



# THE VALUE OF A HUMAN LIFE

Ritual Killing and Human Sacrifice in Antiquity

edited by

Karel C. Innemée



**PALMA 26**

PAPERS ON ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE  
LEIDEN MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES

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PALMA: Papers on Archaeology of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities  
(volume 26)

Published by Sidestone Press, Leiden  
[www.sidestone.com](http://www.sidestone.com)

Layout & cover design: Sidestone Press

Photograph front cover: Tophet de Salammbô, Tunisia by Patrick  
Giraud (CC BY-SA 2.5)

Photograph back cover: Pylon of Medinet Habu by Jacobus van Dijk

Volume editor: Karel C. Innemée

ISBN 978-94-6426-056-4 (softcover)

ISBN 978-94-6426-057-1 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-94-6426-058-8 (PDF e-book)

ISSN 2034-550X

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# Preface

Birth and death, the beginning and the end of a human life, are moments that are surrounded by myths and rituals in all cultures. Where the moment of birth usually announces itself and is surrounded with joy, the moment and the way a human life ends, by natural causes or not, can be unpredictable and is rarely met with positive emotions. Among the unnatural causes of death ritual killing takes a special place. Throughout history and all over the world people have been killed in a ritual way for a variety of reasons. Without exception, ritual killings have provoked emotions of various kinds, first of all to the ones directly involved. Victims, executioners, and bystanders must have been emotionally affected, although few reliable eyewitness accounts are known. The reactions of others who were not witnesses or directly involved are often expressions of horror, rejection and condemnation. Those ‘others’ could be contemporaries belonging to other cultures or religions, but also scholars studying these phenomena (anthropologists, historians, archaeologists) have often expressed their emotions and may have even let them stand in the way of an unbiased view on ritual killing.

Closely related to this is the atmosphere of horror and sensation surrounding ritual killing and human sacrifice, which has been the reason that they became the subjects of countless films and novels, ranging from cheap horror stories to literary works like Gustave Flaubert’s *Salammbô* (1862). For scholars it has not always been easy to correct caricatures and distortions of history that were the result.

Much has been said and written about ritual killing and human sacrifice and this volume is a modest contribution to the discussions surrounding the subject. It is the result of a symposium held on 11 April 2015 at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden, organised in collaboration with the Egyptological society *Huis van Horus*. It coincided with an exhibition about Carthage and was aimed at a wide audience of scholars and interested laypeople, with the intention to present the phenomenon in general and a number of case-studies of ritual killing, in Punic society and other cultures. This publication does not claim by any means to be exhaustive; it is a selection of essays, elaborations of the papers presented at the symposium, by scholars who, each in their field, shed light on questions surrounding ritual killing, and aimed at general readership. They try to do so by presenting the material in a way as unbiased as possible, trying to leave emotions aside, and with a critical look at conclusions and opinions from a recent past.

Karel Innemée

# Ritual homicide in ancient Egypt

Jacobus van Dijk\*

## 3.1. Introduction

Human sacrifice is not the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of the culture of Ancient Egypt, and the question of whether any form of human sacrifice was ever actually practised there is still controversial today. For a long time it was thought (and many still think) that the ancient Egyptians were too civilized to practise such a barbaric custom. They were not to be compared with the Aztecs, for example, who have the bad reputation of practising particularly cruel forms of human sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> In discussions of this subject, a famous episode from a literary text from the early New Kingdom usually comes up. This text, known as the *Tales of Wonder from the Court of King Khufu* (Papyrus Westcar), contains a number of fairytale-like stories situated in the distant past, in the time of the Old Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> One of the narratives concerns a certain magician Djedi, who is rumoured to be able to reattach a decapitated head and restore life to the victim. Pharaoh Khufu, or Cheops as he was known to the Greeks, the builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza, wants to have a demonstration of this and orders a prisoner to be brought to act as guinea pig, but Djedi refuses indignantly because, as he says, “it is forbidden to do such a thing to ‘the noble cattle’”, i.e. to human beings. A duck, a goose and a bull are then successfully used instead. In this tale, King Khufu is clearly depicted as a barbaric despot.

## 3.2. Retainer sacrifice

When discussing human sacrifice, we must differentiate between two main types: so-called *retainer sacrifice*, whereby servants or other subordinates are killed in order to be buried with their master and serve him in the afterlife, and true, *cultic human sacrifice*, whereby people – often but not always convicted criminals or captured enemies – are sacrificed as part of a temple cult (regular or otherwise) to satisfy the gods, maintain cosmic order, etc. About ten years ago, the *Religious Symbols* working group of the department of Religious Studies of the University of Groningen dedicated a symposium to *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, and in the resulting publication I wrote extensively about retainer sacrifice in Egypt and Nubia,<sup>3</sup> and I am therefore not going to dwell on that subject here. That form of human sacrifice was practised

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1 Cf. Trigger, *Early Civilizations* 84. See also Jansen and Pérez Jiménez in this volume.

2 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I*, 218-219; Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 114-115; Borghouts, *Egyptische sagen* 32-33.

