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in the Near East

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Nicola Laneri



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Front cover: *Arms, hands and elements of clothing reveal the anthropomorphic character of Göbekli Tepe's pillars (Pillar 31 in the centre of Enclosure D) (photo: N. Becker, © DAI).*

Back cover: *Detail of Ur-Nammu's stele (Börker Klähn 1982, pl. 39)*

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Identifying sacrifice in Bronze Age Near Eastern iconography

Laerke Recht

Written sources and archaeological contexts provide us with ample examples of events that involve sacrificial practices: sacrifice took place in connection with treaties, with divination, with religious festivals, with funerals, with processions, and were offered to deities in temples and other sacred structures, as well as to deceased ancestors.¹ The sources hint that kings and other royal individuals played a key role in the contribution of the sacrifices, that priests and diviners were central to the action, and that various groups of the populace took part in the rituals. But how are we to securely identify and possibly correlate these practices to images from the iconographic record? I here propose some preliminary ideas of how to approach this topic, suggesting a means to make not only secure identifications, but to use these along with other types of material and more theoretical works to open up new possibilities of seeing other images as depicting elements of sacrificial practices.

In order to arrive at a sound methodology for identifying sacrifice in iconography, it is necessary to provide some background of how the concept of sacrifice is and has been used. The concept of ‘sacrifice’ has been a favourite topic of modern scholars since the beginning of the study of religion, and is often seen as a most basic religious act. Given the popularity of the subject, a complete review of ideas concerning sacrifice is not possible here, so I will only mention a few of the more influential and well-known thinkers (Fig. 3.1): Edward Burnett Tylor, William Robertson Smith, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, and Walter Burkert.² I will begin with a short look at some of the ideas presented in modern studies of the definition, function and meaning of sacrifice, then move on to suggest a definition that is both useful in identifying sacrifice in our material and covers the entire span of what might be considered sacrifice in the ancient Near East. Although I am in this paper focusing on iconography, the definition and method proposed can be extended and refined for use in other contexts as well.

In his *Primitive culture* (1871), Edward Burnett Tylor saw sacrifice as having three stages. In the first stage, sacrifice is understood as a simple ‘gift’, supposedly with no implication of obligations on either the side of the receiver or the donor. In the second stage, sacrifice is a ‘homage’, and here, the

offering becomes an expression of devotion or expiation of sin. In the third stage is what Tylor calls ‘abnegation’, and here the value of the gift to the donor rather than to the receiver is what is important, and the more valuable the sacrifice, the more efficient it is, and the more acceptable to the deity it is. William Robertson Smith (*Religion of the Semites* 2002, first published as *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* in 1894), on the other hand, did not see sacrifice as a gift, because he did not believe that the concept of property applied to sacred things. Instead, sacrifice is seen as an important event where a communion takes place, where worshippers and deities both eat the meat of the sacrificed animal, thus creating a shared space and experience between humans and deities. In his view, these are always joyous occasions, and any violence or negative connotations are ignored.

Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss highlight the importance of the sacrificial victim, and see it as an intermediary between human and divine (*Sacrifice: its Nature and Functions*, translated from the 1899 French version to English in 1964). They maintain a strong divide between sacred and profane, and believe that the victim is the means through which communication can occur between the two spheres.

Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917)	Gift Homage Abnegation
William Robertson Smith (1846–1894)	Communion
Henri Hubert (1872–1927) Marcel Mauss (1872–1950)	Mediation
Walter Burkert (1931–)	Hunting Guilt

Fig. 3.1: Table of selected authors writing about sacrifice and their main ideas.

This intermediary is seen as necessary because the sacred is considered too forceful and dangerous for humans to access directly. Finally, Walter Burkert sees sacrificial killing as the basic experience of the sacred, and the origin of sacrifice in the hunt for and killing of prey (Burkert 1983; 1987). The killing leads to guilt, which in turn leads to the ritualisation of hunting and killing, including illusions of willingness on the part of the victim. Violence is thus placed at the core of sacrificial practice.

Each of these theories carries certain assumptions. For example, Tylor places his three stages in chronological and hierarchical order, Robertson Smith believes that sacrifice must take place on an altar, and that it is always communal and positive, Hubert and Mauss maintain a strict division between profane and sacred, and Burkert thinks that the high point of the ritual is the actual killing of the victim, and has a tendency to exclude women from the ritual. These ideas may be pertinent and insightful in some cases, as will be seen later, but in other cases, their singular application can exclude practices that may otherwise be considered part of the sacrificial repertoire and can also lead to misunderstandings concerning the content and process of the ritual.

The theories presented all deal with the meaning or function of sacrifice, and in that sense, they are concerned with the mental processes or intentions of people partaking in the ritual – what might in more traditional terms be referred to as ‘beliefs’ (on experience, belief and practice as the main, inseparable components of religion, see Renfrew 1994 and Lewis Williams 2008). We may in some instances be able to infer intentions or beliefs of participants, but they are not immediately accessible to us. Therefore, a broader definition based more on practice than belief in the first instance would be more useful. That is not to say that beliefs and especially experience are not important factors, but it may be more useful to focus on the aspect that is identifiable in the material, and, when and where possible, to move from this to suggest or identify beliefs. To this end, I will use a simple dictionary definition as a basis for a further refinement. This is taken from the *OED*, which defines sacrifice as: “the killing of an animal or person or the giving up of a possession as an offering to a god or goddess”.³

This should be subject to a few reservations. First of all, in this paper, I only discuss sacrifice of living beings, and although inanimate objects may also be seen as sacrificed, they are not included here.⁴ Second, although the death of the sacrificial victim is a condition, it must not necessarily be seen as the most important moment, as can be learned from the theoretical and anthropological sources, as well as gleaned from written sources. Third, ‘god and goddess’ should be extended to include any kind of entity that might be considered supernatural, so that sacrifices to beings such as demons or dead ancestors can also be part of the discussion. Finally, I include human beings in the category of ‘animal’, making the doubling of ‘human or animal’ unnecessary. The definition that follows is a simple but useful base for discovering all variations of a highly eclectic

practice: “ritual that includes the death of an animal as an offering to one or several supernatural entities”.

