

## Introduction

### *William Robertson Smith and the First Camel Sacrifice*

Given that the modern study of religion is based in large part on the description of a camel sacrifice said to have been performed by a group of Arabs in fifth or sixth century CE Sinai, it is surprising that so little attention has been given to the camel sacrifice of the prophet Muhammad. Just shortly before his death, ten years after his emigration to Medina, the prophet Muhammad performed a valedictory or “good-bye pilgrimage” [ḥajjat al-wadāʿ] at Mecca. At the conclusion of the pilgrimage he made an elaborate sacrifice of camels.

Ibn ʿAbbās said: The Apostle of God, on his farewell pilgrimage, drove to sacrifice 100 camels. He slaughtered 30 of them, then he ordered ʿAlī to slaughter those that remained. The Apostle of God said: “Distribute the meat, the skin, and the coverings among the people but do not give any of it to the butcher. Take for us from each camel a piece of the meat and put it in a single pot so that we might eat from the meat and drink from the broth.” So he did it.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to distributing the camels and their trappings, the prophet Muhammad is reported to have passed out to his followers the hairs shaved from his head.

The Apostle of God related that all Minā is a place of sacrifice, all the valley of Mecca is a place of sacrifice. Then the Apostle of God shaved his head – that is Muʿamar b. ʿAbdallāh shaved it – and the Apostle of God said to him: “Here” and he pointed with his hand to the right side, and he shaved it, and then the left side, and he distributed his hair. He gave half of it to Abū Ṭalḥah al-Anṣārī – that is the hair of the left side of his head – and said “Here Abū Ṭalḥah.” It is said that he gave it to Umm Sulaym the wife of Abū Ṭalḥah. And it is said, by Abū Kurayb, that he gave the other half of it – that is, the hair of the right side – to the people one and two hairs at a time.<sup>2</sup>

Several ḥadīth reports relate that Abū Ṭalḥah distributed one share of the prophet Muhammad's hair to each of the men, and his wife Umm Sulaym two shares to each of the women.<sup>3</sup> Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855)<sup>4</sup> preserves a report that every single hair from the prophet Muhammad's head was collected by his followers. Other traditions mention that the camels slaughtered by 'Alī had been driven by him from Yemen,<sup>5</sup> that the slaughter took place among the "stones" or "pillars" [al-jamarāt] at which pilgrims throw stones,<sup>6</sup> and that one of the male camels driven by the prophet Muhammad had a silver ring in its nose.<sup>7</sup>

Immediately preceding this sacrifice, the prophet Muhammad delivered a special sermon in which he proclaimed the onset of a new era, abolishing certain pre-Islamic practices, reiterating the obligatory practices of Islam, and disjoining the new Islamic calendar from the solar year by eliminating the intercalary month.<sup>8</sup> Among the injunctions the prophet Muhammad is said to have instituted at this time are the prohibition of temporary marriage,<sup>9</sup> stoning as punishment for adultery,<sup>10</sup> the cancelation of debts from pre-Islamic times,<sup>11</sup> assigning the value of wergild for certain crimes,<sup>12</sup> that women cannot spend their husband's money without permission,<sup>13</sup> and the rules for bequests, wills, and inheritance.<sup>14</sup> He established that prayer, fasting, and offerings guaranteed entry into paradise,<sup>15</sup> prohibited polytheists from entering Mecca, and disallowed the practice of performing the pilgrimage naked.<sup>16</sup> A number of reports describe the prophet Muhammad as having performed his farewell pilgrimage on a camel so that the people could see him and ask him questions about religion.<sup>17</sup>

According to Muslim exegesis, Q 5:3 was revealed at the time of this sermon and sacrifice.<sup>18</sup> Coming after a lengthy list of prohibitions relating to the eating of meat, God proclaims that "Islam" has been completed. "Today I have perfected for you my religion, completed my grace upon you, and blessed you with Islam as a religion." In a report preserved in the authoritative ḥadīth collection of Abū Dā'ūd, the prophet Muhammad compares his sermon and sacrifice with the creation of the world at the beginning of time. "Time has now completed a cycle like the form of a day when God created the heavens and the earth."<sup>19</sup> Muslim exegetes report that, after the revelation of this verse the prophet Muhammad received no further revelations. The sermon and sacrifice serve not only to complete the scriptural text that would be the Quran and conclude the mission of the prophet Muhammad, but to end all revelation, making Muhammad the final "seal" of the Prophets.

