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# The stuff of the gods

The material aspects of religion  
in ancient Greece

Edited by Matthew Haysom,  
Maria Mili & Jenny Wallensten

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## ABSTRACT

The “material turn” in the humanities and social sciences has brought about an expanded understanding of the material dimension of all cultural and social phenomena. In the Classics it has resulted in the breaking down of boundaries within the discipline and a growing interest in materiality within literature. In the study of religion cross-culturally new perspectives are emphasising religion as a material phenomenon and belief as a practice founded in the material world. This volume brings together experts in all aspects of Greek religion to consider its material dimensions. Chapters cover both themes traditionally approached by archaeologists, such as dedications and sacred space, and themes traditionally approached by philologists, such as the role of objects in divine power. They include a wide variety of themes ranging from the imminent material experience of religion for ancient Greek worshippers to the role of material culture in change and continuity over the long term.

*Keywords:* Greek religion, Etruscan religion, Mycenaean religion, materiality, religious change, *temenos*, temples, offerings, cult statues, terracottas, *omphalos*, cauldrons, sacred laws, visuality, purity, pollution, gods’ identities, divine power, inscribed dedications

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## 7. Resistant, willing, and controlled

### Sacrificial animals as “things” on Greek vases

Because man partook of the divine allotment, at first he was the only animal to honor the gods, and he began to construct altars and divine images.

Protagoras 322b, transl. Durand & Schnapp 1989, 59.

#### Abstract

The iconography of sacrifice in ancient Greek art has been studied from a variety of angles. Relevant vases and votive reliefs have been collected and categorized, and consideration has been given to the possible meanings and messages (i.e. political, religious, social) embedded in the imagery. Sacrificial victims have also been identified and scrutinized in terms of their value and cultic significance, and other material manifestations of the ritual (i.e. altar, *kanoun*, tables) have received a certain amount of attention. An important area to explore is the position, treatment, and behavior of sacrificial animals in the scenes. How is the relationship between man, beast, and the divine understood and conveyed by vase-painters? Using the concept of materiality as an interpretive framework, this paper will focus on vases from Corinth, Athens, and Boiotia, where the evidence is best and most plentiful. When animals are categorized as ritual objects, or “things”, in their own right, the idea of the “willing” victim, and the handling and control of animals in a specialized context may be investigated and questioned.\*

*Keywords:* animal sacrifice, vase-painting, iconography, materiality, human-animal interaction

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### Animal bodies, human things

The iconography of animal sacrifice (*thysia*) in ancient Greek art has been studied from a variety of angles. Relevant vases and votive reliefs have been collected and categorized, and consideration has been given to the possible meanings and messages (i.e. political, religious, social) embedded in the imagery. Sacrificial victims have also been identified and scrutinized in terms of their value and cultic significance, and other moments (i.e. *pompe*), and material manifestations of the ritual (i.e. altar, basket, tables) have received a certain amount of attention.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the animals themselves, sacrificial and otherwise, have become an important area of study in their own right, not only through portrayals in ancient art but also in reference to Mediterranean cultures in general.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between humans and animals, in both religious and

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<sup>1</sup> Durand & Schnapp 1989; Durand 1989; Van Straten 2016; *ThesCRA* I, “Processions”, “Sacrifices”. See also Morgan 2021 on the material study of religion.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Smith 2021a; Campbell 2014; Weddle 2013; Calder 2011; Kalof 2007.

non-religious contexts, is yet another current area of archaeological inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

An important aspect not fully explored in scholarship is the position, treatment, and behavior of animals in visual representations of sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> When considering scenes on the ancient Greek vases of the 6th and 5th centuries BC, such as those from Corinth, Athens and Boiotia, where the evidence is best and most plentiful, how is the relationship between man, beast, and the divine understood and conveyed by vase-painters? Where we appear to be witnessing a public festival, does the human-animal dynamic differ from events of a seemingly more private nature? Are animal bodies being visualized with an ability or “status as mediators between the gods and humanity”?<sup>5</sup> Indeed, not all of these questions may be addressed or answered here, even though the relevant available evidence is substantial. What this paper does suggest, however, is that as physical beings, sacrificial animals should be viewed as objects in their own right, and that in art (as in life) they functioned as such. As an indispensable component of the ritual, vase-painters are compelled not only to showcase them, but also to emphasize their lack of agency, despite the fact that they are life forms capable of behaving unreliably.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to using the victims as indicators of the setting, context, or occasion, vase-painters display them as key props in their own tragic dramatic performances.<sup>7</sup> The range of animal manipulations employed by individual artists indicates that, on the one hand, there was no one way to portray a scene of sacrifice or a victim, and on the other, that animals on vases reflect a wide range of possible behaviors and positions in relation to the human actors and divine presences they accompany. Be they standing, walking, or rearing, guided by ropes, led by the horns, or moving independently, the animals involved in religious rituals in the ancient Greek world were consistently, throughout the process, the subjects of human intervention, dependency, and control.<sup>8</sup> Each and every one would have been domesticated, selected, handled, and transported; and, in the case of a *thysia* sacrifice, eventually

killed, butchered, cooked, offered, discarded, and consumed.<sup>9</sup> The combination of physical human strength and man-made ritual/material objects (i.e. axes, knives, ropes) in the scenes—not to mention the ancient context for and function of the decorated vessels themselves—adds an additional layer of complexity and materiality, and is particularly poignant when the vessel takes an animal form.<sup>10</sup>

The types of animals chosen for sacrificial iconography must be some reflection of those selected in reality, and include cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. Gunnell Ekroth has pointed out that “vase-paintings prefer to represent cattle” and that “vase-paintings do not refer to a particular deity, sanctuary, or occasion, but show generic depictions of sacrifices”.<sup>11</sup> She further explains, as others have done before, that cattle would have been the most expensive and prestigious choice for blood sacrifice, and were thus dedicated by the state rather than by individuals.<sup>12</sup> While it is true that cattle are very often chosen by vase-painters to convey the subject of sacrifice, they were by no means the only animals represented in this capacity. Black- and red-figure vessels as well as votive reliefs include cattle, sheep and pigs in both cultic and mythic situations, either alone or in groups.<sup>13</sup>

