

# The Nature of Sacrifice

--by Rev. Kirk S. Thomas

When modern people use the word 'sacrifice' today, they usually mean something negative and uncomfortable, such as when we refer to the 'ultimate sacrifice' when speaking about the deaths of our soldiers in war. But the word had a quite different meaning in the religious lives of the ancients.

The word 'sacrifice' comes from two Latin roots, *sacer*, meaning 'sacred', and *facere*, meaning 'to make' or 'to do'. So sacrifice would mean, 'to make sacred' in this context.

The word 'sacred' probably comes from the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) word *\*sacros*, which means 'holy' (the \* means that the word is a recreated one). Cognates for this PIE word also include the Latin *sacerdos* 'priest' and the Tocharian B word *sakre-* 'happy'. There may also be a distant connection with the Hittite word *saklai-* 'rite, custom', which is intriguing if you consider that some think 'sacred' might also come from the PIE word *\*sek-* 'cut', which, in a ritual sense, could mean to 'cut off from the world'. So a rite in which something was made sacred could be one where something was set apart from mundane reality. Another interesting word related to the sacred, 'consecrate', means to 'declare or set apart as sacred', according to the American Heritage College Dictionary. The PIE root for consecrate would have been *\*weik-*, and this has some interesting cognates as well, such as the Latin *victima* 'sacrificial victim' and even the modern word 'witch'. The Sanskrit cognate, *vinákti*, means to 'select out' (Mallory, 412). All this suggests that a good definition for the word 'sacrifice' might be 'to make something set apart from ordinary reality.'

So why did the word sacrifice come to have such a negative meaning? The answer may be in the Christian re-making of the word based on the crucifixion of Christ. This sacrifice on the cross summed up all the sacrifices of the Old Testament, and was seen as the last sacrifice ever needed, as it created a new relationship between man and the angry, wrathful God of Judaism (Rogerson, 50; Sykes, 62, 73-77). So sacrifice came to mean giving up one's life, or, at least, 'giving until it hurts'. The concept of 'giving up' here rather than the ancient religious concept of 'giving to' is important and will be covered later in this essay.

Sacrifice as a religious act in Pagan thought appears to have taken place in four ancient contexts as well as in one modern one. They are:

1. Maintaining the Cosmic Order
2. Delivering Services Through Gifts
3. Providing Protection
4. Commensality (Community)
5. Mitigating Order with Chaos (the modern idea)

## 1. MAINTAINING THE COSMIC ORDER

There are many myths concerning the creation of the cosmos in the ancient Indo-European (IE) world, but some of them share remarkable similarities. In general, a primordial being is killed or dismembered and from the pieces of his body the universe is made (Lincoln 1986, 2). Sometimes, though not always, the central characters are 'Man' (\**Manu*) and 'Twin' (\**Yemo*), who is often referred to as a king, and they are sometimes accompanied by an ox. Together they decide to create the universe. The 'Man' would be a priest, and he makes a sacrifice of the other two in order to accomplish their goal. This may be the original PIE creation myth (Lincoln 1991, 7).

In the *Rig Veda*, the book of hymns from Vedic India, there is a creation myth where Purusha (meaning "Person" according to Mahony, 112) is sacrificed and dismembered by the Gods. It can be found in Book 10, Hymn 90, verses 11-14 (Griffith, 603):

11 When they divided Purusha how many portions  
did they make?

What do they call his mouth, his arms?  
What do they call his thighs and feet?

12 The Brahman (Priest) was in his mouth,  
of both his arms was the Rajanya (Warrior) made.  
His thighs became the Vaisya (Commoners),  
from his feet the Sudra (Servant) was produced.\*

13 The Moon was gendered from his mind,  
and from his eye the Sun had birth;  
Indra and Agni (Fire) from his mouth were  
Born, and Vayu (Wind) from his breath.

14 Forth from his navel came mid-air; the  
sky was fashioned from his head;  
Earth from his feet, and from his ear the regions (directions?).  
Thus they formed the worlds.

