Human Ritual Killing at Domuztepe and Ur: A Bataillan Perspective

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Summary: Human Ritual Killing at Domuztepe and Ur: A Bataillan Perspective

The ritual killing of humans in the ancient Near East has received increased attention in recent years. Material evidence for the practice is commonly interpreted in terms of theories of ritual and sacrifice developed by prominent scholars of comparative religion during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Typical interpretive models include communication and communion with supernatural beings and gift exchange as a social and political tool. This article provides a brief overview of these recent trends in the study of human sacrifice in the ancient Near East before turning to George Bataille's views of the practice in the context of his theories of general economy and religion. It is argued that his notions of expenditure and transgression serve as useful tools for the interpretation of several instances of anthropoctony in the ancient Near East.

Keywords: Human Ritual Killing – Ancient Near East – Bataille – Expenditure – Transgression

Resumen: La matanza de seres humanos en Domuztepe y Ur: una perspectiva Batailleana

La matanza ritual de seres humanos en el Cercano Oriente antiguo ha recibido mayor atención en los últimos años. La evidencia material de esta práctica se interpreta comúnmente en términos de las teorías del ritual y del sacrificio desarrolladas por destacados académicos de la religión comparada de finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX. Los modelos interpretativos típicos incluyen la comunicación y la comunión con seres sobrenaturales y el intercambio de regalos como una herramienta social y política. Este artículo ofrece un breve repaso de estas tendencias recientes en el estudio del sacrificio humano en el Cercano Oriente antiguo para luego enfocarse en la

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perspectiva de George Bataille sobre esta práctica en el contexto de sus teorías sobre la economía general y la religión. Asimismo, se argumenta aquí que sus nociones de gasto y transgresión sirven como herramientas útiles para la interpretación de varios casos de antropoctonía en el Cercano Oriente antiguo.

Palabras clave: Matanza ritual de seres humanos – Cercano Oriente antiguo – Bataille – Gasto – Transgresión

Introduction

Traditionally, scholarly discussions of the ritual killing of humans in the ancient Near East centred around a few references to the practice in the Hebrew Bible, such as the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, Jephtah's sacrifice of his daughter as recounted in Judges 11, a Moabite king sacrificing his firstborn son as narrated in 2 Kings 3, and references to a Canaanite practice of child sacrifice in 2 Kings 23.[1] However, with increasing archaeological evidence of the ritual killing of humans in various historical periods all over the ancient Near East, increasing numbers of scholars from various fields have joined the discussion. Notable contributions have been made, especially in the collections of essays edited by A. M. Porter and G. M. Schwartz[2] and À. A. Nagy and F. Prescendi.[3] Although not focusing exclusively on the ancient Near East, both of these collections introduce new ways of thinking about the topic of the ritual killing of humans in various periods and regions of the ancient Near East. It is commonly assumed that the routine slaying of humans was a religious act. However, it seems necessary to distinguish between human sacrifice as a religious act involving an offering to supernatural beings and ritual murder. The English term sacrifice derives from the Latin *sacer*, "sacred," and *facere*, "to make," meaning "to make sacred," or "to perform sacred rites."[4] Although archaeological evidence for the ritual killing of humans is usually discussed as human sacrifice it remains difficult to assess the exact role of religion and belief systems in

[1] Also see Hattingh and Meyer 2017; Masoga and Rugwiji 2018.
[2] Porter and Schwartz 2012.
[3] Nagy and Prescendi 2013
[4] Schwartz 2017: 224.

the practice in the ancient Near East. For this reason, it seems best to use more neutral terms, such as anthropoctony, with the sense of the slaying of humans in a ritual manner, when discussing instances of the ritual murder of humans in the ancient Near East.[5]

