

## “Human Sacrifice at Perusia”

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In his treatise on clemency, Seneca notes that Augustus in his old age became mild and merciful, but this was only after the rage of his youth, after the slaughter of the civil wars, and *post Perusinas aras et proscriptiones*, “after the Perusian altars and the proscriptions.”<sup>1</sup> Seneca is alluding to Augustus’ sack of Perusia in 40 BC when he supposedly had 300 senators and equites sacrificed on an altar to Julius Caesar.

Historians have always been skeptical about the historicity of this event, because it would seem to go against established Roman *mores*. However, if some form of human sacrifice had occurred following the fall of Perusia, as I will argue here is likely, then this reveals an interesting tension in Roman society. Human sacrifice, although generally documented as repulsive to Romans, was not entirely inconsistent with ancient traditions and Roman attitudes toward the treatment of conquered foes. For example, during the Punic Wars, after consulting the Sibylline books, the Romans turned to human sacrifice to propitiate the gods. Other Roman traditions, such as the *deditio* of generals and the mysterious *rex nemorensis* (discussed later), also show traces of human sacrifice. This paper will examine the literary sources that reference this event and will reconcile some of their contradictions. It will also note one small bit of material culture that offers circumstantial evidence. At Perusia, it will be argued, years of civil war had laid bare some of the more archaic aspects of Roman religion, resulting in the seemingly “un-Roman” practice of human sacrifice.

Only a few literary sources document the fall of Perusia. Seneca the Younger’s passing comment has already been mentioned. Suetonius and Cassius Dio both describe the sacrifice of

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<sup>1</sup> Seneca, *De Clementia*, 11.1; all translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

senators and *equites* to the deified Julius.<sup>2</sup> Velleius Paterculus and Appian, however, give different accounts of the fall of the city. Appian acknowledges that Augustus had the leading men of the city executed, but does not mention any form of human sacrifice.<sup>3</sup> And Velleius writes that “rage was vented on the Perusians more by the anger of the soldiers than by the will of the commander.”<sup>4</sup> Both Appian and Velleius attribute the destruction of the city to a man named Macedonicus who started a fire.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Suetonius, Dio, and Seneca all agree that human sacrifices took place, while Velleius and Appian offer a different story.

Based on the disagreement between these sources, some scholars have chosen to discount the whole story of the human sacrifices as a fabrication by Octavian’s political enemies.<sup>6</sup> These scholars point to the fact that neither Suetonius nor Dio definitively support the veracity of the story.<sup>7</sup> Suetonius merely reports *Scribunt quidam* – “some write” – that three hundred were sacrificed, and Dio qualifies his version by writing *καὶ λόγος γε ἔχει* – “and the story goes.”<sup>8</sup> For these historians, then, this language suggests that Dio and Suetonius regarded their sources as unreliable hearsay. Even Seneca’s mention of the “Perusian altars” has been dismissed by Reid as a literary device, “mere allusion,” and not a valid historical source.<sup>9</sup>

At the root of these arguments against the historicity of the event lies a disbelief that the Romans could have tolerated such a cruel act; human sacrifice seems inconsistent with Roman

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.; Cassius Dio, 48.14.4.

<sup>3</sup> Appian, *The Civil Wars* 5.48.

<sup>4</sup> Velleius, 2.74; “*in Perusinos magis ira militum quam voluntate saevitum ducis.*”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.; Appian, *The Civil Wars* 5.49.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956), 212; Kenneth Scott, “The Political Propaganda of 44-30 B. C.,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 11 (1933): 28.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, “The Political Propaganda of 44-30 B. C.,” 27; John M. Carter, *Suetonius: Divus Augustus*, (Great Britain: Bristol Classical Press, 1982), 104.

<sup>8</sup> Suetonius, *Vita Divi Augusti* 15; “*Scribunt quidam*”; Cassius Dio, 48.14.4, in *Dio’s Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary, Vol. V (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1917), 289.

