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HUMANS AS RITUAL VICTIMS IN THE LATER PREHISTORY OF WESTERN EUROPE

Summary. The paper presented here addresses the issue of how far current evidence permits the admittance of ritual murder or human sacrifice in the European Iron Age. It argues from two basic premises: firstly that the notion of human sacrifice is the more acceptable within the context of strictly hierarchical, slave-owning societies for whom human life was not, of itself, sacrosanct; secondly that, since there is a solid body of both literary and archaeological evidence for human sacrifice in antiquity, there is no intrinsic reason to deny its presence in later European prehistory. However, scrutiny of the data reveals that, if human sacrifice did take place in Iron Age Europe, it appears to have been both rare and special. More importantly, virtually all the evidence has a measure of ambiguity and is capable of alternative interpretation.

INTRODUCTION: SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING FLESH OFFERINGS

‘When in English we speak of the institution of sacrifice, we commonly refer to the system of worship which has its most characteristic and effective action in the slaughter of a victim. Sacrifice is pre-eminently bloody sacrifice’

(Jones 1991, 9)

This paper seeks to re-evaluate some of the ‘evidence’ for the ritual slaughter of humans in temperate Europe during the last few centuries BC. In a religious context, the term ‘sacrifice’ has a quite specific meaning, namely the destruction of something or its removal from the earthly world, in order to

bring about benefits for the sacrificers. Such benefits may involve gaining or aversion: a sacrifice might be carried out in order to achieve a positive outcome or avert a negative one. There is, however, some controversy as to the proper parameters of the term: for Richard Bradley (1990, 37), there is a clear distinction between human or animal sacrifice, on the one hand, and the offering of inanimate objects, on the other, but for others, such as Randsborg (1995, 74–89), the deliberate deposition of a wooden boat full of weapons in a Danish peat-bog is as much a sacrifice as a slaughtered ox or sheep. What separates sacrifice from any other kind of ritual killing or destruction is the need, in the case of sacrifice, for a supernatural recipient (Hughes 1991, 3).

In most, if not all, religious systems — past

and present — the element of sacrifice plays a central role: humans sacrifice themselves — symbolically rather than through physical destruction — by, for example, their abnegation of the world in becoming monks or nuns; in some systems (as in the ancient Anatolian cult of Atys, the Egyptian Osiris and, of course, Christianity) divine beings themselves become sacrificial victims, in order either to grant salvation, to deliver from sin or to generate fertility/prosperity for their devotees. In such circumstances, sacrifice is intimately bound up with the paradox of polarity: the association between death and regeneration/resurrection (Bradley 1995, 49–51).

Giving and Separation

Crucial to the determination of sacrifice are the notions of giving, on the one hand, and separation, on the other. Giving has a number of functions: it may involve a request to the spirits for something to happen or not to happen (gaining or aversion); it may be a response to a crisis; it may take the form of propitiation or appeasement for something perceived as potentially offensive to the supernatural forces; or it may be a thank-offering for a successful battle, a good harvest, the birth of a healthy child, recovery from illness, or a satisfactory business transaction. Separation is equally important for the efficacy of a sacrificial offering: holiness itself implies separation from the world of humans and the distance between the sacred and the profane can be bridged only through sacrificial offerings. For a gift to the spirit-world to be successfully transferred thereto, it is necessary for it to be physically or metaphorically removed from the 'real' world. This may be achieved by burial in the ground, an action which renders the offering invisible and

inaccessible; the same is true of its immersion in water or marshy ground; it may be enclosed within sanctified space, the enclosure thereby acting as a sacred barrier protecting what is, in effect, an earthly manifestation of the supernatural world (rather as a foreign embassy building symbolically belongs to its homeland rather than its host country). For living sacrificial victims, the most prominent element of separation is the act of killing, which is comparable to the ritual destruction of an inanimate votive offering, such as a sword, torc or pot. For an animate offering to be a true sacrifice, the act of slaughter and the ritual that accompanies it is the crucial enabler, the factor that makes the victim acceptable to the recipient, and the violence involved (see below) may play an essential role in the potency of the sacrificial gift. Natural death, with subsequent ritual treatment of the body, does not qualify for sacrificial status.

Sacrifice and Value

An important consideration of sacrifice is the notion of value. Our late-twentieth-century western viewpoint would unquestionably grade animate and inanimate value according to strict anthropocentric rules, in which a human being is considered of greater importance than an animal or inanimate object. Even within our own value-system, there is equivocation concerning the perceived relative value placed upon an animal and an expensive object, like a car or painting: the presence of breath (*anima*) is not itself the deciding factor. In antiquity, the killing of a living being, whether human or animal, was not inevitably regarded as more efficacious (in relation to value) than the consignment of a gold necklet or decorated shield-cover to the spirit-world. An animal's

sacrificial 'currency' may depend upon its economic status or, alternatively, upon its symbolism within a societal structure, a symbolism that may or may not be linked with the creature's practical value.

In considering human sacrifice, and the value placed upon human life, it is all the more important not to impose our value-systems on the past. In most present-day societies, human beings have a value over and above everything else, and it is this perception that makes the idea of human sacrifice particularly unacceptable. It is, however, necessary to question the natural assumption that the same priorities pertained in antiquity: in the Roman world, the male head of the family (the *paterfamilias*) technically had powers of life and death over his wife and children; slavery was endemic to Roman society and human life was by no means automatically accorded primacy relative to beasts and inanimate goods. In Gaul and Britain where, according to such Greek and Roman chroniclers as Strabo (for example *Geography* IV, 4, 5) and Caesar (*de Bello Gallico* VI, 16), human sacrifice was still practised during the first century BC, the value of a human sacrificial victim probably partly depended on the status of the victim: criminals may have been perceived as of less value than prisoners of war, particularly if the latter were of noble rank.

Humans and Animals

'It is better to show human sacrifice in the realm of the imaginary, just as the cannibalism so close to it is best imagined in the far away reaches of myth or in the tales of another people'

(Durand 1989, 91)

A challengeable assumption is the argument that animals were inevitably perceived as

sacrificial substitutes for humans (as, for example, argued by A.R.W. Green 1975, after Smith 1927). Evidence suggests that for some religious systems of antiquity this was indeed the case. In the Old Testament episode of God's request for Isaac as a sacrifice (*Genesis* 22, vv 2–13), when Abraham passes the test of his commitment and prepares to slaughter his son, he is allowed instead to sacrifice a ram, conveniently caught in some foliage nearby. But an attitude relevant to ancient Judaism, in which humans were fashioned in the image of God and which, in any case, may be the result of manipulation in reporting (Bradley 1995, 88–9), must not necessarily be taken as a normative attitude in antiquity and, indeed, there is firm evidence for human sacrifice in the ancient Near East in, for instance, Mesopotamia (A.R.W. Green 1975), Palestine (Day 1989) and Nubia (O'Connor 1993).