The initial goal of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the most influential interpretations of human ritual killing in the ancient Near East. Many scholars have tended to place the ritual killing of humans in the context of offerings to supernatural beings as part of communal feasting, thereby reviving R. Smith's communion theory of sacrifice.[6] Others have focused on the consecrating effect of sacrifice, building on the landmark study of H. Hubert and M. Mauss.[7] Mauss' famous study of gift exchange has also been popular among scholars to analyse the social and political implications of the apparently flamboyant and conspicuous immolations of humans in the ancient Near East.[8]

Although these scholars have made productive use of the Durkheimian sociological school's theories of sacrifice, the detailed interpretations of human ritual killing by G. Bataille have received little attention.[9] The latter part of the paper will investigate the applicability of his views to evidence from the material record of the ancient Near East. It will be demonstrated that his interpretations of anthropoctony as the expenditure of excess wealth and the transgression of social codes against violence are particularly useful for an understanding of ritual killing in the ancient Near East, especially at Domuztepe and Ur.

[5] Volokhine 2013: 41.
[6] Smith 1889; cf. Tatlock 2006; Pongratz-Leisten 2006; Recht 2010; Carter 2012; Porter 2012; Weber 2012.
[7] Hubert and Mauss 1964 [1898]; cf. Moses 2012; Kornienko 2015.
[8] Mauss 1990 [1925]; cf. Pongratz-Leisten 2006; Carter 2012; Recht 2020.
[9] Bataille 1992 [1949]; 1998 [1973].

Interpretations of Human Ritual Killing in the Ancient Near East: An Overview

Evidence of the ritual killing of human beings in the ancient Near East continues to fascinate scholars. Various explanations of this apparently senseless practice have been developed based on available evidence regarding the social status of the victims, cultural attitudes toward life, death, and human beings in general, religious traditions, and possible political motivations. However, with limited textual evidence, especially with reference to archaeological information from pre-historic periods, a full understanding of the practice remains elusive. In addition, many scholars continue to insist that ceremonial killing routinely involved the recognition of and interaction with supernatural entities. For example, C. Grottanelli defines sacrifice as the offering of something to another realm, or the ritual killing of a victim for the benefit of this superior sphere.[10] Similarly, Humphrey and Laidlaw associate ceremonial slaughter with the offering of a victim to supernatural beings before the target is consumed.[11] R. B. Campbell, too, emphasises the aspect of offering to supernatural entities in the context of ritual slaughter.[12] Correspondingly, other scholars have extended the meaning of sacrifice to include diverse forms of ceremonial immolations.[13] However, while it is not always possible to assess the role of belief systems in ritualistic slayings it seems best to differentiate between carnages, for example in the context of funerary rituals, such as accompaniment deaths, and human sacrifice in a religious context involving procedural offerings to supernatural beings.[14]

[10] Grottanelli 1999: 6.
[11] Humphrey and Laidlaw 2007.
[12] Campbell 2012.
[13] Nagy and Prescendi 2013: 7.
[14] Schwartz 2017: 224.

Offering to Supernatural Entities

Many scholars interpret the ritual killing of humans as a religious act involving communication with supernatural entities. Tatlock, for example, defines sacrifice as killing with the goal of influencing supernatural spiritual beings.[15] Focusing on evidence from the renowned, so-called "Royal Cemetery" of ancient Ur in Mesopotamia, L. Recht points out that in the absence of clear iconographic and textual evidence, all interpretations of the ritual killing of humans remain speculative.[16] The Royal Cemetery comprises about 16 out of hundreds of graves over a large area and covering a time span of around 1200 years. Although many possible explanations for the ritual killing of humans at ancient Ur have been advanced through the years, Recht proposes that the ultimate long-term purpose of immolations at these sites was communication with the supernatural, as suggested, according to her, by the fact that scenes were eventually buried to be hidden from public view.[17]

Interpreting human ritual killings as offerings to deities, B. Pongratz-Leisten discusses the practice within the broader context of anthropoctony in the ancient Near East.[18] The scapegoat ritual, which had its origin in Northern Mesopotamia, serves as an example of human sacrifice as an offering to a deity with the goal to eliminate bad fortune. For example, in a Hittite ritual dating to *ca.* 1350 BCE designed to eliminate pestilence, a ram is chosen as a substitute for military officers and a woman as a substitute for the king. The victims are adorned with jewellery and sent off into enemy territory together with bread, beer, and milk to draw the illness causing god away from the military camp and so transfer the pestilence to the enemy.

