Introduction

After more than a century of grand theorizing about the universal dimensions to the practice of ritual sacrifice, scholars now question the analytical utility of the notion of sacrifice writ large. The word “sacrifice” itself frequently is broken down into its Latin roots, *sacer*, and *facere*, to do or make sacred – which is a huge category and also vague. Presuming it is people and places that are made sacred, we must question the dynamics. Does sacrifice “make sacred” by summoning the presence of gods or ancestors? By offering gifts to them? By dining with them? By averting their wrath? By atoning for personal or collective sins? By rectifying social disequilibrium through scapegoating? By restoring or establishing cosmic order? By purifying sacred sites? By inducing an existential epiphany about life and death? These are a handful of the diverse models proffered over the past century. Considering that we find accounts of sacrifice on virtually all the world’s continents, contextualization of the term and practice will be complex and varied.

One key problem is what kind of acts we should deem sacrificial. Typically, we identify sacrifice with ritual killing, but ritual killing leans far toward the dramatic and doesn’t comport well with, for instance, sacrificing soma or ghee to the gods (McClymond 2008). Yet, in the wake of Freud (1918), Girard (1977), and Burkert (1983, 2013), we have learned to consider the ritual killing of animals as trauma-inducing, as generating some kind of ontic seizure – perhaps an *Ergriffenheit* (Jensen 1963[1951]) or *mysterium tremendum* (Otto 1958[1923]). Indeed, it is such epiphanies that reputedly thrust the experience of ritual killing into the religious sphere as opposed simply into the culinary – for example, slaughtering animals and cooking meat.

For comparison, though, as Pongratz-Leisten notes about early Mesopotamian sacrifices, the killing there is less significant than what the

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1 See Scheid (2015) on the Latin terminology, including “*rem divinam facere*, ‘to make a thing sacred,’ often abridged to *facere* (‘to sacrifice’), and the etymology of the words designating sacrificial activity, *sacificare, sacrificium* (*sacrum facere*, ‘to perform a religious ceremony’).”
killing achieves and to what other acts it is attached. Concerning what it achieves, the emphasis is less on the complete annihilation of the victim than on the “transformative, reordering, or reintegrative purposes when [killing is] occurring in a ritually controlled environment” (2012:292). In short, ritual control and larger purpose eclipse the drama of death. Concerning the accompanying acts, in divine offerings the ritual killing might be combined with greeting, kissing, clothing, praying, and singing to the god, which make for a complex of ritualized activities that do not necessarily privilege the killings, which in any case are varied in kind and terminology (Pongratz-Leisten 2007). The point is that one must beware of simple generalizations in the historical study of “sacrificial” rituals.

While we cannot cover all the complexities in this short Element, we can summarize some of the themes, theories, and controversies attached to the topic. First, this Element will sketch two sensational themes that have become impossible to extricate from the study of sacrifice, namely the sweeping trope of patriotic death as sacrifice and remarkable reports of premodern human ritual killings. The first has a vast resonance, particularly in the West, while examples of the latter are restricted, due to the enormous scope of material, to literary reports from the premodern Mesoamerican, Chinese, and Greek milieus, which illustrate the complexity of the subject. Second, it will summarize classical theories of religious sacrifice, touching first on the embryonic theories in biblical, early Christian, Vedic, and classical Greek understandings, then moving on to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century theorists. Third, it will problematize the two typical scenes in the Homeric poems considered to represent sacrifice, thysia (commensal) and horkia/horkos (oath-making) scenes. These are instructive because they differ hugely in tone, in how they represent the killing and death of the victim, and in their narrative purposes overall. It will be argued that the label sacrifice for these representations from the Iliad – one of the earliest literary artifacts of Western culture – is anachronistic and unhelpful for capturing their essences. The Element will conclude by exploring the ritual dynamics of one kind of pan-Near Eastern “sacrifice” that is indeed dedicated to ritual killing. That is oath-sacrifice. Ritual dynamics will be shown to offer a more helpful lens on the subject than the grand sacrificial theories of the past two centuries.
In what follows, readers will notice a preponderance of materials from Western traditions, which can only be explained by the author’s restricted field of expertise and the 32,000-word constraint of the Cambridge Elements series. There is also a scarcity of archaeological evidence, which, however fascinating, is simply beyond the introductory purpose of this Element. Ritual theories too are not thoroughly covered, although readers can consult *Elements of Ritual and Violence* (Kitts 2018a) for a summary of those. While it would be fascinating to explore any of these subjects further, this sweep of topics hopefully offers readers an overview of important themes and theories in the field.

