Giving Up the Ghost: The Development and Origins of Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece

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Erin Brantmayer

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To the group chat, stay weird.

Although she will never read this, I must also acknowledge my beautiful dog, Mya. Thank you for taking naps next to me, and I promise there will be more walks immediately.

For A.P., my eye of the hurricane.
ABSTRACT

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A thesis presented to the Graduate Program in Ancient Greek and Roman Studies

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

By Erin Brantmayer

The practice of human sacrifice in ancient Greece has often been ignored by scholars due to the lack of archaeological and visual evidence and the usage of the practice as a literary device in the written record. In reexamining the extant data alongside new archaeological finds, I analyze the development of human sacrifice in Greek cultures from the late Bronze Age to the end of the Classical Period. In addition I examine how the Greeks viewed human sacrifice within their own societies through the written record. Further, I seek the possible origins of human sacrifice in Greece and the confluence of cultural influences in the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Seas that likely led to the practice’s dissemination west.
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I. Introduction

But then after they offered prayers and threw barley-groats, they first drew back and cut their throats and skinned them, and after doing that they cut out their leg-bones and covered them with double-folded fat, and placed raw flesh upon them; and the old man was lighting them on fire on split wood, and was pouring over them fiery wine; and beside him the youths were holding five-pronged forks in their hands. But after the leg-bones were thoroughly burned and tasted of the innards, then they cut up the rest and fixed it round spits, and roasted it very carefully, and tore it all off. But after they rested from their toil and prepared the feast they ate, and their spirits were not lacking anything of the equal feast.¹

Homer, *Iliad* 458-468.

It is a commonly held belief that human sacrifice was not practiced in the region of Greece despite the rich textual tradition. New archaeological evidence, however, seems to contradict this. In light of this evidence, the presence of human sacrifice in Greece needs a reexamination. At the core of this new study is a series of questions posed around a number of anthropological sacrifice theories. Through these theories and an examination of the available evidence, the development of human sacrifice from its possible dissemination to Greece to its likely end is explored, as well as how the practice itself was viewed by the Greeks. This analysis allows for an understanding of how the function of human sacrifice in Greek societies changed over time, from an actual practice to simply a myth and a literary device.

Many scholars have defined sacrifice over the last hundred and fifty years,

¹ All translations are my own.
attempting to ascertain its place in human societies. E.B. Tylor defined the sacrifice as a gift that was offered to the very spirit of an individual or a personified force.\textsuperscript{2} Those adhering to the theory proposed by W. Robertson Smith view sacrifice as a method of establishing common ground between populations and their deities.\textsuperscript{3} Sir James George Frazer explained sacrifice as a kind of magical rite in which “man imitates nature and believes that nature will be magically compelled to follow his example.”\textsuperscript{4} The seminal French anthropologists Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss classified the practice as a religious act that changes the state of whomever is committing the act and as a method for bridging the mortal and divine.\textsuperscript{5} As a counter to these views, Edvard Westermarck based his theory of sacrifice on the concept of expiation, considering it the original impetus for the practice and one that initially featured humans as victims before substituting them for animals.\textsuperscript{6} Many of these theories were combined by M. Alfred Loisy, who viewed sacrifice as a combination of magic and gift-giving, but rejected Hubert and Mauss’ hypothesis, instead seeing the practice as a way to sever this kind of communication between the two worlds. He says that where many of his predecessors viewed the realms of the divine and the mortal as separate and distinct, “the two are in perpetual contact, and man employs the ‘process’ of sacrifice often to disengage himself from the influences of what is called the ‘sacred world’.”\textsuperscript{7} Freud and R. Money-Kyrle both tied the practice to Freud’s Oedipus complex theory, but while psychoanalysis certainly

\textsuperscript{2} Tylor, \textit{Primitive Culture}, 108–10.
\textsuperscript{3} Smith, \textit{Religion of the Semites}, 312–52.
\textsuperscript{5} Hubert and Mauss, \textit{Sacrifice}, 9, 13.
\textsuperscript{6} Westermarck, \textit{The Origin of Moral Ideas}, 469-71.
\textsuperscript{7} Loisy, \textit{Essai historique sur le sacrifice}, 7-8.
has a place in anthropology, Freud’s work has largely been debunked. Finally Alberto Green proposed a new multidisciplinary method integrating anthropology, history, sociology, and psychology that was becoming increasingly common in historical studies in the 1970s. In following this methodology, this study combines the analysis of textual evidence and archaeological evidence and examines both with anthropological theories on human sacrifice.

The overarching theory at play is the social control hypothesis. While this concept has many applications and is often used in criminology, it has been applied to human sacrifice as a tool that “legitimates class-based power distinctions by combining displays of ultimate authority, the taking of a life, with supernatural justifications that sanctify authority as divinely ordained”. Human sacrifice seems to generally be a facet of less-urbanized and more egalitarian societies, but as societies grow, the practice acts as a stabilizer, imposing hierarchy by distinguishing between sacrificers and victims. These populations, however, are not purely egalitarian bands or without some sort of power structure, but have at least some form of political authority. As they grow and become stratified along other lines such as wealth or gender, human sacrifice becomes unsustainable culturally and dies out.

The aim of this study, then, is to ascertain the development of human sacrifice in Greece from an early method of social control to a taboo practice understood only as rumor and myth. Central to this purpose is discovering the range of the practice and how prevalent

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9 Green 17.
11 Spinney, “Did Human Sacrifice Help People Form Complex Societies?”
12 Otterbein, The Anthropology of War, 48.
it was throughout Greece, both as an archaeologically-evidenced practice and as a literary theme, and how geography affected where these cults existed. Further, the cultural contexts of the attested practice are vitally important, as nothing is ever done in a vacuum. Thus, monumental events, such as the end of the Bronze Age and the factors that contributed to that end, as well as the reestablishment of international connections in the Iron Age. Much later, the spread of the Romans, and their effects on society are analyzed when relevant. The trend seems to be that the practice was isolated in the Bronze Age before being slowly phased out at those few locations. Therefore, in addition to proving this via evidence where previous scholars have disregarded or denied it, the goal of this work is also to discover why.

Defining the boundaries of this study is necessary for the purpose of clarity. While many of these scholars have defined sacrifice as an offering made to either a deity or in the context of a cult to the dead, I have limited my own working definition to the ritualized killing of human beings in dedication to a named deity or a natural force. The purpose of this is to exclude the practices of retainer sacrifice and *sati*, which are sacrifices meant to accompany the dead in order to somehow benefit them in the afterlife, with the former mainly being of slaves or prisoners of war and the latter being wives. Both are also excluded from being defined as human sacrifice herein because of their status as offerings for the dead instead of to deities. The intent and purpose behind these ritual killings is different.\(^{13}\) While arguments have been made for the presence of both in the Greek archaeological record they seem to be predicated entirely on early Classical scholarship using singular scenes in the *Iliad* and other seminal texts as a basis for practice. While mythology does feature largely in this work, the

\(^{13}\) For a treatment of both retainer sacrifices and *sati* in the Greek archaeological and written records, see Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece*. The expansion of this working definition is intended to be a future project.
function of the myths themselves is utilized for analysis rather than the stories being used as some sort of foundational practice, except for in the case of Mount Lykaion, which is admittedly a special case.

In addition to limiting the term human sacrifice, I have also set physical boundaries on the region that this study focuses on. Since a major component of this study is how the perception of human sacrifice by the Greeks changed over time, setting a specific region was necessary. To that end, I have focused only on those examples of human sacrifice, whether mythological, historical, or archaeological, that occurred in mainland Greece and the islands of the Aegean that fell under Mycenaean purview, as this is the major power structure in place at the chronological inception of this work. Greek colonies on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean in Asia Minor and the Levant and in Italy and further west, as well as the island of Crete have all been excluded, as the intricate webs of influence functioning in these locations are complex enough to warrant a bigger and broader work than this can currently hope to be.

Chronology cannot be limited in the same way because of the temporal ranges of each line of evidence. Therefore each facet of the study has its own limitations. The written material can only begin when the Greeks started writing things down, and thus the oldest works are from the sixth, possibly seventh, century BCE, with the terminus of this in the second century CE for reception and into the fifth for sources on mythology. The archaeological material naturally predates these sources, and so this chronology begins in the Late Helladic and continues on to the third century BCE. Both records have sizeable gaps, however, and while these are both large spans of time, the amount of material is small.

Moving first through the mythological instances of human sacrifice and the functions
of these stories within Greek society, and then into actual historical records of the practice, the first chapter seeks to understand the written history of human sacrifice. Myths are modernly defined as those stories which take place in a legendary past, such as the events of the *Iliad* or the subsequent tales about its characters. History is often not necessarily a factual account but is set in the historical present or recent past of those writing about it, and more importantly in a time in which we have abundant written and material evidence, generally the Classical period and later. While much of this material comes from a time when the practice was nearly eradicated, the attitudes of these writers and the prevalence that human sacrifice seems to have in Greek literature is telling and certainly reflective of its place in Greek society. Taken together, the written record shows that human sacrifice was thought by the Greeks to have been conducted at certain locations prior to and during the Classical era, but that this was morally unsupported by the populations from which we have extant texts, such as Athens.

The archaeological record is scanty in comparison. Because of this, the chapter first focuses on the works of the few scholars who have studied the archaeological material available before turning to some prominent recent evidence. This burial, from Mount Lykaion in the Peloponnese, is the best and perhaps singular example of human sacrifice in Greece not found in a tomb. I speculate on how the practice might have been introduced here to the Mycenaean, or earlier, Greeks and to further elucidate this, I also look into the possible origins of the varied traditions of human sacrifice in the studied region.
II. The Language of Sacrifice

But after taking Polyxena by the hand, the son of Akhilleus made her stand on top of the mound, and I was near:
and chosen youths picked out from the Akhaeans, who will restrain the struggles of your girl, followed. And the son of Akhilleus after taking in his hands a full goblet of solid gold raised it in hand as a libation for his dead father...
And he, both not willing and willing, by compassion for the girl, cut her wind-pipes with iron...
Euripides, Hekabe 523-29, 566-68.

Introduction

In discussing the place of human sacrificial practice in Greek history, the majority of the focus is necessarily placed on written sources due to the small body of archaeological evidence. These sources are some of the few remaining vestiges of the way ancient Greeks conceived of themselves and their environments. Thus, in order to understand the place of human sacrifice in ancient Greece and how it evolved over a long period of time, a variety of authors and subjects need to be explored. To that end, this chapter takes a threefold approach, examining mythic accounts of human sacrifice as the basis for actual practices or the justification thereof, historical accounts of real sacrificial practice, and an analysis of both in order to determine how authors in different periods of ancient Greece reacted to the idea of human sacrifice, whether positive, negative, or neutral.

Only those few authors who were writing in the analyzed area of Greece are considered an appropriate reflection of the Greek opinion of sacrifice, but a wide variety of authors writing from the seventh century BCE to the fifth century CE are used to understand
the variations of the myths. For the purposes of this chapter, Greece is herein defined as the mainland including the Peloponnese and those islands in the surrounding waters that were culturally Greek at the time of the author’s writing. Colonies function in a gray area; their relevance is determined on the same criteria, but examined much more critically given the broader influences they were subjected to.

Additionally, to establish a broader understanding of the interplay between these authors and human sacrifice, the geographic and temporal contexts they were writing in is of utmost importance. The regional biases of each author factor into the analysis of their works in the third section of this chapter. This allows for a deeper analysis not only of the language used, but of how political barriers colored interactions between disparate Greek poleis. Further, the geographic isolation of the cults mentioned below allows for an internal othering of Greeks towards other Greeks, effectively painting different Greek peoples as foreign on the basis of their religious customs.

Mythic Anecdotes

Myths in ancient Greek societies were incredibly prevalent. Myths framed and informed the Greek way of life for centuries, and served as the foundation of a large part of their culture. In understanding human sacrifice in Greece, myths naturally play an enormous role due to their cultural prevalence. While each legendary act is not evidence of a corresponding historic one, each story sets the stage for a deeper understanding of sacrificial reception. Further, understanding the way myths of human sacrifice functioned within the society of ancient Greece is a direct representation of how the authors discussing them conceived of the practice, allowing for not only a surface level reading of positivity or negativity, but also a grasp of how the literary device of human sacrifice was woven into the
fabric of life. The prevalence of the practice in written versions of myths shows the lingering of the practice in the cultural memory of Greece, even if it occurred in much earlier times than their own.

Not every mention of a ritualistic murder in myth is relevant, however. To be included in this section and classified as a human sacrifice, each myth had to include two simple criteria: 1) a frame similar to animal sacrifice, including dedicated to a god, and 2) follow through. To put it another way, each instance had to have a ceremony conducted like that of an animal sacrifice, with specific ritual elements and dedication to a god, and the victim had to actually be killed. Thus, famous examples like Akhilleus' sacrifice at the funeral of Patroklos in Book 23 of the *Iliad* is unusable as this presents more as an instance of retainer sacrifice or as a revenge killing.\textsuperscript{14} Also discluded are the stories recounted by Euripides in his plays *Erectheus, Andromeda*, and both of the *Iphigenia* works due to the ultimate escapes of these victims. Both Andromeda and Iphigenia are touched on, however, as these are prominent examples of the virgin sacrifice motif. The myth of Polyxene falls into this category as well, and while she is traditionally sacrificed to Akhilleus after his death, the nature of hero cults in Greek religion allow for a gray area of sorts.

The focus of this section is the relevant written evidence from the seventh century BCE to the fifth century CE. As many works of ancient authors have been lost, quotations and summaries by later authors are used to reconstruct myths, or parts of them, in order to understand the reasons for variation. Additionally, the few examples from the artistic record are also examined, but these are incredibly limited. The extant evidence generally falls within two distinct categories: myths from the Trojan epics and the myth of Lykaon. The former

\textsuperscript{14} Hom. *Il.* 23.175-76
includes a story about Menelaos after the Trojan War and Polyxene. The latter is focused on the myriad versions of the Lykaon story and the disparate elements from each.

