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Lambs of god: an end of human sacrifice

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Ferrando: ... e si rinvenne mal spenta brace... e d'un bambino,
ahimè l'ossame bruciato a mezzo, fumante ancor!
Uomini: Ah scellerata! Oh donna infame! Del par m'investe ira ed orror!
Il Trovatore. Act I, Scene 1

In certain modern sensibilities, played upon here by Verdi's librettist Salvatore Cammarano, infant sacrifice has tended to rouse a basal sense of horror. The moral outrage has usually imputed alien rites and the evils of dreadful barbaric practices. Consider the following descriptions not about the fictions of an imaginary Iberian court, but rather of an actual historical practice.

It is night — but a night which, no doubt, is not too dark because we are at Carthage. But it is a darkness which adds to the sense of mystery. The scene before us seems to be illuminated only by the lighted fire burning down in the sacred depression, the tophet. We see the reflections in it more than the glowing fire itself. There is the great statue of Ba'al Hammon, set up right on the edge of the sacred depression, towards which the god's hands extend, hands glowing red from the burning fire. Before the statue... on the other side of the tophet, are strung out players of flutes and tambourines, who set up an deafening noise. The father and mother of a child are present. They must restrain themselves and not ... either weep or moan. They hand their infant child over to a priest, who then walks the length of the depression, and then next cuts the infant's throat as part of the mystery, according to a special ritual, which the spectators, standing behind the priests and the musicians, are not able to see in any detail. Then he places the small victim in the extended hands of the divine statue, from which it rolls into the raging fires of the blaze. In the meantime, the crowd, driven mad by the noise and by the smell of the burning flesh, oscillating back and forth to the beat of the music, in a half-crazed rhythm, falls under the rhythmic beat of the tambourines. The offering of each new infant only causes this collective frenzy of theirs to gather force.¹

All these rites are celebrated in a thoroughly oriental atmosphere of beating and pounding music, the fumes of incense and aromatic perfumes, to reinforce the orgiastic nature of the rituals, so pleasing to these Semiticized Africans, but so upsetting to Westerners.²

I could be quoting from Flaubert's dramatic replaying of Carthaginian life at its acme in his novel *Salammbô* (1862), and in particular from its famous chapter 13 entitled "Moloch". But I am not. These colourful, if not lurid, descriptions were penned by two eminent, coolly positivist 20th-c. scholars who had closely studied the sacred ritual that they are pretending to describe. As can be readily sensed from the emotive language, in the view of these modern writers the cultic act whose alien nature they wish to convey was a peculiar and exotic sacrifice. In terms of religious practice in the ancient Mediterranean, including Africa where the ritual described was being enacted, one of the core elements of cult, if not the core element, was that of sacrifice: the offering of a living being whose life was taken by the taking of blood in the offering of a gift to a deity.³ It is just that in this case the sacrifice

1 J.-G. Février, "Essai de reconstitution du sacrifice molek," *J. Asiatique* 248 (1960) at 183-84, under a heading entitled, notably, "La démente collective" (my translation).

2 M. Leglay, *Saturne africain, histoire* (Paris 1966) 350 (my translation).

3 See J. B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman empire* (Oxford 2006) 24-26; J. Rüpke (transl. R. Gordon), *Religion of the Romans* (London 2007) 137-53, especially 141 for the significance of the altar; G. G. Stroumsa (transl. S. Emanuel), *The end of sacrifice: religious transformations in late antiquity* (Chicago 2009); see J. McNerney, "Heroes and gods," chapt. 5 in *Cattle of the sun: cows and culture in the world of the ancient Greeks* (Princeton, NJ 2010) 97-122, for a partial explanation of the historical ecology. Of course, there could be 'offerings' made of plants and first-fruits,