In the religion of Classical Greece, although animal sacrifice — as elsewhere in the ancient world — was endemic (Burkert 1983, 9), human sacrifice belonged firmly to myth: it is represented in drama, of which Euripides' tragedy *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, (c. 406 BC) is a prime example (van Straten 1995, 34). Human sacrifice is also portrayed in the iconography of painted vases: the sacrifice of Iphigeneia is occasionally depicted in Greek vase-painting, as is the episode in the *Iliad* in which Polyxena is sacrificed at Achilles' tomb by Neoptolemos (Durand 1989, 87–118, fig. 7; van Straten 1995, 113–14); an Attic Black Figure amphora depicts Polyxena held face-down over an altar by hoplites while Neoptolemos plunges his sword into her throat, releasing a stream of blood which pours down onto the altar. For the Classical Greeks, then, human sacrifice was acceptable only in terms of a mythical past. In Republican Rome, human sacrifice was not unknown, though it was only carried out in exceptional circum-

stances. Tatian (*Oratio ad Graecos* 29, 1) mentions human sacrifice in connection with two Latin cults, those of Jupiter Latiaris and Diana Nemorensis; the Christian writer Minucius Felix (*Octavius* 30) comments that in his own day (late second–early third century AD) the Romans sacrificed men to Latiaris. It is recorded (for example by Plutarch *Moralia: Quaestiones Romanae* 83 and Pliny the Elder *Natural History* XXVIII, 3, 12) that in 228 BC, following a series of disasters, a pair of Greeks and one of Gauls (a male and female in each case) were buried alive in the Forum Boarium at Rome, in accordance with instructions from the Sibylline Books; after the catastrophic Roman defeat at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BC, the rite was repeated (Liebeschütz 1979, 449–450). But, in reporting this practice, Livy (*History of Rome from its Foundation* XXII, 57, 6) speaks of it as a very un-Roman rite. Human sacrifice was officially outlawed in Rome by a senatorial decree in 97 BC.

It is quite possible that in Gaul and Britain prior to the Roman period the conceptual framework diverged from that of the Classical world. None of the Graeco-Roman commentators on their ‘barbarian’ neighbours to the north in Gaul and Britain speak of substitution of animal for human sacrifice. Although many of these observers of Gaulish and British customs were undoubtedly guilty of barbaric stereotyping, exaggeration of ‘uncivilized’ practices and other foreign bias, there is no justification for mistrusting all of their allusions to human sacrifice. Although there is a small amount of evidence that hints at possible human sacrifice in Roman Britain (Isserlin 1997, 91–100), it appears likely that the imposition of Roman rule put an end — at least officially — to ritual murder in these regions and so it seems probable that, thereafter, animal sacrifice was the only source

of flesh for sacrificial offerings. But in the pre-Roman Iron Age, whilst human sacrifice was perhaps never a normative rite (this is suggested by the paucity of unequivocal archaeological evidence), there is no inherent reason why it should not have occurred in cases of specific religious need.

Slaughter as a ritual act

‘Sacrificial killing is the basic experience of the “sacred”’: *homo religiosus* acts and attains self-awareness as *homo necans*’ (Burkert 1983, 3). A final general issue concerns the principles underlying sacrificial killing and the offering of flesh to the gods. It is worth posing the question as to whether slaughter *per se* is significant. Killing involves violence, and a sudden transition of the victim’s status from living to dead. My contention is that violence may have been an important factor in the sacrificial process. In ancient Greek ritual, violence was — to an extent — considered as a negative force and so to be minimized inasmuch as the animal should be seen symbolically to consent to its death (Detienne 1989, 9). This was achieved by inducing the animal to lower its head in submission (by offering it food or drink) or by sprinkling water over it, thus causing it to shake its head. There is some evidence that the perception of symbolic consent also existed in Iron Age Gaul: examination of the skulls of sacrificial cattle at the shrine of Gournay-sur-Aronde (Oise) indicates that they were ritually killed by blows to the nape of the neck, which can only have been inflicted on beasts with their heads lowered (Meniel 1987, 101–43; 1989, 87–97; Brunaux 1988, 123). But there is also a suggestion — arising from some archaeological evidence — that for certain Gaulish and British communities there existed a perception that particular energy

or force was generated by actual or symbolic violence: the ritual destruction of weapons prior to their deposition, for instance at Gournay (Lejars 1994, 219, 232–3; Rapin 1988, 47–54), can sometimes be demonstrated to have been conducted with unnecessary savagery, as if the force required to snap an iron sword was transmitted to the gift and its recipient. Scrutiny of the evidence for human and animal sacrifice in Iron Age Europe reveals a similar ‘overkill’ factor: the skinned, eviscerated dog buried with its owner at the Tartigny (Oise) cemetery (Meniel, 1987, 25–31) and the ‘triple killing’ of Lindow Man in Cheshire (Stead *et al.* 1986) both bear witness to such deliberate excess in the dispatch of sacrificial victims. It has been noted that many north European bog-bodies show evidence of rough handling before their deaths (Glob 1969, 93; Finlay *et al.* 1997, 7). Ritual aggression was thus arguably an important element in the symbolism of sacrifice because of the energy associated with violence (Girard 1977); the act of violence towards human, animal or inanimate sacrifice may itself be associated with its efficacy in stimulating regeneration, prosperity or other desired outcome. In discussing ancient Greek sacrificial ritual, Burkert (1983, 41, 47) argues that the close association between war, hunting and sacrifice was due, in part, to the common factor of aggression.

The specific requirement of flesh-offerings demands consideration: animal sacrifice is endemic to many past and present religious systems but the mindsets behind such activity are by no means necessarily shared by all. The shedding of blood, whether that of humans or beasts, is a significant element in the ritual process. Cutting the throat of a sacrificial pig, sheep or ox was symbolically important in both the Classical world and in Iron Age temperate Europe. In the Greek

world, the *sphageion* (the blood-container) was central to ritual animal-slaughter and the warm flowing blood represented the catharsis of sacrifice and the liminality between life and death, pure and impure inasmuch as spilling blood at the same time drains life but also nourishes the ground on which it falls (Durand 1989, 119–28; Burkert 1983, 59). I argue elsewhere (Green 1998, in press) that the Greek *sphageion* perhaps had its north European counterpart in some of the great sheet-bronze cauldrons found in Iron Age ritual deposits in a huge area from Ireland to Bohemia. Strabo (VII, 2, 3) specifically mentions that Cimbrian sacrificial victims had their throats cut over sacred cauldrons: the blood collected was presumably sprinkled over altars and poured onto the earth to the accompaniment of prayers and invocations.

