

HUMAN SACRIFICES IN EARLY DYNASTIC EGYPT: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MIRAGE?

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Researchers have long advanced the idea that human sacrifice was practiced in Egypt in the last third of the 4th millennium B. C., reaching their supposed apogee with the instauration of the Egyptian state around 3000 B.C.

The theory of “human sacrifices” was first formulated by Petrie in 1901, based on the iconography of Early Dynastic jar labels, and then in 1936 by G. A. Reisner, based on royal funerary architecture unearthed in Abydos. It was never really tested and, quite to the contrary, was re-used and embellished, especially since the re-opening of excavations at Abydos by G. Dreyer and D. O’Connor. These ostentatious acts would have been carried out as a tool to make invincible the absolute political and religious power of the newly founded state.

The argument supporting the theory of “human sacrifices” is based on two main points. Firstly, it is based on the iconographic study of a few First-Dynasty ivory jar labels engraved with difficultly read scenes: two individuals, one the executioner and one the victim, facing off, in the supposed context of a religious ceremony. Secondly, the theory is based on the presence around the Abydos royal tombs of less-important graves belonging to the king’s entourage. These subsidiary graves are indicated by different researchers as burials of sacrificed victims, based on three characteristics: their great number (*e. g.* several hundreds in the case of Djer) viewed as abnormal, their proximity to each royal grave (particularly as for the later ones, stuck to the Qaa and Semerkhet graves), and the supposition that all of the deceased were buried at the same time as the king (despite no remain of tomb roofs).

In addition to these two arguments is a study of a set of bones scattered on part of the royal cemetery near the grave of Aha at Abydos. The preliminary results indicate the age and gender (mostly males) of a group of individuals analyzed as an “anomalous” sample, which consequently are, according to G. Dreyer, sacrificed retainers. As for the argument of the sealing of several graves together, it was reiterated by D. O’Connor for another archaeological area comprising funerary enclosures, located 1.5 kilometers from the royal cemetery: a layer of plaster covers six joined graves, that he explains by human sacrifice.

Lastly, the theory of “human sacrifice” was recently dusted-off and applied to the pre-dynastic context after the finding of some human skeletons bearing evidence of incisions interpreted as sacrificial practices (El Adaima), whereas similar traces are commented elsewhere (Naqada, Gerzeh, Hierakonpolis) as intentional *post mortem* ritual dismemberments, likely related to specific funerary practices (secondary burials).

This theory suffers from methodological flaws. Each set of data can be read in a great number of ways which have to be exposed and tested before giving credence to one interpretation or another. Without any scientific process, the points tend to be subjective and unfounded, often presented as a peremptory declaration without arguments, making them hard to challenge.

We will undertake to develop a scientific process for evaluating the foundations of the human sacrifice theory. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the above-mentioned archaeological data from royal Thinite cemeteries are neither conclusive nor sufficient to sustain the hypothesis of ritual

sacrifices (or collective suicide). The conclusion will be that none of the arguments put forth for the moment makes it possible to credit the theory of human sacrifice.

It will be demonstrated that the above-mentioned jar labels of Aha and Djer do not work towards religious purposes, but rather economic and fiscal. Due to this, it seems more appropriate to discern a free man or a slave marked with paint or tattoo in framework of receiving taxes or royal tributes. It will also be shown that the proximity of the “subsidiary burials” with the royal tombs is an institutionalized practice, which remained invariable during Old Kingdom, with the same funerary concessions layout – the whole tombs being built beforehand around the royal grave for bureaucrats and servants. As such, neither the proximity of the subsidiary burials with the royal grave, nor the simultaneous construction of the graves attests to the practice of human sacrifice. Then, we will challenge the notion that the Abydos burials were simultaneous, which is pure speculation. For the individual graves adjacent to the Qaa and Semerkhet graves, no cover remains. For the area of funerary enclosures, explaining the presence of a layer of plaster by human sacrifice is a shortcut that omits other more likely explanations.

In conclusion, in its current state, the thesis of “human sacrifice” is a dossier lacking of evidence. Particularly in the case of individual burials and without any trauma traces on the bones, the thesis of sacrifice is neither the only nor the most likely explanation.

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