French schools do, however, share two assumptions. First, animal sacrifice differed from other rituals, including other kinds of sacrifice. It was unique. Second, animal sacrifice, and especially the meal occurring after it, accounted for male bonding, group formation, and cultural self-definition. Besides being unique, animal sacrifice was socially and politically determinative. These two qualities gave it the status of a central ritual.

This status had never been self-evident. The Greek language did not possess a *vox propria* for "animal sacrifice." The common term *thuein*, for example, meant to "make smoke," not to slaughter and consume an animal victim.³ "Animal sacrifice" was a modern invention subject to doubts affecting both the usefulness of the category of ritual and the particulars found in the work of both Burkert and the *équipe* of Vernant and Detienne. In Burkert's case, nearly all of the Neolithic evidence upon which he built his theory has met with archeological objections. Scholars also questioned his primary source for guilt-ridden sacrifice – the Bouphonia at Athens – a ritual that is both idiosyncratic and distorted by Pythagorean and vegetarian concerns.⁴ In the case of the French school, doubt has arisen concerning Homeric and especially Hesiodic descriptions of the division of the sacrificial animal into two portions, the useless fat and bones for the gods and the valuable meat and innards for mortals. Recent osteological analysis from Isthmia and elsewhere suggests that, contrary to Hesiod's putative foundation story, the forequarters of the animal were not part of the sacrificial meal, and it has drawn new attention to the question

³ For a survey of the philological issues, see J. Casabona, *Recherches sur le vocabulaire des sacrifices en grec* (Aix-en-Provence, 1966), and J. Rudhardt, *Notions fondamentales de la pensée religieuse et actes constitutifs du culte dans la Grèce classique* (Geneva, 1958); among earlier literature, note H. von Fritze, *Die Rauchopfer der Griechen* (Berlin, 1894).

⁴ D. Obbink, "The origin of Greek sacrifice: Theophrastus on religion and cultural history," in *Theophrastean Studies*, eds. W. Fortenbaugh and R. Sharples (New Brunswick, N.J., 1988), 272–96, here 283–6, cited with further discussion by F. Naiden, "The fallacy of the willing victim," *JHS* 127 (2007): 61–73, at 66–7.

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of how much meat came from animals that were not sacrificed.⁵ Both schools, moreover, assumed that the sacrificial animal consented to being sacrificed, an important feature of Burkert's notion of deception on the one hand and of the French notion of minimized violence on the other, yet this assumption has come under attack in recent publications in both France and England.⁶

Cristiano Grottanelli and other scholars in Italy meanwhile observed that the theories of Burkert and Vernant, although centered on animal slaughter and meat-eating, say little about the distribution of meat among worshippers.⁷ Burkert neglects the topic entirely and Vernant and his school suppose that this distribution was, in the Classical polis at least, egalitarian. Without denying that sacrifice is central, these Italian writers have shed a new light on the political and social role of the ritual. They also drew attention away from the act of slaughter that preoccupied Burkert and made helpful comparisons between meat distribution in Greece on the one hand and Rome and the Near East on the other.

For Roman sacrifice, similar questions arise from a similar history. A century ago, scholarship on Roman religion did not typically identify animal sacrifice as a distinct practice. Instead it formed part of the practice of worship.⁸ By 1961, Kurt Latte's *Römische Religionsgeschichte*, a contribution to the standard *Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft*, included a chapter on sacrifice and prayer and a subsection on "blutige Opfer."⁹ And by 2007, a new *Companion to Roman Religion* included a chapter on sacrifice on the grounds that "Sacrifice was at the heart of most acts of cult worship," while adding that sacrifice was "first and foremost a banquet," meaning a meal including meat.¹⁰ Yet Roman practice presented some of the same

⁵ Isthmia: E. R. Gebhard and D. S. Reese, "Sacrifices for Poseidon and Melikertes-Palaimon at Isthmia," in *Greek Sacrificial Ritual: Olympian and Chthonian*, eds. R. Hägg and B. Alroth (Stockholm, 2005), 125–54, with bibliography. Non-sacrificial meat: G. Ekroth, "Meat in ancient Greece: sacrificial, sacred, or secular?" *Food and History* 5 (2007): 249–72.