The Trojan Cycle

Due to the particulars of the sacrifice in the *Iliad* causing it to fall outside the parameters of this study, this section begins not at what many consider to be the beginning of Greek myth, the works of Homer and Hesiod, but a bit later with Herodotos. He wrote histories, but many of his anecdotes are tellings of myth, including many tales in his earlier books. Though he tends to sandwich mythology with ethnographic accounts, the tall tales are often easy to pick out due to their familiar cast of characters. His stories of Menelaos follow this pattern, and one in particular in which he relates an alternate version of Menelaos’ own post-war odyssey.

Also from this epic tradition is the figure of Polyxene, the Trojan princess doomed to die for Akhilleus. There are many, many versions of her story, examined for the most part herein alongside an analysis of the function of virgin sacrifice in Greek literature. Though not the first, Polyxene was an early victim and would have many antecedents. Her death in some versions of the myth might be better characterized as a *sati*, a custom in which a wife is killed or commits suicide following the death of her husband. The way in which her story is portrayed, however, particularly in sixth century BCE art and in writing from the Classical Period frames her death as more of a true sacrifice, and affords an opportunity to discuss a very prominent feature of Greek myth, virgin sacrifice.

Menelaos

Herodotos relates an embellished version of Menelaos’ wanderings after the events of the *Iliad* that he heard from Egyptian priests, in which the Greeks find no Helen at Troy
and are instead redirected to Egypt, where she is said to be with the local king. Menelaos himself travels to Memphis and reclaims his wife, but is unable to leave the country due to issues with the weather. To combat this, he sacrifices two Egyptian children - \( \lambda \alpha \beta \omega \nu \gamma \dot{a} \rho \delta \upsilon \omicron \nu \ \alpha \nu \delta \dot{a} \iota \alpha \ \alpha \nu \delta \rho \omega \nu \ \epsilon \pi \chi \omega \rho \iota \omega \nu \ \epsilon \nu \tau \omicron \omicron \alpha \ \sigma \rho \acute{e} \alpha \ \epsilon \pi \omicron \omicron \iota \sigma e.\) The treatment of this story is brief and Herodotos mentions no details of the sacrifice itself. He closes the scene by briefly describing Menelaos’ flight from Egypt to Libya, hated and pursued by the Egyptians. The only other reference to this story comes from a response to Herodotos by Plutarch, but this is a quote, not a corroboration or a similar tale.

The variant of the traditional Troy storyline that features the twist of Helen marooned in Egypt is not altogether uncommon. Herodotos’ version is an early example, as is Stesichoros’ *Palinode*, and the two are followed dramatically by Euripides’ play *Helen*. The origin of this variation is unknown, but it is apparently set up in opposition to the epic these characters feature in. Egypt itself in Greek literature is also often depicted as an opposite, a place of alterity and liminality that differs from the reality of Greece. It is this characterization of Egypt that Herodotos seems to be playing off of, using the inherent and endemic otherness of Egypt and possibly the influence of the human sacrifices that Egyptians engaged in as a way to define the character of his Menelaos or perhaps to show the corrupting nature of such a place. In light of the latter, it would appear that the intent of the myth is to set Greeks apart from such liminal spaces, but the language used by Herodotos’ seems to contradict this. While he himself describes the act as “impious” and “unjust”, he says

15 Hdt. 2.119.3.
16 Hdt. 2.119.3.
17 Plut. *De Herod.* 12
19 Friedman, “Old Stories in Euripides’ New ‘Helen,’” 199.
only that Menelaos was then “hated”, offering no other elaboration. It possible, however, that this response is simply to the Egyptians’ own children being sacrificed as opposed to a typical Egyptian victim, and also in this case an unsanctioned act.

Polyxene

Polyxene is a relatively important figure for the end of the Trojan Cycle. Her story happens too late to be included in the Iliad and too early to feature in the Odyssey, and as such is found only in the lost epics. Other versions of her tale, collected here, have been told by a number of authors working in genres from lyric poetry to mythography. Of note is her noticeable contrast with Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon who is sacrificed so that the Greeks may sail to Troy. In this case, Polyxene is sacrificed to Akhilleus so that the Greeks may sail home. Roman authors tended to depict her death as a sati sacrifice, but her death is not necessarily shown this way among the Greeks. She also shares similarities with other virgin sacrifices in Greek myth, though her peers tend to survive, such as the daughters of Erectheus and Aethiopian Andromeda, as well as Iphigenia herself.

The earliest references to Polyxene in Greek poetry are fragmentary and vague. The oldest comes from a papyrus fragment of Stesichoros, a lyric poet born in the Greek colony of Metauros in southern Italy in the late seventh century BCE. Four words from the fourteen line fragment are discernible, one being πολυξέ. This is generally thought to be a cut-off Πολυξένα. No other details from the fragment hint at what treatment Stesichoros gave her story, but the mention of her name places her as far back as the early sixth century BCE.

The slightly later work of the lyric poet Ibykos is also fragmentary. The pieces that

\(^{20}\) Hdt. 2.119.2-3.
\(^{21}\) S135 Davies.
remain have either miraculously survived on their own or have been quoted in works by other authors. One such quotation comes from a scholion to Euripides’ play Hekabe: ὑπὸ Νεοπτολέμου φασίν αὐτὴν (sc. Πολυξένην) σφαγιασθῆναι Ἐὐριπίδης καὶ Ἰβυκός - “Euripides and Ibykos say that she (Polyxene) was sacrificed by Neoptolemos”.22 Likely Ibykos dealt more fully with Polyxene’s story in his poetry, but all that remains to this day is the nature of her death as a sacrifice.

Yet another lyric poet dances around the subject of Polyxene’s sacrifice in fragments. Simonides is said to have described the scene of Akhilleus’ appearance over his own tomb as the Greek army is departing Troy, but the poet is not quoted nor are there other details of the scene.23 The passage, however, is on poetic feats of visualization, so perhaps Simonides’ scene lacked as intense language focused on Polyxene’s death. At any rate, this is another case of a mention without any relevant details.

Human sacrifice does not appear again in the written record until the advent of tragedy. Euripides in particular tends to favor human sacrifice as a subject, employing the practice in five of his plays, both extant and not. Two of these, Hekabe and Troades, deal with the sacrifice of Polyxene and its aftermath. The first is centered around Polyxene’s mother, Hekabe, and hones in on the moments immediately prior to and after the girl’s death. Off screen and previous to the events of the play, Akhilleus appears and demands her death as his share of the plunder of Troy: αἰτεῖ δ’ ἀδελφὴν τὴν ἐμὴν Πολυξένην τῷμβῳ φίλον πρόσφαγμα καὶ γέρας λαβεῖν.24 The Greeks then vote on this, also prior to the play, and send Odysseus to collect her, though he and Neoptolemos are both reluctant to engage in this

22 F307 Davies.
23 [Longinus], Subl. 15.7.
practice. Polyxene willingly lets herself be taken to Akhilleus’ tomb and also willingly offers her throat to Neoptolemos so that he may kill her.

The scene offers a direct corollary to scenes of animal sacrifice. The girl is led to the tomb, instead of an altar, where Neoptolemos acting as a priest raises libations to Akhilleus in place of a god, and then slits the throat of a willing victim. In this case, the sacrificed is a girl, and, rather than immolating her on the spot, her body is left to rest for a time. This is due to the fact that the Greeks allowed Hekabe to handle her daughter’s burial, which makes the nature of this sacrifice muddled. Polyxene is eventually interred in a tomb alongside her brother, Polydoros, instead of being treated as any other sacrificial victim. Thus, Euripides treatment of the myth paints it indeed as a human sacrifice, but one with undertones of traditional Greek death rites.

*Troades*, or the *Trojan Women*, is another of Euripides’ plays that focuses on the aftermath of the Trojan War. Polyxene’s death is mentioned briefly several times, and as this is another work by Euripides, her story is the same as in his earlier play. Nothing is mentioned of her delayed burial, however, and her death is framed again as a sacrificial act for Akhilleus. Indeed, she is described by Andromakhe as a δῶρον, a gift, certainly, but in sacrificial contexts, the word often means an offering. Of note is that early in the play, it is said that Hekabe had no knowledge of her daughter’s death, a set-up for a later scene in which she is told of this event, but a direct contradiction with the earlier play.

Much later, several Roman authors offered interpretations similar to Euripides’ on

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26 *Hec.* 345-47, 547-49.
27 *Hec.* 726-30, 894-97.
the Polyxene story. Hyginus, writing in the first century BCE, gives this myth a simplistic treatment in his Fabulae. He relates that after sacking Troy and before they were able to sail home, the Greeks heard the voice of the dead Akhilleus emanating from his tomb, demanding a share of their plunder. In response to this, they sacrificed Polyxene, a daughter of Priam, at the tomb of Akhilleus: Danai Polyxenem Priami filiam...ad sepulcrum eius eam immolaverunt.29 There are no further details of how this sacrifice was conducted, but the similarities between the rest of the story and earlier Greek material suggest that a sacrificial ceremony likely occurred.

Seneca the Younger, writing at about the same time as Hyginus, wrote his own version of the Troades, largely based upon Euripides play of the same name. This Troades couples Polyxene's death with that of Asyanax, the son of Andromakhe and Hektor. The story follows the pattern of Akhilleus' ghost demanding a sacrifice, although this time he mentions that Polyxene is desponsa nostris cineribus, “betrothed to his ashes”, suggesting perhaps that in the early Imperial Period the myth had evolved to include that Polyxene was perhaps a captive of Akhilleus’ before his death.30 Neoptolemos, here named Pyrrhus, pushes for this sacrifice against the wishes of Agamemnon, contradicting his own willingness to sacrifice Iphigenia before the war.31 The story of Iphigenia is heavily paralleled in Seneca’s work, as Polyxene’s death is ultimately made possible by luring her to the grave of Akhilleus under the pretense of marrying Pyrrhus, a direct corollary to the enticing of Iphigenia to Aulis to marry Akhilleus himself.32

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29 Hyg. Fab. 110.
30 Sen. Tro. 195.
31 Sen. 330-34.
32 Sen. 871-87.
Ovid relates a very similar version in his *Metamorphoses*. It follows the same threads as Euripides and Hyginus with Achilles angrily demanding a sacrifice and Polyxene willingly going to his tomb, and leaves out Seneca’s Iphigenia parallels.\(^{33}\) Interestingly, as a departure from Euripides, who specifically mentions that while Polyxene does bare her breast, it is her offered throat Neoptolemos cuts, Ovid writes that he strikes her through her torso: *ipse etiam flens invitusque sacerdos coniecto rupit praecordia ferro*\(^{34}\). This action frames the story more as a murder and less as a sacrifice, as a sword through the breast or midriff (*praecordia*) is a far less specific method of killing. This also contrasts with the use of the verb *macto* earlier in this passage, which can be applied to multiple situations, but does have a connotation with sacrificing and immolation.\(^{35}\)

Polyxene’s death is one of the few instances of human sacrifice to appear in the visual record. Other myths included here do not feature at all, with no artistic depictions of Lykaon at all and Menelaos only in relation to the more common aspects of his story. The sacrifice of Polyxene itself is on only two pieces, a Tyrrhenian amphora (Fig. 1) and a sarcophagus (Fig. 2), both from the sixth


\(^{34}\) Ov. 475-76.

\(^{35}\) Ov. 448.
century BCE.\textsuperscript{36} The amphora was manufactured in Athens, but found in Etruria, and the sarcophagus was found in a tomb at Gümüşçay in Turkey. Both feature violent depictions of Polyxene’s death, with men holding her over the tumulus of Akhilleus’ as Neoptolemos cuts her throat. Other artistic representations of Polyxene focus on the ambush by Akhilleus and shy away from the brutality of her death. This is likely because of an unwillingness on the part of Greek artists to give credence to a practice that they ultimately did not approve of, as they had no problems depicting violent acts of war.\textsuperscript{37}

While it seems problematic in terms of definition to feature a sacrifice to Akhilleus, who was not a god, his mythical status allows for a gray area in interpretation. He was a semi-divine figure, and following his death, he was the beneficiary of a hero cult at multiple locations. While most hero cults are tied to a small number of locations that had a connection to their subject, Akhilleus was worshipped almost at god status near Troy, Kroton in Southern Italy, Lakonia and Elis in the Peloponnese, Astypalaia in the Cyclades, Erythrai in Asia Minor, and very prominently around the Black Sea.\textsuperscript{38} The extent of this cult and the offerings and dedications for Akhilleus color him as more of a divine figure than an ordinary man.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{Sarcophagus depicting Polyxene’s death via Mylonopoulos 2013.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{36} Mylonopoulos, “Gory Details?,” 74–75.
\textsuperscript{37} Mylonopoulos, 83.
The function of Polyxene’s death for Akhilleus at first glance does appear to be in the vein of sati, but the complex theme of virgin sacrifice in ancient Greek literature elevates her story beyond this surface level interpretation. This motif has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Burkert sees virgin sacrifice generally as a natural dichotomy in which the virgin is tied either to a hunter’s quarry or to a planted seed that yields a crop, a giving in order to get. Bremmer likens Polyxene’s death to a wedding ceremony, ironic given the connotations between she and Iphigenia and the direct parallels made between the two by Seneca. Loraux notes that virgin sacrifices are always of benefit to the state and stresses the comparisons made, in Euripides in particular, between virgins and untamed animals, an association which frames these sacrifices as man’s taming of nature. Both Loraux and Marshall emphasize again the patterning after a marriage and bounds of the traditional life cycle.

From this compilation of interpretation, the sacrifice of Polyxene seems to have filled multiple functions. First, it is likely that her death served as a foundation sacrifice of sorts, the first in a cult to the deceased Akhilleus that would be followed by other less severe offerings. Second, she offers a parallel closure to the end of the Trojan War that allows the Greek army to leave the same way it arrived. Her death is a plot device in some versions, and only functions as an emotional drive in those instances that also feature her mother. Finally, as she is a princess of Troy, her death is perhaps evident of the taming of that place, and possibly echoes the earlier Trojan princess Hesione, another given as a prize after the city.