This definition can then be used to set up criteria for identifying sacrifice – here in relation to imagery. We can say that some form of two main elements should be present to securely identify a scene as sacrificial:

- *the deliberate death of an animal* (i.e. not a death by natural causes).

It is not possible to say a priori exactly how this may occur, but must be seen in the full composition of an image. It could, for example, include a weapon or deadly implement being moved towards an animal, only part of an animal depicted, e.g. head or legs missing, or an animal in a ‘limp’ position, appearing dead.

- *reference to religious or sacred element or indications of a supernatural presence, and that the animal is being given to this element or presence*

As above, this cannot be determined a priori, but may include deities, sacred structures or symbols related to the divine.⁵

Let us then see how the criteria are applied. I will do this by first examining two compositions where the identification of sacrifice is relatively secure, and from these, suggest comparative examples that may by analogy depict other parts of sacrificial rituals.

The first scene comes from an Akkadian seal recently found at Tell Mozan/Urkesh in northeastern Syria (Fig. 3.2). It was discovered in 2003, in a deposit immediately above a floor accumulation in the palace, dated to Phase 3 (Ta’ram-Agade, c. 2200 BC), but it could also be from Phase 2 (the Tupkish palace, c. 2300 BC) (Kelly-Buccellati 2005, 36). The seal depicts a seated figure, probably female, with her arm stretched out holding onto an object with a vessel placed below. I have not been able to identify the object she holds, as it does not occur in the glyptics otherwise; given the complete composition and comparison with other seals, it may be an object in some way related to libation. To the right of the seated female are two figures holding a decapitated bull upside down. They wear knee-length kilts with a vertical fringe running down the front and a small belt; their upper bodies appear to be bare. They wear headdresses with a strap below the chin, and the figure on the left holds a dagger.⁶ Their attire and actions suggest they are priests. Between the priest on the right and the seated figure is a horned animal head, presumably from the bull. It is topped by a palm column and a large necked jar. Between the seated figure and the priest on the left are placed an eight-pointed star, a crescent moon and perhaps a disc in the field (this part of the seal is damaged).

The criteria can fairly easily be detected here: the bull has clearly recently been slain, and special attention is given to its head (a situation comparable to how cattle may be slaughtered even today, held upside down by the hind legs with a machine, and the head being cut off first). No deities or other supernatural beings are directly depicted, but the sacred content of the scene



Fig. 3.2: Seal from Tell Mozan/Urkesh (Dark grey stone, 0.7 × 0.5 cm). Deposit immediately above floor accumulation of palace, Akkadian. (Kelly-Buccellati 2005, 36–40). Image by kind permission of IIMAS. Drawing by the author (after Kelly-Buccellati 2005, figs 6–7).

is indicated by the crescent moon and star symbols, and by the likely role of the two standing figures as priests. The scene is unique, and has components that appear to be specific to Urkesh glyptics (such as the headdress with a strap below the chin worn by the ‘priests’ – Kelly-Buccellati 2005, 38, see also Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995 for other elements characteristic of Urkesh glyptics), and as a result, it is difficult to find precise analogies.

However, some components are familiar, for example the seated figure from presentation and banquet scenes and the upside-down animal between other figures from contest scenes. The closest parallels may come from Kültepe in Anatolia.⁷ Figures 3.3–3.6 show drawings of four seal impressions from Kültepe (Garelli and Collon 1975; Teissier 1994). In all four, the seated figure is present, and astral symbols are placed in front of this figure. The seated figure as depicted here and commonly in presentation scenes wears some kind of headdress, often a horned crown to denote them as a deity, whereas the figure on the Urkesh seal does not seem to wear a headdress, but has a tuft of hair pointed upwards at the neck. This is more in line

with commonly occurring seated females in banquet scenes, who also do not wear anything on their head (see Figs 3.11 and 3.12), but frequently do wear a similarly pleated dress. Seated figures are also commonly depicted with one arm extended, often holding an object, such as a cup or a divine attribute, as Figures 3.4–3.6. The arm is diagonally pointing upwards or, in rare cases, horizontal. But in the Urkesh seal, the figure’s arm points downward, holding onto her enigmatic object. This action gives the impression of the figure very actively partaking in the ritual in front of her.

The two men killing the bull mostly resemble combat scenes where animals fight each other, hybrid or human figures. We see a small section of this in the first three examples given here, which includes the dagger on Figure 3.3. Again, there are significant deviations from the Urkesh seal – the figure fighting the bull is more commonly a bull-man hybrid, not the human figures in the Urkesh seal, and the animal is never shown as decapitated.⁸ However, although the bull is never shown as decapitated, the images do have separate animal heads, in some cases closely resembling the one on the Urkesh seal:

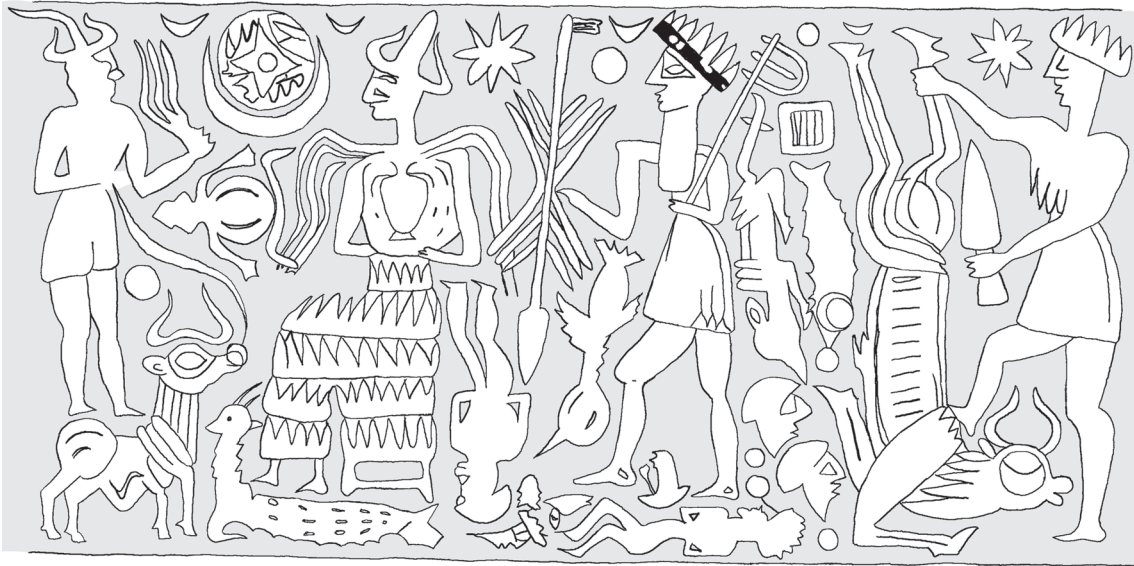


Fig. 3.3: Seal impression from Kültepe. Early 2nd millennium. Drawing by the author (after Garelli and Collon 1975, pl. 48.4).



Fig. 3.4: Seal impression from Kültepe. k̄arum 2, early 2nd millennium. Drawing by the author (after Teissier 1994, 224, no. 304).

we can see examples of this on Figures 3.4–3.6. Interestingly, such animal heads could by analogy with the Urkesh seal be suggested to be a shorthand for sacrifice, or even an animal head kept as a mnemonic device.⁹ The last two examples are particularly intriguing in this connection; Figure 3.5 shows a head very similar to the Urkesh one, placed in a similar position, at the base line with several objects on top; in Figure 3.6, it is shown on top of what may be an offering table, in front of the deity.

A much later impression from Hurrian Nuzi may represent a continuation of a similar ritual (Porada 1944–1945, no. 642). It does not have the complete scene as on the Urkesh seal,

but between a deity, facing left, and another figure holding its arm up in the typical gesture of those approaching a deity in presentation scenes, is an animal head exactly like the one on our seal. It is placed low, at their lower legs. What is more, the deity holds an object which is shaped much like the palm column on the Urkesh seal, and perhaps even with a similar vessel placed on top.

The Urkesh seal provides us with a unique view into a practice that we know existed in the ancient Near East, but is rarely depicted so explicitly. In a way, its very special features make it difficult to compare directly with other glyptic material, but at the same time, it has subtle hints of possible



Fig. 3.5: Seal impression from Kültepe. kârum 2, early 2nd millennium. Drawing by the author (after Teissier 1994, 226, no. 338).



Fig. 3.6: Seal impression from Kültepe. kârum 2, early 2nd millennium. Drawing by the author (after Teissier 1994, 225, no. 321).

interpretations of certain elements, for example the separate animal heads.

One of the other few instances of explicit scenes of sacrifice in Near Eastern art is that of an animal placed on its back, usually directly on the ground, but in some instances on a low platform, with one or several human figures stretching and holding its legs and head, perhaps in the process of skinning or dividing the animal into parts, or removing organs for use in divination. The first example is a section from the stele of Ur-Namma from Ur (only the right half of the register is preserved) (Fig. 3.7). The part of interest here is a small section on one side of the stele which depicts an animal on

its back on the ground, being held down by a male figure on the right, while another male figure on the left has his arms inside the animal's stomach. The figures wear garments similar to those on the Urkesh seal; knee-length kilts with a vertical fringe and bare upper bodies, except for a strap going over one shoulder. However, their heads are bare, perhaps even shaved. They have daggers in their belts, similar to, though perhaps less pointed than the one on the Urkesh seal. The section is not well enough preserved to make a secure identification of the animal killed, but Canby's suggestion of it being a bovine (Canby 2001, 22)¹⁰ may be supported by the similarity of the hooves to those on the Urkesh seal, and the size of the animal



Fig. 3.7: “Stele of Ur-Nammu” from Ur (Limestone, 320 × 152 cm). Sacred Area, near temple of Enunmakh, Ur III. Drawing by the author (after Woolley 1974, 75–81, pl. 41 and 44a, and Canby 2001, pl. 2, 11, 28 and 29).

compared to the one to the right.

To their right is another male figure in the same attire, apparently making a libation in front of a figure on a small base, holding an elongated object, perhaps a flute. The male figure is pouring the libation from something shaped like an animal – either blood from an animal just sacrificed or, less likely, an unidentified liquid from an animal skin-bag.¹¹ Given its slender build, lack of indication of coat, short tail and cloven hooves, this is most likely a deer or antelope, or possibly a goat, as suggested by both Woolley (1974, 78) and Canby (2001, 22). If it is indeed an actual animal, the similarity to the decapitated animal on the Urkesh seal is striking, and may indicate different stages in the same kind of ritual. The stele is here quite fragmentary, but the figure may be carrying a dagger in his belt like the other two, which would support the idea of this also being related to sacrifice. We can identify this as part of a sacrificial ritual, because the killing of at least one animal is clear, and the sacred setting is marked by the libation and the standards on the right-hand side of the fragment. The rest of the stele reinforces this impression on both sides, with several other scenes of libations and deities (see Canby 2001 for good images and restorations of all the registers on both sides of the stele; Woolley provides his complete description in Woolley 1974, 74–81, pl. 41 and 44a).