When considering animals within the specialized context of sacrifice and through the lens of materiality, we may revisit the idea of the “willing” or “assenting” victim—i.e. an animal deemed, according to certain criteria, a suitable offering to the gods, an appropriate intercessor between human and divine—as opposed to the resistant or unwilling victim, an unruly or uncooperative beast, who (if the textual sources are to be trusted) would not be the right fit and, we may conclude, would not ultimately have been offered, killed, and consumed.<sup>14</sup> In order to do so, we must concentrate our efforts on the “pre-kill” or processional phase of the proceedings, when the animals in question are living beings taking part in a mortal situation. Also, we should ponder how relevant such concepts or details would have been to Greek vase-painters and their viewers.<sup>15</sup> Separating the evidence into scenes with a single animal and those with pairs or larger groups, and isolating examples that appear to be everyday rather than mythological or dramatic, we will look in particular at the placement of ani-

<sup>3</sup> Recht & Zeman-Wisniewska 2021; Arbuckle & McCarty 2014; Watts 2013; Olsen *et al.* 2012, 32–33; Santos-Granero 2009, 7 and 22; cf. Goslinga 2012. For sacrifice and dining, see Parker 2011, 124–170.

<sup>4</sup> Harden 2014, esp. 37–46; Calder 2011, 7–9.

<sup>5</sup> Grumett 2007, 713.

<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge animals in scenes of sacrifice are never shown defecating, drooling, biting, etc. For the sensory experience of sacrifice, see Weddle 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Smith 2016, 134–139; Mueller 2016, 2–5; Henrichs 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Hodder 2012, 74–80; cf. Serpell 1986, esp. 119–135; Ekroth 2014, 325–328. For animals being coaxed or controlled by food and drink see van Straten 2016, 209, V90, fig. 46 (Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlung 2412). Smaller animals being carried on the shoulders are documented in a variety of artistic media, the canonical example being the calf-bearer statue from the Athenian Acropolis; see Spivey 2013, 114–115.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Méniel 2015.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Ebbinghaus 2018, 191–231; 2008; cf. Lazzari 2005, 126–128.

<sup>11</sup> Ekroth 2014, 331; cf. Bremmer 1999, 41–42; Bevan 1986, 320–322.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. van Straten 2016, 175–181; McInerney 2010, ch. 7; Bodson 1975, 144–151.

<sup>13</sup> van Straten 2016, 170–186, and 16–17 (*trittoi boarchos*); *ThesCRA* I, “Processions”, 9–10, “Sacrifices”, 95–102.

<sup>14</sup> The best starting point is Naiden 2007. See also: van Straten 2016, 100–102, esp. n. 303; Ekroth 2014, 332–333; Calder 2011, 101–102, with bibliography; Shelton 2007, 106–112.

<sup>15</sup> See recently Oakley 2013, esp. 131–132 for the relevant iconography, and Bundrick 2014.

mals in relation to humans, any significant interaction evident between them, and some of the ways that other physical items (e.g. altar, vessel, ropes) are used by painters to emphasize certain aspects of the human-animal association.

## Animal solos

Vase-painters from Corinth, Athens, and Boiotia feature single animals in sacrificial scenes for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways, among them available space, spotlighting the victim, or a combination of both. As is always the case when looking at vase iconography, issues of technique, regional style, convention, and artistic preference must be kept in mind. Regardless, it may be assumed that the sacrificial victims both large and small are guided through the process by the humans they join. Beginning with a Corinthian black-figure *alabastron* of c. 600 BC (Fig. 1) we see a large, stationary bovine being approached by a simply draped and bearded male, who prepares to strike the animal with a large axe.<sup>16</sup> The living bull lowers its head, as if bracing for the inevitable, stunning blow. The shape and size of the vessel encourage the painter to reduce the scene to the three basic elements of animal, human, and weapon. To quote Van Straten, “There is no explicit indication that a sacrifice is involved, but it can hardly be anything else.”<sup>17</sup> A similar creature is visible on another Corinthian black-figure vessel of slightly later date, an *amphoriskos* in Oslo displaying an un-interrupted multi-figure scene on its body. Included here are basket-bearers (*kanephoroi*) and figures walking in procession led by an *aulos*-player.<sup>18</sup> Between the groups is a large bull with nicely incised anatomical details, a braided tail, and a decorative fillet (*stemma*) dangling from its horns. As in the previous example, the animal (like the human figures in the procession) appears to be stationary and docile. It is also notable that in each of these examples the humans, although in close proximity to their victims and linked to them visually, neither touch nor overlap them.

By contrast, on Athenian vases, where the evidence is far more plentiful, animals interact with humans and are used to create physical links between mortal and divine spheres. Artists show animals being handled, led, or restrained, and they may either dominate the composition or blend into a larger human group. A number of Athenian vases reveal a single beast being led towards an altar. An intriguing example decorates a black-figure *oinochoe* of c. 500 BC, showing a bearded male guiding an alert bull behind a line of figures in a procession towards Athe-



Fig. 1. Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 3219. Corinthian alabastron, c. 600 BC. Photograph: museum.

na, who is seated before a fiery altar and holding up a libation bowl.<sup>19</sup> It is important to mention that the painter has placed the bull *in front of* the human handler, at least from the outside viewer's perspective. As in the Corinthian example above, the difficulty of conveying figures in motion in the black-figure technique is apparent, yet it in no way hinders our ability to recognize the subject. If the perky bovine had not been included by the painter and all other details had remained the same, our interpretation of the scene would alter somewhat.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the balancing of the composition with the large bull at one extreme and the goddess at the other emphasizes their primary roles, and the addition of slim Doric columns to demarcate the space and contain all the figures—human, animal, and divine—exaggerates their importance.<sup>21</sup>

An earlier version of the same visual strategy can be spotted on a much-discussed belly *amphora* attributed to the Painter

<sup>16</sup> Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 3219. Van Straten 2016, V148, fig. 113; *ThesCRA* I, “Sacrifices”, 117, Gr. 484.