3 Van Dijk, ‘Retainer Sacrifice’. See also idem, ‘Dodencultus en dodenpersoneel’.

\*University of Groningen

in Egypt only during the formative phase of the Egyptian central state, during the First Dynasty, as well as during various periods in Nubia. It remains controversial, however, and there are still Egyptologists – mistakenly in my view – who doubt the existence of this practice. Incidentally, I would like to note that I do not share the objections to the use of the term sacrifice in this context raised in the introductory chapter of the present publication. The view that we are not dealing with sacrifices here, but merely with taking one's possessions with one to the other world seems to me to be a false dichotomy. We know virtually nothing about the ritual actions that accompanied retainer sacrifice, nor do we know whether the servants who were killed in order to follow their master to the hereafter were perhaps sacrificed during a ritual performed for a god, for example an early form of the god Osiris, with whom the divine deceased king may have been identified.

### 3.3. Human sacrifice as part of the temple cult

Far more controversial than retainer sacrifice is the cultic, ritual form of human sacrifice. The only more or less concrete indications we have date from the time of the First Dynasty, so from the same period in which retainer sacrifice was practised. They consist of a number of representations on wooden and ivory labels that seem to depict the killing of a kneeling figure in a ritual setting. The interpretation of this scene is extremely difficult given the lack of explanatory text and suitable parallels. It appears to be a royal ritual, but it is not clear at all on which occasion it would have been carried out. It is quite possible that we are dealing here with a ritual that took place during the funeral of the king; in other words, that it depicts an actual retainer sacrifice. The anthropologist and Egyptologist Bruce Trigger, mentioned above, has pointed out that retainer sacrifice and cultic human sacrifice often go hand in hand – when one is discontinued, the other disappears as well.<sup>4</sup> It would therefore appear to be unlikely from the start that cultic human sacrifice could have continued in Egyptian culture after the early dynastic period. Nevertheless, there are a few clues that point in that direction and need explaining.

In the Egyptian temples dating from the Graeco-Roman Period, we have numerous extensively described and illustrated rituals whereby the enemy of the god, of the king, of Egypt and thus of the order of creation, is destroyed. This enemy can take the form of an animal, such as a crocodile, a hippopotamus, a donkey or a pig, and sometimes even that of a human. This has led

some Egyptologists to suppose that people were actually sacrificed to the gods in these late temples. This theory is strengthened by a number of classical authors who report that human sacrifice was practised in Egypt. For example, we read that the Egyptian king Busiris sacrificed foreigners (possibly referring to prisoners-of-war) to Zeus (Amun). In turn, he and his henchmen were killed by Hercules, a theme that also appears in Greek vase painting. Authors such as Plutarch and Diodorus record that 'Typhonic' or 'Sethian' people, who are distinguished by their blond or red hair or other physical characteristics, were used for this. (Typhon is the Greek name for Seth, the god who murdered Osiris, who during the Late Period gradually became a kind of devil in Egyptian religion.)

Such stories were apparently already doing the rounds, at least among the Greeks, in the days of Herodotus, who refers to them in Book II of his *Histories*. However, Herodotus, who actually travelled to Egypt and so does not simply repeat other writers, regarded these rumours as tall stories to which no credibility should be attached: "For me at least such a tale is proof enough that the Greeks know nothing whatever about Egyptian character and custom. The Egyptians are forbidden by their religion even to kill animals for sacrifice, except sheep and such bulls and bull-calves as have passed the test for 'cleanness' – and geese: is it likely, then, that they would sacrifice human beings?"<sup>5</sup> Later Greek and Roman authors report nevertheless that the Egyptians sometimes sacrificed humans, and John Gwyn Griffiths, who collected all of these sources, came to the conclusion that during the pharaonic period human sacrifice may have been very rare but not unknown, and that in the post-pharaonic era, particularly in the Roman Period, human sacrifice was practised regularly.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand there is a reference in Manetho (cited by Porphyry), who says in his *On Ancient Ritual and Religion* that the custom of sacrificing three men a day to the goddess Hera of Heliopolis was abolished by a certain Pharaoh Amosis (either Amasis of the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty or Ahmose of the 18<sup>th</sup>) and replaced by the ritual burning of three wax figurines.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.4. Killing the followers of Seth and Apophis

The French Egyptologist Jean Yoyotte has compared this classical tradition with the sparse Egyptian sources.<sup>8</sup> According to him, human sacrifice did occur from time

4 Trigger, *Early Civilizations*, 97-98.

5 *Histories* II, 45; de Sélincourt, 120; for a Dutch translation see Van Dolen, *Herodotos*, 154. Cf. Lloyd, *Herodotus Book II*, 212-214.

