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## 11. Thinking the Unthinkable: Human Sacrifice in *Roman Britain*?

by R. M. J. Isserlin

'...I should be glad of another death'

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), *Journey of the Magi*

### *Introduction*

With such words Eliot concludes his disquieting 1920's vision of a Roman Levant where killing was little more than whim. It was not just a product of personal prejudice but a response to the aftershock of the First World War: a *leitmotif* of human suffering and sacrifice linked Briton and German alike. In 1915, the year Eliot set up residence in London, Friedrich Schwenn published his *Die Menschenopfer bei den Griechen und Römern*. His work represented the systematic scouring of Classical literature for material with a bearing on the topic of human sacrifice in the Greco-Roman world; his discussion was far-sighted. *Alleged* human sacrifice has a 'bad press' (Maccoby 1982). Today, Schwenn's work is virtually unknown.

In this paper I explore this neglected theme from an archaeological viewpoint, basically through the examination of human remains in relation to stratigraphic phenomena (the archaeology of context), rather than osteological examples (damage to human bone). I concentrate on the deposition of adult bone material in relation to monumental or public (i.e., non-domestic) buildings, and avoid discussion of the association of 'stray' human bone associated with domestic buildings, wells or pits. I likewise exclude infant burials (Scott 1990, 1991, 1992), and adult human remains from cemeteries, and touch only briefly on high-status, separate burials: though the importance of examples such as Folly Lane, Verulamium, is considerable (Niblett 1992; Mays & Steele 1996). A recent paper shows a revival of interest in some of the literary sources pertaining to allegations of human sacrifice or ritual killing, predominantly in the Late Empire (Rives 1995), but the debate is by no means over. For Britain, it has barely started: fieldwork in the province has produced an extremely interesting text in recent years which is directly relevant.

### *Some concepts*

First of all, what do we mean by *sacrifice*? For the last 2000 years or so, in a monetized, western society the term has often meant a *going without*. Yet, as Roman archaeologists, we come across traces of something very different. Without inscriptions, we may not be able to identify the *aims* of the offerants, but when we uncover ritual deposits, with their broken vessels, twisted metalwork

or animal bone, we are apt to neglect the *means* by which the offerings were made, in favour of the *results* which confront us. Controlled violence – the smashing of pots, the bending of weapons, and the killing of animals – produced these archaeological remains. Often it was part of the process of placation, or of stipulation, regulated by a presiding official, ensuring that material remained *sacer/tabu*. Providing it was suitably performed, all would be well: the celestial system was ‘in balance’, and the victim was non-human.

But what if the celestial system became ‘out-of-kilter’? Drastic measures might be required to restore equilibrium – one result being that the violence became uncontrolled – and directed towards our own species, *Homo Sapiens*. Custom (or an obliging religious official) might dictate the choice of victim – whose own actions might render them ‘beyond the pale’ or ‘non-human’. In pre-Roman Gaul, human deaths were thus engineered (Strabo, 4.4.6, quoting Posidonius) at a temple-ceremony. Possibly offenders who were not *cives Romani*, but already condemned to death under Roman law, met a fate as grim as crucifixion or decapitation, at the hands of natives in Britain. The preconception that the killing of human beings was not normal religious practice in Britain during AD 43–410 deserves re-examination (though it was never so crucial as in parts of Central America). I avoid the terms ‘Druid’ or ‘shape-shifting’ so beloved of Celtic scholars (convention has it that after AD 60/61 and the invasion of the isle of Mona, the Druids were extinct in Roman Britain; see King 1990:233 for comment), for there are other ways of attacking the problem.

### *Textual Matters*

In 1979 two lead tablets were found in Brandon, Suffolk, the latest of a series of religious finds from that area. Previous finds include a crown and five diadems, which were recovered over the preceding thirty years, and a temple which has been excavated by the late Charles Green (Gurney 1986). The fourth century text, on one of the 1979 tablets, suggests that at least one other item of equipment existed, however:

(Whoever)... whether male slave or female slave, whether freedman or freedwoman, whether woman or man... has committed the theft of an iron pan(?), he is sacrificed(?) to the Lord Neptune with hazel(?) (*Translation*: Hassall & Tomlin 1994:293).