<sup>17</sup> Van Straten 2016, 107.

<sup>18</sup> Oslo, University Museum of National Antiquities 6909. Van Straten 2016, V117, fig. 16, and 162 on the fillets (*stemma*).

<sup>19</sup> London, British Museum 1905.7-11.1, by the Gela Painter. Gebauer 2002, 75–77, P35, fig. 34; Van Straten 2016, V31, fig. 8 (drawing); *ThesCRA* I, “Sacrifices”, 78, Gr. 109. See also Boardman 1974, 147. On sacrificial iconography and Athena see Shapiro 1989, 29–32.

<sup>20</sup> See Patton 2009, esp. part I on Greek gods sacrificing.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Herakles leading a bull to sacrifice on a bilingual *amphora* (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 99.538). Both figures dominate, and although making contact, they do not overlap; in fact, the bull on both sides overlaps a tree instead. See Gebauer 2002, 50–54, P15, fig. 15; *ThesCRA* I, “Sacrifices”, 114, Gr. 455; Schefold 1992, 110–111, fig. 129 (red-figure); Smith 2021b, 94–102.



Fig. 2. Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 1686. Athenian black-figure amphora, c. 540 BC. Photograph: museum.

of Berlin 1686 and dated to c. 540 BC.<sup>22</sup> On one side of the vessel four heavily draped musicians play *auloi* and kitharas, while on the other a young male guides a bull towards an altar at which a female, presumably a priestess, stands and faces the goddess (Fig. 2). As in many instances of sacrificial procession, the movement of all figures is to the right. Totally *behind* the bull are two more males, one bearded and the other beardless, following behind the priestess. Again, Athena is present on the other side although this time she is standing upright and statue-like, both larger and taller than the other figures. Each composition is naturally framed by a panel, and the two scenes, while no doubt associated, are physically separated by the *amphora* handles. The large animal is the length of the four mortal figures, and is placed almost completely between us (the viewer) and them (the procession). Two of the three males are particularly obscured by the beast and once more there is a sense of balance and equality created by the splendor of Athena and the scale of

<sup>22</sup> Berlin, Antikensammlungen, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 1686, with a musical procession on the reverse. Gebauer 2002, 40–42, P8, fig. 8; Van Straten 2016, V21, fig. 4.



Fig. 3. Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 3391. Boiotian rhyton in the form of a swine. 6th century BC. Photograph: museum.

her victim. At the same time, the priestess figure, like the altar, connects the animal to the divine through her presence, her position in the scene, and her gestures.

An interesting comparison can be made with Boiotian vase-painting, where animal themes and iconography are much-loved by vase-painters.<sup>23</sup> Scenes on vases either in black-figure or black-silhouette have been tied to local Boiotian festivals and seem to capitalize on the moments and stages of multi-day events. Such is the case on a *tripod-kothon*, a vessel of unusual (perhaps ritual) shape, with figure decoration on each of its three sides: procession/sacrifice, banquet/symposium, music/dance.<sup>24</sup> Directing our attention to the sacrificial iconography, we witness a procession of four male figures, who play pipes, hold a branch or tray, and who seem to follow a larger than life-size boar as it walks towards a burning altar. The scale of the animal in relation to the humans and the altar enables it to dominate the composition. Although, as in some Athenian examples, the human figures (mobile elements) and the altar (a stationary element) frame the victim, here human, animal, and thing are spaced out across the visual field and there is a total lack of touch or overlap. The vases of this group are defined by “a strong sense of activity”, but the complete absence of physical contact between figures is somewhat unusual.<sup>25</sup> Related to this iconography is a zoomorphic *rhyton*, also in Berlin (Fig. 3), which takes the shape of a swine and has dancing figures decorated its body.<sup>26</sup> Such a conver-

<sup>23</sup> Kilinski 1990, 41–42.

<sup>24</sup> Smith 2004, for full description and bibliography. For the shape: Kilinski 1990, 56–57.

<sup>25</sup> Kilinski 1990, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 3391. Kilinski 1990, 50, pl. 11.2.



gence of human, animal, and thing is rare to be sure, but it encapsulates perfectly the idea of the live sacrificial offering as an object, and one that may well have been used during blood rituals be it literally or symbolically.<sup>27</sup>

The scheme of a solo animal being led, yet placed in a dominant visual position, is noticeable throughout Athenian vase-painting. Again and again, the animal by its mere presence embodies the meaning of the scene and the timing of the occasion, even if a specific deity or other indications of exact setting or precise event are not highlighted. Such is the case on an early 5th century BC black-figure *lekythos* where a male leads a bull, followed by a pipes-player and two men holding sprigs;<sup>28</sup> and again on a red-figure column-*krater* fragment (c. 510 BC) on which a youth supporting a big basket on his shoulder accompanies a bull that has been dressed up for sacrifice.<sup>29</sup> In each of these examples, we witness the by now familiar scheme of placing the sacrificial victim in plain sight of the viewer. Other animal species may also be positioned in the foreground, such as a good sized ram on the exterior of a red-figure cup in Rome dated c. 450 BC;<sup>30</sup> a big pig being led towards an altar on early 4th century BC red-figure *krater*;<sup>31</sup> or a goat approaching a Herm.<sup>32</sup> Even in the much-cited example of a small pig being sacrificed by a youth and a man at an altar in the tondo of a red-figure cup of c. 500 BC, attributed to the Epidromos Painter (Fig. 4), the youth holds the creature in way that restrains and silences it yet displays it quite obviously to the outside viewer.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the sacrificial knife (*machaira*) held directly above the animal's head is clutched in an equally noticeable manner.