6 Griffiths, 'Human Sacrifice', 409-423.

7 Waddell, *Manetho*, 199-201.

8 Yoyotte, 'Héra d'Héliopolis', 31-102.

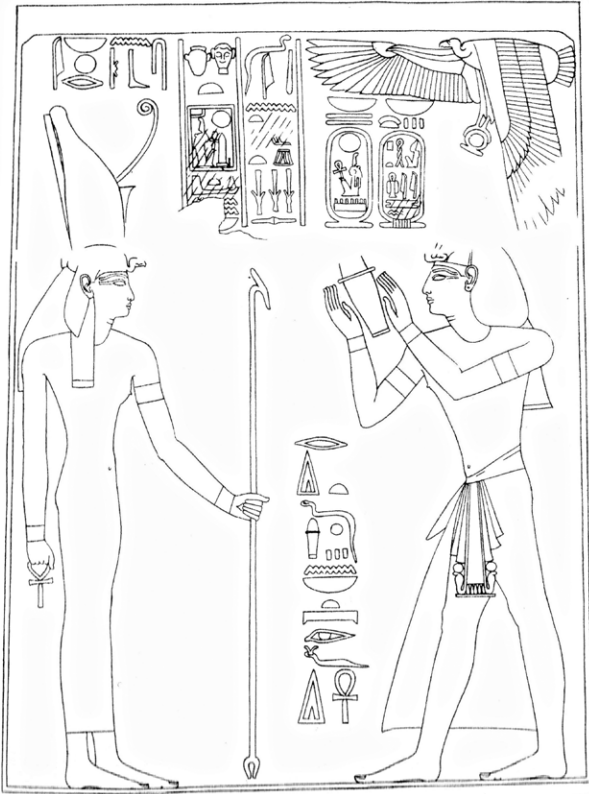


Figure 3.1 Mut *hrt snwt-s* as shown in the Re-Harakhty complex in the Temple of Seti I in Abydos. After: Calverley and Broome, *The Temple of King Sethos I*, Pl. 75, 9C (W).

to time, particularly in the Third Intermediate Period and later. The people who were sacrificed (or the images that represented them) were regarded as followers of Seth, the murderer of Osiris, or of Apophis, the primeval snake who is the enemy of the sun god Re and who attempts to destroy the order of creation. These people were sacrificed as burnt offerings to the daughter of Re, the sun's eye, who protects him and destroys his enemies. This goddess is called Mut or Sakhmet in the Egyptian sources (and sometimes Hathor, Tefnut, Bastet, etc.) and is usually depicted in the form of a lioness. Manetho calls this goddess Hera of Heliopolis, and this Heliopolitan goddess is known in Egyptian sources as Mut *hrt snwt-s*, "Mut who is under her *snwt*" (fig. 3.1). The meaning of the word *snwt* is not clear here; it probably originally meant some sort of wooden poles or raised stones (stelae) that were placed at the entrance of a building to mark someone's property and to ward off enemies. It later also became the word used for the flagpoles raised in front of the pylon of a temple. At some point, the Egyptians themselves obviously no longer knew what "Mut who is under her *snwt*" meant: in the temple of Hibis from the Persian Period, and in several ritual texts from the Late Period, *Mut hrt snwt-s* was changed into *Mut hrt sn-s*, "Mut who is under (i.e. carrying)



Figure 3.2 Mut *hrt sn-s* carrying the mummy of her brother Osiris. After: De Garis Davies, *The Temple of Hibis*, Pl. 3 (vi).

her brother", and she is sometimes depicted carrying the mummy of Osiris (fig. 3.2); she is then obviously perceived as a form of the goddess Isis. In the Late Period, Re and Osiris were more than ever seen as aspects of one and the same god, and the connection with Heliopolis primarily points to a link with the sun god Re.

Mut *hrt sn(wt)-s* also appears in two spells from the *Book of Warding off the Evil One*, whereby both Apophis and Seth are meant. In a passage about Heliopolis, twenty enemies of the sun god are mentioned. They are followers of Apophis, "conspirators who are destined for the slaughter block of the gate of the Horizon". They, their children and grandchildren down to the present day, have taken on the appearance of the human inhabitants of Heliopolis. They are doomed and will burn on the braziers (*ḥw*) of Mut *hrt sn(wt)-s*. The gods of Heliopolis are standing nearby and shout four times: "Re triumphs

over Apophis, Osiris triumphs over the evil Seth!”<sup>9</sup> In another spell from the same book, the rebel is addressed as follows:

You will be destroyed on the slaughter block (*nmt*) intended for Apophis, without your *ba* being able to escape, your body will be burnt on the braziers (*ḥw*) of Mut *hrt sn(wt)=s* (...), who surrounds all those who behave as rebels. They will be consumed by the fire of the Eye of Re. ‘Yes, they are your conspirators!’, one says to Apophis. The Heliopolitans rise up to cause Re to triumph over Apophis, to cause Osiris to triumph over the evil Seth, to cause the king to triumph over his enemies.<sup>10</sup>

This text speaks unequivocally about the burning of human rebels, and such human sacrifices or ritual executions were performed within the framework of the solar cult in Heliopolis. In this context it is interesting that the writer Procopius of Caesarea, who lived in the sixth century AD, says that the Blemmyes and the Noubades, two southern tribes who lived in the region around Philae, were accustomed to sacrifice people to Helios, i.e. the sun god Re, in the Temple of Philae up until the Roman emperor Justinian, who converted to Christianity, ended this practice by closing down all the pagan temples. Junker has linked this comment by Procopius with the illustrations of ritual executions (known as *smꜣ sbiꜣw*, “the killing of the rebel”) on the temple walls at Philae,<sup>11</sup> and both he and Griffiths conclude from this that actual human sacrifices took place at Philae, at least in the Roman Period. It should thus come as no surprise that the following passage can also be read in the Temple of Philae: “May you (a certain god) place those who have evil intentions and who hate the king upon the braziers (*ḥw*) of Mut *hrt sn(wt)=s*, after you have overcome the opponents of His Majesty”.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.5. Ritual execution at the palace or temple gate