Similar scenes also appear on plaques and seals (Figs 3.8–3.10). Figures 3.8a–c are ivory inlays from plaques from the Shamash Temple at Mari, dated to the ED III period (Parrot

1954, pl. xviii). They depict male figures, again probably priests, holding down a ram on the ground on its back. As with the stele, it appears particularly important that the animal is kept in an outstretched position, and especially that its head is kept down. The ‘priests’ wear knee-length kilts, with a belt around the waist, and a tassel running down the back; judging from Figure 3.8c, they have bare upper bodies and shaved heads. The two seals are from Early Dynastic Tell Asmar and Kish (Collon 1987, no. 830 and Mackay 1929, pl. xli, 6). In both of these, we see that the animal is now placed on a ladder-patterned platform, again on its back and with figures holding it on either side. The scenes are less detailed than the other examples, but it also appears that these figures have bare upper bodies and wear knee-length kilts, perhaps with fringes at the bottom; in line with all but the Urkesh seal, their heads are bare. The dagger is held above the animal’s neck by the figure on the left on the Tell Asmar seal, while its presence is less clear on the Kish seal, but may be what looks like the extended arm of the figure on the right. The short, upturned tails, cloven hooves on Figure 3.10 and indication of coat on Figure 3.9 suggest that the animals are goats, or possibly sheep.¹² The animals and associated figures are part of more extensive compositions which include a boat scene and perhaps people at a temple structure.

A final example showing an ox on its back on the ground, but lacking the human figures on either side, is depicted on the so-called ‘Stele of the Vultures’, found at Tello/Girsu,

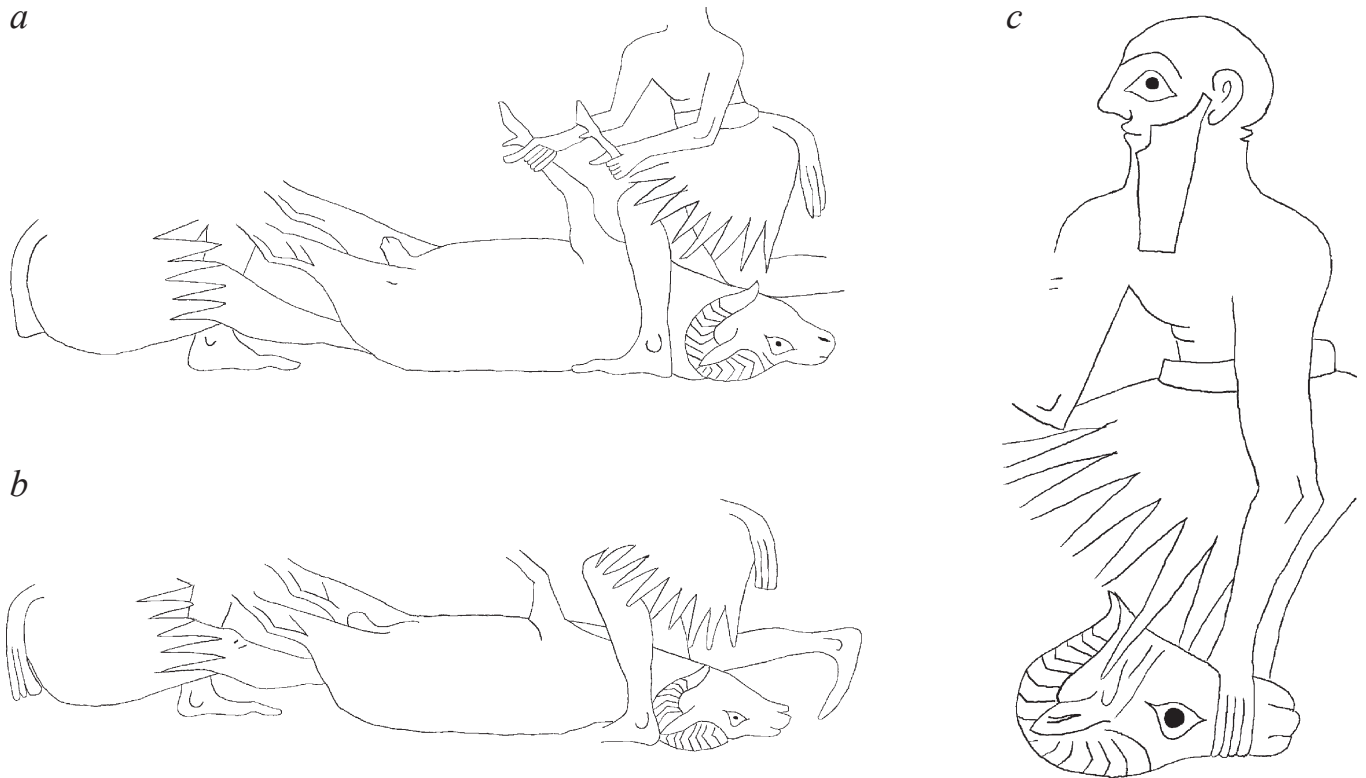


Fig. 3.8: a–c. Plaque inlays from Mari (Ivory, c. 12.5 × 5.5 cm, c. 13.5 × 4.0 cm, c. 4.0 × 8.0 cm). Shamash Temple, ED III. Drawing by the author (after Parrot 1954, 163, pl. xviii and Aruz 2003, no. 96).



