

# Ritual Sacrifice

In

## Medieval Foundations

S. Baring Gould, 1892

*What follows is an article reprinted in part from a book titled "Strange Survivals: Some Chapters in the History of Man," published by Methuen & Co. in London at the end of the last century. Of course, some of it is hyperbole, but many of the stories probably emerged from some true event, and you may want to refer to some of the author's formal references yourself. If you do find more substantiation on this topic, please enlighten the guild – Ed.*

**B**uilding, in early ages, was not so lightly taken in hand as at present, and the principles of architectural construction were ill understood. If the walls showed tokens of settlement, the reason supposed was that the earth had not been sufficiently propitiated, and that she refused to bear the superimposed burden.

Every great work was initiated with sacrifice. If a man started on a journey, he first made an offering. A warlike expedition was not to be undertaken till an oblation had been made, and the recollection of this lingered on in an altered form of superstition... The baptism of a vessel nowadays with a bottle of wine is a relic of breaking of the neck of a human victim and the suffusion of the prow with blood, just as the burial of a bottle of coins at the present day under a foundation stone is the faded reminiscence of immuring a human victim.

Plutarch says that when Romulus was about to found the Eternal City, by the advice of Etruscan Augurs, he opened a deep pit and cast into it "first fruits of everything that is reckoned good by use, or necessary by nature," and before it was closed by a great stone, Faustulus and Quinctilius were killed and laid under it. This place was the Comitium, and from it as

a center, Romulus described the circuit of the walls.

A curious incident occurs in the legend of St. Columba, founder of Iona. The original idea of a sacrifice to propitiate the earth was gone, the the idea that appropriation of a site was not possible without one took its place. The monk is said to have buried one of his monks, Oran by name, alive, under the foundations of his new abbey, be-

cause, as fast as he built, the spirits of the soil demolished by night what he built by day.

It is certain that the usage remained in practice long after Europe had become somewhat Christian; how late it continued we shall be able to show nominally.

Good weather is still thought in parts of Germany to be secured by building a live cock into a wall, and cattle are prevented from straying by burying a living blind dog under the threshold of a stable.

In France, among the peasantry, a new farmhouse is not entered until a cock has been killed, and its blood sprinkled in the rooms. In Poitou, the explanation given is that if the living are to dwell in the house, the dead must first have passed through it. And in Germany, until recently it was customary to place an empty coffin under the foundations of a house.

The idea of a sacrifice faded with the spread of Christianity, but in its place rose the notion of securing a spiritual protector to a building, and, until quite recently, the belief remained that weak foundations could be strengthened by burying a living being under them.



The medieval priest allowed the old Pagan customs to continue unrebuked, and he half believed them himself. An Italian contemporary historian says that when Sessa was besieged by the king of Naples, and ran short of water, the inhabitants put a consecrated host in the mouth of an ass, and buried the ass alive in the porch of the church. Rain commenced immediately.

In 1885, Holsworthy parish church was restored, and when the southwest angle wall was taken down, workers found a skeleton embedded in the mortar and stone. According to their testimony, there was no trace of a tomb, and the body had been buried alive, and hurriedly. A mass of mortar was over the mouth, and stones had been heaped around the corpse. Then the wall was finished leisurely.

When the parish church of Kirkcudbright was partially renovated in 1838, the skull of a man was found built into a wall above the doorway. This church was erected in 1730, showing how the shades of the old tradition continued even to that date.

In 1615, Count Anthony Gunther of Oldenburg, on visiting a dyke under construction, found the workmen about to bury an infant under it. He interfered, saved the child, reprimanded the builders and imprisoned the mother who had sold the babe for this purpose.

Count Floris III of Holland, who married Ada, daughter of Henry, the son of David, King of Scotland, visited the island of Walcheren in 1157, to receive the homage of the islanders. On his return, he dispatched workers to repair the sea walls. In one place, they were unable to make the walls stand until they had sunk a live dog in the quicksand. The dyke is called Hontsdamm to this day. Usually a live horse was buried in such places.

The dog or horse is a substitute for a child. In other cases, a wolf or a cock may play the sacrificial role. Every so called Devil's Bridge has some story with it pointing to sacrifice, and sometimes to the substitution of an animal for a human victim. The almost invariable story is that the devil had been invoked and promised his aid, if given the first life that passed over the bridge. On the completion of a bridge, a goat, or a dog or a rabbit is driven over and torn to pieces by the devil.

The latest instance of a human being having been

immured alive, of which a record remains and which is well authenticated, is that of Geronimo of Oran, in the wall to the fort near the gate of Bab-el-oved, of Algiers in 1569. The fort is composed of blocks of pise, a concrete made of stones, lime and sand, mixed in certain proportions, trodden down and rammed hard into a mold.

Geronimo was a Christian who had served in a Spanish regiment. He was taken by pirates and handed over to the Dey of Algiers. When the fort was in construction, Geronimo was put into one of the molds, the concrete rammed around him (18th Sept., 1569), and then the block was put into the walls.

On December 27, 1853, the block was extracted. The old fort was demolished to make room for the modern "Fort des vingt-quatre-heures," under the direction of Captain Susoni, when a petard which had been placed between two or three courses of pise near the ground exploded, exposing a cavity containing a human skeleton, the whole of which was visible, from the neck to the knees in a perfect state of preservation. The remains, the cast of the head, and the broken block of pise are now in the Cathedral of Algiers.

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We see now how suitable was the description given of Christ the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world – and the appropriateness of the symbol of Christ as the chief cornerstone of the church.

*This is a much abbreviated form of the original article (courtesy of Mistress Aelflaed of Duckford). If you want to see the rest, I suggest you order the book through ILL-or write to her and ask for photocopies, which she will supply. I'm told, if you pay her copying fees – Ed.*