

SYMBOLIC ORDER: LIMINALITY AND SIMULATION IN HUMAN SACRIFICE IN THE BRONZE-AGE AEGEAN AND NEAR EAST

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Abstract: This paper examines engagement with live and dead human bodies through rituals involving human sacrifice in the ancient Aegean and Near East. After a review of the most significant archaeological contexts, properties of liminality and the manipulation of human remains for various types of staging are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Human sacrifice is one of the most discussed religious rituals, its apparent waste, violence, and meaninglessness easily capturing the imagination.¹ The literature on the topic is vast.² It is a ritual that has been practiced across the world in various time periods. One of the reasons that this particular practice has attracted and continues to attract so much attention is a bewilderment concerning the reasons for carrying out an act that has no obvious practical purpose. Sacrifice³ appears *wasteful* in the sense that something, a living

¹I would like to thank James R. Lewis for inviting me to contribute to this volume, and Aoife Fitzgerald for her very useful comments and corrections.

²A good introduction to the most influential theories with original extracts can be found in Carter (2003). Papers in Hamerton-Kelly (1987) illustrate some of the more recent thoughts on the topic.

³Definitions of the concept of sacrifice vary, with small differences having a great impact on perception and interpretation. As I use it here, sacrifice refers to a religious ritual where a living being is deliberately killed in the process for the purposes of the event and usually in honour of a supernatural entity. A supernatural entity is anything beyond what we usually consider part of the physical world, and need not therefore be a deity in the traditional sense but may be more like 'spirits' or deceased individuals considered to still have some degree of influence in this world.

creature, is deprived of life without being ‘used’ for anything. In fact, for some scholars, this is part of the very definition of sacrifice—that the object or creature sacrificed is not otherwise used by human beings, for example by eating the meat of a sacrificed animal.⁴ Others, especially following the work of William Robertson Smith (2002: especially lectures VI–VIII), emphasise the vital importance of feasting and the sacrificial meal in creating social bonds,⁵ and the consumption of the sacrifices are in this case seen as essential to the very function of the rite. Looking at the material evidence and literary records, there is often no separation of sacrifice and feasting; the two can be integral parts of the same event. Having said that, there are also many instances where humans do not consume the sacrifice and this applies to most of the cases of human sacrifice discussed here. Whether or not a sacrifice is consumed (by humans) very much depends on the occasion or type of sacrifice and the type of victim.

Sacrifice is a violent act in that a living being is deliberately killed in the process of the ritual.⁶ The act of killing may be more or less brutal and painful for the creature sacrificed, from poison to blunt force trauma. In this respect, the violent component of sacrifice cannot be denied, but it should be placed in its context, and here we turn to the *meaninglessness* of the act. It only appears meaningless to us, of a different age and various different cultures. Sacrifice is in fact never without meaning for those performing the act, but always done for specific reasons, and often with other less overt purposes (e.g., a known or general reason might be to appease a deity, while covert purposes might include ideological, social, and political agendas such as displays of power, negotiation of identities, and social bonding). It is only that we are far too often unable to *detect* the meaning nor are we able to

⁴For example, one finds in excavation reports comments to the effect of animal remains representing joints of meat which could therefore not have been sacrificed (e.g., Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997: 263).

⁵See papers in Dietler and Hayden (2001); Bray (2003); *Hesperia* 73(2) (2004); and Hitchcock, Laffineur, and Crowley (2008).

⁶The language of sacrifice is filled with vocabulary referring to violence and aggression (of which the present paper is also guilty) such as *victim*, *perpetrator*, *killing*, *murder*, *destruction*, *cruelty*, *gruesome* and *bloody*. This rhetoric carries with it a certain level of judgement and assumptions which can hamper understanding of and learning from the data—we may see a creature being sacrificed as a ‘victim’, while others could see it as honoured, sacred or some other aspect not immediately clear to us. I use much of the vocabulary here because neutral terms are difficult to come by and these are what are most commonly used and comprehended, but the loaded character of such words should be kept in mind. Significantly, we do not find in the texts of the ancient Near East a similarly violent vocabulary in relation to sacrifice.

sympathise with it. It is in this sense that it is meaningless: because it does not have immediate meaning *for us*. The challenge is then to overcome any personal aversion or bewilderment in relation to this particular ritual and instead endeavour to identify its place in ancient cultures.

I will not here attempt a complete understanding of the various types of human sacrifice in the Aegean and Near East, as would be impossible given the sparsity and type of evidence available. Rather, I will explore trends and elements shared by some of the examples, particularly focussing on aspects of liminality and staging or simulation using the human remains. The element of liminality can be related to place, the sacrificial victim or other parts of a ritual; it is an in-between spheres which can be physical, social or metaphorical/symbolic.⁷ It can work as a transitional area, and is a kind of limbo, characterised as a period of alternative or subversive structures, where the usual order of things may be absent, reversed or in other ways varied. Doors, walls, floors, boundary posts, tomb shafts or dromoi, temple courtyards, altars and thresholds⁸ may work as places of transition, or marking places of transition, and sacrificial victims can be agents of liminality by possessing hybrid or unsolidified identities that often belong on the fringes of a group. For humans, such identities are depending on social contexts and perceptions, but may include very young individuals, outsiders (ethnically, socially, geographically), slaves, servants, captives, or women.

Religious rituals are artificial events in the sense that they are carefully created and controlled by humans and consist of elements and acts that are symbolic, referring to, or *simulating*, something else, something outside the

⁷The concept of liminality in ritual was proposed and enumerated by Arnold van Gennep in his *Rites of Passage*, first published in French in 1909 and translated into English in 1960. Van Gennep focused on the transitional element of rituals—that is, the *passage* from one place to another (physical, mental or otherwise). Not all, but many rituals contain this element, and van Gennep divides these rituals into three parts, each of which may display varying degrees of elaboration in a given context: preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition) and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation) (van Gennep 1960: 11). It is important, as van Gennep does not tire of repeating, not to isolate ritual segments, but to take complete ritual processes into consideration (van Gennep 1960: 116). The complete context is necessary not only for fuller understanding, but for each element to make sense: each element has meaning in relation to others, and must be defined accordingly—the liminal only has value insofar as it relates to the preliminal and the postliminal. If it is separation, it must have something to separate from and to which it can again be incorporated.

⁸Thresholds are particularly palpable examples of a space placed between something, physically marking the entrance (or exit) from one room to another, or from outside to inside. An elaborate account of threshold rituals was offered already in 1896 by Trumbull, who also contends that the threshold was the first type of altar.

ritual itself; it is a way for humans to simulate control of something which is otherwise outside their naturally given jurisdiction.⁹ In a way the ritual is even more important, more real, than what it refers to precisely because it is possible to manipulate it.¹⁰ This malleability can take the form of carefully staged ‘acts’ or scenes, and in the material culture, it may manifest itself in what appear as extravagant or meticulously arranged assemblages or contexts, for example in tombs. Ritual becomes a kind of performance, but a deeply serious one, not one produced for entertainment as we may be used to, but for creating, maintaining and displaying social structures and identities, and for honouring supernatural entities in ways which we are not always able to grasp the details, content or sentiments of.