A number of reports describe this culminating sermon and sacrifice in explicit eschatological terms signaling the end of the current world and

the founding of the new order under the leadership of Muhammad. The coming of trials and afflictions [fitnah] are proclaimed by the prophet Muhammad to include attacks on the Ka‘bah itself and its destruction by an Ethiopian ruler,<sup>20</sup> the death of the nonbelieving people of Mecca,<sup>21</sup> infighting among the Quraysh,<sup>22</sup> and the earth at the Wādī al-Baidah swallowing the enemies of Islam.<sup>23</sup> The prophet Muhammad’s entry into Mecca for this final pilgrimage is portrayed as that of a warrior king, and in several ḥadīth reports the prophet Muhammad equates his pilgrimage and sacrifice with the blood and wealth of his followers that will establish Mecca as the final capital and cultic center of the new world.<sup>24</sup>

Ibn ‘Umar: The Apostle of God stood, on the day of sacrifice, between the pillars during his pilgrimage and he said: “What day is this?” They said: “The day of sacrifice.” He said: “What land is this?” They said: “This is the sacred land of God.” He said: “What month is this?” They said: “The sacred month of God.” He said: “This is the day of the greatest pilgrimage. Your blood, your belongings, and your honor are a sacred obligation on you like the sacredness of this land, this month, and this day.” Then he said: “Have I fulfilled my mission?” They said: “Yes.” Then the Prophet started: “God bear witness,” he said goodbye, and the people said: “This is the farewell pilgrimage.”<sup>25</sup>

This camel sacrifice marks the end of the prophet Muhammad’s mission and the origins of the Islamic civilization that is built upon and succeeds that mission.

These aspects of the prophet Muhammad’s sacrifice suggest at least a casual comparison with the Indo-European, and especially Iranian, idea of the world being created from the self-sacrifice and dismemberment of a king. The distribution of the camel and of Muhammad’s body parts along with the eating and drinking might be linked with the Christian notion of Jesus offering bread and wine as his flesh and blood in the Last Supper just before his death. Indian and other Asian traditions tell how the Buddha gives away pieces of his body in order to ensure the emergence of and to protect his future community. In a number of myths from the ancient Near East a primordial king creates the world and constructs civilization from the carcass of a slain beast. Medieval and modern Muslim conceptions of martyrdom emphasize scattering one’s body on the battlefield in defense of or in an effort to expand and maintain Islamic civilization.

What is the meaning of the prophet Muhammad’s camel sacrifice? How is the distribution of the camels related to the distribution of Muhammad’s own body parts? And why is this elaborate practice linked to an eschatological closure of the old world and opening of Islamic civilization as a new creation?

## CAMEL SACRIFICE OF ST. NILUS

A conception of sacrifice, dominated by William Robertson Smith's interpretation of an account attributed to a certain St. Nilus in which a group of Arabs devour whole a white camel, has played an integral role in the development of the modern study of religion. The account is found in a brief excursus on the customs of the "barbarians" who live in the region of Arabia bordered by the Red Sea and the River Jordan.

They especially like to offer children distinguished by beauty and the bloom of youth. These they sacrifice on piles of stones at dawn . . . But if no children are available, they make a camel that is white and free from blemishes bend down on its knees. Then they circle around it three times in a procession that is drawn out by the multitude of participants involved. The person who leads in the procession and in singing a hymn they compose for the start is either one of their kings or one of their priests distinguished by old age. After the third circuit, but before the throng has finished its hymn, while the last refrain is still carrying on their tongues, this man draws a sword and vigorously strikes at the victim's sinews. Eagerly, he is the first to have a taste of the blood.<sup>26</sup> Then the rest run up with daggers drawn. Some cut off just a small patch of hide and hair, others seize whatever flesh they see and hack away, while others go straight for the innards and entrails. No part of the sacrifice is left unconsumed, so that nothing remains to be seen when the sun appears. They do not even refrain from eating bone and marrow, gradually overcoming its hardness and toughness through perseverance.<sup>27</sup>

Earlier in this section (III.1) the author states that the victim of such sacrifices is "the best of their spoils," which they obtained by "robbing people on roads that they watch in ambush" and from their "bandit raids" particularly on Christian pilgrims. It is also explained that the flesh of camels is not eaten raw but "softened" with "heat from a fire only insofar as it makes it yield to their teeth without having to be too forcefully torn" when it is consumed.

