

C. SACRIFICES

THE CEREMONY

The central religious act of the Greeks was the sacrifice of fruit, grain, or (most spectacularly) an animal. Two passages from Homer's *Odyssey* illustrate the details of animal sacrifice accompanied by prayer. The first describes a public festival occasion at which Nestor, king of Pylos, celebrates a solemn sacrifice to Poseidon. The second is more private; it takes place in the hut of Eumaios, the swineherd of Odysseus, and is not much more than the ritualized butchering of a pig for supper.

(Homer, *Odyssey* III. 439–463.)

Stratios and noble Echephron led an ox by the horns, and Aretos came from the chamber bringing them lustral water in a flower-decked cauldron; in the other hand he held barley meal in a basket. Thrasymedes stood by with a sharp axe in his hand to strike the ox dead. Perseus held a bowl [to receive the blood]. Old Nestor, the horseman, began to pour down the lustral water and sprinkle the barley meal. He made many prayers to Athena, setting aside as first-fruits hairs from the victim's head and tossing them in the fire. When they had prayed and sprinkled out the barley, bold Thrasymedes, Nestor's son, moved up and struck: the axe cut the neck tendons and stunned the ox. The women let out a shrill cry, Nestor's daughters, daughters-in-law and wife, Klymenos' eldest daughter Eurydike. The men raised it from the ground, and Peisistratos cut its throat. Its dark blood flowed out, its life left its bones. Straightway they quartered it, and cut off all the thigh-pieces, covered them with fat, folded them double, and placed pieces of raw flesh on them. The old man burnt them on split wood, and poured sparkling wine on it. The young men, beside him, held forked spits in their hands. When both the thighs had burned up and they had tasted the intestines, they cut the rest into smaller pieces and skewered them on spits, then took the sharp spits in their hands and roasted them.

(Homer, *Odyssey* XIV. 418–436.)

[The swineherd] cut the wood with his bronze axe, and the others brought in a fat five-year-old boar and made it stand by the hearth. The swineherd did not forget the immortals, for he had a good spirit. Setting aside as first-fruits hairs from the head of the white-toothed boar he tossed them in the fire and prayed to all the gods for Odysseus to return to his home. He raised himself up and struck with a piece of oak which he had cut, and the life left the boar. The others cut its throat

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and singed its hair. Straightway they quartered it and the swineherd laid on pieces of raw flesh, starting with all the limbs and ending with the fatty tissue. They tossed these in the fire and sprinkled it with barley meal. They cut the rest into smaller pieces and skewered them on spits. They roasted them carefully and removed them, and piled them on wooden platters. The swineherd stood up to distribute it, for he had a sense of fairness. He divided it all up in seven portions—one for the Nymphs and Hermes, the son of Maia, which he set aside with a prayer,¹⁰ and the rest he distributed to each person.

THE RATIONALE

As the preceding passages from the *Odyssey* show, it was customary for the human participants in a sacrifice to eat the best parts of the victim. Hesiod, in the *Theogony*, gives an aetiological explanation of this custom. See J. Rudhardt, "Les mythes Grecs relatifs à l'instauration du Sacrifice," *Museum Helveticum* 27 (1970) 1–15; J.P. Vernant, "Pensée Sociale et Religieuse de la Grèce Ancienne," *Annuaire de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* (Paris), 9e Sec., Sc. Relig. 81, 3 (1973–74) 259–276.

(Hesiod, *Theogony*, 535–557.)

Once when the gods and mortal men were disputing at Mekone, Prometheus divided up a large ox with careful thought and set it before them, intending to deceive Zeus. To the men he served flesh and intestines rich in fat inside a skin, covered with the ox's stomach. To Zeus in turn he served the white bones of the ox arranged with tricky craft, and he covered it with white fat.

Then the father of men and gods said to him, "Prometheus, son of Iapetos, most renowned of all sovereigns, esteemed one, what a discrepancy there is in the portions you have distributed." So spoke Zeus in mockery, for he knew about resourceful schemes.

Wily Prometheus spoke to him in answer, with a little smile as he remembered his crafty trick: "Zeus, most glorious, most great of the ever-living gods, choose whichever of these your heart urges you to take."

