

Athenian Sacrifice

Dating as far back as the Paleolithic period (3000 BCE), Athenian religion was primarily established through rituals and actions rather than beliefs. Rituals also reflected the different social values, effectively seeping into Athenian daily life. The most important type of ritual and main form of worship was sacrifice. Sacrifices were done to build a better relationship between the gods and the Athenians and tie together the community.

Much evidence for Athenian sacrifice is either literary or archaeological. A genre about Greek rituals, *historia*, thrived in the 5th century BCE forward.¹ A few important authors who worked in this genre are Herodotus (484-420 BCE) and Plutarch (46-119 CE), and they described sacrifice and their procedures in great detail.² Some other written pieces that help scholars understand sacrifice are Aristophanes' *Clouds* (423 BCE), Strabo's geographical works (64 BCE - 21 CE), and Pausanias' travel guide through Greece (143-161 CE).³ Preserved sanctuaries, temples, statues, paintings, and pottery, dating back as far as 700 BCE, provide evidence of sacrifice as well.⁴

Sacrifices were a way of showing respect and bonding with the gods. The classical Greek philosopher Theophrastus says, "One must sacrifice to the gods for three purposes: to give honor, to show gratitude, or because of one's need for good things."⁵ This illustrates how the Athenian mindset viewed sacrifices as a way to communicate with the gods. As historian Walter Burkert explains, "The sacrifice, it is known, creates a relationship between the sacrificer and the god:

¹ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, trans. John Raffan (Oxford, London: Blackwell Publishers, 1985), 5

² Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 5.

³ For Aristophanes' *Clouds*, see Deborah Boedeker, "Athenian Religion in the Age of Pericles," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*, ed. Loren J. Samons, II, Cambridge Companions to the Ancient World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 46. For Pausanias and Strabo, see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 5.

⁴ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 5-6.

⁵ Theophrastus, cited in Jon D. Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 2: 84, digital file.

poets recount how the god remembers the sacrifice with pleasure or how he rages dangerously if sacrifices fail to be performed.”⁶ Creating a close relationship with the gods was essential in Athenian society because important parts of daily life were intertwined with religion. The belief that a sacrifice makes it more likely for the gods to help their worshippers and grant favors for them, was the main purpose of the practice.⁷ Burkert builds upon this sentiment by explaining different sacrifices done to ensure good harvests.⁸ Overall, through the importance of agriculture and its regard among the Athenian community, sacrifices held similar weight due to their representation of prosperity.

Sacrifices were done in many ways, all with different meanings and significance to the Athenian people. As Mikalson defines it, sacrifice is an umbrella term for offering substance or food to the gods.⁹ The most common sacrifice was leading domesticated animals (such as cattle, sheep, pigs, or goats) to a sanctuary and killing them ritually.¹⁰ There were many steps of an animal sacrifice, but “the general pattern [was] 1) a procession, 2) a hymn to the deity, 3) a prayer, 4) a sacrifice, 5) special events, often competitions, appropriate to the deity, and 6) a communal banquet on the meat of the sacrificed animal.”¹¹ There is a lot of thought and sentiment that goes into the steps of a sacrifice. One example of this is the sacrificial cry. As Burkert explains, when “the fatal blow falls, (the) women must cry out in high, shrill tones...life screams over death.”¹² Another example is the presence of fire. According to Burkert, the symbolism behind fire was that it provided “light and warmth”, while being “the very epitome of

⁶ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 57.

⁷ Walter Burkert, “Athenian Cults and Festivals,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 5, *The Fifth Century BC*, 2nd ed., ed. David M. Lewis, et al., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Page 256.

⁸ Burkert, “Athenian Cults,” 252.

⁹ Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, 2: 83.

¹⁰ Deborah Boedeker, “Athenian Religion in the Age of Pericles,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*, ed. Loren J. Samons, II, Cambridge Companions to the Ancient World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 54.

¹¹ Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, 2: 86.

¹² Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 56.

destruction”, which is why it was present in so many sacrifices.¹³ This shows how the Athenians planned out each part of the sacrifice to have a deeper significance. The sentimental value of the steps provided something more to sacrifice, which is why it held a special meaning to the Athenians.

Individuals could make a more personal connection with the gods and combine religion and daily life through private sacrifice. As Boedeker observes, people privately offered sacrifices to show their benevolence and respect to the gods, in hopes of winning their favor.¹⁴ There were many different types of private sacrifices, and the most popular form was *anathema*, or setting up objects in temples for the gods.¹⁵ As Burkert suggests, the object left behind by the worshiper represents the bond between them and the specific god, which is why it was the ideal private sacrifice.¹⁶ The private sacrifice was a way to directly ask the gods for something in their sanctuary, representing personal exchange. Private sacrifices were also very intertwined with daily life, with patron gods and small sacrifices in a household.¹⁷ An example of this was libation, which was to pour wine onto the ground while calling a deity or hero during formal events.¹⁸ It was a non-violent and small sacrifice, but still, they used it to bring divine favor to important occasions.

Sacrifice was also one of the key ways that Athenian people strengthened their community. As Mikalson notes, each step of the sacrificial process was done with community-building in mind, so it is not only a sacred deed, but something for the whole community to bond.¹⁹ Burkert gives an example of these steps; “membership of the community

¹³ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 60-61.

¹⁴ Boedeker, “Athenian Religion,” 60.

¹⁵ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 93.

¹⁶ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 93.

¹⁷ Boedeker, “Athenian Religion,” 54-55.

¹⁸ Boedeker, “Athenian Religion,” 55.

