VIOLENCE AND CIVILIZATION

STUDIES OF SOCIAL VIOLENCE
IN HISTORY AND PREHISTORY

edited by

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Those theorists who have most famously spilt their ink on the relationship between violence, civilization, and sacrifice – Walter Burkert, René Girard, and others – have drawn their inspiration from myth, scripture, ritual, and from literature, but less often from ethnohistorical or archaeological records of sacrifice. Thus Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac has been discussed far more often than eye-witness accounts of human sacrifice or the many death-pits worldwide that have served as the repositories for corpses ritually killed. This essay is intended partially to redress this imbalance. Moreover, it focuses attention on a particularly under-theorized aspect of human sacrifice, the provision for a dead person of sacrificed retainers – of servants, sex partners, or others whose services the deceased could command in death, just as he or she had commanded them in life.

The type of sacrifice much more frequently discussed is that undertaken by a community to propitiate a deity thought either to be bloodthirsty or, perhaps, simply thirsty for tangible signs of that community’s devotion. The gift of life given back to the gods served ostensibly to save life in the future by virtue of abundant harvests, success in war, divine forgiveness of community transgression, and the like. In such cases, the people sacrificed as gifts to the gods were often taken from categories of social actors deemed in some way already alienated from the community at large and therefore expendable (Girard 2005: 12–13; Law 1985: 60; Westermarck 1906: 467). Enemy combatants, criminals, and slaves are classic candidates for such ritual killings. Alternatively, the person whose life was offered up as a gift to the god might – like the quintessential virgin sacrifice – represent a human equivalent to the first-fruits or to the finest, fattest, and most unblemished beast. Souls of the newly slain might also be expected to fulfil a specific function, such as relaying an important message to those in the next world or protecting a structure erected over their
own corpses (Davies 1984). In any case, human beings typically constituted the highest form of sacrifice, the most emphatic medium of request or praise it was possible for a community to offer (Ellis 1970: 119).

Attention to retainer sacrifice as a cross-cultural phenomenon has been far scantier – though the related custom of widow inhumation or incineration (as the individual case might be) has received somewhat more attention, due to Britain’s former sovereignty over India. Even when retainer sacrifice has been addressed by archaeologists, however, it has rarely been taken farther than where V. Gordon Childe left it in the 1940s. According to him, “Royal Tombs, characterized by magnitude, extravagance of furniture, and the immolation of human victims, were all confined to a transitional stage in social development when a territorial state was replacing barbarian organizations” (Childe 1943: 118; see similarly Childe 1945: 18). Childe’s assertion that such displays tend to coincide with sudden leaps in the scope of a polity’s political power does indeed seem to fit the most infamous and extravagant displays of retainer sacrifice. One might cite, for example, the royal tombs of Ur, Kerma, Abydos and Saqqara in Egypt, Cahokia, and Sipan. Thus, when such retainer sacrifices are discussed broadly, they are most frequently interpreted as particularly dramatic examples of the conspicuous consumption typical of a state’s first florescence. Along with Childe, scholarly opinion seems to hold that violence co-occurs with the rise of civilization. But, because it in itself is not civilized, one finds it typically abandoned or radically curtailed after the passage of only a few generations.

What I would like to do in the context of this necessarily brief essay is to push the discussion of retainer sacrifice a little further by posing three questions (or sets of questions) concerning retainer sacrifice, provoked in part by my own studies of the custom as it is manifested in First Dynasty Egypt and in part from readings on other instances of retainer sacrifice known from archaeological or historical records. The first asks how distinct a practice retainer sacrifice was from human sacrifice, given that – although scholars contrast the two traditions – they frequently occurred at the same ceremonies. The second asks questions concerned with the nature of the relationship – ideal and real – between the deceased and those sacrificed as part of his or her entourage. According to the official view, were lives sacrificed willingly out of love or fealty? Or were retainers viewed as functionally equivalent to grave goods – i.e., as possessions indicative of the deceased’s wealth and power, objects to be disposed of freely? The third and final set of questions examines whether or not the trajectories of retainer sacrifice provide evidence that – despite the best efforts of elite ideologies – retainer sacrifices were viewed as violent by those who gave their lives, by those whose loved ones did, and by society at large.
I preface my contribution to this volume with a disclaimer. As an Egyptologist, I am well versed in the instances of retainer sacrifice that occurred in Egypt and in Kerma. It is my interest in these sacrifices that prompted me to look outwards to find other instances in which the motivations for participants in the ceremony of retainer sacrifice were even more clearly articulated than they were in Egypt. Seeking seemingly analogous situations, however, necessitates engaging with evidence from societies about which I have only a superficial knowledge. The questions posed herein are intended, thus, to provoke discussion, rather than to settle it. No claims are made as to the universality of the ideas or trends discussed. While the core of the investigation resides in Egypt, the essay ranges far and wide in the societies that it draws upon for inspiration, but it does not claim that all sacrificial events can or should be encompassed under the same theoretical framework. While eye-witness accounts of ritual killings are inevitably biased, and culture-specific subtleties will always remain obscure, I believe even flawed attempts at understanding cross-cultural patterning are preferable to a dogmatically imposed tunnel vision. In my view, then, this is not so much a study as it is a meditation on an under-served subject. If it has goals, it is to ask a series of generative questions and to address these, however incompletely or ineffectively, by looking out at the world at large.

Question One

Retainer sacrifice is often viewed as “essentially different” from the ritual killing of prisoners of war (Trigger 1978: 161), yet history and archaeology complicate this picture. Are the two practices indeed so different?

I would argue that they are not necessarily so. Childe’s generalization – that retainer sacrifice is a practice that peaks in the period of instability initiated by a quantum leap in the power of a polity – holds true for Egypt, as it does in so many cases. And the birth of a new order, of course, is also a period often typified by state violence. New lands are forcibly conquered, internal rivals joust for power, and incipient rebellions must be constantly quelled. Prisoners of war, pictured both before and after their execution, certainly figure prominently in late protodynastic iconography. To take only the most famous example, the Narmer palette appears to commemorate the aftermath of a particularly important battle, and it showcases a deathblow on the verge of being dealt (Figure 3.1). While Narmer’s is not the first smiting scene – this occurred in the “royal” Painted Tomb at Hierakonpolis some generations earlier – his hieratic pose was to become emblematic of pharaonic power for nearly 3,000 years.
Narmer’s palette informs us – as do later temple reliefs and battle narratives – that after the frenzied killing of war came a ritualized and highly public execution of captives. Narmer is depicted inflicting this punishment personally on the most obviously important enemy on his palette, while the execution of a great mass of other prisoners was apparently left to his agents. Narmer and his officials are depicted inspecting the aftermath of this work as evident in a field of bound and decapitated corpses. The fact that each severed head is tucked neatly between the feet of the body it belonged to demonstrates the meticulously orchestrated spectacle of the event. The bodies are rearranged in such a precise and disturbing fashion because the dehumanizing fate of Narmer’s enemies was meant to be witnessed, to be internalized, and to be communicated widely.