Pongratz-Leisten further suggests that human sacrifice was a cultural means of re-establishing the cosmic order as originally set by the gods.[19] For example, the ritual killing of a substitute king served to mend

[15] Tatlock 2006.
[16] Recht 2010: 168.
[17] Recht 2014: 427; Recht 2020.
[18] Pongratz-Leisten 2006: 3–34.
[19] Pongratz-Leisten 2012: 291–304.

the relationships between kings and the gods. The ritual of the substitute king is well attested under the reign of the Sargonid kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal during the 7th century BCE. It was meant to eliminate threatening elements, especially at times of certain solar and lunar eclipses that foretold the death of the reigning king. At such times, the chief exorcist would choose a substitute while the king would temporarily abdicate. After reigning for a predetermined period, the surrogate king would then be killed and all his requisites, such as the throne, sceptre, and weapons, would be burned before the original king would take up his reign again.

Porter considers human sacrifice as an offering to the gods within the broader context of strategies used by the emerging elite in state formation during the first half of the third millennium BCE.[20] She notes that the period was characterised by a breakdown in kinship relations, which were increasingly replaced by class stratification. In this context, the elite used human sacrifice to strengthen relations with ancestors and deities. Referring to a case at Arslantepe, she suggests that the mirroring of the bodies of sacrificial victims points to an expression of the relationship between the living and the dead. By rendering the connection between the two worlds, which are the same, but opposite, visually explicit, it brings them closer, in her view. In the case of the royal tombs at Ur, she argues that the fruit remains that were found, such as apples and dates, as well as a prominent female headdress, could be connected to the cult of Inana/Ishtar, and therefore suggest a ritual context. Further, the staging of sacrificial victims in a *tableau mort* in the Great Death Pit at Ur hints at an attempt to create a moment that would be frozen in time forever, which adds to the religious context and meaning of the sacrifice.

Porter goes on to argue that kinship in the ancient Near East was established through rituals, often through sacrifice. Many treaties required animal sacrifice. The drawing of blood, in her view, served as a symbol for the substance of kinship relations. New kin entering families in this way were often responsible for providing for their adopted parents' continued existence after death and the performance of post-

[20] Porter 2012: 191–216.

funerary commemorative rituals. Whereas animal sacrifice sufficed to construe social relations between living parties, human sacrifice, according to her, was used to establish relations with the world of the dead. The need for such relations arose where the death of a royal member was interpreted as caused by divine wrath, or where the right to rule needed to be established after rule had been usurped from a divinely chosen ruler.

J. A. Weber also interprets human sacrifice as an attempt to restore order after the death of a member of the ruling authority.[21] Also referring to the Ur royal tombs, she associates the immolation of humans with the veneration of ancestors in the context of succession rituals. The goal, in her view, was to engage the ancestors and gods of the netherworld by opening channels of communication through sacrifice.

Turning her attention to human and animal sacrifice in the Halaf period in the late Neolithic at Domuztepe, E. Carter defines sacrifice as an offering in appeasement or homage to a higher power.[22] Dating to *ca.* 5570 BCE, the Death Pit at Domuztepe contains evidence of cannibalism, such as butchering marks, dismemberment, and scorching of bones of predominantly prime-aged members of society. The sacrifice of humans and animals was clearly done in the context of a large feast. Noting that the iconography of the period points to complex rituals, the use of masks, and a close association of humans and animals, she suggests that sacrifice at Domuztepe may point to an animistic and shamanistic worldview. Ritual specialists may have negotiated links between humans and animals and between the living and the dead. The destructive immolation and consumption of victims were meant to create strong ties between the living and the dead.

