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Meat on the Bones: Zooarchaeological Patterns of Ancient Greek Sacrifice

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the growing evidence for Greek sacrificial practices in the ancient animal bone record. Textual and iconographic sources highlight the processes of slaughter and butchery and the act of burning bones as offerings as important ritual components of ancient sacrifice.

Burned animal bone deposits from cultic and settlement contexts reveal the diversity of ancient ritual. Large deposits of burned bones prevalent in thighs and/or tails seem to present a norm for much large-scale sacrificial feasting. However, smaller deposits of burned lower legs (and sometimes heads), often found in settlement or household contexts, reveal the existence of a contrasting pattern evident, at least, in the Late Bronze Age through the Hellenistic periods. The relationship of sacrificial feasting with changing foodways is explored through the lens of butchery practices. It is argued that - similar to bone burning - butchery was an important component of sacrificial spectacle. Furthermore, the adoption of cleavers in both large-scale sacrificial events and in commercial butchery activities highlights the dynamic relationship between animal sacrifice and cuisine in ancient Greece.