<sup>9</sup> J. S. Reid, “Human Sacrifices at Rome and Other Notes on Roman Religion,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 2 (1912): 44.

laws and sensibilities. Livy dubs the practice a “not at all Roman rite.”<sup>10</sup> Because Roman elites considered human sacrifice to be barbaric, they generally ascribed it to non-Romans. When listing the evils of *religio*, Lucretius describes the sacrifice of Iphianassa by Agamemnon using the same words Suetonius would use of Octavian’s deed at Perusia: *hostia* (a sacrificial victim) and *mactare* (to slaughter or to sacrifice).<sup>11</sup> Caesar, attempting to paint the Gauls as inherently un-Roman, chooses to record their human sacrifices. He writes that “they have statues of great magnitude, of which they fill the limbs, woven together with twigs, with living humans; once the statues are set on fire, the humans, engulfed by flames, are killed.”<sup>12</sup> The Roman revulsion to human sacrifice was codified in 97 B.C. by a decree of the senate banning the *immolatio* of humans.<sup>13</sup> Given stringent Roman law and a general revulsion to human sacrifice, some find it hard to believe that Octavian would have slaughtered his enemies on an altar to his father, a man renowned for his leniency and *clementia*.<sup>14</sup>

Even so, many scholars see the agreement between Suetonius, Dio, and Seneca as compelling enough evidence to accept the fact that human sacrifices took place. Anthony Everitt, for instance, believes that the incident was “very probable.”<sup>15</sup> W. F. J. Knight argues that, despite questions raised by some scholars, “the evidence remains sufficient.”<sup>16</sup> Whatever the case, Suetonius and Dio must have had access to sources which reported the incident, for they even agree on small details, including the number sacrificed (300) and their identity as men of both orders, ἱππῆς καὶ βουλευταί. Even the words they use to describe the incident are similar. Suetonius writes that the men were sacrificed *ad aram Divo Iulio extractam* – “at an

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<sup>10</sup> Livy, *Historiae* 22.57; “*minime Romano sacro.*”

<sup>11</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 1.99

<sup>12</sup> Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* 6.16.3-4; “*Alii immani magnitudine simulacra habent, quorum contexta viminibus membra vivis hominibus complent; quibus succensis circumventi flamma exanimantur homines.*”

<sup>13</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.3.12; “*senatusconsultum factum est, ne homo immolaretur.*”

<sup>14</sup> Carter, *Suetonius*, 104.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Everitt, *Augustus: The Life of Rome’s First Emperor* (New York: Random House, 2006), 103-105.

<sup>16</sup> W. F. J. Knight, “Animamque Sverbam,” *The Classical Review* Vol 46, No. 2 (May, 1932): 57.

altar erected to the Deified Julius” – and Dio uses an almost identical prepositional phrase in Greek, *ἐπὶ τὸν τῷ καίσαρι τῷ προτέρῳ ὡσιωμένον* – “at an [altar] consecrated to the former Caesar.” These similarities do not prove that the accounts are reliable, but they do suggest that both Suetonius and Dio, writing over a hundred years after Augustus’ death, were using the same sources. It is also difficult to believe that propaganda so hostile to Augustus could have persisted for so long without some basis in fact. Seneca’s comment on the “Perusian altars” clearly makes a connection between Augustus’ mercilessness and the fall of the city. Even Velleius’s pro-Augustus account records some form of brutal slaughter, while Appian remains silent on the manner in which the senators *–βουλευταί–* were executed. After all, Octavian only came to appreciate the virtue of his father’s *clementia* later on in his life.<sup>17</sup> Based on the agreement of the sources, human sacrifice at this point in Octavian’s career is entirely plausible.

If the agreement between Suetonius and Dio is not enough, consider the problems with the accounts of Velleius and Appian. Velleius is part of the literary tradition of “universal summarists,” so the events he describes are restricted by a need for brevity.<sup>18</sup> In addition, his history is colored by a strong pro-Augustan bias, so it is no surprise that he defends Octavian and attributes cruelty instead to the soldiers.<sup>19</sup> Although Appian provides many details on the city’s fall, his facts appear to be confused. He describes Cannutius, Clodius, and Flavius as *decuriones*; however, these men were probably not local elite but important politicians from Rome.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, neither source agrees on the fate of the local population. Appian says merely that Augustus intended to turn over the local community to his men, but was prevented

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<sup>17</sup> Werner Eck, *The Age of Augustus*, Trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 16-17.

<sup>18</sup> A. J. Woodman, *Velleius Paterculus: The Tiberian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 42.

<sup>19</sup> Scott, “The Political Propoganda of 44-30 B.C.,” 27.

<sup>20</sup> Reid, “Human Sacrifices at Rome,” 42.

from doing so by Macedonicus' fire.<sup>21</sup> Velleius, on the other hand, explicitly mentions cruel treatment of the Perusians by the Roman soldiers, contrary to the will of Augustus.<sup>22</sup> So Velleius and Appian are quite problematic as sources due to their biases, disagreement, and confusion over the facts.