Fig. 3.9: Seal from Tell Asmar/Eshnunna (Shell, 2.9 × 2.0 cm). Late ED III. Drawing by the author (after Amiet 1961, pl. 108, no. 1438 and Collon 1987, 176, no. 830).

commemorating a victory of Lagash led by the ensi Eannatum over Umma, c. 2460 BC (Parrot 1948, 95–101, fig. 23, pl. vi). This scene is clearly part of a broader ritual (which in turn is part of an extensive battle), with other animals piled on top of the ox towards its back, and a naked male, probably also

a priest, making a libation on plants – all by now familiar elements of ritual and sacrificial compositions. If Winter's suggestion is correct that this whole register relates Eannatum's visit to a temple for divine instruction before battle (Winter 2010, 16), the sacrificial element may well support the idea

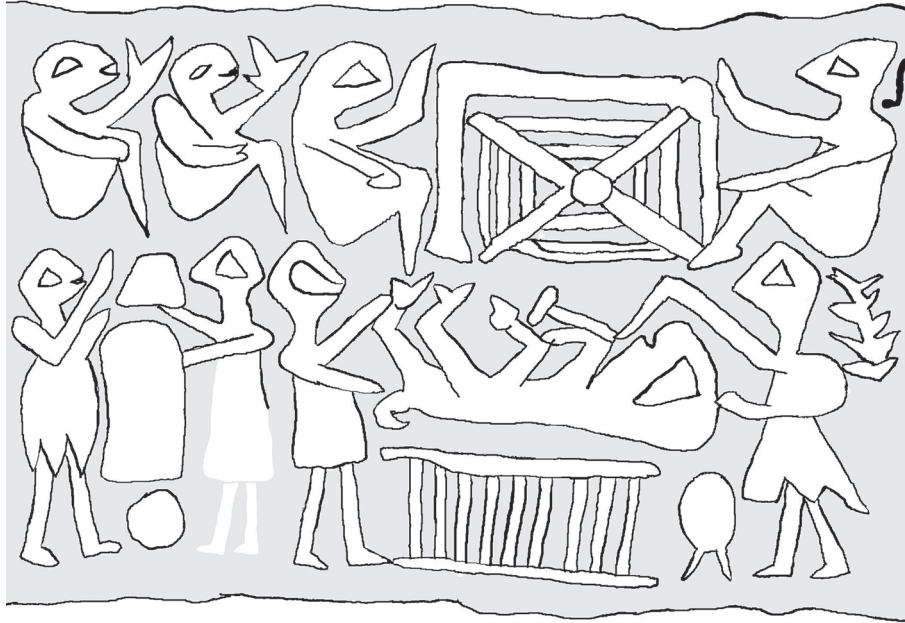


Fig. 3.10: Seal from Kish (Shell, 3.0 × 1.60 cm). Grave 7, ED. Drawing by the author (after Mackay 1929, 194, pl. xli, 6 and Amiet 1961, pl. 110, no. 1465).

that this type of scene, with animals on their back, is linked to divination; if the pile of human bodies on the left refers to a dream oracle, the sacrificed animals may logically refer to prophecy by extispicy.¹³

I have in these examples focused on one specific part of the sacrificial ritual: that of the moment of death of the animal, or shortly thereafter. That is simply because it is the moment most easily identified. However, sacrifice is a process and often involves much more than the actual killing of the animal – in fact, in some cases, other parts may have been considered more important, and these may include both the period before and after the animal dies – and this is where the theories presented at the beginning may prove insightful. Adding to the initial criteria of the deliberate death of an animal and a reference to a religious or sacred element, those theories can be used to suggest sacrificial elements outside the very moment of death, including:

- feasting, festivals or other celebrations (Robertson Smith)
- processions, display or presentation (Robertson Smith, Burkert)
- mediation (Hubert and Mauss)
- hunting (Burkert)
- substitution (Tylor, Burkert)

These are merely a selection: more may be gained from including work from further writers on theories or anthropological studies of sacrifice. The brackets indicate the main thinkers whose studies suggest these elements. At present, if any of the elements are found in an image, they only constitute *possible* indicators of sacrifice, since they usually lack the combination

of the first two criteria. The first three are also recorded in written records of the Near East, where festivals often included a multitude of sacrifices, as well as processions (as is for example recorded in the Emar texts – see Fleming 2000, esp. nos 373, VI/3 375, 446 and 452). The most obvious type of mediation in sacrifice is known from divination, in particular the practice of extispicy, in which the animal's (usually a sheep) liver is inspected for signs of future events (e.g. Goetze 1957; Jeyes 1989). A strict relation between hunting and sacrifice has not yet been established for the Bronze Age Near East, but some connection can be suggested elsewhere,¹⁴ so the possibility remains. Substitution can occur at a variety of levels – as part for the whole, one animal for many, one animal for another, or an object for an animal. Although all or any of these may have taken place, most of them are virtually impossible to prove definitively without written records of such practices. Only in objects substituting animals do we have a possible hint – model animals, on their own, or being carried by humans (examples can be seen in Frankfort *et al.* 1940, figs 116–117 and 119e), especially when found in sacred structures *could* be suggested to be sacrificial substitutes for real animals.

The broader processes of sacrificial ritual can even be glimpsed in many of the examples seen so far: in the Urkesh seal, the dead animal is central, but of equal importance is the seated figure and the action she performs. The stele, plaques and seals with an animal on its back all only represent one small section of their composition, being part of various other activities and events.

Two further well-known compositional examples will briefly

serve to illustrate the case. So-called ‘banquet scenes’ depict feasting (perhaps religious festivals?), usually with seated figures drinking from cups and straws, and attended by servants and musicians. These scenes can with benefit be interpreted in light of Robertson Smith’s emphasis on feasting and festivals in sacrifice. In some instances, the scenes include food, and in particular, meat, placed on a kind of board or high table. An example of this can be seen on the lower register of Figure 3.11, where an animal leg is placed on the table all the way to the left.¹⁵ In another example, Figure 3.12, a sheep is being brought to the feast (shown in the second register),¹⁶ along with other provisions, and musicians. The sheep is likely to be killed and eaten by the participants. In these cases, the death of the animal is undisputed (in the form of joints of meat), but the divine element is not obviously identifiable, as no divine elements are directly present. What is present in some of the images, however, is the vessel carried by the figure on the right in the lower register of Figure 3.11. This vessel is referred to as ‘spouted vessel’, ‘libation jug’ or ‘Röhrenkanne’ (Winter 2010, 239; Müller-Karpe 1993, 13).¹⁷ Its frequent unambiguous depiction as used for libations (as can be seen in Fig. 3.14) makes its ritual connotations clear,¹⁸ and by extension suggests the ritual and religious content of the banquet scenes.