While the majority of scholars associate the ritual killing of humans with communication or communion with supernatural beings, some have also linked it with the creation of sacred space and the practice of magic, particularly in relation to the so-called "construction sacrifices."

[21] Weber 2012: 159–190.
[22] Carter 2012: 97–124.

Construction Sacrifices: Ensuring Fertility and Creating Sacred Space

T. V. Kornienko notes that anthropoctony was a relatively rare phenomenon in Northern Mesopotamia during the pre-pottery Neolithic.[23] It only occurred at times of special importance to communities. She associates the practice with a period of transition in the Fertile Crescent when humans started to master the domestication of plants. Considering archaeological evidence from sites such as Çayönü Tepesi and Göbekli Tepe, she suggests that ceremonial murder should be interpreted against the background of agricultural practices and ideology. More specifically, it served as a kind of imitative magic based on agricultural experience. In so-called "construction sacrifices," victims were commonly buried in residential and public buildings to symbolise death and revival in analogy to grains being planted to lead to the sprouting of new life.

Also focusing her study on Northern Mesopotamia in the Neolithic, S. Moses considers possible reasons for child foundation deposits in Çatalhöyük.[24] She links the higher than expected infant mortality rate with the beginnings of class stratification. In her view, the child deposits were meant to create sacred spaces and imbue houses with sacred power. In addition, they may have served to create bonds between people and produce links to ancestors.

Establishing Political Control

Centring on the Royal Cemetery of Ur, A. Baardsgaard, J. Monge, and R. L. Zettler foreground the many and varied potential social impacts of the ritual killing of humans during Early Dynastic times in this ancient Mesopotamian city.[25] Sir Leonard Woolley, who initially excavated the tombs during the early twentieth century, interpreted the scene at the

[23] Kornienko 2015: 42–49.
[24] Moses 2012: 57–78.
[25] Baardsgaard, Monge and Zettler 2012: 125–158.

Great Death Pit as a mass suicide during a funerary ritual.[26] Questioning this interpretation, Baardgaard, Monge and Zettler point to evidence that the participants did not die peacefully as willing participants. Rather, the cause of death was blunt force trauma to the back of the skull by means of a pick-axe-like weapon, commonly depicted in iconography of the time. In addition, the bodies of victims were treated with mercury sulphide and heated for soft tissue preservation, which suggests that they were kept around for public display after death. The staged *tableaux morts* further clearly point to funerary feasting as an occasion for the sacrificial ritual. It is possible that the victims took part in the funerary rituals before they were killed.

In addition to the staged festival scene, which included musicians, guards, and cart drivers, cylinder seals depicting banquets with people dancing and musical instruments were also found in the tombs. The authors suggest that these were deliberately placed at the scenes to indicate what transpired during the festivals. They further propose that the elaborate spectacle of the carnage at Ur constituted, in addition to possible gifts to the gods or ancestors, a show of power and wealth with the goal to establish and legitimise social and political control.

Similarly, Recht suggests that the ritual slaughter of humans in ancient Ur served to mark the authority of the ruling elite. In addition to the iconic ziggurats created during the latter part of the third millennium BCE, the extravagant and flamboyant human immolations were meant to mark authority and create a strong social impact.[27] For comparison, she refers to the practice of anthropoctony by the kings and queens of the first dynasty at Abydos in ancient Egypt early in the third millennium BCE.[28] Similar to the royal tombs at Ur, the graves of kings and queens at Abydos were surrounded by chambers for the accompanying victims. Although the retainers were probably meant to continue their service to the elite after death, the ostentatious display involved in the ritual mur-

[26] Woolley 1934.
[27] Recht 2020.
[28] Also see Volokhine 2013: 39–64.

der, especially at Ur, were meant to make a social impact and mark the authority of the ruling families. This, in her view, explains why the practice seems to have been short-lived and limited to the emergence of states in the ancient Near East.