I will in this paper focus on the archaeological evidence for human sacrifice in the Aegean and Near East, with the majority of the cases coming from the Bronze Age (c. 3000–1100 B.C.).¹¹ Contributions from textual and iconographic sources to the topic are rather limited, and therefore not discussed in detail here.¹²

THE AEGEAN

In the Bronze Age of the Aegean, hints of human sacrificial victims come from mortuary contexts where several humans appear to have been buried simultaneously, at times in the liminal spaces of a tomb. This is the case in several tombs at Mycenae, where human skeletons found in the dromoi of Tomb 505 at the Third Kilometre Cemetery (Wace 1932: 12–18) and Tomb

⁹Nancy Jay’s theory of sacrifice focusses on the artificiality of the ritual. She argues that sacrifice is a way of artificially creating blood-bonds, which are otherwise biologically only made by women through the act of giving birth; she describes sacrifice as “opposed to childbirth as *birth done better, under deliberate purposeful control, and on a more exalted level than ordinary mothers do it*” (Jay 1992: xxiv, my emphasis).

¹⁰This can favourably be compared to Jean Baudrillard’s notion of simulation and simulacra (1994). Simulation is more than simply pretending, and threatens the border between real and imaginary (or in this case, ‘artificial’ and ‘natural’); and a simulacrum no longer has a referent—the artificial becomes all that remains. See also his *Symbolic exchange and death* (1993), e.g., p. 133, “The symbolic is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a ‘structure’, but an act of exchange and a *social relation which puts an end to the real*, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary.”

¹¹Identifying human sacrifice in the archaeological record can be very challenging (and depending on how it is defined)—see discussions and possible methodologies suggested in Recht (2010) and papers in Porter and Schwartz (2012).

¹²For discussions of this material, see, e.g., Chadwick (1973: 286–289, 462–464); Green (1975); Recht (2010); and papers in Porter and Schwartz (2012).

15 in the Lower City (Tsountas 1889: 130–131), and at the mouth of graves or in secondary enclosures in Grave Circle A (Tsountas and Manatt 1969: 83–114) have been interpreted as sacrificial victims. In Tomb 505, human remains from three individuals were found near the floor of the dromos, some with animal bones. They were associated with around 500 ceramic vessels, many of which were kylikes, a vessel that suggests a funerary ritual involving drinking. However, the remains that might have been sacrificial were found immediately below the top and in front of the doorway, consisting of at least six individuals. These were disarticulated and mixed with the soil. In Tomb 15, the description indicates that the six skeletons found in front of the door were articulated and placed there at the same time (Tsountas and Manatt 1969: 151). Reminiscent of this is the description of Chamber Tomb VI at Argos, where human bones were placed near the top of the doorway below a heap of stones; significantly, the bones are said to have been put there before the final closure of the tomb (Vollgraff 1904: 370), suggesting that this was *not* a secondary burial, but regrettably, the report does not provide further details on the context. Finally, in Tomb VII at Prosymna, human bones are reported in the dromos, again almost directly on the door, and in this case in their primary position, since the complete skeleton was present, lying on its back with the head against the dromos (Blegen and Blegen 1937: 157). The dromos contained many pottery sherds which included fragments of 57 kylikes.

A tholos tomb at Dendra may also contain elements of human sacrifice (Persson 1931: 8–42, 68–70). The excavators found the chamber collapsed and evidence of ancient tomb robbing (possibly causing the collapse). On the plastered floor of the chamber were the remains of at least three human skeletons, gold fragments and beads scattered throughout. The chamber had four pits, all of which appear to have remained largely untouched by the robbers. Pit III contained a single human skeleton (the so-called ‘princess’) with gold items, and covered with flat stone slabs placed about 50 cm below the level of the floor; in Pit IV, only earth, charcoal, gold, bronze, and burnt ivory fragments were found. The most important for the present topic are Pits I and II. Pit I had two skeletons in it with rich finds of gold and silver vessels, gold jewellery and fine weapons of bronze and gold. One skeleton, associated especially with gold jewellery and a small gold box is the ‘queen’, and the other, found with short swords placed on both sides of the body, the ‘king’. They are interpreted as having been buried simultaneously, with the queen following her husband into the afterlife, whether voluntarily or involuntarily (Persson 1931: 68–69). Pit II contained unburnt human and animals bones, including the skull of a dog, beads and bronze fragments. These were understood as the sacrificial remains of a servant and what would essentially have been a pet dog (Persson 1931: 69).

If it is indeed the case that the three skeletons found in Pit I and II were buried at the same time, one explanation is that two were sacrificed at the funeral of the third person. Another option is that they all happened to die at roughly the same time, perhaps due to disease. As described in the excavation report, it seems likely that the 'king' and 'queen' of Pit I were buried at the same time,¹³ and sherds from the same stirrup jar found in this and Pit II suggest these were contemporary (Persson 1931: 39, *contra* Mylonas). Unfortunately, the report does not detail the condition and position of the human skeleton in Pit II, but is it noteworthy that the bones of the human appear to have been treated in the same manner as that of the dog.

Moving to Crete, we find in one tomb, Knossos New Hospital Site Tomb I, a situation not unlike that at Dendra, dated to LM II (Hood and de Jong 1952: 248–249). The tomb contained only two skeletons which by the overall arrangement (including a large amount of ceramic vessels and a goat/sheep offering) appear to have been buried at the same time. They are suggested to have been those of a man and a woman based on the associated finds, but the skeletal remains were too poorly preserved for identification. Unfortunately, it is not possible in these cases to reach any final conclusions because the reports are not clear or detailed enough. When all the evidence points to the bodies being buried at the same time, it *does* require some explanation, and one possibility here is sacrifice. Others include illness or violent but non-ritual deaths,¹⁴ but in many cases, it may not be possible to do more than suggest a likely scenario.

Two more unusual examples of sacrifices of humans come from Crete. The first is the well-known site of Anemospilia, located on the north side of Mount Jouktas and variously described as a temple or a shrine by the excavators (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1981; 1991: 137–156; 1997: 268–311). Here, a small building consisting of three parallel, elongated rooms fronted by a corridor was destroyed by an earthquake in MM II–MM IIIA (first half of the seventeenth century B.C.). Traces of a temenos wall were also identified. It appears that a ritual involving human sacrifice was

¹³Mylonas argued that the three skeletons in the two pits were buried at three different points in time, based on a difference in date of the gold and silver cups found with the 'king' and 'queen', and arguing, *contra* Persson, that the sherds from the same vessels found in various places in the tomb demonstrate not the same event but a brushing aside of an earlier burial (Mylonas 1966: 128–129). There is nothing to prevent the metal vessels from being heirlooms, but as far as can be gleaned from the publication, it is not possible to determine with certainty the sequence of burials in the tomb and consequently, its interpretation remains open.