Despite difficulties of translation, the sense is clear. The theft of offerings or religious items from a temple (*i.e.*, *sacra bona*) could be sufficient to upset the balance between mortal and deity, and require a drastic and salutary remedy. The term *sacrificed* is not expressed in the original text, but this need not be a hindrance (Hassall & Tomlin 1994:295). Some fates might be too terrible to mention (after all, Greek drama did not depict violence on stage and was all the more effective for it). Hardly surprising, then, that no similar pronouncement is known from an empire-wide survey of *defixiones* (Gager 1995). At Bath, supplicants piously hoped that the death of a thief of personal items (*bona privata*) might take place ‘in the temple’ (*Tab. Sulis*, nos 5 & 31) – a process for which we may see surprising corroboration in archaeological form, elsewhere in the province.

If human death was a necessity for the good of an entire community, people sometimes ‘volunteered’. This *pharmakos* was defined ‘in ancient times’ by the twelfth century Byzantine scholar Johannes Tzetzes thus:

...if misfortune laid hold of a city through divine wrath, whether famine or plague or any other ill, the most ugly man of all they would lead as to a sacrifice, for the cleansing and

cure of the ailing city. And, having set up the sacrifice at the suitable place and having given in his hand cheese, cake and dried figs, and having whipped him seven times on the penis with squills, wild figs, and other wild plants, in the end on a pyre they would burn him on wild wood, and into the sea they would scatter the ash to the winds... (*Translatio*: Hughes 1991:141-2)

This perhaps shares motifs with the Roman triumph. Victorious generals paraded captives and *spolia* through the city. Thanksgiving to Jupiter at the Capitol was one conclusion: the games and death, another; there animal or human 'threats to civilised life were destroyed' (Wiedemann 1992:89ff.). These executions and sacrifices are both highly ritualised affairs, and involve the systematic externalisation or casting-out of the individual: sometimes for the amusement of the majority, but ultimately for the destruction of the threat to civilised life. The specification of materials for the *pharmakos* (hazel, fig branches) and procession after humiliating treatment to a designated place (at the settlement – or tribal-territory limits?) is notable. So too is the specification of the locus of action: in Germany offenders were buried in a marsh, under hurdles (*Tac., Germ. XII, 1*) (cf. Hassall & Tomlin 1994:295). Such measures were necessary to prevent individuals from 'coming back' (Barber 1988:145). *If* such things happened in Britain AD 43-410 (and it is a big *if*, but perhaps not so great as it was!) perhaps these are some factors we should consider.

### *Some Archaeological Oddities*

Most (by no means all) burials took place in cemeteries: some other situations have been mentioned above (see Philpott 1991 for broad discussion). I turn, first of all, to a type of burial which is well-known but whose causes are disputed: bog-burials. Hassall and Tomlin note (1994:295) the similarity between the insistence upon the use of hazel which is such a feature of the Brandon *defixio*, and its occurrence in the Danish Windeby and Undelev bog-burials (Glob 1969:166, 168). In fact, at least 184 bog burials are known from within the province of *Britannia*, at least ten of which are possibly Roman (table 1):

Bog Burial	Location	# of Bodies	Date of Burial	Source of Dating
Scalegby	Cumbria	1	Romano-British	style of clothes
Seascale	Cumbria	1	Romano-British	style of clothes
Lindow Moss	Cheshire	4	First - Fifth c.	Carbon-14
Worsely	Lancashire	1	Second - Fourth c.	Carbon-14
Austwick	North Yorks.	1	Romano-British	style of clothes
Grewelthorpe	North Yorks.	1	Romano-British	style of clothes
Amcotts	Lincolnshire	1	Romano-British	style of clothes
Wymondham	Norfolk	1	Romano-British	style of pottery

*Table 1: Romano-British Bog-burials (Sources: Gowlett, Hedges & Law 1989; Turner 1989; Turner 1995a, table 1; Turner & Briggs 1986; Turner & Rhodes 1992; Turner, Rhodes & Wild 1991).*