\* *This is the only hymn in the Rig Veda that mentions the four castes of Vedic society (Griffith, 603, n.12).*

In the Poetic Edda, a repository of Norse lore written in Iceland during the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, a similar idea exists. The Lay of Grímnir (*Grímnismál*) has the following stanzas (Hollander, 61):

41. Of Ymir's flesh the earth was shaped,  
of his blood, the briny sea,

of his hair, the trees, the hills of his bones,  
out of his skull the sky.

42. But of his lashes the loving gods made  
Mithgarth for the sons of men;  
from his brow they made the menacing clouds  
which in the heavens hover.

The Romans also had some similar themes in their own lore. It must be remembered that IE mythology in Rome was remembered along civic, rather than religious, lines, where the mythic themes would play out in the 'histories' of the founding of Rome, the monarchical era and even the early Republic (Puhvel, 146-7).

Two myths concerning the founding of the city (the 'cosmos' of Rome) reflect these themes – one of the killing of Twin and the other of dismemberment. In one tale, the twins Romulus and Remus were laying out the walls of the city. Romulus was plowing a furrow to mark the walls while Remus, who had just lost the right to name the new city after himself, taunted his brother by jumping over the furrowed 'wall'. In anger, Romulus killed his brother (Morford, 653-5). The sacred name of Romulus, *Quirinus*, (\**Co-vir-inos*) comes from the word for 'Man', and the name 'Remus' is cognate (with initial consonantal deformation) to the word \**yem-* or 'Twin' (Lincoln, 1984, 174n.3).

Plutarch mentions a story in wide circulation about Romulus in his *Life of Romulus*, chapter 27:

But others conjecture that the senators rose up against him and dismembered him in the temple of Hephaistos, distributing his body (among themselves), and each one putting a piece in the folds of his robes in order to carry them away.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus mentions later that the pieces of his body were buried by the Senators, and Walter Burkert has argued that by being placed in the earth, Romulus *became* the earth, a form of cosmological creation (Lincoln, 1984, 42).

These transformations from the microcosm (Twin) to the macrocosm (creation of cosmos) also occur during sacrifice. IE priests claimed to be doing the same thing, though perhaps on a smaller scale, where each sacrifice would be distributed to the cosmos. Without the matter derived from these offerings, the cosmos and the material world would become exhausted and depleted (Lincoln 1991, 12). Herodotus, in his *History* (1.131) mentions the practices of the Persian priests where sacrifice is given to the cosmos (Rawlingson, 1.131):

Their wont, however, is to ascend the summits of the loftiest mountains, and there to offer sacrifice to Jupiter, which is the name they give to the whole

circuit of the firmament. They likewise offer to the sun and moon, to the earth, to fire, to water, and to the winds. These are the only gods whose worship has come down to them from ancient times.

An Indic text, the *Aitareya Brahmana* 2.6, gives instructions as to the handling of the body parts of an animal victim in sacrifice (Lincoln 1991, 13):

Lay his feet down to the north. Cause his eye to go to the sun. Send forth his breath to the wind; his life-force to the atmosphere, his ears to the cardinal points, his flesh to the earth. Thus the Priest places the victim in these worlds.

But sacrifice is a two-way street. Not only do we offer to sustain the cosmos, but we can also use sacrifice to transfer the power of the universe into our own bodies. Food (through the 'shared meal' taken after sacrifice) and healing are the two prime examples of this. Healing shows up in the story of the healer Dian Cecht and his son, Miach, found in the *Cath Maige Turedh*, (The Second Battle of Moytura) 33-35. The King, Nuadu, cannot rule because he has lost his hand in battle. Dian Cecht makes him a new one of silver, but Miach goes and re-grows the hand on the King's arm, thus infuriating his father. Dian Cecht strikes his son three times, but Miach repairs the damage each time. Finally, the father cuts out his son's brain, and Miach dies. The story continues (Blamires, 115):

35. After that, Miach was buried by Dian Cecht, and three hundred and sixty-five herbs grew through the grave, corresponding to the number of his joints and sinews. Then Airmed spread her cloak and uprooted those herbs according to their properties. Dian Cecht came to her and mixed the herbs, so that no one knows their proper healing qualities.....