¹⁴An example of violence without any signs of ritual can be found in Ayios Stephanos Grave 23, where the person appears to have been bound (Taylour 1972: 226).

interrupted by the earthquake. The corridor, with its many ceramic vessels, bench or shelf-like structure, and trays associated with goat and bovine bones in the western end, may have been used in preparation for rituals. The eastern room is interpreted as having been used for bloodless offerings and also contained a large amount of ceramic vessels and a stepped altar with 'ritual' vessels on top of it against the southern wall. The central room may have been the centre of the cult¹⁵—it had a slightly higher threshold than the others, and against the southern wall was a bench made from the natural rock. On it was found a rhyton and a 'bucket', with many more vessels in the rest of the room. Near the bench were found two life-size clay feet with ash from burnt wooden material, interpreted by the excavators as belonging to a *xoanon*, a cult idol. In the doorway of this room was the skeleton of an adult killed by blocks falling during the earthquake. Associated with this person was a large Kamares ware vessel decorated with a bull in relief. The western room is where the human sacrifice had taken place. It did not contain a large amount of ceramic vessels, as the other rooms did. Instead, there were three human skeletons. Two of them, a woman and a man, were also killed by the earthquake, as suggested by their placement in the room and their bodily positions (the woman having fallen on her stomach, the man on his back and seemingly holding up his hand in a defensive position). The third person, however, was lying on his side on a small platform, with his legs bent in a manner that suggests he was bound. Near his stomach was a bronze weapon, probably a lance or spearhead (Höckmann 1982: 131).

It would thus appear that the young man on the low platform had the role of sacrificial victim with the man and the woman in the room and the person in the corridor acting as the sacred personnel performing the ritual. We cannot know exactly who of the three other people actually killed the man, but the large vessel associated with the skeleton in the corridor was plausibly used for the collection of blood, as depicted in iconography of animal sacrifice,¹⁶ and the bronze weapon found near him could well have been the instrument used.¹⁷ As with many cases of human sacrifice, *Anemospilia* is hotly disputed

¹⁵There was also evidence of a stairway at the end of the corridor, which would have led to either a flat roof or a second storey: we do not know the relation of this space to the ground floor. Without contesting the possibility of human sacrifice, Driessen has argued that the ground floor was primarily a storage unit (2001: 365–366).

¹⁶On the so-called *Ayia Triada* sarcophagus. First published in detail by Paribeni (1908); see also Marinatos (1993: 31–37).

¹⁷The excavators also argued that a differentiation in the burn pattern of this skeleton (the right side black and the left white) proves that there was more blood in one side of the body—i.e., as a result of bleeding out after being sacrificed (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997: 305). However, the burn pattern is completely consistent

among archaeologists. Arguments against human sacrifice usually revolve around the small size of the structure being unsuitable (Marinatos 1986: 19; 1993: 114) or that the weapon was unsuitable as a sacrificial tool, because it is a spearhead rather than a knife (Hughes 1991: 15–16).

Overall, the structure at Anemospilia is clearly of a ritual nature, as the contents and layout demonstrate. That human sacrifice was extremely uncommon is certainly true, but not a very meaningful argument for understanding this particular context. Although we have reason to believe that many rituals, including sacrifice, did take place outdoors, this does not preclude indoor rituals, as there are also clear indoor spaces set aside for this purpose.¹⁸ The western room with its low platform is one such space and sacrifice could well be one of the rituals taking place on the platform. Even a large animal like a bull could be taken into this space, but we do not know what animals were usually taken there. Although bovines were important sacrificial animals, they are far from the only one (nor the most frequent; sheep/goat remains occur more often), but it is also possible that some animals were sacrificed outside and others inside at this particular site. Put differently, if the young man on the platform had instead been an animal—be it a bovine, goat or otherwise, I think there would have been little doubt as to the interpretation of the scenario. The bronze instrument, regardless of the exact type, and whether or not it was actually used in this ritual, *could* easily have been used; there is no reason that a spear could not be used in sacrifice.¹⁹

with a difference in thermal exposure, the right side being slightly further away from the heat, reaching around 300° C and resulting in charring, while the left side was more directly exposed to the heat and so calcined and turned white, reaching 900° C or more (I am very grateful to Dr. Christopher W. Schmidt of the University of Indianapolis for this information, personal communication 31 Oct 2014).

¹⁸Sacred structures often include open areas, and it is not always possible to determine where exactly the killing would have taken place, regardless of whether the remains are found in inside or outside spaces. Animal bones likely from sacrificial remains are found in outdoor areas at Kato Syme Viannou Sanctuary (Lebessi and Muhly 1990), and in the indoor areas of Ayios Konstantinos, Methana (Konsolaki 2002; Hamilakis and Konsolaki 2004), Knossos House of the Sacrificed Oxen and the Pillar Crypts (Evans 1928: 301–303, 818–820). At the Sanctuary on Mt. Jouktas (Karetsou 1976, 1979, 1981) and the Palace of Archanes, (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1991: 38–41, 44–46; 1997: 98–104, 107–110) there are indications of an integral relation between the use of interior and exterior or open spaces; this is most likely how it would in fact have worked in most places.

¹⁹There may be an association between sacrifice and hunting in some instances (though certainly not all), where the spear would have been used (see Marinatos 1986: 42–49 for the arguments for this association). Höckmann, who identified the instrument as a spearhead, considers the type a ceremonial or cult weapon (1982: 16).

The second case comes from Knossos on Crete. In the North House, a complex of rooms appears to have been the focus of events that included the consumption of human meat (Warren 1980/1981; 1981; Wall, Musgrave, and Warren 1986). The area mainly survives at basement levels dated to LM IB (c. 1450 B.C.), the ground level being covered and closed by later LM II habitation. It consists of a court surrounded by the Room of the Frescoes in the northeast, possibly the lower part of a light well and was given its name from the fresco fragments found there. To the south of the court were two rooms with a small corridor between them. The eastern room, called the Cult Room Basement, contained a large amount of cult vessels, including many rhyta of small sizes. Among the finds was also a pithos which contained shells, edible snails and children's bones with cut marks. These finds had all fallen from the ground floor into the basement; the basement itself also held many ceramic vessels, and two interesting structures. A finely dressed ashlar block was against the eastern wall, and placed diagonally in the room was an elongated, built stone construction, possibly a bench or shelf. Beneath the ashlar block, but placed there before the block presumably as a foundation deposit, was a deposit of animal bones, a small bowl and a chlorite lentoid seal. The western room was divided into two, roughly along an east-west line, with the northern room being called the Room of the Children's Bones. In a layer belonging to the basement itself were found over 300 fragments of bones belonging to children. These represent a minimum of 199 bones (from at least four children; two skulls were of children aged eight and twelve), and 79 of these displayed cut marks (Wall, Musgrave, and Warren 1986). The careful study of these bones concludes that the large majority of them were fine cuts likely made by a knife with a fine blade, either of obsidian or metal. The cuts are consistent with and best explained by the removal of flesh for meat (rather than dismemberment²⁰), and skinning or flaying; there was also evidence of the removal of brains, lungs, and intestines. The bones were found in a carbonised layer of decayed wood, but none of the human bones were burnt. Some unburnt sheep bones were also found with the human bones, some also with cut marks consistent with sacrifice and slaughter.

Aside from in the Cult Room Basement and the Room of the Children's Bones, children's bones with cut marks were found associated with the court itself, the Room of the Frescoes and the drain outside the Room of the Frescoes. The finds and contexts suggest that this whole area was in some way part of the ritual that involved the sacrifice of children, possibly in the court of the Cult Room Basement where the ashlar block and bench-like features

²⁰Dismemberment could suggest some kind of preparation for secondary burial as suggested by Hughes (1991: 21), but there is no indication of this being the case here.

could have been used in the cutting. The Room of the Children's Bones was most likely not used for the actual cutting, but perhaps as an intermediate repository for the bones. The close association of human and animal bones/remains and their similar treatment²¹ strongly suggests that both were indeed consumed as part of a ritual that, not surprisingly for Minoan Crete, also included libation, as indicated by the many rhyta.