Although the meaning of the falcon and the boat carved above the corpses is unclear, the niched façade surmounted by a Horus-falcon that seemingly provides entrance to the grisly scene suggests that the captives had been brought back to the royal capital and that the ceremonial execution was thus emphatically situated at the very center of Egyptian kingship. Such scenes of bound captives and ritual execution are staples of Narmer’s
pictorial repertoire, and there is little reason to believe that such images were fashioned out of whole cloth. We infer from the vast range of territory in which artifacts bearing Narmer’s name were found, from the sophistication of his commemorative artwork, and from the fact that the very next king was indisputably a King of Upper and Lower Egypt, that Narmer’s conquests were instrumental in bringing the peoples of the Nile Valley under a single government. Such considerable conquests and consolidations could hardly have been undertaken without an ample application of violence.

So far as it is possible to tell, retainer sacrifice did not begin in earnest until the reign of Narmer’s successor, Hor-Aha, although political leaders at Hierakonpolis and perhaps also Nagada experimented with the custom prior to the unification of Upper Egypt (Hoffman 1979: 114–116). With Hor-aha, however, it is clear that just as the king’s victory in battle demanded that he sacrifice enemy captives, so the death of the king now necessitated the death of others whose souls would accompany his into the next world. The graves of Hor-aha’s sacrificed retainers were arrayed in lines behind his own tomb, as if their inhabitants were processing after the king in strict marching order to battle or court ceremony (Figure 3.2). Behind the triple chambers presumed to have constituted Hor-aha’s tomb, there were two largish graves and then eleven rows of three graves each. A double-chambered grave at the rear of the procession originally contained the bodies, not of young men, as most of the others had, but of young lions, killed to enhance the ostentatiousness of the entourage (Dreyer et al. 1990: 86–89). Moreover, each successive First Dynasty ruler emulated Hor-aha’s heir in surrounding the tomb – and in some cases the funerary enclosure – of their predecessor with rows upon rows of sacrificed retainers.

In Egypt, the physical evidence so far analyzed from these graves appears consistent with what we would expect for sacrificed retainers. The bodies were interred intact in an apparently respectful manner and were most often provisioned with grave goods of some sort. The bones that have been analyzed bear no signs of trauma, other than perhaps a pinkish tinge of the teeth that may be indicative of death by strangulation (Galvin 2005: 120). If these bodies were indeed strangled, it is possible that this mode of death, as in the Asante kingdom, was viewed as aristocratic “because blood is not shed and there is not any mutilation” (Rattray 1927: 109). Certainly, no bodies were without their heads, and no heads bore the crushing impact of a blow from a mace. There is, however, evidence from three First Dynasty labels that may indicate that other deaths, besides those of retainers, heightened the pageantry of the royal funeral (Figure 3.3).

Two of the labels were discovered in Hor-aha’s tomb complex (Petrie 1901: pls. 3.4, 3.6) and depict the ritual killing of a person – pinioned in the manner
of a prisoner of war – just outside the royal palace. Underneath the label “receiving (from) Upper and Lower Egypt” (šsp šm ‘w mh₃w), the executioner plunges a dagger into the chest of the victim and catches his blood with a bowl, in the same manner as countless butchers in tomb scenes and models catch the blood of cattle. Just to the right of the sacrifice is a standard bearing...
the royal god Horus and an imy-wt fetish. This fetish, versions of which were also fashioned in the reigns of the First Dynasty kings Den and Semerkhet (Wilkinson 2000: 196, 242), is closely associated with the god Anubis, who oversaw the king’s transition at death into a full-fledged god. It is tempting to speculate that the associated annotation – “ms(t)” (meaning “to create”) – may
indicate that the sacrifices of individuals taken from the south and the north coincided with the fashioning of one or both royal fetishes and thus that, like the famous nail fetishes of the Bakongo, these religious foci were animated or enriched by the souls of sacrificial victims (Gell 1998: 59–61). The third label, discovered in the most massive mastaba of its time at Saqqara (3035; Emery 1938: 35), shows the same šsp šm ‘w mhw-ceremony of sacrifice. This time, it occurs in conjunction with what looks to be the “ms(t)”-creation of funerary images, perhaps corpses wrapped in linen. The line of humans bearing these images processes towards the name of King Djer. While it is not certain that these scenes of sacrifice take place in conjunction with a royal funeral, the central imagery surrounding the rite is linked to the “fashioning” of powerful entities that perhaps aided in the spiritual transfiguration of the deceased king.

If the evidence for the co-occurrence of retainer sacrifice and the sacrifice of prisoners of war in conjunction with royal funerals in Egypt is admittedly tenuous, this practice is well attested in archaeological and ethnohistoric records from other societies. Certainly, in the royal tombs of Late Shang China, in Mound 72 at Cahokia, and perhaps even at the Feathered Serpent Temple at Teotihuacan (if, as some scholars have suggested, the sacrifices there were meant not only to dedicate the building, but also to equip a royal burial), bound and/or decapitated corpses shared company with others, whose bodily integrity and arrangement, associated accoutrements, sex, age, and/or regional affiliation present a stark and meaningful contrast.

In the Shang royal tombs at Anyang, sacrificed retainers were generally interred just outside the tomb chamber on ledges and niches. These burials were respectfully laid out in relatively close proximity to the main burial, and the bodies were often equipped with grave goods. Guards, occasionally armed with jade or bronze weapons and accompanied by a dog, were found in the waist pit, closer to the outer extremity of the tomb. In contrast to these bodies, carefully arranged and equipped, excavators also found numerous dismembered bodies at the entrances and extremities of the royal tombs. These were frequently headless and had their arms tied behind their backs in much the same manner as the sacrificial victims on the Narmer palette and the Egyptian labels. Such corpses were either arranged in rows or splayed about in what looked to be death-pits, and grave goods were notably absent (Campbell 2007: 231–234, 239).

Rod Campbell’s (2007: 234) study of Shang burials at Anyang suggests that what distinguished the royal burials from others in the cemetery (in addition, of course, to their greater size and opulence) was the presence of large-scale human sacrifice. While retainer sacrifices were found in both large and medium graves (and, very rarely, in small graves), bound and
dismembered corpses were associated in appreciable numbers only with the largest tombs. Thus, counter-intuitively, the killing of social outsiders at one’s funeral and at commemorative events afterward appears to have been more prestigious (in the sense of being socially restricted) than retainer sacrifice. Perhaps this indicates that the victims had been prisoners of war and so represented tangible symbols of the king’s prowess in battle. Alternatively or additionally, the royal co-option of human sacrifice may indicate that human lives represented the most prestigious gift it was possible to offer the ancestors and so access to such sacrifices needed to be strictly regulated (Campbell 2007: 183–184).

The sacrificial victims interred in conjunction with high-status burials at Mound 72 in Cahokia offer an interesting parallel to the Shang burials, although the relationship between the high-status burials, contemporary sacrifices, and commemorative sacrifices is more difficult to disentangle. Mound 72 appears to have been constructed over a period of 50 years at most, during which time some 265 corpses were distributed into 25 burial units. It appears that at least 161 of these individuals had been sacrificed at the death of other higher-status personages. The deaths of the retainers, arranged carefully about the main burials, seem to have been supplemented by the deaths of numerous young women. These females, interred in four mass graves in two careful layers separated by matting were mostly between 15 and 25 years of age. Dental morphology suggests that many came from outside the community – perhaps as tribute, as captives, or as wives drawn from subject populations. Four men buried together overlooking one of these mass graves were also sacrifices, but these men lacked heads and hands. Further, a jumbled mass of 39 people interred below a series of respectful litter burials had been carelessly tossed into their pit. The projectile point wounds and decapitations of some of these victims suggested that they came from a population of war captives. So here again, especially prominent individuals had been buried together with others, killed on the occasion of their death and also, apparently, afterwards in commemoration of it. As with the Shang royal tombs, the sacrificial victims at Cahokia were sharply divided into those treated with care and others whose corpses had been deliberately disrespected (Fowler et al. 1999: 3, 11, 63–82; Pauketat 2004: 87–92).

