

Perhaps no aspect of the ancient pagan religion has been more misunderstood than animal sacrifice. The usual view is that the pagans were bloodthirsty and wanton killers of innocent victims. In fact, sacrifice was one of the more civilized things about paganism. It was for the most part a ceremonial way of killing an animal prior to consumption: a way of acknowledging a genuine gift from the gods, since red meat was a rare part of the ordinary person's diet. True, the Greeks in particular had many occasions on which they offered up the whole animal to the gods, leaving no part for human consumption; this was the original sense of the word "holocaust", which means "burning whole". However, these were solemn ceremonies, charged with a religious feeling which we do ill to belittle. For the rest, it may well be pointed out that we moderns consume hundreds of times the amount of meat that the ancients did, and think ourselves more civilized because most of us do not have to do the killing with our own hands. Yet the killing is done by someone.

A Greek myth traced the origin of sacrifice to a prehistoric event at a place called Mekone, where, we are told, "gods and men were first divided by quarrel" (Hesiod, Theogony 535). Prometheus, the champion of humankind, deceived Zeus into picking the less tempting of two sacrificial bundles; Zeus picked the one wrapped in fat, believing it to be good meat, but found that Prometheus had hidden nothing but bones within. (This event set the pattern forever; the inedible parts were burned for the gods in historical times.) In anger at the deception (although Hesiod tells us Zeus allowed himself to be deceived - he is all-wise, of course), Zeus kept

fire from mortals. But Prometheus stole it back, whereupon Zeus inflicted an even greater punishment on mankind, in the form of - woman-kind. (Hesiod had a dim view of women.) Putting together this story with hints from other parts of Hesiod's work, we surmise that all this was connected with the end of the Golden Age, a time when gods and men did not quarrel but lived on earth together, when nature spontaneously produced food without cultivation, and when humans were all but immortal. Now we live in the Iron Age, when life is short and filled with disease, work, poverty and uncertainty. The central ritual of paganism, animal sacrifice, is said by the myth to mark the point at which the decline began. The whole Greek attitude to life and the gods is therefore reflected in the story, which is not, of course, a true history of the past, but an allegorical or symbolic explanation of the way the contemporary world was understood. It is a coded statement that has to be decoded to yield its true meaning. It is significant that the story is marked by unpleasantness: deceit, theft, punishment, and disharmony all play a part. Fire, the symbol of our technological superiority to the animals, is begrudged to us by the gods; they would rather we were animals too. We are not, however; the story emphasizes our self-reliance and superiority on the one hand (in comparison with animals), but our inferiority and utter helplessness on the other (with respect to the gods). This concern with the status of mortality, and the assumption that the world is essentially hostile, are central to Greek mythology and religious feeling. To make the point plain, contrast the story of the Last Supper, which lies behind

the central ritual of Christianity (Communion); contrast too the kinds of emotions and attitudes found there with those of the Greek myth. In the Christian sacrament the emphasis is placed on union with the divinity, love, remembrance, and the promise of eternal reward - the return of the Golden Age, in a way.

Sacrifice could be offered on many occasions (and did not always have to be an animal sacrifice: "bloodless" sacrifices of fruits, vegetables or cakes were appropriate in certain situations, and ordinary folk might offer almost any household object in prayer or thanksgiving.) The Greeks tended to offer sacrifice on certain types of irregular occasions (for example, when swearing an oath, when crossing into enemy territory, when commencing battle, when propitiation of angry gods was called for by the presence of plague or famine), although they did have regular festivals at which huge public sacrifices (i.e. feasts) were normal. The Romans, on the other hand, favoured an elaborate calendar of regular sacrifice, designed to ensure by the continuous flow of gifts the smooth operation of the divine machinery which, in turn, guaranteed the prosperity of earthlings. The Romans' attitude ("do ut des") was more ritualistic, and their sacrificial procedures and formulas were far more elaborate than the Greeks'. At times they seem more primitive, yet their keen sense of the ubiquitous power of the divine can be called more truly religious. It is hard not to respect the simple piety of the prayer recommended by the elder Cato (234-149 B.C.): "Iuppiter, te hoc ferto (a kind of cake) obmovendo bonas preces precor uti sies volens propitius mihi

liberisque meis domo familiaeque mac-tus hoc ferto."

The basic elements of the animal sacrifice were quite similar in both Greek and Roman cultures. The animal (normally a cow or bull, pig or sheep; goats were not as common in Rome as in Greece) was first ceremoniously decorated and led to the altar. The priest next called for silence ("euphemeite", "favete lingu-is") to ensure that no words of ill omen were spoken. Hands were washed as an act of ritual purification. Barley groats (oulochytai/ mola salsa - salt was added in the Roman rite) were sprinkled on the altar and the victim's head. The animal was further dedicated in Greek ritual by the removal of a lock of hair from the forehead, in Roman ritual by passing a knife over its back from head to tail. At this point the priest or priestess offered the appropriate prayer, and the beast was slaughtered by cutting the jugular artery. Blood was splattered on the altar, although no great importance was attached to it as there is in the sacrificial prescriptions of the Old Testament. The entrails were inspected for omens (this was very regular in Roman sacrifice). The parts of the animal appropriate for the gods' consumption were burned on the altar; naive popular imagination actually thought the gods needed the smoke as physical nourishment, just as we need food. Aristophanes makes fun of this in The Birds; the city of the birds in the sky ("Clouduckooborough", Nephelokokkygia) intercepts smoke rising from the altars below, and starves the gods into submitting to the birds' demands. Finally, the remaining parts of the animal were prepared for human consumption.