The significance of flesh and blood in sacrificial contexts is perhaps multi-faceted: an animal victim may be butchered and partially consumed in an act of ritual feasting, wherein the gods are invited to join in the conviviality of a shared meal; it is generally assumed that human victims were not so treated, but it is wise to re-examine the evidence before dismissing it out of hand. Additionally, both human and animal flesh may have been important if the supernatural powers were perceived to be like humans (or animals), albeit dwelling in a parallel world, and were thus recipients of gifts which could be appreciated either as food or because they consisted of matter similar to that from which the gods themselves were constructed.

HUMAN SACRIFICE IN GAUL AND BRITAIN

The source material

Both the literary testimony of Classical observers and the archaeological record

provide evidence that is, at the same time, ambiguous and potentially significant. The ancient literature is sufficiently well-known to render unnecessary any detailed analysis here of its value and its problems. The writings of Greek and Roman commentators were indubitably coloured by literary convention, by influences from their own cultural context and by specific, sometimes personal, agenda, such as the desire to project a sensational or stereotypic image of barbarism (Champion 1985, 9–24). Nonetheless (Brunaux 1988, 127), a variety of ancient authors mention human sacrificial ritual in Gaul, of whom at least some may be considered relatively trustworthy, despite their inevitable bias as foreign observers. Diodorus Siculus, for instance, stresses (V, 31, 3) that human sacrifice was exceptional but he is extremely precise about the manner of the victim's death: 'when enquiring into matters of great import they devote to death a human being and stab him in the region above the diaphragm'.

A major difficulty in using the comments of writers from the Mediterranean world about Gaul is that of chronology: the great majority of the texts date to the first centuries BC and AD, a period in which Iron Age society was undergoing significant changes, partly as a result of indigenous politico-societal development and partly because of ever-increasing influences from the Roman world. It is necessary both to acknowledge the inevitably diachronic nature of ritual practice and to avoid falling into the trap of retrospective inference: what may have pertained in Caesar's Gaul must not be assumed to be relevant in earlier periods. In the same way, it is essential to recognize that a practice observed to take place in one region of non-Mediterranean Gaul may not have been generally applicable over large areas of temperate Europe.

The four principal ancient authors who recorded human sacrifice among the Gauls are Diodorus Siculus, Strabo and Caesar (all of whom wrote in the first century BC) and Lucan, a first century AD poet. All are quite specific in their descriptions: the earlier three may have derived their material from the lost texts of the Greek Stoic philosopher Poseidonios (135–50 BC), who travelled in Gaul. Moreover Caesar campaigned in Gaul for nearly ten years, and could well have observed human sacrificial practice for himself. Lucan (who lived a very short life) never visited Gaul, and it is generally accepted (see, for example, Getty 1940, xxix; Pichon 1912) that he used the lost books of Livy's *Roman History* as his main source.

Archaeologists are, quite properly, extremely wary of interpreting human deaths as the result of sacrifice. It is seldom that the evidence is other than ambiguous and it is important, on the one hand, to make a distinction between human bodies which may have been subjected to ritual treatment after death and victims of sacrifice and, on the other, to recognize that the apparent evidence for ceremonial murder may sometimes instead reflect the execution of a malefactor. The situation is further complicated by the possible presence of religious overtones even in suspected punitive killings: there is a fine line between the sacrifice of an individual, who is specifically dispatched in an act of divine appeasement or thanksgiving, and the execution of a transgressor whose death was carried out as part of a religious ceremony. However, in view of the undoubted practice of human sacrifice in antiquity, it is perhaps unwise for archaeologists to close their minds utterly to the possible presence of such ritual behaviour; the evidence needs to be judged on its own merits (particularly in a context

where human life was not necessarily imbued with great value) rather than overlain by quite natural, but inappropriate, feelings of repugnance for admittance of such practice.

Careful scrutiny of the possible evidence for human sacrifice in Iron Age western Europe reveals a wide variety of types and circumstances; despite the equivocal nature of the material, it is a valid exercise to attempt an identification of possible instances of human sacrifice on a scale of probability, ranging from the doubtful but possible to the highly likely. Between the sixth century BC and the Roman period, candidates for consideration as human sacrificial victims show specificity in neither age nor gender. Sometimes there is clear evidence for the cause of death but, in other instances, certain features of the treatment of the body are suggestive of ritual murder. In most examples, the precise reason for sacrifice, if such it be, is not apparent but occasionally — as in the case of ‘retainer-sacrifice’ — it is possible to infer something of the circumstances which led to the killing.

It is not my intention to present a survey of all possible evidence for Iron Age human sacrifice but, rather, to attempt an identification of elements in the material culture of death in the European Iron Age which appear to share common features with other cultures of antiquity, where the reality of human sacrifice has long been established and accepted. It is acknowledged, however, that whilst archaeological evidence can present clues as to the manner and context of unnatural and untimely death, it can provide little information about the ritual perceptions behind the ‘sacrifice’. Classical and other ancient writers (for example those responsible for the books of the Old Testament) speak of scapegoats and divination, appeasement and atonement,

reparation and regeneration but — in the majority of instances — archaeological evidence cannot distinguish such categories.

Rites of Fire

‘The Gauls believe the power of the immortal gods can be appeased only if one human life is exchanged for another, and they have sacrifices of this kind regularly established by the community. Some of them have enormous images made of wickerwork the limbs of which they fill with living men; these are set on fire and the men perish, enveloped in the flames.

(Caesar *de Bello Gallico* VI, 16)

In this brief comment, Caesar raises some important and complex issues: he implies that ritual murder was a recurrent practice (‘regularly established’); he speaks of the exchange of human lives, which could be interpreted as meaning that — in order to protect warriors from death in battle or the sick — death had to be projected onto another individual, rather in the manner of a *pharmakos* or scapegoat (see below). Strabo (*Geography* IV, 4, 5) refers to the same custom, a holocaust in which people were consumed in a great pyre of wicker fashioned in the image of a gigantic human being; Strabo adds that animals as well as humans were immolated in this way. Since both writers probably trawled a common Poseidonian text (Tierney 1959–60, 189–275), the mention of the wicker man in both sources is not significant in itself, except for the minor differences between the two descriptions.