To supplement the picture gained from archaeology, the practice of slaying both retainers and prisoners of war together at royal funerals is attested in reports concerning Dahomey and Asante, in addition to other West African kingdoms. After Dahomey had conquered its former overlords, the ritual killings associated with royal funerals purportedly skyrocketed. At the funeral of King Kpengla in 1789, reports suggest that over a period of two years some 1,500 people were killed. These included 595 wives and numerous prisoners
of war. Sixty-eight captives were killed on the royal corpse’s journey to the capital, 48 on the way to his tomb, and 300 at the tomb itself. Then, at the Grand Customs held the following year to commemorate the funeral, a further 500 men, women, and children were killed (Dalzel 1793: 204–205, 224, 226; Law 1985: 68). While these numbers appear exaggerated – and may indeed have been – the many hundreds of sacrificial victims discovered in the individual interments of Egyptian, Nubian, and Chinese rulers, demonstrate that such a flagrant expenditure of human life in the course of a royal funeral is not entirely inconceivable.

Like the kings of Dahomey, Asante rulers were accompanied in their death by wives, officials, and servants, but also ritually murdered slaves and criminals killed by the hundreds and (purportedly) thousands. Such sacrifices gave certain royal centers the reputation of being “cities of blood.” Although the bodies associated with the Asante royal graves have not been excavated, the observation that the wives and retainers were sent to their deaths dressed in their finest clothes, stupefied with intoxicants, and strangled suggests that they would not have been difficult to discern from the many hundreds of prisoners and criminals summarily executed at the same funeral and interred outside the royal tomb (Law 1985: 70; Parrinder 1956: 113).

So what accounts for this relatively frequent pairing of retainer and human sacrifice, given that the underlying rationales behind the two types of deaths seem so disparate? I would argue that two factors in particular may lie at the heart of this unusual combination. First, there is the desire of those heavily invested in the success of a new kingship to cope with the death of its figurehead by simultaneously enhancing, dematerializing, and rendering royal authority eternal. The second factor may be the urge of a new – or newly threatened – polity to construct and model in microcosm a world order in which the state is all-powerful, and both internal and external realms are properly pacified. As I will argue below, indulging in human and retainer sacrifices is one way to accomplish both sets of goals. It should be stated, however, that in both cases one of the prerequisites and prompts for choosing such a strategy may have been an exponential increase in subjects and in enshackled enemies due to intensified military activity.

Rulers who practiced mortuary sacrifice with the greatest abandon seem to have been those who were experimenting, as Childe suggested, with ways to express their greatly increased power and to keep a firm grip upon it in this life and the next. For First Dynasty Egypt, Shang China, and Cahokia, this assessment makes sense. Conquests had radically augmented the size of these kingdoms and a royal mandate had been established to continually expand, consolidate, and protect them (Campbell 2007: 9; Hoffman 1979: 279; Pauketat 2004: 167). It also holds true for the Asante and Dahomey
kingdoms, although it is fascinating that funerary sacrifices in these two regions were ratcheted up again when suppression of the slave trade left their rulers with the equivalent of human overstock (Law 1985: 69–70, 74, 77–78; Wilks 1993: 227).

Orlando Patterson (1982) argues that in many societies prisoners of war turned slaves were viewed as socially dead, for they had been spared death only in order to completely devote themselves to the service of another. Although undoubtedly violent, the large-scale killing of prisoners of war at a king’s funeral or in the type of public ceremony depicted in the aftermath of wars on the Narmer Palette and on Egyptian pylons may not have been viewed as untoward by onlookers. The battlefield execution of such prisoners had essentially been deferred until the desired audience could be mustered to witness it. Indeed, Richard Burton observed in the 1860’s that the Dahomey ceremonies showcasing human sacrifice “are, in fact, the yearly execution, as if all the murderers in Britain were kept for hanging on a certain day in London” (quoted in Law 1985: 60). Interestingly, in the Asante Kingdom there was an entire village of prisoners who lived their lives under a death sentence and thus constituted an available pool of victims to be sacrificed when occasion demanded (Rattray 1927: 106). Moreover, Chinese lexical evidence suggests that this type of prisoner, who lived only in order to die spectacularly, may have had equivalents in the fa-captives of Shang times. Referred to collectively as “those-to-be-decapitated,” this subset of the population was defined both by the inevitability and the precise manner of their death (Campbell, Ch. 4, this volume).

The death of a king – which occasioned such sacrifices in certain societies – is the single greatest cyclically recurrent point of vulnerability for a kingdom. This is especially so if the power of the state is not yet internalized as an unalterable fact of life. At his death, the royal authority of the old king is dematerialized, and the power of his heir has yet to be established. In the context of a young kingdom, then, sacrifice is a way to simultaneously advertise the power of the new king and to perpetuate the power of the old king. Societies that practiced retainer sacrifice evidently believed that it was essential for the king to arrive in the next world attended by dependents who would continue their services and/or devotions eternally. To modern minds, the “continuance theory” underlying retainer sacrifice requires little imagination to comprehend. But why provision the king with the sacrifices of other human beings in addition to his servants and loved ones?

The answer almost certainly has to do with the potential of human sacrifice to dramatically mark the royal apotheosis, the king’s transfiguration into an entirely different order of being. Even in an established divine kingship like Egypt, the king only unambiguously attains the status of a god after his death.
When the king is not divine on earth, death represents an even more important transition, for it is only when he enters the realm of the ancestors that he can affect great wonders (Cannadine 1987: 8; Richards 1968: 27). The funeral of a king can thus be viewed as akin to the fashioning of a new idol—much like the Egyptian labels discussed above seem to depict. Fetishes and idols in many cultures required the gift of human lives to activate and sustain them. Further, the king, as an ancestor, now required sacrifices in an analogous manner to other people’s ancestors and to gods. If ordinary people offered sacrificial animals to ordinary ancestors, however, and if dead kings needed to be distinguished from ordinary ancestors, what better way to accomplish this than by violating the taboos against taking a human life that extend to all others but the king and his delegates (Campbell 2007: 183–184; Herskovits 1938: 54–55; Law 1985: 74–76)? If violence is a jealously guarded Weberian monopoly of the state, the violence toward people that has the power to transform them into escorting souls, on the one hand, and sustenance on the other, showcases the power of the dead and living king alike—at least at first. The ultimate effectiveness of this experiment will be addressed in subsequent sections.

