

Chapter VII in: Jan N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*. – Studies in the History and Anthropology of Religion, Vol. 1 (Leuven, Peeters, 2007), 135–155.

This is a pre-publication version, all but identical to the printed version except for the pagination. Red numbers within brackets indicate the beginning of a page in the published book.

[135]

Retainer Sacrifice in Egypt and in Nubia

JACOBUS VAN DIJK

‘The truth of the doctrine of cultural (or historical—it is the same thing) relativism is that we can never apprehend another people’s or another period’s imagination neatly, as though it were our own. The falsity of it is that we can therefore never genuinely apprehend it at all. We can apprehend it well enough, at least as well as we apprehend anything else not properly ours; but we do so not by looking *behind* the interfering glosses that connect us to it but *through* them.’¹

Human sacrifice has long been, and perhaps still is, a somewhat controversial subject among Egyptologists. The ancient Egyptians have often been considered too civilized for such a

¹ C. Geertz, ‘Found in Translation: On the Social History of Moral Imagination’, in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983) 44.

barbaric custom. As the Canadian anthropologist and archaeologist Bruce Trigger put it, ‘the cruel forms of human sacrifice practised by the Aztecs have caused many Egyptologists to wonder if such people can really be considered to have been civilized’.² Invariably, a famous episode from an early New Kingdom literary text, the Westcar Papyrus, is cited in this context.³ It is a collection of fairy tales set in a distant past, the time of the Old Kingdom pharaohs. One of the stories tells of the magical skills of a man called Djedi, who is able to reconnect [136] a severed head and restore the victim to life. King Cheops, the builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza, is keen to have a demonstration of this and gives orders to fetch a prisoner and use him as a guinea pig, but Djedi tells the King that ‘it is forbidden to do such a thing to the noble cattle’, i.e. human beings. A duck, a goose, and a bull are then used instead. King Cheops is clearly depicted here as a barbarian who does not acknowledge the value of human life.

In modern popular imagination the idea of the pharaoh as a cruel despot is still very much alive. In many a film or novel the pharaoh has the people who have built his pyramid buried alive with him in order to ensure that nobody will disclose the secret of its construction and rob his tomb, and these people then often return as vengeful mummies risen from the dead. Of course this is all nonsense, but on the other hand it cannot be denied that the custom of having the King’s servants killed and buried with him in order to serve him in the afterlife did actually exist in Ancient

² B.G. Trigger, *Early Civilizations: Ancient Egypt in Context* (Cairo, 1993) 84.

³ A.M. Blackman, *The Story of King Kheops and the Magicians. Transcribed from Papyrus Westcar (Berlin Papyrus 3033)*, ed. W.V. Davies (Reading, 1988). The text has often been translated; recent English translations are available in M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1973) 215–22 and R.B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940–1640 BC* (Oxford, 1997) 102–27.

Egypt, albeit only for a brief period at the very beginning of pharaonic civilization.

Two main forms of human sacrifice can be distinguished. On the one hand there is the ritual killing of a human being, either as a regular or as an exceptional form of the offering cult. In this case human beings – usually, though not always, convicted criminals or prisoners of war – are sacrificed to the gods in order to maintain or re-establish cosmic order and to emphasize the role of the King as its main guarantor. In some cases this type of human sacrifice may be no more than a ritualized form of the legal death penalty.⁴ On the other hand there is the practice of retainer sacrifice, where the death of the king is followed by the killing of people who are supposed to accompany him to the hereafter.⁵ It is on this latter custom that we shall focus here, although it is possible that the two forms of human sacrifice may sometimes overlap, for example if, as sometimes has been suggested, prisoners of war were selected to be killed on the occasion of the royal funeral.⁶

[137] The earliest instances of retainer sacrifice from Egypt appear to date from the last phases of Egyptian prehistory, particularly the Naqada II (Gerzean) period (c. 3500–3200 BC). In some cemeteries there is evidence for dismemberment of the

⁴ See for the various forms of cultic human sacrifice the contribution by H. te Velde to this volume.

⁵ Sometimes rather inappropriately called *sati*-burial, after the Indian rite of widow-burning, see e.g. H. Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: The Anglo-Indian Dictionary* (1886, repr. Ware, Hertfordshire, 1996) 878–83, s.v. *suttee*. As Trigger has pointed out, ‘in India, where *sati* was widespread, retainer sacrifice is unreported’, *JNES* 28 (1969) 257.

⁶ On the various problems of interpretation of archaeological and anthropological data in this context see the special volume of the journal *Archéo-Nil* (10, 2002) devoted to *Le sacrifice humain en contexte funéraire*.

body, a burial custom not attested in earlier times. Parts of the body were buried or reburied separately; in a number of cases the skull has been detached from the body and in a tomb at Naqada several skulls and long bones have been carefully laid out along the walls of the tomb. Evidence of post mortem decapitation has recently come to light not only at Hierakonpolis⁷ but also at near-by Adaima, where at least two cases are known where the victim had been decapitated after his throat had been slit.⁸ These examples have been interpreted as cases of 'self-sacrifice' and the beginning of the practice of retainer sacrifice,⁹ but caution is needed since the status in life of the victims remains unknown.

Firmer and more substantial evidence of retainer sacrifice comes from the royal burial grounds of the Early Dynastic Period at Abydos. The kings of Dynasties 0 and I, when the centralized Egyptian state was formed, as well as those of the second part of Dynasty II were buried here. The unification of the country under one central government is traditionally ascribed to Menes, the legendary first king of the First Dynasty, but although military operations may ultimately have played a decisive role, this unification is now usually seen as the result of a gradual process which took several decades. The identity of 'Menes', whose name does not appear in contemporary records, is still uncertain; he is most often identified either with Narmer, who is depicted as king of both Upper and Lower Egypt on a famous slate palette from Hierakonpolis now in the Cairo Museum, or with his successor Aha.¹⁰ Be this as it may, retainer

⁷ R. Friedman et al., 'Preliminary Report on Field Work at Hierakonpolis 1996-1998', *JARCE* 36 (1999) 1-35.