Their distribution lies mostly within the northern uplands, *i.e.*, within the military zone, though two are from the Fens or their margins (precisely the region from which the Brandon *defixio* came!). Few examples are securely dated. The Lindow Moss examples are dated 15 BC – AD 40 and AD 90 – 440 (Gowlett, Hedges & Law 1989; cf. Turner 1995b) – but even this is open to dispute. Modes of deposition are debatable, though the ‘death by misadventure’ theory (for Grewelthorpe: Turner, Rhodes & Wild 1991:201) cannot hold good for all the Lindow Moss examples, one of whom suffered head-wounds, garrotting and a slit throat (West 1986:77). This goes beyond mere misfortune. Activity at a designated place seems more likely than a series of individuals lost in a marsh. All the bodies are situated within wet, marginal or liminal locations, at the limit of settlement, *sept* or *civitas*? This would not conflict with the scenario outlined above for a prescribed locus of action. Head-wounds are, incidentally, a feature of the (unstratified) skulls from the Thames and Walbrook (Marsh & West 1981; Maloney 1990; West 1996). While bias in recovery towards the more visible components may be responsible for a lack of other body-parts, this does not appear to be the whole explanation (see Knüsel & Carr 1995 for the suggestion that many of these were suicides or drownings). We should recall a burial at the Thames foreshore dated to AD 70 ± 70 (HAR 2239: Parnell 1985:5–7) which fits the pattern remarkably well, and was, moreover, sealed by first century foreshore-deposits containing human leg-bone, when the area was marshland! The suggestion that these rivers marked boundaries between two parts of *Londinium* (east and west) and Southwark, designated by ritual deposits has much to commend it (Millett 1994:429–30).

We may see archaeological features which conform – very broadly – to some of the parameters discussed above. It is for the reader to decide whether these are the result of executions or sacrifice. Roman capital punishment often involved beheading (*Digest*, 48.19.28). At the west gate (Balkerne Gate) of the fortress of Colchester, the remains:

...of at least six people lay scattered on the bottom and sides of the legionary ditch. They were in layers of debris associated with... ironworking... and they were mixed with large quantities of animal bone. The human remains consisted of various odd bones, mainly parts of limbs, and six crania... (Crummy 1984:94–5).

The fortress is currently dated to AD 44–49 (Crummy 1992:21). At pre-/early Flavian Canterbury, a similar sequence may apply. A ?military ditch was excavated its primary fills contained a decapitated horse, its upper fills contained human skull-fragments. The ditch’s recut contained a semi-articulated human skeleton, with a sword-cut to the skull (Bennett *et al.* 1982:21, 27ff.). At Colchester the excavator envisaged defences “...almost littered with decaying heads and rotting corpses...” which had been “exposed to public view” as a result of military execution (Crummy 1984:94–7). On its own, this would be very believable. However these remains were associated with dog-skeletons, and Romano-British examples of ritual burials of dogs are known in primary contexts (Black 1983). Horse-burials have also been recovered, for example at Blewburton Hill, Berks, where four horses were buried at the entrance to the hillfort (Harding 1976). An association between the deposition of human and animal remains seems possible – if the activity was structured. The Gaulish horse-goddess Epona was favoured by some mounted units of the Roman army (Moore-Colyer 1994:13) and perhaps something related to that cult operated at Canterbury. Similarly, at Colchester the presence of auxiliaries may be responsible for the remains. Batavian auxiliaries were operating in Britain at the time (Frere 1987:48, 77–8) and in their homeland, around the Rhine Delta, the association between human and dog burials is unquestioned (Todd 1975:189–9).

The cause of this activity at the beginning of the architectural sequence is not clear – perhaps the executions of prisoners should be considered. There are examples of this in Rome, where two captured Gauls were alive in the forum, so to posit execution in conditions *tantamount* to sacrifice may not be far-fetched. Octavian justified the killing of captives which accompanied the sack of Perugia, in 40 BC by claiming it as Etruscan tradition (Suet., *Vit. Aug.*, 15). He had clearly read Herodotus, who claims that this act accompanied Etruscan funerals (6, 71), though not all agree (Wiedemann 1992:33ff.). The strangulation of Vercingetorix, after Caesar's triumph (Dio, 43, 19) was another state-sanctioned (ritualised?) killing (cf. Cicero: *Verr* ii, 5, 30 on the process). Indeed, it has been suggested on epigraphic grounds that 'native' religious practices survived in the Thracian and Belgic units of native *auxilia* (Haynes 1993:153ff., following von Domaszewski). This, as Trajan's column reminds us, went so far as to include the collection of enemy heads as trophies. On the other hand, recent evidence from Spain (including the severing of limbs) reminds us what regular troops were capable of (Rivera i Lacomba & Calvo Galvez 1995: figure 9); in this case, sacking a rebellious Valentia.