It is also possible for Athenian painters to place the human handlers or other members of the scene *in front of* the sacrificial animal, thus dramatically obscuring the view, or for



Fig. 4. Paris, Musée du Louvre G 112. Athenian red-figure cup, c. 500 BC. Epidromos Painter. Photograph: © Musée du Louvre. Image Source: Erich Lessing, Art Resource, NY.

the humans to *straddle* or *surround* the creature in some manner. Straddling in particular can be used to control the animal at the critical moment, as seen on the inside of an early 5th century BC red-figure cup presenting a soldier slaying a ram, where the animal is also being muzzled by hand.<sup>34</sup> Humans surround animals in a way that suggests increased restraint, sometimes simply using their own bodies to keep the animal in its proper place. Such is the case on a black-figure *hydria* of c. 550 BC and now in Paris, where a bovine is found in a procession of many figures and the leader of the group is a priest, as indicated by his sleeveless garment.<sup>35</sup> Behind the priest are two scantily clothed males on either side of a large animal. The male closest to the viewer controls the beast with a lead or prod and his stride permits him to conceal the bull's back end and back legs. Interestingly, the animal seems to sniff or nuzzle the priest, though the human and the animal categori-

<sup>27</sup> For the related topic of animal-head *rhyta* see Hoffman 1989, who perhaps overemphasizes death cult, and Kitchell 2014, 150–151.

<sup>28</sup> New Orleans, Tulane University. Gebauer 2002, 77–78, P36, fig. 35; Van Straten 2016, V35.

<sup>29</sup> Bochum, Kunstsammlungen der Ruhr-Universität, S 1174. Gebauer 2002, 67–69, P26, fig. 26.

<sup>30</sup> Vatican Museums 16508. Gebauer 2002, 99–101, P52, fig. 50, moving left rather than right; Van Straten 2016, V137. Cf. Munich, Antikensammlungen 1441 (black-figure). Gebauer 2002, 42–44, P9, fig. 9; Van Straten 2016, V32.

<sup>31</sup> Athens, National Museum 12491. Gebauer 2002, 226–228, A10, fig. 120; Van Straten 2016, V128, fig. 36. Cf. Athens, National Museum Acr. 636. Gebauer 2002, 55–60, P16, fig. 16; Van Straten 2016, V67, fig. 20.

<sup>32</sup> London, Market. Gebauer 2002, Av 21a, fig. 133. Cf. Orvieto, Museo Civico Archeologico 1001. Gebauer 2002, 39–40, P7, fig. 7 (drawing); Van Straten 2016, V36. For Herms in scenes of sacrifice see Van Straten 2016, 27–30.

<sup>33</sup> Paris, Louvre G 112. Gebauer 2002, 259–261, S2, fig. 135; *ThesCRA* I, “Sacrifices”, 117, Gr. 487; Van Straten 2016, V147, fig. 110. For the painter see Boardman 1988, 62. For animals being man-handled see Smith 2014, 105.

<sup>34</sup> Cleveland, Museum of Art 26.242. Gebauer 2002, 266, S4, fig. 138; *ThesCRA* I, “Sacrifices”, 105, Gr. 359; Van Straten 2016, V144, fig. 112. On sacrifice before battle: Jameson 1993, esp. 217–219.

<sup>35</sup> Paris, Louvre F 10. Gebauer 2002, 26–28, P2, fig. 2; Van Straten 2016, V39. See Van Straten 2016, 168–170, on the male figures and their dress.

cally do not overlap from the viewer's perspective. The black-figure *amphora* already mentioned (Fig. 2) with a bull being presented to Athena, interweaves man and beast even more strategically by placing the handler (identifiable as such by his clothing and stick) in the foreground, the procession participants and priestess in the background, and by wrapping the bull's braided tail subtly around the handler's outer leg.

In Athenian red-figure vase-painting, there are several examples also positioning the victim between people. As in black-figure, the nearly universal adherence to profile views, coupled with a lack of interest in perspective, greatly limits the painter's ability to translate the occasion and its participants literally. Furthermore, the concern with balancing the composition in both techniques in these time periods no doubt dictates certain visual choices. On a mid-5th century BC red-figure *krater* three males surround a large bull, presumably being led to the procession or already taking part in it.<sup>36</sup> All three of the males hold branches and are heavily cloaked. One of the men is placed at the center of the composition, overlapping the bull; the other two males are each placed on the other side ("behind") the bull, one at the head and the other at the tail. The result is a nicely balanced, yet crowded composition that relays a tranquil mood complete with devout observers and a willing victim. The black silhouette animal frieze decorating the rim of the same vessel creates a nice juxtaposition of the wild/secular and the domestic/sacred. A red-figure *oinochoe* in Ferrara (c. 410 BC) reduces the adjacent human participants to two, yet enlarges the body of the bull to craft the same balanced result.<sup>37</sup>

Another iconographic method used by Athenian painters occurs on scenes where a large central animal is controlled by a youthful handler, while a third figure looks on. The handler may be placed on either side of the animal, while the third figure is situated ahead and turning to look back as if to prompt, guide, or welcome the victim.<sup>38</sup> Variations on this scheme in black-figure include a *lekkythos* of c. 500 BC where a female figure stands next to the animal and a youthful male walks ahead yet looks back.<sup>39</sup> A somewhat different mood is expressed by the painter of a red-figure bell-*krater* of the late 5th century BC attributed to the Marley Painter.<sup>40</sup> A massive, stout bull

stands upright accompanied by a youth, who has been drawn in the background. The sanctuary setting is confirmed by a *pinax* to the left of and at the same level as the youth's head, as well as an altar and a Herm to the far right. Although the Herm is completely stationary, its separation from the human-animal pair, as well as the way it "faces" the victim (practically at eye level) is reminiscent of the images discussed above. The mood here is rather different and the exaggerated, realistic erect phallus on the statue animates the object while creating a certain ambiguity in human, animal, and divine relations.