⁸ B. Midant-Reynes, E. Crubézy and T. Janin, 'The Predynastic site of Adaima', *Egyptian Archaeology* 9 (1996) 13-5.

⁹ Midant-Reynes, in I. Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford, 2000) 53-4.

¹⁰ On this debate see T.A.H. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London and New York, 1999) 67-8.

sacrifice in the necropolis of Abydos is first attested in the [138] burial complex of King Aha and continues to be a feature of all royal tombs of the First Dynasty. The burial complexes of these kings consist not only of the tomb proper, an impressive mud-brick structure built on the high desert which was once covered by a rectangular tumulus,¹¹ but also of a separate funerary enclosure situated nearer the edge of the cultivation.¹² The necropolis has suffered extensively both from looting and from less than careful digging by early excavators, but the work carried out by Petrie in 1899–1903 and 1922 and the excavations of the German and American missions presently working there have nevertheless yielded important results.

Both the tomb and the funerary enclosure are surrounded by rows of small square or rectangular subsidiary graves each containing one burial, usually in a wooden coffin.¹³ The tomb of Aha had three parallel rows of 36 subsidiary graves containing the skeletal remains of young males, none of whom was older than 20–25 years. This uniform age is a strong indication that they were all killed simultaneously, apparently by strangulation.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the remains of at

¹¹ G. Dreyer, 'Zur Rekonstruktion der Oberbauten der Königsgräber der 1. Dynastie in Abydos', *MDAIK* 47 (1991) 93–104.

¹² See Wilkinson's chapter 7 for a survey of the royal mortuary architecture of this period.

¹³ The following information on individual tombs and enclosures has chiefly been gained from Petrie's excavation reports; cf. also W.B. Emery, *Archaic Egypt* (Harmondsworth, 1961) 62, 67–8, 73, 81, 85, 90, 135–8. For a detailed analysis of the subsidiary graves at Abydos see G.A. Reisner, *The Development of the Egyptian Tomb down to the Accession of Cheops* (Cambridge, Mass., Oxford and London, 1936) 75–121, who also assessed the problem of the retainer sacrifices, 117–21; cf. M.A. Hoffman, *Egypt Before the Pharaohs: The Prehistoric Foundations of Egyptian Civilization* (London and Henley-on-Thames, 1980) 275–9.

¹⁴ As suggested by a recent re-examination of the victims' teeth by

least seven young lions were found near one of these burials.¹⁵ Further confirmation of the practice of retainer sacrifice [139] comes from the very recent excavation of Aha's funerary enclosure by the American mission.¹⁶ Here the expedition uncovered six subsidiary burials containing the skeletons of what appear to be court officials, servants and artisans. Although the graves had been looted they still contained funerary goods such as jars with the royal seal of Aha and precious items of ivory and lapis lazuli jewellery, indicating that these people were no mere servants but persons of some standing. That they were all buried at the same time is made probable by the fact that the wooden roofs over the individual graves were covered by a continuous layer of mud plaster laid down over all the graves very soon after the enclosure was constructed.

Aha was succeeded by Djer, whose tomb was surrounded by the graves of no fewer than 317¹⁷ individuals, while a further

Nancy Lovell, see K.A. Bard, in I. Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 71. Strangulation, besides cutting of the throat and interment alive, has also been observed in the much later retainer sacrifices at Ballana and Qustul, where the remains of a rope were found around the necks of some individuals, see A.M. el Batrawi, *Mission archéologique de Nubie 1929–1934. Report on the Human Remains* (Cairo, 1935) 79. In a scene in the New Kingdom Theban tomb of Mentuherkhepshef, which I hope to discuss elsewhere, two Nubians are put to death by strangulation as part of the funerary rites of the tomb-owner.

¹⁵ Three young lions, two of whom wore amulets, were found in individual sand burials in the Napatan non-royal cemetery at Sanam in Lower Nubia, see F.Ll. Griffith, *LAAA* 10 (1923) 81–2.

¹⁶ The find was officially announced on 14 March 2004 and is as yet unpublished. The details given here are based on the press release issued by New York University on 16 March 2004 and the report in *The New York Times* of that day.

¹⁷ The number given by Emery is 338.

242 were found buried around his funerary enclosure, a total of 559 individuals, among whom were a considerable number of women. Many of these subsidiary graves were originally marked by simple tombstones inscribed with the names of their occupants, a further indication that these people were not just nameless slaves. Not all of the subsidiary burials are necessarily retainer sacrifices, however. In the case of the burials at Djer's tomb, Reisner, after careful consideration of the archeological and constructional evidence, considered 63 cases probable and a further 99 possible. After Djer the numbers gradually decrease. The tomb of his successor Djet (Wadji) had 174 subsidiary burials (assessed by Reisner as 14 probable and 99 possible cases of retainer sacrifice); his funerary enclosure counted a further 161. The tomb of Queen Merytneith, who appears to have acted as regent during the minority of her son Den, contained 41 (33 probably sacrificial) subsidiary graves, and Den's own tomb had 133 (40 probable, 83 possible), while his ritual enclosure, perhaps originally associated with Merytneith, counted 77. The tomb of the next king, Andjib, was surrounded by 64 poorly constructed graves; his enclosure, if he had one, is as yet unidentified.

The last two kings to be buried in the First Dynasty necropolis at Abydos were Semerkhet and Qaa. Semerkhet's tomb is particularly interesting in that the 68 subsidiary graves have been constructed directly around the king's own burial chamber and were almost [140] certainly covered by the same roofing timbers and superstructure, a further strong indication that these burials were simultaneous with the royal funeral (Reisner considers all 68 burials as probable cases of retainer sacrifice). Some of the retainers buried were dwarfs, as evidenced by skeletal remains as well as depictions on some of the seven stelae found in the tomb. Semerkhet's funerary enclosure is unknown, although it has been identified with the so-called 'Western Mastaba', a building neighbouring (and similar to) the enclosure of Den; if so, there do not seem to have been any subsidiary burials. Qaa's tomb contained only 26

subsidiary graves which were again constructed around the core of the royal tomb itself, and are therefore very probably all cases of retainer sacrifice; his enclosure has not yet been identified.