There is a Middle Persian text written after Zarathustra's reforms which tells of the evil spirit Ahriman and his first assault on the 'good creation' in the *Zad Spram* 3.42-51 (Lincoln 1991, 170):

Ahriman came to the cattle. He struggled against the cattle. As the first ox died, because it possessed the nature and form of plants, fifty-seven species of grain and twelve species of healing plants came into being.

Sacrifice is performed to feed the cosmos, as well as the reverse, to regenerate life. The sacrificed animal gives food to the family, promoting life in another form. And as the pruned vines give new and stronger growth so does harvested grain, buried in the ground as seeds, give new grain. It's all a continuing cycle (or circle, if you will) of life and death.

## **2. DELIVERING SERVICES THROUGH GIFTS**

As mentioned earlier, sacrifice is about 'giving to' not 'giving up'. And a good motivation for giving could be the formation of relationships where gifts can be received in return. This idea is well summed up in the Latin phrase, *do ut des*, 'I give so that you may give'.

### **\*ghosti-**

The term, *\*ghosti-*, is a recreated Proto-Indo-European root which means, 'Someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality'. Cognates include the English words 'guest' and 'host' as well as the Latin word *hostis* 'enemy', which just shows that strangers could potentially become either friends or enemies (Watkins, 31).

Hospitality, and the obligations pertaining to it (on both sides) were extremely important. In the tale of the Trojan War, Zeus resolves to destroy the city because Paris violated the laws of hospitality when he stole Helen away from Sparta while staying as a guest under the hospitality of her husband, Menelaus (Burkert, 130).

Relationships based on mutual exchange were similar to 'kin' relationships but crossed the boundaries between families and were usually accompanied by ritual gift giving. This would create an obligation of mutual hospitality and friendship that could continue in perpetuity.

One famous example of this type of relationship continuing on through generations is that of Glaucus and Diomedes in the Trojan War. Though on opposite sides of the battle, they discovered that Glaucus' grandfather, Bellerophon, had been a guest of Diomedes' grandfather, Oeneus, years before (Butler, Book VI):

"...we two, then, will exchange armour, that  
all present may know of the old ties that subsist between us."

With these words they sprang from their chariots, grasped one another's hands, and plighted friendship.

Since the time of Hesiod (c. 700 BCE) it was said that the absolute value of a gift to the Gods was not what mattered, but rather that each man should make sacrifice according to his means (Burkert, 274). In other words, those who have more shall give more.

The Greeks carried this to an extreme in their rite called a *hecatomb*. This rite was a magical act of multiplication. The Greeks would offer one ox in the expectation of receiving 100 oxen from the Gods in return (Burkert, 18)!

But the idea of 'he who has more shall give more' plays out well in the Patron-Client relationship that appeared in many parts of the Indo-European sphere.

## Patron – Client

In this form of reciprocity, called clientship, the patron and client have mutual responsibilities towards each other that form the basis of the relationship. The patron, the richer and more powerful of the two, provides supplies, money or other needs and the client, in return, performs tasks or provides political support. In Rome, the patron might supply a steady income and in return, the client would run errands or vote as he is told.

In ancient Celtic society, clientship was fundamental and a patron's status would depend on the number of clients he had. Since this relationship embraced social, military, political and economic obligations, it was in large part the basis of the power of the nobility. The patron would supply his clients with legal support, political protection, the possibility of sharing in the spoils of war, and even a place filled with the needed tools of farming. In return, the client would pay an annual food rent, supply manual labor, give political support and fight in the patron's army or at least under his command (Green 1995, 92). A patron who was stingy in fulfilling his side of the bargain might not last too long.