⁶ S. Georgoudi, "'L'occultation de la violence' dans le sacrifice grec: données anciennes, discours modernes," in *La cuisine et l'autel: les sacrifices en questions dans les sociétés de la Méditerranée ancienne*, eds. S. Georgoudi, R. Koch Piettre, and F. Schmidt, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences Religieuses 124 (Turnhout, 2005), vol. II, 1; Naiden, "Fallacy."

⁷ C. Grottanelli M. G. Amadasi, and N. F. Parise (eds.), *Sacrificio e società nel mondo antico* (Rome, 1988), including responses by Burkert (163–77) and Detienne (177–88).

⁸ E.g., G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (Munich, 1902 = *Handbuch der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft in systematischer Darstellung* 5.4), describes sacrifice as part of "Die gottesdienstlichen Handlungen" (344–65).

⁹ K. Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte*, 375–94, and especially 379–81, on "blutige Opfer" (Munich, 1961 = *Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft* 5.4), updating Wissowa, *Religion*.

¹⁰ J. Scheid, "Sacrifices to Gods and Ancestors," in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. J. Rüpke (Oxford, 2007) 263–73.

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quandaries as the Greek. The general term for sacrifice, *sacrificare*, refers to any act by which something was put into the possession of a god.¹¹ A common term, *immolare*, “to sprinkle meal,” does not designate the slaughter of an animal in an act of sacrifice, but, like *thuein*, designates a related act. With problems of terminology come problems of conceptualization. Roman sources betray far less interest in bloodshed than Greek ones do. Compared to the Greeks, they lay far more stress on hierarchical division of meat, and so they are as ill suited for Vernant’s theme of the egalitarian meal as they are for Burkert’s theme of collective guilt.

The advent of the Roman Empire heightened these differences between Roman practice and the scholarly models devised for Greece. For the sake of the imperial cult, the Roman authorities demanded that anyone suspected of refusing to worship the emperor make an offering of incense and wine, not an offering of meat. The “central” act of Roman self-identification, in short, is the burning of incense, as we see in the proliferation of public images of Roman generals and emperors making offerings on small incense burners. Another development, one that accelerated under the Empire, but had begun earlier, in the Hellenistic Period, was the greater availability of meat that did not come from sacrificial animals (as implied by St. Paul, who in 1 Corinthians assumed that some of the meat available from butchers did not come from sacrifice).¹² A third development was the diffusion of Greek literary culture. One strain of Neo-Platonism, manifest in Porphyry’s *De Abstemientia*, included widely known moral objections to animal sacrifice. The roots of these objections go back centuries earlier, to Theophrastus, to Empedocles, and to scattered reports of early Greek vegetarianism. Porphyry, however, is the author through whom these objections are mainly known.

Christianity presented another challenge to the practice of animal sacrifice. Rejecting this ritual themselves, Christians condemned pagans for countenancing it. Pagan counterattacks led to a polemic creating a new awareness of animal sacrifice as opposed to sacrifice of other kinds, including the manifold sacrifice accomplished by Jesus during his ministry as well as on the cross. A complicating factor was that each side in the polemic accused the other of commingling aspects of animal sacrifice with the sacrifice of human beings.¹³ Here, for the first time, we begin to find explicit

¹¹ Macr. 3.3.2. ¹² 1 Corinthians 8.25.

¹³ For pagan accusations, see A. Henrichs, “Pagan ritual and the alleged crimes of the early Christians: a reconsideration,” in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, eds. P. Granfield and J. A. Jungmann (Munster, 1970), vol. 1, 18–35.

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parallels between human and mammalian bodies and explicit remarks on the special character of blood sacrifice. And it is only in this period, the early Common Era, that we find an ample literature that presents animal sacrifice as a distinct practice, and as central to religious identity. Yet the distinctiveness and centrality of animal sacrifice are both negative traits. Animal sacrifice is something to condemn.

In condemning pagan animal sacrifices, the Church Fathers denounced the Romans, the Greeks, and also other peoples, notably the Phoenicians and Carthaginians. Whatever animal sacrifice was, it was not a practice that set the Greeks apart from the Romans, or set these two peoples apart from others, notably the Western Semites. Theories that fail to acknowledge these links run the risk of overestimating national as opposed to shared features of the practice. Yet, as Grottanelli observed, the work of Burkert and Vernant and Detienne confined itself to Greek sacrifice. References to Roman sacrifice were incidental.

