

**Book Review: Matthew J. Walsh, Sean O’Neill and Lasse Sørensen (eds), *In the Darkest of Days. Exploring Human Sacrifice and Value in Southern Scandinavian Prehistory*. 2024, Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 144 pp., 41 plates**  
Author: Piotr Włodarczak

PL ISSN 0066-5924, e-ISSN: 2719-6542

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23858/APa62.2024.3925>

<https://rcin.org.pl/dlibra/publication/280878>

Jak cytować:

*Włodarczak, P. (2024). Book Review: Matthew J. Walsh, Sean O’Neill and Lasse Sørensen (eds), In the Darkest of Days. Exploring Human Sacrifice and Value in Southern Scandinavian Prehistory. 2024, Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 144 pp., 41 plates. Archaeologia Polona, 62, 343–348. <https://doi.org/10.23858/APa62.2024.3925>*

Matthew J. Walsh, Sean O’Neill and Lasse Sørensen (eds), *In the Darkest of Days. Exploring Human Sacrifice and Value in Southern Scandinavian Prehistory*. 2024, Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 144 pp., 41 plates.

**Reviewed by Piotr Włodarczak<sup>a</sup>**

The titular darkest of days is a moment that inevitably affects every society from the Stone Age to the present. Then comes the time for desperate behaviour. It is also a time for sacrifices, including of humans. The subject of human sacrifices is closely linked to Scandinavian archaeology – considering the spectacular finds from the bogs. In recent years, studies on them have been conducted as part of the project “Human Sacrifice and Value: The Limits of Sacred Violence”, financed by the Norwegian Research Council. The project manager was Rane Willerslev, the author of the foreword to the presented book. An essential part of this publication are papers presented at a National Museum of Denmark conference in 2018. The publication consists of a two-part introduction and twelve chapters presenting various aspects of sacrificial offerings and ritualised violence in a broad period: from the Neolithic to the historical Vikings. In a short foreword, Rane Willerslev emphasised the supraregional and timeless nature of the institution of sacrifice, referring to the tragic events that have occurred in humanity in recent years. In this way, he outlined the primary intention of the authors of the book: to present the issue of human sacrifices with reference to universalist anthropological theories. The authors of the long, broader introduction to the book about the “Darkest of Days” are Matthew J. Walsh, Marianne Moen, Sean O’Neill, Sven H. Gullbekk and Rane Willerslev. Starting from an attempt to define sacrifice, they presented its manifestations in various parts of Scandinavia from the Neolithic to the Viking Age without limiting themselves to the aspects discussed by the authors of the main part of the book. In drawing the background, the authors of the introduction cite references to human sacrifice in the written sources from ancient times and the Viking era. The interpretation of discoveries from wetland areas remains at the centre of the discussion on human sacrifice in Scandinavia. Nevertheless, both in the introductory articles and in the main part of the book, there

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Sławkowska st. 17, 31-016 Kraków, Poland; e-mail: p.wlodarczak@iaepan.edu.pl; ORCID: 0000-0003-0359-7386

is a visible tendency to interpret the special role of bogs as places of ritual practices (“liminal areas”), as well as to present human sacrifices as a universal phenomenon, appearing commonly in different places and times. The authors of the introduction presented a comparison of manifestations of human sacrifice throughout time using diagrammatic visualisations (neighbour-joining dendrogram, NeighborNet network analysis and correspondence analysis). These images do not show a clear temporal evolution in the rituals practised. In the absence of a phylogenetic relationship, a conclusion was proposed about the universal nature of human sacrifices: they appeared in different places and times, serving various purposes or functions (“as genuine acts of communion, other times and places as a regulatory measure for signalling and maintaining social order or control, and others as a necessity for violence, or as a means of mitigating calamity”). Moreover, these functions were not mutually exclusive, but on the contrary – they complemented each other.

The book presents various aspects related to human sacrifices in the following 12 chapters. In the first one, Lasse Sorensen and Poul Otto Nielsen attempt to generalise this issue for the Scandinavian Mesolithic and Neolithic. They point to an apparent increase in brutal behaviour in the Neolithic, related to competition and the emergence of surplus production, population growth and increased social stratification. When trying to interpret human sacrifices, uncertainty associated with the cause of death often appears. Double or mass burials illustrate this problem well. The authors only indicate the possibilities of their interpretation, referring to phenomena known from ethnology and cultural anthropology. They describe, among other things, mercy killing and infanticide. At the same time, they point to the dilemmas related to interpreting the nature of human sacrifices: killed enemies or intentional sacrifices. This is a typical narrative present in all of European archaeology. In the further part of the chapter, human sacrifices in wetland areas are described in more detail. Examples of sacrifices with visible injuries, other signs of violence (e.g., cords wrapped around the neck) and the origin of the deceased from distant regions, confirmed by isotope studies, are presented. The authors try to place the phenomenon of human sacrifices in the context of the social and economic structures of the Scandinavian Neolithic.

In the second chapter, Matthew J. Walsh and Samantha S. Reiter present human sacrifices from the areas of Jutland and northern Germany dated to the Bronze Age. The text concerns the custom of attendant sacrifices or ritualised killing (animal or human) associated with honouring a high-status individual. As the authors emphasise, the idea of attendant sacrifice is widespread, and is known from different periods and regions. The article presents burials indicating the implementation of attendant killing, with inhumations with human sacrifices in the form of cremation standing out here. As in the previous chapter, human sacrifices are linked to social conditions, i.e., the regulation of an apparent inequality in the social structures of Bronze Age communities.

In the next part, Pernille Pantmann focuses on properly defining human sacrifices. She believes reflection on this subject is too narrowly limited to well-preserved, mummified bodies from bogs. Therefore, she focuses on partial finds: loose parts of the bodies discovered at archaeological sites, systematising knowledge about “Loose Human Bones” (LHB). Based on the problem of LHB, the author discusses the general issue of the nature of human sacrifices and the possibilities of their identification at archaeological sites.