In the Irish tale *Cath Maige Turedh* (The Second Battle off Moytura) the Tuatha de Danaan have elevated the half-Formor Bres to the Kingship. However (Blamires, 123),

36. At that time, Bres held the sovereignty as it had been granted to him. There was great murmuring against him among his maternal kinsmen the Tuatha De, for their knives were not greased by him. However frequently they might come, their breaths did not smell of ale; and they did not see their poets nor their bards nor their satirists nor their harpers nor their pipers nor their horn-blowers nor their jugglers nor their fools entertaining them in the household.

Finally Coirpre son of Etain, the poet of the Tuatha De, pronounces a satire on Bres concerning his stinginess and "there was a blight on him from that hour" (Blamires, 124 & 133). With this blemish Bres could no longer be King.

Another example, this one from Rome, shows clearly the importance of maintaining the reciprocal relationship. There was an ancient, public ritual called the *Evocatio* (evocation) that involved luring the Gods of an enemy city being besieged by the Romans into deserting that city and joining the Roman camp. The Romans would vow to set up a residence and cult for the enemies' Gods among the Romans (Sheid, 104). But part of the ritual involved calling on the Gods to instill fear, terror and *forgetfulness* (italics mine) in the enemy people. Should the enemy forget to make their sacrifices to their Gods, the bonds of reciprocity would be broken. So the Gods, driven forth from the city, would still retain their honor because of the forgetfulness of the people (Lincoln 1991, 232).

## **The Expectation of Heaven**

Heaven in Vedic India was the reward of those who did rigorous penance, or heroes who risk their lives in battle (which resonates with the Norse ideas of Valhalla), but most of all to those who give liberal sacrificial gifts (Macdonell, 167).

In the Rig Veda, Book 1, Hymn 125, verses 1 and 5 (Griffith, 86-87) we see:

1. Coming at early morn he gives his treasure ; the prudent one receives and entertains him.  
Thereby increasing still his life and offspring, he comes with brave sons to abundant riches.

And

5. On the high ridge of heaven he stands exalted, yea, to the Gods he goes, the liberal giver.  
The streams, the waters flow for him with fatness : to him this guerdon (reward) ever yields abundance.

## **A Gift Is Part of Oneself**

The sacrificer is the person who actually performs the sacrifice, while the sacrificant is the person who will be receiving the benefit of the sacrifice (Bourdillion, 11). In Vedic culture a householder and his wife would pay the priests to perform a sacrifice, with the intention that the blessings would come to the household. Similarly, in the cities of the Mediterranean, the sacrificers would be professional priests, and the sacrificants would be the people (or the State). In cases where a person would be performing their own sacrifice, they would be both sacrificer and sacrificant.

Sacrificers can be priests, sacrificing on behalf of clients or the people, senior members of the family (such as the Roman Paterfamilias) sacrificing for the family, or indeed the supplicant herself. People usually make sacrifices at times of personal or group crisis, or periodically, at special seasonal times, or at the advice of seers or diviners. And what folks usually are doing in sacrifice is performing an act of propitiation, which is done to cause the deities to be favorably inclined, to induce or regain their good will, or to appease or conciliate them (Beattie, 31-32).

In giving, a person gives a part of himself. The best gift a person might give to the Gods would actually be his own life, but a sacrificial offering of oneself is rare. One example might be Decius Mus as recorded by Livy in his *History of Rome*, 10:28. In battle against the Gauls, Decius put on ritual garb and went to the priests (Roberts):

After the usual prayers had been recited he uttered the following awful curse: "I carry before me terror and rout and carnage and blood and the wrath of all the gods, those above and those below. I will infect the standards, the armour, the weapons of the enemy with dire and manifold death, the place of my destruction shall also witness that of the Gauls and Samnites." After uttering this imprecation on himself and on the enemy he spurred his horse against that part of the Gaulish line where they were most densely massed and leaping into it was slain by their missiles.

And thus the battle was won.

The problem with sacrifice of the self is that once you're dead, you can't personally receive any of the benefits of the sacrifice.

### **Substitution**

The ancients came up with a handy solution to this problem through the concept of substitution. In the ancient world, the usual and most ideal substitute for the sacrificant would be a domestic animal, such as an ox, goat, sheep, etc., to be killed in his stead. Other items were also acceptable, such as precious objects, the first fruits of harvest, etc., but animals were preferred. The reason for the use of domestic animals was that they were identified with the home, the people who lived there and therefore with *man* himself, as opposed to nature or the wild (Beattie, 30-31).