Elsewhere in Egypt monumental funerary structures are also sometimes accompanied by subsidiary graves of sacrificed retainers. In the Early Dynastic cemeteries of the capital Memphis, at Giza and Saqqara, several cases have been found. At Nezlet Batran, near Giza, 56 subsidiary graves were found around a large rectangular mud-brick structure with a palace façade surrounded by an enclosure wall, the so-called mastaba Giza V, dated by Petrie to the reign of Djet (Wadji). The interpretation of this massive building is uncertain; it may be the tomb of Djet's mother or one of his wives, or possibly a cenotaph of Djet himself,¹⁸ a symbolic tomb representing the king's continued presence in the north. The same problem arises with the huge palace façade mastabas of the First Dynasty found by Emery at Saqqara. Emery believed these to be the true royal tombs of the early rulers of Egypt, whereas he saw Petrie's Abydos tombs as royal cenotaphs erected in the sacred domain of the god Osiris, a view still held by some scholars today.¹⁹ The size of the Saqqara mastabas in particular is an important argument: they are much larger and much more imposing than the tombs at Abydos, that is, if the funeral enclosures belonging to the latter are left out of the equation. This makes it rather unlikely that the Saqqara mastabas belong to high officials even if these were of royal blood themselves, for as Michael Hoffman has pointed out, it is hardly conceivable that they would have been allowed to outshine the king by the grandeur of their funerary monuments, and there is much to be said for Hoffman's [141] solution that at least some of the Saqqara

¹⁸ Hoffman, *Egypt Before the Pharaohs*, 280.

¹⁹ See W.B. Emery, *Great Tombs of the First Dynasty II* (London, 1954) 1–4; Hoffman, 280–88; Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, 259–60.

mastabas are in fact the northern cenotaphs of the kings buried at Abydos.

The question is not without interest for the subject of this article, for if the Saqqara monuments did not belong to kings, it would mean that even private individuals, albeit of the highest rank, could have retainer sacrifices with their burials. Mastaba 3504 at Saqqara, associated with King Djet, which is nearly twice as large as the king's tomb at Abydos, contained 62 retainer burials. Mastaba 3503, associated with Queen Merytneith, also had 20 subsidiary burials which were largely undisturbed and contained not only the remains of the sacrificed servants, but also 'the objects denoting their particular service to their royal mistress, such as model boats with her shipmaster, paint pots with her artist, stone vessels and copper tools with her vase maker, pots of every type with her potter, etc.'²⁰ Four subsidiary graves were found adjoining mastaba 3500, dated to the reign of Qaa, which according to Emery, 'all showed evidence of having been buried at the same time'.²¹

At Abu Rawash, a little to the north of Giza, at least two of the First Dynasty mastabas excavated by Montet in 1913–14 (nos. I and VII) were flanked by rows of subsidiary graves similar to the ones found at Giza and Saqqara.²² At tomb I, dated to the reign of Den, there were seven, each of them covered with a miniature tumulus and marked with a small stela. The contents had been disturbed in antiquity, but some of the graves still contained skeletal material and remains of wooden coffins; the surviving grave goods consisted mainly of pottery and stone vessels. In one of the graves the relatively well-preserved coffin contained not only a human skeleton but also (unspecified) animal bones. A similar arrangement, this time of eight burials,

²⁰ Emery, *Archaic Egypt*, 66–8 and 137–9.

²¹ *Archaic Egypt*, 90.

²² P. Montet, 'Tombeaux de la I^{ère} et de la IV^e dynasties à Abou-Roach', *Kémi* 7 (1938) 11–69.

was found at Tomb VII, also from the time of Den, although the superstructure was no longer extant here. The tombs at Abu Rawash are smaller than those at Saqqara and must have belonged to members of the elite, perhaps of the royal family. The grave goods are of the same type and quality as those at Saqqara and presumably came from the same royal workshops.²³ There is no [142] certain archaeological evidence that we are dealing with retainer sacrifice here, but the similarity with the arrangements at Saqqara and Abydos suggests that this is indeed the case. This means that at this time retainer sacrifice was not an exclusively royal prerogative.

The kings of the Second Dynasty initially broke with the tradition of having themselves buried in the ancestral cemetery at Abydos; instead, they moved to Saqqara. Many kings of this dynasty are ephemeral rulers of whom little beyond their names is known. The tombs of only two of these kings, Hetepsekhemwy and Ninetjer, have been identified with reasonable certainty. They are of a new type, with a very long underground gallery cut into the bedrock and containing a large number of rectangular niches. The superstructures of these tombs have disappeared completely and the underground parts were emptied out long ago.²⁴ Later in the history of the dynasty the kings returned to Abydos. The first to do so was Peribsen, who built a tomb similar to those of his First Dynasty predecessors. No subsidiary burials have been found with it, and although Reisner thought that such burials ‘in the main tomb continued to be made’, he admitted that neither their number nor their placing could be determined.²⁵ The last king of the dynasty, Khasekhemwy, built a tomb unlike any of the others at

²³ Cf. A. Klasens, *OMRO* 42 (1961) 108.

²⁴ The same applies to a possible further Second Dynasty royal tomb recently discovered at Saqqara, which was reused and extended first at the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty and then again in the Late Period; see M.J. Raven et al., *JEOL* 37 (2001–2002) 95–100.

²⁵ Reisner, *Tomb Development*, 125.

Abydos; it looks like a mud-brick adaptation of the Saqqara gallery tombs. It is an oblong structure of about 70 m with the royal tomb proper in the centre; a sloping entrance corridor leads to a series of 40 niches on either side of the compound, with a further 9 in the middle, behind the royal tomb. According to Reisner, 'the central burial-complex ... certainly contained two or more *sati*-burials, and it is to be presumed that other chambers ... contained other *sati*-burials. The numbers of these burials would probably not have exceeded ten or fifteen'.²⁶ If there were [143] retainer sacrifices at these Late Second Dynasty tombs, it is likely that they also existed in the earlier gallery tombs at Saqqara, but it should be stressed that there is no evidence for any such burials in either location; indeed, it is usually supposed that the custom died out after the First Dynasty. On the other hand, the function of the niches in the walls of the galleries, usually assumed to be magazines, has yet to be determined and it has to be admitted that their arrangement resembles the rows of subsidiary graves along the exterior walls of First Dynasty royal tombs.