In the light of the parallels between Greek and Roman issues, this book deals with both cultures in most of its four sections. The essays in the first section (“Modern historiography”) deal with the genesis and evolution of the concept of animal sacrifice. The chief question is the development of the idea of the centrality of animal sacrifice in the Greek world – the distinctiveness of the ritual and its role in shaping social and political life. In “From Bergaigne to Meuli: how animal sacrifice became a hot topic,” Bruce Lincoln traces “animal sacrifice” from the eighteenth century to the present, showing how political and intellectual factors influenced the creation of this topic, and how systematic treatments of sacrifice arose partly from evaluation of Greek and other ancient evidence and partly from the influence of political and social science on the study of antiquity. Burkert’s theme of violence goes back to the French reactionary de Maistre, and the French school’s theme of commensal solidarity goes back to Durkheim and the Enlightenment. The work of both sides appears as the latest, but not necessarily the last, stage in two centuries of debate. In “One generation after Burkert and Girard: where are the great theories?” Fritz Graf turns to the state of debate today, some decades after the work of Burkert and the French, but also of René Girard and Jonathan Z. Smith. He observes that the wave of theoretical innovations from social science and also from psychiatry and sociobiology has halted, and thrown the study of Greek religion back upon cultural and regional specifics in lieu of generalities manifest over larger areas and longer periods. On this view, the theories of Vernant and Detienne fare better than those of Burkert and Girard by

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being specific to Greek religion. In Lincoln, too, Vernant and his associates fare better in the sense of belonging to a tradition that minimizes violence, especially violence with human victims.

At the same time, Graf differs from Lincoln in contending that the distinctiveness of animal sacrifice in Greek and also Roman religion does not depend on the armature of assumptions that Burkert especially brought to the subject. Greek and Latin terminology, he argues, confirms the distinctiveness of sacrifice: the lack of *voces propriae* did not prevent the Latin verb *sacrificare* and the Greek *hieria rezein* from commonly referring to animal sacrifice. This conceptualization allowed the ancients to take the practice for granted, at least until the pagan–Christian controversies of the Common Era. Graf also recognizes the link between Greek and Near Eastern sacrifice by citing new archeological evidence that suggests that animal sacrifice developed in Syria in the late Neolithic Period. From here, the practice could have spread to the rest of the Western Semitic area and also Greece. If Greek and Roman animal sacrifice is no longer distinctive because it casts light on theoretical perspectives, it still remains important because it casts light on Eastern Mediterranean historical perspectives.

The essays in the second section (“Greek and Roman practice”) take up the issue of ancient practice as opposed to modern theory, and focus on one aspect of the claim that sacrifice is a central ritual – the role of sacrifice in group formation. For this role, sacrificial feasting has been instrumental since the nineteenth-century work of Robertson Smith and Wellhausen. Burkert and the French both insist on sacrificial feasting, and in describing it both stress solidarity rather than the unequal distribution of interest to Grottanelli. The French go beyond Burkert in focusing on democratic Athens as an example of feasting by a community defined as the heads of citizen households and their dependents. F. S. Naiden’s essay, “Blessèd are the parasites,” asks whether these feasts were communal, as the prevailing view requires, and points out that recent archeological analysis suggests that too little meat was available to feed all or even many of the citizens of Athens. By the same token, too little was usually available to feed smaller groups like demes. In this essay, an issue of method arises alongside the issues of feasting and group formation. The prevailing view rests firstly on literary sources and secondly on archeological sources from outside Greece. (In this regard, the critique offered by Graf does not differ from Burkert, save that the archeological evidence comes from the east, and not the north.) Naiden, however, uses osteological evidence from Greek shrines. Besides citing the evidence from Isthmia, he attempts to show that ancient animals were smaller than previously assumed.

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The conclusion that there was too little meat for entire communities or other large groups leads to the question of who, in all likelihood, was fed, and to this question Naiden gives an answer that links his essay to the next one, John Scheid's. In the Greek world, priests and other social superiors got the meat, making animal sacrifice an occasion for differentiation, not solidarity, and for hierarchy, not the *isonomia* characteristic of democratic Athens. Scheid draws a similar conclusion in "Roman animal sacrifice and the system of being." Defining sacrifice as a meal for the gods, he draws away from the prevailing view that it is a human meal tending toward solidarity among worshipers. He also finds that acts of sacrifice reproduce social hierarchy. This hierarchy, moreover, appears in both animal sacrifice and vegetal sacrifice, two practices as difficult to divorce from one another in Roman as in Greek practice.

