

SACRIFICE OR OFFERING: WHAT CAN WE SEE IN THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NORTHERN EUROPE?

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Abstract: This article analyses the concepts of sacrifice and offering, with a further aim to discuss how to decode and differentiate these practices in archaeological material. The main criteria for distinguishing sacrifice and offering from anthropology and comparative religious studies are presented. The focal points are the relationship between sacrifice and offering, questions of linguistic preferences, and qualitative criteria such as concepts of value, destruction and sanctification. The problems of making a distinction between the two concepts are discussed on the basis of the archaeological record of intentional artefact deposits in northern Europe, especially Estonia. As a result, it is argued that there can be no universal and strictly distinguishing definitions for these religious practices. They share a common idea of communication with the supernatural via giving, but any further distinction depends on the specific cultural context of both the practitioners and contemporary scholars investigating the archaeological record. Therefore, any universal definitions that result from trying to distinguish between sacrifice and offering are problematic, and they should be seen rather as scholarly categories, which, however, help to acknowledge the multifaceted and variable nature of these religious phenomena. This article stresses the importance of acknowledging the context-dependency of any religious and ritual activity and dismissing a quest for defining and applying concepts related to such activity cross-regionally and -temporally.

Keywords: archaeology, deposits, northern Europe, offering, religion, ritual, sacrifice

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the archaeology of ritual and religion has developed into a flourishing discipline with its own specialist publications, methodological and theoretical discussions and various regional case studies. A clear emergence of such publications was evident in the 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. Renfrew 1985; 1994; Garwood et al. 1991; Carmichael et al. 1994), but a considerable increase has taken place since the turn of the millennium (see, e.g., Insoll 2004a; Insoll 2004b; Barrowclough & Malone 2007; Kyriakidis 2007; Hays-Gilpin & Whitley

2008; Rowan 2011). *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion* (Insoll 2011a) was published in 2011. The topics covered in these numerous books and articles are varied, including different geographical regions, temporal scales, and general abstract questions. Debates about religious and ritual practices, such as sacrifice and offering, are represented among them. However, the way that these two terms are utilised in different publications often contains some fluidity and vagueness. There is also not much of a clear and in-depth discussion as to which term – sacrifice or offering – is preferred in specific research contexts and why.

Intentional artefact deposits, be it hoards, wealth deposits, special or structured deposits, votives, etc. (for discussion about terminology see, e.g., Osborne 2004; Garrow 2012; Oras 2012), are one of the find groups which often involve the use of the terms ‘sacrifice’ and ‘offering’. This group of archaeological material is a widespread phenomenon with a long-term history. In the northern European context, it is possible to talk about the emergence of artefact deposits as a separate and specific archaeological find group from the Mesolithic onwards (e.g. Stjernquist 1997; Berggren 2010). The material from northern European intentional artefact deposits is very rich in the Bronze Age (e.g. Levy 1982; Čivilytė 2009) and abundant in the Iron Age (see, e.g., Fabech 1991; Hedeager 1992; Ilkjær 2000; Jørgensen et al. 2003; Bliujienė 2010; Oras 2010). The aim of this article is to discuss the choice of terms that archaeologists use when talking about various practices of artefact depositing in northern Europe. Which term – either sacrifice or offering – should be used in discussing northern Europe prehistoric contexts and why? Can we differentiate between sacrifice and offering in northern Europe prehistory on the basis of archaeological material and how? Are there any universal applications of these terms regardless of time and space? Is the differentiation important for the practitioners or is it purely a scholarly endeavour? These are the questions taken into consideration in the following pages.

I start by introducing some general explanations and issues related to the definitions of and distinctions between sacrifice and offering. The traditional use and definition of these two terms in the social sciences and humanities is discussed, and the main difficulties of distinguishing these two concepts at both the mental and material level are analysed. These difficulties are approached via what I call the four main confusions: confusion of language, value, destruction and concepts of sacred/holy (see below). Thereafter, I discuss if and how these differences can be traced in material culture alone, i.e., whether we can separate those two concepts in archaeology. This analysis and discussion is based on the material of the northern Europe intentional artefact deposits.

The broader aim of this article is to contribute to the debate of terminology-related issues in the archaeology of religion and ritual. It has to be emphasised that I am not planning to analyse long-term and detailed developments of any specific religion(s) and/or religious practices. This article is rather terminology-based, aiming to provide a polemic discussion on the choice of terms that archaeologists prefer to utilise in their academic research on past religions.

SACRIFICE AND OFFERING: GENERAL DEFINITIONS

Although several important qualitative differences can be distinguished in the concepts of sacrifice and offering (see below), there are certain common characteristics in the general definitions of these terms. The Oxford English Dictionary Online¹ entries define them as follows:

Offer n.: An act of offering something for acceptance or refusal; an expression of intention or willingness to give or do something if desired; a proposal, an invitation.