But there is another link that is very old indeed, as evidenced by the name Mut *hrt snwt=s*, namely with the façade of a building or the gate of a temple. The *snwt*, as has already been mentioned, stood near the entrance to a building, and this term is also used for the flagpoles in front of the pylon of a temple. In the introduction to

the late (demotic) Instructions of Ankhsheshonqy,<sup>13</sup> it is related that the chief court physician Harsiese, together with a group of military men and other courtiers, hatched a plot to murder the king. But the evil plan was discovered in time and the pharaoh caused an altar with a copper brazier (*ḥ hmt*) to be constructed near the palace gate, and on it Harsiese and his fellow conspirators were burnt. There is a similar passage in a Late Period hieratic literary papyrus, unfortunately in a very fragmentary context.<sup>14</sup> Here, too, people are executed on the orders of the king and placed on a brazier (*ḥ*) in front of Mut *hrt sn(wt)=s* in Heliopolis. Even more fragmentary is a demotic literary papyrus from Saqqara, but here again Pharaoh orders that someone who has fallen from grace (in a conflict involving the priesthood and the army?) “should be placed upon the brazier with his family and his fellow [priests]” and the execution takes place “at the door of the palace”.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, in the passages of the *Book of Warding off the Evil One* that we have just discussed, there is a reference to “the slaughter block (*nmt*) of the gate of the Horizon”. Yoyotte, because of the association with Osiris, connected this location specifically with the entrance to the place where Osiris was mummified,<sup>16</sup> but it seems more likely to me to see this “gate of the Horizon” in more general terms as a reference to the place where the sun rises, i.e. the gateway in the pylon of the temple, which is after all a symbolic representation of the *akhet*, the two hills between which the sun rises.<sup>17</sup>

All of these passages give rise at least to the question of whether, perhaps under certain circumstances, people were indeed sacrificed near the gate to the temple or the palace. A number of years ago, Alan Schulman published a controversial book entitled *Ceremonial Execution and Public Rewards*.<sup>18</sup> It deals with two types of representation, one of which is explained by analogy with the other – a rather risky method, as we shall see. The first group is the well-known representation of a high official being rewarded by the king for outstanding services rendered by being given the ‘gold of honour’.<sup>19</sup> The recipient of

9 Schott, *Urk.* VI, 63: 16-18, 65: 10-13.

10 Schott, *Urk.* VI, 77: 15, 79: 13.

11 Junker, ‘Die Schlacht- und Brandopfer’, 69-77.

12 Bénédite, *Le temple de Philæ*, 116: 19.

13 Smith, ‘The Story of Ankhsheshonqy’, 133-156; translations: Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* III, 163; Stricker, ‘De wijsheid van Anchsjesjongq’, 14.

14 pVandier 5, 12: G. Posener, *Le Papyrus Vandier*, 32-33 and 77.

15 Smith and Tait, *Saqqāra Demotic Papyri* I, 40-41 (Text 1, col. 14, 3-4 and 36). Cf. also Leahy, ‘Death by Fire’.

16 Yoyotte, ‘Héra d’Héliopolis’, 99-101.

17 “Flagpoles (*snwt*) covered with white gold are set up before its façade, it resembles the horizon (*ꜣḥt*) in the sky in which Re arises”, Helck, *Urk.* IV, 1649, 3-5. The roof over the gateway between the pylon towers is dedicated to the cult of the rising and setting sun, see e.g. *Medinet Habu* VI, Pls 430-433 and Stadelmann, ‘*Šwt-Rꜥw*’, 159-178.

18 Cf. Schulman, *Ceremonial Execution*.

19 Binder, *The Gold of Honour*.



Figure 3.3 Votive stelae from Memphis, Newark 29.1788 (left) and Brussels E 2386 (right). After: Schulman, *Ceremonial Execution*, Pls 6 and 4.



this prestigious royal decoration naturally took great pride in it and had this very important event in his life immortalized in his tomb. The second group comprises a number of small stelae, most of which come from Memphis, the royal residence and administrative capital of Egypt. On them we see the owner depicted in obeisance in front of a gateway; in the gate can be seen a representation of the king destroying one or more enemies in front of a god, in these instances usually the god Ptah of Memphis (fig. 3.3). Schulman now concludes that, just like the award ceremony, this scene is also referring to a real, historical event, *i.e.* the ceremonial execution of prisoners-of-war as an offering to the god to thank him for a victory achieved by the king; Schulman postulates that the stela owner was given the privilege of being a witness to this event.

Critics, however, have rightly pointed out that there is not a single scrap of contemporary written or other evidence besides the stelae themselves to support this interpretation. It rests exclusively on the analogy with the reward scenes, but this analogy is not as secure as it may seem to be. During a reward ceremony, it is of course the person in whose tomb it is depicted who is the centre of attention; he derives enormous prestige from it, and this is the reason why it takes pride of place in the tomb decoration of the person in question. The depictions of 'ceremonial executions', on the other hand, appear on votive stelae; the person represented has left his stela at a temple and hopes as a result to receive favours from

the god, such as being healed of a disease, or being given children etc., or wishes to thank the god for similar favours that he already received. This is made very clear by the ears which are sometimes depicted on these stelae and which we know well from other types of votive stelae; they represent the benevolent hearing ear of the god.

