

Burning Bulls, Broken Bones: Sacrificial Ritual in the Context of Palace Period Minoan Religion

By Robert James Cromarty (*BAR-IS 1792*). Pp. 157, figs. 77, maps 2. Archaeopress, Oxford 2008. £32. ISBN 978-1-4073-0208-5 (paper).

This book addresses the subject of Minoan sacrifice primarily from the perspective of material data, faunal remains, and ash deposits, even as it also tackles theoretical issues. The title gives away the author's main approach. The key word is "context," namely, that excavation data are privileged over iconography.

The work is divided into three main sections. Chapter 1 discusses general issues, the main Minoan symbols, some images, and, most importantly, the usefulness of zooarchaeology for the study of sacrifice. Cromarty rightly stresses that this science has much to contribute to the understanding of procedures accompanying sacrificial rites. The second chapter, far longer than the first, consists of a list of individual sites where bones, ashes, and related material have been found. The final chapter consists of summary and interpretation. Some key questions are raised: How many faunal remains actually exist? Are there many ash deposits? Is there evidence of human sacrifice? Is there geographic and regional variation among the remains? Are we allowed to speak of Minoan sacrificial ritual as a pan-Cretan phenomenon? Is the designation "Minoan" at all valid? These questions prepare the reader for the mainly negative conclusions at which the author eventually arrives.

The most useful part of the book is the second chapter, where the compiled data is presented. The author provides a tabulated guide to the material evidence of animal remnants and warns against excessive generalizations and speculation. It is indeed progress to have at our disposal tables indicating what types of beasts were sacrificed, where the bones were

found, and whether they were burned. It might be useful in a future study to compare these results with written lists of sacrificed animals attested in Ugaritic tablets of the 14th century B.C.E. The latter have now been translated and published by Pardee (*Ritual and Cult at Ugarit*. Writings from the Ancient World 10 [Atlanta 2002]). Such a comparison would provide a good perspective on intercultural habits and show how written lists may compare with material remains.

Having said this, the results from the tables are not as unexpected as one might have hoped. We already knew from the Hagia Triada sarcophagus that goats and bovines were the animals primarily slaughtered and offered to the gods, and although the author doubts that the tasseled and bleeding bovine on the sarcophagus is actually sacrificed, one cannot take this suggestion seriously. There is more evidence: some Minoan seals show pigs and rams lying on tables (*CMS* 1, no. 80; *CMS* 2 8, no. 482; *CMS* 6, no. 422). Sacrifice is hinted at by many more recently published seals that show men leading multiple animals, especially bulls and rams (*CMS* 6, nos. 329, 330).

Concerning the theoretical side of sacrifice, the weaknesses of this work are significant. First, there is no discussion of what is meant by "sacrifice." Is it any offering to the gods, or just a bloody one? Can Minoan sacrifice actually be divided into bloody and bloodless? In other words, did the Minoans themselves make such a distinction? Only the imagery can answer such questions.

The author makes the claim that there is no demonstrable connection between animal

sacrifice, ecstatic cults, and epiphany. But why should there be a connection in the first place? A history of the ideas that led the author to address this question ought to have been presented, especially the discussions by Sir Arthur Evans and Friedrich Matz. Cromarty defines ecstasy as a state of heightened emotion, noting that “most societies have sanctioned limited and circumscribed forms of altered states of consciousness” (100). Based on Oliver Dickinson, he suggests that ecstasy results from summoning rituals designed to produce epiphany. Then he comes to the conclusion that there is no demonstrable connection between sacrifice and epiphany in Crete (100–2). This is close to Matz’s thesis, which ought to have been acknowledged. The relationship between animal sacrifice, epiphany, and cult images remains vague.

One general claim is that there was disunity in cult practice in Minoan Crete (61). Treatment of feasting has been rather superficial until recent years; local variations have not been sufficiently highlighted (92). The author states that previous studies are Knosso-centric (80). There is a problem here. Were previous studies both Knosso-centric and Minoan-centric? Knosso-centric ideally ought to denote a perspective biased by the finds of Knossos, whereas Minoan-centric ought to denote a pan-Cretan perspective (A. Evans, *The Palace of Minos* [London 1921] 13 n. 1). The definition of terms may need further exploration. As far as the unity of Minoan culture, the author of this book is not alone in contesting it. The evidence, though, points to such unity. There is the use of Linear A throughout Crete and the Aegean in the second millennium. There is the occur-

rence of common symbols, such as the double axe, the rosette, the so-called sacral horns, the mason’s marks, the lily, the papyrus, the palm, the worshiping monkey. There is the use of a homogenous sealing administration. And yet, while the author is skeptical about accepted terms, he is not skeptical about particulars. He includes the Thisbe ring in the conspectus of iconographical data without awareness that it is an acknowledged forgery (74, 137 [fig. 58]).

Iconography is not privileged in this book. Yet, if iconography is properly used and thoroughly studied, it supplements the study of bones and helps establish the basic facts of “Minoan” ritual. This is not to deny that Cromarty makes a contribution. Had he confined his conclusions modestly to the scientific section of his work without embarking on general thoughts on theory of sacrifice, this would have been a far more satisfactory book. As it stands, the reader is left with a feeling that only particulars can be learned about Minoan sacrifice and that each site must be studied by and for itself. But if we follow this, we are doomed as a discipline. If the bits of the ever-increasing material evidence are not ordered into hypotheses against which one may argue, there will be no progress. We shall all be deconstructing one another, and our field will dissolve into an infinite number of little particles with no detectable constellations.

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