In the aftermath of the sort of conquest that fashions a great kingdom, there is typically no shortage of prisoners of war or of those caught attempting to break newly imposed rules. Sacrificing prisoners of war is one answer to a dilemma of what to do with large quantities of people whose potential for domestication appears limited. Killing such people not only eliminates the problem that they themselves constituted, but, as an act of terror, it serves as a lesson to all who might act against the state. The thousands killed at the death of Dahomey King Kplenga have been discussed above. In this practice, however, his heir was simply following Kplenga’s own lead. This king rationalized his employment of human sacrifice to a European observer, stating: “you have seen me kill many men at the customs… This gives a grandeur to my customs, far beyond the display of fine things which I buy. This makes my enemies fear me, and gives me such a name in the bush” (Dalzel 1793: 220). Such a sentiment is similar to one offered by a nineteenth-century Asante king, who stated simply “If I were to abolish human sacrifices, I should deprive myself of one of the most effectual means of keeping the people in subjection” (Wilks 1975: 594). Clearly, the real function of sacrifice for these kings was its utility in establishing and maintaining a terrible awe among the populace. To quote Bruce Lincoln (2012: 84), by means of such elaborate human sacrifices these rulers were “producing—and perpetuating—a docile, compliant, and semi-objectified state among the community of the fearful.”

The killing of prisoners of war at the death of a king, then, perhaps was not at all separate from the killing of retainers, but rather a perfect counterpart. One act of violence communicated the king’s power in life and death over those
frightening and chaotic entities outside his realm. The other demonstrated his all encompassing power over the very core of his kingdom and the tenet that his, indeed, was a state worth dying for. As Campbell (Ch.4, this volume) has concluded with respect to the Shang, the simultaneous, performative act of human and retainer sacrifice “instantiate(d) and reproduce(d) hierarchies of being fundamental to the Shang civilizational order.” Moreover, it “fed the honor and status of the sacrificer at the expense of the sacrificed even as their relative status was marked in the permanence of death” (Campbell 2007: 184). Indeed it is fascinating to see this ideological juxtaposition of insider vs. outsider embodied in the positioning of the representatives of these categories at death. In Shang royal tombs and at Cahokia, for instance, retainers ringed the core burials, while sacrificed foreigners and societal outsiders occupied the periphery. Thus tomb became realm, and the ruler retained his rightful place at its dead center for all eternity.

Question 2

If retainers symbolize a ruler’s relationship with his or her subjects – the inhabitants of the kingdom’s core – what is the nature of that relationship? Is it akin to the love and devotion offered by a wife or a child to the head of a family? Or are the ruler’s subjects literally or figuratively slaves – property that can be possessed and taken to the grave?

Undoubtedly, Childe would have espoused the latter view. In his observations on directional changes in funerary practices over the last 50,000 years, he concluded first that state stability correlated with a societal-wide decrease in the conspicuous consumption associated with funerals and, second, that stability also led to the curtailment of retainer sacrifice (Childe 1943: 117–118). The notion that sexual partners and servants were viewed as possessions and that their souls simply supplemented a ruler’s other grave-goods finds support in certain ethnohistorical accounts of retainer sacrifice. The functionaries called to accompany the king to his death in Baganda, for instance, included the chief cook, the chief brewer, the chief over the herdsmen, as well as women in charge of cooking, brewing, the bed chamber, the water, the king’s clothing, and the king’s milk. About these individuals it was said, for instance, “Her beer-gourd is broken, for whom should she draw beer?” (Roscoe 1966: 106). In Asante too, palace employees and slaves were killed in order to accompany the king, and chiefs provided the dead king with humans to be sacrificed in addition to (other) sumptuous grave goods (Rattray 1927: 109–112). Similarly, at the Grand Customs of Dahomey “a representative of each army corps, a weaver, a smith, a woman potter, a
cloth-worker, a wood-carver, a farmer, and a man and woman from each village in the kingdom were sacrificed” in order to provide the dead king with services in the next world (Herskovits 1938: 53).

This utilitarian attitude towards retainer sacrifice was not restricted to African kingdoms. At the funeral of the Maharaja of Jaipur in 1818, the royal barber was one of the 36 victims burnt upon the pyre, so that he might continue to shave his lord in the next world (Thompson 1928: 38). Further, according to Herodotus, Scythian kings were buried together with a complete domestic staff.

Then they strangle one of the king’s concubines and also his cupbearer, his cook, his groom, his principal servant, his courier, and his horses, and they bury them all in the remaining open space of the grave, along with the prized possessions dedicated by others… After they have done all this, everyone enthusiastically joins up in building up a huge mound, which they strive together to make as large as possible. One year later, they attend to the rites again. They first choose the most suitable of the surviving servants; these are native Scythians, for all whom the king orders to become his servants must do so, and servants are not bought and sold among these Scythians. Of these they strangle fifty males, and also fifty of the king’s best horses…. After arranging these horsemen in a circle around the burial site, they ride away [Herodotus IV.70–71].

The recent discovery of a Scythian burial with roughly 1,000 people arranged along its perimeter suggests that in this case, at least, Herodotus’ reports may not have been exaggerated. Very similar satellite retainer burials have been discovered around Mongolian graves of the nomadic Xiongnu culture from roughly the same period (Allard et al. 2002). Shang soldiers, interred with their weapons and their dogs, provide yet another archaeological example of such functional death attendants, although the Royal Tombs at Ur still provide the most fuel for the imagination. The differing roles of the retainers in these Mesopotamian tombs were easily distinguished by virtue of their association with harps, lamps, oxen-drawn chariots, weapons, and other evocative accoutrements (Woolley 1965: 52–81).

In Egypt, where the majority of retainers seem to have been provisioned with grave goods from a central store, such functional differences are difficult to discern. An unusually massive mastaba at Saqqara (3503), contemporary with the reign of Merneith, is an interesting exception. This monument was surrounded with subsidiary graves, and based on the individualized nature of their contents the excavator felt sure the inhabitants of each had plied a particular trade: boat-builder, artist, vasemaker, potter, butcher, and the like (Emery 1954: 142, 1961: 67–68, 139). Such differentiation is less visible in the subsidiary tombs at Abydos, because of their extremely disturbed state and sparse records. Graves with arrowheads, animal skins, and other seemingly
meaningful artifacts, however, did cluster in specific areas of the subsidiary graves at Abydos. Thus, it is not unlikely that retainers had originally been grouped together according to their specific roles or occupations (Bestock 2009: 34–35, 49–50).

As an additional line of evidence, the limestone stelae that served as memorials for specific Abydene retainers are particularly useful. The stelae preserve titles suggesting that these individuals ranged from soldiers to moderately high religious and/or palace officials, although the correlation of duties with titles in the latter cases is often obscure (Petrie 1925: 3; Kaplony 1963: 364–376). Further, it is fascinating to observe that different monarchs seem to have had differing ideas of who they desired to be surrounded by in death. Hor-aha’s retainers, buried prior to the tradition of fashioning memorial stelae, appear from skeletal evidence to have been virtually all males, killed at the peak of their physical prowess (Dreyer 1993: 11). His successor, however, evidently preferred to surround himself with women, if the ratio of 76 stelae of females to 11 of males is at all reflective of reality (Kaplony 1963: 215). In the reign of the next king, King Djët, the pendulum evidently swung back the other way, for data suggest that his retainers were primarily male (Bestock 2009: 36). The relatively consistent inclusion of dwarves in the entourages of deceased kings – witnessed in both epigraphic and physical evidence – is also worth remark. These individuals almost certainly belonged to the corps of “palace dwarves,” known from Old Kingdom texts, whose job it was to attend the king (Kaplony 1963: 374–375; Petrie 1900: 13 and pl. 60; Petrie 1901: pl. 28; Strudwick 2005: 247).