The full title of the St. Nilus text, found in the earliest complete Greek manuscripts, is "Narrations by Nilus the Monk of the Slaughter of the Monks on Mount Sinai and the Captivity of His Son, Theodulus." According to Fabricius Conca, the text is preserved in two recensions in four manuscripts.<sup>28</sup> The earliest of these Greek texts is found in the Synaxarion of Constantinople from the tenth century CE.<sup>29</sup> Also as early as the tenth century the author of the Narrations is identified as Nilus of Ancyra (modern Ankara), reported to have died at the beginning of the fifth century (c. 430 CE). This Nilus of Ancyra is known for a number of other works including commentaries on the Bible and a series of letters.<sup>30</sup> He is first identified as a biblical exegete in the sixth-century CE catena of

Procopius of Gaza (d. c. 526),<sup>31</sup> and the letters themselves appear to have been edited during the sixth century.<sup>32</sup> It is not at all clear, however, that this Nilus of Ancyra is to be identified with the Nilus to whom the Narrations are attributed.<sup>33</sup>

Discovered appended to a ninth-century (886 CE) manuscript of a copy of the Report of the Sinai monk Ammonius is a Syriac excerpt or fragment of the Narrations of Nilus.<sup>34</sup> The short Syriac text of just three paragraphs, compared to the seven sections of the full tenth-century Greek manuscripts, corresponds to sections IV.11–14 and VI.11–12. It does not contain the episode describing the camel sacrifice or the larger section on the customs of the Arabs of the Sinai (sections III.1–3). The scribe of the Ammonius text to which the Narrations fragment is appended states that the Syriac translation was made from a Greek text dated to the eighth century (767 CE) but this statement might not extend to the appendix of the Narrations fragment itself. From the manuscript evidence alone, it is possible that the description of the camel sacrifice is based on a post-Islamic event or at least informed by practices or reports and perceptions of practices from a period considerably later than the fifth century CE.

Based on other evidence, recent scholarship has attempted to date and locate the provenance of the Narrations of St. Nilus earlier than the eighth through tenth centuries CE. Some scholars put the writing of the Greek original of the Narrations in the late sixth century when the monastery at St. Catherine's was said to be flourishing.<sup>35</sup> Daniel Caner argues that the Narrations lacks references to key details from the late sixth century, such as references to coenobitic monasticism, the fortifications below Mt. Sinai, and the church leadership in Pharan, suggesting an earlier date for the composition of the text.<sup>36</sup> Others, following Karl Heussi, propose that the Narrations was written in Elusa rather than the Sinai.<sup>37</sup> In the fourth century CE the city of Elusa is reported to have had a temple to Venus that was frequented by Arabs from the surrounding desert.<sup>38</sup> Heussi goes so far as to assign the precise date of 411 CE to the Narrations based on his identification of an earlier attack mentioned in the text with the attack described by Ammonius around 370 CE.<sup>39</sup>

The uncertainty of the date and provenance, and identity of the author of the Narrations with Nilus of Ancyra, has led some scholars to contend that the Narrations, as a whole or in part, has no ethnographic value but is instead based on late antique literary romances. Heussi, for example, followed by later editors of the Greek text, observe that certain elements of the Narrations parallel commonly found themes and literary tropes

such as the first-person narrative, dreams and flashbacks, bandit raids, captivity of monks, sacrifice of virgins, and emphasize moral themes such as chastity, providence, and fate.<sup>40</sup> Other scholarship points to specific texts, such as the “Letter to Heliodorus” of Nilus Ancyra, the first half of the third book of the second- or third-century CE *Leucippe and Clitophon* by Achilles Tatius, and perhaps the late-first-century CE Fourth Maccabees, that contain themes and certain words and phrases similar to those in the Narrations.<sup>41</sup> Joseph Henninger questions everything about the account, except for the camel, specifically calling into question that the sacrifice took place before sunrise, was presided over by a priest or king, involved the recitation of hymns and circumambulation, that the victim would be dismembered alive and eaten raw, that human sacrifice was practiced among the Arabs, and that the camel in lieu of the boy was offered to Venus.<sup>42</sup>

