

Animal Sacrifice and the Origins of Islam

Islam is the only biblical religion that still practices animal sacrifice. Indeed, every year more than a million animals are shipped to Mecca from all over the world to be slaughtered during the Muslim Ḥajj. This multidisciplinary volume is the first to examine the physical foundations of this practice and the significance of the ritual. Brannon Wheeler uses both textual analysis and various types of material evidence to gain insight into the role of animal sacrifice in Islam. He provides a “thick description” of the elaborate camel sacrifice performed by Muhammad, which serves as the model for future Ḥajj sacrifices. Wheeler integrates biblical and classical Arabic sources with evidence from zooarchaeology and the rock art of ancient Arabia to gain insight into an event that reportedly occurred 1,400 years ago. His book encourages a more nuanced and expansive conception of “sacrifice” in the history of religion.

Brannon Wheeler is Professor of History at the United States Naval Academy. A recipient of Fulbright fellowships for research in Jordan, Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, he has been a visiting scholar at various institutions throughout the Middle East, Europe, and the United States.

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Preface

When I first read about the prophet Muhammad’s camel sacrifice, I was surprised that I had never heard about it before, especially since I had spent so much time thinking about the background and influence of the St. Nilus camel sacrifice in the work of William Robertson Smith.

Every year more than a million animals are shipped to Mecca from all over the world to be slaughtered during the Muslim Ḥajj. Islam, unlike other biblical religions such as Judaism and Christianity, still practices animal sacrifice. According to Muslim scholars, the prophet Muhammad established the annual sacrifice as part of the Ḥajj, to be celebrated at the same time by all Muslims around the world as the “festival of sacrifice” [‘Īd al-aḏḥā], following the example of Abraham. Yet in the Bible and in Muslim exegesis of the Quran, Abraham is said to have sacrificed a wild ram in the place of his son. So, why do Muslim scholars claim that the prophet Muhammad, when he performed this sacrifice and marked the origins of Islam as the “religion of Abraham” at the conclusion of his Ḥajj, sacrificed 100 camels?

Several research trips to the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean allowed me to see firsthand archaeological evidence for ancient and late antique camel sacrifices, including the burial of camels alongside humans interred with ceremonial weapons and armor. These trips consisted of visits to Oman (2004), Saudi Arabia (2013), the United Arab Emirates (2013), and Qatar (2013) in part funded by a Fulbright fellowship and sponsored by the Ministry of Awqāf and Religious Affairs in Muscat, the Institute for Islamic World Studies at Sheikh Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, and the liberal arts division of Texas A&M University in Doha. Special thanks are due to Meteb Almahmoud for helping me to spend

time in several locations throughout the Hijāz, including al-‘Ulā and Madā’in Šāliḥ. During an earlier trip to Qatar (2009), the Qatar Museum Authority was particularly helpful in taking me to rock art and ancient burial sites around the island.

A subsequent research trip to Lebanon and Jordan (2017) was supported in part by grants from the International Institute of Islamic Thought, and the American Public University. Hani Hayajneh, Romel Gharib, and Wessam Esaid were instrumental in showing me sites in the desert near al-Azraq and elsewhere. Their personal guidance and published work are a wealth of knowledge about the region and the work of regional archaeologists. Glenn Joey Corbett not only introduced me to the right people and provided invaluable insights regarding particular sites but also shared with me all of his references on the archaeology relating to camels in Jordan and Arabia more widely.

A research residency, funded by a Fulbright fellowship, at the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies in Amman (2018) gave me the opportunity to complete my research and writing on what became Chapter 2 of this book. The writing of Chapters 1 and 4, as well as most of the fieldwork used in Chapter 3, was made possible by a fellowship at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh (2019). The King Faisal Center sponsored my visits to many sites with significance to this book including Jubbah, Ḥā’il, ‘Uyūn al-Jawā’, Buraydah, al-Ṭā’if, al-Bāḥah, Bīshah, and sites near Abhā. My longtime friend Mohamed Harawy put me in touch with Sulayman al-Theeb, who, in turn, gave me access to everything I wanted to see in the Kingdom. During the same visit, I was also able to visit a number of sites in Bahrain, following up on an earlier visit to the island in 2009.

