

Reminiscences of a forgotten practice: Human sacrifice in Mesopotamia, the Opferstätten at Al-Hiba and Tell Surghul

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INTRODUCTION

Sacrifice is not only an expression of heterogeneous beliefs, but a highly symbolic rite that lends itself to various kinds of manipulation by those carrying it out. One universal that can be stated with a fair degree of certainty is that sacrifice was in fact never perceived as purposeless by those performing it: the people involved kill (or die) for something they believe in.

This project does not intend to discern about the philosophical and historical nature of such practice, but rather expose a potential evidence of such practice in two different 3rd millennium sites in southern Mesopotamia: Al-Hiba and Tell Surghul.

In 1887 R. Koldewey performed excavations at both sites finding two circular structures on the top and on one side of Mound A and Mound B, with incinerated remains of heterogeneous nature. These narrow circular trough-like trenches sunk into the floors of enclosure were common in Mesopotamia. These consisted of an outer brick wall with an earth filling covered by an irregular paving of brick. Their interior was usually plastered with a thin coating of clay, upon which the offerings were placed.

BASIC QUESTIONS

Did Koldewey excavated these Opferstätten with appropriate methods?

Can these Opferstätten be interpreted differently? (cooking-place)

Is it possible that he missed burial pits?

Why placing animal/fruit remains inside the burial?

No burial goods?

Are we dealing with more than one individual?

The death was due to natural or unnatural causes?

OUTCOMES

Consequently of the previous questions resumed in here, it is mandatory to, not only renovate the interpretation of these places of sacrifice, but rather focusing on the archaeological traces that perhaps may evidencethe exemption of the norm. The absence of bio-anthropological studies of the bones found at Al-Hiba and Tell Surghul hinder a correct interpretation that is hard on its own to maintain.

Whether the preceding evidence should be interpreted as evidence depicting the ritual slaughter of human beings in this region is mainly dependent upon the personal bias of the particular scholar.

Due to the lack of written evidence, a proper documentation, the presence of human skeletal remains in other Opferstätten, and the inherent connotation this practice has; attempts to ascertain their real meaning or purpose are frustrating because one or another school of reasoning would interpret a given piece of evidence to support a long-held theory, and efforts at re-interpretation which do not conform to these previously-held positions are often viewed with suspicion.

DISCUSSION

Inside these structures were usually found fish and other animal and fruit remains, interpreted as offerings. Therefore and together with its location in the temple surroundings were called Opferstätten or places of sacrifice. Their form may be paralleled by similar circular structures, found on a number of Mesopotamian sites, such as Eridu, Ur, Ubad, Khafajah, Tell Asmar, Tepe Gawra (A, B, C).

In the case of Al-Hiba and Tell Surghul, among the animal and fruit offerings, human skeletal remains were also found. It is to be emphasized, however, that aside from the sites mentioned, there is no recorded evidence of human remains at other sites; what is usually to be noted is ashes and, at times, animal remains. The fact that human remains (partially cremated) are noted at some of these sites suggests they are, perhaps, rites to avert evil or expiate sin.

The offerings made in the prescribed areas were burnt offerings, and continued to be offered on almost the same spot through consecutive occupational layers. This was based on: the size of the places, the persistence of the rite, and the fact that the floor was swept clean after every use.



B. Opferstätten, Sin Temple at Khafajah. Op cit., Plate XXX