Offer v.: To present (something) to God, a god, a saint, etc., as an act of devotion; to sacrifice; to give in worship.

Offering n.: Something presented or sacrificed to God, a god, a saint, etc., in worship or devotion; a thing (as fruits, a slain animal, money, etc.) given as an expression of religious homage; a sacrifice; an oblation.

Sacrifice n.: Primarily, the slaughter of an animal (often including the subsequent consumption of it by fire) as an offering to God or a deity. Hence, in wider sense, the surrender to God or a deity, for the purpose of propitiation or homage, of some object of possession. Also applied *fig.* to the offering of prayer, thanksgiving, penitence, submission, or the like.

Sacrifice n.: That which is offered in sacrifice; a victim immolated on the altar; anything (material or immaterial) offered to God or a deity as an act of propitiation or homage.

Sacrifice v.: To offer as a sacrifice; to make an offering or sacrifice.

Very often the word 'sacrifice' is preferred in dictionaries and encyclopaedias as the main entry. For instance, in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade (1987), there is no special entry for the word 'offering', and instead the words 'almsgiving', 'sacrifice', and 'tithes' are referenced. The same applies to the *Religion Past & Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion* (Betz 2007),

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions (2000), and *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology* (2008).

In the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Joseph Henninger (1987) defines the word 'sacrifice' as a religious act on its highest level. He also points out that it is often used as a synonym for 'offering'. According to him, the latter forms a wider category that refers to presenting a gift in general, and sacrifice can form one part of that act. He also emphasises that it is the receiver of the gift that matters, i.e., the supernatural being with whom one wishes to communicate via the gift.

In the most recent encyclopaedia of religious studies, Philippe Borgeaud (2012) gives a rather specific definition of the word 'sacrifice':

[...] *Sacrifice* denotes both the living creature or offering sacrificed and the ritual action (e.g. destruction) through which that creature or object is dedicated to a supernatural being. [...] Etymologically *sacrifice* suggests an action in which the sacrificed object is "made holy / sacred" (Lat. *Sacrum facere*).

In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (2000), the term 'sacrifice' is defined as follows:

(Lat., 'that which is made sacred'). The offering of something, animate or inanimate, in a ritual procedure which establishes, or mobilizes, a relationship of mutuality between the one who sacrifices (whether individual or group) and the recipient – who may be human but more often is of another order, e.g. God or spirit. Sacrifice pervades virtually all religions, but it is extremely difficult to say precisely what the meanings of sacrifice are – perhaps because the meanings are so many.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology (2008) defines the same word as follows:

The slaughter of an animal or person or the surrender of a possession as an offering to a deity. [...] Although generally seen as ceremonial in context, sacrifice may have functional ends institutionalized in the practice itself, for example the regulation of population and the creation of an instrument of political terror.

The main link between these two concepts according to those definitions as well as the classical works on this subject (e.g. Firth 1963; Baaren 1964; Turner 1977; Bourdillon & Fortes 1980; Hubert & Mauss 1964; Hicks 2001; Girard 2011) is that they both form an important means of communication with the supernatural via giving up or presenting something in order to attain its (his/her)

favour. However, there are different opinions about the main elements of these practices as well, and this is where it all becomes confusing and complicated.

Based on the definitions provided above, different ideas about the distinction of sacrifice and offering can be traced. For instance, Theodorus Petrus van Baaren (1964) has emphasised that offering is an element of sacrifice, the materiality of it. According to him, offering plays a crucial role in the act of sacrifice along with other elements, such as the active agent conducting the sacrifice, the time and place, the method, the receiver and the motives behind it. Another example is by Jan van Baal (1976: 161–162), who states that sacrifice and offering are both gifts, but that “a sacrifice is not necessarily a more deeply religious ceremony than an offering. [...] Reversely, an offering can be a highly impressive religious ceremony without including a sacrifice”. Thus, it is easy to see a certain contradiction already. While Henninger (1987) categorises sacrifice under offering as a special kind of gift giving, and Baal (1976) seems to handle them as two sides of the same coin, then Baaren (1964) prefers to leave offering solely in the position of one, albeit crucial, element of the sacrificial act – the material part of what is given away (Fig. 1). At the same time, Borgeaud (2012) barely mentions offering as a term related to the actual action of sacrifice, but rather uses it to refer to the object that is sacrificed. The definitions also diverge in more specific aspects, such as the importance of destruction, animate or inanimate objects, dependency on value and changes in the quality of participants and materialities used (see further below).