Human Ritual Killing at Domuztepe and Ur as Expenditure and Transgression

Bataille demonstrated a strong interest in the topic of human ritual killing in many of his works. Unfortunately, unlike other members of the Durkheimian school, his perspectives on ritual murder have remained largely neglected in investigations of the practice in the ancient Near East. Bataille's interpretation of anthropoctony as expenditure of excess energy in the context of his theory of general economy and his notions of transgression seem particularly useful as interpretive tools with reference to the ritual killing of humans in the ancient Near East, especially at the sites of Domuztepe and Ur.

Anthropoctony and the Expenditure of Excess

Bataille's view of human ritual killing is best understood in the context of his theory of general economy. In his *The Accursed Share* he puts forward the idea of an economic model based on excess energy moving through all living organisms.[29] In opposition to the traditional restricted economical model, which focuses on financial capital and production, general economy centres on the consumption of surplus energy. In Bataille's view, like life itself, economy is not only about growth and conservation, as is commonly assumed, but also about loss and ruin.[30] Bataille points out that the biosphere cannot contain the proliferation of life caused by the endless exudation of solar energy. The flow of energy also cannot be tamed or placed under the control of man. Energy that

[29] Bataille 1992 [1949].
[30] Traylor 2014a: 109–112.

cannot be contained in a system or used for growth must be wasted. This leads to luxury, as the optimisation of excess energy into nonutility. According to Bataille, the most luxurious exudation of a system's excess energy, is death.[31]

Bataille therefore proposes that consumption underlies the practice of ritual killing. As life evolved, energy was used to elevate life to higher forms of complexity. The ultimate luxury of a system is the destruction of complex beings as a growth strategy. The higher the complexity of the organism sacrificed, the more luxurious is the non-productive expenditure of energy. In Bataille's view, war in the Aztec societies was the religious act par excellence, since it involved the quest for sacrificial victims, rather than a search for economic or political gain.

Bataille also demonstrated a fascination with the North American potlatch as discussed by Mauss in his *The Gift*.[32] However, whereas Mauss emphasised the role of the gift in harmonising relationships, Bataille noted its disruptive nature. Mauss argued that in gift societies the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate gifts led to an orderly system, which constantly renewed the relationships between parties. In some instances, however, the gift exchange could develop into violent, exaggerated, and antagonistic generosity. In this kind of gift exchange, where nothing is held back, rival chiefs compete for honour and prestige. If a rival fails to reciprocate a gift with interest, he loses social rank and status. The destructive quality of such giving resembles a sacrifice.

The major difference between the views of ritual killing, or sacrifice, as potlatch of Mauss and Bataille is to be found in Mauss' concept of the gift (*don*) and Bataille's notion of expenditure (*dépense*). Referring to the practice among Indian societies of the American North West, such as the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Kwakiutl, Bataille emphasises the irrational, disruptive, destructive, and excessive aspect of the gift.[33] If a gift is given in silence, it has no power. Up until the 19th

[31] Arculus 2018: 142–145.
[32] Mauss 1990 [1925]: 31–40.
[33] Bataille 1992 [1949]: 63–80. Cf. Dorfman 2002: 37–71; Olson 2002: 350–374.

century, Tlingit chieftains would display their power by bringing slaves before a rival and slitting their throats in his presence. If the rival chief wanted to challenge for power, he would have to sacrifice a greater number of slaves.