Ulla Mannering, a renowned specialist in the clothing of people from Scandinavian bogs, discusses several aspects of her research in a short chapter. The examples concerned are from the Late Iron Age. To present her findings, she interprets the outfit of the Huldremose Woman in more detail. The work also includes a tabular summary of clothing discoveries from Danish bogs. In conclusion, Ulla Mannering draws attention to the ritual significance of the clothing and the interpretation possibilities resulting from its analysis for describing social structures in the pre-Roman period.

Niels Lynnerup, an experienced specialist in forensic medicine, together with archaeologist Pauline Asingh, present their observations on the causes of death of bog victims in a short fifth chapter. The text begins with a historical introduction discussing progress in research on Danish bog bodies. The authors emphasise the importance of modern specialist studies of 14 bodies conducted in the last 20 years. They have provided enormous interpretation possibilities on the physical characteristics of these individuals, as well as the causes of their deaths. These are often results inconsistent with older findings. When analysing the causes of death, repeated cases of quick execution are emphasised. The final part of the article – “Meeting gods in wetland” – contains reflections on the role of bogs in the ideology of prehistoric communities. In conclusion, the authors draw attention to the fact that the previous findings of bog bodies were always accidental discoveries, which significantly complicates and sometimes prevents multi-faceted scientific research.

The unusual discovery of six skulls in pits from the Roman period in Svennum bog on Vendyssel, Denmark, is the subject of Sidsel Wåhlin’s considerations in Chapter 6. The context of this interesting discovery is discussed and interpreted here. Analyses have shown that some of these skulls were defleshed before deposition. The article presents multi-faceted specialist studies of these discoveries. The text ends with considerations of the rituals of prehistoric and historical communities, such as “The power of skulls as sacred objects”.

In Chapter 7, Mads Ravn discusses one particular bog body: Haraldskær Woman. As with other parts of the book, the case study is the starting point for a general presentation of the nature of bog bodies. Discovered in 1835, Haraldskær Woman was identified as Queen Gunhild (wife of Harald Bluetooth) and reburied in stately robes in a medieval church. It remained there until 2012, when the body was transported

to the Vejle Museum, where much specialist research was carried out. Mads Ravn attempts an anthropological interpretation of these analyses, ending his chapter with remarks on the symbolic, universal significance of wetlands – as liminal landscapes.

In Chapter 8, Christina Fredengren presents her observations on bog bodies and body parts, resulting from her experiences with the “Water of the Times” project. This concerned finds from Sweden. In her research method, she attempted to apply critical feminist posthuman theories, which oppose the traditional anthropocentric approach. In this approach, bog finds establish relationships between humans, animals and the landscape. Fredengren wants to deal with research on the nature of inhumane, i.e., social and ideological mechanisms leading to killability. These processes lead to treating humans as dehumanised tools used in the process of segregating individuals into normalised and unnormalised. This perspective, written in the spirit of posthumanism, presents alternative aspects of human sacrifices and complements the general interpretations presented in other chapters.

Matthew J. Walsh, Pernille Pantmann and Marianne Moen presented in Chapter 9 the custom of ritually depositing white stones in wetlands. The source basis for explaining this issue are selected Danish prehistoric sites. The authors discuss in detail the cosmological significance of the act of throwing stones, referring to various mythological examples. They also devote attention to interpreting white stones as substitutes for other sacrifices/offerings. This is an interesting discussion of a type of find that is rarely the subject of scientific interpretation.

Bo Jensen examines the problem of early medieval ritual killing in Northern Europe in Chapter 10. After presenting written sources in the first part of the work, Jensen concludes that they do not correspond well with data from archaeological sites. The written sources describe executions by hanging, but there is no information about the decapitations known from archaeological sources. The author also presents an extensive catalogue of examples of decapitations from the Viking era. He tries to explain this situation by the predominance of decapitated individuals killed in military conflicts in archaeological sources.

In Chapter 11, Mads D. Jensen and Jesper Olsen discuss the case of two decapitated individuals from Tissø. They classify these finds as “deviant graves”, which are among the latest discoveries of this type from the Viking Age, associated with the period of consolidation of the role of the Christian church in the Danish kingdom. The text included detailed discussion of the context of the find, problems related to its dating and the significance of the act of decapitation. The authors try to link the resulting reconstruction of the situation of public punishment with social and political changes (“administration of the monopoly of violence”) in the 11th-century Danish state.

In the last part, Klas Wikström af Edholm discusses human sacrifices

in the pages of Old Norse skaldic poetry. Starting from the definition of sacrifice, the author discusses killing enemies as a sacrificial act. He disagrees with the simple reconstruction, assuming that this act was an aesthetic metaphor showing the sacrifice to Odin of the slain, who will receive the afterlife. However, he reads from the Viking texts the importance of the killings themselves – as the essence of sacrifice.

A set of 41 tables concerning the articles discussed above is placed at the end of the book. This is not a fortunate solution for the reader. One could also expect more figures of all kinds to illustrate the striking subject matter of this work. Not all figures correspond in quality to the attractiveness of the presented discoveries.

The texts presented above (together with the introductory chapters) make up a fascinating story presenting the issue of Norse human sacrifices from different sides. Sometimes, different concepts concerning the analysed problems are proposed. The chapters consist of presentations of the basic evidence and attempts to interpret the material as best as possible. The form of the publication means that sometimes the discussions need to be longer and sometimes are repetitions of information already known to the reader from earlier works. However, the whole makes up an attractive publication that allows the reader to get to know the views of a galaxy of recognised specialists in the field of research on the fascinating topic of bog bodies.

