Matthew. J. Walsh, Sean O'Neill & Lasse Sørensen (eds)

In the Darkest of Days: Exploring Human Sacrifice and Value in Southern Scandinavian Prehistory

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Review by Sophie Bergerbrant

The book is an anthology that contains twelve articles and one introduction. There are 19 authors that has contributed to the book, the majority being active in Denmark. There are also contributors from Finland, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The articles deal with archaeological material that could be related to human sacrifice from the Mesolithic to the Viking Age, as well as Norse texts related to human sacrifice. The majority of the articles focus on human sacrifice in the Iron Age.

The book is generally well-edited, and the language is largely very good. A few sections are difficult to follow, likely due to the style of individual authors in those specific sections. I have only found one error concerning the archaeological material. The classic Swedish wetland sacrifice site Kärringsjön was placed in Härjedalen instead of Halland (Walsh et al. 2024a). However, this mistake did not affect the overall discussion.

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The book has many different approaches to human sacrifice, making it clear that the articles have developed from a conference rather than a project. For example, many articles use slightly different definitions of sacrifice. Wåhlin (2024:52), for example, defines sacrifice as giving something or someone up to make sacred rather than directly connecting it to ritual killings. This definition works very well for the studied site, Svennum, where six human skulls were deposited in a structured way in a wetland area. In contrast, Jensen (2024) indirectly suggests that human sacrifice includes ritual killings, as the article discusses structured homicide in the Viking Age. The introduction would have benefited from discussing more in detail the different uses of sacrifice through the book. Currently, the introduction presents a picture of human sacrifice that differs from some of the individual authors. This leaves the reader to pick up on the sometimes subtle or not-so-subtle differences in the authors' views. The book both suffers and gains from these varying definitions. On the one hand, it loses coherency, and the reader must remember the individual definitions of sacrifice in each article. On the other hand, it opens up for future discussions about human sacrifice within archaeology.

Most articles agree on how difficult it is to identify human sacrifice in archaeological material. Jensen (2024:91) argues that 'archaeology is poorly suited in distinguishing between sacrifice and execution, but well suited to distinguish between opportunistic killings and structured killings'. Laffranchi et al. (2024) have elsewhere shown that distinguishing between an accident, a bridge collapse, and a human sacrifice can be difficult too.

Many of the articles focus on human remains found in wetlands (Asingh 2024; Fredengren 2024; Lynnerup & Wåhlin 2024; Mannering 2024; Ravn 2024; Sørensen & Nielsen 2024) but some articles deal with human remains in other contexts (Pantmann 2024; Walsh & Reiter 2024), such as graves or loose human bones. One discusses white stones as replacement for humans (Walsh et al. 2024a) and another Old Norse skaldic poetry (Edholm 2024).

Out of the eight articles that in some way discusses human sacrifice based on materials found in wetlands, I will highlight one: the article written by Sidsel Wåhlin (2024) about the Svennum site in northern Jutland. The site is a recently well-excavated wetland area where, among other things, six human skulls were found. The article highlights the potential new understanding that can come from modern excavations. The analysis shows that the skulls where not fresh at the time of the deposition in the wetland and that they were deposited in a structured way. It also explores the skulls' relationship to other deposited material.

Unfortunately, the animal bones do not seem to be radiocarbon-dated. If they had been dated, it would have given us the possibility to understand the relationships between the deposition of the human remains and the ani-

mal remains. As many of the other articles dealing with human remains in wetlands (e.g. Mannering 2024), this article shows how complex the question of interpreting such remains is. This book highlights the importance of contextualizing each find of human remains in wetlands to avoid simplification.

A conclusion after reading the book is that, in spite of the introduction's (Walsh et al. 2024b) strong argumentation for a continuous practice over a millennium in Scandinavian prehistory, arguing for human sacrifice in prehistory is very difficult. Two of the final three articles (Jensen 2024; Jessen & Olsen 2024) argue for a judicial context for some of the beheaded Viking Age skeletons, although within a ritual setting. The final article (Edholm 2024) discusses taking your enemy's life in battle as a human sacrifice to Odin. This article, in other words, has a very different take on human sacrifice than the traditional archaeological understanding. The structure of the book leaves the reader with the thought that human sacrifice was probably not as common as some of the editors argue in the introduction. The book would probably have benefitted from a shorter, more neutral introduction and a final chapter summing up the evidence presented in the articles, perhaps tightening the analytical concepts to show how the editors interpret evidence of human sacrifice through Scandinavian prehistory. This would make it easier for the reader to evaluate the editor's argumentation for continuous, but changing practice, of human sacrifice through most of Scandinavian prehistory. However, the book can be read as a background to a discussion about the possible existence of human sacrifice in Scandinavia, and if so, when and where. It will create a debate and new research that will hopefully bring research forward on the question if human sacrifice existed in some or all prehistoric periods in Scandinavia.

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