Further, the power that the giver gains, manifests the absurdity of gifts. Bataille identifies three laws for the acquisition of rank. Firstly, through the squandering of surplus resources, the giver acquires prestige, like a commodity. Secondly, waste itself becomes an object of acquisition. Thirdly, any individual accumulation of wealth is doomed to destruction, since an individual does not really possess it nor the rank that accompanies it. Bataille further suggests that potlatch, like sacrifice, withdraws wealth from productive consumption:

> *The victim is a surplus taken from the mass of useful wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed. Once chosen, he is the* accursed share*, destined for violent consumption. But the curse tears him away from the* order of things*; it gives him a recognisable figure, which now radiates intimacy, anguish, the profundity of living beings.*[34]

Bataille's conceptualisation of ritual killing as the expenditure of excess energy seems particularly useful for an interpretation of human sacrifice in the case of Domuztepe during the late Neolithic. The victims were well-nourished, which, according to Carter, suggests that they were not sacrificed in the context of a power struggle between rival political leaders.[35] Rather than fulfilling the function of a conspicuous destruction of wealth in competition with a rival chief for social and political rank, the ritual killing and associated cannibalism in the context of a great feast in this instance may be interpreted as an expenditure of excess energy. Similarly, in the case of the royal tombs of Ur during the third millennium, it may be tempting to interpret the *tableaux morts* and the evi-

[34] Bataille 1992 [1949]: 59.
[35] Carter 2012: 121.

dence of post-mortem preservation as a kind of potlatch in competition with rival kings. However, as Baardsgaard, Monge, and Zettler point out, there is no clear evidence of similar conspicuous human immolations in the area.[36] Again, rather than an attempt to establish relationships with ancestors and gods or compete with rivals, the offering of human lives may have constituted the mere luxurious expenditure of excess energy and wealth.

Anthropoctony and Transgression

Another element of the ritual killing of humans that Bataille foregrounds, which proves useful for the interpretation of anthropoctony in the ancient Near East, is the notion of transgression. Bataille understood transgression as the suspension of the prohibition against violence in ritualistic killing. Sacrifice, or ritual murder, therefore gives access to transgression. Traylor suggests that this aspect of Bataille's theory presents an alternative to R. Girard's popular scapegoat mechanism in that it adds a dimension to religious violence for its own sake, rather than ascribing the function of restoring communal peace to the violent act.[37]

Girard suggests that the common scapegoat mechanism represents the restaging of an historically real event, where a community unanimously gathers and rallies against an arbitrarily selected victim.[38] The societal agitation concentrates itself on this ill-fated victim and results in lethal hysteria, which leads to a cathartic discharge. The collective murder of the victim is mistakenly attributed to an unforeseen benign aspect of the target, who is posthumously credited with reconciling warring members of society and treated to mythic deification. In Girard's view, sacrifice constitutes a stylised re-enactment of the original singling out of a scapegoat. It is therefore an attempt to repeat the conditions which in past experience proved to be effective in producing communal harmony and renewal. Apart from the cathartic societal bene-

[36] Baardsgaard, Monge and Zettler 2012: 154.
[37] Traylor 2014b: 131.
[38] Girard 1982.

fit, the sacrificial event loses its significance, according to Girard. The violent social upheaval, constituting a mimetic crisis, leads to a denouement in the single victim mechanism of the scapegoat.

By contrast, in his *Theory of Religion*, Bataille associates anthropoctony with a phenomenology of animal existence.[39] He suggests that animal existence is characterised by a state of immanence, immediacy, and uninterrupted continuity in contrast to human existence, which is marked by discontinuity. He envisions animal reality as a nebulous ebb and flow between an organism and her surroundings devoid of purpose, distinction, or meaning. Human existence, on the other hand, encloses itself within boundaries. During the course of evolution, humans started to think of themselves as isolated "things," in analogy to tools and instruments that existed in separation from themselves. In this state of isolation, death became catastrophic. Subconsciously, however, humans long for the immanence of animal existence that they lost along the way and for the apathy of the predator after the kill.

The introduction of the tool in the history of human evolution marks the passage from continuous to discontinuous existence. Discrete objects were linked to instrumentality and subordinated to future ends. When continuous being became part of the realm of things, the world of the profane was initiated. The sacred became segmented off through the restraint of prohibition. Concerns for security, utility, work, productivity, and rationality became moral obligations. This led to a mode of being that shuts out the immediacy of the present. Human beings started to focus on stability and the creation of a predictable future. Despite these developments, however, humans demonstrate resistance to being reduced to the sphere of utility. The immediacy of the animal world, which elicits both horror and fascination, is experienced as seductively sacred, although it may be regarded as sinister from a moral or religious point of view.