Two further possible cases of retainer sacrifice in Egypt must be mentioned here, both from the Nile Delta. In the Late Middle Kingdom stratum at Tell ed-Dab'a (c. 1680–1660 BC), a

²⁶ Reisner, *Tomb Development*, 128. It should be pointed out that Reisner uses the term *sati*-burial not only for sacrificed retainers in subsidiary graves, but also for wives of the king who were killed to accompany him to the other world and who were buried within the royal tomb itself. As far as I can see, however, there is no hard evidence for this practice in the Early Dynastic cemeteries at either Abydos or Saqqara. It is true that the tomb of Djer introduced the multiple-room substructure (Reisner, 350ff.) and that a human arm bedecked with precious jewellery, thought to have belonged to the body of a queen, was found in a robbers' hole in the wall of the tomb, but the arm may equally well have belonged to Djer himself and a queen of Djer called Herneith appears to have been the owner of the large mastaba 3507 at Saqqara.

Canaanite settlement was found which was characterized, among other things, by donkey burials, usually a pair of them, near the entrance of the tomb. In three cases human bodies were also found outside the tomb, in front of and facing the entrance; in one instance two completely disarticulated bodies were found together with five donkeys and an ox. To Van den Brink these circumstances ‘strongly suggest that the dead were intentionally killed and buried together with the owner of the tomb in front of which they were buried. Probably they were servants who followed their master to the Next World’.²⁷ This interpretation has been called into question, however. The skeletons actually appear to predate the tomb in front of which they were found. They probably belong to a multiple burial such as have been found in earlier strata at Tell ed-Dab‘a, which was disturbed when the tomb above them was dug out.²⁸

In 1978, a team from the University of Mansura carried out excavations at Tell el-Balamun, in the far north of the Nile Delta. Unfortunately only a very brief preliminary report has been published so far,²⁹ and many intriguing questions must remain unresolved for the [144] time being. Most of the finds appear to date from the Late Period, but there is also a mastaba-like structure of a ‘much earlier’ date. It contains a large T-shaped room; at one end of the transverse room were found the

²⁷ E.C.M. van den Brink, *Tombs and Burial Customs at Tell el-Dab‘a* (Vienna, 1982) 48–50.

²⁸ M. Bietak, *Tell el-Dab‘a V: Ein Friedhofsbezirk der Mittleren Bronzezeitkultur mit Totentempel und Siedlungsschichten*, Teil I (Vienna, 1991) 58, with figs. 24–25 on pp. 52–3. P. Montet, the excavator of Tanis, which he believed was the Hyksos capital Avaris, claimed that he had found ‘Canaanite’ human sacrifices (as part of foundation rituals) there as well, but his interpretations have since been convincingly refuted, see P. Brissaud, ‘Les prétendus sacrifices humains de Tanis’, *Cahiers de Tanis* 1 (1987) 129–44.

²⁹ F. Abd el-Malek Ghattas, ‘Tell el-Balamoun 1978 (Fouilles de l’Université de Mansoura)’, *ASAE* 68 (1982) 45–9.

skeletons of two individuals, whose faces had been covered by crude masks made of gold foil. At the opposite end of the same room were 'further skeletons', but without any trappings. More skeletons were found in the long room taking off from the centre and these had a circular hole in the front of the skull, just above the forehead, leading the excavator to suspect that they had been 'systematically, or even ritually' killed by a blow with a blunt instrument in order to let them follow the individuals wearing the gold masks into the hereafter. More skeletons were found in another room in the tomb; the only objects found were pottery, which unfortunately has not been included in the report, depriving us of a ready means to date this curious ensemble. It is difficult to assess this find; it is not even certain how many skeletons there were and how many of them had pierced skulls. The method by which these people were killed has not been observed before in clear cases of retainer sacrifice, and other interpretations are also possible. Moreover, the date of the tomb is uncertain; although the excavator thought it was much earlier than the Late Period, it is quite possible that it is in fact later, perhaps as late as Roman.³⁰

In Nubia, retainer sacrifice is a recurring phenomenon from at least the Classic Kerma Period (c. 1750–1500 BC) to the time of the kingdoms of Ballana and Qustul (5th/6th century AD).³¹ The kings of Kerma, just south of the Third Cataract, were buried in very large tumulus tombs which were accompanied by massive mud-brick mortuary chapels. The tombs, excavated by G.A.

³⁰ Cf. the use of gold leaf on (parts of) the faces of Roman mummies, W.A. Daszewski, in M.L. Bierbrier (ed.), *Portraits and Masks. Burial Customs in Roman Egypt* (London, 1997) 63.

³¹ Cf. the brief surveys in e.g. B.G. Trigger, *Nubia under the Pharaohs* (London, 1976) 89–96; W.Y. Adams, *Nubia, Corridor to Africa* (London, 1977) 198–9, 203–5; D.A. Welsby, *The Kingdom of Kush: The Napatan and Meroitic Empires* (London, 1996) 88–91.

Reisner shortly before World War I,³² contained not only large quantities of all sorts of luxury objects such as furniture, model ships, pottery, jewellery, and weapons, but also various sacrificial animals as well as the [145] skeletons of sacrificed human beings who had apparently been buried alive. One of the largest tumuli contained the bodies of at least 322 people, a great many of them female, perhaps members of the royal harem. Retainer sacrifice was not just a royal prerogative here, however, for smaller numbers of victims have also been found in subsidiary graves belonging to court officials, dug into the royal tumulus itself. These massive royal burial sites evidently represent the Kingdom of Kerma at its most powerful. In the northern parts of the cemetery human sacrifices are less in evidence. Reisner ascribed this difference to a period of decline, but Adams has suggested that it may instead reflect the period of development leading up to the cultural heyday of Kerma.³³ Neither the A-Group culture which preceded it nor the C-Group culture of Lower Nubia which was partly contemporaneous with Kerma appear to have known retainer sacrifice, although Kerma-type burials with smaller numbers of victims have been found in the region where the two overlap, near the Second Cataract, at Mirgissa,³⁴ where evidence for cultic human sacrifice, briefly discussed elsewhere in this volume, has also been found, and at Ukma.³⁵

During the Egyptian New Kingdom, Nubia was an Egyptian colony governed by 'The King's Son of Kush', the Egyptian viceroy. It was dominated politically, economically and culturally by Egypt, which also meant that 'slaves were protected from grim Nubian customs such as retainer

³² G.A. Reisner, *Excavations at Kerma I-V*, Harvard African Studies V-VI (Cambridge, Mass, 1923).