Scheid then turns to another topic pertinent to Naiden's essay: non-sacrificial meat. The paucity of meat that Naiden reports might imply that non-sacrificial meat was eaten instead, as reported in 1 Corinthians. Scheid finds no evidence for non-sacrificial meat in Roman Italy, and to that degree comes to the support of the prevailing view of the importance of meat at sacrificial feasts, but he also says that the act of sacrifice might be limited to an offering of the firstborn of the herd, through *primitiae*, making it possible to slaughter the rest of the herd without ceremony. Scheid's concept of the religious purpose served by sacrifice does not require compulsory communal banquets, only compulsory, if modest, gifts to the gods. Differing from Vernant because of his stress on the gods, Scheid also differs in his stress on ceremony rather than commensality.

The third section ("Visual representation") turns aside from both theory and practice to consider the sources for sacrifice. Born of currents in social and political science, and reinforced by psychiatry and biology, the prevailing view of Greek sacrifice has proved ill suited to the use of some sources, including artistic as opposed to documentary sources and visual as opposed to literary sources. Burkert and the French writers do not think artistic or visual sources irrelevant, but they do think that the relation of these sources to sacrifice was negative, because they usually presented the atypical or the perverse. Human sacrifice, for example, was frequent in myth yet infrequent otherwise.¹⁴ Yet as commonly as archeology and art history must deal with sacrifice, writers in these two fields have not responded to the methodological challenge presented by the prevailing view.

¹⁴ W. Burkert, "Greek tragedy and sacrificial ritual," *GRBS* 7 (1966): 87–121, revised and reprinted in *Savage Energies: Lessons of Myth and Ritual in Ancient Greece*, tr. P. Bing (Chicago, 2001), 1–21.

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In “Sacrificing stones: on some sculpture, mostly Athenian,” Richard Neer begins by observing that for archeologists and art historians, animal sacrifice never held the place that it did for other scholars: whatever else it was, the prevailing view reflected the dominance of written sources in the study of antiquity. Neer also observes that the practice of sacrifice was as much about commemorating offerings as making them. This observation implies that sacrifice is not a ritual with a central place in a religion, but a link in a communicative chain including commemorations and also dedications (the Parthenon ranking as one of the most prepossessing). In such a chain, no link is central. Neer then turns to the issue of ambiguity: does a commemoration of sacrifice stand as just that, a commemoration, or as an object in its own right, an *agalma* pleasing to god? For Neer, the artistic treatment of sacrifice reshapes ritual praxis.

Just as Neer concentrates on a few objects, the next chapter, Jaś Elsner’s “Sacrifice in late Roman art,” surveys many objects in pursuit of a different goal, the use of visual evidence to gauge the importance of animal sacrifice. While surveying images of sacrifice in a given time and place, the late Principate, Elsner asks how important the practice was to this era’s commissioners of art and sculpture. Although Elsner concedes that no survey of this source, or any source, can measure the value of animal sacrifice to worshipers, he demonstrates that images of sacrifice diminish after the early third century CE. At the same time, Roman imperial edicts prescribed attendance at animal sacrifices. This juxtaposition of less sacrifice and more official support for the practice raises an issue overlooked by Burkert and Vernant: the relation between official pronouncements on sacrifice and popular attitudes. The issue sharpens in the late Roman Period, in which the Christian population was growing, yet it is relevant for any period in Greco-Roman antiquity. Sacrifice was always regulated, not to say officially sponsored, but how much did the regulations affect personal or familial practices? According to Plato, these practices were dangerously independent of regulation, and could even harm the communal cult, and Aeschines agreed. So did some of the Athenian juries that heard cases of *asebeia*.¹⁵ Yet the prevailing view assumes communal unanimity on the subject of animal sacrifice. Only marginal objections, as by Pythagoreans, would disrupt this unanimity. The interplay of communal, familial, and personal sacrifices was considered unproblematic.

¹⁵ Pl. *Leg.* 90e–910b; so also Aeschin. 3.121. See F. Naiden, “Sanctions in sacred laws,” in *Symposion* 2007 (Vienna, 2008), 125–38.