In both these examples from Crete, we do not seem to have final deposition—at Anemospilia, the ritual was interrupted, and the context at Knossos suggests an intermediate event. Consequently, we do not know how the remains would have been treated subsequently. It is intriguing to wonder what would have happened to the young man at Anemospilia if the earthquake had not occurred—would he in fact have been disposed of in a way that we would recognise the ritual he had been part of? It is likely we would not: had he been buried, we would assume a 'normal' burial, had he been thrown in the sea or left exposed, we would not have found him.

Other instances where human skeletal remains are found in a number of places in contexts that are highly unusual and tantalizing are unfortunately too flimsy for any definite conclusions. One such is at the settlement of Akroterion, Kastri on Kythera, where a human skull was found on an LM IB floor in a room in the South House. Not much more can be said about its contexts, but the assemblage of pottery from the same deposit as the skull included a fragment of a kernos and two rhyta of the flower pot type (Simpson and Lazenby 1972: 62; Coldstream 1972: 145, nos. 108, 112, 113), which may have cultic associations. In LM I House D on Mochlos, badly burned human bones were found throughout the house, which have been interpreted as a non-peaceful evacuation of the house's inhabitants (Seager 1909: 301), but the description does not suggest we are dealing with complete skeletons, in which case a different explanation must be sought. Another case of partial skeletons found within a settlement comes from House 1 at Trianda (Ialysos) on Rhodes. A human skull with parts of one hand and arm were found in the eastern area of the house, associated with a bowl with small bones, and the remains of a skull (some teeth, part of cranium and mandible) were found in the northwestern area, near a pithos and three stone lamps turned upside down. The former was interpreted as a sleeping person surprised by an earthquake that destroyed the house (Monaco 1941: 82–83). An earthquake would not, however, explain the selective elements of the remains; these must instead have been brought into the house separately and deliberately, for whatever

²¹For a study of how to identify cannibalism and differentiate it from mortuary ritual or animal activity, see Villa et al. (1986). An interesting perspective of consumption, cannibalism and the human body is offered by Simandiraki (2008).

reason. Most recently, reports from the excavations at Chania in western Crete mention the discovery of a woman's skull in the corner of a court, together with animal skulls and apparently having received a blow to the forehead in a manner similar to that of the animals (Manolitsakis 2014).²²

THE NEAR EAST²³

The most iconic and written about human sacrifices in the Near East come from the cemetery of Ur in modern-day southern Iraq, excavated in the early twentieth century by Sir Leonard Woolley (the main report is Woolley 1934). Among the hundreds of graves in the cemeteries, Woolley discovered sixteen tombs which he labelled 'royal',²⁴ distinguished by their structure, finds and indications of human sacrifice (ED IIIA, middle of the third millennium B.C.). These tombs usually consisted of a main chamber which held the deceased, and a separate 'death pit' with human sacrificial victims and other offerings. It would be too much here to recount all of the tombs in question, but some of the most characteristic examples will, I think, sufficiently reveal the type of context involved.²⁵ PG 800, the tomb of Queen Puabi, is one of the few tombs that appeared to be entirely undisturbed (Woolley 1934: 73–91, pls. 36–43). In this case, the chamber held the skeleton of the queen on a wooden bier, and 'attendants' were found near her head and feet with remains of another skull found against the southwest wall of the chamber. The other offerings are extremely rich, with a mass of gold, silver, copper/bronze, an ostrich eggshell, shell, stone and clay objects: vessels of various types, jewellery, models, cockle-shells with paint, an offering table, dagger, drinking tube, shell plaques, and musical instruments. In the 'death pit' were even more human skeletons and fine offerings. Near the entrance was a row of five men with daggers, a razor, and clay saucers, all placed in a shallow depression. In the southeastern area were ten female 'court ladies', each with a fine headdress,

²²This find is intriguing, but at this point, the reports are still very much preliminary and awaiting detailed study.

²³For possible Anatolian examples, which are not otherwise included here, see *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, 'Menschopfer, B' (1993–1997, vol. 8: 60–61); Moses (2012); Carter (2012); and Porter (2012: 195–199).

²⁴Discussions concerning the identity of the people buried in these tombs and for more detailed chronological sequences, see Marchesi (2004) and Reade (2001).

²⁵The two examples presented here are among the ones very often used, presumably because the contexts are most clear and the finds perhaps the most spectacular. However, other tombs from the cemetery which indicate the presence of human sacrificial victims include PG 777, PG 779, PG 789, PG 1050, PG 1054, PG 1157, PG 1332, PG 1618 and PG 1648 (Woolley 1934: 53–71, 91–107, 124–130, 133–134, 168–171, 405–406).

and one with her hands still placed on a harp.²⁶ They are placed in two rows, and in some places their legs actually cross, removing any doubt that they were all placed there in a single event. Near the centre of the pit, the remains of a sledge drawn by two bovids²⁷ associated with another four human skeletons were found. Closer to the chamber itself was a large chest, empty but assumed to have contained organic remains that have degraded. Around this chest were a huge amount of fine objects similar to those in the chamber, and another three human skeletons.

In another tomb, only the pit was found (PG 1237, dramatically labelled 'The Great Death Pit' by Woolley), with the chamber being mainly conjectural (Woolley 1934: 113–124, pls. 3, 8, 69–77). On the floor of the pit were over 70 human bodies. Against the northeast wall were six men in a row (one a little apart from the others); with them were daggers and jewellery. The rest of the area contained 68 women²⁸ in neat rows and all with fine jewellery and other personal items such as cockle-shells containing paint. Near the southeastern wall, four of the skeletons were associated with four lyres and a large copper cauldron. The many other finds include gold and lapis lazuli goat statuettes, decorative poles or beams, cylinder seals, a conch-shell lamp, ostrich eggshell and vessels of stone, silver, and copper/bronze. Based on the neat arrangement of the skeletons, and an apparent association of cups with many of them, Woolley believed that the 'retainers' in the royal tombs had willingly and peacefully followed their ruler to their deaths by drinking poison (1934: 35). Recent studies of the scant skeletal material remaining in museum collections strongly suggest that they were instead killed by blunt force trauma to the skull,²⁹ and the bodies possibly subjected to postmortem preservation procedures akin to embalming (Molleson and Hodgson 2003; Baadsgaard et al. 2011; Baadsgaard, Monge, and Zettler 2012).

At nearby Kish, a practice similar to that in Ur may have occurred in the so-called Chariot Burials (late ED II; Gibson 1972: 83–86, Moorey 1978:

²⁶The exact number of skeletons in this area is unclear—Woolley mentions 10 in the description (1934: 74), but lists 14 bodies as part of this cluster (1934: 77). Body no. 14 is shown on the plan as placed a little away from the others, closer to the five bodies near the entrance, but nos. 2–13 are drawn in the same cluster. Further, one is actually a child rather than an adult female.

²⁷Woolley thought the animals were donkeys, but later studies have shown that they were cattle (Dyson Jr. 1960).

²⁸One is described as "a very young person" (Woolley 1934: 117, no. 9), and may therefore have been a child.

²⁹This is based on two skulls, one male and one female, from two different death pits. Unfortunately, not much skeletal material was kept from the excavations, and no other specimens could provide details about manner of death.