³³ Adams, *Nubia*, 212-3.

³⁴ A. Vila, in J. Vercoutter, *Mirgissa I* (Paris, 1970) 223-305.

³⁵ Vila, *Le cimetière kermaïque d'Ukma Ouest* (Paris 1987).

sacrifice'.³⁶ By the end of the New Kingdom Egypt had lost control over Nubia, and not much is known about the period which follows; it is not until *c.* 850 BC that the archaeological evidence becomes more abundant again. Egyptian religious traditions, and especially the cult of the god Amun at Gebel Barkal, appear to have been preserved among the elite. This may explain why retainer sacrifice does not seem to have been practiced in the royal cemeteries at Kurru and Nuri, near the capital city Napata at Gebel Barkal, although sacrificial burials of animals, especially horses and guardian dogs, are common there. The earlier tombs at Kurru were covered by tumuli, but from the reign of Piye (Piankhy) onwards the kings both here and at Nuri erected pyramids with adjacent mortuary chapels over their tombs. Piye is the king who [146] invaded Egypt and whose successors ruled over it for close to a century as the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. Both in their inscriptions and in their monuments they portray themselves as 'more Egyptian than the Egyptians'.

The period of Nubian rule over Egypt came to an end in 657 BC, when King Tanutamani fled to his native country before the plundering troops of the Assyrian King Assurbanipal. The kings continued to be buried in the cemeteries of Napata (chiefly Nuri), however, and it was not until after Arkamaniqo (*c.* 270–260 BC) decided to move the royal cemetery much further to the south to Meroe, between the Fifth and Sixth Cataracts, that we see a revival of the ancient practice of retainer sacrifice.³⁷ The first kings and queens were buried in the existing elite cemetery at Meroe South, but the later North Cemetery is the true royal necropolis with no fewer than thirty-eight royal pyramid tombs. Queens and members of the court elite were buried in the adjacent West Cemetery. The last royal tomb, the owner of which is unidentified, dates from *c.* AD 320. Reisner, who

³⁶ Trigger, *Nubia under the Pharaohs*, 130.

³⁷ Adams, *Nubia*, 308–9.

excavated these cemeteries, stated that evidence of ‘*sati*-burial’ was found in almost all of these tombs, but on the basis of his published reports it is now thought that he ‘exaggerated the frequency of the phenomenon’.³⁸ Nevertheless, it is certain that at least sixteen tombs (five kings, a queen, a prince, and a further eight of unknown status) dating from the first century BC onwards contained additional sacrificial burials, with a maximum of seven in any one tomb. Here too, however, human interments are outnumbered by those of horses, dogs, and later, camels.

In the post-Meroitic period (4th–6th century AD) ‘royal’ cemeteries are found at el-Hobagi, some 75 km upstream from Meroe, north of the Sixth Cataract. The exact status of the tumulus graves found there is not certain; Patrice Lenoble, the excavator of the site, sees them as the direct successors of the royal tombs of Meroe and as proof that Meroitic culture continued after the political decline of Meroe itself, but others prefer to view them as the tombs of local chiefs.³⁹ Whatever the truth may be, it seems certain that these people saw themselves as kings, as Lenoble’s analysis of the grave goods shows. But, although vast quantities of weaponry were found in these tombs, only one of them contained a horse burial and no human sacrifices were found at all.⁴⁰

Large tumuli of the post-Meroitic period are also present in many other sites, both in the north (Qasr Ibrim, Ballana, Qustul, Gemai, Firka, Kosha, Wawa) and further south, from Tanqasi

³⁸ Welsby, *The Kingdom of Kush*, 89.

³⁹ P. Lenoble and N.M. Sharif, ‘Barbarians at the gates? The royal mounds of El Hobagi and the end of Meroe’, *Antiquity* 66 (1992), 626–35, and the comment on this paper by P.L. Shinnie and J.H. Robertson in *Antiquity* 67 (1993) 895–9. See also Lenoble, ‘Le rang des inhumés sous terre à enceinte à El Hobagi’, *Meroitic Newsletter* 25 (1994) 89–124.

⁴⁰ D.A. Welsby, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia. Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile* (London, 2002) 41; 44.

and Zuma, near Gebel Barkal, to Gebel Qisi, south of the Sixth Cataract. Most of the latter sites are unexcavated; limited work by Shinnie at Tanqasi has not revealed human sacrifices.⁴¹ By contrast, clear evidence of the custom has emerged from the huge burial mounds at Ballana and Qustul in Lower Nubia, discovered in the early 1930s by Emery and Kirwan.⁴² These two places, situated on opposite sides of the Nile just north of the Egyptian-Sudanese border, constitute the most important sites of the so-called X-Group Culture, nowadays usually referred to as the Ballana Culture. The average height of the tumuli is about 4.5 m, with a diameter of between 4 and 12 m, but the royal burial mounds are much larger, the largest measuring some 77 m in diameter and 12 m high. Concealed underneath them is a long sloping corridor, usually from the east, which leads to a number of barrel-vaulted, mud-brick rooms constructed in pits cut out of the bedrock. Their massive size as well as the opulence of their contents make these tombs stand out as ‘the only symbolic representations of state authority which we are able to recognize in the post-Meroitic era’.⁴³

Several of the royal tombs were undisturbed and full of archaeological treasures such as wooden, bronze, and iron furniture, bronze and silver vessels, lamps, jewellery, tools, and weapons. Sacrificial victims, both animals and humans, were found in the burial compartments themselves as well as in the sloping corridors. In some of the larger tombs the queen, ‘who was undoubtedly sacrificed’ was in a separate room ‘with her attendant slaves’, in smaller tombs ‘the sacrificed queen was placed beside her consort’. After the entrance to the tomb proper had been blocked, ‘the owner’s horses, camels, [148] donkeys, and dogs, together with their grooms and possibly soldiers, were

⁴¹ P.L. Shinnie, ‘Excavations at Tanqasi, 1953’, *Kush* 2 (1954) 66–85.