Based upon the merits of the sources, then, Suetonius and Dio's version of events is most reliable. Thus, while it cannot be determined with certainty whether Augustus himself ordered the ritual slaughter, it is likely that there was some form of human sacrifice conducted at the fall of Perusia. The inconsistency between this incident and Roman attitudes towards human sacrifice demands a consideration of possible explanations for the event and its implications for our understanding of Roman culture and religion.

First, it is worth noting that the slaughter of the citizens of Perusia is entirely consistent with the Roman attitude towards conquered foes. It is well established that the Romans regarded *deditio*, surrender, as absolute; it "did not guarantee to the defeated even the minimum of human rights."<sup>23</sup> In a passage of Livy, the Aetolians misunderstood the Roman concept of surrender and futilely attempted to negotiate even after they had given up.<sup>24</sup> The Perusians, on the other hand, understood that the vanquished could expect nothing from the conqueror. When they surrendered, they left themselves entirely at the mercy of Octavian and pled for leniency. A massacre, then, should not be surprising. What is surprising is the religious manner in which it was conducted.

The sacrifice at Perusia stands out as a unique incident, but it is not completely remarkable. Throughout Roman history and culture, there is a discernible pattern of human

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<sup>21</sup> Appian, *The Civil Wars* 5.49.

<sup>22</sup> Velleius, 2.74.

<sup>23</sup> Carlin Barton, "The Price of Peace in Ancient Rome," in *War and Peace in the Ancient World*, ed. Kurt Raflaub (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 249.

<sup>24</sup> Livy, 36.27-28.

sacrifice, usually in times of crisis. For instance, in 228, 216, and 114/113 BC the Romans, facing imminent conflict, buried pairs of foreigners (Greeks and Gauls) alive in the Forum Boarium.<sup>25</sup> The Romans also practiced the live burial of Vestal virgins who had been impure.

In fact, in still other rituals there are clear echoes of archaic customs of human sacrifice. A Roman general would sometimes offer himself to the gods before he charged headlong into the enemy.<sup>26</sup> If by chance he survived the battle, he would bury a larger than life statue as a replacement for his life. The murder associated with the legendary *rex nemorensis*, a priest at the sanctuary of Diana at Lake Nemi, seems to allude to human sacrifice. According to Strabo, the priest could be ritually killed and replaced by any runaway slave.<sup>27</sup> Gladiatorial games are widely considered to have emerged from archaic human sacrifice rituals and developed into a more secular spectacle.<sup>28</sup> There are also veiled references in Roman myth to human sacrifice. For instance, the death of Remus has been described as a necessary “foundation sacrifice for Rome’s protective walls.”<sup>29</sup> Although the concept of human sacrifice was abhorrent to most Roman elite, it was not outside their grasp, for many of their rituals and beliefs were somehow rooted in the practice.

But why would Octavian’s men have taken part in such a profane act at Perugia? For the Romans, human sacrifice was most conceivable during times of unrest. Alison Futrell describes the bloody gladiatorial games of 42 BC as “the logical fulfillment” of an increasingly violent political system.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, more obvious instances of human sacrifice could have been the product of ongoing civil war. Julius Caesar’s alleged use of human sacrifice as a form of

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<sup>25</sup> Zsuzsanna Varhelyi, “The Specters of Roman Imperialism: The Live Burials of Gauls and Greeks at Rome,” *Classical Antiquity* Vol. 26, No. 2 (Oct., 2007): 278.

<sup>26</sup> Reid, “Human Sacrifices at Ancient Rome,” 40.

<sup>27</sup> Strabo, *Geographia*, 5.3.12; Suetonius, *Vita Gai*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Roland Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 1972), 21-23.

<sup>29</sup> T. P. Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), 142.

<sup>30</sup> Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 3.

punishment in the Campus Martius could be understood in this manner.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Octavian's employment of human sacrifice at Perugia could have resulted from the ordeal of civil war.