104–110). The burials contain parts of chariots, equids, bovids, and ‘several’ human skeletons. The context appears quite like that at Ur, but possibly a great deal more disturbed and not excavated as methodically as the Ur tombs. Burials a good deal further west and from a later period (MB II, c. 1750–1650 BC) at Jericho present more cases of a number of human skeletons that include human sacrifices in the same tomb. The tombs at Jericho were used repeatedly, so that in many instances, the remains of more than one person in each tomb are easily explained as re-use. However, there are also times when it is clear that several people were placed in a tomb simultaneously. This can be seen in Tomb G1, which contained a minimum of twenty-two individuals, and at least seven of these had been buried at the same time (with previous interments swept to the sides of the tomb), evidenced not only by the stratigraphy, but also by the interlocking of limbs (Kenyon 1960: 443–453, pls. XXIII–XXIV). Five of the seven skeletons had been placed in a neat row on their backs, while one was placed at their feet, head turned the other way, and the last was placed to the side. The human remains in this tomb are all in the chamber itself, with no significant finds in the shaft. The Jericho tombs are remarkable for the level of preservation. Traces of flesh could still be seen on some of the human skeletons, and the tombs also contained a bowl with a slab of meat, a boneless slab of meat was found under a jar, and the complete skeleton of a young sheep still displayed remains of flesh; further, traces of liquid was discernible in some of the vessels. The tomb was not otherwise rich compared to the amount of individuals, and certainly not compared to those at Ur. The offerings consisted of only ceramic vessels, and none of the skeletons had any personal items with them. As such, there are no signs of differentiation between these individuals.

A wealthier example from Jericho in terms of finds but with a similar arrangement of bodies can be seen in Tomb H22 (Kenyon 1960: 500–513, pls. XXXIII–XXXVI). Here twelve individuals—four adults³⁰ and eight children—were placed in a neat row with their legs towards the entrance. The ‘lavish’ grave offerings placed around the sides of the tomb included a large amount of meat in the form of joints, with signs of burning and one sheep or goat skull split down the middle. The adults were provided with personal toiletries. Unusually for the Jericho tombs, a human skeleton was also found in the shaft, placed there after the door to the chamber had been blocked. In Tomb P17, there were eighteen simultaneous burials of children, adolescents, and adults, eight of which were placed in a row with their feet pointing to the door and with two children pressed in between them (Kenyon 1964: 358–368). Apart from a few personal items like scarabs, pins, and beads, the

³⁰The adults are described as ‘not very old’, the sternum still unfused (Kenyon 1960: 502).

grave goods (ceramic and alabaster vessels, wooden and bone objects, bone inlays) do not appear to belong to specific individuals and therefore do not indicate singling out of any of the individuals.

Another type of interesting arrangement of the skeletons is that of Tomb H6 (Kenyon 1960: 453–469, pls. XXVI–XXVIII), where differentiation more like that seen at Ur is identifiable. The latest event was the burial of four individuals. One was placed roughly in the centre of the tomb, stretched out on the back on a low platform made of mudbrick. Traces of textile and flesh were still visible, and the personal items associated with this individual were a pin, an alabaster vessel, wooden cups, a comb, boxes and bone inlays. At the head of the platform was an adult and a child, and at the back of the chamber was another child. There were rich offerings of stools, one with joints of meat, ceramic vessels, including a bowl with a sheep skull, jugs and juglets with liquids, and a wooden table immediately inside the door with joints of meat. Organic remains of seeds suggest the presence of pomegranates. In Tomb H18, we find the other example from Jericho where one adult is placed on a ‘wooden bed’ in the centre of the chamber and associated with a table piled with grave goods and a basket of personal toiletries (Kenyon 1960: 486–500, pls. XXX–XXXII). One other adult (also with some toiletries) and 11 children were buried at the same time, around the ‘wooden bed’. The children were all placed with their feet towards the door except one, which was lying in the opposite direction. The placement of the individuals on the platform and ‘wooden bed’ and their finds clearly marks them out as special, and Kenyon interpreted the scenario as a man with his wife and children (1960: 487).

Finally, perhaps the most intriguing tomb from Jericho is Tomb P19 (Kenyon 1964: 388–410, pls. XVII.3–4, XVIII.3). The latest phase here was of six individuals, all placed in a row with legs pointing towards the entrance. There were three males and three females, aged eleven to twenty-six.³¹ All of the skeletons had evidence of severe blunt force trauma to the head, and the three males were all missing their right hand. Kenyon interprets this as tomb robbers caught in the act, executed and buried in the tomb they were robbing (1964: 390). This suggestion cannot be verified, but it would seem odd to provide executed criminals with the honour of burial in one of the largest tombs of the cemetery, effectively inheriting the wealthy grave goods of the previous occupant (including ceramic and alabaster vessels, wooden objects, bone inlays and objects, an ostrich eggshell, bronze objects, basketry, a stool and two complete lambs or kids). There is no contextual evidence that

³¹Skeleton B: male aged 26; skeleton F: male aged 24; skeleton A: probably female aged 15; skeleton C: probably male aged 11; skeleton D: probably female aged 11; skeleton G: probably female aged 17 (Kenyon 1964: 388).

they belong to the earlier interment of a single adult. What is more, some of the skeletons were equipped with personal items and there were traces of clothing.³² An alternative scenario would refer to the Egyptian custom of removing the hands of defeated enemies as a counting measure; in recent excavations at Tell el-Daba, pits were found containing a total of 16 severed hands (Ngo 2014). Rather than punished criminals, we may here instead be dealing with victims of ‘secular’ violence, all having been killed by a blow to the head and, as suggested elsewhere, only hands of the men were removed because only they counted (Cartwright et al. 2009: 113). This is in any case a more satisfactory explanation of the grave goods and treatment of the bodies, which suggests honour and respect rather than punished criminals.

At Tell Umm el-Marra in Syria, a number of structures related to tombs (dated c. 2500–2200 BC), but seemingly not tombs themselves, contained remains of equids and infants, at times associated with spouted jars. These features were labelled installations and infant remains have so far been found in Installation A, in and outside of Installation B, Installation C and Installation D (Schwartz et al. 2006: 624–627; Schwartz 2012; Schwartz et al. 2012: 164). Besides these, it has convincingly been argued that human sacrifice may also have taken place in Tomb 1 (Porter 2012: 201–202), which consisted of three levels of burials, the top two roughly simultaneous. The bottom level contained one adult of unknown sex, in the middle level were two adult men placed facing each other with an infant and objects of silver, pottery and a dagger. The top layer contained two females placed in a double mirror arrangement, facing each other but head to toe, and each with an infant at their knee and objects of gold, beads, lapis lazuli, and cosmetic shells (Schwartz et al. 2003: 330–341). The individual at the bottom appears the most likely main deceased person, given their position and being the only person in that layer. Speaking against this proposition is the fact that this appears to be from an earlier event, and the women in the top layer were accompanied by the wealthiest finds, which is usually one of the characteristics of the main deceased. In any case, the arrangement suggests careful composition and staging. Porter reports another interesting case of a mortuary sacrifice at Shiyukh Tahtani in Syria from the mid-third millennium BC (Porter 2012: 199–201). One burial contained five individuals which appear to have been interred simultaneously, as evidenced by interweaving limbs. There were three adults, one child, and one infant. Two adults and the child had been lined up with their backs against the side of the round pit, the infant and the last adult

³²At Gezer, a man buried below the floor of a building was missing his left hand (Macalister 1912: 428). Not much more is said about the context, but the placement here also does not suggest dishonour as a result of a crime committed by the deceased.

between them. All except the adult in the middle had been interred with grave goods, again raising the question of which bodies had been sacrificed and which had died of other causes and been buried normally. Porter offers the possibility that they were in fact all sacrificed (2012: 200).