⁴² W.B. Emery, with L.P. Kirwan, *The Royal Tombs of Ballana and Qustul I–II* (Cairo, 1938).

⁴³ Adams, *Nubia*, 405.

... sacrificed in the courtyard and the ramp'.⁴⁴ Among the human victims were men, women and children. The horses were pole-axed and then buried on the spot wearing their saddles and harnesses, some of which were richly wrought with silver, and some of the dogs had collars and leashes. Finally, the whole burial site was covered by a massive tumulus, the surface of which was, at least at Ballana, covered with white pebbles.

The number of sacrificed victims appears to have been relatively small; the highest count in any one tomb was seventeen.⁴⁵ In recent years the interpretation of these human sacrifices has been the subject of debate. The excavators described them as retainer sacrifices, and so have subsequent authors like Trigger and Adams. Lenoble, however, who strongly advocates the continuity of Kushite funerary beliefs and practices from Napata to Ballana, has interpreted the Ballana and Qustul finds as well as the earlier ones in the royal tombs in the North Cemetery at Meroe as victims of the ritual slaughter of enemies on the occasion of a king's funeral.⁴⁶ He refers to reliefs in Meroitic temples and royal mortuary chapels showing rows of bound prisoners and kings and queens grasping groups of captive enemies by the hair and raising a club or a sword in order to kill them. However, these scenes are a direct borrowing from ancient Egypt, where they are commonplace on temple pylons and elsewhere. They represent the pharaoh, whose main task it is to maintain *ma'at*, the order of creation, subduing the powers of chaos represented by Egypt's enemies, and although a

⁴⁴ Emery, *Ballana and Qustul I*, 25–6.

⁴⁵ Trigger, *JEA* 55 (1969) 123; but cf. Welsby, *Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, 43, who specifies 'a maximum of nineteen at Qustul, nine at Ballana and four in one of the elite burials at Firka'.

⁴⁶ P. Lenoble, 'Les "sacrifices humains" de Meroe, Qustul et Ballana. I: Le massacre de nombreux prisonniers', *Beiträge zur Sudanforschung* 6 (1995) 59–87. In his *The Kingdom of Kush*, 90, Welsby is still reluctant to accept Lenoble's interpretation, but in *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, 43, he appears to have accepted it.

literal ('historical') interpretation has been suggested recently for these Egyptian scenes as well,⁴⁷ they are almost certainly purely symbolic.

[149] Lenoble's interpretation is part of a long-standing debate about continuity and change in the various stages of Nubian culture, from the early Kerma civilization to the Ballana culture of Byzantine times, and particularly on the position of the latter vis-à-vis its predecessors.⁴⁸ It would take us beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this problem here in detail. Nevertheless, the differences between the Ballana tumuli and the Meroitic royal tombs seem greater to me than the similarities. For starters, the latter all take the shape of pyramids; even at the very end of the Meroitic period, when retainer sacrifice is revived and Nubian customs begin to regain the upper hand over the Egyptianizing trends of the previous centuries, the tombs are still covered by (badly constructed) pyramids. By contrast, as Adams pointed out, 'the domed earth tumulus, which is the standard superstructure for all burials of the Ballana period, is much more nearly comparable to the tumulus of Kerma times than to anything which was built in the intervening 2,000 years' and even the custom of covering the earth mound with white pebbles was widespread in Kerma times.⁴⁹

Another important point is the custom of bed burials. This is an 'un-Egyptian form of burial' which had been practised from Kerma to the early kings of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty until

⁴⁷ A.R. Schulman, *Ceremonial Execution and Public Rewards. Some Historical Scenes on New Kingdom Private Stelae* (Freiburg and Göttingen, 1988). See the final paragraphs of H. te Velde's contribution to the present volume.

⁴⁸ See in particular Trigger, 'The Royal Tombs at Qustul and Ballâna and their Meroitic Antecedents', *JEA* 55 (1969) 117–28; Adams, *Nubia*, 407ff.; L. Török, *Late Antique Nubia* (Budapest, 1988) 216ff.; Welsby, *Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, 23ff.

⁴⁹ Adams, *Nubia*, 408–9. Cf. the recently introduced term 'post-pyramidal Meroitic' for the 4th–6th centuries.

it was abandoned first for royal burials at the time of Taharqa, and then by lesser members of the elite.⁵⁰ It then reappeared in post-Meroitic graves at Meroe and also at Ballana and Qustul. Furthermore, the royal North Cemetery of Meroe was, as we have seen, exclusively royal, whereas the elite and even the queens were buried in the West Cemetery. At Ballana and Qustul, the royal tumuli and smaller graves are in the same cemetery, as had been the case at Kerma.⁵¹

In fact, the only indisputable evidence for an ideological link between the kings of Ballana and their Meroitic predecessors are the silver crowns in Meroitic, that is Egyptianizing, style found in [150] several of the Ballana royal tombs.⁵² While these are obviously potent symbols of kingship, they have in fact little to do with funerary customs *per se*, and in this respect their significance has probably been overrated. It seems more likely to me, therefore, that Adams is right when he says that ‘many aspects of the post-Meroitic burial complex seem to represent a deliberate break with tradition, and a revival of much older, pre-pharaonic practices’.⁵³

Apart from these general considerations there is also the actual location of the bodies of the sacrificed victims in the Ballana tombs to take into account. Some of them were found in the underground complex, some even within the royal burial chamber itself. Thus in one case, the king’s body ‘was placed on a canopied wooden bier below which were placed bronze and silver vessels for his immediate use. He was dressed in his royal regalia, and weapons for his protection were left leaning against the foot of the bier, and at its head lay the sacrificed bodies of a

⁵⁰ D.M. Dixon, ‘The Origin of the Kingdom of Kush (Napata–Meroë)’, *JEA* 50 (1964) 121–32, esp. 129–30.

