

Scapegoat Ritual in Ancient Greece

By Christina Vester

It is February 2005. On account of failed labour negotiations between the National Hockey League Players Association and the team owners, it was recently announced that the 2004/05 season is canceled. Tongue firmly in cheek, I wish to propose both a cause and a solution to this situation. First then, a serious ailment must have spread through the professional hockey community and caused this outcome (in my opinion, there is no other conceivable diagnosis). Second, as a shared illness may well be affecting this group of people, a situation somewhat paralleled in ancient Greek times, a remedy might be found in the ancient Greek scapegoat ritual.

During periods of famine, plague, pestilence, or some other hardship, the ancient Greeks responded by choosing a person from within their community, ritually transferring the communal afflictions onto him, and then by driving him beyond the boundaries of the state. This was a curious process, and one marked by contradictions. It is my purpose to describe the ancient Greek scapegoat ritual, and to briefly discuss some of the more paradoxical aspects of the process. The *pharmakos* ritual is attested in Chaeronea, Abdera, Massilia, Athens, Greek Asia Minor, and Leucas. These two fragmentary texts, one by Petronius (1st century CE), and the other by Hipponax (6th century BCE), describe the ritual: "Sacred" means "accursed." This expression is derived from a Gallic custom. For whenever the people of Massilia were burdened with pestilence, one of the poor would volunteer to be fed for an entire year out of public funds on food of special purity. After this period he would be decked with sacred herbs and sacred robes, and would be led through the whole state while people cursed him, in order that the sufferings of the whole state might fall upon him; and so he was cast out. This account has been given in Petronius.

The *pharmakos* was an ancient form of purification as follows. If a disaster, such as famine or pestilence or some other blight, struck a city because of divine wrath, they led the ugliest man of all as if to a sacrifice in order to purify and cure the city's ills. They set the victim in an appropriate place, put cheese, barley cake and dried figs in his hand, flogged him seven times on the penis with squills, wild fig branches, and other wild plants, and finally burned him on wood from wild trees and scattered his ashes into the sea and winds in order to purify the city of its ills, as I said. ... But Hipponax describes the whole custom best...

Variations of this religious procedure were carried out in Leucas, Athens, and Chaeronea, either at times of communal danger or at yearly festivals. Although the texts describing these places and the ritual are not here quoted, what was carried out in those places has been added into the following list of characteristics common to the ritual: the gods were angry and laid a state of danger and suffering upon the people; the scapegoat ritual responded to their wrath, or was enacted yearly at a festival called the Thargelia to ward this off; an individual, usually one on the margins of Greek society, was singled out as the *pharmakos*, either by volunteering himself or by being chosen by the civic body; this person was maintained at public expense for some time, fed with choice foods and clothed in special garments; at the end of the year the scapegoat was dressed in special or sacred clothing, bedecked with particular plants or other objects, and driven from the

city; this was done while the civic body hurled curses at the *pharmakos*, struck him with squills or wild fig branches, or pelted him with stones; in the most violent of endings, the scapegoat leapt to his death from a cliff into the sea, or was stoned to death, cremated, and his ashes flung into the sea. Once the scapegoat had left the boundaries of the city, or of life, the citizens considered the community cleansed and saved.

Now let me turn to the contradictions of ancient Greek scapegoat ritual. The cleansing and salvation of an endangered and polluted community was dependent upon a person both powerful and weak, polluted yet capable of purifying, part of and apart from his community, marginal and yet exceedingly important. However, as he moved from one state of being to its opposite, so too did the community undergo a radical inversion, changing from being contaminated and at risk to cleansed and saved. The ritual included clear signposts to mark the changes that the *pharmakos* made in moving from one state to another. When chosen, the *pharmakos* was on the periphery of society (as stated above by Petronius and Hipponax, the man was either poor or exceedingly ugly). However, after being marked out as the scapegoat, he left behind his marginal status and was treated as a man of importance for a period of time. He was both part of the society, as he was a denizen of a city suffering from plague or pestilence, but also above it, in that he received nourishment at public expense and thus lived beyond the commonplace worries of his fellow citizens. By the final stage of the ritual, he had become an exceedingly powerful man, capable of carrying all the suffering of the civic body away from the state and into the wild. As such he was outfitted in sacred robes, fed ritual food, and bedecked with special plants, animals, or objects, all of which marked him out as a man of prominence, and invested him with ritual power. When the cursing, beating, and stoning began, the close daily contact between the *pharmakos* and society was severed. Rather than causing more pollution, which would normally be incurred by injuring a fellow citizen, the cursing and beating apparently transferred the affliction from the people to the scapegoat, and once he was gone, so too had the plague or pestilence crossed from inside to outside the city. Order was restored through the inversion of the scapegoat's status. On account of his dramatic and speedy transformation into the polluted, marginal, cursed, outsider, the community was able to clearly demarcate the boundaries between clean and polluted, saved and doomed.

While the Hittites used rams, mice, bulls, and effigies in their *pharmakos* rituals, the Greeks used humans exclusively. However, the most striking differences between the Hittite and Greek rituals lie in the person chosen and the violence by which the evil is transferred. As has been well noted in scholarly work, the *pharmakos* was of marginal status. As Tzetzes describes him, the scapegoat was the most ill-formed of all, an observation paralleled in other texts. Ancient works discussing Abdera and Massilia point out that those who were very poor traded their lives for one year of food and drink. Strabo tells us that in Leucas criminals were flung from the cliffs for the sake of averting evil. That the ugly, poor and criminal were chosen on account of their marginal status raises an important question. Were the Greeks offering 'inferior' persons as substitutes? Was it 'right' to expect salvation after transferring a society's misfortunes onto someone deformed, poor, or criminal, who was to be driven from the community? It must be noted that contemporary ideas of morality have no bearing here. If morality principles were conflicting, pollution rules and rites most likely dispersed criticism. After the restoration of order, the efficacy of the ritual would have been reinforced and the tradition continued.

Moreover, the scapegoat's standing was reversed by the process of feeding, clothing and adorning him. As Jan Bremmer points out, "the people realized that they could not save their own skin by sacrificing the scum of the polis, ... the scapegoat was always treated as a very important person." Marginal characters were most likely chosen for another reason. As they were in a state of crisis due to plague or pestilence, the Greek cities needed to invert their situation. By transforming a man into a *pharmakos*, from a marginal/safe/clean fellow citizen to one honoured/powerful/clean, and finally to one polluted/accursed/doomed, the state achieved societal safety.

The term "scapegoat" has become rather weaker over time, as has the ritual. In suggesting that the hockey community find salvation in this practice, I am neither making light of what was obviously a serious undertaking in antiquity, nor of the hockey season impasse. I am simply suggesting that the league choose one or two from within their community, expel them, and say as the Greeks did, "Out with hunger and in with wealth and health". Societal happiness would surely be ensured.

Further reading:

Bremmer, J. 1983. "Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece." *HSCP* 87: 299-320.

Burkert, W. 1985. *Greek Religion*. tr. John Raffan. Cambridge, MA.

Douglas, M. 1966. *Purity and Danger*. London.

Frazer, Sir J.G. 1950 [1922]. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. New York.