¹⁹ Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, 2: 84.

is marked by the washing of hands, the encirclement and the communal throwing; an even closer bond is forged through the tasting of the *splanchna*.”²⁰ For the Athenian people, no matter how complex the mythological sentiment behind a sacrifice was, “what it means for [them] is always quite clear: community, *koinunia*”, as Burkert observes.²¹ Sacrifice created an intimate and safe environment for people in Athens, creating social ties between religion and prosperity.

Because of those ties, skepticism and negativity towards religion were seen as a danger to the Athenian community. A good example of this would be the desecration of the herms during 415 BCE.²² Many stone squared pillars with depictions of Hermes, or herms, were vandalized across Athenian streets and doorways.²³ From the Athenians’ perspective, this was interpreted as a bad portent or a conspiracy against the democracy.²⁴ After the defacement of the herms, the people of the city felt that they were in danger. It was considered a severe political and communal offense against Athens, showing how impactful religion was. Another example of impiety was Socrates’ execution in 399 BCE.²⁵ He was convicted mostly because of his claimed teachings about new gods.²⁶ However, the political context of Socrates’ trial is also important to remember. According to Boedeker, “the philosopher had close connections with some of the harsh oligarchs who came to power in 411 and 404, a fact which must have caused resentment in the restored democracy.”²⁷ Nonetheless, Socrates’ execution is still a good example of how Athens treated skepticism. Another instance of legal action being taken with charges of piety would be General Alcibiades and his supposed involvement in the parody of Elunisian

²⁰ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 58.

²¹ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 58.

²² Boedeker, “Athenian Religion,” 62.

²³ Boedeker, “Athenian Religion,” 62.

²⁴ Boedeker, “Athenian Religion,” 62.

²⁵ Burkert, “Athenian Cults,” 247.

²⁶ Boedeker, “Athenian Religion,” 62.

²⁷ Boedeker, “Athenian Religion,” 62.

mysteries.²⁸ The mysteries were a set of rituals for Demeter and Persephone and it was one of the most important celebrations in Athens. Because of his claimed participation in the parody, Alcibiades was removed from Athenian office and was exiled to Sparta.²⁹ The action of ridiculing the rituals was considered impious and horrible conduct, resulting in harsh treatment from the Athenian government.

The practice of sacrifice shows how much impact religion had on Athens, and overall, how deeply religion influences a civilization. Sacrifice is a ritual born from the human fear of the unknown and the uncontrolled. The vulnerability of humans to natural forces is what scared the ancient people. So they gave up something important to them, in hopes of bettered survival in the world. The ritual evolved differently as distinct civilizations grew, creating many types of sacrifices in different religions. Because of the sense of safety sacrifice created, it became something fundamental for the entire community. While the practice of sacrifice is ancient, it appears that it will survive in future civilizations as humans continue to find fear in new places.

²⁸ Boedecker, "Athenian Religion," 62.

²⁹ Boedecker, "Athenian Religion," 62.

Works Cited

Boedecker, Deborah. "Athenian Religion in the Age of Pericles." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*, edited by Loren J. Samons, II, 46-69. Cambridge Companions to the Ancient World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol9780521807937>.

This source was my initial reading, and I accessed this source through CHO. Because this source is from CHO and the initial reading list, I know it is scholarly. This chapter discusses Athenian practices, the "correct" way to honor the gods, and how they added to society. Because my particular research question is about sacrifice and the significance of why they did so, the relevant sections would be *Gods of Athens* (pages 47 - 49), *Immortal Mortals* (pages 49-52), *Sanctuaries, Sacrifices, Festivals* (pages 53 - 57), and *Private Religious Activities and Beliefs* (pages 59 - 61). I would recommend this source for details of the social role religion plays in Athenian community, and to understand the ways to treat the Athenian gods correctly. However, I would not recommend it for the details of sacrifice and the procedures.

Burkert, Walter. "Athenian Cults and Festivals." In *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 5, *The Fifth Century BC*, 2nd ed., edited by David M. Lewis, John Boardman, J. K. Davies, and M. Ostwald, 245-67. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521233477>.

This source is a CHO chapter, which is how I know it is a scholarly source. This source gives a very in-depth explanation as to what sacrifices the Athenian people performed, how they did so in their respective cults, and why they were important to the Athenian people. Because of this fact, this whole chapter is relevant to my research question. I would recommend this source for more specific information on religious communities in Athens, but not particularly for the details of sacrifice.

Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*. Translated by John Raffan. Oxford, London: Blackwell Publishers, 1985.

I found this source by looking at sources that were recommended and used by my other sources (*Ancient Greek Religion* by Mikalson and the Suggestions for Further Reading section in *Athenian Religion in the Age of Pericles* by Boedecker). Because I found this source through other scholars recommending it, I know it is scholarly. Walter Burkert, the author, is also a scholar of Greek mythology and cults. This source expands on the specifics of Greek mythology, cults, and rituals, and gets into the different types and significance of each practice. It also gives names to rituals and explains the exact procedures. I would suggest this book the most from all of my sources, as this book is overall the most in-depth source when it comes to sacrifice, analyzing it from a religious and communal perspective.

Mikalson, Jon D. *Ancient Greek Religion*. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
Digital file.

I found this source through one of my previous sources listed above (the Suggestions for Further Reading section in *Athenian Religion in the Age of Pericles* by Boedecker, Ms. Budding also recommended this source during our meeting). Because I found this source through a section in a reliable research source, I know it is scholarly. The author, Jon D. Mikalson, is also a professor at the University of Virginia. This book is a good overview of Greek religion and culture, and the most relevant section is *Worship* (pages 76 - 89). I would recommend this source because it provides a lot of necessary background information and context, which makes this source different from my other sources.