

An Indian Horse Sacrifice on the Leuktrian Plain

This paper examines the Greek legend of the Leuktridai and of the horse sacrifice offered to them on the eve of the Theban battle against the Spartans in 371 BCE in light of horse sacrifices in related Indo-European cultures. In it I point out how the idiosyncrasies of this sacrifice resemble those of related sacrifices in ways that defy coincidence, but rather than use these similarities to reconstruct inherited sacrificial practices per se I attempt to lay bear what these similarities tell us about certain inherited ideologies that shaped Greek mythology.

My comparison of the sacrifices employs composite sketches drawn from several Greek and Indian sources. The Greek legend is preserved in a variety of texts (e.g. Ailianos fr. 77, Diodorus Siculus 15.54.2-3), but the fullest accounts come from Pausanias (9.13.5-6, 9.14.3) and Plutarch (*Life of Pelopidas* 20-2). A group of sisters known as the Leuktridae, who lived somewhere near the Leuktrian plain, were raped by Spartans and subsequently died. Their tomb was then prophesized to be the site of the future Spartan defeat. Pausanias and Plutarch add that a horse was sacrificed to them on the eve before the battle. My comparative evidence concerns the Indian *aśvamedha* (horse-sacrifice), a remarkably sexual ritual described in *Rgveda* 1.162, 163, as well as in several corresponding Vedic and epic texts. The *aśvamedha* has several parallels elsewhere in the IE world and is generally thought to have descended from Proto-Indo-European ritual practice.

The similarities between these rituals concern sexuality, the re-establishing of a particular masculine authority, and hippomorphism, the last of which deserves the most attention.

Throughout the Greek texts the names of the girls frequently have equine elements (e.g. Hippo and Euxippe) and Plutarch explains that the horse was sacrificed in place in a human girl whom the horse resembled. The Indian texts also draw extensive parallels between the horse and the

king for whom it is sacrificed. The horse, in fact, stands in for the king. Furthermore, the same slippage of identity is reiterated in another Vedic ritual, called the *puruṣamedha* or *naramedha*, the heavily debated human sacrifice recorded in the Vedic texts. It is unclear whether this ritual ever actually occurred or if it is a liturgical pretense, but its description (in the *Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta*) presents a sacrificial practice that is modeled on the *aśvamedha*. Similar slippages of human and equine identity in sacrifice can be seen elsewhere in the IE world as well. The Greek legend of the Leuktridai then reflects especially ancient IE traditions regarding the sacrifice of horses.

I do not suggest, however, that the story of the Leuktridai preserves evidence for an *aśvamedha* ritual in Greece, but that the Greek legend reflects the same ideological tendencies that informed actual horse-sacrifices in related cultures and, therefore, that it bears witness to an inherited way of thinking about horses and humans. Recognition of this inheritance ultimately sheds light on numerous other depictions of horses in Greek myth as well, especially Achilles' sacrifice of horses and humans to Patroclus.