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fell.\textsuperscript{43} If virgins are indeed to be identified with wild animals, such as the wild heifers that Euripides tends to compare them to, her death marking the end of the war in Troy cements the Greek victory over the area.\textsuperscript{44}

Lykaon and His Sons

The prevailing theme of the sacrifice of young people continues on mainland Greece. As Menelaos sacrificed young boys, so too does the legendary figure Lykaon sacrifice a boy to Zeus, his son. The story is a complex one with alternating versions moving the action between Lykaon and his other sons and changing the identity of the victim between Nyktimos and an unnamed boy. The additions of lycanthropy, the punishment inflicted upon Lykaon by Zeus for his transgression, and cannibalism add another dimension to the act. Various traditions, typically those that focus on the lycanthropic side of the story, hold that the entrails of the sacrificed youth were eaten in order to induce the transformation. This myth served as a foundation story for the practices at Mount Lykaion, named for Lykaon, which purportedly featured a sacrifice of a youth to Zeus Lykaios at the Lykaia festival.

Plato’s concentration on the myth is the oldest extant and very brief. In the Republic, composed in the early fourth century BCE, he deals primarily with the consumption of human flesh and ensuing lycanthropy from the myth specifically as a metaphor for a leader becoming a tyrant. He refers to the story of Lykaon as a \textit{λόγον}, which can refer to a history, but here seems to take on the meaning of “tale” or even “myth”.\textsuperscript{45} Though framed in this way, the description of the mythic ritual is quite good. As Plato knows, one piece of a human victim’s remains was mixed up with those of animal sacrifices, and those partaking in the

\textsuperscript{43} Apollod. \textit{Bibl.} 2.6.4.
\textsuperscript{44} Loraux, \textit{Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman}, 34–35.
\textsuperscript{45} Pl. \textit{Resp.} 8.565e.
ritual play a kind of Russian roulette wherein anyone who eats the human entrails is turned into a wolf: ὡς ἄρα ὁ γευσάμενος τοῦ ἄνθρωπίου σπλάγχνου, ἐν ἄλλοις ἄλλων ἱερείων ἕνὸς ἐγκατατετμημένου, ἀνάγκη δὴ τούτῳ λύκῳ γενέσθαι. This is the only version of the myth extant that is related by a Greek.

The version of Lykaon’s story relayed by Hyginus is perhaps the simplest, both in terms of content and language. He contextualizes the myth by placing the rape of Callisto by Zeus and the subsequent birth of Arcas prior to the feast where Zeus is fed a son of Lykaon. Interestingly though, the myth is not then framed as some sort of revenge, as Hyginus takes the action of the sacrifice away from Lykaon and places it with his sons: sed Lycaonis filii Iovem tentare voluerunt, deusne esset; carnem humanam cum cetera carne commiscuerunt idque in epulo ei apposuerunt - “but the sons of Lykaon wanted to put Jupiter to the test, should he be a god; they mixed together human flesh with other flesh and served it up to him at a feast”. The usage of carnem here holds no reference to sacrificial practice or any religious language. Indeed, this is the only Lykaon myth not framed as a sacrifice, but just as an off-screen murder to test a god.

Clement of Alexandria’s diatribe against Greek religion, Exhortation to the Greeks, contains critical and negative responses to a wide range of Greek religious practices and the myths associated with them. As a Christian convert, his work is a rejection of his previous paganism, and thus likely a response to the traditions he knew of or perhaps participated in himself. His reference to Lykaon comes late in a chapter filled with condemnations of rituals and their mythic foundations. He does not discuss, however, the real or ongoing practices

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46 Pl. 8.565d-e.
47 Hyg. Fab. 176.
stemming from this myth, as the story is found in a section vehemently directed at Zeus himself. Clement uses language that frames the killing of Nyktimos as a murder: ἠγνόει γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ὡς ἄρα Δυκάων ὁ Ἀρκάς ὁ ἐστιάτωρ αὐτοῦ τὸν παῖδα κατασφάξας τὸν αὐτοῦ (Νύκτιμος ὄνομα αὐτῶ) παραθεὶ ὃψον τῷ Διῷ - “for the god did not know that Lykaon, his Arcadian host, after murdering his own son (Nyktimos his name) served him up as dainty fare for Zeus”.48

The reasoning behind this framing is simplistic. Clement had an agenda unlike any of the other sources seen thus far. As an early Christian theologian writing at a time when paganism was not just extant, but prevalent, his goal would have been to discredit Greek religion as much as possible. This story perfectly conducts many of the negative aspects of myth, aspects that were reprehensible to Greeks as well. Not only is Lykaon killing his own son, a break with the traditional life cycle, he is also guilty of violating the role of the host, a crime that comes with a variety of negative consequences.

If Clement was aware of the Lykaon myth, why did he not write about its subsequent ritual practices in Arcadia, as he does earlier in this chapter with mystery cults? He is writing rather late in the second century CE, and far removed from the Greek mainland down in Alexandria, though perhaps not entirely culturally removed. By this time, it is possible that the practice of sacrifice had died out, as the Roman Empire had already swept across the land and they were well known for ending such rituals in other parts of the Mediterranean. It is also possible that the practice seemed eradicated but had merely become even more secretive. It seems unlikely, however, that Clement would make no mention of human sacrifice if he were aware of it happening in conjunction with a myth at any point in recent

48 Clem. Al. Protr. 2.31.
Turning to another theologian, writing nearly two centuries later than Clement, Augustine makes mention of the cult of Zeus on Mount Lykaion in *City of God*. In this work, Augustine heavily quotes from Varro’s lost work *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum*, a text focused on the cultural and religious history of Rome. As such, this passage is tricky, as Varro’s own sources are unknown. Although Augustine is also writing against pagan religion in defense of Christianity, his work is less antagonistic than that of Clement. The passage he quotes from Varro deals with the lycanthropic transformation of a boxer who went on to win at the Olympic Games. He writes: *Denique etiam nominatim expressit quendam Demaenetum gustasse de sacrificio, quod Arcades immolato puero deo suo Lycaeo facere solerent...* - “At last he has now expressed by name a certain Demaenetos who tasted from a sacrifice, an offered boy which the Arcadians are wont to sacrifice to their god Lykaios...”.

He goes on to say that following the sacrifice, the boxer was transformed into a wolf for ten years, and it was after his return to human form that he won at the Olympic games.

This passage raises an interesting question about the work of Clement, though. If Augustine, writing in the fifth century CE in Numidia (modern-day Algeria) was aware of the Arcadian practice of human sacrifice, how was Clement writing in the second century CE in Alexandria not aware? He has a targeted agenda in his work, and even brings up the practice of human sacrifice in a subsequent chapter. His goal is to discredit paganism, so it serves no purpose for him to hide such a practice.

The latest reference to human sacrifice extant is found in the work of the epic poet

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Nonnus, who wrote in the early fifth century CE. The work examined in part here is the forty-eight book epic poem the *Dionysiaka*, composed in traditional Homeric dialect and dactylic hexameter. The poem’s subject is the life of Dionysus, and features a short reference to Lykaon in the form of an invocation:

ἄκλυον, ὡς ὑπέδεκτο τεὸν γενετήρα Λυκάων, αὐτὸν ὁμοῦ μακάρεσαν, καὶ ὑίόν ἀπειδήν διάζεας Νύκτιμον ἀγνώσσοντι τεὸν παρέβαλλε τοκῆ, καὶ Διὸ παμμεδέοντι μιής ἐψαυσε τραπέζης, Ἀρκαδίης παρὰ πέζαν.

I heard, how Lykaon received your father, he together with the blessed, and after slaying with his own hand his son Nyktimos he offered him to your unknowing father, and he touched one table with Zeus the All-Deviser, near the land of Arkadia.

Lykaon is also mentioned later in the text as *παιδοφονή*, “the son-slayer”. Clearly, the tradition of Lykaon has persisted for nearly one thousand years after the first extant reference in Plato, and has undergone very little change. This could be due to a number of factors, but likely is evidence that later authors were using Plato as a source.

The version told by Hyginus, which seems to be the prevailing example, bears many similarities to the story the myth of Tantalos, who feeds his son Pelops to the gods. Pelops, however, is saved and reconstituted, while Tantalos is sent to Tartaros. Lykaon does not suffer this fate, but is instead turned into a wolf, and neither is Nyktimos brought back to life. This is perhaps because the function of this myth is much different than that of Tantalos. His story deals with the dangers of tricking the gods, but also serves as a moralistic narrative punishing a man for cannibalism and the killing of his own son. Lykaon too is punished for these things, but the outcomes are drastically different. Tantalos suffers in Tartaros, but

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52 Nonnus 18.31.
Pelops continues the house of Atreus, a family which becomes probably the most important to all of Greek mythology, save for the gods themselves. Lykaon’s dynasty continues on as well, but their place is not as pervasive in Greek myth.

Arcadians were long thought to be the most backward of the Greeks, a people who lived in the wilds of the Peloponnese and were as close to untamed as Greeks could get. Lycophron describes them as “descendants of the oak”, “wolf-shaped flesh-eaters of Nyktimos”, and “those before the moon”. The first of these descriptors refers to the perceived primitiveness of the Arcadians, a people who subsisted on acorns and were not as advanced as their neighbors. The second is rather self-explanatory, but extends the Lykaion cult’s lycanthropy and cannibalism to all Arcadians. The third refers to age of the Arcadians as a people. Greeks seemed to believe that the Arcadians were among the first to settle the land, preceding the moon.

In this context, Lykaon’s myth mirrors Tantalos less and less. The story instead seems to be a basis or perhaps just a facet for this view of the Arcadians as an untamed people. The Greeks believed many of their non-Greek neighbors participated in human sacrifice, so perhaps this myth was a way in which the larger Greek societies attempted to understand the otherness of one of their own. The myth, however, seems to be anything but a story, and in light of new evidence actually appears to have been based in reality, so it is also possible that this myth functioned as a cult’s foundation story similar to that of Polyxene.

What is clear from both the Trojan epics and the story of Lykaon is that Greek myths had a lasting tradition of sacrificing humans, specifically youths, outside of centralized areas.

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53 Lycoph. Alex. 480-82.
54 Borgeaud, The Cult of Pan, 10.
55 Borgeaud, 7.
These sacrifices were framed as animal sacrifices with human victims, which perhaps is suggestive of a non-specialized language regarding the practice, as in *Hekabe* lines 523-529. The connotation many of these words have with animal sacrifice, however, is not present in the language, but derived from contextual usage in Greek texts. Collecting these myths together here establishes that in the Greek mind, human sacrifice was not completely outlandish, but was something relegated to the mythic past. Instances of the practice in reality, however, did in fact exist.

**Historical Anecdotes**

The evidence for real human sacrificial practice in ancient writing is, in a word, scanty. Few authors seemed to deal with it as a subject, and many of those who do are later authors quoting lost works of earlier writers. This dearth of information could be because of two things: either further texts discussing human sacrifice in Greece, and those that were known to contain this information because they are quoted by late authors, were intentionally destroyed, possibly by Romans or anti-pagan Christians, or because the practice was found only in remote places such as mountain tops or islands, information about these cults was hard to come by and thus difficult to write about.

To begin are two excerpts from Porphyry’s *De Absinentia*. In the first, he quotes from a lost work of Theophrastos: ἡ γοῦν ἱστορία οὐ μόνον ἄνθρωπων ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄλλων πλείονων τῆν μνήμην παρέδωκεν ὡς καὶ ἀνθρώπους θυόντων τῶν πάλαι - “At any rate, not only the history which is recounted by Theophrastos, but also many others hand down the record that even long ago men were sacrificed.” The second is a quote from another lost work by Phylarkos: Φύλαρχος δὲ κοινῶς πάντας τοὺς Ἑλλήνας πρὶν ἐπὶ

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56 Porph. *Abst.* 2.53.
πολεμίους ἔξιέναι ἀνθρωποκτόνειν ἱστορεῖ - “But Phylarkos records that all Greeks in common before going out to war sacrificed men”.57 These two quotes establish that, at least according to Porphyry, Greek authors in the third century BCE were conceiving of a shared and ancient practice wherein their ancestors sacrificed men. The lack of specifics in regards to location prevents these quotes from featuring in the following sections. Historical mentions of human sacrifices that do feature a locale, however, are the prominent focus, and dates have been applied where they are readily apparent. The scope has once again been limited to mainland Greece and the nearby islands that share their culture.

Mount Lykaion

A number of sources discuss the human sacrificial practices that occurred at Mount Lykaion in Arcadia, named after the mythic character who fed his son to Zeus, and not only those that dealt with the mythology of the site. The earliest belongs to Plato in *Minos*: καὶ μὴ ὃτι βάρβαροι ἀνθρωποὶ ἡμῶν ἄλλοις νόμοις χρώνται, ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ ἐν τῇ Λυκαίᾳ οὗτοι καὶ οἱ τοῦ Ἀθάμαντος ἐκγονοὶ οίας θυσίας θύουσιν Ἑλληνες ὄντες - “and not all barbarian men consult other laws than us, but even those who are in Lykaia and the descendants of Athamas offer such sacrifices even though they are Greeks”.58 The same logic applies here as above, the dating of the text dates the sacrifice, meaning that in the fourth century BCE, there was at least an idea in the Greek mind that Arcadians were sacrificing humans to Zeus at Lykaion.