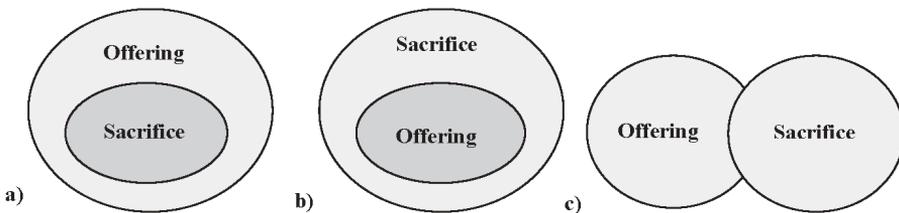


Figure 1. Relations between sacrifice and offering according to a) Henninger (1987), b) Baaren (1964) and c) Baal (1976).

The more one reads about these concepts and terms, the more evident it becomes that all the possible simplicities of making sense of and comparing those two terms vanish quickly. Not only is there disagreement in discussions on the general relationship of these two concepts, but different scholars also emphasise different qualitative aspects and characteristics of each, drawing distinctions between them accordingly. In other words, there is no general consensus on the relationship between sacrifice and offering, and the defining criteria vary scholar by scholar. It all becomes even more complicated when considering relevant archaeological literature about these phenomena and trying to apply the concepts of sacrifice and offering as distinct categories to the prehistoric archaeological record.

SACRIFICE OR OFFERING: THE FOUR MAIN CONFUSIONS AND NORTHERN EUROPE ARCHAEOLOGY

The four detailed qualitative and distinguishing aspects can be found in the literature about the definitions, characteristics and meanings of the concepts 'sacrifice' and 'offering'. First, the separation of the terms and their use in specific case studies seems to depend on who is writing about them and where this person is situated. I tentatively call it language confusion. Second is the question of what specific criteria apply to sacrifice or offering and what qualitative changes are expected to happen as a result of sacrifice or offering. I have divided these aspects into the confusions related to the concepts of value, destruction and sacred/holy (see below for details).

Language confusion

The first of the aforementioned issues – the question of language – relates partly to the tradition of the scholarship in the specific region where a scholar is based, but more importantly to the terminology and native language of the scholar him/herself. These two terms – 'sacrifice' and 'offering' – do not have equivalents in all languages. Looking at the dictionary results, it strikes the eye that in some languages only one possible answer is suggested whilst others include more variable words (see Table 1).

Language	Sacrifice	Offer / Offering
Estonian	-	Uri (noun), urjama (verb) Kahi, and Ohver(dus)
Finnish	-	Uhri
Danish (applied to Scandinavian languages in general)	-	Ofring
German	-	Opfer
French	Sacrifice	Offre, offrande
Italian	Sacrificio	Offerta
Latin	Sacrificium	Offerre (verb), oblatio
Lithuanian	Pasiūlymas	Auka
Latvian	Upuris	Piedāvājums
Polish	Składanie	Oferta, ofiara
Russian	Жертвоприношение	Подношение (religious), предложение

Table 1. A selection of dictionary results to words ‘sacrifice’ and ‘offering’.

It seems that the word ‘sacrifice’ does not have an equivalent in either the Germanic branch of the Indo-European languages or in the Finno-Ugric languages. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the verb ‘offer’ is an old Germanic root (documented use in Old English) that predates ‘sacrifice’ as a later loan from Romanic languages, which in primary use related to slaughter and altar.² In this context, it is interesting that differentiation between the two seems to exist in the Slavic and Baltic languages, which are part of the Indo-European language family. However, in those languages, it is difficult to draw a relation with Latin equivalents of sacrifice. Thus, in geographical terms, we can see that one word relating to ‘offering’ prevails in northern Europe, mainly among the Finno-Ugric and Germanic languages, while a distinction is made in the Romanic, Slavic and Baltic languages. It makes one think about the specifics of the choice of words and the related meanings of those actions for the practitioners. At least in the case of the Estonian language and etymology, there seem to exist two word categories: old and practice-specific local words (*uri*, *kahi*, *and*), and general, more abstract (loan?) words that relate to the word ‘offering’. Might it also reflect the essential differences in the religious practices of different cultures?

According to the *Estonian Etymological Dictionary*, the Estonian word 'ohver' is a loan-word from Low German (EE 2012: 335). The background of this word is closely connected to history, especially the northern crusades in the 12th and 13th centuries. During the conversion of the country in the 13th century, when the official language of the period was Latin, the words used in the written sources for this specific ritual practice were derivations from *sacrificere* and *immolare* or other Latin words relating to the victim and the act of killing (cf., e.g., HCL 1982; Tamm & Jonuks forthcoming). As the main interest groups in the region at the time were of German origin, it is likely that the German words 'Offeringe' and 'opperen/offeren' were utilised in spoken language as well. Germans, or at least the German-speaking population, remained a ruling class over the following centuries, and their language dominated in official documents and history writing. Native dialects and relevant terminology, including those in relation to religious practices, became marginalised and remained at the level of oral tradition. As a result, the native terms were left out of history recordings for centuries, and the concepts that were familiar to higher class were used instead. Although it cannot be entirely excluded that the Estonian word 'ohver' is an earlier loan from Scandinavian languages, e.g. from the Viking Age or even before that, it is most likely that its origin is directly connected to the German conquest and long-term reign in the region.