That the banquet scenes do in fact depict religious feasts or festivals can also be supported by their archaeological contexts and ownership: the seal on Figure 3.11 was owned by a priestess, as indicated by the inscription (Woolley

1934, 343, no. 98), and presumably the grave it was found in belonged to her. The main figure depicted on the seal is likely the priestess (in the upper register, on the right), and the event she is partaking in part of her sacerdotal duties. The votive plaques, including Figure 3.12, have mostly been found in temples, and are therefore also likely to be related to temple events like religious festivals for various occasions (Frankfort makes a similar observation – Frankfort 1939, 77, and in her systematic study of banquet scenes, Selz also notes the ‘ritual situation’ of the scenes, connected with sacred areas – Selz 1983, 456–460, 479). Finally, it can be noted that although festivals are abundantly recorded in written records, there are no examples of strictly secular feasts. This may not exclude their existence, but apparently they were not deemed worthy of mention, and the same is likely to be the case for iconographic representations. If this interpretation of banquet scenes as depicting religious events is correct, we are here dealing with a period *after* the actual killing of the animal, but nevertheless an important part of the ritual. Communion, and the sharing of food and drink, perhaps also including elements like music and dancing, can be extremely potent experiences. These events may also be powerful tools of manipulation for political or ideological purposes (e.g. the legitimation of power or authority), with careful *inclusion* and *exclusion* of certain groups (see e.g. papers in Dietler and Hayden 2001; Bray 2003).

Another well-known composition, that of the ‘presentation



Fig. 3.11: Seal from Ur (Lapis lazuli, h: 3.9 cm). PG 580, ED III? Inscribed “The seal of he-kun-sig nin-dingir dpa-[gi]bil-gis-sag, priestess of the divine Gilgamesh”. Drawing by the author (after Woolley 1934, 343, pl. 200, no. 98 and Amiet 1961, pl. 90, no. 1184).



Fig. 3.12: Votive plaque from Khafajeh (Limestone, 20 × 20 cm). Sin Temple, Level IX, ED IIIA (Frankfort 1939, pl. 105, no. 185). Drawing by the author (after Aruz 2003, no. 32; Amiet 1961, pl. 93, no. 1222; Strommenger 1962, pl. 42 for lower right-hand corner).

scene', could be suggested in some cases to illustrate events *before* the animal is killed (Figs 3.13–3.15).¹⁹ In these scenes, a seated or standing deity (more rarely, the king) is approached by one or several human worshippers, sometimes attended by 'intermediary' deities. The human worshipper sometimes carries an animal (mostly goat or sheep) in their arms to the deity. It is clear from the compositions that the animal is to be given to the deity, and the emphasis is on *display*. The divine element is thus undisputed, but what is not certain is whether the animal is consequently killed. The context and way the animal is handled in some images hint that this is the case, however. On a votive plaque from the Ur *giparu*, two registers depict offerings and libations being made in front of a deity in the upper register and a temple facade in the lower one (Fig. 3.14). The lower register includes a male figure bringing a sheep,²⁰ carried in the common 'stiff' manner of a presentation scene. To his right is a female thought to be the priestess Enheduana (Woolley 1955, 45; Collon 1995, 74; Aruz 2003, 74). She is depicted with a frontal face: this is a feature often associated with liminality and death, and is in some cases strongly linked to sacrifice (Asher-Greve

2003; Morgan 1995) – here it is likely used to designate the liminal character of the priestess as mediating between humans and deities. In fact, the whole scene is focused towards the liminal space where the action is taking place, which is immediately before the temple and the deity, with the stands/vases and accompanying libations working as thresholds. The palm column on the Urkesh seal and the dais/libation on the Ur-Nammu stele may similarly be interpreted as thresholds marking liminal spaces.

The animal carried by the human worshipper in presentation scenes is occasionally depicted as hanging limp, and held by a leg, the ears/horns, or as in the example here, by the neck (Fig. 3.15). At the least, it transmits total submission, and may in fact be a reference to its death. We have then possible depictions of events that were part of the sacrificial process from both *before* and *after* the actual killing of the animal, related to *display* and *feasting*. If these scenes – or even some of them – are to be understood in this manner, the importance of these events and the human experience that accompanied them cannot be denied, and the sheer number of seals and other objects depicting these actions illustrate that significance.²¹ They show that sacrifice



Fig. 3.13: Seal from Tell Suleimeh (Serpentine, 3.2 × 1.8 cm). Room 3, L.IV. Drawing by the author (after Werr 1992, 37, no. 66).