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Just as the prevailing view neglected visual sources, it neglected genre and author in regard to literary sources, issues for the fourth and final section of the volume, “Literary representation.” Modern scholars use epic and tragedy as sources for ritual praxis, but they do not use them as sources for ideology, as Elsner does, or as sources for reconfigured material, as Neer does. This is not to say that epic and tragedy were not conceded peculiar places as sources for sacrifice: epic had its distinctive vocabulary as well as setting, and tragedy had its controversial relation to the sacrifices and choruses, from which some ancient sources said that this genre derived. Yet appreciation of the literary torsion applied to the ritual was lacking. There was no synthetic treatment of sacrifice in comedy, for example, nor any consideration of the ancient literature that could best stand beside Greek as a complex, well-known treatment of sacrifice – the Hebrew literature of the Tanakh, especially Genesis. In “Animal sacrifice and comedy: an alternative point of view,” James Redfield remedies these two omissions. Beginning with the act of animal sacrifice performed by Noah at Genesis 8.20–9.7, Redfield shows that sacrifice can receive a positive treatment founded on a covenant between god and man, not a negative treatment founded on man’s deceiving god, as in Hesiod. Comedy, too, gives sacrifice a positive treatment, one in which killing matters less than burning, *thuein*, and in which burning and smelling foretell eating, the most important aspect of the rite. New Comedy adds weddings to Old Comedy’s feasts and acts of sacrifice. Redfield has pinpointed a comic version for the theme of group formation via sacrifice.

Yet the group formation that occurs in sacrifice according to Vernant and Detienne is, in Durkheim’s terms, an instance of mechanical solidarity. Group formation of this kind requires rituals, but it does not allow for variation that would imperil the reproduction of collective consciousness. For Redfield, however, sacrifice is generically determined. In Old Comedy, the treatment of sacrifice is transgressive rather than normative. In New Comedy, the treatment of sacrifice is reparative or recuperative. Neither treatment fits the template given by the prevailing view.

The challenges of using evidence from tragedy appear in the title of Albert Henrichs’ essay, “Animal sacrifice in Greek tragedy: ritual, metaphor, problematizations.” Henrichs observes that Burkert attributes to the Greeks an unfounded fear lest tragedy inspire human, not animal, sacrifice. For dramatic purposes, Henrichs says, tragedy pays more heed to the killing of victims than to meals afterward, comedy’s emphasis, or to preparations and processions beforehand. For dramatic and also ethical purposes, tragedy

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highlights sacrifices that go awry, whether because of the intent of the worshiper or a mishap during the ritual. Both of these tendencies might be misunderstood. The first would suggest that sacrifice was somehow criminal, and the second would suggest that sacrifice was especially bloody.

Both Burkert and Vernant treat sacrifice as a whole. Their view of sacrifice as both central and distinctive requires as much. Yet Henrichs divides tragic sacrifice into two parts, *thusia* and *sphagia*. If this split veers away from the prevailing view of sacrifice, so do emphases found in these two terms. The first term refers to burning, not killing or eating, whereas the second refers to slaughtering, not murdering or eating. Both terms have Homeric roots that Henrichs uncovers in his treatment of Aeschylus and the *Odyssey*. Like Redfield's comparison of Greek comedy to Genesis, this comparison of epic poetry to tragedy reveals a disposition toward narrative reasoning about the ritual. Sacrifice adheres to norms that need questioning, not just affirming; it is a cultural artifact, not just a social practice. Modern notions of sacrifice prove to follow some generic rendering of this artifact – tragedy for Burkert, comedy, Hesiod, and Homer for the French school. The tragic rendering, however, is the most difficult to use.

Detienne acknowledged the difficulties inherent in “sacrifice,” saying that “the notion of sacrifice is indeed a category of the thought of yesterday.”¹⁶ The essays in this book have sought to show that Detienne was right, even at the expense of his own views, and the views of Vernant and Burkert. Forty years after the publication of *Homo Necans*, “sacrifice” is a category of the thought of yesterday – a problematic category, as shown by Lincoln and Graf. This category is difficult to reconcile with the epigraphical evidence of Naiden and Scheid, with the visual evidence of Neer and Elsner, and with the epic and dramatic evidence re-examined by Redfield and Henrichs. When does a category like this one cease to be a tool, and become an obstacle? At the invitation of the editors, Clifford Ando of the University of Chicago has answered this question in an afterword. We invite our readers to answer it, too, in whatever way will carry forward the attempt to understand what victims did or did not have to do with honoring the gods of Greece and Rome.

¹⁶ Wissing (tr.), *Cuisine of Sacrifice*, 20.