Interestingly, when the human handler is placed closer to the viewer, vase-painters may enlarge, elongate, decorate or animate the animal to draw attention to its importance or to highlight the lead or stick being used to control it. Regardless, each of these choices emphasizes human interference with the animal as well as the beast's dependence on human involvement throughout the ritual. When the scene is a procession the animal in question is often a bovine that demonstrates no resistance.<sup>41</sup> Some red-figure painters, however, depict smaller animals physically restrained by a boy at the altar, while religious personnel and participants make preparations for the kill. A series of late 5th century BC examples portray a sheep or a goat to the left of the altar, facing right, and normally just slightly taller than the altar itself. Because these animals are smaller than the cattle so often depicted, they by no means dominate the composition. Typically, a large number of humans are present and there is a notable amount of gazing across the central altar to the sound of the pipes or dipping of hands in a *chernips* (vessel holding water).<sup>42</sup> Inevitably, our eyes are drawn to the victims because the boys stand in front of them, hold them with their bare hands, and bend down towards them out of necessity. What is probably a realistic way to keep a sheep or goat in its place—as a priest prepares to sprinkle water on the animal's head perhaps hoping to attain its approval—becomes an artistic convention that is then repeated in multiple examples.<sup>43</sup> The willingness or unwillingness of the victim in these examples is impossible to judge, but one could easily imagine that if the boys were to let go, these helpless creatures would wander away or even take off running.

Indeed, the helplessness of the victim—its lack of agency—is further exaggerated in images where the animal's body is being raised up, transported or slaughtered in human hands, or even flung towards the ground. In at least some of these cas-

<sup>36</sup> London, Market. Gebauer 2002, 101–102, P53, fig. 51; Van Straten 2016, V99.

<sup>37</sup> Ferrara, Museo Nazionale 2510. Gebauer 2002, 111–112, P62, fig. 62; Van Straten 2016, V82.

<sup>38</sup> Ferrara, Museo Nazionale T 416 B VP. Gebauer 2002, 109–110, P59, fig. 59; Van Straten 2016, V79. Ferrara, Museo Nazionale 2510. Gebauer 2002, 111, P62, fig. 62. Nocera, Museo dell'Argo Nocerino. Gebauer 2002, 112, P63a, fig. 64 (with an additional figure at the end).

<sup>39</sup> London, British Museum 1860.4–4.40. Gebauer 2002, 120–121, P67, fig. 77; Van Straten 2016, V29.

<sup>40</sup> Ferrara, Museo Nazionale 42888. Gebauer 2002, 112, P63, fig. 63; Van Straten 2016, V80. See Robertson 1992, 232; Collard 2019 (Herms).

<sup>41</sup> E.g. London, British Museum 1836.2–24.62. Gebauer 2002, 87–90, P43, fig. 42; Van Straten 2016, V50, fig. 5. Ferrara, Museo Nazionale 2510 (see above, note 37).

<sup>42</sup> E.g. Gebauer 2002, 217–223, A3–A6 (all c. 420 BC), figs. 113–116, and 246–249; Van Straten 2016, 33; Bundrick 2014, 661–672.

<sup>43</sup> Burkert 1985, 56; Durand & Schnapp 1989, 38. See also Gebauer 2002, 250–251; Bundrick 2014, 661 ("this action is not shown on the vases").



es we can assume that the animal's resistance has already made itself known and that human interference has been employed out of necessity. At the same time, at least some such examples clearly belong to a mythological and/or dramatic setting where the resistant-willing dichotomy might either be secondary to the narrative or where the action is exaggerated for theatrical effect. Brute human strength is being used to hoist up an enormous bull on one side of a black-figure *amphora* dated to the 3rd quarter of the 6th century BC (Fig. 5).<sup>44</sup> The scene has been described and studied in full elsewhere, as it is rare example of the kill.<sup>45</sup> A bearded man sporting a short, pleated *chiton* drives a knife straight into the animal's throat, while a group of fully nude males support the beast on their shoulders, steadying it by the tail and with ropes. The sheer weight of the bull is palpable to the viewer who can literally feel the pain of the men who balance the victim and "form an athletic pyramid".<sup>46</sup>

Also important is the addition of another material object, the wide basin (*sphageion*) held by a youth below the animal's throat to catch the blood, which will in turn be poured on the altar.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, both the boy with the basin and the man with the knife touch the animal and make contact with each other in doing so. This disposable detail nicely triangulates the human-animal-object relationship, yet directs the viewer to what is really most important here: the blood ritual. A related red-figure example (c. 500 BC), connected by some to a festival of Hephaistos (the god depicted in the tondo), decorates one side of the exterior of a cup in Florence considered to be the precursor to the moment of kill we have just seen.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of exact festival or occasion, the boys on the cup might be preparing to lift the big bull, while a youth to the left is sharpening his knives; but it is just as likely that the all-male group is simply restraining an unruly animal. An important detail is the boy who straddles the animal atop its head and neck, a restrictive method we have noted already in other sacrificial scenes. The horses being tamed and restrained on the opposite side of the same cup further suggest the difficulties involved in human containment of the animal world.

A much more modest version of the human-animal struggle in the sacrificial setting is discernable on two sides of a black-figure *skyphos* by the Theseus Painter, an artist with a palpable interest in religious iconography.<sup>49</sup> On one side a



Fig. 5. Viterbo, Museo Civico. Athenian black-figure amphora, 3rd quarter 6th century BC. Drawing: D. Weiss.

nude male whose head and neck are not preserved stands between the viewer and a modest sized bull, while he manages the creature using a rope. Ironically, the body-posture of the male suggests that he is struggling with an all-too-eager victim, who appears to lead him. The opposite side of the vessel, where a partially preserved male catches or grabs a boar by the leg, must be thematically related.<sup>50</sup>

Smaller animals in the scenes may be cradled, as we have already seen in the example of a pig being slaughtered at an altar (Fig. 4), hugged, guided by hand, flung or held by a limb. There is an intimacy between human and animal inherent in some of these scenes that set them apart from many examples where a larger animal dominates the composition. A youth guides a ram by the horns with one hand and grips a knife in the other on the tondo of a red-figure cup of c. 490 BC attributed to the Ambrosios Painter;<sup>51</sup> while youths secure a goat or sheep by holding both hands on the animal's neck or shoulders.<sup>52</sup> In another instance, on a red-figure fragment from the Athenian Acropolis, the handler walks alongside a ram placing one hand around the animal's neck as if hugging it.<sup>53</sup> A similar strategy appears on a black-figure *pelike* (c. 500 BC), where the

scenes see Borgers 2004; *ThesCRA* I, 14 ("Processions") and 82 ("Sacrifices"), Gr. 149, and 115, Gr. 458.