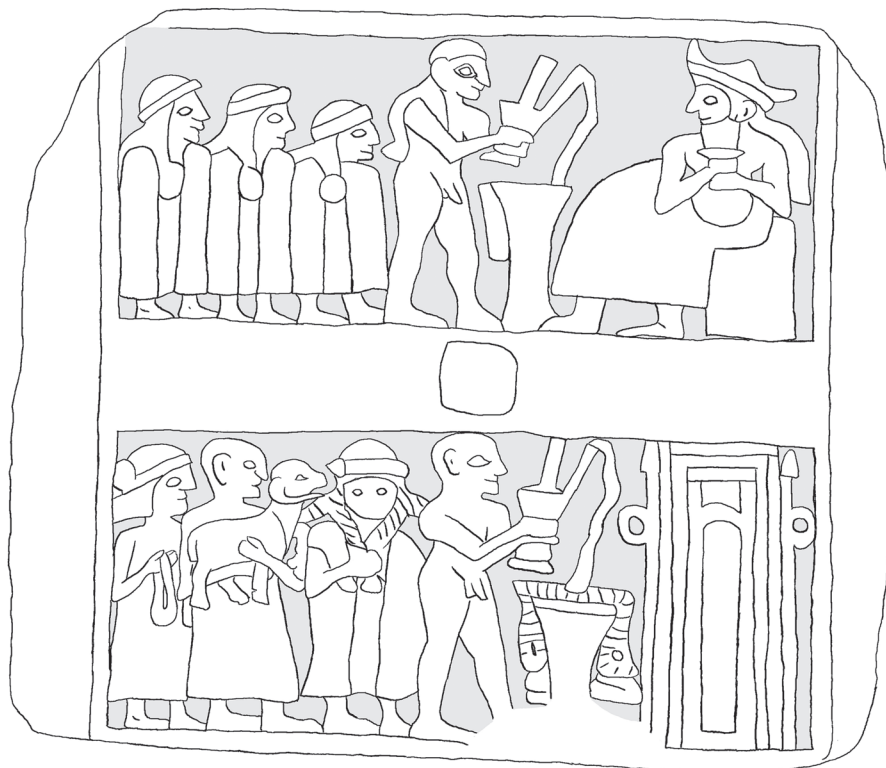


Fig. 3.14: Votive plaque from Ur (Limestone, 22 × 26 cm). The giparu, ED III. Drawing by the author (after Woolley 1955, 45–46, pl. 39c; Aruz 2003, no. 33; Amiet 1961, pl. 102, no. 1355).

was an integral, but not necessarily central, part of many rituals and activities, and theories suggested by imminent scholars of the last centuries alert us to the importance of elements of sacrifice which we may otherwise have missed or marginalised.

In conclusion, careful criteria sensitive to the wide array of religious practices in the ancient Near East can be set up to identify sacrifice in the iconography, and combined with other ancient material such as written sources and archaeological

contexts, and theories proposed by modern scholars, these can be used to suggest further depictions and references to sacrificial rituals and their individual elements. Once carefully identified, we can begin to make inferences about the content of the practices of sacrifice in the ancient Near East – occasions, manner of killing, equipment used, participants (both animal and human), functions and locations.²²

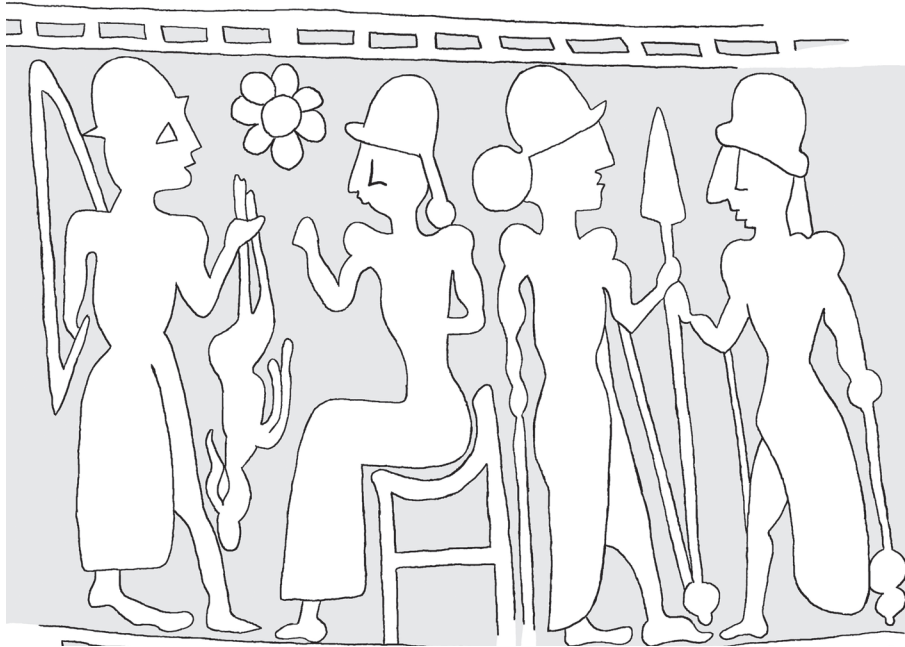


Fig. 3.15: Seal impression from Emar/Tell Meskene. Tablet ME 118, Mitanni. Drawing by the author (after Beyer 2001, 219, pl. I, E24).

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati and Giorgio Buccellati for first introducing me to the seal from Tell Mozan/Urkesh discussed below, and for suggestions to this paper, and to Glenn Schwartz and Emma Saunders for reading and commenting on earlier drafts.
- 2 Good introductory overviews and selected readings on the topic can be found in Mizruchi 1998 and Carter 2003.
- 3 This is the first option given, which is the one of relevance here. The second and third options are: “an animal, person, or object offered in this way” and “an act of giving up something one values for the sake of something that is more important”.
- 4 In fact, many authors do include inanimate objects in their understanding of sacrifice – e.g. Edward Burnett Tylor (1871, ch. xviii, e.g. 342), Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (1964, 12), Valerio Valeri (1985, 37) and Bruce Lincoln (1991, 204). Written sources relating to sacrifice also do not always make a distinction between the sacrifice of animate and inanimate objects (e.g. the Sumerian *siskur* and Akkadian *niqû*, usually translated as either ‘sacrifice’ or ‘offering’ – CAD, RIA 10, 100 and Limet 1993), and in archaeological contexts, the two could be interpreted as found together (as is often the case when animal bones are found in graves, the Royal Cemetery at Ur being a prime example of humans, animals and a multitude of inanimate objects being found together – Woolley 1934). In iconography, the sacrifice of inanimate objects also occurs, and libations are common (see e.g. Figs 3.4, 3.7, 3.12–3.14 depicted here). Here, the distinction is maintained for the purposes of limiting the scope of investigation, and facilitating identification, which would otherwise become more problematic. I prefer to use the broader term ‘offering’ for the sacrifice of inanimate objects.
- 5 The term ‘ritual killing’ may also be used when specifically referring to the moment of death, if by ritual is meant an ordered sequence of actions that have religious or sacred significance, including a sense in which the animal dies in honour of a supernatural being.
- 6 The instrument on this seal, as well as on all the other examples referred to in this study are daggers, rather than knives. In the archaeological records, metal objects of this shape are called daggers, and one has even been found at Tell Mozan/Urkesh, dated to the 3rd millennium, along with many other examples (Bianchi and Franke 2011, 214–216, pl. 5). In iconographic studies of weapons, the same nomenclature is confirmed (Solyman 1968, 58–59, 110–111, nos 170–177, 462–468). It is of great interest to note that a weapon whose main function is to stab, rather than cut, is what is most commonly depicted in images of sacrifice, reflecting the manner in which the animal was likely killed.
- 7 Other sites closer in time or space to the Urkesh seal only display similarities in certain individual elements, but not enough to shed light on or link closely with it. For analogies to the ‘palm column’/vessel see Matthews 1997, no. 96 (Tell Brak) and Parker 1975, no. 49 (Tell al Rimah), for the animal-human composition, see Matthews 1997, nos 138, 142, 168, 171, 196 and 322 (Tell Brak), Porada 1944–1945, nos 465 and 466 (Nuzi), and Beyer 2001, nos E45 and E54 (Tell Meskene/Emar).
- 8 The only other glyptic material possibly showing a decapitated animal in a ritual context is found on impressions from Uruk, dated much earlier, to the Uruk period (Brandes 1979, pl. 30). It shows an animal being held upside down against a pole by a naked human figure, who holds a dagger against the animal’s back. The animal itself cannot be identified beyond quadruped,