Pausanias, writing nearly four hundred years after Plato, also tells the story of Lykaon and the sacrifice which followed his tradition. Pausanias attributes to him the founding of a

57 Porph. 2.56.
58 Pl. *Min.* 315c.
town on the mountain, the naming of Zeus as Lykaios, and beginning the Lykaion games. His version of the foundation myth is standard, but told in opposition to Cecrops', a mythical king of Athens who, according to Pausanias, "thought it fit to sacrifice nothing of these, whatsoever has life" (καὶ ὁπόσα ἔχει ψυχήν, τούτων μὲν ἡξίωσεν οὐδὲν θύσαι). Countering this, Lykaon, per myth, sacrificed a human child on Zeus's altar and was punished with lycanthropy: Λυκάων δὲ ἐπὶ τὸν βωμὸν τοῦ Λυκαίου Διὸς βρέφος ἦνεγκεν ἀνθρώπου καὶ ἔθυσε τὸ βρέφος καὶ ἔσπεισεν ἐπὶ τοῦ βωμοῦ τὸ αἷμα. He goes on to mention the current sacrifice to Zeus Lykaios, but omits any details relating to victims in order to focus on the incredulity of lycanthropic transformations stemming from this sacrifice: λέγουσι γὰρ δὴ ὡς Λυκάονος ὀστερον ἀεὶ τις ἐξ ἀνθρώπου λύκος γίνοιτο ἐπὶ τῇ θυσίᾳ τοῦ Λυκαίου Διός. Later, in a description of the mountain and its sacred precincts, Pausanias names an earthen mound on the highest peak as the altar of Zeus, and describes the proceedings thus: ἐπὶ τούτου τοῦ βωμοῦ τῷ Λυκαίῳ Διῗθύουσιν ἐν ἀπορρήτῳ: πολυπραγμονήσαι δὲ οὐ μοι τὰ ἐς τὴν θυσίαν ἥδον ἦν, ἔχετω δὲ ὡς ἔχει καὶ ὡς ἔσχεν ἐξ ἀρχῆς - "Upon this altar they sacrifice to Zeus Lykaios in secret; and I was glad to not inquire closely into those things for the sacrifice, but let it be as it is and as it was from the beginning". It seems from his language that Pausanias believed that some sort of taboo practice was still going on within the Lykaion cult, and he certainly wanted no part of it. The practitioners were at the very least conducting their rites secretly, but this could easily have been a holdover of a longstanding tradition and not necessarily evidence that human sacrifice was still occurring.

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59 Paus. 8.2.1.
60 Paus. 8.2.3.
61 Paus. 8.2.3
62 Paus. 8.2.6.
63 Paus. 8.38.7.
A late reference to the Lykaion sacrifice is actually a quotation of possibly the earliest reference. Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* features a chapter on wolves in which he delves into subject of lycanthropy. He quotes an earlier author with a corrupted name, often called either Apollas, Agriopas, or Skopas, who wrote an account of Olympic victors, the *Olympianics*. The passage refers to a boxer, also mentioned by Pausanias, who won in the games despite his fantastical back story: *item \\textcopyright\textcopas, qui Olympionicas scripsit, narrat Demaenetum Parrhasium in sacrificio, quod Arcades Jovi Lycaeo humana etiamtum hostia faciebant, immolati pueri exta degustasse et in lupum se convertisse* – “likewise Skopas, who wrote the *Olympionikai*, relates that Damaenetus the Parrhasian during a sacrifice, in which the Arcadians were still offering human victims to Jupiter Lykaios, tasted the innards of a sacrificed boy and he was changed into a wolf”.\textsuperscript{64} Because the author has a problematic name, dating the fragment has been difficult. As this same story is told by Varro, who is quoted in Augustine’s *City of God*, the date is at least prior to 100 BCE. Scholars have tentatively dated the victory of Damaenetus, or Damarchos as Pausanias names him, to the Olympics of 400 BCE, meaning that, if true, the sacrifice is contemporary with Plato, and thus may have been practiced at least to the end of the fifth century BCE.

Challenging the end of the Lykaion sacrifices this early, though, is an excerpt from the fourth century CE historian and theologian Eusebius of Caesarea. In his *Praeparatio Evangelica*, he quotes from a lost work of Phylarchus, a historian writing in the third century BCE: ‘Αφ’ οὗ μέχρι τοῦ νῦν οὐκ έν ’Αρκαδίᾳ μόνον τοῖς Λυκαίοις οὔτε έν Καρχηδόνι τῷ Κρόνῳ κοινῇ πάντες ἀνθρωποθυτοῦσιν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ περίοδον, τῆς τοῦ νομίμου χάριν μνήμης, ἐμφύλιον ἀεὶ αἷμα ραίνουσι πρὸς τοὺς βωμοὺς - “From this time up to now not only in

\textsuperscript{64} Plin. *HN*. 8.82.
Arcadia for Lykaios nor in Carthage for Kronos do all commonly sacrifice humans, but throughout the period, for the sake of the memory of the custom, they always sprinkle kinsfolk blood at the altars”. What this suggests is up for interpretation. It could be that the practice of human sacrifice continued down into the third century BCE and died out some time after that, possibly with Roman intrusion into the area. The alternative is that, given the word choice, victims were no longer being killed at the altar, but practitioners simply cut themselves enough to let a few drops of blood wet the altar in deference to the earlier practice. The latter may seem more likely, but due to the fact that Phylarchus’ work is lost, there is no way to know if this was his original wording or a summarization done by Eusebius.

Halos

The sacrifices which purportedly took place in the region of Achaea on the Peloponnese have a mythic tradition, but one more in line with that of Iphigenia and Andromeda. It is necessary to note that Herodotos places this sacrifice in the wrong location, as the town in question is actually not in Achaea or the Peloponnese, but actually in the region of Thessaly on the Aegean Sea. The story is that Athamas, a son of Aeolus and a king of Boeotia, had a son named Phrixus from his first marriage that his second wife was jealous of. So, she managed to ruin the season’s wheat crop and persuaded a messenger sent to the oracle at Delphi to tell Athamas that he had to kill Phrixus to save his crops, and thus save his people. Phrixus was led to the altar, like Iphigenia, but saved by his divine mother and deposited in Colchis, where he was taken in by the king, wed, and had several children.66

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65 Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 4.16.
Additional sources claim that tradition of human sacrifice stemming from this myth occurred at Halos. Herodotos mentions both the tradition of the sacrifice and participation within the cult in the context of a visit from Xerxes as he’s passing through the area. He names the cult as that of Laphystian, or “gluttonous”, Zeus, a god who demands the sacrifice of first-born sons due to the tradition of Athamas. Not all first-borns are subject to death, however, as the inhabitants of this town, Halos, only sacrifice those youths who enter their town hall. While no mention is made of how the killing is done, Herodotos does reference the fact that the victims are decorated with garlands and led to the altar in a procession, just as animal sacrifices traditionally were conducted: ὡς θύεται τε ἐξηγέοντο στέμμασι πᾶς πυκασθείς καὶ ὡς σὺν πομπῇ ἐξαχθείς. Herodotos ends his anecdote by stressing the fear and reverence Xerxes had for this place and his avoidance of it.

In the Pseudo-Platonic work Minos, the author also mentions this sacrifice. In a discussion of how different laws govern different men, the companion to Sokrates’ character uses the example of human sacrifice. He says that among themselves (i.e. Athenians), the practice is illegal and unholy, but that other people engage with it, such as the Carthaginians, and indeed some Greeks too: καὶ μὴ ὃτι βάρβαροι ἄνθρωποι ἴμων ἄλλοις νόμοις χρῄσται, ὁλλὰ καὶ οἱ ἐν τῇ Λυκαίᾳ οὖν τοῦ Ἀθάμαντος ἐκγενοὶ οίκας θυσίας θύοντον Ἑλληνες ὄντες. Associating Greeks with Carthaginians is rather odd, as the author does connect them with barbarians. This seems to be another instance of Greeks othering fellow Greeks, a method of understanding such a sacrifice that might have been necessary.

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67 Hdt. 7.197.1.
68 Hdt. 7.197.2.
69 Hdt. 7.197.2.
70 Hdt. 7.197.4.
71 Pl. Min. 315c.
Salamis, Attica

One historical reference to human sacrifice is conducted by an Athenian, though not at Athens. This instance comes from the series of biographies written by Plutarch, the *Vitae Parallelae*, in *Themistokles*. The scene in question occurs before the Battle of Salamis between the Greeks and the Persians under Xerxes, somewhere on the western shore of Attica. The story related is this: Themistokles, who is about to sacrifice to bless the battle, is brought three beautifully adorned prisoners (τρεῖς...αἰχμάλωτοι...ἐσθήσι δὲ καὶ χρυσῷ κεκοσμημένοι διαπρεπῶς). A sign (ὡς ἀμα μὲν ἀνέλαμψεν ἐκ τῶν ἱερῶν μέγα καὶ περιφανὲς πῦρ, ἀμα δὲ πταρμὸς ἐκ δεξιῶν ἐσῆμην) seen by the seer Euphrantides leads him to believe that these three must be sacrificed to Dionysus in order to ensure their success. Themistokles is very against this, shocked even (ἐκπλαγέντος), but because the great crowd of people encouraged him, he felt he had to, and led the victims to the altar where he sacrificed them (καὶ τοὺς ἀἰχμαλώτους τῷ βωμῷ προσαγάγοντες ἡνἀγκασαν...τὴν θυσίαν συντελεσθήναι). Plutarch’s final word on this sacrifice is not to offer further details or segue into a tangent about other instances of this, but simply to state that the information comes from the philosopher Phanias the Lesbian, a source who is “not inexperienced with historical writing”:

Thebes

A similar situation arises in another of the *Vitae Parallelae* for Pelopidas, a Theban statesman born nearly thirty years after the death of Themistokles. In this *Vita*, Plutarch

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73 Them. 13.2.
74 Them. 13.3.
75 Them. 13.3.
relates that on the eve of battle with the Lacedaemonians near the village of Leuktra, southwest of Thebes, Pelopidas had a dream in which he was urged to sacrifice an auburn-haired maiden (τὸν τε Ἐκέδασον κελεύοντα ταῖς κόραις σφαγίσαι παρθένον ξανθήν) in order to secure victory in the battle.\(^76\) This is another case of sacrifice averted, however, as after telling his fellow leaders, a seer saw a filly breaking away from her herd and named her as the auburn-haired virgin to be sacrificed.\(^77\) Thus, this instance falls more in line with the myth of Iphigenia than with any actual sacrifice.

As a decision had not been reached by Pelopidas’ committee, it is altogether possible that he would have gone through with the sacrifice, as within this episode Plutarch mentions several other legendary “sacrifices” that the Theban leaders argued as precedence, including that of Menoeceus, who killed himself in accordance with an oracle to save Thebes, and Makaria, a daughter of Herakles who gives herself to be sacrificed to save Athens.\(^78\) The former, though in honor of a god, is a suicide, as Menoeceus throws himself from the city walls. In Makaria’s case, the earliest mention of her is in Euripides’ play *Heracleidae*, and as such an earlier mythic tradition is lost. There are also no details of her death, as it happens outside the text, so although she was supposedly to be killed on an altar in accordance with traditional sacrificial practice, there is no guarantee that this act was actually completed. Themistokles’ sacrifice of three youths to Dionysus is also referenced.\(^79\)

Lacedaemonia

Porphyry is likewise the only source for a human sacrificial practice in Lakedaemonia:

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\(^{77}\) *Pel.* 21.1-2. 
\(^{78}\) *Pel.* 21.2. 
\(^{79}\) *Pel.* 21.3.
ἐπεὶ καὶ Λακεδαιμονίους φησίν ὁ Ἄπολλόδωρος τῷ Ἀρεί θύειν ἄνθρωπον - “For Apollodoros says that even the Lakedaemonians sacrifice a man to Ares”.

Dating this sacrifice is difficult, but Apollodoros is the source for this information, and the word used to define the sacrifice, θύειν, is a present infinitive, possibly suggesting that the practice is ongoing in his time and not relegated to the past. Apollodoros lived in the second century BCE, which would date the Lakedaemonia sacrifice a century later than those at Mount Lykaion. The ongoing nature of the sacrifice, however, could just be a fluke of the language.

Plutarch mentions a Lakedaimonian sacrifice in his Life of Pelopidas: τῶν δ’ [προφέροντες] ὥστερον Φερεκύδην τε τὸν σοφὸν ὑπὸ Λακεδαιμονίων ἀναμεθέντα καὶ τὴν δορὰν αὐτοῦ κατὰ τὶ λόγιον ὑπὸ τῶν βασιλέων φρουρομένην - “and [cited] of the latest time Pherekydes the Wise who was killed by the Lakedaimonians and his skin was guarded by their kings in accordance with some oracle”.

This story references an older tradition surrounding the semi-mythic seventh century BCE philosopher Epimenides. Diogenes Laertius says that, according to tradition, he was killed by the Lakedaimonians and had his skin preserved, so perhaps Plutarch is conflating stories or this simply is not true. Given the Epimenides version is legendary, the veracity of both versions is questionable. Additionally, the verb used to describe the killing of either man is not specifically related to sacrificial practice, so the sacred nature of their deaths is doubtful. If this is a Lakedaimonian tradition, however, it is possible that a sacrifice occurred once and not again, as there is no further evidence of such a practice.

Lesbos, Chios, and Tenedos

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80 Porph. Abst. 2.55.
81 Plut. Pel. 21.2.
82 Diog. Laert. 1.10.
Porphyry’s next placement of human sacrificial practice is located on two islands in the Aegean. A ritual that he places first on Chios, and then a few islands north on Tenedos, involved sacrificing a man to Dionysus and then ripping him to pieces: ἔθυνον δὲ καὶ ἐν Χῖῳ τῷ Ὠμαδίῳ Διονύσῳ ἀνθρώπον διασπόντες, καὶ ἐν Τενέδῳ, ὡς φησίν Εὐελπίς ὁ Καρύστιος. Euelpis, who Porphyry attributes this information to, is a mysterious figure, so unfortunately this information cannot be tied to a date in history. There is a chance that he is being confused with Carystius of Pergamon, who wrote in the second century BCE, but there is no true way to confirm this.