Therefore it can be argued that there is no Estonian primary and old word that would precisely accord with the abstract terms of either 'sacrifice' or 'offering'. The word 'and' means literally a gift, and derives from the verb 'andma' (to give) which is an old Finno-Ugric word that can be found in several languages. 'Kahi' is referred to as a drinking offering. This too has an old Finno-Ugric root relating to (alcoholic) drink, possibly mead, and it most likely comes from Finnish (EE 2012: 115–116). 'Uri' means an offering and derives from Finnish 'uhri', but it seems to have been borrowed into written Estonian language in the early 20th century (EE 2012: 579) and in contemporary Estonian it is related to poetic language. If we were to take language as one argument explaining the origin and time-depth of specific activities, it seems that the whole picture of activities that we would call a phenomenon of offering in Estonia(n) was not something abstract and universal, but more nuanced and action-specific. Additionally, the qualitative distinction between sacrifice and offering does not seem to be of any importance at all. The native speakers of other languages can probably provide similar examples of other specific words that can be translated and reduced to the academic terms of 'sacrifice' or 'offering', but which actually have a much more variable and subtle field of meanings in the native language.

Another intriguing cultural differentiation in the use of the terms 'sacrifice' and 'offering' derives from the language of the researcher. Although there are

more particular and specific Finno-Ugric words available, most of the contemporary scholars still tend to use the widely spread and academic words 'sacrifice' and 'offering'. This is most likely related to the development of academic disciplines and scientific writing of the Modern Era. It has to be remembered that the scientific language in the 19th century was very rarely a native one. In the context of the eastern Baltic and as a result of long-term historical development from German conquest to centuries of foreign rule by mainly Germans and Russians, the scientific and academic terminologies were largely based on German or Russian, with a dominance of the former. It seems that the terms and concepts picked up at the beginning of the academic discipline became the norm and tradition. Additionally, there is no escape from this terminology issue when writing in foreign languages, such as German or English. One simply has to decide which foreign word best applies to a relevant concept in the native language and culture.

However, even if the word in one's local language and the possible translation of it in another language are directly related, the use of foreign terms is sometimes inconsistent. One such example is the derivation of 'offering' in Scandinavian languages. For instance, in the writing on artefact deposits in Iron Age Scandinavia, one can easily recognise that the word 'offering' is preferred in Scandinavian languages (e.g. Hagberg 1964; Harck 1984; Ilkjær 2002; Hansen 2006). However, quite often when the same or similar material is presented in English, the term 'sacrifice' is used instead (Fabech 1991; Randsborg 1995; Carlie 1998; Helgesson 2004; Berggren 2006; Nørgård Jørgensen 2008), sometimes even by the same authors (Ilkjær 2003; Hansen 2006). The same tendency of the mixing of the two terms concurrently in English texts is evident in publications by Finno-Ugric scholars as well (e.g. Jonuks 2009b; Wessman 2009; Oras 2010; Salmi et al. 2011). The words 'sacrifice' and 'offering' often occur simultaneously and are utilised as synonyms. This altogether contributes to some extent to the general confusion as to which term is more suitable and why, as well as whether there is or should be any differentiation.

Value

The second confusion relates to the concept of 'value'. It is mainly Raymond Firth (1963) who in his cross-cultural analysis of the organisation of sacrifice and offering stressed that sacrifice means presenting something valuable for the favour of the supernatural. Not everything is suitable for sacrifice, but the act must be related to giving up something at a cost. He sees such gifts as one part of a process of general allocation of resources, in which the degree and quality of what is given within this act is important. At the same time,

he regards offering as something that is just given away — something that is available and not extraordinary.

However, there seems to be some disagreement about this concept of value. Namely, as Michael F.C. Bourdillon (1980: 12) implies, the recognisable economic value is not the main characteristic of the sacrifice. He points out ethnographic examples in which ordinary and mundane objects can be regarded as suitable for the sacrifice. Firth himself also arrives at the conclusion that quite often the value of the sacrificed is not obvious or clearly measurable. It can be manipulated, with objects of high value substituted for lower ones, communal participation included, etc. Thus, although the idea of giving up something at a cost is to some extent inscribed in the sacrifice, there is in practice a rational calculation and manipulation of value in it. It is the aim, intention and quality of the practice – “the spirit of the gift”, according to Firth (1963: 23) – that dictates the suitability of the object for sacrifice. Thus, the distinction between offering and sacrifice on the basis of an object’s value is a very problematic and complicated one. The same can be followed in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (2000), which states that an object is given a value by the actual act of sacrifice itself.