The representation of the king who is destroying his enemy is an ancient motif in Egyptian iconography; the oldest examples date from as early as the Predynastic Period. The most familiar are the huge scenes on the façades of the temple pylons (fig. 3.4). These are purely symbolic representations showing the divine pharaoh as the maintainer and protector of cosmic order, *ma'at*; maintaining cosmic order, after all, is what an Egyptian temple is all about. We also know that 'ordinary' people, unlike consecrated priests, were not permitted to enter the actual temple but were allowed to pray to the gods or the divine king or deposit votive offerings to them in the forecourt of the temple, in front of the pylon, where the colossal royal statues were objects of worship. Schulman's stelae must therefore be viewed in this context. The person depicted has dedicated his stela to the god of the temple (Ptah) and to the divine king who is depicted on the pylon of the temple while symbolically destroying the enemy in the presence of Ptah. The stelae do not depict an historical event, but rather show the setting in which the stela owner offers his prayers and his votive offering. Similar scenes of the king destroying his enemies are shown on the private stelae carved into the cliffs in the border area between

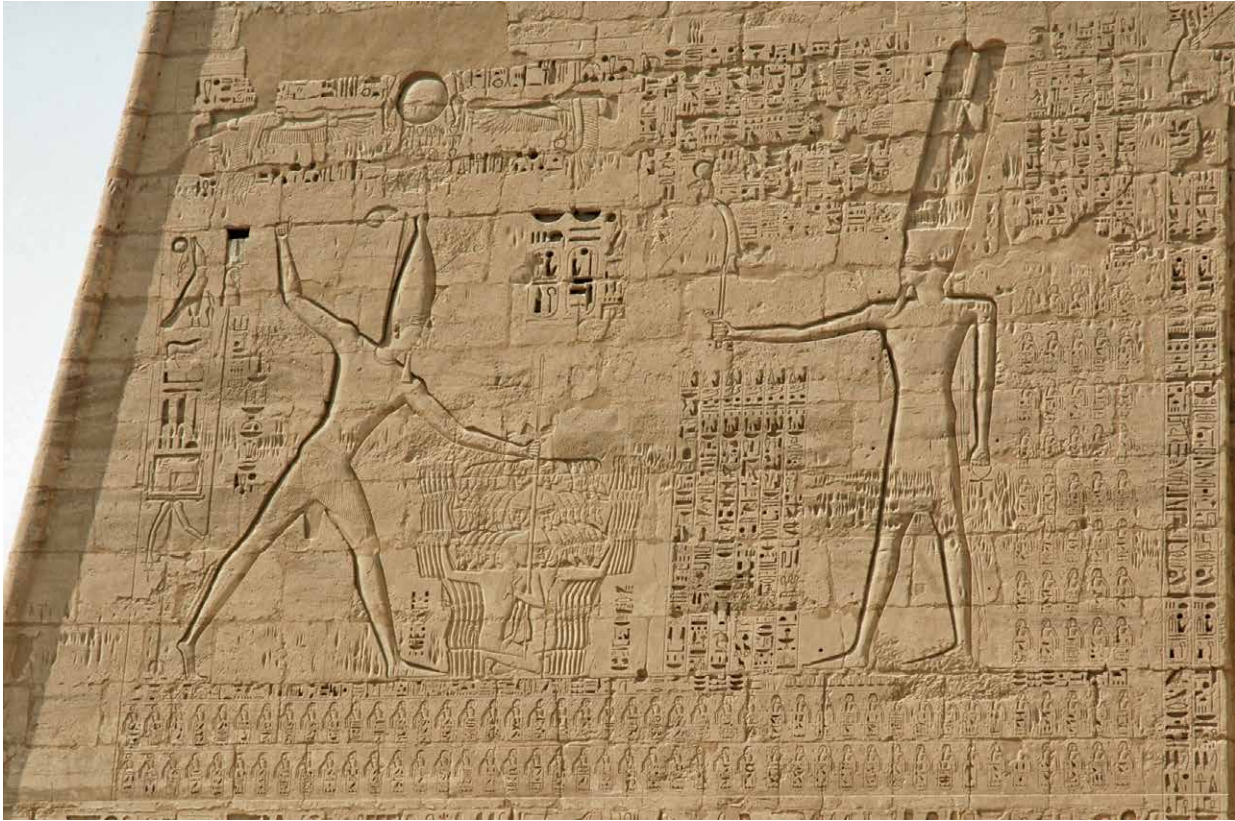


Figure 3.4 The King smiting the enemies before Amun on the Pylon of Medinet Habu. Photo: author.

Egypt and Nubia, for example at Abu Simbel. Although these stelae have a dated inscription, and therefore record a specific occasion, the texts do not ever mention the type of historical event that Schulman wants to see in them. Here, too, they are symbolic representations displaying the pharaoh as the protector of the borders of Egypt and the suppressor of the forces of chaos. None of these scenes, it should be noted, make any reference to goddesses like Mut or Sakhmet, let alone Mut *hrt sn(wt)-s*, as one might have expected had they been depictions of real executions.