So, here in Egypt as well, rulers were buried with categories of individuals who could perform specific services for them in the afterlife, just as their slain hunting dogs might accompany them on future hunts, and the donkeys and boats buried outside select funerary enclosures would no doubt aid in transporting them by water and land. If the differing observed instances of porotic hyperostosis in the burials surrounding the kings’ tombs and their funerary enclosures are meaningful, this too may suggest that the interment of sacrificed retainers patterned according to the nature of their backgrounds and duties (Keita and Boyce 2006: 70–71). Certainly, the fact that the walls of many subsidiary graves bore the names of their intended occupants indicates that significant forethought went into which individuals (or categories of individuals) would accompany the king and where such people would be most appropriately placed.

If, according to Bruce Lincoln (2012: 83), “we can best theorize violence as the deployment of physical force in a manner that tends to convert subjects – individual or collective, but in either case fully human actors – into depersonalized objects,” retainer sacrifice should indeed be classified
as a violent act. It is likely safe to say that the bakers, brewers, and soldiers interred with the king were required to die and that their own thoughts on the matter mattered little. People and things in such burials were equated — both interred because of their potential utility to the dead and also (as will be discussed shortly) because the wealth and power it took to procure such things and such people-things inspired awe.

But this is not the sole story, even within specific large-scale instances of retainer sacrifice. Ethnohistoric records from India, China, and Africa indicate that popular ideology in these societies held that at least a core of wives and retainers sacrificed their lives willingly, even ecstatically, out of overriding emotions of love, fealty, and deep personal grief. In Dahomey, for instance, it was stated that “as soon as the king expired, the women of the palace commenced breaking up the furniture, ornaments, and utensils, and then proceeded to destroy themselves” (Ellis 1970: 128). The women killed in these (ostensibly) grief-stricken frenzies could number in the hundreds. Likewise, the wives of the Asante king, said to have lost their desire to live once “the great tree had fallen, compelled their relatives to slay them by swearing the great oath that they must do so, thus not leaving them any option but to carry out their wishes” (Rattray 1927: 107). The suicides of women, whose reason to live had died with their husband or lover, are found wherever retainer sacrifices are — and some of the more (in)famous instances from India and China will be discussed in greater detail below. In New World societies, as in those of the Old, women followed men to the grave because of the intensity of their love — or so the stories go. Indeed, so many royal wives purportedly volunteered to accompany the Inka king in death that some were denied the privilege (de la Vega 1871: 113).

In these societies, the self-sacrifice of a wife was deemed more noble than that of a female servant by virtue not only of her higher status, but also of her higher love (theoretically at least). Analogously, the death of a chief minister meant more than that of an overseer of herdsmen, presumably because of the grandee’s greater freedom to choose his destiny and also the correspondingly greater splendor of all that he willingly left behind. In the eyes of others, then, his self-chosen death was the greater sacrifice. This concept is aptly illustrated by a mournful Chinese poem (also discussed by Campbell, Ch. 4, this volume), which was written in honor of three of the 177 victims who perished at the funeral of the Zhou Period ruler Duke Mu of Qin in 621 B.C. “Who went with Duke Mu to the grave? Yen-hsi of the clan Tzu-chü. Now this Yen-hsi was the pick of all our men; But as he drew near the tomb-hole his limbs shook with dread. That blue one, Heaven, takes all our good men. Could we but ransom him there are a hundred would give their lives” (quoted in Chang 1974: 6–7). Each of the three most worthy men who
followed Duke Mu to the death, then, was worth a hundred others. It was their deaths that were construed as tragic, not those of the lesser-status retainers whose collective sacrifice did not merit a mention.

The self-sacrifice of male as well as female intimates of the king is reported for many societies that practiced retainer sacrifice. Among the Yoruba, for instance, it was part of the job description of the King’s Friend to poison himself out of grief at the death of the king. Perhaps not surprisingly, this office was a particularly lucrative one while the occupant and his king lived, for the King’s Friend was awarded first pick from any gifts or booty that the king distributed to his nobles (Morton-Williams 1967: 56). Moreover, among the Asante, individuals who volunteered to die with the king were especially honored in life and allowed not only to choose their manner of death, but also the articles that they wished to take with them, and their funerary rites were fully funded (Rattray 1927: 109; Bowdich 1966 [1819]: 291). Undoubtedly, the quality of the grave goods and the pomp of the funeral would have been far greater than such individuals could have otherwise expected.

This ranking and explicit acknowledgement that some deaths were worth more than others is aptly materialized in Hor-aha’s complex, wherein the first two graves following his were significantly larger than the others. Moreover, both the size of the tombs and the amount of grave goods interred within them steadily decreased the farther back one moved in the rows (Dreyer et al. 1990: 63, 66). From one of the especially large front graves came a number of ivory items, including a comb and box that bore the only name besides Hor-aha’s found in the entire complex. Bnr-ib can be translated as “Sweetheart” and is generally presumed to have designated a secondary wife of the king, although this cannot be proven. Certainly, the name is reminiscent of some borne by women who had burnt on the funerary pyres of the Bikanir Rajas, such as Love's Delight, Virtue Found, Soft Eye, Comfort, Love-lorn, Eye-play, Love-bud, Glad Omen, or, especially, Dear Heart (Thompson 1928: 47). If Laurel Bestock, who has excavated the two funerary enclosures that complimented Hor-aha’s enclosure, is correct in her theory that these installations honored family members of the king, it may have been that part of the compensation for a royal woman to give up her life to accompany her husband in death – in this reign at least, when the practice was new – was the provision of a funerary enclosure, complete with sacrificed retainers of her own (Bestock 2009: 100). Interestingly, where it was possible to tell at Abydos, the largest and richest subsidiary graves located closest to the king’s chamber tended to belong to women (Bestock 2009: 26–27; 33–35).

Due to its relative lack of disturbance, an even more nuanced understanding of the rankings of First Dynasty death attendants can be ascertained in the cemetery at Saqqara informally known as Macramallah’s rectangle (Figure
3.4). Here some 230 burials laid out in meticulous rows flanked an empty area that Werner Kaiser (1985) has argued, with good reason, was occupied by King Den’s body while it lay in state, but before it fared southward for burial at Abydos. If Kaiser is correct, the richest group of burials by far was located to the right of where the king’s body would have been, i.e., the traditional place of honor, as the cemetery was oriented toward the south (Group E; see Figure 3.4). Groups A and F ranked next in status and were amply provided for, while the poorest graves – excavated with the least care, provided with the fewest grave goods and the shabbiest protection for the body – were situated at the very back (Groups B/C and especially D). From this vantage, if all the death attendants were envisioned as alive and standing at a ceremony, these individuals would hardly have been able to see (Morris 2007a).

Such elaborate choreography seems also to have been present in the subsidiary burials at Abydos, where on the basis of architecture alone one can easily identify graves that would have been the equivalent of box seats – final resting places that were larger than the others and closer to the king (Bestock 2009: 35, 36; Reisner 1936: 106–107). In the funerary enclosure complexes too, there were particularly posh subsidiary graves, and these generally were located to either side of an ever-present and presumably ritually important gap in the eastern corner of the subsidiary graves (O’Connor 1989: 80–81; Bestock 2009: 60). Similarly, as at Saqqara, retainer graves in the royal cemetery got smaller and poorer the farther they were situated from the king’s own grave (Bestock 2009: 27–28, 32, 34–35).