The burning of victims has two effects which separate the practice from any other kind of sacrifice: it consumes the offering completely, leaving little trace, thus

effectively removing it from the earthly world; and the flames, smoke and ashes rise to the sky. It could be argued, therefore, that such a gift was designed specifically for divinities whose domain was in the upper air. Neither Caesar nor Strabo link this sacrificial practice with particular cults, but a ninth-century glossator on Lucan's *Pharsalia* associates fire-sacrifice with the thunder-god Taranis (who is described in Lucan's original text), with the consumption of his human victims by fire (Zwicker 1934, 50). Taranis is attested epigraphically in Roman Gaul and Britain (Green 1982, 37–44), and a fire-offering would have been appropriate for a god of thunder and lightning. Whether or not the 'wicker man' element in the sacrificial ritual described by Caesar and Strabo is authentic reporting, fire-sacrifice involving human victims is by no means unknown in the ancient world, for example in Mesopotamia (A.R.W. Green 1975, 127) and in Old Testament Judaism (Day 1989, 82–5), where fire-sacrifice was associated with atonement, purification and as a representation of theophany, the visible manifestation of God. Neither Caesar nor Strabo make it clear as to why fire was selected, but Caesar does refer to appeasement. It is likely that the Gaulish priests involved in human sacrifice chose fire for a particular symbolic purpose, perhaps connected with expiation, purification or as an appropriate medium for the divine recipients of holocaust. It may even be that both the spectacle and the protracted agony of death by fire were considered as significant contributors to the efficacy of the offering.

Rites of Blood

The Classical texts are unequivocal in their presentation of blood-sacrifice as being the

favoured means of effecting ritual murder. Diodorus (V, 32, 6) alludes to the impaling of sacrificial victims, and he also (V, 31, 3) mentions stabbing in the back; Strabo likewise refers to stabbing and impalement of victims in sacred places; additionally, he speaks of shooting victims with arrows (IV, 4, 5), a method of particular note since there is little evidence for archery as a normal method of killing in the Gaulish Iron Age. Stabbing, shooting and impaling are all 'penetrative' deaths which involve spilling blood, and this may — as in the case of Greek animal sacrifice — (Durand 1989, 90) have been central to the symbolism associated with certain ceremonies. When Strabo elsewhere (VII, 2, 3) discusses rites followed by the Germanic Cimbri, he describes how holy women cut the throats of sacrificial victims and collected their blood in great cauldrons. Another bloody, and very specific, sacrificial custom observed by Strabo concerns the Maenad-like tearing to pieces of one of their number by an all-female group of cult-officials who lived a secluded life on a sacred island off the mouth of the Loire (IV, 4, 6). The passage is especially interesting both because the ceremony is associated with an annual rite involving the re-roofing of a temple and because the sacrifice consists of a cult-official, perhaps a particularly efficacious gift. Both Tacitus (*Annals* XIV, 30) and Lucan (*Pharsalia* III, 372–417) refer to the 'drenching' or 'sprinkling' of altars with human sacrificial blood in sacred groves.

Several Graeco-Roman writers allude to human blood-sacrifice in the context of divinatory ritual: Strabo (IV, 4, 5), Diodorus (V, 31, 3) and Tacitus (*Annals* XIV, 30) all speak of consultation of the gods and of foretelling the future by studying death-convulsions or examining innards. In these instances, therefore, the sacrifice has a dual

purpose: it is both a gift to the divine powers and a means of communicating with them. In addition, it is likely that the blood itself had particular symbolic properties: for the Greeks, warm, flowing blood represented the paradox of unity and polarity between life and death (Durand 1989, 87–118) and the essence of liminality between the two states of being.

For bodies which survive in the archaeological record only as skeletons, identification as blood-sacrifice will seldom be possible: on rare occasions, there may be circumstantial evidence, such as the presence, in or near the body, of penetrative weapons like daggers or arrows. However, some of the well-preserved Iron Age bog-bodies from northern Europe do exhibit evidence of what may be interpreted as blood-sacrifice: the Grauballe man, who died in the Roman Iron Age (Glob 1969, 37–62), had suffered a wound to his throat that had all but severed his gullet; that he died terrified, rather than consenting, is indicated by the look of pain and fear on his face (Glob 1969, 39; Finlay *et al.* 1997, 6). Lindow II (Stead *et al.* 1986) had had his throat cut as well as being garotted.

Drowning, strangulation & burial alive

A passage in Book I of Lucan's epic Civil War poem refers to three Gaulish gods by name:

‘... and those who propitiate with horrid victims ruthless Teutates and Esus whose savage shrine makes men shudder, and Taranis, whose altar is no more benign than that of Scythian Diana’

(*Pharsalia* I, 444–446)

The ninth-century Bernese scholiast on Lucan's text (Zwicker 1934, 50) assigns different methods of sacrificial killing to

these three deities: the burnt offerings deemed acceptable to Taranis were mentioned earlier; Esus' victims were hanged from trees; Teutates was appeased by drowned human sacrifices. There is a suspiciously neat association of these methods with the elements of air, fire and water, and so it is necessary to exercise caution in reading too much into this late gloss on Lucan's text. However, in the treatise known as the *Germania* (XL), Tacitus also refers to drowning as part of the ritual associated with the Germanic earth-goddess Nerthus: the slaves who performed the task of washing the holy cloth, which apparently symbolized the divine presence, in a sacred lake were afterwards ritually drowned in the water, because intimacy with the goddess could be permitted only to those about to die. Whether or not such killing constitutes human sacrifice *sensu stricto* is unclear, but Tacitus is certainly recounting a variety of ritual murder.

Death by suffocation, arguably within a sacral context, can sometimes be inferred from archaeological evidence. The ritual immersion of human bodies, whether in dry or wet locations, can be conceived as liminal placement with the grave, pit or marsh representing the interstices between earthly life and the Otherworld. The interment of a sacrificial offering underground or underwater involves both giving and separation which, as indicated earlier, are essential factors in the definition of a sacrificial act.

Some, although by no means all, the human pit-burials at Danebury (and elsewhere) may be considered as possible candidates for interpretation as human sacrifice. Such an explanation seems particularly likely in respect of the complete skeletons found alone, or in groups of two or three, at the base of 'disused' grain silos.

Cunliffe (1993a, 9–13) has estimated that one such burial took place on an average of about once every six years during the period of the ‘pit-tradition’ (eighth/seventh to first century BC). The ritual activity focused on corn-storage pits was complex, involving a sequence of repeated, curated depositions of humans, parts of humans, whole or incomplete animals and inanimate objects, probably including organic material that has not survived (Cunliffe 1992, 69–83; 1993a, 19). It is important to realise that the apparently secular business of storing seed-corn over the winter was probably an integral part of a dynamic sequence of ritual action and only one element in a multi-phase network of cult-behaviour, reflecting a complicated set of beliefs. In the present context, the main interest lies in the deposition in the pits of complete human bodies. Apart from their presence, sometimes as multiple disposals, other features of their interment are suggestive of ceremonial practice: the arms of some were placed tightly together, as if once bound; and some bodies were smashed and/or weighted down by large blocks of flint or chalk (Cunliffe 1993a, 12–13). Neither element points unequivocally to sacrificial murder, but the mode of deposition and the weighing down of bodies are identical to the treatment accorded some of the animal pit-burials and could well reflect similar sacrificial practice. The smashing of the bodies could relate to symbolic violence (see above), or even ritual cannibalism — perhaps — to insult or honour the dead (Lewis 1996, 88–104). The paucity of erosion-deposits beneath most ‘special’ human burials indicates that the bodies were placed in the pits only a short time after their clearance.