Returning for a moment to cases of infant burials as possible sacrifices, we may also note the many infant burials found associated with buildings, particularly at sites in northern Mesopotamia/Syria (see Green 1975: 59–79 for a good overview and discussion of this phenomenon). Evidence of infants or very young children interred in the floors or walls of structures is remarkably abundant at Nuzi and Tepe Gawra, where the custom seems to date back as far as the al-'Ubaid period,³³ and into the Old Babylonian levels (although perhaps not continuous throughout this long timespan). At Nuzi, infants are in and below floors, in walls, and in a doorway, all belonging to private houses (Starr 1939: 9–10, 14, 16, 226–227, 267–268, 274–275, 298–299, 510). The remains are placed in jars specially used for this purpose and sometimes covered by an upside down bowl. In some cases, several skeletons were buried together, as in one room where eleven infants were in one pot, situated directly under a wall corner and clearly associated with the floor level (Starr 1939: 267–268). Green argues for the sacrificial nature of the Nuzi infant burials in that the age-range is limited (and therefore not accounted for by infant mortality) and in that there appears to be a concern for direct contact of the skeletons with the soil and they are all associated with structures in some manner (1975: 64–65). In contrast to the situation at Nuzi, at Tepe Gawra many of the burials found were in some way associated with temples and a disproportionate number of these belonged to children or infants. The majority of the burials belong to normal burial practices of deceased individuals,³⁴ but interments of particular interest are those found below floors, in walls and directly in front of temples. For example, infant or child burials had been placed below the floors of every room of the Stratum XI Temple, including the central chamber near the podium and in two corners (one of these being of a youth rather than a child). The Stratum X Temple contained an infant burial below the floor of the central chamber and one directly in front of the building while Temple IX had burials below a wall and the pavement. The Eastern and Western Temples of VIII-C had

³³Another early example which may reflect a similar ritual comes from the mound of Kudish Sagir near Nuzi (Starr 1939: 9–10).

³⁴Although the mere fact that they are near sacred space in itself makes them special, since clearly not everybody at Tepe Gawra received this kind of burial. The burials found at the site only represent a small portion of the population, and it is assumed that a cemetery is located elsewhere (Tobler 1950: 111–112).

burials associated with the foundations, in the wall, in front of the buildings and one associated with the podium (Tobler 1950: 57, 66, 100–101; Speiser 1935: 25–26, 140, 142, pl. XII). The Nuzi and Tepe Gawra examples mostly belong to the late Ubaid-Uruk periods, but later cases may be represented in Akkadian levels at Tell Brak, where three child/infant burials were found in association with a chapel (Mallowan 1947: 70). In the HS3 building, infants were buried in the same area of a courtyard, in the fill of the construction of level 6 (Matthews 2003: 196–197) and at Chagar Bazar, where five infants were found below the floor of a shrine (Mallowan 1936: 18).³⁵

Intriguingly, we find in Chalcolithic Cyprus a situation reminiscent of that at Nuzi. At the site of Lemba, a significant number of burials related to buildings were found, and these all contained children. Below the walls of Building B3 were the remains of four children; in other instances, only parts of the skeleton were buried, with an emphasis on skulls (Peltenburg 1979: 22–23). From even earlier times, at Neolithic Khirokitia, Dikaios reports skeletons of twenty-five infants, some with adults, in the construction floors of one round structure (Dikaios 1940: 74). In another such structure, a woman was found below a square platform in a distorted position with her hands behind her back as if tied. In a third structure, two skeletons had been placed inside a rectangular plastered mud platform, one of them a young person in a position similar to that of the woman just mentioned (Dikaios 1940: 73–74). Cases of infant burials are particularly difficult to interpret due to a presumed high mortality rate in such young individuals. Whether deliberately killed for ritual purposes or by natural causes, infants were clearly considered highly appropriate ritual content. They were in the cases of the Umm el-Marra installations and the Nuzi burials not treated in the same manner as normal burials, and therefore must have carried special meaning.

Outside mortuary contexts, indications of human sacrifice are occasionally detected, usually in contexts that can be identified as sacred spaces. One such case comes from MB I Ebla (c. 2000–1900 BC) in the Sacred Area of Ishtar, where several *favissae* and other ritual deposits were identified, especially in the square next to Monument P3 (Marchetti and Nigro 1997; Nigro 1998). The deposits contained bones from various animals including sheep, goats, bovines and complete dogs. One deposit (D.6274) buried below the floor

³⁵At Tell Abou Danné, we may have an example of a foundation deposit with an adult: dug into the foundations of the fortifications was a deposit of an adult human placed elongated with their back against the wall, and with several dog skeletons, including a puppy against the chest of the human (Tefnin 1979: 48–49). Another possible foundation deposit with an adult comes from Gezer, where a woman was found in a hollow below the corner of a building (Macalister 1904: 16).

and roughly in the centre of the square, was a pit lined with mudbrick and stones, and found in it was a human skull, a sheep cranium and two sheep long bones (Nigro 1998: 22).

Returning west, we find a Late Bronze Age temple near Amman in Jordan. The temple is an isolated square stone structure with its cella and altar in the centre (Wright 1966; Hennessy 1966, 1985). Scattered throughout the building, but especially in the cella and near an outdoor 'incinerator' were small fragments of human bones, many black and burnt. Bones of sheep/goat and fowl were also found, but these only made up a small percentage of the total amount. The finds included much pottery and stone vessels (largely imported from Egypt and the Aegean, including a limestone piriform rhyton from Crete; see Hankey 1974a, 1974b), cylinder seals and a large amount of lance/arrow heads which were also found throughout but again concentrated near the altar/cella area. Cutting instruments in the shape of short swords/daggers and a khepesh sword are likewise recorded. The human bones were so fragmented and burnt that it was in most cases difficult to determine age or sex. An initial assessment that mostly young individuals were represented was amended with the identification of a youth aged fourteen to eighteen and a possible female aged around forty (Hennessy 1985: 99), while in later excavations, almost only adult bones were found (Herr 1983: 226). The bones appear to represent a minimum of six individuals, and are interpreted as the remains of a ritual that involved the burning and scattering of 'freshly slaughtered bodies' (Hennessy 1985: 104).

Not surprisingly, the interpretation of the site as one of sacrifice has been contested.³⁶ Herr believed that the age of the individuals, the lack of structural parallels to other temples³⁷ and the find assemblage pointed to a crematorium used by Hittites rather than a temple (Herr 1981, 1983). This interpretation represents a possible scenario, but does not provide an improved explanation of the context. Whether temple or crematorium, the building type is rare, and the crematorium interpretation further requires introducing Hittites with such a need to the area. The finds would in fact not be unusual in a mortuary context,³⁸

³⁶Apart from the function of the building, the question of *who* used it has attracted much interest, especially given its isolated location and the 'international' nature of the finds. See, e.g., Campbell and Wright (1969, who thought the building was used by nomads); Shanks (2014, suggesting an Ammonite god for the temple); and Ottosson (1980, suggesting Anat as the deity worshipped).