The image of something very 'un-Roman' (if we stick to preconceptions) is further dented by material from near the south gate of Colchester (the Head Gate). Six skulls and a femur were recovered from robber-trenches of a late first century structure. They are thought to derive from a granary, mausoleum or shrine and are considered to be the remains of "...disturbed... inhumations or executed individuals..." (Benfield & Garrod 1992:37). A shrine outside the gateway would be appropriate. One of the skulls had "...a plaster-like deposit adhering to it..." (Benfield & Garrod 1992:35). It is conceivable that this material originally came from the wall having been rejected by stone-robbers when the building was dismantled – in other words, it had originally been built into the wall fabric. At Cosgrove, Northants., evidence is even clearer. A skeleton lay in the ambulatory of a Romano-Celtic temple, and at right-angles to its course; two skulls were set into the *cella* wall (Quinnell 1991:21ff., 53), roughly where one might expect a doorway. A *defixio* from Bath mentioned that someone might die in the temple (see above), perhaps this is in some way related. Such display of skeletal material could not fail to impress a viewing public already gathered in an ambulatory to witness more normal sacrifices (Muckelroy 1976:188).

One might be justified in viewing the body not as decoration, so much as something which had to be included as a structural component, echoing (?continuing) earlier practice (Whimster 1981 for details and parallels at Bredon Hill, Worcs; la Roquepertuse (Bouches-du-Rhône); and Entremont). Usually, such material might result from battle contexts: an explanation not so acceptable for the *pax Romana*. In the same *civitas* as the Cosgrove temple, the practice extended to the erection of bridges. At Aldwinckle one burial lay "in the trench which had been dug into the river bank to take the side-timbers of the bridge abutment" (Jackson & Ambrose 1976:47). The structure has been dated to AD 95–380 (Jackson & Ambrose 1976:46). The excavators note the absence of any grave, and rightly assume contemporaneity; for after the body was placed in the construction-cut, the bridge-foundations were placed on top of it. The body was at right-angles to the construction-cut for the bridge and three other burials at the approach to the bridge are known (one dated to the seventh century AD by a knife in its ribs). At La Tène, Switzerland, human and animal remains are known from the pier-bases of a bridge (Vouga & de Navarro, summarised in Bradley 1990:157–9, 164–5).

Such activity was not only confined to the early years; in the late fourth century, the *principia* of the fortress at York was rebuilt (Period 6). A hollow was specially dug in the south-east corner of the basilica, and a group of disarticulated bones and a smashed skull deposited in it. The strati-

graphic sequence suggests this took place while work was going on, for the backfilled feature was sealed by the flooring of the building (Phillips & Heywood 1995:63, 185). On its own, a smashed skull might suggest the victim of an industrial accident (real or contrived), however, the disarticulation of the other bones suggests something altogether more purposeful. The authors note the absence of any memorial marker: perhaps commemoration was not appropriate.

### *The Ritual Deposit as Stratigraphic Paradigm*

Superficially, these individuals appear to fall into the category of those persons whose burials indicated that they were outcasts or of low status (Philpott 1991:232). Indeed, in Rome criminals were buried in ditches (Cumont 1922:145). They would appear to be not so very different from the two Roman soldiers whose grave-pit was dug through the fills of a ?military ditch in second century Canterbury (Bennett *et al.*, 1982:44–6). It was suggested that these two met their end through murder, execution or ritual killing. This last explanation, while possible, is in terms of the criterion adopted here, less likely, for they are not in a primary position. By contrast, the beginning of the sequence at the same site reveals a more familiar story (see above). Spatially or structurally some human remains enjoy a depressingly intimate acquaintance with a structure or major topographical feature, demonstrable at Cosgrove, Aldwinkle, Colchester and York.

The late Ralph Merrifield devised a criterion for one type of ritual deposit: bones or artefacts in or beneath builder's levels (1987:52). These were *foundation deposits*. This contextual identification for securely stratified material seems not to have been challenged by practitioners of an extremely cautious discipline. The implications of a transition across the species barrier – from animal bones to those of *H. Sapiens* – when otherwise the context remained unchanged, do not appear to have been fully grasped in terms of ritual in Roman Britain. For Merrifield also pointed out examples in Roman towns such as Wroxeter and Verulamium (Kenyon, 1940:88; Wheeler & Wheeler 1936:139), where the bones were human, not animal.