1 Themes

*The Trope of Patriotic Sacrifice*

Probably no term is more resonant in patriotic lore than “sacrifice.” Especially in the United States, dying for kin and country is adorned with sacrificial imagery that, if not tied to ritual practices specifically, certainly falls within the sphere of civil religion, as noted by Marvin and Ingle decades ago (1996) and reinvigorated by Bellah (2005) and Gorski (2017), among others. As far back as the Civil War, battlefield deaths could be figured as blood sacrifices and battlefields as “consecrated” by the blood of the fallen (Gorski 2017:98). It is not only wars that attract sacrificial metaphors in US vernacular, but warlike endeavors are particularly rich vehicles for them.

Lest we dismiss these figurations as mere rhetorical flourishes catering uniquely to US tastes, it should be noted that rendering battlefield death as sacrifice permeates the history of Western war rhetoric. Sacrificial imagery permeated the rhetoric of the Great War, for instance (Wintermute 2020), of Western accounts of the Crusades (Gaposchkin 2017:55–62), and of Jewish medieval martyrs’ narratives (Shepkaru 2002). Indeed, one can

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2 Timothy Insoll provides an archaeological overview (2012) and Dennis Hughes probes the archaeological evidence for ritual killings in chapter 2 of his *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece* (1991).
trace it all the way back to Roman *devotio* traditions (Versnel 2015) and even to Pindar fragment 78: “Hear, Alala, daughter of war, prelude of spears, to whom men sacrifice themselves, . . . a sacred death.” The list could be vastly expanded. Whereas anthropologists and religious historians might prefer to disregard such vernacular as merely metaphorical, as tropes incompatible with reports from fieldwork and with sacrificial theory, the fact that this metaphorical understanding persevered for millennia makes it worth exploring, briefly.

Underpinning the trope of patriotic sacrifice is the notion of noble death, wherein battlefield death is understood not as the mere reduction of human bodies to inert matter but rather as bearing witness to something more pure, sublime, and profound. Droge and Tabor trace the notion of noble death back in classical literature before Eleazer and the mother and sons in 2 and 4 Maccabees, before the figure of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, to the figure of Achilles in the *Iliad* (1992:18). Given the *Iliad*’s status as Western *Ur*-literature, seeding noble death in Homeric epic is plausible, but Droge and Tabor err in attributing Achilles’ decision to fight and die to his wholesale purchase of the concept. Achilles dismisses the heroic ethos at *Iliad* 9:318–320 and when he does decide to fight and die, it is not due to a dispassionate stoicism nor to an embrace of beautiful death in battle – granted, an extraordinary theme in the *Iliad*. Rather, his decision is motivated foremost by love, grief, and a desire for revenge, as he eloquently tells his mother at 18:98–104 (Kitts 2018b). Achilles aside, though, it cannot be denied that the poem does extol warriors who die beautifully, who fall as

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3 ᾣ θύεται ἄνδρες . . . τὸν ιερόθυτον θάνατον. Pindar Fragment 78.
4 N.b., the conversations between Sarpedon and Glaucos at 12:310–328, between Hector and Andromache at 6:440–449.
5 “Then let me die, since I was unable to protect my companion who was killed, who perished far from his fatherland, and he needed me to be his protector.
So now I am not returning to my own fatherland, since I was no light to Patroclus nor to my other companions, the many subdued by godlike Hector.
Rather I sat by the ships, a useless burden on the cultivated ground” (Il.18.98–104). Author’s translation.
Sacrifice

white poplar trees or tall pines hewn by craftsmen (Sarpedon 16:483–484), or as wheat and barley mown by farmers (Achaean and Trojans 11:67–71) — similes that represent death in battle as natural and poetic. Old king Priam wistfully reflects on the theme when he contrasts his imminent and dreadful bodily rending by his own dogs to the most exquisite bodily rending of a young warrior in battle who dies at the peak of manhood (22.66–73). While these examples are not explicitly sacrificial, they do idealize battlefield death.