³⁷Ottosson (1980: 101–104) notes a very similar structure in a similar geographic setting and roughly contemporary at Tananir, which has also been identified as a temple.

³⁸Although perhaps less so in a Hittite mortuary context, where rich finds appear to be quite rare (Macqueen 1986: 132–135).

but neither would they be so in a temple, and the argument considering age relies on assumptions drawn especially from later Carthaginian infant sacrifice. The highly symmetrical layout of the building³⁹ with its central 'altar' would appear a more likely setting for cultic activities.

A very different kind of ritual is represented at Tell Brak in the Akkadian levels of Areas FS and SS. The monumental complex of Area FS had been ritually closed, with fills that contained deliberately placed deposits. The most remarkable of these are complete, articulated donkey skeletons found in six locations, and one complete dog skeleton (Oates and Oates 2001: 41–73; Clutton-Brock 2001: 327–336). With one of the donkey skeletons, in Courtyard 5,7 (south of a temple) were dismembered human skeletons, and more human bones 5 m to the east of these. Three or four (three male and one possible female adult) individuals were represented (Molleson 2001).⁴⁰ In the Ceremonial Complex of Area SS, apparently as part of the same closing ritual, a human skull was found on the bottom step of the doorway in Room 30, onto Courtyard 8, which itself contained deposits of food and inverted vessels (Oates and Oates 2001: 84, 90). We cannot say with certainty how the individuals found here died, but the fact that they are found in contexts like, and in one case with, those of animals killed for the purpose of the ritual is very suggestive. A significant difference is that the humans are dismembered while the donkeys and dog are not; the excavators speculate that a motive of revenge might be involved (Oates and Oates 2001: 50). Looking back at the dismembered skeletons from Jericho, admittedly a very different context, it may also be suggested that this was a way of honouring the individuals, regardless of their identity and manner of death; their considered appropriateness as ritual deposits does not seem like one of punishment.

DISCUSSION

I have here mostly presented cases where I considered human sacrifice to be a legitimate possible interpretation of the data.⁴¹ However, in all but a few cases,

³⁹Fritz (1971), finding no temple parallels to the layout, suggested that it is instead a watchtower. This was before the publication of the finds, which are not consistent with this interpretation.

⁴⁰In the later level 3, a severed human arm was found in a room which also contained zoomorphic vessels, often considered as of cultic nature (Oates and Oates 2001: 57). This is particularly interesting in light of the skeletons found elsewhere lacking their hands.

⁴¹As we have seen, there is a resistance in almost every case to accept the interpretation of human sacrifice. An interesting thought experiment worth carrying out for each is to imagine how the context would have been interpreted if the human 'sacrificial' remains had been those of a bovid. The experiment is of course limited (in particular because

the archaeological data is not such that we can rule out other possibilities or propose human sacrifice as the only properly viable explanation. The Ur tombs are among the few cases where we can be quite certain that the majority of humans found there were killed for the purpose of the ritual that took place in connection with the funeral of the deceased, and this, according to my definition, qualifies as sacrifice. The data also makes it clear that human sacrifice was not a regular custom during or before the Bronze Ages of the Aegean and Near East. Even if all the possible cases outlined above in fact represent human sacrifices, they occurred over a time span of nearly 2000 years and a large geographical area. The examples given display a variation that makes it nearly impossible to imagine any single or specific tradition, which only emphasises the rarity of the ritual. However, this uniqueness should not be used to deny the existence or importance of the ritual, or to discontinue attempts at explanation or interpretation. The variety in rituals that involved the manipulation of human bodies (dead or alive) represent an equivalent variety of purposes, but there are some common components which can be discerned in many of the cases. Rather than focus on what cannot at present be concluded with certainty, I will here explore elements that do help, however discreetly, in the broader understanding of the ritual.

Sacrifices usually require very specific victims, depending on the occasion and type of sacrifice; further, certain types of victims appear to often be treated in predetermined ways. For example, sheep and goats are frequently found as jointed remains, suggesting that they were eaten after being sacrificed, while equids are more frequently represented as complete skeletons and, to an extent, with some association with canines. In the possible cases of human sacrifices discussed here, the remains are most frequently complete bodies. The only possible example of consumption is the scenario of cannibalism at Knossos. The remaining exceptions are of human skulls or parts of bodies, as at Tell Brak or dismembered parts as at Jericho, but these all suggest manipulation of the human remains which does not involve eating. It therefore seems that human sacrifices were not considered appropriate for consumption. Beyond this, we can say that physical identities of age and sex do *not* appear to have been important in a general sense, since we find women, men and children of various ages. Some sacrifices, however, seem to be more particular, as indicated by the infant/child burials found on some sites. It is also possible that persons of a more advanced age were not considered suitable, since they are rarely found in sacrificial contexts, but this is complicated by an increased possibility of death due to natural causes (a deceased animal or human, if it

animals are rarely given individual burials the way humans are), but could nevertheless be very revealing.

is very young or very old, is more likely to be interpreted as a death due to natural causes).

Social identity would almost certainly have been significant, but this is not something that can be determined in most cases. What we *can* say in some instances is how social identities were displayed; how those performing the rite wanted the victims to be perceived. This identity may very well correspond to actual identities. We see representations of identities most clearly in the Ur tombs, where ‘ladies of the court’ had a fairly standard set of items, and we may also identify female musicians and male guards or soldiers and drivers or animal attendants.⁴² Social identities may also be gleaned from items found with the bodies in Tell el Umm-Marra, Jericho, and Dendra. A rare glimpse of the identity of people performing the sacrifice comes from Anemospilia, where the exceptional circumstances interrupting the ritual means that people other than the victim itself are present. We cannot verify the excavators’ identification of the man and the woman in the room as priest and priestess, but the items found with the skeletons certainly suggest persons of some significance, and if a sacrifice did take place, they were certainly *sacrificers*, if not actually priestly personnel. What is more, both men and women were then present at the ritual, regardless of who might have killed the victim.⁴³ It may also be that some of the instances where victims are found without any items suggest individuals who might have been considered of marginal identities, such as slaves, servants or captives.

Events that may at times have called for human sacrifices relate to the construction of buildings, and in the singular case of Tell Brak, the closure of a building. So-called ‘foundation deposits’ are frequently found in Mesopotamia (Ellis 1968), and have also been identified in the Aegean (Boulotis 1982). They more commonly consist of prized objects and at times animal remains and are worked into the very structure or foundations of a building. They do not serve a practical structural purpose as such, but appear to have been thought of as fortifying or sanctifying the building; it has also been suggested that buildings can be considered embodied entities that would require a kind of ‘feeding’ (Kirch 2000: 105; see also Herva 2005). These deposits of human remains worked into buildings in the Near East are found in foundations, walls, floors and doorways, and often consist of infant or child remains. Children and infants, like servants and captives, may have been considered marginal individuals of society, their youth meaning a not yet

⁴²Gansell (2007) has been able to identify groups of individuals based on their associated items, especially of headgear.