He said this in his craftiness, but Zeus who knew about resourceful schemes was aware of the trick. He espied trouble for mortal men and he intended to bring it about: so with both hands he selected the white fat—anger surrounded him, and wrath went through his heart, when he saw the white bones of the ox, the

10. See D. H. Gill, "Trapezomata, a Neglected Aspect of Greek Sacrifice," *Harvard Theological Review* 67 (1974) 117–137.

crafty trick. Ever since, the human race on the earth burns white bones to the immortals on smoking altars.

In spite of Hesiod's explanation, it seemed to many Greeks that sacrifices were often nothing more than excuses for a big banquet. In the following selection Knemon, the grouch-hero of one of Menander's comedies (written in the fourth century) complains about the increasing elaboration and irreverence of sacrifices.

(Menander, *Dyskolos*, 447–453.)

What sacrifices these scoundrels make! They bring their picnic boxes, their wine-jars, not for the gods, but themselves. The incense and barleycake is holy enough. The god gets all that, put there on the fire and they put on the tail bone and the bile, because they are inedible, for the gods—then they gulp down all the rest.

SACRIFICIAL PROCEDURE

Each month the Elean attendants at the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia conducted sacrifices at a solemn procession to a long series of altars in and around the sacred precinct. Pausanias' guidebook to Olympia details the order of the sacrifices, and concludes with the following account of the procedure. It illustrates incidentally the personnel in attendance at the ceremony.

(Pausanias, *Description of Greece* V. 15.10–12.)

Once each month the Eleans sacrifice on all the altars listed. They sacrifice in an ancient manner, burning incense on the altars along with wheat kneaded with honey, then lay on olive twigs and pour a libation of wine—except at the altars to the Nymphs, to the Ladies [*Despoinai*], and to all the gods in common, where it is not proper to offer wine. The sacrifices are under the supervision of the *theokolos* who holds that office for the month, the soothsayers, the libation-bearers, the *exegetes* [interpreter], the flute-player and the wood-man. They speak traditional words at the libations in the *prytaneion* and sing hymns, but it is not fitting for me to introduce them into my account. They pour libations not only to the Greek gods but also to the god in Libya [Ammon], to Hera Ammonia and to Parammon. (Parammon is an epithet of Hermes.) ... The Eleans also pour libations to the heroes and the wives of heroes who are paid honor either in the district of Elis or in Aetolia. The hymns they sing in the *prytaneion* are in the Doric dialect, but they do not say who composed them.

SACRIFICE AND AUGURY

In addition to the verbal communications of the oracles, the gods were also thought to speak to men by means of the entrails of sacrificial victims. The following episode from Xenophon's account of a military expedition at the end of the fifth century shows him consulting the sacrificial victims for help in a personal decision, whether to assume sole command of the army.

(Xenophon, *Anabasis* VI. 1.17–24.)

In choosing a commander . . . they turned to Xenophon. The captains came to him and said that this was the army's judgment and each of them showed good will and tried to persuade him to take the command. Xenophon himself was inclined to desire the command, because he thought that he would gain more honor among his friends and a greater reputation when he came home. It might also happen that he would be the cause of some good to the army. These reflections urged him to take sole command. But on the other hand he noted that for every man the outcome of the future is unclear and for this reason there was danger that he might lose the good reputation he had already acquired, and so he was in doubt.

Since he could not decide, he thought it best to consult the gods. He brought two victims to the altar and offered sacrifice to King Zeus as was prescribed for him by the oracle at Delphi, and because he thought that from that god came the dream which he had when he took the initial step towards a share of the command. He remembered that when he was setting out from Ephesus to join Cyrus an eagle screamed on his right; however, it was sitting down, which the soothsayer who was escorting him said was a bird for the great rather than for the ordinary person, and its appearance symbolized glory, but also hard work, for other birds attack the eagle when it is sitting. The bird also did not prophecy profit, for the eagle captures its food while flying. So Xenophon offered sacrifice and the god signified clearly that he should not seek the command, not accept it if he were selected. So the matter ended.

Sometimes the gods refused to accept the sacrifices offered to them. In this passage Sophocles has the prophet Teiresias report on the bad omens he has observed both in the patterns of flying birds and in the inauspicious occurrences at sacrifices; both indicate the gods' displeasure with King Kreon, who has forbidden the burial of his nephew Polyneikes, in violation of Greek funeral custom.

(Sophocles, *Antigone*, 998–1011.)

Teiresias: You will know the trouble, when you hear the signs my art interprets. I was sitting at the old place of augury, where I observe the gathering of every sort of bird; I heard the cryptic voice of the birds, set to clamoring unintelligibly, goaded by some evil; I realized that they were tearing at each other with murderous claws; there was meaning in the flapping of wings.