This story, however, is in line with another told about the island of Lesbos, which lies conveniently in between Chios and Tenedos: Λυκτίους γὰρ – Κρητῶν δὲ ἔθνος εἰσίν οὗτοι – Ἀντικλέιδης ἐν Νόστοις ἀποφαίνεται ἀνθρώπους ἀποσφάττειν τῶι Δίῳ καὶ Λεσβίοις Διονύσῳ τὴν ὁμοίαν προσάγειν θυσίαν Δωσίδας λέγει – “For Antikleides proclaims in the Nostoi that the Lyktians - a people who are from Crete - cut the throats of men for Zeus; and Dosiadas says that the Lesbians bring in the same sacrifice for Dionysos”. While this Lesbian sacrifice does not include the same limb rending ritual that was purportedly conducted on Chios and Tenedos, all three traditions are focused on killing men for the same god. Given their geographic proximity, this is likely evidence that a singular ritual practice with an as yet unknown origin was spread to this area. Unfortunately, though the Dosiadas fragment does allow for a complete circuit between Chios and Tenedos via Lesbos, the date of this author is also an unknown.

Rhodes

83 Porph. Abst. 2.55.  
84 BNJ 458 F7.
Further south from Chios, Porphyry discusses the practices of human sacrifice present on the island of Rhodes: ἐθύετο γὰρ καὶ ἐν Ἑρώδῳ μηνὶ Μεταγειτνίων ἔκτη ἱσταμένου ἄνθρωπος τῷ Κρόνῳ - “For even in Rhodes in the beginning of the month of Metageitnion on the sixth day a man was sacrificed to Kronos”. He notes that this was long-running practice that eventually became a method of killing those who had been sentenced to death. While Porphry neither deigns to mention his source for this sacrifice or when in history it might have taken place, he does detail the ritual itself, which likely did not change with the changing of the victim: ἕνα γὰρ τῶν ἐπὶ θανάτῳ δημοσίᾳ κατακριθέντων μέχρι μὲν τῶν Κρονίων συνείχον, ἐνστάσης δὲ τῆς ἐφορτής προαγώντες τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἔξω πυλῶν ἀντικρυς τοῦ Ἀριστοβούλης ἡδους, οἷνο ποτίσαντες ἐσφαττον - “for one of those who was to die, since he was sentenced by public consent, was restrained until the Saturnalia, but when the festival began they led the man forward outside of the gates opposite the temple of Aristoboule, and after giving him wine to drink they cut his throat”. Aristoboule is an epithet of Artemis, who was herself commonly associated by Greeks with human sacrifices in the Black Sea region. There are reports of similar sacrifices to Kronos taking place in a variety of places, including on Crete and in Carthage. Giving the position of Rhodes on trade routes that connected Phoenicia with mainland Greece, it is possible that this Phoenician tradition, as evidenced by the practice in their homeland and in satellite cities such as Carthage, was spread to Rhodes by traders or even settlers.

Although Porphyry notes the month and day that the sacrificed occurred on, there is no date of its origination or when the practice ended. Unfortunately the calendar

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85 Porph. Abst. 2.54.
86 Porph. 2.54.
87 Cole, “Landscapes of Artemis,” 479; Fischer-Hansen and Poulsen, From Artemis to Diana, 305.
terminology also offers no hints to date the sacrifice, as the name Metageistnion is Attic, and likely a detail from an Attic source used by Porphyry. The mentions of the Saturnalia and the temple of Aristoboule are interesting, but likely unimportant. The sacrifice was conducted for Kronos, so it stands to reason that the weightiest of sacrificial acts would occur during his festival. Aristoboule likely refers to Artemis, as this is one of her epithets, and the use of the temple here is problem just to give context to the path the sacrificial train took. There are, however, other traditions to the north that focus on sacrificing humans to other epithets of Artemis. These occur among the Tauri in particular, but they were a non-Greek people living in modern Crimea and possibly associated with the Scythians. Thus, the equation of their goddess with Artemis is likely a late syncretic association.

These few traditions of human sacrifice in the historical record paint a picture of the practice as one relegated to remote locations. The instances of human sacrifice that are most questionable occurred in places that were not remote. Achaea, for instance, as a whole region and not a specific place seems like it might be the most accessible location, but the town named, Halos, is not traditionally placed there, but in the region of Phthiotis. This makes more sense for a visit from Xerxes, as the former is the most northern region of the Peloponnese and the latter is in the northeast of the mainland on the Aegean coast. The town, however, did not lie on the peaks of any mountains, but rather in coastal foothills. Likewise, those sacrifices related by Plutarch took place at Salamis and outside of Thebes, which would not have been inaccessible. Plutarch’s veracity has often been called into question, and these highly detailed anecdotes occurring many centuries before his birth are equally as suspect. Truly the practice that seems to be the most legitimate happened on a mountain peak, as is the case for the Lykaia sacrifices. If our sources are to be believed, the practice was also
present on islands far from the mainland, as in Rhodes, and the islands surrounding Lesbos.

According to the historical record sacrifices are still, for the most part, framed the same way as animal sacrifices. The rituals attributed to the Dionysus cults are understandably odd given the other traditions associated with his worship, but the majority of these stories follow the familiar pattern. A victim is sacrificed in a sacred space according to traditional sacred rites, often decorated and involving libations, before having their throat cut. While locations, such as altars, seem to be described less than in the myths, the steps involved are similar enough to see a clear connection between the historical practices and the mythic traditions.

Reception

In order to understand how Greek authors were thinking about these instances of human sacrifice not just as historical anecdotes, but as facets of their own history, the texts reviewed above need to be looked at not just for their content, but for how that content is expressed. By analyzing the language used in these texts to describe sacrifices and the contextual information that some authors provide, the viewpoint of these authors through the various periods of Greek history is readily apparent, and it is one that does not remain static.

Of the many authors cited herein, only three of them can be included in this analysis. These three - Euripides, Plato, and Plutarch - are from the Greek mainland, but the same scope used to limit the rest of this study was employed here as well. Simonides and Lycophron, while from Greece, did not offer enough to truly warrant a linguistic analysis. The purpose of this is to examine only those authors who are writing in the geographical region that is itself being analyzed in order to narrow in on the mindset of those Greeks who may
be influenced by local traditions and ideas, Romans, or others. In order to exemplify this influence, the opinions of Greek authors writing in Greek colonies in southern Italy and in the eastern Mediterranean are also subject to this analysis though they are few, however only those writing before the spread of the Romans are included, as those influenced by Roman rule have a decidedly negative view of human sacrifice.

To start, Euripides’ plays deal extensively with sacrificing people, but the language he employs boils down to a small set of verbs and nouns. In *Hekabe*, the words that define both the action of Polyxene’s death and the purpose of it revolve around sacrificial language: πρόσφαγμα, σφάξαι, θύματος. These are all words exclusive to the practice, and thus would have framed this death specifically as that of a sacrificial victim. His *Troades* tends towards less specific language, describing her death with more general terms like τέθνηκε and the purpose of her death with δῶρον, though forms of σφάζω are also used.

How Euripides felt about such an act, and how he intended a Greek audience to interpret said actions, seems to come from a negative perspective. Both plays are, of course, tragedies, and the author goes out of his way to really enhance the purity and inherent goodness of Polyxene nearly every time she speaks. Hekabe is understandably upset, and calls attention to the futility of it all: ὃμοι ἔγω: τάφῳ πρόσπολον ἐτεκόμαν. Indeed, she wonders what kind of Greek custom this is, with no sufficient answer from Talthybius with whom she speaks. Further, the characters within *Hekabe*, on both sides of the war, are not exactly happy about going through with it. When Odysseus comes to collect Polyxene, he is

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89 Eur. *Tro*. 40, 622-23
90 *Tro*. 265.
91 *Tro*. 266-68.
sure to mention that he wishes he didn’t have to do this: μηδὲ τὸνδ᾽ ὠφείλομεν.\textsuperscript{92} The Argives, however, apparently voted on whether or not to sacrifice her, and evidently the majority voted in favor: ἀγγέλλοις Ἀργείων δόξαι ψήφῳ τᾶς σὰς περὶ μοι ψυχᾶς.\textsuperscript{93} Thus, it seems as though Euripides is slightly conflicted. His common body of Greeks, composed of soldiers from all over the Greek world, has voted for human sacrifice, but his heroic characters seem against it. Neoptolemos later exhibits this odd dichotomy as well: ὃ δ᾽ οὐ θέλων τε καὶ θέλων οἰκτῷ κόρης, τέμνει σιδήρῳ πνεύματος διαρροᾶς - “And he, both not willing and willing, with compassion for the girl, cut her wind-pipes with the iron...”.\textsuperscript{94} Perhaps this is evident of the same dichotomy in reality; a historic tradition of human sacrifices in certain places of Greece, and a recent and strong negative reaction to these practices.

Closely following Euripides in time is Plato. His language usage is interesting, and, just as in previous examples, he frames human sacrifice in the same language as animal sacrifice. While he does not refer to a human victim as such, he does refer to those parts mixed to be eaten as σπλάγχνου, a form of the noun σπλάγχνον which generally refers to entrails, but is often used specifically to denote those parts of sacrifices which are reserved for eating.\textsuperscript{95} Subsequently, the author refers to ἄλλων ἱερείων, “other victims”; ἱερείον is exclusively used for sacrificial offerings.

The framing by Plato of this retelling of Lykaon’s story as a metaphorical transformation of a politician into a tyrant seems to suggest a negative slant towards the

\textsuperscript{92} Eur. Hec. 395.
\textsuperscript{93} Hec. 195-96.
\textsuperscript{94} Hec. 566-68.
\textsuperscript{95} Pl. Resp. 8.565d.
practice. While the language itself does not necessarily suggest this, Athenians were typically not fond of tyrants. Thus Plato seems to exhibit none of the uncertainty that Euripides exhibits in his works. In *Minos*, however, his offering of human sacrifices at Lykaion and Halos as an example of different laws being upheld by different peoples, even among the Greeks, has no negative language, unless the vague connotation these are given with βάρβαροι ἄνθρωποι skews this instance more towards the negative.

Plutarch is an interesting case for looking at the Greek view of human sacrifice. He wrote very late, the first century CE, compared to the other authors in this section, and even became a Roman citizen, although he lived his entire life in his homeland of Boeotia. Plutarch’s opinions on human sacrifice, readily apparent in works such as On the Malice of *Herodotos*, suggest that human sacrifice had died out before his lifetime or that, given his own strong aversions, had deescalated to be more like the bloodletting ritual described by Eusebius.

Looking at the two texts analyzed above, episodes from Plutarch’s *Vitae Paralleleae*, reveals quite a lot about how he conceived of these historic instances of sacrifice. In *Themistocles*, he uses his title character to convey a suite of negative emotions, including fear and shock: ἐκπλαγέντος δὲ τοῦ θεμιστοκλέους ὡς μέγα τὸ μάντευμα καὶ δεινόν. Plutarch even places the blame for carrying out the sacrifice with the common people, similarly to Euripides in *Hekabe*. He relates that those responsible were “hoping for deliverance from unreasonable rather than reasonable things”: μᾶλλον ἐκ τῶν παραλόγων ἢ τῶν εὐλόγων τὴν σωτηρίαν ἐλπίζοντες. Thus, he gazes rather negatively at this choice and, as this line

96 Plut. Vit. Them. 13.3.
97 Them. 13.3.
suggests, considers it “beyond reason”.

The feeling is much the same in Pelopidas. As soon as Pelopidas has his prophetic dream, he takes it to the commanders of the army, even though “the command appeared fearful and lawless to him”: δεινοὶ δὲ καὶ παρανόμου τοῦ προστάγματος αὐτῶ φανέντος ἔξαναστὰς ἐκοινῷ τοῖς τε μάντεσι καὶ τοῖς ἄρχουσιν.98 Despite this initial reaction, again the advisors argue over whether or not to do this, with some citing mythic examples to justify the sacrifice and others arguing against it.99 Those who were not in favor of the sacrifice clearly offer Plutarch’s feelings on such sacrifices, calling them “lawless”, “barbaric”, “unnatural”, and “grievous”.100 Further, he adds that “to believe in gods who rejoice in the slaughter and blood of men is equally stupid”: δαίμονας δὲ χαίροντας ἀνθρώπων αἵματι καὶ φόνῳ πιστεύειν μὲν ἵσως ἐστὶν ἀβέλτερον.101 Indeed, in Plutarch’s mind, such gods should be neglected to make them powerless: οὖν δὲ τοιούτων ἀμελητέον ὡς ἀδυνάτων.102

If these two sources did not cement the fact that Plutarch regarded human sacrifice as terribly abhorrent, an excerpt from his work De Herodoti Malignitate would. This text is a response to Herodotos’ Histories, and features the strong opinions of Plutarch. In one section, he discusses the sacrifice which Herodotos attributes to Menelaos, saying that Herodotos “turns that defilement and bloodthirstiness back upon the Greeks”: ἐφ’ “Ελλήνας ἀναστρέφει τὸ μύσος τοῦτο καὶ τὴν μιαιφονίαν.103 Menelaos is “the most unjust” and “the most wicked” for sacrificing two Egyptian boys.104 The majority of this section is quoted directly from

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99 Pel. 21.2-4.
100 Pel. 21.4.
101 Pel. 21.4.
102 Pel. 21.4.
103 Plut. De Herod. 12.
104 De Herod. 12.
Herodotos, but the two superlatives ἀδικώτατον and κάκιστον are Plutarch’s additions. Clearly by the first century CE opinions had changed from a balance of reluctance and negativity to pure revilement for human sacrifice, likely due to an increasing Roman influence.

What this analysis shows is a significant gap in the Greek written record. Before Euripides, there are no extant Greek writers from the mainland or its surrounding islands who were writing about human sacrifice. The evidence from Euripides and Plato suggests that in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE the general view of human sacrifice was negative, but perhaps not warranting of condemnation. The idea seemed to be that the practice was something that Greeks should not engage in, but did when the scenario called for it, with the response to this from these authors being lukewarm. Lycophron offers nothing, and Plutarch, writing many centuries later, finds the practice entirely reprehensible, likely due to the strong Roman influences on Greece during his period. There is clearly an evolution of thought here, but it is a slight one, moving from bad to worse. Truly, though, three authors cannot speak for the whole of ancient Greece and indeed offer a rather poor sample size.

