

References

- MALLORY, J.P. 2013. *The origins of the Irish*. London & New York: Thames & Hudson.
- Ó HÓGÁIN, D. 1999. *The sacred isle: belief and religion in pre-Christian Ireland*. Wilton, Cork: Collins.
- RAFTERY, B. 1994. *Pagan Celtic Ireland*. London & New York: Thames & Hudson.

MIRANDA ALDHOUSE-GREEN
School of History, Archaeology and Religion
Cardiff University, Wales
✉ aldhouse-greenmj@cardiff.ac.uk

ANTIQUITY 2024 Vol. 98 (400): 1127–1129
<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2024.90>

MATTHEW J. WALSH, SEAN O'NEILL & LASSE SØRENSEN (ed.). 2023. *In the darkest of days: exploring human sacrifice and value in southern Scandinavian prehistory*. Oxford: Oxbow; 978-1-78925-859-2 paperback £38.



The edited volume *In the darkest of days: exploring human sacrifice and value in southern Scandinavian prehistory* brings together novel explorations of the topic of human sacrificial violence, ranging from Mesolithic to Viking times. Some of the contributions were originally presented at a conference at the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen in 2018, within the framework of the ‘Human Sacrifice and Value’ project of the University of Oslo.

The book consists of a general introduction followed by 12 chapters, which are placed in a roughly chronological order, and are significantly varied in scope, theoretical framework and methodological approach. The main focus throughout most chapters is on two archaeological contexts: bogs and other watery places yielding human and ‘non-human’ remains; and ‘dryland’ burial data. In the last three chapters, dealing with the Viking Age, historical texts take a more prominent position. Potentially relevant quotes from classical authors surface occasionally in other contributions. Combined, this set of contributions provides a fascinating overview of the unparalleled richness of the southern Scandinavian data on human violence and ritual.

The huge scope of the current volume—chronologically, spatially and thematically—inevitably brings challenges. These mainly evolve around the definitions of (human) sacrifice, offering and ritual, the potential entanglement of ritual and violence, and how sacrificial practices may (or may not) be reflected in the archaeological record. These themes are central in most chapters and prompt the question to what extent general trends may be expected across time and space. In the Introduction (p.xi), the authors follow Bruce Lincoln’s (1991: 204) definition of sacrifice as “most fundamentally a logic, language, and practice of transformative negation, in which one entity—a plant or animal, a bodily part, some portion of a person’s

life, energy, property, or even the life itself—is given up for the benefit of some other species, group, god, or principle that is understood to be ‘higher’ or more deserving in one fashion or another”. Drawing from the different contributions, the authors conclude that “human sacrifice does not appear so much to evolve as it seems to be transformed to fit the morays and necessities of the time and the societies undertaken it within their own culturally relative contexts” (p.xxii). This makes sense based on the presented evidence and can be taken as the central message of the volume.

As phrased in the Introduction, ritual violence, sacrifice and offering seem to have emerged at various points in Northern European prehistory to fit the particular social, political, economic and religious needs of the societies in question. Similarly, a recent overview study of human remains from Northern European bogs (not all of which have established death causes) shows clear fluctuations in time and space, as well as a huge diversity in site types (van Beek *et al.* 2023). To be able to understand trends across time and space, as well as to interpret individual sites, a contextual approach is required. This appeal is by no means new (e.g. Roberts 1998). In this respect, it may be useful to distinguish between the sociocultural context of sacrificial sites and practices, their environmental setting and the ‘life history’ of individual sites. In the current volume, the sociocultural context receives significant attention, even though the main focus generally remains on the deposition or burial sites themselves. Their environmental context is largely discussed at a superficial level only, if at all. More attention for this topic would have been useful, particularly with the growing body of recent, promising work in this field. Henry Chapman and colleagues (2019), for example, have recently demonstrated the potential of an interdisciplinary, contextual approach to interpret deposition sites of bog bodies. Various contributions in the current volume highlight the great diversity in sites and practices, even within limited geographic areas. Many sites have repeated phases of use, and yield human remains that were subject to specific treatments before they ended up in a bog or burial (e.g. Wählin, Chapter 6). This shows that the meaning and use of individual sites, human remains and objects may change over time, adding to the complexity of the topic.