### 3.6. Altars near the temple gate

Schulman's claim thus holds no water, but his thesis that ritual executions took place near the gates of a temple or palace cannot simply be relegated to the world of fantasy, given the passages that we have examined earlier. Incidentally, it is rather surprising that Schulman in his book never refers to the studies by Griffiths and Yoyotte, or even to the classical authors. In this context, it is interesting that several temples from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods contain huge altars, which were usually erected immediately inside the pylon, in the first courtyard. Anyone who has been to Karnak will remember those in the temple of Amun (fig. 3.5). There were originally two of

them, but only the northern example is still in situ. They are very large, almost square altars with flat tops on which triangular blocks were originally placed at each of the four corners, creating a typical horned altar.

This is a type of altar that was imported into Egypt from Syria-Palestine, probably not before the Ptolemaic Period.<sup>20</sup> Behind the Amun temple, in the open space between the rear wall of the temple and what is known as the contra-temple, is one of the best-preserved examples, complete with 'horns' and with a stairway granting access to the upper surface of the altar (fig. 3.6).

In the temple of the goddess Opet, adjacent to the Khonsu temple, there is also one of these altars just inside the gate, missing its horns but with a stairway. It was excavated in the early 1950s by Alexandre Varille,<sup>21</sup> who says that traces of fire could still be seen on the upper surface.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, a granite statue of the goddess Mut-Sakhmet, the goddess known as the "mistress of the slaughter block" (*nbt nmt*), was placed beside the altar

20 Quaegebeur, 'L'autel-à-feu'.

21 Varille, 'La grande porte du temple d'Apet à Karnak', 79-118; cf. p. 108, fig. 9, and Pls XVII-XVIII.

22 Varille, 'La grande porte', 109.

Figure 3.5 One of two large altars inside the First Pylon of the Temple of Amun, Karnak. Photo: author.



Figure 3.6 Horned altar with walled staircase between the rear of the Temple of Amun and the Contra-temple, Karnak. Photo: author.



(fig. 3.7).<sup>23</sup> The scenes on the gateway immediately next to it record the destruction of the king's enemies before a god. On the left, the god says: "I will cause you to triumph over your enemies", and on the right: "I will cause the rebel to fall on your slaughter block (*nmt*)" (fig. 3.8).

In the temple of Mut, too, there used to be such an altar, again immediately inside the entrance gate. Unfortunately not much more of it remains than two huge loose blocks, on one of which is a graffito of a horned animal. Here, too, it can clearly be seen where the blocks that formed the horns of the altar were placed. We also know of similar huge

<sup>23</sup> This statue is one of the several hundred statues of Mut-Sakhmet which originally stood in the mortuary temple of Amenhotep III on the Theban West Bank (Kom el-Hetan) and in the Temple of Mut in Karnak. On one of them the goddess is called *nbt snwt*, "mistress of the *snwt*" (Louvre A 4).



Figure 3.7 Altar with staircase and statue of Mut-Sakhmet inside the gate of the Opet Temple, Karnak. Photo: author.

altars at Medamud and Coptos.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, not a single one of these altars is inscribed; the only exception is an earlier altar from Medamud, the blocks of which were reused in the foundation of the (Roman) altar just mentioned and which is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (fig. 3.9).<sup>25</sup> It has detailed reliefs showing all kinds of sacrificial animals and inscriptions derived from the traditional offering liturgy that unfortunately tell us nothing specific about this kind of altar.

Given the location of these huge open-air altars right beside the entrance gates to the temple, and the passages from Egyptian and classical texts, it seems likely that *if* people were actually sacrificed in an Egyptian temple, it would have been on these altars. Once again, however, unequivocal evidence is lacking. Numerous sacrificial animals are depicted on the Medamud altar in the Cairo Museum, but no humans. The few representations that we have of these altars also only show animals and never people. Even though the inscriptions on the gateway by the altar in the Opet temple speak of “enemies” and

the “rebel”, the sacrificial animals depicted are bulls (see fig. 3.8).

The question thus again arises how literally we should take all these texts and descriptions. Sacrificial animals have been used as symbols of the enemies of the god and the king since the Pyramid Texts, if not earlier, and on these altars, too, it may have been animals being sacrificed that only in the religious vocabulary are being represented as human enemies. The punishing of the evildoers, *i.e.* those whose behaviour places them outside cosmic order (*maʿat*), and who thus prove that they belong in the world of the primeval chaos that rules outside the cosmic order, is also a motif that appears in numerous Egyptian religious texts and representations, most explicitly in the so-called Books of the Underworld in the royal tombs of the New Kingdom, such as the Amduat, the Book of Gates, the Book of Caverns, etc. In these books, the forces of chaos are permanently punished and killed, and great emphasis is placed on the doomed being cut into pieces and burnt or cooked in huge cauldrons.<sup>26</sup> It is a giant leap, however, from these representations of ancient Egyptian hell to a ritual practice of actual human sacrificial victims on earth.

