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A NEW RESEARCH ON ANIMAL SACRIFICE IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

(peer-review on the monograph: Rives, J. B. (2024). Animal Sacrifice in the Roman Empire (31 BCE-395 CE): Power, Communication, and Cultural Transformation.

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НОВЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ЩОДО ЖЕРТВОПРИНОШЕНЬ ТВАРИН

У ГРЕКО-РИМСЬКОМУ СВІТІ (рецензія на монографію: Rives, J. B. (2024). Animal Sacrifice in the Roman Empire (31 BCE-395 CE): Power, Communication, and Cultural Transformation. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024. xvi+400.

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This year there was published the monograph, written by Professor James Rives from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, dedicated to important aspects of a social and cultural role of animal sacrifices as an efficient tool for communication and a strengthening

of certain structures and institutions that played a key role in the effective functioning of the Roman Empire. The author noted that the first results of the above-mentioned research project were presented back in January of 2008 (Rives, 2024, p. ix). Consequently, the monograph under peer-review is considered to be the result of the perennial work by an American researcher of ancient history, whose sphere of scientific interests largely encompasses the issues of a religious development in the Roman Empire in general, and animal sacrifice in particular. The purpose of the monograph is to highlight specific aspects of the social function and cultural significance of animal sacrifices in the first four centuries of our era. The author outlined the parameters of the above-mentioned project and explained key terms in Foreword. In this context, the author considered “animal sacrifice” as “a ritualized practice involving the slaughter of an animal, of which the whole or parts were offered to perceived superhuman powers for the sake of winning their favor”. The author emphasized that “animal sacrifice was not a *sui generis* phenomenon but rather a particular type of social and cultural practice” (Rives, 2024, p. 4). By using the phrase “perceived superhuman powers” the author meant “the beings that the peoples of the ancient Graeco-Roman world believed to be present and active in their world and to have power over their lives that was greater than that which they could exercise themselves” (Rives, 2024, p. 5). The term “religion” is absent in the title of the monograph, which the author also justified. The author points out that there are numerous connotations of the word “religion”, which are quite popular in modern society – are misleading/false when we talk about the ancient Graeco-Roman world. Hence, when it was appropriate, the author tried to use more precise terms. At the same time, James Rives notes quite decently, it is more appropriate to use the terms “religion” and “religious” in the realities of the cultural environment of late antiquity. According to the author, it was precisely the dynamics of transformation from the culture in which there was no “religion” to the culture in which religion was present, that he highlighted in his research (Rives, 2024, pp. 15–17).

The structure of the monograph seems to be thought out well, it allows to reveal the issue properly. The author analysed the connections between wealth, status and construction of socio-political hierarchies in the context of strengthening key social structures, focused on the practice of animal sacrifice from Julius-Claudius to Severus in the first Part of the monograph “The Practice of Animal Sacrifice in the Roman Empire” (Rives, 2024, pp. 21–149). Considering the economic aspect of animal sacrifices, the author concludes that “animal sacrifice, as an expression of piety toward the gods, was a social practice that was inherently geared toward the wealthy and served in many ways to mark elite status” (Rives, 2024, p. 38). The author focused on sacrificial euergetism, analysing numerous epigraphic monuments from the Greek cities of the Roman Empire (Rives, 2024, pp. 45–60). Based on the indirect evidence of the sources, D. Rives suggested that selling the meat of sacrificial animals at the market was a common practice in the Roman Empire, more widespread in its western part than in the eastern (Rives, 2024, pp. 70–71). According to the author: “the link between public animal sacrifice and euergetism, while not normally as immediate and direct in the cities of the Latin west as in those of the Greek east, was nevertheless just as strong” (Rives, 2024, p. 79). D. Rives believes that the practice of public animal sacrifices helped structure a social and political role of local elites in the Graeco-Roman cities and surrounding territories, and, thus contributed to the structure of the Roman Empire in general (Rives, 2024, p. 80). There were slight differences in details regarding the animal sacrifices of the Greeks and the Romans, but in general, it could be seen as part of a common practice and a sign of

belonging to the Graeco-Roman civilization. The author's opinion that the representatives of the elite considered significant deviations from the norms of the Graeco-Roman practice, such as human sacrifices, as markers of deviation from civilized behaviour seems quite correct (Rives, 2024, p. 87). The author substantiates his thesis that animal sacrifice contributed to the integration of other peoples into the Graeco-Roman mainstream: some – more, like the Gauls, the others – less, like the Jews (Rives, 2024, pp. 89–105). Analysing animal sacrifices in the context of defining the relationship between the Emperor and his subjects, the author emphasizes their potential for flexibility and indeterminacy (Rives, 2024, p. 124). In turn, the above-mentioned flexibility and adaptability, resulted from the fact that it was a practice, not a doctrine, or a dogma, or any other type of verbally articulated discourse (Rives, 2024, pp. 124, 148). According to the author, there were numerous images of the Emperor as a sacrificant, which reflected the process of transformation of the empire ruled by Rome into the Empire of the Romans: “the Empire was increasingly integrated, becoming less an Empire ruled by Rome and more an Empire of Romans; the spread of Roman citizenship is one index of that change” (Rives, 2024, p. 141). The author made conclusion that animal sacrifice was transformed from a practice into a symbol – the vast majority of subjects got to know the Roman Emperor not as real, but as a virtual sacrificant, depicted as the paradigmatic officiant on coins and reliefs throughout the Empire (Rives, 2024, p. 142). Animal sacrifice in various ways contributed to the structuring of relationship between the Emperor and his subjects, and, therefore, played an important role in the formation of the Empire, defining and strengthening both local hierarchies and those formed in the empire in general, especially the overarching hierarchy between the Emperor and his subjects (Rives, 2024, pp. 146–148).