If the human (and animal etc) pit-deposits do reflect ritual — and perhaps sometimes — sacrificial activity, then the questions arise as

to criteria affecting victim-selection and the manner of sacrifice enacted. The association between seed-corn and special burial argues for a link with fertility and crop-protection. The most likely purpose for sacrificial practice in such a context is propitiation or appeasement of the supernatural powers in whose keeping the corn was placed, in the ‘threshold’ space between earth and underworld, at what has been suggested as a liminal time, between harvest and germination (Cunliffe 1993a, 21). The symbolic ‘death’ of the buried corn, followed by its ‘resurrection’ in the spring perhaps warranted particular ritual activity which was designed both to ensure the continuance of the germination-process and as a means of acknowledging the divine forces behind seasonal regeneration (Bloch & Parry 1982, 1–44). The relationship between the victims and the community can only be a subject of speculation; their rarity argues for some kind of specialness, perhaps reflective of a societal marginality: selection could be on the grounds of behaviour, lot, appearance, voluntary submission or some other feature which set them apart from their peers.

Certain other Iron Age dry burials from Britain are suggestive of ritual practice, which *may* have involved sacrifice. An embanked enclosure at the Curragh, Co. Kildare contained the skeleton of a woman, whose ‘strained and awkward position and unnaturally raised skull’ imply her burial alive (Raftery 1981, 173–204; 1994, 199). There is evidence for a ritual or punitive killing, involving burial alive, at Garton Slack near Driffield in Yorkshire, where the bodies of a young man and woman were found buried together, a wooden stake pinning their arms together into the ground; between the woman’s pelvis was a foetus, expelled from her womb just before her death (Brewster 1976, 115). Burial alive is itself

not necessarily indicative of human sacrifice, but may sometimes have been punitive: in Rome, the punishment for Vestal Virgins who broke their vows of chastity was burial alive; the occurrence of this practice is recorded as late as AD 90, in the reign of Domitian, by the Younger Pliny (*Letters* IV, XI, 6–11; Adkins & Adkins 1996, 237–8). However, the live burial of Greeks and Gauls by the Romans in the Forum Boarium at Rome in the third century BC (see above) was undoubtedly a sacrificial act.

Pinning or weighting down human victims of violent death, which has been observed, for example, at Danebury and Garton Slack, occurred also in the disposal of bodies in watery contexts. The body of a young man was found at Gallagher in Co. Galway in 1821. According to records made at the time of discovery, he had long black hair and a beard, and wore a tight-fitting deerskin garment; at each side of the body was a pointed stake, as if to act as a restraint, and a band of hazel wands at his throat may have been an actual (or symbolic) garotte. Recent analysis suggests that the body belonged to the later first millennium BC (Raftery 1994, 187–88, pl. 77). Human bodies of Iron Age date found in aquatic contexts at La Tène and at Cornaux in Switzerland were apparently weighted down with large timbers (Dunning 1991, 366–368; Bradley 1990, 164), as were the bodies of a fifty-year-old woman drowned on the site of a spring in the Juthe Fen bog in Denmark and of an adolescent girl, immersed in a marsh at Windeby in Schleswig-Holstein, together with several other Iron Age bog-bodies (Glob 1969, 70–100, 114). One of the stakes pinning the Juthe Fen woman down in the marsh-bed had been driven through her knee-joint, the swelling of which indicates that the victim was still alive when the injury was sustained. Tacitus (*Germania* XII) specifically mentions

pinning victims of punitive execution down in bogs using hurdles, but he does not suggest that this action was anything to do with sacrificial ritual. Stephen Briggs (1995, 168–82) suggests that such hurdles could have sometimes been present with bog-bodies because they had been used in rescue-attempts rather than deliberate killing, but the large stone placed on top of the Windeby girl shows that this was not always the case; and if the idea of the stake was to aid the Juthe Fen woman out of the bog, then the attempt went sadly awry.

Several bodies from watery or marshy graves exhibit signs of garotting: the La Tène body had a rope around the neck, as did those from Tollund and Borre Fen in Denmark (Glob 1969, 18–36, 90) and one of the two from Lindow Moss in Cheshire (Lindow II, dating to the first century AD: Stead *et al.* 1986; Turner 1995, 10–18). The Gallagher bog-victim had a collar of woven hazel-withies; and the Windeby girl was naked but for an ox-hide collar, which could have been a symbolic garotte but she, like the older woman from Juthe Fen, was probably drowned. Some bodies (like the one from Grauballe: Glob 1969, 48) show evidence of throat-cutting; Lindow II had had his throat cut in addition to the blows sustained to his skull and his strangulation, though it was probably the latter which killed him; Lindow III (of second-century AD date) had been decapitated, his head found some way from his body (Turner 1995, 34–5); it is not clear whether he was beheaded or met his death by drowning prior to decapitation.

None of the methods of killing illustrated by these bog-bodies in themselves constitute sufficient evidence to claim sacrificial activity, but the ‘overkill’ factor present in the treatment of some victims and the special meals ingested by Lindow II and III and by Tollund Man (Holden 1995, 76–82; Turner

1996, 34) are highly suggestive of an elaborate ritual sequence of events. The quantity of crushed hazelnuts found in the gut of Lindow III may reflect a particular symbolism associated with hazel (incidentally, he may have been selected as a 'special' victim on account of his vestigial second thumb); the Irish bog-body wore a hazel collar; a male victim from Windeby had a hazel-withey around his neck (Glob 1969, 166), and another Danish victim, from a bog at Undelev, was deposited with three hazel rods (Glob 1969, 68). It may or may not be significant that a recently-discovered lead *defixio* from Brandon in Suffolk (dated to the fourth century AD) refers to punishment — for the theft of an iron pan — in the form of sacrifice (whether physical or symbolic) to Neptune, a Roman water-god, 'with hazel' (Hassall & Tomlin 1994, 293–95). Such repeated association between hazel, water and the arguably ritual disposal of bodies in the Iron Age and Roman periods may be coincidental or be due to seasonal factors, such as availability of material, but it should, perhaps, not be forgotten that hazel, in association with water, possessed a prominent symbolic role in early Irish pagan myth (O'Fáolain 1954; Green 1997, 109).