With sudden fear I made trial of the burnt-offerings on the kindled altars—from the sacrifices none of Hephaestus' fire shown forth; instead the thigh portions became soggy and sodden, smoldering and sputtering. The gall bladder burst and sputtered bile, and the dripping thigh-pieces lay bared of their wrapping of fat.

THE SWEARING OF OATHS

To swear an oath with proper solemnity and efficacy, it was necessary to call the gods to witness and implicate their divine prestige in the oath. In the *Iliad*, Agamemnon returns the girl Briseis to Achilles with an apology and an oath that he has not violated her. Homer appropriately surrounds the oath-taking with a scene of sacrifice—this sacrifice differs from most in that the victim is not eaten, but devoted entirely to the god, as Pausanias points out in his account of the athletes' oath to Zeus at Olympia.

(Homer, *Iliad* XIX. 252–268.)

Agamemnon drew a knife which he always wore in his sword's scabbard; setting aside as first-fruits hairs from a wild boar and raising his hands to Zeus, he prayed; and all the Argives stood silently by him in order, listening to the king. Making his prayer he looked toward broad heaven and said, "May now Zeus know first, most high and most perfect of the gods, and Earth and Sun and the Furies who under the earth punish men who swear false oaths: I have not laid a hand upon the girl Briseis, neither to sleep with her nor for any other reason. She has remained, untouched, in my tent. If any of this is falsely sworn, may the gods give me all the many pains which they give to a person who commits sin against them when he swears."

So he spoke, and slit the throat of the boar with the pitiless bronze. Taithybios spun it around and hurled it into the great expanse of the sea.

(Pausanias, *Description of Greece* V. 24.9–11.)

The statue of Zeus in the council-house [at Olympia] is made, more than any of his other statues, to strike wrongdoers with terror. It is called Zeus of the

Oaths, and holds a thunderbolt in each hand. It is customary for the contestants, their fathers and brothers, and even their trainers, to swear on the sacrificial flesh of a wild boar that there will be no cheating on their part in the Olympic games. The contestants swear in addition that for ten consecutive months they have perfectly followed all the training rules. Those who examine the boys and the colts which compete also take an oath to make their examination fairly and without bribes, and to keep secret the reasons for approval or rejection. I did not think to ask what it is the custom to do with the boar on which the athletes take their oath, since among the ancients custom ordained in regard to sacrifices that the victim on which an oath was made was not to be eaten by any man. Homer shows this, for the boar on which Agamemnon swore that Briseis had not shared his bed was thrown by the herald into the sea.

A CALENDAR OF SACRIFICES FROM MARATHON

Individual localities had their annual and biennial cycle of rites, as attested by this inscription, a list of the official sacrifices held by the Athenian deme of Marathon and the cost of each. The inscription, published and discussed briefly by R.B. Richardson, "A Sacrificial Calendar from the Epakria," *American Journal of Archaeology* 10 (1895) 209–226, is dated to the early-fourth century.¹¹

(IG II² 1358, col. ii, lines 1–53.)

[The deme-leader of the Ma]rathonians makes the following sacrifices [in the first quarter of the year: ... within] ten days. To the Hero, [a pig, 3 drachmas; to the Heroine,] a pig, 3 drachmas. A table¹² for the Hero [and the Heroine, 1 drachmas.] In the month Boedromion, before the Mysteries [---] an ox, 90 drachmas, a sheep, 12 drachmas; to Kourotrophos [...].

In the second quarter: in the month Posideon [---] an ox, 150 drachmas; a sheep, 12 drachmas; to the Heroine, [a sheep, 11 drachmas, priestly portion,] 7 drachmas. To Ge [Earth] "in the Fields," a pregnant cow, 70 [drachmas, priestly portion---]. (line 10) To Telete,¹³ *spylia*,¹⁴ 40 drachmas.

11. A similar deme calendar, from Erchia, has been published by G. Daux in *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 87 (1963) 603–638, with further discussion by E. Vanderpool, *ibid.* 89 (1965) 21–26; M. Jameson, *ibid.* 154–172; S. Dow, *ibid.* 180–213.

12. Spread with meats and offerings. See D.H. Gill, "The Classical Greek Cult Table," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 70 (1965) 265–269.