⁴³The excavators assume it is the man that killed the victim, but there is no reason for this assumption.

fully-formed identity and integration. This, in fact, is a sphere of liminality, related to identity rather than a physical space. But what is significant is that they are also placed in physical liminal spaces. Doors, walls and even floors mark a small area between two spheres. These spheres can be a 'simple' inside-outside distinction, but just as much one of below and above (earth and sky?), or one of degrees, for example more or less sacred areas. That space in between is a space of uncertainty, of things being able to go one way or the other, and this uncertainty, this limbo, is therefore an area that easily lends itself to negotiations of power and identity, where things can be either perpetuated or subverted.

This liminal element of sacrificial victims (or could we more appropriately call them 'agents'?) can also be seen in tombs, where they are frequently found in in-between spaces like dromoi, shafts, 'pits' or similar areas between initial entrances and the main deceased. Many of the possible examples of human sacrifice come from mortuary contexts. We can thus conclude that death is another occasion on which sacrifice was considered appropriate, perhaps in some cases even necessary. Animal remains, both suggesting joints of meat and complete animals, are not uncommon in the funerary practices during the time period. As we have noted, human remains in these cases nearly always represent complete bodies. The sacrifices may have taken place in connection with the funeral or funeral feast itself, or at later events at the tomb. We see in these cases a real concern with display and appearances. This is again most obvious in the Ur tombs, where a look at the drawn plans of some of the larger tombs nearly reads as images from a theatre performance. The finds as well as the human and animal bodies are neatly arranged in rows and groups, and according to Woolley, one of the musicians even with her hands still on the instrument (1934: 74). The 'main' occupants are also quite carefully distinguished by placement, finds and composition. The overall arrangement is a carefully composed impression which required the finest, most skilfully crafted items (quite likely this extends to the animals and people too). Everything is attributed a certain identity or function; they are in a Sartrean sense being made to *play at* or *simulate* being musicians, 'ladies of the court', guards and so on. This does not necessarily mean that they did not have similar functions or identities when alive, but they are *in death* staged⁴⁴ and idealised, not unlike modern open funerals where a person is

⁴⁴The idea of staging in association with the Ur tombs has also been suggested by Baadsgaard, Monge, and Zettler, who argue that the victims took part in the preceding mortuary rites before being arranged (Baadsgaard, Monge, and Zettler 2012: 148). Dickson (2006) provides a damning account of the individuals responsible for the tombs, seeing the preceding rituals as the elite 'terrorising' the people through 'theatres of cruelty'. For

put in their best outfit, or even a new fine outfit purchased for the purpose.⁴⁵ This simulation does not diminish the importance or severity of the ritual, or mean that the whole event was considered an extensive act of entertainment. On the contrary, most rituals involve elements of staging, and the adherence to correct 'performance' is what lends the ritual authority. Staging on more limited scales can also be detected at Jericho, Tell Umm el-Marra and Shiyuk Tahtani, and possibly in the Aegean cases, but here the circumstances of excavation make this more difficult to determine. Certainly there is also an emphasis on placement in the liminal space of dromoi (in particular associated with thresholds/doorways), and the general lack of grave goods with the remains found there could again suggest individuals of marginal identities.

An obvious question is then who the complete scene was staged for. At Ur, Woolley envisions a large procession with all the participants moving into the tombs with the deceased and then voluntarily taking the poison (Woolley 1934: 35), which would go some way toward explaining the careful arrangement. The remains may have been left open for 'public view' for a limited time before being covered, but certainly not for very long. The sequence suggested by Woolley seems unlikely. We know from the recent studies on the skeletal material that poison was not the cause of death, at least not for all the victims. If instead they were in general killed in the more brutal manner of blunt force trauma,⁴⁶ this is likely to have caused chaos and panic, even if it was voluntary; and certainly the animals present would not have understood the 'voluntary' sentiment, but would quickly sense the danger. This would create a situation that would have been extremely difficult to control, and highly inappropriate for ritual. More importantly, we saw that studies of the surviving skeletal material have detected signs that the bodies had been subjected to some form of preservation methods. The preservation is postmortem and the bodies were dressed afterwards, and almost certainly required facilities that were not and could not be made present in the tomb itself. In other words, it seems far more likely that the sacrificial victims were actually killed, preserved and dressed elsewhere and afterwards moved to the

papers on performance in relation to funerary practices, see Laneri (2007). Most recently, Vidale (2011) has discussed the possibility and importance of music and performance in the mortuary rituals.

⁴⁵It is also possible that the headdresses were made especially for the purpose, as recorded in texts (Vogel 2013: 422).

⁴⁶Based on Woolley's plans, Vidale (2011: 438) also raises the interesting possibility that some of the victims were strangled or their throats cut. Unfortunately, there is no other evidence to corroborate this, but in any case, the turned heads of some of the bodies is revealing in relation to the idea of subversion in liminal spaces and in relation to Porter's idea of mirroring in sacrificial ritual (2012).

tombs for their specific role in the ritual. The tombs could still have been open for display for a short period, but I think the preservation and the elaborate display suggest that it was not primarily meant for the public to view. Care was also taken in covering the whole scene, and subsequent layers show that further rituals took place at intervals.

The main occupant of the tomb, the person presumably deceased before the ritual,⁴⁷ would seem a good candidate in whose honour the entire ceremony was carried out, the sacrificial victims thus being ‘retainers’. But this picture is too simplistic. The scene is significant only in its *entirety*, and the deceased is an integral part of this. He or she may be singled out by their placement and finds, but never so much so that they are not part of the whole scene. Being part of the scene makes it more likely that it was meant for somebody *outside*, perhaps initially the living, but ultimately some kind of supernatural entity, as also suggested by Porter (2012: 203). A certain power may also lie precisely in the remains being hidden. Like the foundation deposits, invisible to human eyes once they have been placed, but still generally known to be there, whatever their purpose was considered to be, it continued to operate even after being hidden. Being unseen but known may in fact have increased its strength; things not immediately grasped more readily become shrouded in mystery and are attributed supernatural powers. A similar phenomenon can be detected in individuals whose works or acts are given more attention or attributed further significance after their death. This power is similar to, and may be increased when combined with that of individuals of a liminal nature, who with their in-between identities have the ability to relate to either, or beyond, the two spheres.

CONCLUSION

Largely due to its rarity in this part of the world, human sacrifice is very much an enigma, and common traits, let alone ideological reason are hard to come by. However, a survey of the available archaeological material does leave hints as to the kind of people buried and the circumstances under which the ritual took place. More importantly, we can detect aspects of the ritual beyond the more ‘formal’ ones of occasions, reasons and participating actors. Liminal aspects are seen in many of the examples, both in terms of physical space, with placement of sacrificial victims in walls, floors, thresholds and dromoi, and in terms of biological and social identities. There seems in some cases to be an emphasis on youth (both human and animal), suggesting individuals

⁴⁷Although one should note the suggestion that *all* the individuals were sacrificial victims, as this scenario that would also explain very well the context of Tomb 1 at Tell el Umm-Marra (Porter 2012).

who float between spheres and are therefore particularly suitable for sacrifice. We can also note a kind of *simulation*, where entire contexts work as carefully set up scenes, down to the very last detail. The ultimately concealed nature of such scenes and of deposits within structures lend them the kind of supernatural association that is appropriate for the intended, supernatural, viewer or viewers.

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