Nonetheless the *Iliad* does indeed configure death as sacrifice in a handful of poetic renderings. We see this in similes, as when, for instance, Hippodamas dies as a bull being sacrificed to Poseidon: “[Achilles] stabbed Hippodamas in the upper back with his spear. Then Hippodamas exhaled (αἰσθή) his spirit (θυμός) and belched (ἐρυγήν), as a bull belches when he is dragged for the Helikonian lord by young men, and the Earthshaker is pleased with them” (20:402–406). More subtly, we see it in the ascription of panting and gasping verbs to men, typically Trojans or their allies, who die in language similar to the gasping lambs who die in the oath-sacrifice of the *Iliad* — they die “gasping and deprived of spirit, for the bronze had taken away their strength” (αἰσπαίροντας thumōi deiomenous; apo gar menos heileto chalkos 3:293–294). On a narrative level, this ascription of gasping and panting verbs is arguably because the Trojans en masse are implied to be suffering the fate of oath-violators, stemming from the oath-sacrifice in Book 3 (Kitts 2005). Examples include Asteropaios, who exhaled (ασθμαίνοντα) his thumos (spirit) when Achilles killed him at the beginning of his fight with the river god (21.182); Thracians who gasped (ασπαίροντας) when Diomedes and Odysseus slaughtered them in the night (10.521); while dying, Adamos gasped (ἀσπαίρ) like an ox dying by human blows (13.571); Medon exhaled (αἰσθμαίνισν) as he was struck in the temple and fell from the chariot (5.585); and Asios’ charioteer did the very same thing [con’t]. Achilles does say eventually that he would win that good fame (νῦν δὲ κλέος ἐσθόλον ὑροίμην [18:121]), but it is after a long self-incriminating lament and his anticipation of the costs of his imminent rage on the mothers and wives of Troy (18:122–125). On Achilles’ emotional depth, see Zanker 1994:10–27 and Cairns 2003:11–50.
(13.396). These gasping and panting verbs in verses for dying on the battlefield give the audience an unflinching view of the victims’ last breaths.6 By reading metaphor with Ricoeur (1981), we can see a figurative transference implied between dying in oath-sacrifice and dying in battle. These examples show that the sacrificial figuration of battlefield death runs very deep in Western imagination. We will return to this sacrificial figuration of dying humans when we explore the curses accompanying oath-sacrifices of the ancient Near East.

For contemporary sensibilities, though, it is arguably the Christian martyrologies that set the Western bar for sacrifice, despite abundant antecedents in classical Greek tragedy,7 Greek political oratory,8 Judeo-Christian theology (Hengel 1977, 1981), and biblical narrative (n.b. Levenson 1993, 2013). The first generations of Christians may have disparaged the actual sacrificial practices of Jews and pagans (1 Cor. 10:18–22), but the trope of sacrifice resounded through martyrologies and hagiographies, representing Christian deaths in the Roman arena as courageous self-sacrifices in the model of Christ. Moss (2010), Nasrallah (2012), and others have explored the uneasy tension between the call to Christian sacrifice in the form of selfless devotion and communal sharing (e.g., Romans 10:1–13, 12:1–6) versus the call to imitatio Christi unto death,9 but it is fair to say that vicarious suffering is a conspicuous theme in the occasional epistle10 and in the martyr acts. Rather than view Christ’s crucifixion as a one-time salvific event (as in, e.g., Matthew 20:28, Hebrews 7:27, 9:11–14, Philippians 2:5–9, Romans 5:6–11, 1 Corinthians 5:7), these texts, particularly the martyr acts of Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen of Alexandria, and Ignatius of Antioch, enjoin imitatio in the Roman arena as an opportunity to participate in suffering with Christ. Thus Ignatius proclaims: “Let there come upon me fire and cross and encounters with beasts, mutilation, tearing apart, scattering of bones,
mangling of limbs, grinding of the whole body, evil tortures of the devil, only that I may attain to Jesus Christ.”