The closest substitutes for the sacrificant would be another person, a domestic animal, cultivated plants or their products (like wine) and precious objects.

### **Human Sacrifice**

This brings up the question of human sacrifice. The closest substitute for a human being would be another human being. And the choice of the victim would be important. It would need to be someone separate from the community (criminals, strangers, foreigners, slaves) but not *too* separate, or the substitution might not be of enough equality (Green 2001, 30) to act as a stand-in for the sacrificants. Often these sacrifices would be for the purpose of averting evil, such as in the Roman 'extraordinary' (Plutarch's word) sacrifice of a pair of Greeks and a pair of Gauls (one male and one female in each couple) in 228 BCE to avert the threat of a Gaulish invasion (Green 2001, 32).

In Acy-Romance in the Ardennes of France, a bizarre burial was found. Over the course of about a century in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE young men were killed, their bodies placed in a seated position and then desiccated. After drying out, the bodies were buried under the terrace of a temple, accompanied by great feasting on cattle and horses. Each event saw the reburial of a young man in a seated position, either guarding the temple or as a symbol of burial alive. As most other



graves were accompanied by cremation and grave goods, this is seen to be a human sacrifice rite, possibly for fertility purposes or as a gift to chthonic gods (Green 2001, 129-130).

As Caesar remarks in his *De Bello Gallico*, 6.16 (Koch, 22):

All the people of Gaul are completely devoted to religion, and for this reason those who are greatly affected by diseases and in the dangers of battle either sacrifice human victims or vow to do so using the Druids as administrators to these sacrifices, since it is judged that unless for a man's life a man's life is given back, the will of the immortal gods cannot be placated.

But human sacrifice was rare in the general course of things, and usually seen as an offering for protection in a time of threat or for the purposes of judicial execution, where a criminal would be "cut off" from society. Indeed, it can be difficult to determine whether the burials found by archeologists are sacrifices or executions or both.

### **Sacrifice Without Killing**

As stated earlier, the killing of animals was a preferred form of sacrifice. Besides the fact that domestic animals made good stand-ins for the sacrificant, they were also a good form of animal protein for ancient peoples. In fact, in Greece, the only meat that was eaten was sacrificial meat (Green 2001, 42). After all, death is necessary for a carnivorous meal.

But since death is something that is final and irrevocable, it also implies a change of status. A death causes something to no longer be of human use. Once it's gone, it's gone.

So weapons could be 'killed' and offered, and precious objects could be buried or thrown into bodies of water, and therefore go out of human use. The force needed to snap or bend a bronze object would imply violence of a kind, similar to the killing of animals. Weapons, chariot fittings, precious objects and even slave chains have been found in lakes and rivers all over Europe, such as at La Tène in Switzerland, Hayling Island, Hampshire, UK (Green 1995, 470-471) and especially Llyn Cerreg Bach, a lake on Anglesey in Wales, where they even found a trumpet (Green 2001, 183).

Julius Caesar, in *De Bello Gallico* 6.17 (Koch, 22) says of the Gauls and their worship of the God Mars:

To him, when they have decided to fight a battle, they consecrate a large part of the plunder;

Perhaps this is an indication of a warrior cult? In any case, large deposits were made in temples and lakes in the Celtic world. Diodorus Siculus (who wrote between 60-30 BCE) in V.27 states (Koch, 12):

The Celts of the interior also have a peculiar custom concerning the sacred places of their gods. In temples and sanctuaries throughout the country, large amounts of gold are openly displayed as dedications to the gods. No one dares to touch these sacred depositions, even though the Celts are an especially covetous people.

And Strabo (who wrote between 64/63 BCE – CE 21 at least), in his *Geography* 4.1.13 said (Koch, 15):

But as that one [Posidonius] and others have reported, the land, being full of gold and belonging to men who were pious and not extravagant in their living, contained treasures in many places in Celtica. What provided safety more than anything, however, was the lakes into which they had thrown heavy weights of silver and gold.