Either stratigraphy and context is of little help in understanding material – or our understanding of ritual must be less narrow to embrace structured deposition and taphonomic processes. Briefly summarised, this is also the thrust of an argument regarding Iron Age material (Hill 1995). If context-formation processes *are* taken into account, the legal and cultural implications are profound: what is this material doing away from a properly-ordered cemetery? Take two related cases: to note that “burials in ditches are very common” (Philpott 1991:241 n. 18) is merely to identify a phenomenon. The explanation of “indifference or laziness on the part of gravediggers” (Philpott 1991:232) is rationalising the irrational: “violent or illicit death, or disapprobation on the part of the family or community” is nearer the mark (Philpott 1991, *loc. cit.*), although these are virtually unrecoverable attitudes of mind. Unless building-work had to await the natural demise of individuals, in order to include the remains in structures, one can only arrive at unfortunate (to modern minds) conclusions. Again, stratigraphic observation has led to the conclusion that the bodies of new-born infants “... were normally put in the roof and often leave a scatter of tiny bones on the floors [of villas]...” (Webster 1969:233). Even if this generalisation is not universally valid (i.e., many were buried: Scott 1990, 1991, 1992), we should nevertheless divorce ourselves from twentieth century western attitudes. Contextual analysis along the lines suggested here may help a little in coming to terms with very different behaviour patterns.

*Legal and Constitutional Aspects*

The position of infants in Roman law was perilous but clear (Wheeler & Wheeler 1936:138–9), and the recovery of infants buried beneath buildings has occasioned little excitement (e.g. shrine IV at Springhead, Kent: Penn 1960:121–2). It is usually agreed that these are foundation-offerings – and the practice of infanticide has been suggested (Mays 1993). The presence of adult remains is somewhat different. Though the death-penalty certainly existed in Roman law, killing a fellow adult for the purposes of *cult* was contrary to the *lex provinciae* and the *religio druidarum* had been banned since Augustus' day (Suet., *Claud.* 25.5). How rigidly that law was enforced is another matter, especially given the importance of the 'cult of the severed head' in the Celtic world (if only symbolic: Green 1986:32). In Gaul, the deposition of eight or nine skulls underneath an altar dedicated to Mars at Apt, Vaucluse by individuals with Celtic names, demands, therefore, explanation (*CIL* XII, 1077; Ross 1974:99 n.18). The tenor of this paper has suggested one – though it is possible that these were pre-Roman antique battle-trophies (probably removed *post-mortem*?) and ceremoniously disposed of, structured deposition is still apparent. If they were remains of those who died a natural death, why were they manipulated as secondary rituals? Posidonius (Athenaeus 4. 154 A–C) refers to decapitation of someone within a community. The third century marble sarcophagus within a mausoleum at Welwyn, Herts., may be more pertinent (Rook, Walker & Denston 1984; Isserlin forthcoming). Though such a sarcophagus indicates superficially the highest possible *Roman* cultural identity, the mortuary ritual with the deposition of bodies in the base of a ditch surrounding it, appears to have varied little from the Folly Lane, near Verulamium – within the same *civitas*. There a ditch surrounded a first century timber structure and contained bodies carefully deposited in the base (Niblett 1992).

I conclude with a question pertaining to another island, second century Cyprus, to which there is no ready answer – in conventional terms at least. One assumption perhaps too readily made is of a law-abiding, thoroughly 'Roman' Mediterranean to whose standard of civilisation and good government a remote province, such as *Britannia* seemingly wished to emulate. In this the eradication of the Druids with their obnoxious cults was a necessary preliminary as has been remarked (Pliny, *H.N.*, 30, 13; Strabo, *Geo.*, 4.4.5; Tac., *Ann.* 14, 30). All the more surprising then is a passage of that Christian writer, Lactantius (c. AD 240–320), apparently in praise of Hadrian – whose attitudes to the Christians, amongst others, are well-known. By the time that emperor's rule began, in AD 117, Cyprus had been 'Roman' for generations: since 58 BC, in fact. The text runs as follows:

In Salamis of Cyprus Teucer sacrificed a human victim to Jove. And this sacrifice he handed down to posterity, and it was recently abolished during the reign of Hadrian (Lactantius, *Div. Inst.*, 1.21; *trans.* Hughes 1991, 133).

If Lactantius' words have any factual basis, they hint at a response to a petition by the provincials of Cyprus. This would have been sent either directly to the Emperor, or transmitted to him by a provincial governor unable to give a ruling on a particularly troublesome matter (for the process, Millar 1977). But what could the request have been that provoked such a response, some 175 years after the island became Roman?



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