Justifiable Violence: The Paradox in Roman Attitudes toward Human Sacrifice and Ritual Killing

The Romans scorned human sacrifice even as they practiced several different forms of ritual killing. An analysis of the forms of ritual killing practiced by the Romans reveals that the line between acceptable ritual killing and unacceptable human sacrifice is defined by the agency of the victim. The ritual killing of a person was justifiable, I argue, if a person's agency put them in the role of the victim, or if their agency could get them out of that role. In my discussion, I use the term "ritual killing" to include the practice of human sacrifice, but I do not define Roman ritual killing as strictly or exclusively sacrificial. Rather, I follow in the model of Celia Schultz (Schultz 2010; 2016) and use the Roman's own terminology to identify what was considered sacrificial. Through this approach, my paper clarifies the apparent paradox in Roman attitudes toward human sacrifice by elucidating how the Romans themselves distinguished between different types of ritual killing.

There is one key example of explicit human sacrifice practiced within Rome: the immuration of two Gauls and two Greeks in pairs of men and women. This sacrificial ritual is known to have occurred at least three times, in 228, 216, and 114/3 BCE (Schultz 2010; 2016). However, later authors show distaste for this practice, with Livy writing that this was "barely a Roman right" ("*minime Romano sacro*") (*Ab Urbe Condita* 22.57.6), and Plutarch contending with how the Romans may have justified this sacrifice, directly calling out the paradox in Roman condemnation of similar practices among other groups and offering suggestions for how the Romans may have made the distinction (*Roman Questions* 83). Rome officially banned human sacrifice in 97 BCE (Schultz, 2010), suggesting that even if it was acceptable in extreme past cases, by the time of the later authors, attitudes toward this particular ritual had shifted even as

other forms of ritual killing continued to be performed. After this ban, descriptions of human sacrifice were employed by the Roman authors to characterize a separation from their distant past (as with Livy and Plutarch above), as well as to portray certain groups in a negative, "un-Roman" light. For example, descriptions of human sacrifice are present in accounts of the Celtic people of Gaul and Iberia in Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* (6.16) and Strabo's *Geography* (4.4.5; 3.3.6–8) respectively. Individuals too — Augustus in Suetonius (*Divus Augustus* 15) and Nero in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (30.6.16–17) — were accused of human sacrifice to undermine their character.

Human sacrifice was certainly, then, used as a means by which to construct a Roman identity, but this does not account for why other forms of ritual killing were acceptable within Rome. In these cases, I urge, ritual killing was justified because the victims would, plausibly, be argued to have agency — to have caused their own deaths and/or to be able to escape them. In the case of the immuration of Vestal Virgins accused of breaking their vow of chastity, for example, this agency is manifest in two key places: (1) the Vestal broke her vow and her death was a consequence of her own actions, and (2) she was buried with small portions of food and water, meaning that she was not directly killed by Roman hands (Plutarch, *Roman Questions* 96; *Numa* 10; Parker, 2004). In the arena, the manifestation of agency is similarly twofold: (1) those condemned explicitly to death were in that position because of some action, and (2) those fighting could, at least in theory, save their own lives. Moreover, when gladiatorial combat was fatal, the gladiators were perceived as "dying willingly" (Edwards 2007). Finally, there is the example of Roman ritual killing is in the form of *devotio*, a ritual self-sacrifice considered to be honorable (Schultz 2016; Edwards 2007).

Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to address the paradox that exists in Roman attitudes towards different forms of ritual killing and to contribute to a broader understanding of Roman religion and attitudes toward death. Through this analysis, I present a new argument for the centrality of perceived agency in Roman religion within the specific context of ritual killing, in turn suggesting a broader importance of this principle within Roman society.

Bibliography

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