It seems safe to state that no other field in archaeology has been as heavily debated as human sacrifice and ritual. The combination of (in many cases) poorly documented find contexts and the fact that sacrificial acts may not leave unequivocal traces in the archaeological record has led to almost endless speculation, and often to over-interpretation. To move the debate forward, a rigorous assessment of the available data—be it archaeological evidence or written sources—combined with the application of novel techniques is vital. That such approaches can correct persistent misconceptions becomes evident from different contributions in this volume. Ulla Mannering shows that bog bodies that were found naked may well have worn (linen) clothes, as is evident for the Huldremose woman. Niels Lynnerup and Pauline Asingh demonstrate that modern forensic findings do not fully support the popular ideas of ‘overkill’ and indicate that various ‘bog people’ were not—as often stated—overtly physically different from the general Iron Age population. Similarly, Sidsel Wählin (on classical sources) and Bo Jensen (on Viking-Age historical texts) argue that ancient and historical texts cannot automatically be counted as evidence, because confrontation with the archaeological record shows many inconsistencies. Novel insights are also gained from revisiting old museum collections and a more systematic dating of human bone material (Chapters 3 & 8 by Pantmann

and Fredengren, respectively). The present volume also shows the increasingly successful application of stable isotope analysis and DNA research, which was very recently demonstrated by the fascinating research into the Neolithic bog body of the Vittrup Man (Fischer *et al.* 2024).

In the darkest of days will have a great appeal to both academic and non-academic audiences. Hopefully, it will be a start signal for a new era in the study of human sacrifice and ritual, in which the field gradually moves from speculation to more evidence-based narratives. As the volume shows, in this area of research, the facts may often be more surprising than fiction.

References

- CHAPMAN, H., R. VAN BEEK, B. GEAREY, B. JENNINGS, D. SMITH, N. HELT NIELSEN & Z. ZEIN ELABDIN. 2019. Bog bodies in context: developing a best practice approach. *European Journal of Archaeology* 23: 227–49.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/eea.2019.54>
- FISCHER, A. *et al.* 2024. Vittrup Man: the life-history of a genetic foreigner in Neolithic Denmark. *PLoS One*.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0297032>
- LINCOLN, B. 1991. *Death, war and sacrifice: studies in ideology and practice*. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press.
- ROBERTS, J. 1998. A contextual approach to the interpretation of the Early Bronze Age skeletons of the East Anglian Fens. *Antiquity* 72: 188–97.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00086397>
- VAN BEEK, R., C. QUIK, S. BERGERBRANT, F. HUISMAN & P. KAMA. 2023. Bogs, bones and bodies: the deposition of human remains in European mires (9000 BC–AD 1900). *Antiquity* 97: 120–40.
<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2022.163>

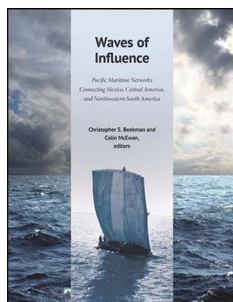
ROY VAN BEEK

Soil Geography & Landscape Group/Cultural Geography Group
Wageningen University, the Netherlands

✉ Roy.vanbeek@wur.nl

ANTIQUITY 2024 Vol. 98 (400): 1129–1132
<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2024.97>

CHRISTOPHER S. BEEKMAN & COLIN MCEWAN (ed.). 2022. *Waves of influence: Pacific maritime networks connecting Mexico, Central America and northwestern South America*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press; 978-0-88402-489-7 hardback \$85.



Firstly, I need to mention that this book is co-edited, but also dedicated to the memory of Colin McEwan who passed away before this volume was published. Colin was an outstanding pre-Hispanic scholar and this final book serves as a fitting epitaph to his considerable accomplishments.

Every so often a book comes along that surprises, this is one of them, and for all the right reasons. The theme it tackles, as well as the geographic area, is huge, nothing less than Pacific maritime contacts between Mexico, Central America and northwestern South America. In the latter case, mainly Colombia and Ecuador

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Antiquity Publications Ltd