<sup>50</sup> See Malagardis 1985; cf. Gebauer 2002, 124–128, P191, fig. 81 (Tampa Museum of Art 86.52); Van Straten 2016, V44.

<sup>51</sup> Gebauer 2002, 72, P30, fig. 29 (Delaware, Winterthur Museum); and for the painter Boardman 1988, 62. Cf. Gebauer 2002, 50, P13, fig. 13, a black-figure fragment from Athens (Agora AP 1556); Van Straten 2016, V5. See also the youth holding a ram aggressively by both horns on a red-figure bell-*krater* (c. 400 BC) in a mythological setting; Van Straten 2016, V408, fig. 42 (Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 2200); and the resistant goat on a Boiotian *lekanis* (London, British Museum B80); Smith 2004, 17–18, fig. 2.9.

<sup>52</sup> Gebauer 2002, A3–A6 (note 42, above).

<sup>53</sup> Gebauer 2002, 72, P31, fig. 30 (Athens, National Museum Acr. 74). See also Van Straten 2016, V69, fig. 21, a red-figure *kalyx-krater* fragment from the Acropolis (Athens, National Museum 739).

<sup>44</sup> Viterbo, Museo Civico. Gebauer 2002, S1, fig. 134; Van Straten 2016, V141, fig. 115.

<sup>45</sup> Durand & Schnapp 1989, 59, fig. 83; Van Straten 2016, 111.

<sup>46</sup> Durand & Schnapp 1989, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Durand 1989, 125–127; Van Straten 2016, 104–105.

<sup>48</sup> Gebauer 2002, 261–265, S3, fig. 136; *ThesCRA* I, "Sacrifices", Gr. 117, 485b. See also Gilotta 1994; Van Straten 2016, V145, fig. 116, for the entire cup.

<sup>49</sup> Stuttgart, Landesmuseum Württemberg, KAS 74; Gebauer 2002, P190, fig. 80; Van Straten 2016, 201, V43. For the painter and related

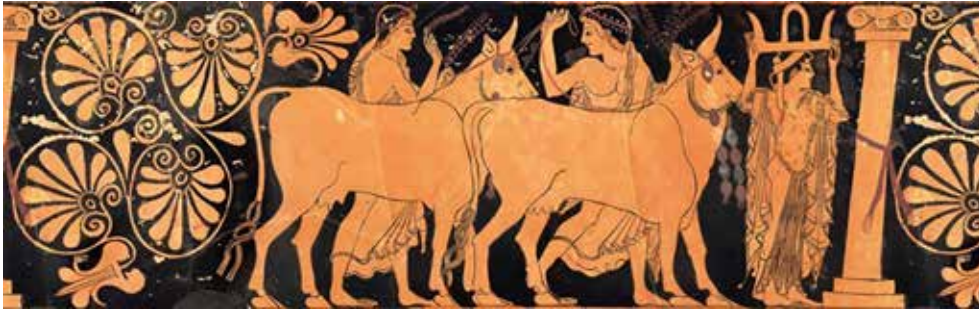


Fig. 6. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 13.195. Athenian red-figure lekythos, c. 500 BC. Gales Painter. Photograph: Museum. Bartlett Collection—Museum purchase with funds from the Francis Bartlett Donation of 1912.

victim is larger, and the setting is determined by several Herms and the basket held in the hands of the bearded handler.<sup>54</sup> Piglets were among the smallest victims chosen for blood sacrifice and their relative scale and ease of manipulation is evident on vases where they are held in hand,<sup>55</sup> seized by one leg by a human figure who stands or walks whilst holding another object (i.e. stick, basket),<sup>56</sup> or confidently approach a Herm.<sup>57</sup>

## Relational performers

With the addition of more animals to scenes of sacrifice comes the potential for different questions and concerns. Is the mood somehow changed? Or, are different moments or events being portrayed? There is, of course, no reason to assume that any of the scenes on vases are there to be read literally. Indeed, many images that emphasize the individual victim may well be abbreviations of much grander occasions where large numbers of victims were offered to the gods. That being said, scenes where two or more animals are depicted have the potential not only for human-animal interactions but also for animal-animal dynamics. The settings are often more involved, allowing for a greater number of animals, humans, or both.

The presence of material objects in most, if not all of the scenes—ropes, instruments, fillets, altars—continues to confirm religious space and time. Although the animals in pairs or larger groups may seem less central, because the focus of the composition is shared amongst a greater number of actors and parts, in reality such scenes may reflect a different festival or circumstance, or simply an alternative method of decoration. Painters of vases were inevitably limited by the space available

and the awkward, curved surfaces of their vessels, and were obligated to make decisions accordingly. As we shall see, there are many possible combinations available and no one way to portray animals in “group” sacrifice.

One way that Athenian vase-painters include more than one creature in a sacrificial setting is by employing processional iconography—namely, an assembly of people and animals moving, sometimes uniformly, in the same direction. In such instances, unlike the Boiotian *tripod-kothon* mentioned earlier, overlapping is used to express a crowded, noisy situation. The logical starting point is the oft cited mid-6th century BC black-figure band-cup, where three animals—a bovine, a pig, and a sheep—are being paraded towards Athena Promachos and her altar in a complicated multi-figure composition complete with musicians and branch-bearers, hoplites and a horseman.<sup>58</sup> Such a scene might be labelled a *trittoa boarchos* (lit: “threesome led by an ox”), although some scholars have attempted to connect the image with the Panathenaia.<sup>59</sup>

Regardless of the specific occasion, the scene is unusually complete and the painter has taken advantage of the long, narrow space available for his complex miniature figure decoration. The artist uses crowding and overlapping to some extent, but has spaced the animal parade enough apart to make the types easily recognizable. Perhaps also to emphasize their importance, or in an attempt to apply depth and perspective, each victim is roughly the same size and height. The bull leads the pack with his handler holding a rope in the foreground and a second youth in the background. The boar and the sheep, by contrast, are closer to the viewer with their human companions thus placed at a visual distance. This same sacrificial triad is visible on a contemporary fragmentary black-figure *dinos* from the Athenian Acropolis that was no doubt a votive offering to Athena.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Gebauer 2002, P34, fig. 32 (Paestum, Museo Archeologico); Van Straten 2016, V38, fig. 28 (detail).

