

## Blood, Fire and Feasting: The Role of Touch and Taste in Greco-Roman Sacrifice

Our knowledge of Greco-Roman sacrifice has been assembled from representations in ancient art, descriptions in ancient authors, and limited archaeological remains. The partial nature of the evidence complicates attempts to achieve a nuanced understanding of the rites. Further problems arise when researchers, often unintentionally, examine the evidence from a contemporary viewpoint grounded in Judeo-Christian religious traditions that privilege the seen (carefully-orchestrated religious rituals) vs. the unseen (the divine power attendant on such rituals) as the primary framework for human-divine interaction. Working in the shadow of religious traditions constructed around that dichotomy, scholars of the classical world have tended to conceive of Greek and Roman sacrifices primarily as visual spectacles.

When researchers do consider the other senses, they tend to confine their analysis to scent and sound. For example, some attention has been paid to important olfactory elements, recognizing that in Greco-Roman culture the savor (κνίστη) of sacrifices, as Homer refers to it (*Il.* 1:317), was the primary vehicle for communication between gods and man (Detienne and Vernant 1989). Sacrificial sounds, also, have received some attention, at least in terms of sounds that were staged and controlled aspects of ritual, such as hymns and instrumental accompaniment (Furley and Bremer 2001; Bremer 1981).

Building on autoethnographic fieldwork I conducted at Islamic sacrifices comparable in nature and scale to large public Greco-Roman sacrifices of bulls and oxen, an experience that impressed on me in a visceral way the overwhelmingly multisensory nature of sacrificial ritual, I have begun to investigate the two senses still largely neglected in the study of ancient Greek and Roman religion: touch and taste. Using ancient historical and philosophical texts, as well as artworks depicting certain moments in the sacrificial process, I show that the act of touching was

carefully controlled at all steps of the proceedings from preparation of sacrificial victims to examination of entrails in cases in which extispicy was carried out, and that improper touch, whether intentional or accidental, could result in negative ritual consequences. The primacy of touch as a vital aspect of ritual extended also to the sacrificial feasts, where men and gods were understood to partake in a communal meal. I argue that at that banqueting table, touch and its counterpart taste played perhaps the most significant role of all: reminding worshippers that they were human and the gods were not.

In this paper, I demonstrate that although we have long considered ancient sacrifice primarily as a spectacle, while the Greeks and Romans themselves probably classified it first and foremost as an olfactory offering, the senses of touch and taste also served vital roles in the correct accomplishment of ritual and, crucially, in defining the boundaries between man and his gods.

#### Works Cited

- Bremer, Jan Maarten 1981. "Greek Hymns." In *Faith, Hope and Worship: Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World*, ed. H.S. Versnel, 193-215. Leiden: Brill.
- Detienne, Marcel and Jean-Pierre Vernant, eds. 1989. *The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Furley, William D. and Jean Maarten Bremer. 2001. *Greek Hymns: Selected Cult Songs from the Archaic to the Hellenistic Period*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.