Further north in Sweden at the time of the Romans, on Öland and Gotland, deposits of gold rings and various ornaments were found. H.R. Ellis Davidson speculates (131) that these could have been sacrifices to Gods connected to rings, such as Thor, Freyr and Ull, since rings were used in oaths, but that there could have been a fertility connection since the Vanir dispensed wealth and were linked to gold in early skaldic poetry.

Women many have been involved in these sacrifices as well. Danish bog finds at Thorsbjerg included gold rings, personal possessions, pottery and wooden objects and even textiles. Women have a great stake in fertility (Davidson, 132).

### **First Fruits, Libations and Votive Offerings**

Gregory of Tours in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE referred to a lake of the Gabalitani tribe, and stated that in the recent past (Davidson, 132):

Into this lake the country people were used to throw, at an appointed time, linen cloths and pieces of material used in male attire, as a firstling sacrifice to this lake. Some threw in woolen fleeces and many also pieces of cheese, wax and thread and various spices, which would take too long to enumerate, each according to his ability. They also used to come with carts, brought with them food and drink, slaughtered animals for the sacrifice and feasted for three days.

A firstling (or first fruits) sacrifice refers to the idea that the first part of any harvest should be reserved for the Gods. In ancient Greece, whenever a wine jar

was opened for drinking, the first cup of wine would be poured on the ground as a libation, again a type of first fruits sacrifice.

Libations were once the most common of sacred acts performed in the ancient world, particularly in the Bronze Age (Burkert, 70). In Greek thought, it stood in opposition to the killing of the animal sacrifice. While the sacrifice burned on the altar, the libation would be poured around it, a sort of ending of hostilities, as it were. Libations poured on the ground were usually intended for the dead or Chthonic Gods under the earth and libations would be made into shafts built into tombs for the dead (for the dead were always thirsty). And it is not only the dead that drink, but the earth as well. Libations were also poured on stones to mark significant spatial orientations, such as at a crossroads (Burkert, 71-73).

A votive offering is an offering made in consequence to a vow. It is usually set up as an 'if – then' formula, such as, "If, mighty Gods, my fields produce more grain than last year, *then* I will sacrifice an extra bushel to You!" The vow comes first, and if the desired outcome occurs, then the sacrifice is made. Often, the vows would be to increase first fruit offerings, linking them to the votive offering in a continuing chain of sacrifice.

The types of offerings usually promised in ancient Greece would be simple sacrifices, costly robes or other items, a gift of a slave to a sanctuary, a vow of service to a sanctuary, and even the building of new sanctuaries or shrines, though usually a divine sign would be needed for this (Burkert, 68-70).

### **3. APOTROPAIC OFFERINGS FOR PROTECTION**

An apotropaic offering is one having the power to avert an evil influence or bad luck and is a safeguarding against evil. This could be a "Take this sacrifice and go, please!" type offering.

Executions could be considered apotropaic, as they are about removing the criminal from society, to safeguard it from more evil. Even today they take place surrounded by a ritual that prescribes what takes place before the event, the place of witnesses, the manner of killing, etc. (Bourdillon, 13).

Offerings to deities to prevent death and war, or disease, or any other ill would be considered an apotropaic sacrifice. In Greece and Rome, offerings to the dead could be considered apotropaic as well.

### **Pollution**

The removal of dangerous power could only be performed through expiation, which is the act of making amends or reparation for wrong-doing or guilt. In Rome and Greece, this could be done in a variety of ways, including through sacrifice.

A piacular sacrifice (from the Latin *piaculum*) would be any sacrifice offered in expiation for any wrong doing (Scheid, 98), from more minor crimes such as performing a ritual incorrectly all the way up to sacrilege.

In Greece, purification was a social process. To belong to the group led to purity, while to be a reprobate, a rebel or an outsider was to be unclean. So rites of purification were involved with acts of cleaning and in celebrating the removal of filth (physical and spiritual), and the rites elevated people into a higher state, out of a place of genuine discomfort to one of purity (Burkert, 76).