Unfortunately there is not much to flesh this out in comparative material. The only authors who were writing in southern Italy before the inception of the Roman Empire were the fragmentary lyric poets Stesichoros and Ibykos. The relevant fragment from the former offers only a handful of discernible words, none of them dealing with sacrificial language, and the latter’s is merely a single summarized line and not a direct quote. Herodotos is the only author from the eastern Mediterranean writing before the Romans, and while his works are definitely broad enough to be analyzed, they add little to the discussion. His language is not inflammatory or particularly strong, but he does also characterize those sacrifices he
describes negatively.

Conclusion

Examining nearly twelve hundred years of written material containing mentions and
descriptions of human sacrifice sounds like a daunting task. What it boils down to, however,
are nearly twenty authors who devoted anywhere from one line to one paragraph on human
sacrificial acts. Occasionally the theme crops up in a play, but even in Euripides’ case, there
are scant few lines dealing with sacrifice and its aftermath. The impression this leaves is that
human sacrifice was on the minds of Greek authors for many centuries, but was taboo in a
way that kept it from being prevalent or common, even in writing. Of the remaining extant
works, it appears that the popularity of human sacrifice in writing went up in the Hellenistic
and Roman periods, but this seems to be a sort of false negative generated by late authors
quoting texts that no longer exist and reactions from Christian authors railing against
paganism.

Given the locations of some of these acts as presented in both myths and histories, the
scarcity of human sacrifice in texts is almost to be expected. Mentions are as difficult to find
as these locations are to get to. Mythic accounts center around wars and hubris, associations
that are echoed in the historical accounts that also depict wartime sacrifice and the audacity
of man. These are perhaps mythic themselves, and lack the kind of regulatory component
that the more realistic sacrifices do. Indeed, the festival-associated human sacrifices, which
happened every four years in the case of the Lykaia and every June on Rhodes, seem to only
occur in mountain sanctuaries or on islands far to the east, places far from large population
centers.

The examination of this body of evidence has yielded several suppositions. Generally
it seems that Greek authors considered human sacrifice to be something only barbarians did and that although Greeks were participating in these rituals, either in the present or the past, they were taboo. Many authors believed that human sacrifice occurred only in the past, a time riddled with other unbelievable and legendary stories. Others, such as Plato and Pausanias, noted that these sacrifices did indeed occur in the past, but were still going on in their day, carrying on an ancient tradition from what was likely the Mycenaean period to the Classical era. This was certainly depicted as taboo, but perhaps as a sort of necessary evil when the times called for it. At some point between the early Classical era and the Roman period, this opinion shifted. Late authors who are not altogether neutral on mythical retellings treat any instance of human sacrifice, mythical or not, as abhorrent, clearly referencing some sort of cultural shift, likely one triggered by the spread of Roman civilization. Whether these sacrifices were still being conducted this late is unclear, but the available evidence suggests that human sacrifice ended sometime in the Archaic period or perhaps the early Classical period in certain places such as Mount Lykaion. There are further suggestions that it was still going on during the Lykaia down to the time of Pausanias in the second century CE, but as he himself did not witness the practice, there is no actual account of the sacrifice.

Information garnered from written sources is undeniably important. In order to understand this singular facet of Greek society, their culture has to be understood in much broader terms. Stories and records written in their own hand allow for a certain kind of analysis, but without material culture much of what is written can be attributed to rumor rather than fact. Further, it is indeed possible that those aware of such sacrificial practices intentionally did not make any kind of record of them in an attempt to keep them from being
known. If human sacrifice was as disapproved of as it seems, authors may have wanted to hide such a shameful practice from their readers. Thus it is also undeniably necessary to incorporate the material record into a discussion of true events.
III. The Remains of Sacrifice

And there is on the highest summit of the mountain a mound, the altar of Zeus Lykaios, and most of the Peloponnese is in full view from it; and in front of the altar stand two pillars that lie towards the sun, and upon them were put eagles plated with gold in a still earlier time. Upon this altar they sacrifice to Zeus Lykaios in secret; it was not courteous for me to meddle in the sacrifice, but let it be as it is and as it was from the beginning. Pausanias, Description of Greece 8.38.7.

Introduction

Literary materials are not produced in a vacuum. Any discussion of the function and purpose of written materials within a culture needs to also be engaged with other lines of evidence. To that end, the presence and analyzation of human sacrifice in the archaeological record is radically important to form a broader understanding of the practice within Greece. Archaeological evidence is slim, but seems to be a result of a lack of targeted excavation rather than a lack of evidence. The available material is confined to the Peloponnese, at one of the sites mentioned extensively in the previous chapter, but ideally future excavations will search for additional remains.

Scholarship on human sacrifice in Greece has been limited, with the majority of scholars writing on the topic publishing in the last fifty years. Only one of these texts deals with the archaeological material, Dennis Hughes’ aptly-titled Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece from 1991, but he focuses only on older excavations ranging from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the mid 1960s. No other work has been done on the archaeology of human sacrifice in Greece. Additionally, this evidence comes only from Mycenaean
tombs, and is characterized as a retainer sacrifice. Hughes proffers his own definition of human sacrifice which includes retainer sacrifice, but the practice lacks the features of human sacrifice defined herein, namely that these individuals were not dedicated to a deity. In every case he examines it appears that the remains themselves were not studied, something necessary to determine the nature of their deaths. Further, he also considers “suttee” burials in which wives or concubines committed suicide or were killed to accompany their dead husbands, but these too are not definable as human sacrifice.

Other scholars have also written on the topic, but none have devoted entire volumes. Walter Burkert featured a chapter on human sacrifice in his 1972 work *Homo Necans*, and even examines the subject with an anthropological perspective, but his evidence is entirely based on written material, which seems for the most part to post-date the practice itself. Similarly Jan Bremmer’s chapter in *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice* from 2007 titled *Myth and Ritual in Greek Human Sacrifice* does exactly that, ignoring any archaeological implications that might have an effect on the practice.

In reexamining the data put forth by Hughes and analyzing new information that has come to light in the past few years, I hope to offer a more complete image of this practice. Beginning in the Argolid with the Mycenaean tombs, then moving to those sites mentioned in literary texts as places of human sacrifice, Mount Lykaion in Arkadia and the islands of Rhodes, Tenedos, Lesbos, and Chios, this chapter explores past scholarship before examining this new data and through it the very origins of human sacrifice in Greece.

Hughes and the Practice of Retainer Sacrifice

The 1991 work of Dennis Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece*, devotes a chapter to various rumors and suppositions of human sacrifice made by archaeologists
excavating tombs all over the eastern Mediterranean, including Crete, the Peloponnese, and Cyprus. Taking cues from this text, the following section explores the data presented by Hughes and offers an updated interpretation, where possible. For the purposes of this chapter, and in line with the geographic boundaries of this work set by culture rather than region, only those sites examined in the Peloponnese are re-analyzed here, as Hughes’ other sites are located outside of these boundaries. The six Peloponnesian tombs are all located in the region known as the Argolid; two are tholos tombs and the remaining four chamber tombs. Of the tholos tombs, the first is near Dendra and the second outside of modern Nauplion at Kazarma. Two of the chamber tombs are at Mycenae, one in the Lower City and the other in the Third Kilometre Cemetery. The remaining two chamber tombs are in Argos at the Necropolis of Deiras and at Prosymna. The tombs are discussed in the same order that Hughes presents them, which seems to follow no chronology, either of the tombs or of the excavations themselves. Unfortunately there seems to be no subsequent work done on the remains from this collection of tombs.

The purpose of looking into Hughes’ work is twofold: first, this is the largest and most recent publication on the subject of human sacrifice in Greece and it is nearly three decades old and could benefit from updating; and second, there are distinct and apparent flaws with the concept of seeking out human sacrifice inside of necropoleis. This is more the fault, if it can be called that, of the original excavators from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, who based much of their interpretation off of extant texts, such as the Iliad. While Hughes works to discredit these hypotheses due to his belief that human sacrifice is not present in the archaeological record (he also discredits any and all written material in a subsequent chapter), this chapter’s focus is to explain that even if human sacrifice was
present in funerary contexts - which the working definition of this study prevents - this is the wrong place to look. While Hughes proposes that these burials are not sacrificial remains, they may very well be evidence of retainer sacrifice. As discussed briefly in the introduction of this chapter, retainer sacrifice and so-called “suttee” sacrifices are not defined as human sacrifice for the purposes of this paper, but are more aptly referred to as ritual killing.

The first of the tholos tombs was excavated near Dendra in the mid-1920s by Axel Persson. Burials identified within the tomb date its use to the early fourteenth century BCE. Hughes recounts much of the excavated material, limited to four pits. Three of these contained human skeletal material, but the remains found in pit II are of interest here.\textsuperscript{105} The pit contained unburnt human bones and a dog’s skull. It was Persson’s supposition that this pit was sacrificial in nature and that the bones there were from a servant and dog killed to accompany their master.\textsuperscript{106} He also maintained that three disturbed skeletons found scattered in the upper layers of pits I and IV were also sacrificial victims, though there is no discussion of the condition of the remains and whether or not they bear sacrificial markers such as cut marks on the cervical vertebrae. Hughes notes that this was discredited by archaeologist George Mylonas who explained the pit as remains of earlier burials swept from the tombs floor, and Hughes himself adds that the remains were apparently insufficient for study.

While Hughes goes on to discuss the problems with depositional layers and tomb disturbances complicating the chronology of burials in the tholos, the questions that could lead to a better determination of human sacrifice go unasked and unanswered. Hughes fails

\textsuperscript{105} Hughes, \textit{Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece}, 26.
\textsuperscript{106} Hughes, 27.
to mention which bones were found in the tholos, although this could be a failing of Persson. If the remains of the person buried in pit II or those who were scattered in the upper layers of other pits were indeed sacrificed, key skeletal remains would bear witness to this. In particular, one would expect to find cut marks on the anterior cervical vertebrae of the victims, which would suggest death by cutting the throat in accordance with Greek sacrificial practices, such as those typified in the *Iliad.* They might have been killed in another way, for instance, the Egyptians in the First Dynasty did not kill their retainer sacrifices as they would traditional sacrificial victims, but might have instead strangled them.

Further, the comparison to Egyptian retainer sacrifices is an apt one, not for method or practice, but for conceptualizing the practice suggested here. Retainer sacrifice is better defined as ritualized murder than it is as sacrifice. The dedication of the victim is made to a dead man rather than to a god, a prominent feature of typical sacrifices. Additionally, since there has been no intensive study of the remains of these or other purported retainer victims, it is difficult, if not impossible, to suggest the method of their deaths, whether they were killed like traditional victims or in some other manner not associated with sacrificial practices.

Persson further attempts to link the burials in pit I to the practice of *sati*, which seems an unusual route to take in discussing human sacrifice. As discussed earlier, *sati* is a now defunct southeast Asian practice in which widows would throw themselves on their husbands’ pyres or commit suicide in some other fashion. The description should make it clear that this is not, by any means, to be interpreted as a sacrifice, as it lacks all of the usual

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107 Hom. *Il.* 458-68.

hallmarks of the practice. This is the only tomb to be discussed where the phenomenon is potentially present, making its inclusion here odd.

Hughes discredits the presence of human sacrifice in the Dendra tholos tomb because of the odd depositional layers caused by numerous disturbances and the presence of bones associated with the dog skull in layers that suggest that these bones, and the associated human sacrificial remains were not deposited contemporaneously with the burials in pits I, III, and IV. While this is evidence that the remains were not sacrificed to the people interred in those pits, it does not entirely rule out a sacrifice to one of the entirely disturbed skeletons resting above. Additionally, the osteological questions remain unanswered and, nearly a century after the remains were excavated, likely will stay that way.

The only other tholos tomb that contained a possible human sacrifice was excavated at Kazarma, fourteen kilometers east of modern Nafplion, in the late 1960s. Ceramics within the tomb dated it to the late sixteenth and early fifteenth century BCE, over a hundred years prior to the burials found in the Dendra tholos. This tomb, however, features three pit burials, each with a single internment, and of particular interest, evidence of a large fire with the remains of several animals and two human skeletons.\textsuperscript{109} Per Hughes, the excavators reported that these two human skeletons had no associated grave goods and were uncovered in a kneeling position, likely as slaves sacrificed on a jumble of stones within the tomb. Hughes notes that this information comes from a preliminary report, meaning that there would have been no analysis of the remains themselves. Subsequent study seems to have not been carried out, other than to confirm the nature of the stones found in the tomb as that of

\textsuperscript{109} Hughes, 40.
an altar.\textsuperscript{110} Another noteworthy fact left out of Hughes’ summary is that at least one of the animals sacrificed in the tomb was an ox. This is important in association with the human remains, as it seems that the animal remains are consistent with typical sacrificial victims. If animals are being sacrificed in traditional ways, it stands to reason that human victims would be as well. Hughes labels this evidence as inconclusive, but the connection between the human and animal bones, the placement and position of the victims, and the presence of a stone altar all heavily points to another case of retainer sacrifice. The lack of osteological analysis, however, prevents a solid confirmation.

The remaining four burials mentioned by Hughes are Mycenaean chamber tombs. Unfortunately, either because of a fault somehow on the part of the excavators or because Hughes did not find it relevant, none of the tombs he discusses are dated. He notes first that similar burials from other tombs are typically considered evidence of previous burials moved to accommodate new remains or secondary burials.\textsuperscript{111} With that caveat, he begins with Tomb 15 from the Lower City of Mycenae itself. The tomb was excavated in 1887 by Christos Tsountas along with fifty-one other chamber tombs. The deposition of human remains in this case is odd compared to others discussed herein. Six skeletons were buried vertically stacked at different depths in front of the entrance.\textsuperscript{112} Tsountas believed the burials were simultaneous, and that the individuals were slaves or prisoners of war. Hughes counters that the burials, by Tsountas’ own logic, could have been made after the final use of the burial chamber. The lack of any dating adds to the depositional confusion and, again, the lack of research on the remains themselves leaves the manner of their death mysterious and

\textsuperscript{110} Kontorli-Papadopoulou, “Mycenaean Tholos Tombs,” 119.
\textsuperscript{111} Hughes, 31.
\textsuperscript{112} Hughes, 31.
the nature of their internment murky.