A curious feature of the body from La Tène is the apparent defleshing of the skull, which bore a number of knife-marks. The same treatment appears to have been meted out to the head of a teenage boy, of Roman date, from a pit associated with a ritual enclosure at Folly Lane, St Albans. In the second century AD, a small 'Romano-Celtic' temple was built inside a ritual enclosure — which had been constructed in the mid first century around a mortuary chamber and cremation-pit (Niblett 1992, 917–929; Haselgrove & Millett 1997, 283) — and a series of pits was dug outside it: in the base of one pit, probably synchronous with the

shrine, was the skull of a youth of about 15–18 years old. At least one of several injuries to the head was sustained to living bone, but more bizarre are the 90 cut-marks to the skull made by a fine-bladed knife, which again seems to indicate defleshing (Mays & Steele 1996, 155–61). The damage to the base of the skull is commensurate with its display on a pole, and the absence of weathering is suggestive of such display having been of short duration or of having taken place indoors, perhaps within the temple-building, before it was placed within the pit as a final act of ritual. The blow to the head of a living person, followed by seemingly ritual treatment, *may* involve human sacrifice, although the killing could be the result of punitive execution, followed by a 'magical' ritual designed to neutralize harmful forces. The defleshing of the skull is interesting, although inconclusive to the sacrificial hypothesis: stripping the flesh from bones may occur for a variety of ritual purposes, most common of which is preparation for burial and (as in the case of excarnation: Carr & Knüsel 1997, 167–73) to facilitate entry into the spirit-world; such activity has recently been argued, for instance, as an explanation for the defleshing of children's bones found in the destruction-layers of a building at Knossos c. 1450 BC (Hughes 1991, 18–24, 195). Defleshing is definitely not, as is sometimes claimed, evidence for ritual (or any other form of) cannibalism. It is interesting, in the context of defleshing and sacrifice, that one of the female Danish bog-victims from Borre Fen (Glob 1969, 93) had been scalped.

The special treatment accorded the skulls at La Tène and St Albans adds to a large volume of evidence for the symbolic importance attached to the human head in Iron Age Europe, which is so well-documented to be almost commonplace.

Most frequently cited are the skulls placed in niches in southern Gaulish sanctuaries, such as Roquepertuse and Entremont in the Lower Rhône Valley, the carvings of severed heads found here and elsewhere (Lambrechts 1954; Benoit 1969; Ross 1974, 94–171; Collis 1984, 110–111) and the references to ritual head-hunting made by some Classical commentators on late Iron Age Gaul (for example Livy X, 26; Diodorus V, 29, 4; Strabo IV, 4, 5). If the Folly Lane skull is connected with the temple nearby, then the association has a close parallel with the two skulls set into the *cella* wall of a shrine at Cosgrove in Northamptonshire (Quinnell 1991, 4–66). Skulls also formed an important category of human deposition in the Danebury pits (Cunliffe 1993b, 106–8).

Criminals and Prisoners-of-War

‘They [the Gauls] believe that the gods prefer it if the people executed have been caught in the act of theft or armed robbery or some other crime, but when the supply of such victims runs out, they even go to the extent of sacrificing innocent men’

(Caesar *de Bello Gallico* VI, 16)

On the face of it, this is a curious statement: Caesar remarks that criminals were deemed the most acceptable sacrificial victims to the gods, and that blameless men were second-best, subject to ritual killing only in the event of a shortfall in the supply of malefactors: for some reason, then, a guilty sacrifice was considered especially efficacious. Diodorus makes a similar reference to the choice of criminals:

‘And in pursuance of their savage ways they manifest an outlandish impiety also with respect to their sacrifices; for their criminals they keep prisoner for five years

and then impale them in honour of the gods’

(V, 32, 6)

A cynic might suspect an expediency-factor in operation: a human sacrifice of criminals might possess a double advantage in, at the same time, ridding the community of its undesirable elements and providing expendable sacrificial victims to appease the gods. It is difficult, at first consideration, to apply the equation of human sacrifice with high value in such circumstances. However, thieves and murderers may have been perceived as possessing special symbolism, either because they were individuals who were marginalized within society or because they were thought to be inhabited by maleficent spirits: thus the sacrifice of such individuals may have been seen as providing a potent (albeit negative) force of energy, channelled towards the gods of the community. There is evidence for the sacrifice of lowly persons in other ancient societies: at Kerma in ancient Nubia (c. 1600 BC), for example, the human sacrifices accompanying royal burials have been interpreted as being of low status because of the paucity and poverty of their grave-goods (O’Connor 1993, 54–5), although this may only reflect their rank *relative* to royalty.

As well as criminals, several Classical writers mention prisoners-of-war as favoured candidates for human sacrifice: the passage in Strabo (VII, 2, 3) which refers to the collection of sacrificial blood in cauldrons, identifies the victims as being war-captives and describes how the entrails were studied in a divinatory ritual designed to foretell victory in battle for the sacrificers. Tacitus (*Annals* XIV, 30) refers to British prisoners in relation to human sacrifice on Anglesey in the first century AD. Like malefactors, the status of war-captives as aliens and as

enemies of the community might have been relevant to their fate. The sacrificers were perhaps treating such victims like scapegoats or *pharmakoi* (see below), cleansing their territory by means of the ritual murder of these outcasts.

An added complexity of literary testimony for Gaulish practice relates to the reference, in Diodorus' statement (V, 32, 6), to the five year period of captivity preceding the dispatch of sacrificial prisoners. There may be a confusion here between sacrifice and punitive execution, for it is documented that the great Arvernian ruler and freedom-fighter Vercingetorix was captured by Caesar after the siege of Alesia in 52 BC and imprisoned in Rome for five years before being executed according to Roman law (King 1990, 52). Was Diodorus, perhaps, embroidering a Gaulish religious practice with Roman custom, or was there a particular ritual reason for keeping prisoners over a certain period before killing them? Two issues arise from Diodorus' statement: one is that it is important not to confuse the ceremony sometimes accompanying the death of prestigious war-prisoners with human sacrifice; the second is Diodorus' referral to a long time-gap between capture and killing, which seems reminiscent of the practice of setting male cattle aside for as long as a decade, after their use as traction-animals, for ritual slaughter at the Iron Age sanctuary of Gournay (Brunaux 1988, 122). The significance of symbolic time, in the context of funerary ritual, is the subject of a recent paper by John Pierce (1997, 174–180).