In Bataille's view, ritual killing allows for the religious prohibition to be transcended in a return to the original condition of continuous being. It lifts the victim out of the realm of the profane and returns her

[39] Bataille 1998 [1973].

to the sacred world of immediacy. The priest therefore acts as a mediator who escorts the victim into the lost world of irrational immediacy and animal intimacy. The ultimate goal of ritual killing is not to end life, but to erase the character of being as a thing of use. To make sacred, for Bataille, is to make useless and arbitrary. In this way, the exuberance of life is allowed to flash up briefly before death. While ceremonial slaughter is commonly interpreted as an offering to the gods, in Bataille's view it should rather be seen as a gift of vitality to the victim at the moment it is taken away. Further, the violence of the act is necessary to rupture the barriers separating one self-enclosed being from another. It succeeds in briefly releasing the participants into the euphoric indeterminateness of the moment and to free the victim from the tedium of discontinuous existence. Instead of a scapegoat, therefore, Bataille regards the victim as the accursed share, whose orchestrated slaughter provides participants with a nonlethal glimpse into the sacred world of animal immediacy.

As transgression, ritual murder is non-instrumental. Its goal is to satisfy the immediate lust for violence, and therefore disregards future gain. Anthropoctony constitutes a return to the seamless depths of a lost animality, devoid of ulterior ends, such as peace, order, or status. This interpretation of ritual killing accords well with archaeological and iconographic evidence of the practice in the ancient Near East. As Carter observed with reference to the practice during the Halaf period at Domuztepe, there seems to have been a close association between animals and humans in this period and region.[40] Iconography hints at complex rituals involving the use of various animal masks, probably by ritual specialists who negotiated not only between the worlds of the living and the dead, but also between human and animal worlds and states of being. Similarly, one of the lyres discovered in the Royal Cemetery of Ur depicts an animal parody of a banquet. As Baardsgaard, Monge, and Zettler pointed out, the iconography on the cylinder seals and the inlays on the instruments left at the scenes were deliberate communications of the meaning to be associated with the events that took place.[41] Again,

[40] Carter 2012: 119–120.
[41] Baardsgaard, Monge, and Zettler 2012: 151–152.

therefore, Bataille's interpretation of ritual killing as a return to animal immediacy in an act of transgression may well be applied to the practice during various periods and at various sites in the ancient Near East.

Bataille further explains that festivals served to resolve the tension between access to the sacred in ritualistic sacrifice and utilitarian pressures exerted by the social body. In his view, communities tolerate transgression as long as it does not jeopardise survival. Festivals as the context of anthropoctony, as evidenced in the archaeological record at sites such as Domuztepe and ancient Ur, can therefore be interpreted as organised transgression in which the disintegrating and contagious forces of the sacred were adapted to the order of society. These isolated rituals served as scheduled reminders of the darker side of existence.

Conclusion

Growing evidence for the practice of anthropoctony at different sites during various periods in the ancient Near East has led to renewed interest in this traditionally neglected topic. With limited textual and iconographic evidence to support interpretations of the material record, scholars have tended to interpret the practice as attempts to communicate with or strengthen ties with supernatural entities, such as ancestors and deities. Others have linked it with the ritualistic creation of sacred space or the formation of social and political power by the elite in periods of state formation. In addition to these interpretations, Bataille's view of human ritual killing as an expenditure of excess energy may also apply to the practice of anthropoctony in certain ancient Near Eastern contexts, such as Domuztepe and Ur. Further, his conception of ritualistic immolations as heterologous transgressions of established social norms in the context of a festival also deserves more systematic consideration as an interpretive tool with reference to the practice in the ancient Near East.

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