BOOK REVIEW

Smoke Signals for the Gods: Ancient Greek Sacrifice from the Archaic through the Roman Periods. By F. S. NAIDEN. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xv + 421. $74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-991640-5.

F. S. Naiden has written a groundbreaking book on ancient Greek sacrifice. His prose reads well; he presents clear, self-aware, and theoretically sophisticated arguments. His book encyclopedically gathers evidence of all sorts—literary, epigraphic, art historical, and archaeological. I have reservations about this impressive book's main interpretative thesis, but, in the future, when I want to know the facts about sacrifice, I will certainly consult it.

For the last few hundred years, many studies of Greek sacrifice have been so invested in current cultural concerns that what the Greeks actually believed about sacrifice has gotten lost. Scholars selectively choose evidence from various sources to build up their particular modern theoretical perspectives. Naiden tries to break through to what the Greeks themselves thought. The author comprehensively reconsiders the actual historical evidence and critiques the evolution of modern theories about sacrifice. In the process, he forcefully challenges prevalent views.

Naiden also constructs his own account of sacrifice. I, myself, am not sure that the amorphous ancient phenomenon that we call sacrifice can be reduced to coherency. The very word sacrifice is problematic. It does not correspond nicely to any Greek word and, in the Western academic world, it is freighted with meaning from its association with the Jewish and Christian tradition, a fact that Naiden acknowledges and even expertly elucidates. So, if we apply this word to Greek institutions, it becomes our task to define it. And from that definition automatically arises the general theory we embrace. If we define sacrifice as a violent ritual where an animal is killed, we wind up with something like Walter Burkert's influential account, and we will find support in tragedy, where murder is constantly portrayed as sacrifice. If we define sacrifice as a culinary precursor to a communal meal, we will wind up with sacrificial theories like those of Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, which stress commensality, and Homer and Hesiod are

there to support us. Naiden does not begin his book with a definition of the phenomenon that he is investigating. Instead, it is as if his entire book were the definition. Over the course of the book, he decouples sacrifice from Detienne's and Vernant's commensality as well as Burkert's violence and emphasizes another aspect of it.

According to Naiden, the evidence indicates that the Greeks viewed sacrifice as a form of communication with the divine, and that is what he views as essential to the practice. Invoking such communication entails taking the gods seriously. In his preface, he approvingly quotes Wilamowitz: "Die Götter sind da"—the gods are there; they exist. Who am I to say otherwise? Nevertheless, I tend to think that sacrifice does not get people in touch with Athena or Zeus or Hermes. I assume, therefore, that communication with the gods cannot fundamentally stabilize a practice that endured for centuries and, accordingly, cannot account for it. But this is a high-level disagreement that probably cannot be resolved by rational means.

There are problems with Naiden's views. It is easy to imagine a sacrifice where people participate for varying reasons. Maybe some participants are there to communicate with a god. But, certainly, if you read Greek comedy enough, you will be able to imagine someone who is there just to get a meal of meat. Someone who doesn't even believe in the gods may be there because of a social obligation. And politicians may be there for other reasons. Can communication with the gods be the only issue?

Moreover, if we grant that sacrifice is a valid category to describe an institution, there is another problem. Lasting institutions like sacrifice somehow precede the motivations alleged by their participants. The old ritual theories of mythology have a point—first comes the ritual, then comes the after-the-fact explanation in the form of a myth. To make an analogy with another institution, I may tell myself a story that my university exists to propagate learning. But, also, it is a paycheck to me. Or a way of reproducing class structure. Or a tool to grow the economy. There are so many different stories I could tell. I fear that any unitary account of a social institution has to fail. Sacrifice may be a means of communication with the divine. But there is so much more.

This brings me to my final point. As I read Naiden's book, I kept on imagining that I heard the wailing of babies being thrown out with the bathwater and the screams of evidence being fit to Procrustean beds. Naiden's zealous critiques of his predecessors and his industrious development of his own theory sometimes

obscure the possibility that multiple, even contradictory truths might suffuse a phenomenon as complex and multifaceted as sacrifice. Still, this is a marvelous and meritorious book that cannot be ignored by anyone who investigates Greek sacrifice.

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