

Sacrificing and Slaughtering Women: Rethinking Women's Roles in Greek Sacrificial Ritual

While scholars recognize the importance of women in Greek sacrificial ritual, in such roles as the *kanêphoroi*, carriers of the sacrificial basket, and the performers of the *ololygê*, or ritual cry, women were typically kept separate from the actual act of bloodshed. In their seminal articles on women and sacrifice, Marcel Detienne (1989) and Robin Osborne (1993) present opposing arguments concerning female participation in sacrifice. Both scholars agree, however, that women did not perform the physical act of sacrifice, and yet they both recognize certain exceptional instances of women as ritual slaughterers. Their work on women and sacrifice does not provide adequate explanations for these exceptions. In this paper, I will utilize a gendered theory of sacrifice from sociologist Nancy Jay (1992) to explain the typical female roles during Greek sacrificial ritual, and I will specifically address the most notable exception to the absence of female ritual slaughterers, namely the four post-menopausal priestesses, who performed the sacrifice to Demeter at the Chthonia in Hermione.

By building on the cross-cultural opposition between childbirth and sacrifice, Jay argues that sacrifice enables men to establish patrilineal relationships that are not dependent on the reproductive powers of women. Sacrifice is the mechanism that constitutes and maintains this male-oriented system; it establishes community and societal relationships in a patrilineal society. Consequently, sacrifice allows for social and ritual paternity, which replaces biological paternity.

Because of the patrilineal nature of Greek society and with application of Jay's theory, I will argue that the relationship between women and Greek sacrifice must be viewed in terms of their childbearing status and relationship to male society. Childbearing women, i.e., wives and mothers, had some roles in sacrificial ritual, but because of their physiological and social identity, they were not allowed to perform all aspects of the sacrificial ritual. For example, they did not have access to the sacrificial animal or the sacrificial instrument. In contrast, pre-childbearing—children and adolescents—and post-menopausal women had broader roles within the ritual. These two groups of women were often granted more access to the sacrificial ritual because they were not viewed as a threat to patrilineal society. Adolescents, notably, carried the *kaneon* in which the sacrificial knife was usually hidden. Among females, who did not hold a priestly office, the *kanêphoroi* had the closest contact to the heart of the sacrificial act. Their proximity to the sacrificial knife was tolerated by the men who participated in the sacrificial rite because of the idealized status of the Greek female adolescent. Yet, among all the female age groups, post-menopausal women were able to participate most fully in the sacrificial ritual, as they were the only females permitted to act as slaughterers. Because post-menopausal women were not deemed to be a threat to the alternate system of social and ritual paternity that was established through sacrifice, they had increased access and involvement in the sacrificial ritual.

An examination of the post-menopausal priestesses at the Chthonia in Hermione, as described in Pausanias (2.35.4-10), will reveal that their ability to carry these ritual roles hinges on their post-menopausal identity. The priestesses' separation from the spheres of motherhood and childbirth eliminated the pollution associated with childbearing and male anxiety concerning female reproductive power. With an odd twist of logic, these post-menopausal priestesses, in a sense, became more manlike, and thus regained their ability to "give birth" via their roles of slaughterer.

Bibliography

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