These staged performances of death, as seem to be preserved eternally in Macramallah’s rectangle and around the royal tombs at Abydos, perhaps offer a clue as to the motivations of those who were able – to some extent at least – to make up their own minds as to whether to accompany their sovereign to the grave. In return for giving up their earthly life, certain benefits were no doubt offered: the biggest graves and most grave goods, perhaps, for those who were perceived as making the biggest sacrifice; memorialization for those who otherwise would receive no monument to their passing; an afterlife in the shining retinue of the one person whose soul who would surely receive an afterlife, if such existed (see Campbell, Ch. 4, this volume, for similar speculation about the Shang sacrificial burials). And, finally, a key supporting role in one of the greatest spectacles that any given individual was likely to witness in his or her lifetime, that is if one is allowed extrapolate on analogy with eye-witness accounts of the highest-tier suttee ceremonies in India, China, and elsewhere, and from Woolley’s “gaily dressed crowd” of royal retainers at Ur (Woolley 1965: 72; see also de Groot 1967: 736, 748–749; Johnson 1966: 54–57; Parrinder 1956: 113, 117; Rattray 1927: 108–111; Swanton 1911: 139–141; Thompson 1928: 51).
Figure 3.4. Macramallah’s cemetery at Saqqara. (After Macramallah 1940: pl. 2; Lehner 1997: 83; Morris 2007a: fig. 4)
Given the material rewards bestowed upon those who appear to have sacrificed their lives willingly in Egypt, one wonders whether there was also a reflected glow of praise once the decision had been made that bolstered the resolve of the royal wife or retainer. The honors laden upon Chinese widows who resolved to sacrifice their lives, for instance, were numerous:

Such self-destruction of wives and brides… have always been greatly encouraged by public opinion. Moralists vied with each other in extolling such women to the skies… The greatest distinction that can be conferred on mortal man in China, viz. rewards and honors from the Son of Heaven himself, have been bestowed upon many suttees. We read of imperial emissaries being commissioned to worship the suttee woman in her house… But since the fifth century it has become more especially customary for emperors to glorify sutteeites by conferring upon them an honorary inscription, to be written or engraved upon a tablet suspended over the door of their dwelling or the gate of their village; and from this arose the custom of erecting special gates for the exhibition of such tablets [de Groot 1967: 745–746].

Hindu widows received similar memorials (Thompson 1928: 30–32, 46). Indeed, according to sacred scriptures, a widow through her sacrifice could simultaneously save her husband from great sins, sanctify her ancestors, and achieve the highest honors imaginable (Mukhodpadhyay 1957: 102). As Thompson writes in his study on the custom of widow sacrifice, “about the death of a sati there was so much pomp and noise of applause, and about the memory of one such praise and exaltation, that often a psychological intoxication upheld her till she had passed beyond the reach of succour” (Thompson 1928: 50). Such public approbations, especially when lavished upon those unused to applause, undoubtedly helped recruit and retain death attendants in other cultures as well.

When posing the question of who benefitted from the custom of retainer sacrifice, the net may widen to encompass not only the ruler and those retainers that chose to accompany him and were duly compensated, but also quite likely the families that surrendered members to the sovereign’s service in the hereafter. The family of a Chinese self-sacrificing widow – even one whose husband was not royal – received state help defraying the costs of the funeral and often much-coveted visits from imperial emissaries (de Groot 1967: 746, 749). A rise in the status of the families of royal death attendants is certainly noted among the Yoruba. Further, if a death attendant lost heart, he or she was apt to be strangled by a relative so that the family would not fall into disgrace and lose the honor accrued to them (Johnson 1966: 57; Parrinder 1956: 117). In an even more explicit example of social promotion, families of those individuals who joined the posthumous retinue of the brother of the Great Sun of the Natchez peoples of Mississippi in 1725 executed their
relatives themselves and were accordingly raised from the level of “Stinkards” to that of “Honored men” (Swanton 1911: 145–146).

In addition to social advancement in life, the families of death attendants may also have desired to provide themselves with an intercessor, whose spirit could speak to that of the dead king on their behalf. Baser motives yet, however, likely motivated some families, for the personal property of the deceased attendant was in many cases redistributed to living family members to compensate them for their loss. A report from the 1867 edition of the Calcutta Review summarizes the complicated web that enabled and exacerbated such sacrificial excesses. By virtue of participation:

…the son was relieved from the expense of maintaining a mother; the male relatives, reversioners in the absence of direct issue, came in at once for the estate which the widow would have held for her life; the Brahmins were paid for their services and were interested in the maintenance of their religion; and the crowd attended the show with the savage merriment exhibited by an English crowd at a boxing match or a bull-fight [Quoted in Thompson 1928: 47–48].

In one widely reported instance, a royal widow issued a scathing rebuke to her relatives and court officers just prior to ascending the pyre, exposing publically their avarice and lack of empathy (Thompson 1928: 84–85). In general, however, such pecuniary motives remained well cloaked in an ideology that trumpeted sentiments of honor, fealty, and great love.

**Question 3**

*If so many benefited from retainer sacrifice – at least in theory – why should the practice have been abandoned in those societies that persisted beyond their first florescence? Similarly, is it right to consider retainer and/or widow sacrifice a violent act?*

To take the second question first, I would argue that once the invisible line between an elected and an expected practice has been crossed, and once the scale of sacrifice has been expanded to include not just a small circle of intimates but an entire cast and crew, the likelihood of the harmonious melding of the real and the ideal dramatically decreases. A typical trajectory for retainer sacrifice is impossible to ascertain, given imperfect records, the accident of conquest or colonial interference, and cultural differences between various societies. It does seem, however, as Childe (1943, 1945) noted long ago, that the scale of retainer sacrifice ratcheted up significantly with a sudden increase in the size and power of a polity. Rulers, who had previously not belonged to a dramatically different class from the upper crust of their subjects, worked hard to distinguish themselves after such an
expansion – funding wildly elaborate funerals and sacrificing different orders of beings to their ancestors, for instance.

At the same time in many societies, the practice of retainer sacrifice could be emulated by the inner circle of the wealthiest and most powerful elites. This set off its own dynamic, whereby elites vied with one another to emulate royalty, and royalty felt the need to distinguish themselves from the upper echelons of their followers. Thus, the wasteful expenditure of human life – of the life of the lower classes – became a strategy in conspicuous consumption.

The increasing scale of human sacrifice evident in some West African societies can therefore be linked to the increasing concentration of wealth, in the form of wives and slaves, in the hands of wealthy and powerful individuals. In some instances, it is true, slaves were purchased specifically for sacrifice rather than (or as well as) being selected from the household of the deceased, but this practice obviously also reflects the same process of the concentration of wealth. Funeral sacrifices increased in scale not merely as an incidental by-product of this concentration of wealth, but also as a means of advertising wealth to the community and thereby ensuring that it conferred commensurate prestige. Human sacrifice can be seen as a particular form of the conspicuous consumption in which wealthy men in pre-colonial West Africa habitually indulged in the quest for social standing [Law 1985: 73].

As Olfert Dapper (1998 [1668]: 16) observed with regard to seventeenth-century Benin, “nobody important dies there without it costing people blood.” Sometimes, the cost in blood was labelled clearly. In fifth-century B.C. China, for instance, the sage Mo Tzu stated that “in the case of a Son of Heaven anywhere from several ten to several hundred persons will be sacrificed, while in the case of generals or high ministers the number will be from several to several tens” (Mo Tzu et al. 1967: 67). This carefully calibrated scale of sacrifice exposes the role of this practice in helping to distinguish kings from grandees and grandees from those who served them. The evident need for clearly stated sumptuary regulations, however, suggests that certain members of the elite had a vested interest in blurring boundaries.