- but it has had its front hooves cut off, and possibly also its head (Brandes 1979, 216–217). The religious setting is marked by a temple structure on the right.
- 9 In the glyptic of the Bronze Age Aegean, separate animal heads (especially frontal ones) have been interpreted as being associated with sacrifice (Morgan 1995).
 - 10 Woolley calls it a bull, but there is in fact no indication of genitals (Woolley 1974, 78).
 - 11 Canby notes the possibility of it being an animal skin-bag, arguing that silver imitations with legs still attached have been found (Canby 2001, 22, n. 46). However, the two silver vessels that have been found at Ur with ‘legs’ still attached only have two very stumpy ‘forelegs’ (Müller-Karpe 1993, 222–223 and nos 1487 and 1488) and hardly resemble a complete animal, and I see nothing to suggest that the one represented here is a skin-bag.
 - 12 Only goats have the upturned tail, but since the animals are on their back, it is not clear if the upturned tail is a feature of the animal depicted or simply due to gravity, and no horns are visible to aid identification.
 - 13 Alternatively, the animals could be read as part of the ‘dream’, meaning that the sacrifice took place in connection with the burial of the defeated enemies.
 - 14 This is strongly argued for in the Bronze Age Aegean by Nannó Marinatos (Marinatos 2005). Although the two are far from always found together, there does in some instances appear to be a link, and the presence of bones from wild animals both in the Aegean and Near East in sacrificial contexts would support this idea, although it is rare that *only* bones from wild animals are found. For the Near East bones of gazelles have been found e.g. in graves at Halawa (Orthmann 1981, H-30, H-31, H-35 and H-37), Abu Salabikh (Postgate 1985, Graves 20 and 34), Tell Arbid (Lasota-Moskalewska *et al.* 2006, 101) and Ur (Woolley 1934, PG 1850), and in a foundation deposit in the palace of Mari (Parrot 1959, 260, Rooms 3 and 62).
 - 15 Other examples from Ur can be found in Woolley 1934, nos 16, 27, 29, 38 and 138.
 - 16 Karen L. Wilson suggests that the small standing figure in the middle of the first register also carries a reclining animal on his head (Aruz 2003, 73); if it is a live animal, this manner of holding it is unparalleled in the iconography.
 - 17 The vessel is not only known in iconography: metal examples have been found at Ur, Khafajeh and Tell al Uqair (Müller-Karpe 1993, pl. 1–5).
 - 18 Irene Winter has carefully studied the distribution and context of this type of vessel in the Royal Cemetery of Ur, noting their possible multifunctionality – meaning that although they were definitely used for libations, they may also have been used for other purposes, including those that might be perceived more secular: for the banquet scenes, she suggests a ritual associated with hand-washing (Winter 2010, 227). Whatever the event of its usage, it was certainly a vessel meant for pouring liquids.
 - 19 A typological study of this type of composition can be found in Haussperger 1991.
 - 20 Not a goat, as suggested by Woolley and van Buren (Woolley 1955, 45 and van Buren 1951, 29): although not all features are always clearly depicted in Near Eastern iconography, goats have short, upturned tails, beards and usually fairly straight horns pointing upwards – sheep have tails directed downwards (short or medium-length), no beards, and horns curled backwards and down, as in the example shown here.
 - 21 Two other examples are even more illuminating: 1. a seal from the Diyala region depicts a presentation scene with a seated deity, in front of which is a human making a libation. Between them is an offering table (on which the libation is poured, like in the *giparu* plaque), with an animal head placed on it and perhaps incense burning next to it (Frankfort 1939, pl. xxivf and 1955, no. 987). 2. a seal formerly in the Francis Berry Collection depicts the usual presentation scene, but directly in front of the seated deity is placed an animal on its back, with a bareheaded figure in knee-length kilt holding on to one leg and holding a dagger to its neck, very similar to the compositions presented above with animals on their back, and leaving no doubt as to the fate of the animal (Collon 1987, no. 831). Unfortunately, although both of these seals are Akkadian in style, their exact provenance is unknown.
 - 22 Such a final study should not isolate iconographic material, but integrate all possible data concerning sacrifice. The Urkesh seal suggests bulls to be important in the sacrificial cult. This, however, should be understood in the full context of the site and period. The importance of this can be illustrated by famous contemporary *abi* pit at Urkesh, which contained a large amount of bones from sacrificial animals, including puppies, donkeys, sheep/goats, piglets and birds, but no cattle (Kelly-Buccellati 2002, 136).

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