These difficulties are particularly significant in archaeology. How can we estimate an object’s value in the past, and is this concept of value universally recognisable? Literature about the value and evaluation of objects both in archaeology and anthropology is vast. Value can be attributed via materials that are rare, durable and attractive, but also acquired in certain ways, including being part of certain assemblages (Randsborg 1973: 565; Haselgrove 1982; Renfrew 1986: 148–149; Lesure 1999). But value is not only economic and measurable on a material basis. One only has to think in terms of object biographies (*sensu* Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986) and culture-specific or emotional or individual values (Davenport 1986; Thomas 1991; Weiner 1992; Lillios 1999; Mauss 2002; Miller 2001; Myers 2001). Therefore, it is often very complicated to decode and assess the value of a gift without further ethnographic record or the attestations of the participants themselves. It altogether means that besides the complications stated above by the anthropological scholars themselves, the concept of value in distinguishing sacrifice and offering can be highly problematic in archaeology.

One good example of the shifting concepts of valuables and context specific evaluation of objects in Estonia is the tradition of deposition of stone axes (see Johanson 2006; 2009). These items were most certainly rare and expensive valuables in their context of production and initial use. They acquired practical, economic and symbolic meaning. However, in later periods when stone was replaced by other production materials, some of these items were still clearly



Figure 2. A selection of different Iron Age wealth deposits from Estonia: silver ornaments from Paali II (AI 3235), iron axes from Igavere (AI 2712: 45–49), and bronze ornaments from Reola (AI 4102) finds. Photomontage by Ester Oras 2013.

regarded as valuables. They were used for healing purposes and deposited in ritual activities. The concept of giving something away at a cost is thus very different from one context to another in the case of these stone axes. However, it would be farfetched to classify Mesolithic and Neolithic stone axe deposits under ‘sacrifice’ and later period finds under ‘offering’ due to the objects’ relative material value in their contemporary depositional context.

Another good example is the comparison of different Iron Age intentional artefact deposits in the eastern Baltic (see, e.g., Oras 2010; 2012). The phenomenon as such is very similar: there is an acknowledged and intentional selective deposition of different objects in different contexts. The deposits include gold, silver, a vast amount of iron and bronze, but also organic and stone items (see Fig. 2). Surely they all had different values in the Iron Age, but it is hardly reasonable to call some of them ‘sacrifices’ and others ‘offerings’ on the basis of the relative economic value of objects.

Destruction

The next qualitative confusion is the idea of destruction. Numerous scholars, such as Firth (1963: 13), Baaren (1964: 9–10), Baal (1976: 161–162), Bourdillon (1980: 10), Girard (2011) and especially Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (1964: 12), emphasise that sacrifice should include, if not destruction of, then at least considerable physical transformation of objects. It is important to change the physical characteristics of an object or living being in order for it to be acceptable for the supernatural. The destruction mainly relates to the blood-letting of the

victim (be it human or animal), which can be followed by communal consumption of its remains, or more general destruction, such as the burning or crushing of other items (plants, paper, ceramics, etc.). Hubert and Mauss (*ibid.*: 12–13, 99) stress that we are dealing with ‘sacrifice’ if the items are destroyed, but with ‘offering’ if their physical state is not altered. They also conclude that the efficiency and religious energy is thus higher in the case of sacrifice as opposed to offering, and that the ceremonial destruction of an object is crucial to creating a communicative link between the supernatural-sacred and the profane world.

Similar ideas have also been expressed by archaeologists. As Timothy In-soll (2011b: 151) describes, there is a difference between sacrifice and offering, because the latter lacks a destructive element. He develops this thought even further with the ideas of personified material objects that therefore can be regarded as ‘living victims’ and the tradition of artefact destruction prior to deposition applies to them as well (*ibid.*). Discussions of the material agency of objects, which relates to the personification of artefacts that make people act in certain ways and do certain things, are of relevance here (see, e.g., Knappett 2005; Hoskins 2006; Knappett & Malafouris 2008).

The ritual killing of objects prior to deposition, either as separate deposits or as burial goods, is a widespread cultural phenomenon (in Estonian context see, e.g., Jonuks 2009a: 252, and literature cited therein). Perhaps this idea of destruction also explains why Scandinavian scholars studying Iron Age deposits prefer to use the term ‘sacrifice’ in English texts as opposed to ‘offering’ in Scandinavian languages. Quite often a previous ritual manipulation, such as burning, bending and smashing objects, can be traced in the Scandinavian Iron Age bog deposits (Ilkjær 2000; 2002; 2003). However, not all the items in these so-called Scandinavian booty deposits are destroyed, and the amount of objects handled in such a way varies from one site to another. Are we talking about different religious practices – separated sacrifices and offerings – during the same event?

Another example from Estonian material is the comparison of different intentional artefact deposits. In Estonian folkloristic and historical material, there are several examples of leaving different kinds of waste, from food remains to wool, ribbons and glass, on sacred stones or trees (Fig. 3.; see, e.g., Loorits 1990; Paulson 1997; Hiimäe 2011). Some of those traditions are carried out even today (see, e.g., Valk 2007). To draw a difference between sacrifice and offering on the basis of destruction here is rather complicated. If the wool is not burnt, does it mean it is an offering? If the glass bottle is left behind, is it an offering? But if it is broken, does it turn into a sacrifice? Thinking in archaeological terms, what if the bottle breaks as a result of later activities or weathering after its initial depositional act?