So too Origen: “Bring wild beasts, bring crosses, bring fire, bring tortures. I know that as soon as I die, I come forth from the body, I rest with Christ.”

That these deaths were conceived not only as imitationes but as martial deaths is evident in the Christian co-option of Roman language of the military devoio and sacramentum: “Oh, what was that spectacle of the Lord, how sublime, how great, how acceptable to the eyes of god through the solemn sacramentum and devoio of his army” (Cyprian Epistulae 10.2.3; n.b. Barton 1994, 2002). For Christian audiences to the actual martyr deaths or to the hagiographies built on them, configuring deaths in the Roman arena as acts of witnessing (martyrion, properly speaking), supported by a military oath of commitment (sacramentum), extended the valorization of sacrificial death to heroic death, earning for the Christian sufferer a certain Roman virtus. It is argued that during the Empire period disenfranchised gladiators came to be seen not as debased slaves but as defiant heroes taking pleasure in the struggle up to the moment of death (Barton 1994:20). Similarly, disenfranchised Christians, at least in their rhetoric, when subjected to torture in the arena inverted their stature, dying not as tepid, impotent victims but as consecrated warriors committed to dying the good death (Shaw 1996; Grig 2002). For Christian audiences, the Greco-Roman ideal of resolute heroic death is said to have combined with the pathos undergirding biblical expectations that the messiah was to suffer and die (alluding to, e.g., Isaiah 53), to create an ethos establishing Christians who endured humiliating deaths in the arena as victorious warriors who won glory in the life to come (Collins 1994; Cobb 2008; Moss 2010).

Of course, Christians were not the only people in world religions to embrace virtuous suffering. Shi‘i commemorations famously engage with

11 Romans 5.2. Translation by Cobb 2008:3.
14 See Kitts 2018b.
15 Itself a combination of devotion, consecration, and execration (Barton 1994:52).
16 Schultz points out that the Romans themselves are unlikely to have perceived the deaths of gladiators as sacrifices (2010:517, n1).
similar themes (Haider 2018), as do Sikh martyrdom tales (Fenech 2018) and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) celebrations (Schonthal 2018). Apparently, the notion resonates across religious contexts.  

**Literary Accounts of Premodern Human Ritual Killings**

It is obvious from the foregoing discussion that the perception of humans as sacrificial victims had a special hold on ancient imaginations, at least as represented in texts. Watts reminds us that stories of human sacrifice and actual practices are two different things (2007). The stories typically explain ritual slaughters that no longer occur but continue to fascinate us – often ascribed to ancestors or foreigners – whereas archaeological evidence only rarely supports the practice, albeit with notorious exceptions. In literature, though, methods of ritual killings are varied and graphic: they range from slitting throats, burnt offering, beheading, burying alive, drowning, halving, dismemberment, and exposing to the sun, and there are occasional reports of anthropophagy. Rationales for the practice are equally varied. Some scholars take pains to distinguish ritual killings from human sacrifices, claiming that sacrifices are by definition “sacrifices to,” as to a god or hero, whereas a ritual killing tends to be a larger category that can occur outside of, for instance, a regular cycle of festivals (Schultz 2010). However, as we shall see, in literary reports involving human victims the line between sacrifice and ritual killing is artificial, since multiple meanings radiate from “sacrificial” events.

This polysemy is consistent with newer trends in ritual studies, which acknowledge a variety of dimensions to ritual communication – for example, poetic, iconic, somatic, metaphoric, even discursive. A host of artistic and imaginative dimensions transcend purely political or socially strategic purposes. These various dimensions likely interpenetrate for participants

17 See Kitts, ed. for overviews of the theme (2018c). N.b. the studies of very ancient funerary rituals that ponder apparently acquiescent deaths of otherwise healthy sacrificial victims – for example, Pollock in Laneri (2007:209–222) on Ur and on the death of households.