<sup>55</sup> Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin F 1690. Gebauer 2002, 37–39, P6, fig. 4.

<sup>56</sup> See e.g. Gebauer 2002, 115–117, P65–68, figs. 66–68, 70.

<sup>57</sup> E.g. Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 1962.62. Gebauer 2002, 117–118, P69, fig. 69. See Van Straten 2016, 27–30 (Herms); Shapiro 1989, 128–131; *ThesCRA* I, “Sacrifices”, 86, Gr. 194 (Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 1966.62).

<sup>58</sup> Private collection. Gebauer 2002, 28–34, P3, fig. 3; *ThesCRA* I, “Processions”, 12, no. 67; Van Straten 2016, V55, fig. 2; Smith 2016, 130, fig. 7.1 (drawing).

<sup>59</sup> See Van Straten 2016, 14–18, for discussion and comparanda; Gebauer 2002, 28–34; Ekroth 2014, 336.

<sup>60</sup> Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 1690 (note 55 above); Van Straten 2016, 17–18, 196, V13, fig. 6. Two fragmentary *dinos* (Museum der Universität Tübingen, Antikensammlung S./10 1508,



Fig. 7. Berlin, *Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin ex F 1858*. Athenian black-figure amphora, c. 500 BC. Leagros Group. Photograph: museum.

Other sacrificial groups on Athenian vases represent a single animal type and stress the moving procession. Such is the case on a red-figure *lekythos* (c. 500 BC) in Boston (Fig. 6) signed by the potter Gales and attributed to the Gales Painter.<sup>61</sup> Cattle are controlled on leads by a youth and his companion who follow a female basket-bearer in the direction of a tall Ionic column. Both bulls have long, elegant horns, and the one at the front exhibits stylish garlands. Like the black-figure band-cup discussed above, the figure decoration is confined to the frieze and dictated by the artistic conventions of the shape being painted. The *lekythos* is tall and cylindrical and the figures literally wrap around it making the whole scene impossible to take in at once. If the viewer were to turn the vessel to the right, the procession would move uniformly across the surface. A black-figure version of cattle being led in procession occurs at roughly the same date and slightly later on *lekythoi*, such as one from the Agora, where the human figures are all women,<sup>62</sup> or another in New York attributed to the Haimon Painter.<sup>63</sup>

and S./10 1581) might also be related; Gebauer 2002, P17, P18, figs. 17, 18; Van Straten 2016, 202, V47, V48.

<sup>61</sup> Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 13.195. Robertson 1992, 131, fig. 135; Gebauer 2002 69–71, P28, fig. 27; *ThesCRA* I, “Processions”, 19, Gr. 126; Van Straten 2016, V74, fig. 17. For potter and painter see Robertson 1992, 131.

<sup>62</sup> Athens, Agora Museum 24519; Gebauer 2002, 121, Pv78, fig. 78 (cf. Ferrara, Museo Nazionale 44894; P 58, fig. 58 [bulls]).

<sup>63</sup> New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 41.162.255; Gebauer 2002, 121–122, Pv 79, fig. 79; Van Straten 2016, V56. Cf. Athens, National Museum 18568; Gebauer 2002, 79, P39, fig. 38 (sheep); Van Straten 2016, V12.

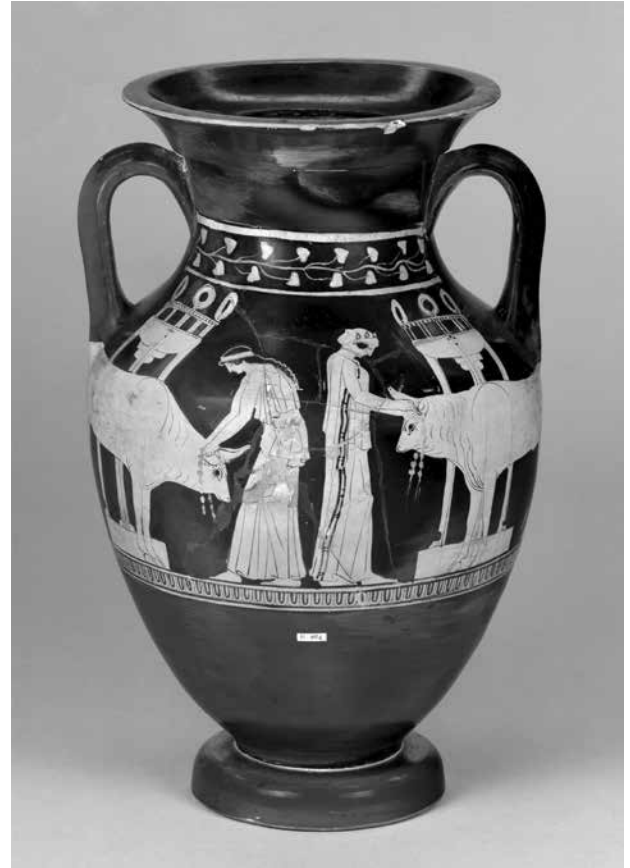


Fig. 8. London, British Museum 1846,0128.1. Athenian red-figure amphora, c. 420 BC. Photograph: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Athenian vase-painters may also use a pair of animals to frame a composition. In such cases the animals are facing each other as if crowding around a central figure or object and significant overlapping is avoided. This visual strategy is evident on a black-figure *pelike* where two large bulls face a seated female figure. The human and animal group fills the reserved panel, and the large creatures are only partially visible (heads, shoulders, front legs), as if being seen through a porthole.<sup>64</sup> Because the seated female is shown in complete profile, she comes face-to-face with the bull and tends to it, perhaps adorning it for processional display.