In Rome, purity was connected to piety. Purity was a bodily state not directly related to intentions or morality. Associations with mourning, the dead or dying could lead to an impure state which would require rites of purification ranging from simple ablutions (washing) to periods of waiting. In like manner, washing of hands before a rite would be obligatory. But impiety could encompass more than just purity. The crime of offending a deity could be expiated if the offence were unintentional, but an intentional offence could not be cleansed (Scheid, 26-27).

Purification through water was the chief method in the Greco-Roman world, as it cleaned by removing dirt, but fumigation through censuring was also used, as it could remove foul smells and was a primitive form of disinfecting.

In Greece anything that set everyday life out of kilter required purification. This included sexual activity, but other events were far more serious. Contact with death would require extravagant signs of mourning, such as the tearing of hair and clothes, for a certain amount of time, ending with the family purifying themselves by pouring water over their heads, cleaning the house and making a special sacrifice on the hearth. Diseases, especially caused by plagues, were occasions for sacrifice and purification rites, and the purification of a murderer required purification with blood (Burkert, 78-81).

## **Scapegoat**

The word 'scapegoat' actually comes from the Abrahamic Old Testament referring to an actual goat that was used to cleanse the people of sin (Green 2001, 48). But a similar concept existed in the Indo-European world as well.

In Greece, the *pharmakos* is a man chosen on account of his ugliness and is feasted on figs, barley broth and cheese, and then he is whipped out with fig branches and sea onions, and very importantly, he is struck seven times on his penis (Burkert, 82). The idea is that an animal or person is used to carry the pollution of the city or group away, which purifies everyone else.

One thing that appears necessary is for the scapegoat to be first brought into intimate contact with the community or city, so that he can absorb, as it were, the pollution there. After he is driven out, only purity remains (Burkert, 83).

Oxen and beautiful maidens could also be scapegoats (Burkert, 84) though men were more likely. And in Greece, the scapegoat might not be killed necessarily (Green 2001, 145), and adolescents chosen for this role might even have gone through rites to reincorporate them back into the community.

One famous example of the death of the scapegoat is from the Greek city of Massilia in southern Gaul. There, a poor citizen volunteered himself on behalf of the town. For a year the people of Massalia feted and cosseted him, and then at the end of the year they dressed him up in a sacred robe and leaf crown, led him through the city with the people cursing him all the way, and then murdered him (Green 2001, 145).

### **Hellenic Oath Sacrifice**

The Hellenic oath sacrifice could be seen as the reverse of an apotropaic rite, in that terror and destruction are used to bind an oath, giving it the greatest importance. Here, after sacrifice, the oath-maker plunges his hands into a bucket of the animal's blood and then treads on the severed genitals of the animal, compounding bloodshed with castration. And acts of self-cursing follow to really bind the act, asking utter destruction to fall upon the oath-breaker and his line – with killing off the family corresponding to castration (Burkert, 251).

### **4. COMMENSALITY – THE SHARED MEAL**

A common part of the sacrificial process in the ancient world was the cooking and eating of the flesh of the sacrificial animal. In Greece, only meat obtained through sacrifice could be eaten (Green 2001, 42) – they didn't have butchers on the street corners. These sacrificial rites were the occasion of great feasting and joy. The sharing of food symbolized and enhanced the unity of the people in celebration. It also allowed for communion with the Gods invoked (Bourdillion, 20).

Generally, in Greece, only the skin, bones and fat were given to the Gods while the rest was reserved for the people. Feasting was extremely important at any festival, and continues to be so today.

And in the patron-client relationship, the client provides food rent to the Patron in return for protection, a share in the spoils, etc. The sharing of food with the Gods in the shared meal also reflects this human bargain, giving man the right to make demands upon the Gods.