Figure 3. *An offering stone with shards of glass bottles and pieces of horse shoes from Varbla from 1936. Photo source: ERA f 262.*

As it can be drawn from these questions, there are examples in which the concept of destruction turns out to be quite problematic. Destruction might be a good and archaeologically recognisable criterion for distinguishing sacrifice and offering. Indeed, as seen in most of the definitions given above and from the several ethnographic and archaeological examples, killing, i.e., blood-letting and also consumption of the being, is a crucial element in performing sacrifice, which distinguishes it from offering (for northern Eurasian context see, e.g., Jordan 2003: 123–129; Vallikivi 2004: 94–95; Äikäs et al. 2009). I agree that destruction is very useful for emphasising inherent differentiations in the meanings and symbolism of ritual practices in the case of living beings. However, it remains a matter of debate whether this particular physical criterion should be a universal distinguishing criterion applied to artefacts and plants as well. Peter Metcalf (1997: 416) raises the problem: very often one talks about offerings in the case of different goods, but about sacrifice in those cases in which living beings are involved. He also points out that even the latter does not always necessarily include physical destruction.

So should we take destruction as a decisive characteristic that separates sacrifice and offering? Perhaps the whole idea of destruction is one specific form of sacrifice, directly related to the practicalities when dealing with the nature of a living 'victim' – they just would not stay put! The idea of destruction might be an important element in the cases where living beings are involved, but not necessarily in the case of objects. Therefore the distinction of sacrifice and offering on the basis of whether destruction is evident is a somewhat biased approach. I would rather agree with Henninger (1987: 545), who concludes that the destructive element can be decisive for decoding sacrifice for some scholars, but it is not universal and applicable to every case.

Sacred/Holy

The final and perhaps the most classical confusion in relation to distinguishing sacrifice and offering is the question of the intrinsic quality of the act and the object. As a simple translation exercise indicates, sacrifice in Latin derives from the word *sacrificium*, where *sacer* means 'holy' and *facere* 'to make', resulting in 'to make holy/sacred'. The concepts, distinctions and definitions of 'holy' and 'sacred' are problematic, and there is an ongoing discussion about whether these terms can or should be used as synonyms (see, e.g., Oxtoby 1987). Here I use them as synonyms in order to explain the supposedly qualitative change happening as a result of a specific religious act, i.e., 'to sacrifice' means 'to make something holy' or 'to sanctify'.

The idea of qualitative change as a distinctive criterion is the main point that Hubert and Mauss support. They state that sacrifice is a religious act through which the moral conditions of the participant and the presented objects alter – they are sanctified (Hubert & Mauss 1964: 9–11). The same idea is followed by Firth (1963: 13), who describes that certain mental state or moral quality changes are supported or renewed in the sacrificial act. What people and objects were before the sacrifice is different, perhaps even culturally and religiously lower, from what they are after this practice. From this, it can be derived that if in sacrifice something or someone is made special, holy and sacred, then the concept of offering does not necessarily have to include such a qualitative alteration (Hubert & Mauss 1964: 11). The main problem, especially for archaeology, is that this meaningful difference is applied to the objects and subjects on a mental and qualitative scale, given by the participants.

Nevertheless, not all scholars agree with such separation. For instance, Baal objects to the idea of the sacred nature of the gift by saying that it is too accidental a feature (1976: 161–162). In archaeological perspectives, making a

distinction on the basis of a moral and mental qualitative change of the objects in question is difficult, especially when relying solely on the material remains of the acts in which those objects were involved. Although such questions and specifications might be available for anthropologists, it is an almost impossible, or at least highly speculative, field of analysis for prehistoric archaeologists. The differentiation between the two is particularly problematic if we think of distinguishing acts of sacrifice and offering that both might have taken place in religious-related places and times concurrently, and might also share similar depositional context. All the archaeological examples discussed above lack necessary information about the changing quality of an object that is impossible to deduce without the participants' input. We do not know if depositing objects in a peat bog or leaving stone axes in the ground meant a qualitative difference in the meaning of the object and whether they were thought to become sacred themselves. It is impossible to pursue such meanings on the basis of material culture. Indeed, even ethnographic studies cannot always provide examples in which all participants agree with the general aim, meaning and qualitative changes of their religious actions (see, e.g., Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994). Thus, the criterion of changing qualities and sanctifications cannot be a universal or single answer for making a distinction between sacrifice and offering. I agree that the qualitative change of the items, places and people involved is an important aspect in acknowledging different intensities and scales of religious acts. However, it largely relies on the mental affiliation of the participants in such acts and is thus open to variable interpretations. As a result, it is the most difficult criterion of those being discussed to apply to the archaeological record when trying to distinguish sacrifice and offering.

