

Iron Age Ritual Murder

--by Kirk Thomas

Dying for the Gods: Human Sacrifice in Iron Age & Roman Europe, by Miranda Aldhouse-Green, 2001. Stroud, UK: Tempus Publishing Inc.; ISBN 0-7524-2528-5 paperback 2002; £17.99 and US\$29.99, 203 pp., 106 illus.

The idea of human sacrifice is distasteful to most people, and has been used by Pagans to attack Christians and vice versa over the past two millennia. Christianity attempted to redefine the concept of sacrifice by asserting that Christ's acceptance of His Father's will was the last blood sacrifice ever again needed, that all the sacrifices of the Old Testament merely foreshadowed that final one, and that the act of Communion allowed later peoples to participate in that sacrifice. Modern ADF Pagans have revived the idea of sacrifice, concentrating on the offering of foodstuffs, art and music while usually avoiding blood-letting. But an understanding of how the ancients viewed sacrifice is necessary for us to imagine how anyone could think that human sacrifice might be a proper and pious religious action. The idea of human sacrifice was quite out of fashion for archeologists for some time, when in 1998 Miranda Green began speaking and writing about it publicly. For the ancients, blood sacrifice was a primary way that people could be sure of establishing reciprocal relationships with those powers greater than themselves. These sacrifices required a mediator of some kind that could pierce the veils separating this world from the other worlds of spirit, and this mediator (preferably an animal or human) could only manage to accomplish this through a sacrificial death. For sacrifice was often a defensive act, used to drive away evil spirits, to enlist the good will of dangerous entities and as 'thanks offerings' for the repayment of a debt or for help in recovery from an illness or just for a run of good luck. Normally, domestic animals (and occasionally plant stuffs) would be used as this sacrificial mediator, and often the meat would be shared with the gods by the people in a communal meal (though holocausts also occurred). In ancient Athens, for example, sacrificial meat was the only animal protein available to most people. Cannibalism is rare in the archeological record, so human sacrifice, if it existed, must have fulfilled some other function than that of the shared, communal meal. In this book, Miranda Aldhouse-Green has taken the concept of *substitution*, first articulated by E. Westermarck in 1906, and expanded it beyond the idea of offering one life

so that another life can be spared. While there are many kinds of sacrifice, substitution, as used by Green, applies primarily to the immolation of animals or people. Since sacrifice is performed with the expectation of receiving something in return, self interest is usually involved. And while self-sacrifice might be the highest form of sacrifice, the form most desirable to the Gods, it leaves the problem that the sacrificer would not be alive to receive any benefit. Thus the theory of substitution enters in, where something (or someone) of lesser value is sacrificed in the place of the sacrificer, and this idea of substitution is central to the entire practice. Usually, an animal would stand in for the sacrificer, but occasionally, especially in times of stress, a human of low status might be considered more desirable (as this would be the closest type of substitution for the person making the sacrifice). These victims were usually criminals, war captives, hostages, children or people with disabilities who could all be considered expendable by society. Other possible victims may have been seers and priests who may have been sent to intercede directly with the Gods. The author also notes, interestingly, that in later years, animals (and even puppets in the case of Rome) would be substituted for the human sacrifices of earlier years. From the discussion of the theory of human sacrifice, Green then goes on to explore the evidence, from classical literature to the latest archeological findings, to try and shed light on this highly controversial topic.

While mentioning the many classical sources concerning human sacrifice in the ‘barbarian’ parts of Europe, Aldhouse-Green correctly acknowledges the problem that the classical authors might not be altogether reliable, as they tended to cite one another’s works with little first-hand experience, and probably had strong cultural prejudices that colored their writings. However, the author puts forward a very convincing case for the existence of human sacrifice in Iron Age and Roman Europe through a series of chapters based on the archeological evidence for different types of death. Deaths by burning come first, followed by those involving the spilling of blood, then the practice of head-hunting and the cult of the head, and finally those of suffocation, drowning and burial while alive. In all of these, the classical sources are cited, where they exist, and parallels are drawn to well-documented practices in North Africa and the Middle East, but the primary evidence given is archeological. Most human remains found by archeologists consist of bones, which can only reveal evidence of certain types of trauma, such as the breaking of bones, or show the possibility that limbs were tied together during burial. And these finds can be quite suggestive. At the Celtic cult site of Acy-Romance in France,

archeologists found a group of bodies of young men of fighting age that had been carefully dried in caskets deep under the cult building, and then brought out and buried in sitting positions under the terrace in front of the temple, as though they were living guardians or sentinels. At a time when cremation was the primary burial custom (2nd and 1st centuries B.C.E.), this group of men had to be quite low status, and probably captured enemies - prime sacrificial fodder. But there was no evidence of how these young men died. The discovery of human remains in peat bogs, the author points out, gives a much clearer picture of how these people met their deaths, as their skin, hair, soft tissues and clothing have been preserved in the anaerobic environment. Lindow Man (Lindow II) suffered a triple death – he sustained a blow to the head, was garroted and had his throat cut. Other victims were garroted or hanged, had their throats cut or even drowned in the bogs, their bodies held down under the water by stakes and bundles of branches (normally used for temporary fencing) called ‘hurdles.’ This contention, that the bog bodies are the remains of sacrificial victims, is not without controversy. Some archeologists maintain that these bodies could simply be those of people who fell in the bogs and drowned accidentally, with the wounds found by archeologists occurring sometime after death. The presence of branches and hurdles on top of the bodies could simply be due to limbs falling into the water after death, or as evidence of rescue attempts before death. They also maintain that the bodies found their way into the bogs at a much later date than the first or second century C.E. in any case, when human sacrifice was no longer practiced. Aldhouse-Green barely mentions these arguments, dismissing them as “not convincing.”

But even while bearing these criticisms in mind, *Dying For the Gods* is a very powerful, thought-provoking and well argued book. The author examines evidence from all over Europe and gives a clear and concise view of what may have been a fairly rare but nonetheless central religious practice in the cultures of the time, including those of the Mediterranean coasts (even though the Romans used the barbarity of human sacrifice as an excuse to destroy the Druids during their conquests of Gaul and Britain, there were at least two recorded instances of human sacrifice in Rome during the Republic). The evidence for human sacrifice in northern and central Europe appears overwhelming, and Miranda Aldhouse-Green has done an excellent job in demonstrating its widespread nature.