24 Medamud: Bisson de la Roque, *Rapport sur les Fouilles*, 25-28, figs 20-21; Coptos: Traunecker, *Coptos*, Pl. Vb.

25 Cairo JE 54853 (see <http://www.globalegyptianmuseum.org/record.aspx?id=15863>; accessed 18 June 2016). See Bisson de la Roque, *Rapport* (1926), 26-28, figs 22-23. It dates from the reign of Ptolemy III.

26 Hornung, *Altägyptische Höllenvorstellungen*; Van Dijk, ‘Hell’.

Figure 3.8 Inscriptions describing the offerings in the reliefs on the interior side of the gate of the Opet Temple, Karnak. Photos: author.

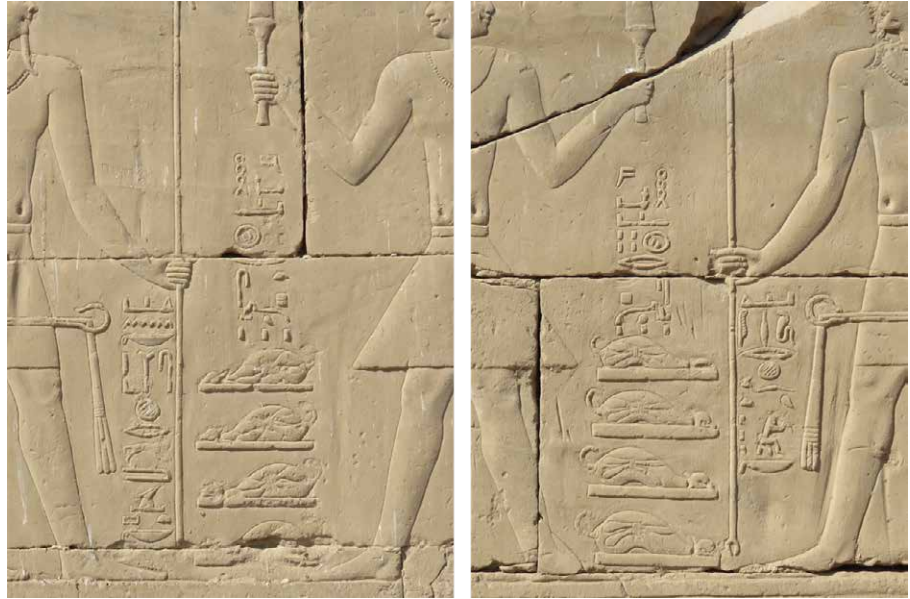
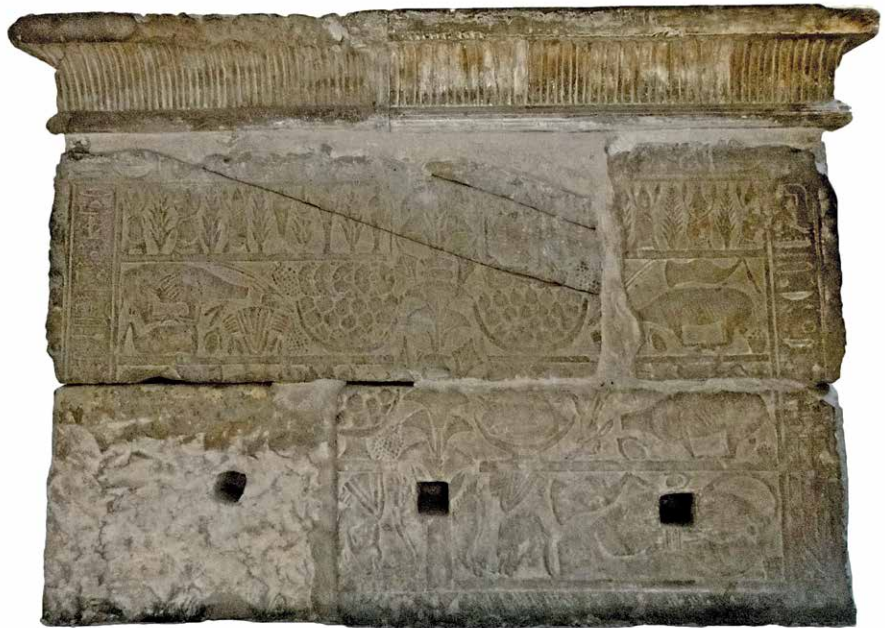


Figure 3.9 Large altar of Ptolemy III from Medamud, Egyptian Museum Cairo JE 54853.



### 3.7. Execution as a last resort

In one of the Egyptian wisdom texts, the Instruction for Merikare, it is said that killing as a punishment is not “useful”, thus counterproductive. “Punish with beatings and with imprisonment, so that the land remains in good order”, says the writer, but he does make a clear exception for “the rebel whose plan is discovered”.<sup>27</sup> Such a person must be expelled from society and killed, his name must be eradicated and his fellow perpetrators must be destroyed. And as we have already seen, Ankhsheshonqy also says that those who want to topple the divine pharaoh are burnt on an altar near the gate to the palace. Serious crimes such as conspiracy or the theft of temple equipment, *i.e.* the property of

<sup>27</sup> Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I*, 100; Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 220.

the god, were punishable in Ancient Egypt with the death penalty,<sup>28</sup> and burning (dead or alive) was one of the most radical options; after all, the body was then destroyed for good and continued life in the hereafter made impossible.