### **5. CHAOS MITIGATES COSMOS (Modern)**

Finally, we come to the modern form of sacrifice that appears in current practice. If cosmos equals order, and chaos equals lack of order, then there is an area in between the two, a sort of liminal place where order and chaos are in balance. While too much chaos causes everything to fall apart, too much order can cause brittleness. Ceisiwr Serith introduced the idea that chaos can feed cosmos in 2000 (Serith).

Imagine a pine tree in a hurricane. The tree's lack of flexibility will cause the tree to snap in the storm. But a supple palm tree will bend with the wind, its leaves folding back to protect the heart from the wind, and after the storm has passed, the palm tree will usually spring back as if nothing had happened.

In parts of the ancient world, rituals had to be performed absolutely correctly or the Gods would be offended. In Rome, if there were some error or omission committed in a rite, the pontiffs would first have to perform a rite of expiation (*piaculum*) to conciliate the offended God, and then repeat the badly performed rite all over again (Scheid, 117). Spontaneity was frowned upon.

In modern times, however, some spontaneity is valued because too much predictability and order can be seen as boring. Spontaneous prayers and offerings of praise can be seen as positive additions to any rite. Here, the mitigation of cosmos (order) with a bit of chaos (disorder) can be a good thing. No matter how carefully organized a Praise Offering section of a modern rite may be, there is always the element of uncertainty involved when the people have their chance to praise, sing, dance or do whatever it is that they have elected to do as a sacrifice for the Gods. This bit of chaos mitigates the normal order of any rite, giving it life.

## **SACRIFICE FOR MODERN PAGANS**

Let's face it, the killing of animals just isn't acceptable for most people in public ritual, and the killing of people is guaranteed to get one into a great deal of trouble.

But we need to have something to give to the Kindreds so that they might give back to us in return, and here substitution comes to the rescue. Items made by the sacrificants or valuables owned by them make wonderful sacrifices, to be thrown in the Well (for later disposal) or hung on the Tree.

Food and drink was often given to the Powers in the ancient world, and we can do the same today. Items the ancients used include oil and butter (or ghee) offered to the Fire, wine to the fire altar (but remember that wine and beer don't burn and will put your fire out if poured directly on the flames), and other foodstuffs can be offered to the Fire, etc., as well. Remember that non-flammable libations are best when poured directly on the ground.

Weapons like swords can be 'killed' by breaking or bending them, or they can just be offered whole to the Well or a shaft or buried in the ground. Likewise hand-made items can be broken or buried or otherwise given to the Kindreds.

Apotropaic offerings are already being performed in ADF in the form of the Outdwellers offering that many of us do. This bribe would be a propitiatory offering. We also perform purifications through the use of water and incense or sage (Water and Fire). Rites and sacrifices of expiation can also be performed for failed oaths and for squabbles among the People. Anytime we fail to live up to our promises, it may be best to get right with the Gods.

Another idea would be to make a doll and give it a place of honor in your rites. At the end of a specified time (a month or a year, say), it can be reviled and burned in the fire as a scapegoat, carrying with it any discord or disharmony in the Grove and the lives of the People. Even a Wicker Man could be used for this purpose, to 'burn away' any impurity felt by the Grove or solitary, or to carry hand-written 'messages' from the People to the Gods.

We already perform Praise Offerings in many Groves, and any poems, songs, chants or dances created by a sacrificant would be an excellent sacrifice to the Kindreds, mitigating cosmos with a bit of chaos.

And finally, the Shared Meal is a wonderful way of joining with each other and the Kindreds in an act of unity. Part of a loaf of bread or other food could be offered to the Spirits, and the rest eaten by the People. And in Groves that have pot-lucks, a portion of each dish could be given to the Kindreds through the Fire or to the Land before the People eat.

## **CONCLUSION**

Sacrifice was an integral part of religion, worship and spirituality in the ancient world, without which there would have been no public religion. The concept of reciprocity enables us to give and to receive the blessings we require for our hearts and spirits, giving us a roadmap for our physical as well as our spiritual lives. And even though we aren't those ancient peoples, these simple ideas can work for us today, bringing us closer to the Gods and other Spirits, that we might know Them, and They, us.

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