Now even if afterlives were viewed as continuations of this life and if retainers willing to sacrifice themselves were rewarded with good burials and praise, once the practice of retainer sacrifice became an exercise in the conspicuous consumption of human lives, there must have been growing numbers who sought to avoid their fate. Certainly, historical documents from China, Africa, the Americas, and India tell of slaves fleeing en masse at the death of their master and of active revolts among individuals destined for sacrifice. In Old Calabar in 1852, a cadre of armed and dangerous farm slaves invaded the capital just after the death of the king and only withdrew after
securing a guarantee that “no more persons should die, in any way, for the late king” (quoted in Law 1985: 80). Earlier revolts against the extravagant scale of human sacrifice were also recorded in Benin and Asante (Law 1985: 70, 81).

If the king's slaves, who were essentially cognized as objects, were reluctant to die, this could perhaps be chalked up to a general reluctance of slaves to be submissive – worrisome, but theoretically solvable by the application of more violence to cow them into proper submission. What was more problematic ideologically was when the high officials who were supposed to follow the king to their deaths out of love and fealty refused to do so, and their participation in the project needed to be secured by a ruse. In Dahomey, some victims were awarded the titles and insignia of major officials just before being killed (Argyle 1966: 113), and this type of victim substitution was likely common practice. Chinese texts also tell of elite dissatisfaction with sacrificing their own – of delegations of family members attempting intercession, and of the empathy induced in onlookers at the sacrifice of noble men (Chang 1974: 6–7; de Groot 1967: 722–723).

China offers a rare opportunity to study retainer sacrifice over the longue durée in order to determine the ways in which it was viewed as time progressed and the practice lost its novelty. Here, the custom ebbed after the mid-twelfth century B.C. in tandem with a number of trends. Military campaigns were less frequent, as the emphasis changed from conquest to consolidation, and when the Shang kingdom was conquered by the Zhou, polities were smaller and could bring fewer resources to bear. War yielded far fewer captives, lessening the expendable mass of prisoners that had previously provided the means to dramatize Shang dominance over the chaotic world around them. Moreover, the normalization of the presence of the state and its attendant class hierarchies may have lessened the need for these hierarchies to be instantiated – performed at the deaths of kings and members of the elite (Campbell 2007: 202, 209–210).

The custom of burying the living with the dead still persisted at certain times in certain kingdoms during the Warring States period, especially at points at which a kingdom’s power peaked. Due to increased literacy, however, intellectual debates about the practice are for the first time accessible (see Campbell, Ch. 4, this volume). For the most part, sentiments seem to have turned against the practice, and it was summed up as “not a good rite” by those who chose to abandon it (de Groot 1967: 727). A number of anecdotes are recorded of wise men who succeeded in talking dying grandees or their heirs out of their intention to sacrifice others to accompany the dead (de Groot 1967: 727, 729). It is fascinating to note, however, just as Childe might have suspected, that much of the reaction against retainer sacrifice was
encompassed in a growing condemnation of the wastefulness of ostentatious funerals generally (Mo Tzu et al. 1967: 67, 105).

The cultural dynamics that went into the diminishment of retainer sacrifice toward the end of the Warring States period are complex. Arguments against the practice by Confucian intellectuals such as Hsün Tzu and Mo Tzu no doubt played an important role. Changing popular sentiment – as perhaps exemplified in the mournful poem about the death of the three retainers – likely also contributed. And, to evoke Childe again, by the beginning of the Han period, the intense internal fragmentation and rivalry that characterized the Warring States period had been repressed by a stable state. What remained, however, and was much slower to die out was the custom of widow suicides, in which the ideology that a sacrifice was freely given out of love was far easier to maintain. Yet, even in this case, the division between what was elected by and what was expected of these women was not at all clear-cut, and here too the practice was finally officially condemned after competition for that precious reflected glow of honor among families drove the numbers of women pressured into such situations alarmingly high (de Groot 1967: 733–736, 746–749). Indeed, one Chinese emperor, who opposed the practice, publically announced his decision in 1729 to cease awarding honors to such suicides and further enumerated the many ways in which a widow is more noble and self-sacrificing alive than dead (de Groot 1967: 746–747).

In India too, widow sacrifice was not popularly perceived to be a problematic act of violence until the competition among elites became so intense that a great many women burnt on the same pyre, and even reluctant widows were forced to their death by relatives or armed soldiers, as their refusal to cooperate was judged an affront to the honor of the dead (Thompson 1928: 28–29, 35–36, 46, 90–106). Further, widow-burning had become something of a spectator sport. As one eyewitness reported,

> Should utter indifference for her husband, and superior sense, enable her to preserve her judgement, and to resist the arguments of those about her, it will avail her little – the people will not be disappointed of their show; and the entire population of a village will turn out to assist in dragging her to the bank of the river and in keeping her down on the pile. Under these circumstances nine out of ten widows are burnt to death [quoted in Thompson 1928: 5].

The custom of widow suicide ranged far further than India and China, of course, and with the Asante as well we have records of wives who fled at the news of their husband’s death and who had to be replaced “by other girls, who, painted white, and hung with gold ornaments, sat around the coffin to drive away the flies – and were strangled at the funeral” (Rattray 1927: 111).
Like China, First Dynasty Egypt offers an undisturbed trajectory that may provide a window into otherwise inaccessible debates. Certainly, evidence for the abandonment of large-scale retainer sacrifice in Egypt is dramatic, for after a sharp peak in the first few reigns of the First Dynasty the decline is precipitous (Figure 3.5). The numbers rose to their zenith – 599 – with the second king of the First Dynasty, King Djer, whose retainers were split between his tomb and funerary enclosure. The numbers of death attendants had dwindled to 26, however, by the reign of King Qa’a, the last king of the First Dynasty (Petrie 1925: 3). Rather than being an outlier, Qa’a’s low body-count fits into a trajectory in which a steep decline followed King Djer’s excesses.

Although retainer sacrifice persisted until the end of the First Dynasty, the emphasis moved from quantity to quality as the reigns progressed from Djer onward (Kaplony 1963: 222–226; Reisner 1936: 104, 115–117). According to the Chinese lament, one noble was worth 100 ordinary men, and so the situation may have been cognized in Egypt. As sacrifices became fewer with the last couple of rulers at Abydos, tombs for retainers moved into the structure of the royal tomb, and the titles on their stelae grew longer. The stele of Sabef, discovered in a burial chamber near to that of King Qa’a, was far larger and better made than those of the retainers sacrificed before him.
The stele depicts Sabef standing and holding a long staff, which was the usual posture of a high official. His titles matched his stance: Foremost of the Audience Chamber, Governor of the Great Estate, Overseer of the King’s Sed-Festival, Smr-companion, priest associated with the cult of Anubis, and others less well understood (Petrie 1900: 26, pl. 30; Wilkinson 1999: 133, 135, 137, 140). A stele of an official bearing similar titles was discovered in association with the unusually elaborate subsidiary tomb in a contemporary mastaba (3505) at Saqqara, which suggests that this converse relationship between quantity and quality was a trend that extended to the elite northern cemetery as well (Morris 2007b: 183–184; O’Connor 2005).