The Second Part of the book “Discourses of Animal Sacrifice in Graeco-Roman Culture and Early Christianity” deals with the issue on reflecting the practice of animal sacrifice in Graeco-Roman culture and early Christianity (Rives, 2024, pp. 153–244). There were two circumstances that contributed to changes in approaches to the practice of animal sacrifices in the Graeco-Roman world to which the author draws attention. The first circumstance is the spread of the idea of refusing to consume animal meat among intellectuals. The second circumstance is the idea of *δαίμονες* as mediators between gods and people in the cult (Rives, 2024, pp. 184–185). As for the Christians, the author believes that the only followers of Christ for whom the practice of animal sacrifice could be important were the Jews, who lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem and, accordingly, could participate in the temple cult, and even then only until the time of destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in September 70 AD (Rives, 2024, pp. 194–195). Commemoration of Christ's sacrificial death could also take place through animal sacrifices. However, this did not happen, also due to the fact that meat, as a product was too expensive for the lower strata of population, was excluded from the menu of joint Christian meals. In addition, some early Christian thinkers tried to distance themselves from the Jewish tradition (Rives, 2024, pp. 207–212). Analysing the discourses of the 2nd – 3rd centuries BC regarding animal sacrifices, the author made a conclusion that their integral part was claims to social power by those who formulated them. The above-mentioned power would be based on an understanding of the true nature of the world and the ability to bring to the ignorant majority an understanding of how best to live their lives (Rives, 2024, p. 240). The theorization of animal sacrifice practice meant that the practice itself became less important than the verbal discourses about it (Rives, 2024, p. 244).

In the Third and final Part of the monograph “Transformations of Animal Sacrifice in Late Antiquity”, James Rives studied the imperial policy on animal sacrifice from the mid-3rd

to the end of the 4th century (Rives, 2024, pp. 247–351). The author made an assumption about the weakening of the role of animal sacrifices in the structuring of the socio-economic hierarchy in the Graeco-Roman cities. According to James Rives, an organic combination of animal sacrifice with the imperial society and culture was weakened greatly. The attempts made by the Roman Emperors of the 3rd century to impose the practice of animal sacrifice from above failed and contributed to the strengthening of Christian rejection of the practice (Rives, 2024, pp. 288–289). Since the time of Constantine, the Emperors' attitude towards the practice of animal sacrifice becomes negative, with the exception of the short reign of Julian. All of Constantine's successors recognized animal sacrifice as a sign of self-identification not with Rome but with a certain religion, regardless of how they felt about that religion. The uncertain legal status of animal sacrifice lasted for about thirty years, until Theodosius I banned it completely (Rives, 2024, pp. 291–331).

The Third Part, and accordingly the monograph, ends with the chapter “The End of Animal Sacrifice?”, in which the author traces some of the Christian transformations of animal sacrifice (Rives, 2024, pp. 336–351). In particular, James Rives notes that “Starting in the early fourth century CE and continuing into the present day, some Christian groups have engaged in ritualized practices that involve the slaughter of animals” (Rives, 2024, p. 339). Analysing the present days, the author provided examples of this kind of practice in the villages of modern Greece and in the Armenian Church, although he does not consider it possible to call them animal sacrifices, since these sacrifices are not offered to superhuman forces (Rives, 2024, pp. 340–342). The author believes that in the Christian tradition “the Eucharist became the only true form of ritual sacrifice, one that reproduced in ritual form the paradigmatic sacrifice of Christ” (Rives, 2024, p. 345). In the penultimate paragraph of the monograph, the author claims that there is nothing special about animal sacrifice: it does not give us a unique insight into the human condition or a unique key to understanding the ancient Mediterranean world. However, it is noteworthy for its interaction with many aspects of the Roman imperial society and culture (Rives, 2024, p. 350).

It is natural that the monograph is written on the basis of a wide source base, because James Rives is known for his translations and commentaries of the ancient texts (Tacitus, 1999; Tacitus 2009). The author's deep knowledge of the historiography of the problem is impressive. Still, in our opinion, at least one research by William Warde Fowler is missing from the list of sources (Fowler, 1899). The monograph was written at the end of the 19th century and was dedicated to an earlier era, it largely retained relevance in our time and deserves attention in the context of this project. Quite decently the author justified the need to sometimes go beyond the defined research period (Rives, 2024, pp. 9–10).

Speaking about the chronological framework of the research, the author defined the lower limit not by the establishment of the principate system, but by the beginning of the sole rule of Augustus, which he dates to 31 BC (Rives, 2024, p. 9). Speaking of the events of 29 BC, the author also uses the name “Augustus” (Rives, 2024, p. 116). However, by 27 BC the use of the name or title “Augustus” in relation to the founder of the principate system seems incorrect.

The selection of illustrations by the author, which helps the reader understand the content better, seems to be thought out well. The illustrations are marked with the letter *f* in the general index. In our opinion, working with the illustrations would be more convenient for a reader if the author compiled a separate index for them. The conclusions drawn by the author are properly substantiated and follow from the text of the study. A positive point of

the monograph is the very informative page-by-page footnotes, which at the same time are not overloaded with unnecessary details and help in working with the main text significantly.

In general, the monograph by James Rives is a deep scientific study of an important and complex issue, written on a thorough source basis, with deep knowledge of the historiography issue, in which a number of specific historical issues are analysed and results obtained that are important for the further study of ancient history in general and the history of Ancient Rome, in particular.

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