19 For summaries, see Kitts 2017, 2018a.
and witnesses and communicate syncretistically. We should acknowledge too a variety of ritual registers – from casual and celebratory to elevated and menacing – that surely bear on the ritual effects. While traditions all over the world could be invoked to show this polysemy, we will confine ourselves here to brief summaries of three somewhat sensational premodern traditions that can be shown to embed human sacrifice in complex cosmologies and etiologies. They are Aztec, Chinese, and Classical Greek.

Aztec Human Sacrifices
Aztec cosmology is built upon the Mesoamerican understanding of cyclical time. Based on the Florentine Codex compiled by Bernardino de Sahagún in the sixteenth century, Graziano points out that, by Aztec understanding, the world had been destroyed four previous times, followed by repopulation with new beings. At the time of the Spanish conquest, “the Aztecs believed that existence under the fifth sun had reached its zenith, that the stages of creation had exhausted all possibilities, and that the forthcoming destruction would be the final one ending the world and humanity forever” (1999:40).

To avert this cataclysmic end, various forms of debt payment were practiced, including human sacrifice. As the gods four different times had cast themselves into an enormous subterranean fire to restore the sun and moon and other celestial bodies – by an elaborate metamorphosis and journey beneath and then above the surface of the earth (Graziano 1999:41; Carrasco 2013:218) – so now earthly creatures were expected to be killed in ritual sacrifice and to undergo a similar metamorphosis. Losing their corporeal coverings through death, humans’ divine essences went into the underworld to await resurrection in the form of new bodies, which again would be sacrificed. This need for continuous human sacrifice was due to the gods’ weariness with their own cosmogonic self-sacrifices and to their need for nourishment with blood (“precious water”), which gods obtained through human sacrifice as well as war, gladiatorial combats, and other blood-spilling activities (Carrasco 1999:82). Humans were understood as privileged to play this role in nourishing the gods. The gods created them and were intimately connected to them, as manifested in the way sacrificed humans were transformed into god-images when they died.
The blood of sacrificed humans was seen as cosmically restorative and ritual sacrifices as necessarily continuous.

Hence, wartime activities could be occasions for accruing captives to be killed not as simple “sacrifices to” but rather as players within this elaborate cosmological scheme, itself built on a rich pantheism. Auspicious points on sacred landscapes—sites of divine beings, temples, and venerable neighborhoods—were understood to absorb the blood of war victims sacrificed by Aztec kings and priests. The blood was deposited at double-helix-shaped portals where the divine world was seen to intersect with the human (Carrasco 1999:148, 2013:218). Such sacrifices were performed with elevated ceremony. The rituals were sensorily titillating, blending costumes, dances, music, and smells—a virtual smorgasbord of experiences designed to reach participants at multiple points on the bodily sensorium.

The Aztec ceremony of Toxcatl illustrates some of this elaborate cosmovision as well as its titillating effects. Considered a debt payment to chief god Tezcatlipoca (“lord of the smoking mirror”), a captive of war—one without bodily blemish, suitably slender and trained in the arts of music, singing, speaking, walking, and flower arranging—after a year of preparation consummated by twenty days of sexual pleasure with four wives, was killed on a ceremonial platform. His heart was then extracted and offered to the sun. He was beheaded, his skull was emptied and placed on a skull rack, and his body was tenderly lowered to the ground. This teotl ixiiptla, divine image of Tezcatlipoca, was understood as not a symbolization of the god but as a transformed being: the young warrior became the god, was absorbed by the god, was possessed by the god. On his way to death he was adorned with all manner of divine attributes and was sighed over by the people he encountered. It was said that he understood his role, ascended to his place of death without resistance, and broke his flutes and whistles on the steps to his death. According to Sahagún, “And this betokened our life on earth. For he who rejoiced, who possessed riches, who sought, who esteemed our lord’s sweetness, his fragrance—richness, prosperity—thus

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20 This notion of profuse saturation of the human world by the divine will linger through contact with the Christian worldview, resulting in a rich syncretism, as described by Graziano (1999:101–107).