The other chamber tomb with possible evidence of retainer sacrifice at Mycenae is from Tomb 505 of the so-called Third Kilometre Cemetery. Excavated by A.J.B. Wace sometime prior to 1932, the tomb contained a plethora of human remains, including parts of at least six individuals in the fill above the entrance, similar to those from the Lower City, and six others in the dromos.\textsuperscript{113} Wace originally described these twelve skeletons as “\textit{disiecta membra}”, scattered limbs, meaning that the remains were not in their original places.\textsuperscript{114} Hughes notes the subsequent vague and confusing references Wace made to this collection of remains, saying that they neither proved nor disproved Mycenaean retainer sacrifice, but were evidence of some kind of “special circumstances”. Hughes interprets these comments as Wace’s support of retainer sacrifice, but he seems to be jumping the gun. Wace himself does not hold them as evidence of this, nor is the phrase “special circumstances” clearly referring to sacrifice. The only link these remains seem to have with the practice is their positioning similar to those found in Tomb 15 in the Lower City. Once again, a detailed study of the skeletal remains is necessary to make these kinds of claims, and it is clear that these were either never conducted or Hughes did not deem them necessary for discussion.

Similar to these two burials within piles of stone fill is another at Prosymna. Tomb VII was excavated prior to 1937 by Carl Blegen. This is the only chamber tomb Hughes discusses with a date, identified by him only as Late Helladic III. This puts the tomb in use during roughly the same time as the two tholos tombs discussed previously. The tomb again featured a burial associated with a jumble of stones. In this case, the skeleton was found atop

\textsuperscript{113} Hughes, 32.  
\textsuperscript{114} Hughes, 32; Wace, \textit{Chamber Tombs at Mycenae}, 12–15.
the pile and covered by a limestone slab, which Hughes states was leaning against the wall in the dromos, suggesting either that it fell atop the skeleton or that the skeleton was lying on the stone pile in the space between the slab and the wall. Blegen posited that due to the position of the burial directly before the entrance to the tomb identified it as a slave or servant of those who were buried within. Further evidence for the offering of sacrifices here was a very thin ash layer inside the tomb itself. Blegen believed the ash was evidence of sacrifice rather than fumigation or cremation, and Hughes is inclined to agree with him on the latter two, but wary to use a funerary cult to connect the burials within the tomb with that before the entrance. No mention is made of the condition of the skeleton of the potential victim. The key questions from this tomb that might illuminate this as an instance of retainer sacrifice are unanswered as a result. Did the cervical vertebrae bear cut marks? Were the bones burnt?

The final chamber tomb discussed is perhaps the least interesting and the least evidenced. Excavated in the early twentieth century by Carl Vollgraff, Tomb VI in the necropolis of Deiras at Argos contained one burial in the same position as the others, beneath stones above the entrance of the tomb and level with the top of the door. Vollgraff tied this burial to retainer sacrifice based upon the similar excavated remains from the Lower City of Mycenae. The quote from Vollgraff suggests that there had been a school of thought that the Mycenaeans killed a victim at the closing of their tombs and interred them above the entrance. While there have been these four examples of such a thing, they by no means are evidence of a prevailing and common practice.

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116 Hughes, 32.
The overall impression left by this body of evidence is one of uncertainty. Hughes seems to be determined to prove that the Mycenaean practiced no kind of ritual killing, human sacrifice or otherwise. These six sets of remains are thoroughly inconclusive, perhaps suggesting some kind of retainer sacrifice, but not clearly. The lack of attention paid to the bones themselves further confuses any claims that could be made. Without proper study of the remains discussed herein, the manner of these individuals’ deaths is unknown. No other scholars have undertaken an examination of the archaeological evidence, likely because of the small number of remains that might possibly be described as human sacrifices.

Further complicating the nature of human sacrifice in Greece is the very practice of retainer sacrifice itself, as well as sati. Hughes includes these examples as his only evidence from the mainland of Greece, but are they even to be classified as human sacrifices? While there is no way to know if any of these potential victims were dedicated to gods, their presence in tomb complexes suggests that they were not. Retainer sacrifices of the kind described by Hughes were simply meant to aid the deceased in the afterlife, easing the life after death of the mortal who had passed. Sati deaths are often characterized the same way. The presence of sacrifice in some of these tombs is evidence of a wider practice is incredibly suspect itself, as not all Mycenaean tombs even featured animal sacrifice. Hughes mentions no evidence of animal remains in the majority of these tombs. If they would not sacrifice animals for the dead, why then would they kill men and women? Necropoleis seem to be the wrong place to seek such evidence. Instead, investigations need to turn towards the greatest source of animal sacrifices in the hopes of finding human sacrifices, the most likely form of evidence being altars.

Mount Lykaion and the Sacrificial Altar

While retainer sacrifices present a number of unanswerable questions and create problems in terms of classification, there are other circumstances that present remains open to little interpretation. Bodies interred in tombs require extensive discussion and argument in order to vaguely equate them to ritual killing without subjecting them to scientific study to determine manner of death, age, and thus their ties to human sacrifice are, subsequently, unsubstantial. As discussed above, even if the remains found in Mycenaean tombs were retainer sacrifice, the lack of a godly dedication and any apparent ritual firmly bars them from being considered human sacrifice. Thus, in moving on from remains found in these funerary contexts to those found in purely ritualized contexts, the cognitive leap required to see these as victims of human sacrifice is a significantly smaller hop.

Of the few places where ancient writers refer to human sacrifice, only one has been excavated to a relevant extent. The ash altar on the peak of Mount Lykaion has been excavated since 2006, and in the twelve years since has yielded a host of intriguing information. A number of discoveries have not only pointed towards a confirmation of human sacrificial practices taking place at the sanctuary, but have also shown that this site was in use as a religious center long before traditionally thought. The exploration of these finds and what they suggest leads to a host of questions regarding the practice of human sacrifice at the site, the length of this practice, and its possible origins.

The 2016 excavation season at Mount Lykaion revealed what is arguably the ash altar’s greatest discovery: a human burial. While scientific information regarding age, cause of death, genetic testing, and isotopic studies of the remains have not yet been published, the preliminary report published from that season gives the same amount of data found
previously in those tomb “victims” analyzed by Hughes. The ash altar is five feet above the bedrock at its deepest points.\textsuperscript{118} The remains were laying on, or nearly on, top of the bedrock, but this gives no deposition clues, as the grave was likely dug into the existing ash altar. The burial was bordered by field stones of unknown dimensions on the sides, with no stones capping either end of the burial, and additional stones covering the pelvic area of the skeleton.\textsuperscript{119} The body was supine and oriented east-west, with no visible evidence of burning.\textsuperscript{120}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.jpg}
\caption{Individual burial from Mt. Lykaion via Urbanus 2018.}
\end{figure}

No suppositions can or perhaps should be made regarding the individual’s cause of death, but the placement of the remains points to this being a victim of the much-mythologized human sacrifice that took place atop the mountain. The burial was uncovered in the direct center of the ash altar, which seems to allude to some sort of symbolic significance.\textsuperscript{121} The nature of the grave itself excludes the methods of burial typical to this

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\textsuperscript{118} Urbanus, “A View from the Birthplace of Zeus,” 47.
\textsuperscript{121} Urbanus, “A View from the Birthplace of Zeus,” 48.
\end{flushright}
period of Greek history. The grave is shallow, lacks the kind of structure that other individual burials usually feature, and seems to have not been entirely covered. This last point is particularly interesting. The publications make no mention of the kind of soil that was dug through to reach the skeleton, but given the lack of covering stones, it is an important question. If the individual is in fact from the eleventh century BCE, as they have been tentatively dated, this places the burial roughly five hundred years into the usage of this ash altar. Presumably the soil covering the remains would have been the same material found in other parts of the altar, a mixture of ash and bone. The partial covering of the remains is also an interesting conundrum. Burials of this type usually feature large stones that cover the entire grave. The significance of covering only the pelvic area might be easier to parse when studies reveal the biological sex of the individual. Greek texts always describe the victims of the Lykaion sacrifices as young boys, which likely comes out of a tradition similar to virgin sacrifice.

The key detail that seems to differ from traditional treatment of sacrificial victims is the lack of evident burning on the bones themselves. As widely evidenced by the surrounding altar, animal victims typically had their femurs and attached patellae or tail bones wrapped in fat and then burned. Ninety-eight percent of the bones found in Lykaion’s ash altar are either thighs or tails.\textsuperscript{122} The interment of an entire skeleton suggests that a human victim was treated much differently than an animal, which is perhaps not a large intuitive leap. Animal bones were burned in offerings to gods because they were viewed as a meal; the fat wrapped bones offered aromatic smoke to the gods, enticing them to join mortals.\textsuperscript{123} While

\textsuperscript{122} Urbanus, 47.
\textsuperscript{123} Hes. Theog. 535-564.
rumors of cannibalism occurring subsequent to human sacrifice at Mount Lykaion is certainly a variation on the associated myths and present in some, but not all, of the historical accounts, the lack of burning on the recovered remains hint to the fact that cannibalism was not practiced here. Perhaps cut marks on the bones surrounding the torso could belie this as in the myths it was the entrails of the victim that were cooked and eaten, but that remains to be seen. Thus, the lack of burning here seems to indicate that while the death was likely important, it was not for the purpose of consumption. What the purpose actually was may remain unknown, but it at least stands to reason that if this youth was sacrificed, they were sacrificed to Zeus.

The presence of a single burial to date presents a slight problem in terms of sample size. Given the large size of the altar - one hundred feet in diameter, five feet deep, and an area of seven thousand five hundred feet - and the extent of the excavation over the past twelve years, future seasons could yield additional remains. Additionally, the altar itself was in use over such a long period of time, from the sixteenth century BCE to the end of the third century BCE, that if human sacrifice was occurring there, additional remains would have to be there.\(^{124}\) This is assuming that all sacrificial victims would be interred in the altar itself, but this is not necessarily true. As the sanctuary covered nearly all of the mountain, it is possible that other victims could be buried elsewhere and that this individual represents a particularly important sacrifice. Other implications arise as well, since given the lack of evidence surrounding this burial, there remains the possibility that this is a secondary burial or that victims were possibly moved after sacrifice.

The dating of this burial, though tentative, is interesting. Nearby ceramic finds date

\(^{124}\) Urbanus, "A View from the Birthplace of Zeus," 44.
the skeleton to the eleventh century BCE, and until results of scientific dating techniques are published, this is the sole date attached to the remains. If this is the only skeleton found at the site, this date could have something to do with its presence. It follows the collapse of the Bronze Age by about a century. The cause of this collapse is still debated, but current research points to a number of causes, including drastic and rapid climate change in the region. In particular, there is strong evidence of a long-lasting drought in the Mediterranean during this period. This could hint at one possibility for the presence of this individual in a sacrificial altar at a sanctuary of Zeus. If enduring drought conditions significantly affected agricultural production in the region, it is possible that the ultimate sacrifice was undertaken in dedication to Zeus, a weather god. Whether or not this was the first instance of human sacrifice at the site, the last, or one of several remains to be seen. More precise dating of the remains could belie this as this was neither the beginning nor the end of the drought period in the area, and so could the discovery of additional skeletons, unless they are relatively contemporary. If this is the only set of remains, though, it would mean that human sacrifices were likely not taking place after this period, further suggesting that the myths of later periods were a cultural memory of this practice.

Additional questions arise when the extensive use of the site is taken into consideration. Archaeological excavations have pointed to the altar itself falling into disuse near the end of the third century BCE, likely due to the establishment of Megalopolis nearby and the moving of the cult of Zeus Lykaios there in 370 BCE. On the earlier end, physical evidence from the site shows that it was in use during the Mycenaean period as a ritualistic

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125 Langgut, Finkelstein, and Litt, “Climate and the Late Bronze Age Collapse: New Evidence from the Southern Levant.”
126 Urbanus, “A View from the Birthplace of Zeus,” 49.
site as early as the sixteenth century BCE, making it the oldest place of worship found in Greece, but that the site’s use actually predated the Mycenaean by quite some time.\textsuperscript{127} Finds from just above the bedrock of the mountain date the earliest use of the site to the late Neolithic, or Chalcolithic, period - 4,000 to 3,000 BCE.\textsuperscript{128} Although the excavators have not yet characterized the nature of this usage, it seems probable that it was also religious and tied to weather, given the confluence of natural phenomena that make the site so intriguing: freak thunderstorms, lightning, and fault activity including landslides and earthquakes.\textsuperscript{129} The presence of the Mycenaean Greeks is likely predicated upon the site’s use by pre-Greek peoples inhabiting the area and worshipping their own versions of nature. The question that arises from these connections is where did human sacrifice come into play?

Eastern Origins?

In order to ascertain how the practice of human sacrifice might have been introduced to mainland Greece, it is necessary first to examine those other instances of human sacrifice present in the historical record at Halos, Lakedaemonia, Athens, Thebes, Lesbos, Chios, Tenedos, and Rhodes. The first four of these are heavily suspect and held in doubt for more than just their lack of archaeological corroboration. The sacrifices mentioned at Halos, for instance, are placed by Herodotos in Achaea, a confusion on his part as the town where this occurred is actually on the coast of the Aegean and not on the Peloponnese. While this sacrifice is also mentioned in \textit{Minos} by that work’s author, the sacrifice itself is not placed in any one location and is described only as something done to a mythological man’s

\textsuperscript{127} Urbanus, 44.
\textsuperscript{128} Gilman Romano and Voyatzis, “Mt. Lykaion Excavation and Survey Project, Part 1: The Upper Sanctuary,” 579; Urbanus, “A View from the Birthplace of Zeus,” 47.
\textsuperscript{129} Davis, “Tectonic Klippe Served the Needs of Cult Worship,” 5; Urbanus, “A View from the Birthplace of Zeus,” 46.
descendants. A similar sense of confusion surrounds those sacrifices mentioned as being performed by the Lakedaimonians.