Similarly, on the neck of a black-figure *amphora* of the Leagros Group (c. 500 BC) two bulls are confronting a semi-draped, bearded male, who kneels down on the ground (Fig. 7).<sup>65</sup> Eye-level with one of the bovines, the man holds or

<sup>64</sup> Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 76.53; Gebauer 2002, 132, Pv 95, fig. 85. Porthole compositions are also found on Laconian cup tondos, such as those by the Hunt Painter; Boardman 1998, 187–188.

<sup>65</sup> Berlin, *Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin ex F 1858*. Gebauer 2002, 133, Pv 98, fig. 86.





Fig. 9. *Gustavianum Collections in Uppsala, UAS 352. Athenian black-figure hydria, c. 480 BC. Theseus Painter. Photograph: museum.*

touches the animal's horn with one hand and waves a branch with the other. The other bull balances the composition, stepping forward with one leg while turning its head an impossible 180 degrees to look back. The preparation of animals for sacrifice is explicit on a red-figure *amphora* attributed to the Nausicaa Painter and dated c. 420 BC (Fig. 8), where the bulls—as in the black-figure example above—literally seem to enter the scene from opposite sides, while women garland them with *stemmata*.<sup>66</sup> As in other examples, the humans and animal do not overlap in the scene, and the essential task of decorating the animals for the spectacle is made explicit. Yet the religious significance and space is implied by the larger than life-size ring-handled tripods located behind each bovine.

Rather different in feel is the scene on a black-figure *hydria* in Uppsala on which a draped youth with a wreath on his head approaches an altar with a lamb (Fig. 9).<sup>67</sup> Atop the altar is a large owl and beside it is a Doric column. A frontal-faced bull glances into the scene just on the other side of the column. The religious setting is confirmed by the altar and the columns, which in combination represent a temple or sanctuary setting. The male figure is behind the sheep from the viewer's perspective, and one has the impression that he restrains the animal with his obscured left hand. With his right arm he gestures towards the owl and practically touches it. In fact,

every figure in the scene is linked by subtle overlap or touch. For example, the sheep's nose touches the top of the altar and also one of the owl's legs, while the bull's horn overlaps the middle of the column and its hoof the base (itself abutting the altar). The symbolic significance of the iconography has been discussed elsewhere as such owl scenes have been connected to Athena.<sup>68</sup> Regardless of exact cult, location or occasion, it is clear that the painter is showcasing the animals all of whom give the impression of willingness to take part in the proceedings—at least for the moment.

## Animals will be animals

Animals are not things. They are living, breathing beings complete with personalities, desires, behaviors, and needs. Domesticated animals in ancient Greece served in many roles: cultivated as pets, used for labor, providers of milk, offerings to gods and heroes. In human hands, however, it is arguable that animals become things; and in the context that interests us here sacrificial animals may in fact be counted amongst the material aspects—the “stuff”—of Greek religion. The moment a single animal, regardless of its size or value, has been selected for sacrificial slaughter, its fate (in theory) has been determined. It will not cease to exist due to accidental or natural cause. Its body, like its destiny, is no longer its own. Sheep or goat, cattle or swine, the animal is

<sup>66</sup> London, British Museum 1846.0128.1 (E 284). Gebauer 2002, 148, Pp 124, fig. 96, 185; *ThesCRA* I, “Sacrifices”, 112, Gr. 439; Van Straten 2016, V90, fig. 46. See also Robertson 1992, 216–217.

<sup>67</sup> Uppsala, Museum Gustavianum 352. Gebauer 2002, 81–86, P41, fig. 40; Van Straten 2016, V50, fig. 5.

<sup>68</sup> See previous note; and Smith 2021b, 72–73.

now an object to be displayed, offered, and ultimately slain. Whether the sacrificial victim is *shown* by the vase-painter as a resistant or willing participant in the proceedings, and the ways in which artists remember and/or choose to *portray* controlled human-animal encounters on vases have been two areas explored here.

By dividing the evidence on vases into two categories—namely, those where a single animal is depicted and those where more than one animal is shown—we have noted the various visual strategies employed by vase-painters to translate theme into meaning. Single animal sacrificial scenes necessitate intensive human-animal contact, whereas multi-animal compositions tend to be more varied. Among both groups of evidence, however, we have noticed the co-dependency of humans and animals, the consistent control of the animal in human hands, and the fundamental addition of manmade material things that contextualize the proceedings and direct our focus.

Not included here, though worth mentioning, are sacrificial images where only animals are positioned around and atop an altar, and the human performers are altogether missing.<sup>69</sup> Regardless of the number or type of animals, the presence or absence of humans, and the addition of material objects, there must have been a number of factors that influenced the myriad ways in which the painter chose religious iconography, and more specifically the sacrificial animals therein: e.g. the comfort level of animals around humans (and vice versa), an individual's personal experience with animals, and more generally ancient Greek perceptions of animals.<sup>70</sup>

An investigation such as this is not without problems and has inherent limitations. Beyond our present scope has been the function and position of non-sacrificial animals either in the same scenes or elsewhere on the same vessel;<sup>71</sup> the find spots of particular examples; the artists or workshops that produced these shapes and images; the relationship of painted vases to other artistic media. Nonetheless, we have observed the varieties of sacrificial animals and their iconography on vases and the ways that vase-painters envision animals, large and small, as substantive things that yoke human beings to the divine. It has been stated that “sacrifice is the domestic side of the control of animals,”<sup>72</sup> while humans and animals have long been “partners” in a co-dependent relationship.<sup>73</sup> The behavior of creatures on their way to ritual slaughter was no doubt

as capricious in life as the humans who joined them, and is as varied in art as the painters who envisioned them to be resistant, willing, and controlled.

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<sup>69</sup> On this series of scenes *ThesCRA* I, “Sacrifices”, 114–115, Gr. 461 (c. 500–490 BC); Gebauer 2002, 137–138, Pv114, Pv115, figs. 89–90, 196–197.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Hodder 2012, 77–79; Calder 2011, 99–115.

<sup>71</sup> See Ekroth 2013.

<sup>72</sup> Durand & Schnapp 1989, 59.

<sup>73</sup> Hodder 2012, 79.



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