⁵¹ Adams, 204–6; 411.

⁵² Emery, *Ballana and Qustul* I, 22–3; cf. Trigger, ‘The Social Significance of the Diadems in the Royal Tombs at Ballana’, *JNES* 28 (1969) 255–61; L. Török, *The Royal Crowns of Kush* (Oxford, 1987).

⁵³ Adams, *Nubia*, 409–411.

male slave and an ox.⁵⁴ Clearly, this sacrificed man was there to serve the king in the afterlife; that this should be the body of an enemy prisoner slaughtered in the course of a triumphal celebration seems wholly unbelievable to me. Lenoble has interpreted the presence of the ox along the same lines, viz. as part of ‘un rite de confirmation du charisme de la famille royale’, whose main function was ‘de célébrer et d’adapter l’idéologie royale lors des successions’.⁵⁵ Even if one accepts this, however,⁵⁶ this does not necessarily exclude the possibility that an ox placed in the king’s burial chamber was supposed to be of use to him in the afterlife, as were the human victims buried with the king. The same holds true for the men buried with the king’s saddled horses, which were clearly not just there for triumphal ostentation,⁵⁷ but ready to be used and therefore needing the continued attention of grooms. Batrawi, in his report on the skeletal material found at Ballana and Qustul, observed that ‘it is a most significant fact that the animals [151] buried inside the tombs were invariably edible, while all the animals found in the ramp and pit are usually used for carrying, riding or hunting’.⁵⁸

Retainer sacrifice is a custom which can be found in many societies, in a variety of times and places, and in many forms.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Emery, *Ballana and Qustul* I, 25–6; Adams, *Nubia*, 407.

⁵⁵ Lenoble, ‘Le sacrifice funéraire de bovinés de Méroé à Qustul et Ballana’, in *Hommages à Jean Leclant* II (Cairo, 1994), 269–83.

⁵⁶ Lenoble’s iconographic evidence comes from Meroitic pyramid chapels, but the scenes in question have again been borrowed from common Egyptian examples.

⁵⁷ Lenoble, ‘Une Monture pour mon Royaume: Sacrifices triomphaux de chevaux et de méhara d’el Kurru à Ballana’, *Archéologie du Nil Moyen* 6 (1994) 107–30.

⁵⁸ A.M. el Batrawi, *Mission archéologique de Nubie 1929–1934. Report on the Human Remains* (Cairo, 1935) 139.

⁵⁹ Cf. the brief survey given by Trigger, *JNES* 28 (1969) 256–7.

There are, however, also some common features. The custom occurs only in developed root-crop cultures,⁶⁰ not in more primitive societies, and only in societies with centralized power in the person of a king or chief who has control over the lives of his retainers, and who is seen as having a special relationship with the supernatural, not in more equalitarian societies.⁶¹ It is also more frequent in territorial states than in city-states. Finally, there appears to be a correlation between retainer sacrifice and other forms of human sacrifice: it occurs only in societies where human beings were regularly sacrificed to the gods, and when cultic human sacrifice is no longer practised, retainer sacrifice also dies out.⁶² All of these factors are at work in Early Dynastic Egypt, a developed agricultural society governed by a powerful divine king who had recently established a centralized territorial state after the ‘incipient city-states’⁶³ of Late Predynastic times. After the First Dynasty, the practice of retainer sacrifice appears to have died out quickly, and it is probably no coincidence that the only pictorial evidence we have of cultic human sacrifice dates from the same period. A scene found on a few Early Dynastic wooden labels⁶⁴ shows a kneeling figure, apparently with his hands tied behind his back, being stabbed in the chest by an officiant holding a bowl to catch the blood. On the best preserved label the context is clearly a royal religious ceremony, but the status of the person killed (a willing victim? a prisoner of war?) is unknown. That this is a real event and not just a

⁶⁰ A.E. Jensen, *Mythos und Kult bei Naturvölkern* (Wiesbaden, 1960) 185–217; cf. A. de Waal Malefijt, *Religion and Culture* (New York and London, 1968) 212.

⁶¹ Trigger, *JNES* 28, 257.

⁶² Trigger, *Early Civilizations* (Cairo, 1993) 97–8.

⁶³ B.J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (London and New York, 1989) 52.

⁶⁴ Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, 266–7 with fig. 8.2.; B. Menu, ‘Mise à mort cérémonielle et prélèvements royaux sous la I^{re} dynastie (Narmer–Den)’, *Archéo-Nil* 11 (2001) 165–77.

symbolic representation of the kind that is [152] so often depicted in later temple reliefs is made likely by the fact that it is not the king who is shown killing the victim, but a nonroyal officiant. This scene is never depicted again after the First Dynasty and cultic human sacrifice appears to have become a highly exceptional event in later times.

There is, then, no indisputable evidence of retainer sacrifice in Ancient Egypt after the First Dynasty. But, as Trigger rightly remarks, ‘the ethical and socio-economic factors that have resulted in the abandonment of this custom in the course of social evolution are no less worthy of investigation than is the custom itself’⁶⁵ – so why was the practice of retainer sacrifice discontinued after the First Dynasty? This is an intriguing problem for which there is no easy solution. It is usually assumed that in Nubia the practice of retainer sacrifice was initially abandoned after the Kerma period because of the political and cultural colonization of the area by the Egyptians, who had not practised retainer sacrifice for well over a millennium. The revival of the custom after the end of the Egyptian domination and its aftermath under the Egyptianizing Kushite rulers tends to confirm this. The final abandonment of the practice appears to have been the result of the introduction of Christianity in Nubia,⁶⁶ although as late as the 11th century AD the Arabic writer ‘Abd-el-‘Aziz El-Bekri still describes a royal burial in a tumulus grave with sacrificed retainers which is strikingly similar to those found at Ballana and Qustul.⁶⁷ For

⁶⁵ *JNES* 28, 257.