Those related by Plutarch in his biographies of Themistokles and Pelopidas are equally as suspect. In the former, the source Plutarch used for this anecdote is a Lesbian philosopher. The sacrifice is dedicated to Dionysos ωμηστής, the eater of raw flesh, and as briefly described in the previous chapter, a cult to a similar aspect of Dionysos, ωμάδιος, was present on Lesbos and several surrounding islands. Phanias, writing in the late fourth century BCE, is hardly contemporary to these events, and seems to have injected some of his own local color into his history, which was later copied by Plutarch. The episode that appears in Pelopidas does not even feature a completed sacrifice and is dramatized to such an extent that either Plutarch or his source on the scene seems to be attempting to convey a moral or philosophical belief, and thereby further define the character of Pelopidas.

That leaves the eastern islands - Lesbos, Chios, Tenedos, and Rhodes. These four islands offer the best examination of how the practice of human sacrifice might have been transmitted to mainland Greece. Beginning with Rhodes, the presence of a cult sacrificing men to Kronos is perhaps no great surprise. The island is well known for having had connections between both mainland Greece and the Levant during the Bronze and Iron Ages. These connections, predicated on Rhodes’ location along trade routes, resulted in a diffusion of cultural aspects of many societies in the eastern Mediterranean to points west, including the mainland of Greece, Italy, Spain, and northern Africa.

130 Pl. Min. 315c.
131 Plut. Them. 13.3; Porph. Abst. 2.55; BNJ 458 F7.
133 Kourou, “Rhodes,” 249–51.
The Phoenicians were one of the biggest beneficiaries of this spread. In their own region, much scholarship has been devoted to the cult of Moloch and the child sacrifices purportedly offered to him. Previous scholars seemed inclined to deny this sacrifice, a common thread in Mediterranean research focused on painting this region as the cradle of western civilization and ignoring the more unsavory aspects of its cultures. More recently, however, attitudes have shifted. Not only are modern scholars accepting of a human sacrificial cult in the Levant, but also of the reach of such a cult as far afield as the Phoenician colony of Carthage, where literary and now archaeological sources place prolific child sacrifices to “Kronos”, a Greco-Roman casting of Ba’al Hammon, the chief god of Carthage.¹³⁴ Given the position of Rhodes as a stepping stone to the rest of the Aegean and Mediterranean and the prominence of Phoenician influence on the island, it is possible that the sacrifices mentioned by Porphyry as taking place there during the Saturnalia are a direct result of the Phoenician presence. When this transmission took place is unclear, as Porphyry fails to date either the year of the sacrifice or mention his source, but since there is a gap in overseas connections between the island and its neighbors between the twelfth and ninth centuries BCE, it would have had to occur on either side of this divide.¹³⁵

The influences present on the chain of islands to the north of Rhodes is less clear, however. Scholars have been aware of Anatolian influences on the religious practices of these islands - Tenedos, Lesbos, and Chios - for some time, owing to their close proximity to the Anatolian mainland.¹³⁶ The human sacrificial practices reported on these islands,

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¹³⁵ Kourou, “Rhodes,” 250.
¹³⁶ Williams, “Secret Rites of Lesbos,” 40.
however, do not seem to be coming from the east, but perhaps rather from the north. These islands were home to a particular kind of worship of the god Dionysos, mentioned by Plutarch via Phanias and Porphyry, that involved either cutting a victim’s throat, a typical sacrificial act, or rending them limb from limb.\textsuperscript{137} It has been noted that cults to Dionysos were present in Thrace and Phrygia.\textsuperscript{138} While human sacrifice has only been attested to in Phrygia, particularly at Gordion, in the Hellenistic era and was performed by Celts, evidence of the practice is prominent in Thrace.\textsuperscript{139} Given the connections between Dionysos and Thrace, and Thrace and god-dedicated human sacrifices, it is possible that the Dionysos-related cult practices that occurred on this chain of islands in the Aegean originated from a Thracian practice.

It seems that human sacrifices conducted on the islands of Greece are the result of cultural diffusion from non-Greeks, a syncretic practice blending deities and rituals from a variety of sources. Therefore the human sacrifices on Mount Lykaion may also be a result of this phenomenon. While the rituals on the islands are unable to be accurately dated due to the lack of archaeological evidence and specifics from literary sources, the individual burial from Mount Lykaion is dateable. Given the long history of practices occurring at the site, it is possible either that human sacrificial practices were introduced to the area and taken up at this ancient place of worship owing to its geographical and meteorological features or perhaps that these practices were already being performed to some extent and were adopted by incoming migrants. A definitive understanding of the ritual practices at the mountain is impossible to form until more evidence is uncovered, but allowing for a range of depositional

\textsuperscript{137} BNJ 458 F7; Plut. Them. 13.3; Porph. Abst. 2.55
\textsuperscript{138} Otto, Dionysus: Myth and Cult, 52.
\textsuperscript{139} Dandoy, Selinsky, and Voigt, “Celtic Sacrifice,” 47; Tonkova, “Human Sacrifice in Thrace,” 503.
methods, either hypothesis could be true.

Conclusion

The longstanding tradition in archaeology of examining skeletons within burial chambers as evidence of human sacrifice is problematic and, frankly the wrong way to understand the practice of human sacrifice. The examinations of the ritual killings, or retainer sacrifices, in a series of Mycenaean tombs does little to further the understanding of human sacrificial practice in Greece. What it does do, however, is introduce the idea that if the Mycenaeans were willing to kill their subjects to accompany them to the afterlife, they were perhaps also capable of permitting the sacrifice of individuals to their gods.

It is within this supposition that a wider picture of human sacrifice in ancient Greece becomes apparent. Contrary to what scholars have thought for centuries, the Greeks did, at least in small communities, sacrifice their fellows. Rather than discredit or ignore this evidence, it is necessary to instead understand it and to look at it as a developing cultural trait. It is possible that the rituals behind human sacrifice were disseminated to the Peloponnese and to Rhodes in the same period, sometime in the late Bronze Age. Both were performed for a chief deity, Zeus and Kronos respectively. The other Aegean islands where these sacrifices were said to have taken place were dedicated to Dionysos, were performed by violently tearing the limbs of the victim, and were likely a result of northern influence, features that don’t seem to coincide with those observed at Lykaion. Thus, it seems from the archaeological evidence that the human sacrifices that occurred at Mount Lykaion were possibly a combination of a prolific and long-running location-based deity worship tied to weather at the mountain’s peak and an eastern influence on ritual.
IV. Conclusion

And Stratios and trusty Ekhephron were leading bull by the horns. And Aretos came out of the chamber bearing water for them in a flowered basin, and he had in the other barley-groats in a reed basket; and steadfast Thrasymedes, who was holding a sharp axe in his hands, was standing near to fell the bull. And Perseus was holding the bowl for the blood; and the old man Nestor, the driver of horses, was beginning with the hand-washing and the barley-groats, and he was praying fervently to Athene while making the first offering, throwing into the fire hair from his head. Homer, *Odyssey* 3.439-54.

From this analysis of both written and archaeological evidence, the answers to many of the questions guiding this study emerge. At some point in their history, likely before the Bronze Age but more prominently following the end of the Bronze Age, the Greeks living near Mount Lykaion in Arkadia sacrificed youths in dedication to Zeus. This new archaeological evidence, consisting of an adolescent burial in the middle of the ash altar on the mountain, confirms a very lengthy written tradition that encompasses both mythology and historical accounts. Additionally, it is likely that the Greeks living on Tenedos, Lesbos, Chios, and Rhodes were influenced by Phoenicia to the east and Thrace to the north; they also sacrificed men to Dionysos and Kronos respectively. Unfortunately, archaeology has not yet corroborated these island traditions, but that is not due to a lack of evidence, but a lack of effort. If such a thing is to be corroborated, excavations need to take place on these islands for the purpose of finding this evidence.

The locations of these cults likely served to further isolate them from the more urbanized and populous centers of Greece. At Lykaion in particular, the hilly landscape
surrounding the mountain and the terrain of the mountain itself made the climb to its peak quite the trek. Coupled with the intense and striking weather effects that likely made the mountain desirable as a ritual space, it seems clear that the altogether impression of the site was imposing. Further, the rumours surrounding the sacred precinct, that any who entered it were doomed to die within a year, cast a deeper mysteriousness to the place and likely scared off tourists, except perhaps for Pausanias.\textsuperscript{140} Similarly, the islands where human sacrifice was taking place lie far to the east of the Aegean and Mediterranean seas, abutting Asia Minor and the Levantine coast. While they were under the purview of the Mycenaean and later various Greek hegemonies, their distance from the mainland set them as far apart from Greece as other colonies, as their proximity to other lands allowed for a greater degree of non-Greek influence.

Tackling the chronology of human sacrifice in Greece is difficult. Many of the sacrifices discussed in literature are given no date and the authors who write about them usually do so vaguely in terms of time. Each cult seems to have a different end point though, which is not altogether unexpected. The sanctuary of Mount Lykaion went out of use in the third century BCE, likely a result of the founding of Megalopolis nearby, the region’s first major urban center.\textsuperscript{141} Archaeologically there is as yet no activity past this date, although Pausanias references several centuries later that rites are still being conducted there in secret.\textsuperscript{142} The single burial dates to the eleventh century BCE, but there is no way to know when in the history of the practice this sacrifice occurred.\textsuperscript{143} Unless more evidence comes to light, the

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\textsuperscript{140} Paus. 8.38.6. \\
\textsuperscript{141} Urbanus, “A View from the Birthplace of Zeus,” 44. \\
\textsuperscript{142} Paus. 8.38.7. \\
\textsuperscript{143} Urbanus, “A View from the Birthplace of Zeus,” 48.
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only termination is that provided by the literary sources, which differs depending on author. Certainly, the practice must have ended when the Romans swept through the region in the second century BCE, but likely this occurred several centuries earlier at least during the intensified urbanization of the Classical period.

The islands are harder to interpret as the only extant literary evidence comes from Porphyry and much of his work is quoted from unknown material. His information on the Rhodian sacrifice mentions a coinciding festival and the eventual switch from sacrificing a man to putting a criminal to death, and he even describes the rite, but fails to attribute this information to a source. For Chios and Tenedos he at least cites Euelpis Karystios, but he is an unknown author himself and nothing is known about him. The Lakedaimonian sacrifice is sourced to Apollodoros but is simply said to have occurred in the past. Without archaeological evidence it is likely that the practices that occurred on these islands, if they did indeed occur, will remain severed from any chronology.

The societal context that may have factored in to the inceptions of these human sacrificial cults can be relegated into a few categories: extraordinary circumstances, outside influences, and the hierarchy-reinforcing facet of the social control hypothesis. The extraordinary circumstances that were at play were probably also contributing factors to the end of the Bronze Age, namely climate change. The story that served as the impetus for the sacrifice that might have occurred at Halos featured a death in order to end a drought, save failing crops, or avert hunger. The drought that occurred near the tail end of the Bronze Age was likely responsible for such things as failing crops and subsequent hunger, so

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perhaps the youth sacrificed in this period at Mount Lykaion and those said to have been sacrificed at Halos were in response to this mounting disaster.

The sacrifices on the islands to the east are also hard to contextualize given their lack of dates. The only discernible information is from Rhodes. Given the isolation the island experienced following the end of the Bronze Age, it is likely that the practice of human sacrifice was introduced to the island either before this or much later in the Iron Age. Considering Rhodes’ proximity to Phoenicia, it is possible that the two locations were still in contact to some extent during the interim. The same cannot be said of the three islands further to the north, Chios, Lesbos, and Tenedos. Their tradition of human sacrifice probably came from Thrace to the north, but when and how this practice was transmitted is an unknown, and unfortunately requires further and deeper study of the connection between these two areas.

Again, for the islands, ascertaining the social stratification of these places without a specific period is impossible. Mount Lykaion, however, has rich enough material from both ancient Greece authors and modern studies. This region of Arkadia was long viewed by other Greeks as rural and archaic, as discussed previously, and might have functioned as a sort of time capsule of rural Mycenaean culture until the founding of Megalopolis in the third century BCE. This speaks nothing for the level of stratification, however, and simply suggests that there might not have been as extensive of a class system that other Greek regions and city-states had. It has been noted that at a population of over 100,000 people, human sacrifice loses its functionality as a stratifier.¹⁴⁵ While population sizes are difficult to estimate for ancient Greece given the lack of statistical data, the general trend is that the land was

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¹⁴⁵ Spinney, “Did Human Sacrifice Help People Form Complex Societies?”
sparsely populated in the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE with population growth in the
ninth and a peak between the fifth and third centuries. The estimated total population for
mainland Greece in the fourth century BCE is around two million people.\textsuperscript{146} If this was the
height of Greek population density before the common era and if Arkadia was truly as rural
as ancient authors have made it out to be, it is unlikely that the population of the region
exceeded five percent of the total population of the Greek mainland. If human sacrifice
continued until the third century BCE, perhaps it is because it never lost its power as a
hierarchical tool.

The attitudes towards the practice of human sacrifice have come mostly from those
more urbanized areas, Attica and Boeotia, as well as major colonies in the east and west. It is
understandable via the social control hypothesis that human sacrifice in these large cities
was seen as taboo. As noted previously, the majority of the authors who wrote about human
sacrifice either discussed it neutrally or negatively, perhaps corresponding to myths and
historical accounts respectively. This negativity was most likely a result of not needing this
sort of stratification, as these are regions that were historically also demographically dense.

\textsuperscript{146} Roberts, “Greek Population.”
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