The fact that the apparent cessation of the custom of retainer sacrifice in Egypt coincided with a change of dynasty is fascinating, for it suggests that the practice had grown unpopular enough that the new ruling family saw fit to abandon it altogether. The rulers of the Second Dynasty may have anticipated Hannah Arendt (1970) in the realization that although violence is often instrumental in gaining power, its excessive use in the maintenance of power is self-defeating. Self-sustaining power is psychological, not physical, and obedience borne of fear alone is tenuous and seldom uncontested. Following the Early Dynastic period, the same desire to equip important individuals with a support staff in the afterlife was satisfied by non-violent means: the invention of servant statues, figural tomb decoration, and the construction of court cemeteries in which the state built the tombs but patiently awaited the natural death of their intended occupants.

In China, as well, the decline of retainer sacrifice in the Shang period coincided with a development in the idea of magical substitution. Now, instead of interring full-size grave goods in a tomb, small models replaced their prototypes and fulfilled the same purpose, being transformed in the next life (Campbell 2007: 260). While this development can be viewed as symptomatic of a movement towards restraint and cost-saving, the 8,000 clay soldiers of Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di (ca. 210 B.C.) demonstrate that this ethos of burying simulacra – and thereby saving lives – was internalized by even the richest and most powerful man in China’s world system. It is, however, worthy of note that while vast quantities of soldiers were spared in this manner, members of the emperor’s harem apparently were not – perhaps for the reasons discussed above (Sima Qian 1993: 63).

A narrative contained in the Nihongi, a manuscript of the eighth century A.D., purports to explain the origin of an analogous development in Japan. According to the tale, the personal retinue of an emperor’s brother was buried alive at his funeral in 2 A.D. The sound of their wailing so upset the emperor that he pronounced the custom of retainer sacrifice a bad one. Thus, when his wife died the following year, a councillor advised the emperor to
command clay workers to fashion miniatures of men, horses, and various objects. A dictate was issued: “Henceforth these clay figures must be set up at tumuli: let not men be harmed,” and from then on it became the custom to arrange effigies of men, animals, and objects in a circle around the corpse in royal tombs (Munro 1911: 378–379). Human nature is difficult to reign in, however, and in a fascinating twist, conspicuous consumption of these small effigies in China’s Sung Dynasty became so intense that sumptuary rules had to be enacted. According to the Rules for Family Life, wooden carts and horses, servants, followers, and female attendants should all “resemble living beings, but be of smaller dimensions. Thirty-seven are allowed for officers of the fifth and sixth degree, twenty for those of the seventh and eighth rank, and fifteen for such people as have not been raised to the dignity of official servant of the dynasty” (de Groot 1967: 710). Such effigies were especially popular in China from 500 B.C. to roughly 1500 A.D., at which time the custom changed to the graveside burning of paper effigies, including “Hell money.” Whether other long-lived independent societies followed a similar trajectory – from many sacrificed retainers, to “a few good men,” to figural substitutes – is unclear, but ethnohistorical accounts are suggestive (Westermarck 1906: 469–470, 475; Davies 1981: 39–40).

The evolutionary lineage that displaced violence from human to effigy is not entirely unproblematic, as Confucius recognized. In his day, the custom of burying effigies existed alongside the custom in certain kingdoms at certain times of the immolation of wives and retainers. According to Mencius (1, A, 4.6; de Groot 1967: 807), Confucius strongly condemned wooden and terracotta burial effigies for their realism, “for was there not a danger of their leading to the use of living victims?” Because of this potential slippage between the sign and its referent, Confucius would deign to condone only highly abstract straw models of people. Otherwise the difference between the interment of a servant statue and that of a real servant was too close for comfort. If civilization was idealized as the antithesis of violence, then such reminders of violence done unto others was not civilized.

**Concluding Thoughts on Retainer Sacrifice, Violence, and Excess**

According to René Girard (2005: 8, 10), human sacrifice – like the animal sacrifice of which it is essentially an extension – serves to suppress dissensions within a community, to restore harmony, and to reinforce the social fabric. Because it is inevitable, unpredictable, and mysterious, death exerts a communal fascination. The executions of criminals, captives, and potentially disruptive social outsiders have formed the center of spectacles for any number of societies. The deaths of these people serve as object lessons and
also as happy endings – points at which order has triumphed over disorder and the threat of danger has been quelled. When prisoners of war are offered up to the gods to thank them for victory, in the same way that the first fruits are laid upon the altar to thank the gods for a successful growing season, there is a satisfying internal logic. Likewise, when the lives of those who violate laws or norms are sacrificed in order to strengthen the souls of the most powerful ancestors, then their sacrifice benefits the entire kin-group and wider community of the faithful.

The human sacrifice that is stranger and more troubling is that of an innocent, whose only reason for death is that he or she exists in a socially subordinate position to another individual. With regard to slaves, who by virtue of their slavery are seen as socially dead (Patterson 1982), the notion that a person might double as a grave good to fulfil a function in the afterlife and to be conspicuously consumed might render retainer sacrifice somewhat palatable to a dispassionate observer. Likewise, if the drama of the death is augmented with suitably awe-inspiring trappings of ritual theater and encased in an ideology that this life is but an instant before an eternity spent in a shining retinue, a retainer might be seen to be embarking at death upon an exalted journey. Servants, wives, and officials, however, exist in a complex web of human relations where ties to others than their social superior – their children, parents, spouse, friends, neighbors, etc. – are of vital importance and where such ties are only reluctantly severed, whatever compensation or ideological explanation a state might offer. When such people are called to the grave or the pyre by the hundreds, the tragedy of that waste cannot be disguised.

Retainer sacrifices thus do appear to be an experiment undertaken by rulers and their innermost circle at the very beginning of their ascension to great power or in its final beleaguered throes. In Benin, for example, some of the most horrible excesses in human sacrifice – mistakenly interpreted by European observers as typical – occurred as the king was attempting to reassert the ritual powers of his monarchy amidst increasingly dire economic and political difficulties. Other notable excesses in retainer sacrifice were perpetrated by usurpers, who had a strong desire to insinuate themselves into rites that promoted royal legitimacy (Law 1985: 75).

As was argued above, it seems that retainers buried with their king symbolized the properly submissive core of his kingdom that would happily die in the service of the state. It is deeply ironic, then, that the more emphatically this metaphor was driven home, the more such sentiments were sapped. Perhaps then, those rulers who abandoned the practice of retainer sacrifice realized, as Hannah Arendt (1970: 56) put it, that “violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s
disappearance.” Just as the Giza pyramids are often taken as the crowning achievement of the ancient Egyptian state – but from an emic perspective appear to have been intentionally avoided by subsequent rulers and damned by tradition – so too the hundreds of retainers slain at the funerals of First Dynasty kings were an aberration of power, abandoned when the violence of the state toward its own threatened to undermine any legitimacy it had succeeded in establishing.

Notes

1. Recent work at Hierankopolis has uncovered further evidence of retainer sacrifices at that site. For useful overviews of human sacrifice in Egypt, see van Dijk 2007 and volume 10 of the journal Archéo-Nil.


3. Merneith and Anedjib both possessed relatively small burials with a large proportion of small-sized retainer graves, but the first was a queen regent and the second appears to have been treated by his successor as to some degree illegitimate (Emery 1961: 80). I am thus considering these two reigns as somewhat anomalous.

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