Some scholars, suspicious of the “mindless” and “bestial” nature of the act described, reject the camel sacrifice in particular.<sup>43</sup> Typical of the “sensationalist” literary tropes of the time, the description of the camel sacrifice in the Narrations has “no ethnographic value but reveals only a knowledge of the rhetorical-pathetic genre” of the Hellenistic novel.<sup>44</sup> Yet other scholars argue that the Narrations display an informed knowledge of the topographic and local conditions of the Sinai, and that the description of the raid on the monks and massacre of hermits fits what is known from other historical records.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the Narrations contains none of the traditional Christian references found in the other works attributed to Nilus of Ancyra or any of the eremitic literature of the time, especially the fourth- or fifth-century CE Report of Ammonius.<sup>46</sup> There are only two references to the New Testament, no references to Jesus Christ, none of the traditional language used for hermits and monks, no miracles, and no demons.<sup>47</sup>

Closer examination, based on more recent archaeological, epigraphic, and ethnographic studies, reveals that wholesale rejections of the Narrations, and its description of the camel sacrifice in particular, might be premature. For example, the offering of sacrifices to the “morning star” or the Roman Venus is well-attested among the Arabs of the Sinai, the Arabian peninsula and elsewhere. According to the fifth-century Isaac of Antioch, the “tribe of the sons of Hagar offer sacrifice to the star goddess.”<sup>48</sup> In his fourth-century *Life of Hilarion*, Jerome mentions an annual festival at a temple of Venus attended by Saracens from the deserts surrounding Elusa.<sup>49</sup> That Venus was associated with and worshipped in late antiquity as the Arab goddess al-‘Uzzā is found in the eighth-century

work of John of Damascus and in the tenth-century Syriac–Arabic dictionary of Ḥasan Bar Bahlūl.<sup>50</sup> Arabic sources attest to the worship of Venus, identified with the so-called three daughters of Allah (al-‘Uzzā, Manāt, al-Lāt) in pre-Islamic Mecca, and Hishām Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 819 CE) relates that the prophet Muhammad himself said “I offered a white sheep to al-‘Uzzā when I was still a follower of the religion of my people.”<sup>51</sup> Epigraphic evidence attests to sacrifices offered to Manāt, al-Lāt, and al-‘Uzzā, and the worship of al-‘Uzzā is found at Petra, Edessa, and Palmyra.<sup>52</sup>

Other aspects of the camel sacrifice described in the Narrations, such as evidence for cult officials and cult sites dedicated to Venus and al-‘Uzzā in the Sinai, are corroborated by other sources. The account of the Piacenza pilgrim, who visited Christian sites in Sinai and Palestine in the late sixth century, mentions a marble stone on the slopes of Mt. Sinai tended by an Arab priest.<sup>53</sup> Two inscriptions from the late antique Sinai refer to priests [kāhin] serving al-‘Uzzā.<sup>54</sup> The singing of hymns to al-‘Uzzā is attested at Petra, and evidence for circumambulation of a cult site accompanied by liturgical practices is widespread in the ancient world.<sup>55</sup> The eating of sacrificed meat raw or only partially cooked is also a practice attested among the Arabs and in the ancient world more broadly.<sup>56</sup> The fourth-century writings of Amianus Marcellinus mention a Saracen soldier drinking the blood of a Goth,<sup>57</sup> and an Islamic ḥadīth report refers to the pre-Islamic practice of sacrificing animals by flaying them alive.<sup>58</sup> Distributing among the participants of the sacrifice the skins, accouterments, and other nonedible parts of the victim is also found in various Arab and non-Arab contexts.