If human sacrifice was made possible by social upheaval, it remains to identify a rationale for the incident at Perugia. The human sacrifice of Octavian's enemies can be understood in much the same way as the live burials of 228, 216, and 114/113 BC. As Varhelyi argues, these sacrifices were meant to deal not so much with present and future foes, but with past offences; human sacrifice was a way that Romans could seek "purification from avenging spirits."<sup>32</sup> Given this religious purpose, it is no wonder that Dio calls the altar at Perugia consecrated – ὁσιωμένον. One of the primary goals of Octavian and his men was to avenge Julius Caesar's death, and the discovery of slingstones at the site inscribed with the words *divom Iulium* reinforces this fact.<sup>33</sup> With this desire for vengeance in mind, the human sacrifice at Perugia may start to make more sense.

The description of Octavian's action as "an act of unnecessary barbarity, if not impiety,"<sup>34</sup> needs to be reconsidered in view of some of these aspects of Roman religion, because it is a normative judgment based not on the peculiarities of Roman paganism but on more contemporary values. Those commentators who describe Roman religion in quite favorable terms, who see an "inherent" goodness in Roman religion, seem also to reflect this sort of bias. Ogilvie, for instance, has gone so far as to say that Roman religion "was a fine, yet tolerant, religion whose adherents committed very few crimes in its name and who were healthily free of neuroses."<sup>35</sup> It is doubtful that every Roman was ever free of neuroses, which would certainly disrupt our views of later emperors. It is also not necessary to linger on any assessment of

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<sup>31</sup> Cassius Dio, 43.24.

<sup>32</sup> Varhelyi, "The Specters of Roman Imperialism," 300.

<sup>33</sup> Reid, "Human Sacrifices at Rome," 43.

<sup>34</sup> Scott, "The Political Propaganda of 44-30 B.C.," 27-28.

<sup>35</sup> Ogilvie, *The Romans and Their Gods* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), 124.

Roman religion as “fine” and “tolerant,” because these are value judgments that have no place in our understanding of the religious life of the Romans. What is important to note, as has been shown, is that human sacrifice (as at Perugia) was not wholly inconsistent with Roman religion. In Roman myth and ritual, there are elements of the practice that highlight some of the more (as we would assess them) unseemly features of Roman religion.

That said, these sacrifices were not just the product of the stress of war. In fact, Octavian’s act of vengeance may have been motivated by some elements of *pietas*. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas kills his foes even as they beg for their lives.<sup>36</sup> Like Octavian, he is bound to seek retribution. Having sworn to Evander to protect his son, upon Pallas’ death, Aeneas feels as though it is his sacred duty to seek vengeance. For this reason, the hero swears to sacrifice eight prisoners to the spirits.<sup>37</sup> The absolutism of Aeneas’ diction – “die and join your brother”<sup>38</sup> – mirrors Octavian’s pronouncements of death at Perugia – “you must die.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, when Aeneas kills Turnus, Virgil has the hero sacrifice – *immolat* – his opponent in Pallas’ name, even though *immolatio* was banned by the Senate in 97 BC.<sup>40</sup> In these passages, Virgil may have been attempting to justify Octavian’s cruelty, but he may have simply been trying to follow the Homeric tradition.<sup>41</sup> Literary evidence is necessarily vague, but Virgil’s picture of slaughter and human sacrifice as “deeds not of cruelty but of vindication”<sup>42</sup> is a helpful parallel for understanding Octavian’s cruel actions.

In a final assessment, the agreement of Suetonius and Dio, along with the confusion and bias of Velleius and Appian, suggests that some form of human sacrifice took place at the fall of

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<sup>36</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* 10.601.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 10.517-520.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 10.600; “*morere et fratrem ne desere frater.*”

<sup>39</sup> Suetonius, *Vita Divi Augusti* 15; “*moriendum esse.*”

<sup>40</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, 12.948-949; “*Pallas te hoc vulnere, Pallas / immolat.*”

<sup>41</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 21.27, 23.175.

<sup>42</sup> Knight, “*Animamqve Sverbam,*” 57.



Perusia. Also, it is clear that Octavian and his army were intent on avenging the death of Julius Caesar, as the slingstones discovered at the site and inscribed with the words *divom Iulium* seem to suggest. Given the likelihood that this extraordinary event happened, it has some important implications for our understanding of Roman culture and history. The elements of human sacrifice found in Roman myths and rituals suggest, for example, that the practice was not completely alien. Moreover, the ordeal and stress of civil war makes human sacrifice plausible as an act of vengeance and *pietas*. Octavian's human sacrifice was not simply a barbaric act of impiety. Rather, it speaks to the complexity of Roman religion, a system which at times could rationalize extremely violent acts.

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