Portions of some chapters were developed from lectures given at various venues throughout the world. Thank you to Francesca Bellino and her graduate students at the University of Turin for all their helpful comments on my presentation on Cain, Abraham, and ritualized hunting in pre-Islamic Arabia (2015). An invitation to speak at the Kazakh Academy of Law and Humanities in Astana gave me the opportunity to think further about ancient Mecca (2007). Parts of Chapter 6 were adapted from talks I gave on “Jihād” and martyrdom in Islam at the Federal Bureau of Investigations Headquarters (2010) and the University of Edinburgh (2009), and a paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association (2009). Particularly helpful in shaping my general conception of the cosmogonic character of the prophet Muhammad’s camel sacrifice were the questions and comments

I received from an invited lecture at Creighton University (2008), and the David and Sherry Berz Religious Studies Lecture at George Washington University (2011). Thank you to John Calvert and to Kelly Pemberton for giving me these opportunities, and for their support for my work. Versions of parts of Chapter 5 and the conclusion were published as “Gift of the Body in Islam: The Prophet Muhammad’s Camel Sacrifice and Distribution of Hair and Nails at his Farewell Pilgrimage,” *Numen* 57 (2010): 341–388.

A Fulbright fellowship also supported a summer of research in Israel, where I was sponsored by the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at the Hebrew University and the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East Studies at Tel Aviv University. It was good to see Michael Lecker again – his ideas and example of scholarship have been guiding me since taking an independent study with him in 1985. His influence on this book, especially in Chapter 6, should be evident. Uzi Avner’s writings, his correspondence, and his guided tour through the desert wadis near Eilat provided me with many helpful suggestions. Yohanán Friedmann was kind enough to include me on the program of the fourteenth annual international colloquium “From Jāhiliyya to Islam” at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Jerusalem, where I presented a version of what is now Chapter 3. A version of the paper, much improved by the comments of the editors and external reviewers, appears in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*. The comments and questions from the many talented and knowledgeable scholars at the colloquium, including Robert Hoyland, Christian Robin, Ahmad Al-Jallad, and Christian Lange, were all extremely helpful. I also want to thank Naftali Meshel for introducing me to Omer Michaelis and sharing with me his fascinating research on sacrifice and the ambiguity of language.

A visiting research position at the University of Chicago Center in Paris enabled me to finish writing several chapters and introduced me to a number of French scholars whose research informed my ideas about the role of animals and violence in religion. Frédéric Keck was kind enough to host me at the Laboratoire d’Anthropologie Sociale and the Bibliothèque Claude Lévi-Strauss at L’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. The opening chapter of his most recent book allowed me to see new connections between Robertson Smith and Lévi-Strauss. Clarisse Herrenschmidt treated me like a life-long friend and introduced me to Jean Lassègue and the intellectual culture of Paris.

A version of Chapter 2 was read and critiqued by my colleagues at the United States Naval Academy. Special thanks are due to Matthew

Dziennik, Ernest Tucker, Thomas Brennan, Benjamin Armstrong, and especially John Freymann. Thank you to the faculty development fund at the Naval Academy for supporting the publication of the full bibliography in what follows. Bruce Lincoln and Mary Thurlkill read the entire book manuscript and gave me detailed comments on each chapter. I consider them both to be what seems to be increasingly rare these days – students of “religion” in a generic and comparative sense.

My most sincere appreciation is to my family for putting up with all of my crazy ideas, seeming obsession with all things related to camels (including llamas and alpacas), and dozens of trips to places not on the map. Most of all, I thank my eternal companion and muse, Deborah Wheeler, for her unfailing patience and inspiring brilliance.