

Ancient Human Sacrifice on China's Periphery

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☒ This bronze vessel, its location and approximate date, indicates a continuation of human sacrifice in south-west China into the Western (also Former) Han Dynasty (206BCE-25CE). Already five centuries have passed since the teachings of Kong Fuzi made human sacrifice obsolete, and several centuries have elapsed without any notable evidence of human sacrifice at the state level. Confucianism, a socio-political philosophy based on etiquette, ritual know-how, and learning made human sacrifice obsolete, as the state no longer needed blood sacrifice to impose political authority and social cohesion. Animal sacrifice, however, continued as an important imperial ritual until the collapse of imperial China in 1911.

This vessel was made and used by the kings of a non-Han-Chinese ethnic group mentioned in Chinese chronicles as the Dian. The Dian occupied a sizable territory in what is now Yunnan Province until taken over by the Han-dynasty Emperor Wudi in 109BCE. The discovery of a Chinese golden seal in 1956 testifies to a kind of tributary relationship imposed by the Han. Chinese chroniclers described the Dian men as coiling their hair on the head-top; they said that the Dian lived off the crops they planted every year in their fields and that they were dispersed in towns and villages. Dian bronze vessels and other implements unearthed since the 1930s and 40s, but especially in the 50s and 70s, revealed a wealth of information about the Dian.

We learn from these excavations that the Dian used seashells as a means of exchange and as symbols of wealth and power. We also learn that oxen were not used to plough the fields nor to pull carts, but as sacrificial domestic animals, sources of food, and symbols of property, wealth, and power, whence their appearance on the lids of bronze vessels made to contain seashells. There are also war scenes, slaves weaving, and oxen sculpted on the lids. Numerous bronze weapons were unearthed: spears, dagger axes, swords, arrow-holders, helmets, arm-armors, leg-armors, helmets, arrowheads, crossbows, shields.

We discovered in these excavations bronze-cast domestic tools such as cooking utensils, kettles, wine cups, jars, ladles, cauldrons, rice steamers, bowls, needles, ear-cups, tables, mirrors, massage-pillows, weaving tools, and ornaments such as bracelets. There were also tools, such as bronze axes, sickles, chisels, choppers, awls, and fish-hooks. Of special interest to us are the musical instruments such as bronze drums, bells, and reed pipes that were excavated. Though most of these items were made of bronze, there are also stone and iron ware, as well as gold and silver ware, jade, agate, turquoise. A house model, looking like a Vietnamese house, was discovered in a bronze coffin unearthed in 1963. All of these were replicas of daily instruments, which were buried with the dead kings.

Some of these vessels came in the shape of drums, hence the likelihood that they were used in rituals and prayers for fertility, as well as receptacles for seashells. Bronze drums must have been important implements calling the people to battle, sending them messages, and used in funeral and banquets. These bronze vessels reveal to us the religious ceremonies and beliefs and the existence of a slave-based economy, and that bronze vessels and implements were buried with the dead and were most likely symbolic instruments of socio-political power. The Dian were illiterate, transmitting important cultural information to the next generations through sculpted oxen and ritual proceedings such as we find on some unearthed vessels. These vessels carried important messages, statements about legitimate political authority and economic wealth.

Furthermore, we learn from these vessels the extraordinary casting skills the Dian had acquired at an unknown date from the Chinese. Some of their vessels, especially the one under investigation here, but also the ones with sculpted oxen, are masterpieces of Dian casting.

The bronze vessel under investigation here was unearthed at Mt. Shizhai in Jining County, Yunnan Province, in 1956 (pit no. 12). Shaped in the form of a drum, it is 53cm high; the lid measures 32 cm in diameter and 29.5cm at the bottom. It depicts on the lid a scene of human sacrifice, animal sacrifice, and communal feasting. The scene contains 129 persons, domestic animals such as horse, pig, rabbits, dogs, and a fish. The vessel stands on the feet of a dog, a domestic animal, and comes with tiger-shaped handles. The scene can be divided into four segments:

1. Communal feast under the roof
2. Preparation for sacrificing a human tied to an ancestral shrine, a kind of sculpted rock or stele
3. Cutting the meat of domestic animals and cooking
4. Feeding wild animals

Let us look closely at these four segments:

In Plate 1, the king sits on top under a roof facing away from the to-be-sacrificed man. He is the only one who sits in a chair. There are eight persons who offer him food. They all sit on their heels in the dirt. The roofed area is the center of the sacrificial event.



In plate 2, there are many men carrying weapons and instruments of punishment. A naked man is tied to a sculpted rock, possibly the king's ancestral shrine.



In plate 3, cooks prepare domestic animals—an ox and a pig—placing the meat into a large cauldron with a ladle on top. The food is offered to the king and the people under the roof.



In 4, we see a tiger, a leopard, and a snake. The tiger is about to devour a dog. We do not know who will get the horse and the pig in the rear. Tigers and leopards are symbols of power. Furthermore, there are musicians and people who present tribute.



It is difficult to determine the provenance of the victim. Looking at his facial features, he seems different from the others, perhaps a Central Asian captive.

How are we to interpret this event? A few assertions can be made, perhaps not with a hundred percent certainty, but as strong possibilities. This vessel symbolizes socio-political authority in more than a single dimension. The vessel is a shell container, a symbol of economic wealth and power. It is shaped in the form of a drum, an important ritual instrument and political tool. It depicts on the lid a sacrificial ritual with the king as the chief ritualist. The victim is tied to the ancestral shrine. This is also where he is going to be killed, undoubtedly as a way to pay respect to the ancestors, thanking them for a good year or as a prayer for a good year to come. At the same time, it is an important social event, consolidating the community under the worldly and religious authority of the king. What will happen to the victim's body is unknown; is it distributed among the people? Are certain parts given to specific recipients? Who gets the head? who eats the heart? Or is it equally divided as in numerous sacrificial rituals elsewhere? Who if anyone drinks the blood? Is any part of the body conserved as a kind of trophy? All these are of course open questions.

The point I would like to suggest is that this sacrifice reminds us of the human sacrifices at the altars of Shang and Chou-dynasty emperors I discussed in my *Anthropoetics* article, ["Archaic Chinese Sacrificial Practices in the Light of Generative Anthropology"](#) (December 1995). It is a symbol of power, very much like the shells it contains, the musical instrument it depicts, and some of the animals depicted on it: tigers and leopards. This vessel was also important enough a symbol of royal power that it was buried with the king.

We know that human sacrifice and cannibalism were widely practiced in pre-literate societies and that they were not local but universal cultural phenomena. To prove that the ancient Chinese also participated in this culture, which has much in common with the GA position about the violent origin and early development of human civilization, was what prompted me to write this article.