DISCUSSION

As can be seen above, there is no general agreement as to what distinguishes sacrifice and offering on a qualitative basis. In fact, there are even different opinions about the relationship of these concepts to one another: are we talking about two different practices, or are they parts of each other. The distinctions drawn by anthropologists or scholars of religious studies are very problematic when it comes to archaeological data. As soon as one goes in depth with the analysis of sacrifice and offering and tries to apply specific distinctions to archaeological material, it often happens that the top-down universal definitions and criteria just do not fit with the matter at hand. So why is it such a hard task to distinguish sacrifice and offering, especially in archaeology?

The answer lies in the consideration of the context. It is the cultural and religious context of a specific act – be it religious activity or research practice – that determines the essential criteria for sacrifice and offering as well as if, and on what basis, they should be distinguished from one another. As contexts vary in spatial and temporal terms, so do the characteristics and ideas about those specific religious phenomena. In some contexts, there is no importance in the distinction, while in others, the categories and definitions provided above seem to be alien or considerably more nuanced, while still in others, the distinction might be an essential part of the local religious system. Therefore, problems in applying those terms to specific material are inevitable as long as one tries to use universal criteria and definitions. The context-dependency is in fact one of the main reasons why universal categorisations and definitions often do not match with specific archaeological material.

The context is not only the past cultural background. It also includes the context in which a specific term has developed, and the context of the researcher with his or her historically set research traditions. Every term has its research history, which influences its definitions and relating categorisations. Scholars themselves are carriers of their cultural context and cannot leave it behind when dealing with past and distant cultures. The educational and broader cultural context as well as scholarly tradition influences the terms that are used in a particular research. In this sense, one cannot escape the concepts of sacrifice and offering, including questions about the differentiation of the two, because they are an intrinsic and important part of the researcher's contemporary cultural and work atmosphere with its own historical background. Therefore, although most probably arbitrary from the practitioner's perspective, the analysis of sacrifice and offering and their elements is to some extent unavoidable from the scholarly point of view. The question is rather if and how scholars can apply the distinctions and definitions derived from the academic research of the last 200 years to thousands of years before the point when we started to actually think about such categorisations of religious practices. Secondly, it is worth keeping in mind that the definitions and distinctions derived from the in-depth study of one religion do not necessarily have to apply to another.

Starting from the past context, its importance is best demonstrated by the archaeological examples of intentional artefact deposits discussed above. The whole idea of intentional artefact deposits is a long-term and widely spread practice in northern Europe. It covers a variety of materials and objects in a variety of contexts from different times. It would be naïve to presume that the idea behind and meaning of intentional artefact concealments was the same over time and in different regions. There was a changing and developing belief system behind those practices. In the case of Estonia, we can talk about a

nature-oriented animated worldview with totemic and shamanistic practices in the Mesolithic and Neolithic societies, celestial fertility as well as agricultural and ancestor-related rituals in the Bronze and Early Iron Ages, and later period polytheistic systems until the very end of the prehistoric period; and some of those religious systems (e.g. natural sacred places or ancestor cults) were probably followed over millennia (Jonuks 2009a). With the conversion and arrival of Christianity, the religious system kept developing according to its local context, and there are several examples of enduring so-called pagan practices throughout the Middle Ages and Modern Period despite the arrival of the new world religion. These practices also include intentional artefact deposits (see, e.g., Valk 2004; Jonuks 2007). The picture of the long-term religious development in Estonia is colourful and gradually evolving, and within it different ideas and practices are combined, accepted and rejected. Some of them are the result of inner socially derived and large-scale political or economic developments (e.g. change from hunter-gatherers to agriculture), and others relate to short-term historical events or foreign contacts (e.g. Crusades in the 13th century). Therefore, it is in essence problematic to apply the same universal definitions and distinguishing criteria to such broad categories of religious practices as sacrifice and offering without considering the different contexts in which they take place.

Turning to scholarly context, as discussed under language confusion, there are no such distinct terminology categories of sacrifice and offering in Estonian at all. Unfortunately, we have no solid evidence of what terms pre-Christian Estonians used for their ritual practices. However, the fact that the word '*ohverdus*' is not a native one and most likely derives from Germanic languages suggests that this abstract concept is rather late and foreign for the indigenous Estonian culture. Its use by religious practitioners and in relation to specific rituals most likely relates to later historical and scholarly developments, which have direct connotations with German tradition and historical events. This is also supported by the fact that Estonian native words are more specific or have a considerably wider meaning attached to them. The concept of offering was preferred in the local scholarly tradition as a result of developments in the academic research in religious studies. Through a process carried out by German-speaking scholars, the words chosen became deeply rooted for the next decades. It makes one wonder why, if at all, the concepts of 'sacrifice' and 'offering', as defined and discussed above, are even considered in discussing Estonian pre-Christian religion. They seem to be relatively later conceptual additions in Estonian religion and closely related to the academic and modern worldview. I certainly do not wish to infer that the idea of communication with the supernatural via particular gifts was missing in prehistoric or the following

historic religion in what is now Estonia. I would rather argue that these periods had such different contents, contexts and connotations that the definitions of 'sacrifice' and 'offering' as based on institutionalised religions do not seem to apply to prehistoric northern Europe quite as precisely. In addition, the whole idea of distinction does not necessarily have to be an intrinsic problem for the past practitioners at all.