Human sacrifice, as the original object of the offering, is also reported not to have been uncommon among Arabs in the pre-Islamic period. John Moschus, who traveled to and lived in the Sinai in the late sixth century, relates a story in which a Christian monk, with divine help, confronts a group of Saracens who are taking a captive boy to be sacrificed by their priest.<sup>59</sup> In another account from a sixth-century Syriac text, two Christian monks are captured by Arabs in the Sinai and taken to their camp to be offered as a sacrifice.<sup>60</sup> Zachariah of Mitylene, writing in the late fifth century, describes how the Arab king al-Nu‘mān abducted 400 virgins from a church in Emesa and sacrificed them to al-‘Uzzā in the Lakhmid capital of al-Ḥīrah.<sup>61</sup> In his *De Abstinencia*, Porphyry claims that certain Arabs bury under a stone altar a boy they sacrifice each year.<sup>62</sup> The capture of Christians by Arabs for the purpose of sacrifice is a theme found in literary romances of the time, including the sixth-century *History of the Great Deeds of Bishop Paul of Qentos and Pries*

*John of Edessa*, and the second-century romance of *Leucippe and Clitophon* attributed to Achilles Tatius in which Leucippe appears to be sacrificed by bandits in Egypt.<sup>63</sup>

That Arab nomads were known for both stealing property and abducting people to be offered to their deities is widely reported and commonly found as a theme in literary accounts of Christian monks living on the edges of the desert in late antiquity. The *Sirat ‘Antar* gives numerous examples of human sacrifice of captured members of the tribe responsible for the hero’s death, performed at the tombs of fallen warriors.<sup>64</sup> Camels and young boys in particular seem to have been the target of such bandit raids.<sup>65</sup> ‘Amr b. al-Ahtam (d. after 717 CE) describes the practice of flaying camels while still alive.<sup>66</sup> The use of crude stone altars, made out of a pile of stones, and the association of this piled altar as a tomb is widely attested in pre-Islamic and early Islamic sources.<sup>67</sup> And the association of these sacrifices with Venus, identified with al-‘Uzzā, Balti-Beltis, and the morning star, is attested more widely among Arabs outside of the peninsula.<sup>68</sup> Some scholars have linked Venus with Manāt.<sup>69</sup> According to Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Azraqī (fl. 800s CE), doves were considered sacred in pre-Islamic Mecca, and elsewhere, in Rome and in Syria, doves were sacrificed to and linked to the worship of Venus.<sup>70</sup>

Maybe it does not matter whether the camel sacrifice described by St. Nilus “really happened” or not. Certainly, the larger narrative in which the camel sacrifice is situated, and the description of the sacrifice itself, share in the conventions of late antique literary romances. Yet the “fictional” character of a wide range of “sources” including chronicles, histories, biographies, and travelogues is to be taken for granted, and not just in late antiquity. And certainly, a variety of other texts attest to the not uncommon occurrence of Arabs in late antiquity sacrificing camels and virgins to Venus and al-‘Uzzā, the use of crude stone altars, and the flaying alive of camels. It is not unlikely that, as the oxymoronic statement goes, the St. Nilus camel sacrifice is a “true story” or perhaps based on “actual” events. In any case, the camel sacrifice became a “fact” when it was showcased by Robertson Smith at the foundations of his argument, exemplifying the origins of religion. It became a fact in the origins of “religion” as these origins came to be understood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

#### SACRIFICE AND THE TOTEM MEAL

It is well known that the theories of religion developed by both Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud at the beginning of the twentieth century



depend upon St. Nilus' description of the camel sacrifice as interpreted by William Robertson Smith in his first set of Lectures on the Religion of the Semites.<sup>71</sup> Freud, who also cites Durkheim, introduces Robertson Smith just before the "spectacle of the totem meal," which is a ritualized repetition of a primal horde of brothers who devour their father.<sup>72</sup> For Freud, Robertson Smith supplies first that sacrifice was related to totemism, but more importantly that the sacrificial animal was identical with the totem animal. The sacrificial animal, whose meat was forbidden to be consumed except in the context of certain rituals in which the whole clan participated, was itself considered to be a blood-member of the clan.<sup>73</sup> It is this point, combined with Freud's earlier conclusion that "the totem animal is in reality a substitute for the father," that allows Freud to postulate a cannibalistic meal at the origins of "all" later religions.<sup>74</sup>