In Moa'lla in the Middle Kingdom, as Harco Willems has shown,<sup>29</sup> representatives of Apophis, the enemy of cosmic order, were sacrificed during the processional feast of the local god Hemen; in addition to the animal sacrifices made on that occasion (bull, hippopotamus, fish), criminals such as tomb robbers were also killed. This could be called a human sacrifice, because the victims were killed in a ritual setting in the presence of a god, but it is also possible to view this event as a legal issue, the implementation of the death penalty, an act that in the context of an ancient culture like that of the Egyptians more or less automatically took on a religious character.<sup>30</sup> After all there was no separation of 'church' and 'state'; the laws of the state were determined by *ma'at*, the cosmic order bequeathed by the creator god.

But even if we interpret such ritual executions as sacrifices to the god, we are still a long way from a regular practice of human sacrifice within the framework of the temple cult, even though Manetho says that the practice abolished by Pharaoh Amosis concerned three people a day.

### 3.8. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that there is no proper hard evidence for the cultic practice of human sacrifice in the Egyptian temple cult. The crucial question still remains whether it was really human beings who were sacrificed and not symbolic substitutes, such as certain sacrificial animals<sup>31</sup> or wax or wooden statuettes of people,<sup>32</sup> as Manetho also records. The few bits of evidence that we have seem to point to individual, ritualized executions of criminals or rebels against the legal authority of the pharaoh rather than to regular sacrificial practices.

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28 Cf. Muhlestein, 'Royal Executions', 181-208, who produces arguments for expanding the range of crimes punishable by execution even during the Middle Kingdom. In an inscription of Senwosret I in Tôd "priests who do not know how to worship", criminals (? *bskw-ib*) who go about stealing, and "those who enjoy stirring up rebellion", in short, all those who have violated the temple domain are put on the brazier (*ḥ*) where "they burn for him (the god) like torches", Barbotin and Clère, 'L'inscription de Sésostri Ier', 1-33, cols. 28-30.

29 Willems, 'Crime, Cult and Capital Punishment'.

30 On this problem see Muhlestein, *Violence in the Service of Order*; idem, 'Sacred Violence' and Müller-Wollermann, *Vergehen und Strafen*, 195-196.

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31 Cf. the passage in Pap. Leiden T 32 (col. IV: 4-5) which says that the ferocious Sakhmet and her emissaries are appeased by the smell of burnt offerings of goats and pigs and not, it may be emphasized, by sacrifices of human enemies. Cf. Herbin, *Le livre de parcourir l'éternité*, 57, 172 and cf. 363; Stricker, 'De Egyptische Mysteriën', 27.

32 Cf. Raven, 'Wax in Egyptian Magic'. As Raven points out, wax images symbolising the enemy are already attested in the Coffin Texts (Spell 37) from the Middle Kingdom.

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## Abbreviations

- ACE = The Australian Centre for Egyptology  
AnnÉPHÉ = Annuaire [de l']École Pratique des Hautes  
Études, V<sup>e</sup> Section, Sciences religieuses  
ASAE = Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte  
ASAW = Abhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der  
Wissenschaften, Philologisch-historische Klasse  
BAR = British Archaeological Reports  
BIFA = Bulletin de l'Institut Française d'Archéologie  
Orientale du Caire  
ÉPRO = Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales  
dans l'Empire Romain  
JEA = Journal of Egyptian Archaeology  
JEOL = Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Ge-  
nootschap Ex Oriente Lux  
JESHO = Journal of the Economic and Social History of the  
Orient  
MDAIK = Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen  
Instituts, Abteilung Kairo  
MMAF = Mémoires publiés par les membres de la Mission  
Archéologique Française au Caire  
OBO = Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis  
OIP = Oriental Institute Publications  
OLA = Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta  
OMRO = Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmu-  
seum van Oudheden te Leiden  
Urk = Urkunden des ägyptischen Altertums  
ZÄS = Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und  
Altertumskunde



## THE VALUE OF A HUMAN LIFE

Throughout the millennia and all over the world people have been killed by others, not only in wars and as a result of murders, but also in a ritualised way, often called human sacrifice. Much has been written about this, and research and discussion about ritual killing continue. This book offers contributions to this ongoing discussion, by a re-evaluation of the term human sacrifice, arguing that not all forms of ritual killing can be considered to be sacrificial.

Experts from different disciplines present new insights into the subject of ritual homicide in various regions of the ancient world. Various aspects of the phenomenon are discussed, such as offering humans to gods, making servants accompany their masters into the hereafter, and ritual killing in connection with execution of criminals and captives.

While in some cultures ritual killing was accepted, others would consider it a symptom of barbarism and would use it as a reason or pretext for hostility, war, or genocide. Thus the Romans justified the violence against Carthage partly because of this, early Christians were accused of infanticide, while in turn they accused Jews of the same. The Spanish conquistadores used the argument to justify the genocide on indigenous Americans. The last chapter concerns one of the last surviving forms of ritual killing in recent history: headhunting among the Asmat.

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ISBN: 978-94-6426-056-4



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