⁶⁶ On Christian burial practices in Nubia see Welsby, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia*, 48ff.

⁶⁷ The passage, as translated by W. Vycichl, ‘The Burial of the Sudanese Kings in the Middle Ages. A survival of the Kerma Civilization’, *Kush* 7 (1959) 221–2, is worth quoting in full: ‘When a king of the Sudan dies, they make him a big cupola from the wood of the plane-tree and put it on his burial place. Then they bring a bed with a few covers and cloths and introduce it (or him) into the cupola.

Early Dynastic Egypt, however, no such external influence can be found, unless one wants to assume, as some scholars have suggested, that the custom was rooted in a distinct Upper Egyptian culture and that it was abandoned under the civilizing influence of the north.⁶⁸

[153] One of the main obstacles to our understanding of the process which led to the discontinuation of the practice in Early Dynastic Egypt is that we know very little about the status in life of the sacrificed victims. That they were supposed to serve the king in the hereafter seems reasonably certain, but had they also been his servants when he was still alive, in other words, were the king's own servants sacrificed? This is usually assumed, and is perhaps the most likely option, but it is also possible that the victims were selected from among the chief families of the elite⁶⁹ or contributed by them from among their servants. This would make it a collective form of sacrifice, a symbol of group unity emphasizing the social bonds of the participants, their shared belief that by sacrificing some of their servants they contributed to the king's continued existence in the hereafter and thereby to the prosperity of the state, and their loyalty to the king's successor.

Apart from these ideological components, however, such a practice, like all forms of conspicuous consumption or indeed

They put beside him his jewellery, his arms, his eating and drinking vessels and they bring food and beverages with him as well as some of the men who served him with his food and drink. Then they shut the door of the cupola and put over the cupola mats and objects. Then the people gather and heap earth on it until it becomes like a huge hill. Then they make a moat around it so that one can arrive at this hill only from one side. And they slaughter animals to their dead'.

⁶⁸ Emery, *Archaic Egypt*, 90.

⁶⁹ This appears to have been the case in 14th century Sudan, according to the report of Ibn Batûtah quoted by E.A. Wallis Budge, *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection* (London, 1911) 225.

like any sacrifice, also involves an important economic factor.⁷⁰ For although, as John Baines put it somewhat apodictically, ‘life was cheap in most pre-modern societies and this was a striking example of that cheapness’,⁷¹ such a statement does not take into account the economic value servants may have represented for their owners. ‘Even at the heart of primitive religious ideology in such a basically important phenomenon as sacrifice, notions of rationality and prudent calculation enter’,⁷² and the sacrifice of a servant does not only despatch an easily replaceable human body to the other world but also deprives the surviving community of his professional skills and experience. The retainer burials excavated by Emery at Saqqara demonstrate that these people were not mere menial labourers but specialized servants, such as craftsmen, painters, potters, sailors etc., who were buried with the particular tools of their trade. The precious items of lapis lazuli and ivory recently found in the subsidiary graves at [154] Aha’s funerary enclosure at Abydos⁷³ point in the same direction. With the establishment of a centralized state and the growing demand for luxury goods and services the elite may well have started to think about more economical ways to meet their ritual obligations to the deceased king and to ‘serve God without losing touch with Mammon’.⁷⁴ These considerations are equally pertinent if, as seems likely, the sacrificed retainers were the deceased king’s own servants, for their deaths would then deprive his successor’s royal workshops of their expertise. Such economic considerations may have been strengthened by a development during the later First Dynasty, when retainer sacrifice no longer appears to have been an

⁷⁰ R. Firth, ‘Offering and Sacrifice: Problems of Organization’, *JRAI* 93 (1963) 12–24.

⁷¹ J. Baines, in D. O’Connor and D.P. Silverman (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Kingship* (Leiden etc., 1995) 137.

⁷² Firth, *JRAI* 93, 22.

⁷³ See p. 139 above.

⁷⁴ Firth, 23.

exclusively royal prerogative.

John Baines has drawn attention to a potential conflict between the idea that ‘the prosperity of the land depended on the deceased king’s destiny’ (which was presumably enhanced by the sacrifice of his retainers) and the position of his successor as guarantor of the country’s well-being.⁷⁵ This may be so, but such a conflict would not have been resolved by abandoning the custom of retainer sacrifice – a similar conflict may conceivably have existed in later times, when an incredible amount of luxury goods for the king’s life in the hereafter was amassed in his tomb, but no human beings were included. Moreover, this would only work if one assumes that the absence of buried retainers in his tomb made the deceased king ‘powerless’, and this can hardly have been the intention in view of the later substitution of sacrificed retainers by depictions of servants and their activities in tomb and mortuary temple reliefs. A conflict there was, but it was between the perceived interests of the deceased king and the earthly economic interests of his survivors. In the end the latter outweighed the former. I would suggest, then, that socio-economical rather than ideological factors were responsible for the gradual decline of the number of sacrificed retainers after the reign of Djer, and the eventual discontinuation of the custom after the First Dynasty. Ideological justification of this abandonment in terms of the inviolability of human life probably followed later. In the age of the great pyramid builders the conspicuous consumption of human life was replaced by other potent symbols of royal [155] status and authority, although according to the folktale in the Westcar Papyrus quoted at the beginning of this article, King Cheops still had to be reminded by one of his subjects that the life of the ‘noble cattle’⁷⁶ was not cheap.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Baines, in *Ancient Egyptian Kingship*, 136.

⁷⁶ It is important to note that this term does not refer to human beings in general, but to the Egyptians, the king’s subjects. Cf. J.M.A.

Janssen, 'De farao als goede herder', in *Mens en dier* [Fs. F.L.R. Sassen] (Antwerpen and Amsterdam, 1954) 71–79; D. Müller, 'Der gute Hirte. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte ägyptischer Bildrede', *ZÄS* 86 (1961) 126–44. The implications of this observation for the interpretation of human sacrifice in Ancient Egypt cannot be discussed here.

⁷⁷ For help with bibliographical queries I would like to thank my colleagues Jitse Dijkstra (Groningen), Wolfram Grajetzki (London), and Louis Zonhoven (Leiden).