13. A goddess of initiations, perhaps. The daughter of Dionysus and Nikaia.

14. Meaning unknown.

In the third quarter: in the month Gamelion: To Daira,¹⁵ a pregnant ewe, 16 drachmas, priestly portion, 1 drachma. To Ge "at the Oracle," a sheep, 11 drachmas. To Zeus Hypatos [Most High], [--- drachmas]. To Ioleus, a sheep, 12 drachmas. To Kourotrophos, a pig, [3 drachmas, a table, 1 drachma, priestly portion, 2 drachmas, 1 1/2 obols. To the hero Pheraios, [a sheep, 12 drachmas]; to the Heroine, a sheep, 11 drachmas, priestly portion, 3 drachmas. In the month Elaphebolion, on the 10th: [To Ge "at the] Oracle," a completely black goat, 15 drachmas, priestly [portion, 1 drachma].

In the fourth quarter, in the month Mounichion, to Ar[---] (line 20) Nechos, an ox, 90 drachmas, a sheep, 12 drachmas, to the Heroine, a sheep, 11 drachmas, priestly [portion], 7 drachmas. To Neanias, an ox, 90 drachmas, a sheep, 12 drachmas, a pig, [3 drachmas], to the Heroine, a sheep, 11 drachmas, priestly portion, 7 drachmas, 1 1/2 obols.

The deme-leader of the Marathonians makes the following sacrifices. To the Hero "in [?]rasileia," a sheep, 12 drachmas, a table, 1 drachma; to the Heroine, a sheep, 11 drachmas. To the Hero "by the Hellotion,"¹⁶ a sheep, 12 drachmas, a table, 1 drachma; to the Heroine, a sheep, 6 drachmas. In the month Thargelion: to Achaia,¹⁷ a ram, 12 drachmas, a ewe, 11 drachmas, priestly portion, 3 drachmas. To the Moirai [Fates], a pig, 3 drachmas, priestly portion, 1 1/2 obols.

(line 30). In the month Skirophorion, before the Skira.¹⁸ To Hyttenios, fruits in season, a sheep, 12 drachmas. To Kourotrophos, a pig, 3 drachmas, priestly portion, 2 drachmas 1 obol. To the Tritopateres,¹⁹ a sheep, priestly portion, 2 drachmas. To the Akamantes, a sheep, 12 drachmas, priestly portion, 2 drachmas.

The following in alternate years: first set—In Hekatombaion, to Athena Hellotis, an ox, 90 drachmas, three sheep, 33 drachmas, a pig, 3 drachmas, priestly portion, 6[+] drachmas. To Kourotrophos, a sheep, 11 drachmas, a pig, 3 drachmas, priestly portion, 1[+] drachmas. [---] boughs of laurel, 7 drachmas.

The following sacrifices are offered in alternate years beginning in the archonship in the Tetrapolis²⁰ of Euboulos: (line 40) second set—In Hekatombaion, to Athena Hellotis, a sheep, 11 drachmas; to Kourotrophos, a pig, 3 drachmas, priestly portion, 1 drachma, 1 1/2 obols. In Metageitnion, to the Eleusinian goddess, an ox, 90 drachmas; to Kore, a rain, 12 drachmas, three pigs, 9 drachmas,

15. An epithet of Persephone.

16. The Hellotion was probably the shrine of Athena Hellotis, an important goddess at Marathon.

17. An epithet of Demeter.

18. A festival of Demeter, held on the 12th of the month.

19. Ancestors of the clans.

20. The Tetrapolis was a vestigial religious consortium of Marathon and three neighboring demes.

priestly portion, 6 drachmas, 4 1/2 obols, 1/6 *medimnos* of barley, 4 obols, a *chous* of wine [---]; to Kourotrophos, a sheep, 11 drachmas, priestly portion, 1 drachma; to Zeus Anthaleus ["Flowering"], a sheep, 12 drachmas, priestly portion, 2 drachmas. In Anthesterion, to the Eleusinian goddess, a pregnant sow, (line 50) 20 drachmas, priestly portion, 1 drachma, 1 obol. To Chloe "beside Medylos' place," a pregnant sow, 20 drachmas, priestly portion, 1 drachma, 1/6 *medimnos* of barley, 4 obols, *chous* of wine, [---]. In Skirophorion, before the Skira, to Galios, a ram, 12 drachmas, priestly portion, 2 drachmas, from the well[?], 6 drachmas; to the Tritopateres, a table, 1 drachma.