As far as the archaeological record is concerned, whilst it may be evident — from associated material — that there is a connection between the ritual treatment of human bodies and warfare, it is overstepping the bounds of acceptable speculation to interpret such human remains as the result

of sacrifice of prisoners-of-war. The eighty human bones at Gournay, which were associated with 3000 animal bones and more than 2000 deliberately-broken weapons, show evidence of postmortem dismemberment and defleshing, which is better interpreted as part of funerary ritual; the same is true of the 'ossuaries' made predominantly of human long-bones, representing 200 adults at Ribemont (Meniel 1987, 101–43). The 'sacrifice' of weapons at both Iron Age sanctuaries is highly reminiscent of the ritual deposit of arms contained within the great wooden war-canoe from Hjortspring (Randsborg 1995, 20–37), the weapon-deposits from watery sites like La Tène, the assemblage of weapons and chariot-fittings from Tiefenau, in the *oppidum* of Engehalsinsel near Berne (Müller 1991, 526–7), the ritually broken weapons from Hayling Island (Downey, King & Soffe 1980, 289–304) and the spears from pre-Roman Uley (Woodward 1992, 66–7; Woodward & Leach 1993, 131–35). Such arms-deposition also brings to mind Caesar's description of Gaulish offerings to a war-god of battle-plunder (VI, 17). It may be significant that, although Caesar does elsewhere describe human sacrifice in Gaul (VI, 16), he does not mention it in connection with the sacral offerings of war-booty.

The references in the Classical texts — to the sacrifice of malefactors and other prisoners — could be relevant in consideration of the selection of persons to be accorded 'special' burial rites at places like Danebury. If it is correct to interpret these bodies as belonging to people in some way marginalized within society, then it may make sense to suggest that they were individuals who had in some way transgressed against the rules of their particular community. They may not have been guilty of what — in western society —

is perceived as criminal behaviour; sacrilege or another form of 'taboo'-breaking could well be sufficient to condemn them.

The Scapegoat

The use of a scapegoat (Greek *pharmakos*) or 'emissary victim' as a purificatory device, which involved the ritual expulsion of a chosen victim, was common to several cities in ancient Greece, including Athens and some Ionian towns, where such rituals were carried out within the context of spring-ceremonies to avert disease. The victim was decorated, paraded and then cursed and driven out, bearing the evils of the community away with him. In most instances, there is no record of the actual death of the *pharmakos* (Hughes 1991, 139–65). This is strongly reminiscent of the Judaic scapegoat described in the Old Testament (*Leviticus* 16, vv 21–22), where the victim was an actual goat, symbolically laden with sin and cast out into the wilderness. However, in two very similar accounts of a scapegoat ritual taking place in southern Gaul, at Massilia, the victim is reported to have been sacrificed. One episode, documented by Servius, is preserved in a fragment of Petronius (*Servius on Virgil Aeneid III*, 57; Petronius Fragment I; trans. Heseltine 1969, 386–87). According to this text, whenever an epidemic broke out, a poor citizen offered himself as a *pharmakos* to save his fellow townsfolk. For a whole year, the self-selected victim was pampered with good food provided by the Massilians; then he was crowned with leaves and clad in a sacred robe before being led through the city, heaped with imprecations so that all the evils suffered by the community were loaded onto him. Finally, the victim was cast into the sea, thereby purifying the town. The second account, which must relate to the same event,

is recorded in the commentary on Statius' *Thebais* (X, 793) by a glossator of 5th or 6th century AD date, known under the name of Lactantius Placidus (Hughes 1991, 139–65). In this second account, the *pharmakos* was stoned to death outside the walls (Brunaux 1988, 131–32). It may be that what we have here is a deliberate distortion of a well-known ritual theme to suit a 'barbarian' society: whilst the normative scapegoat rite in Greece did not involve actual killing, the perceived 'otherness' of Gaul may have prompted the construction of a gloss of savagery on the part of the commentator. The custom of pampering ritual victims may, in part at least, be compensatory behaviour, but probably of greater importance was the perceived need symbolically to raise the status of the victim in order to enhance his sacrificial value.

Retainer sacrifice and suttee

'Although Gaul is not a rich country, funerals there are splendid and costly. Everything the dead man is thought to have been fond of is put on the pyre, including even animals. Not long ago slaves and dependants known to have been their masters' favourites were burned with them at the end of the funeral'

(Caesar VI, 19)

The practice of sacrificing individuals at the time of a high-ranking person's death is well-documented in the ritual culture of many communities in antiquity, for example within the Late Bronze Age to Middle Iron Age of ancient Mesopotamia (A.W.R. Green 1975, 46, 79) and in the royal burials at Kerma in ancient Nubia, in the northern Sudan during the second and first millennia BC (Connah 1987, 37–8, fig. 3.3; O'Connor 1993, 54–5, fig. 4.2; Shinnie 1967, 150).

Very occasionally, it is possible to recognize what it may be valid to interpret, at least tentatively, as retainer-sacrifice, or even *suttee* in Iron Age Europe. Dennis Hughes argues (1991, 18–24) that claims for the presence of *suttee* in antiquity can only be considered if certain strict criteria are met: these include the need to sex and age the burials, the ability to establish simultaneity, evidence of violent death for the lesser burial(s) and the ability to establish a hierarchy of funerary provision. In my opinion, such criteria should not (and indeed cannot always) be too rigidly applied. But Hughes also issues a valid warning against jumping to conclusions based purely on multiple and coeval burials, arguing that such material may relate to ‘grief-suicide’ rather than *suttee* or retainer-sacrifice. Some of the great ‘royal’ tumuli of the Hallstatt D period have been found to contain principal and centrally-situated graves accompanied by lesser burials, usually identified as those of attendants. An apparent example of such practice is the grave-mound at Hohmichele, in the vicinity of the Heuneberg stronghold near Hundersingen, on the Upper Danube. When it was discovered, the large main chamber had been robbed, but its size suggests that it was designed for two bodies; elsewhere in the mound were a number of secondary burials. More significantly, a second large chamber was found to contain the remains of a man and woman, lying next to each other on animal-pelts: on the basis of the grave-goods, these two were of equal rank, (Frey 1991, 75–92). The Hohmichele tomb-complex is of considerable interest for several reasons: both the original, robbed chamber and the intact second major grave were each for double burials, which itself begs questions as to the coincidence of double deaths or the possible presence of a form of *suttee* (whether male or female); the

likely relationship between the occupants of both chambers (whether or not they are synchronous) is significant in its implication either for successive ‘dynastic’ burial or for the retainer-sacrifice of high-ranking individuals. Finally, the undoubted presence of ‘low-status’ graves within the mound may also itself be evidence for a Kerma-like sacrifice of attendants.