Durkheim, too, uses Robertson Smith's identification of the sacrificial meal with the totem meal as the lynchpin for explaining why religion continues to exist in human society.<sup>75</sup>

According to Smith, sacrificial banquets have the object of making the worshipper and his god communicate in the same flesh, in order to form a bond of kinship between them.<sup>76</sup>

A man of the Kangaroo clan believes himself and feels himself a kangaroo; it is by this quality that he defines himself; it is this which marks his place in the society.<sup>77</sup>

But Durkheim regards the fusion of sacrifice and totemism as imperfect. For Durkheim, the purpose of this identification of the clan with the animal, affected through the communal meal, is to focus the attention of the participating individuals on their collective existence. The "God" that the animal represents is "nothing more nor less than society transfigured and personified."<sup>78</sup> In this sense, the rituals imposed by religion, and in particular the symbolism of the animal being consumed in the sacrificial and totem meals, are necessary ingredients for the creation and maintenance of social relations.

Although they might not so easily be conflated, nor does this brief synopsis provide adequate detail for such a comparison, both Durkheim and Freud highlight salient aspects of contemporary understandings of sacrifice in the history of religions. These include that the act of sacrifice, or a primordial act that is later repeated as sacrifice, is at the origins of human society.<sup>79</sup> For both Durkheim and Freud, as for Robertson Smith, the act of sacrifice creates and maintains a social order based on exogamy guaranteed by totemism. Society is a series of artificial relations allowing the group to transcend the more limited connections of its members based

on natural, blood ties. The other salient feature of the model of sacrifice Durkheim and Freud adopt from Robertson Smith is that the identification of the victim (that which is being sacrificed) with the clan (those doing the sacrifice) and the God (to whom the sacrifice is being offered). This “God” might be a substitute for the father figure, a hypostatization and abstraction of society, but as it was for Robertson Smith, the key for Durkheim and Freud is that the sacrificial meal unites people into a society by providing them with a common, divine, or totemic identity.

Aside from the historical context and relative ethnographic value of the St. Nilus camel sacrifice, Robertson Smith and later Durkheim and Freud’s use of it to develop a general theory of religion in which sacrifice and totemism are paired is not without its critics. Perhaps the most penetrating and devastating critique is that leveled by Claude Lévi-Strauss. In his reconstruction of the evidence for what had been called “totemism,” Lévi-Strauss reveals his near exasperation with the coupling of totemism and sacrifice.

That it should have been possible to regard totemism as the origin of sacrifice in the history of religion remains, after so long, a matter of astonishment. Even if, for convenience, one were to agree to grant totemism a semblance of reality, the two institutions would only look the more contrasting and incompatible.<sup>80</sup>

This view is signaled earlier.

Every sacrifice implies a solidarity of nature between officiant, god, and the thing sacrificed, whether this is an animal, a plant, or an object which is treated as though it were alive, since its destruction is meaningful only in the form of a holocaust. Thus the idea of sacrifice also bears within it the germ of a confusion with the animal, a confusion which entails the risk of being extended beyond man to the very god. In amalgamating sacrifice and totemism, a means was found of explaining the former as a survival or as a vestige of the latter.<sup>81</sup>

Lévi-Strauss is critiquing a certain notion of sacrifice that, when imagined by earlier ethnography to have developed from the classificatory systems labeled as totemism, demeans totemic thought.

For Lévi-Strauss, both “sacrifice” and “totemism” are scientific illusions but, as institutions reified by the ethnographic scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the elements that go into the scholarly concepts of sacrifice and totemism are in opposition. Sacrifice is a practice that uses artificial objects (domesticated animals and plants) to erase a natural difference (between people and God). Totemism is a system or mode of thought that uses natural objects (wild animals and plants) to create artificial difference (among groups of people).