In the Moselle region of Belgic Gaul, at Hoppstädten-Weiersbach near Trier, there is evidence suggesting that an entire family was interred together in the late La Tène period (Wightman 1970, 242). This could reflect the eradication of a complete family-unit as the result — perhaps — of an epidemic, but it could also represent the practice, recorded by Caesar, of the killing of ‘favourites’ alongside the deceased head of the family which, so he comments, only became obsolete a short time before his arrival in Gaul in 58 BC.

A curious funerary practice noted in Iron Age Ireland (Raftery 1994, 199) may be the result of some kind of retainer-sacrifice: the bodies of children, aged between five and nine years, quite frequently accompany those of adults; the majority of the children buried in the cemetery at Carrowjames, Co. Mayo were associated with the bodies of fully-grown individuals. One possible explanation for this pattern of interment is the human sacrifice of juvenile ‘retainers’, either as helpmeets in the afterlife or in the expectation that the family would continue to exist together across the liminal zone of death. Recent excavations at Folly Lane, St Albans (Niblett 1992, 917–929) have revealed the presence of a complex funerary ritual associated with the lying-in-state and cremation of a high-ranking Catuvellaunian, who died in about AD 55. The grave was in the centre of a ritual enclosure and, in the ditch near the entrance, three inhumations

were laid, without grave-goods, on the unsilted ditch-floor. Definitive publication of the site is still awaited, but it is perhaps permissible to suggest that the bodies in the ditch — if contemporary with the central cremation — might be present as the result of retainer-sacrifice.

Children: sacrificing the future

The final category of sacrificial victim to be considered here is children. The practice of sacrificing infants and juveniles in honour of the gods arguably represents an act of 'ultimate concern', for it involves relinquishing part of the future generation. The expectation has to be, therefore, that for such a practice to occur, exceptional circumstances must pertain associated, perhaps, with the aversion of impending catastrophe (epidemic, famine, annihilation by an enemy) or the perceived need to appease a powerful and capricious supernatural power. In attempting to identify child-sacrifice in the archaeological record, it is necessary to be careful not to confuse ritual killing with either natural death or infanticide. Neo-natal and stillborn mortality must have been not uncommon in Iron Age Europe, as elsewhere in the ancient world. Simon Mays (1993, 883–8) has made a convincing case for the practice of infanticide, as represented by infant-remains on some late Romano-British sites using, as an indicator, the presence of multiple perinatal deaths.

There is a small amount of evidence in British Iron Age contexts for the disposal of infant-remains whose circumstances point to something other than natural death and normal burial. The body of a child was found just outside the door of a circular 'shrine' at Maiden Castle, Dorset; this building was reconstructed in the Roman period alongside

a rectangular 'Romano-Celtic' temple (Cunliffe 1991, 512). The apparently sacred context may indicate a ritual killing, although the child may, of course, have been the victim of natural death whose body was, for some reason, placed in a consecrated spot. A second infant found in association with a late Iron Age or early Roman building at Maiden Castle (Sharples 1991, 101) is more likely to have died naturally: in this instance, there is nothing to point specifically to sacrificial action. But the interment of a legless child's body, wrapped in a cloth and deposited in a pit at the Wandlebury (Cambridgeshire) hillfort, seems to reflect some kind of ritual practice, if not human sacrifice (Cunliffe 1991, 505; Hartley 1957, 1–28).

The interment of children in temple-contexts was a recurrent, though never common, practice in Roman Britain: the bodies of infants come from postholes apparently forming a line of freestanding timber uprights belonging to Roman levels at the Springhead (Kent) temple-precinct; some of the postholes also contained ox- and horse-skulls, reinforcing a ritual interpretation for the deposits (Isserlin 1997, 91–100). Four other infant-burials, one decapitated (Penn 1960, 121–2) were discovered beneath the structure of Shrine IV at Springhead, suggesting their function as foundation-sacrifices. Eleanor Scott (1991, 116–117) has drawn attention to the presence of infant-burials in association with late Romano-British rural buildings, such as Barton court Farm, Oxon and the Star villa, at Shipham in Somerset, particularly those identified as corn-drying installations, which were probably concerned with malting: four children were interred beside the walls of an aisled building, which may have been used for such a purpose, at Winterton, Lincolnshire. Scott's thesis is that such burials were placed as foundation-offerings

in these structures as part of what she terms a 'revitalizing' fertility ritual. Even here it is impossible to point, with any certainty, to child-sacrifice, although it is perhaps more likely than dependence upon fortuitous natural peri-natal deaths. Foundation-sacrifices were important because of their association with the symbolism of endurance and longevity (Burkert 1983, 39). It was perhaps for this reason that a human body was placed in a trench associated with the construction of a Roman bridge at Aldwinckle in Northamptonshire (Jackson & Ambrose 1976, 46–7). It would be unwise to leap to the conclusion that the Aldwinckle body belonged to a sacrificial victim; it may equally have been that of someone who died in an accident while the foundations for the bridge were being laid and whose remains were interred on the site to avert ill-luck from the structure. As noted earlier in this paper, child-sacrifice may also have been present in Iron Age Ireland, for example at Carrowjames, where child-burials recurrently accompanied those of adults (Raftery 1994, 199).

The early Christian author Minucius Felix, writing in the late 2nd–early 3rd century AD, alludes to human sacrifice among certain peoples (including the Gauls), and specifically (*Octavius* 30, 1) to the North African ritual of child-sacrifice to Saturn (in fact a local divinity conflated with the old Italian agriculture god). Although Felix was a Christian, who probably projected his distaste for pagan practices in a somewhat polemical and exaggerated manner, there does appear to be a body of evidence for Punic child-sacrifice among the Carthaginians (Brown 1991). Cicero (*De Re Publica* 3, 13–15), reproducing arguments of an earlier Greek, Carneades, also speaks of human sacrifice among Gaulish and Punic communities (Rives 1995, 65–85).

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to re-evaluate some of the possible evidence for ritual murder in later prehistoric Europe and, in so doing, has sought to consider this evidence in a wider context of ritual activity in other ancient societies. The material culture demonstrates the essentially equivocal nature of the remains of humans for whom the question of the mode of their ritual dispatch arises: it is quite impossible to point, with any degree of certainty, to the presence of human sacrifice. We need, too, to be cautious in the way we interpret the documentary material, since Classical writers may well have embroidered their observations in order to emphasize the 'otherness' of the alien communities on whom they commented. However, it must also be recognized that our reluctance to admit the presence of human sacrifice among Iron Age European peoples should be tempered by an acknowledgement that, in hierarchical and slave-owning societies where human life was not inevitably considered inviolate, the practice of human sacrifice is not necessarily out of the question. Finally, study of the ritual systems followed by other societies of antiquity demonstrates that human sacrifice sometimes took place for a variety of reasons which may have been just as relevant to European Iron Age communities.

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