This altogether leads to the conclusion that distinguishing sacrifice and offering in the archaeological record and analysing the relationship between these two concepts might be a purely scholarly pursuit leading to categories that do not have much importance in the eyes of the practitioners themselves. Depending on culture, these two concepts may, but do not necessarily, have to exist as separate entities. They might merge into one whole idea of communicating with the supernatural via particular gifts or have much more specific subdivisions that relate to either a particular place or specific form or quality of the objects used. What actually matters is that we are dealing with the religious practice that aims at communication with the supernatural (in the widest sense) by means of rendering something. Perhaps the whole conglomeration and variability of those cultural actions of communication with the supernatural is the reason why scholars feel a need to classify and subcategorise their subjects of research. It just helps to approach the material and make the entangled and changing elements of sacrifice and offering better understandable for the outsider.

In this sense it might also help to think in terms of *emic* and *etic* categories (*sensu* Harris 1976) when talking about sacrifice and offering and their distinction in our scholarly work. In the former, it probably does not play a decisive role for the practitioner to make a difference between offering and sacrifice as long as the ways, aims and directions of communication are appropriate according to his/her cultural context. From the *etic* perspective, the distinctions between various culturally intertwined elements and questions about their relations help to translate them into the words and worlds of contemporary scholars. However, in the case of archaeology, it has to be acknowledged that the *emic* category is something very difficult to grasp because of the fragmentary nature of our data, as well as time and cultural distance from the subject of study. The mental and motivational basis of participants is something that is often unavailable to archaeologists. We have to rely on the materialities of the past practices and derive the meanings and motivations of the past people from them. Moreover, if the separation of and relationship between sacrifice and offering are not always clear in the ethnographic instances, in which both physical and mental aspects of those practices are evident and available, then what are we aiming to accomplish using only the fragmented archaeological record? One solution might be to supplement our material with ethnographic or

historical parallels, which, if critically evaluated and close in terms of cultural context, might help to attain different details and nuances about the intentions and ideas of the practitioners in the past. However, in most cases, such comparisons can only broaden our perspective and provide food for thought rather than give us a firm argument or proof. Therefore, the whole idea of distinguishing sacrifice and offering in prehistoric archaeology might remain at the level of *etic* categorisations due to the nature of this specific source material.

So, in terms of archaeology, what can we do with these two concepts – sacrifice and offering? Or perhaps it is better to ask if it is a necessary endeavour to do something about them at all. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (2000) states, “Sacrifice pervades virtually all religions, but it is extremely difficult to say precisely what the meanings of sacrifice are – perhaps because the meanings are so many”. Several scholars have actually agreed that there is no single and generally applicable definition or theory for sacrifice, because it varies from one society to another. Providing a universal definition for sacrifice and offering is a mission impossible, not to mention distinguishing them from each other (Baaren 1964: 1–2; Bourdillon 1980: 23; Metcalf 1997; Hicks 2001; Carter 2003: 6–7; Girard 2011: 32). Of course I do not propose that one should give up thinking about possible distinctions and definitions of these terms. They are important parts of our scholarly reasoning. I rather see a need to analyse critically if and how much universality there can be when it comes to defining and distinguishing sacrifice and offering for archaeological research, and if one should expect those or perhaps some completely different distinctions in archaeological material in the first place.

As a result, the answer to the question – do we see sacrifice or offering in northern European archaeology? – is that we see both, but neither of them is as distinguished or clear-cut as expected from universal definitions. There is evidence of communication with the supernatural via giving, but further distinctions and elements depend on the specific spatial and temporal context, as well as the ideas and aims of the practitioners. Sometimes it is possible to draw distinct qualitative categories between the objects or subjects included in those acts. In other cases, the emphasis seems to be quite different from what is supposed to apply according to the universal definitions. The way contemporary society and scholars understand and divide sacrifice and offering cannot always be expected to be part of the mind-set of people in the distant past.

CONCLUSION

Different religious systems contain different beliefs, practices and concepts, as well as different relations and distinctions between them. The same applies to sacrifice and offering. We cannot create any checklist for either archaeologists or anthropologists to distinguish sacrifice and offering with specific criteria, such as value, destruction or sacralisation. The maximum achievable generalisation is the above-mentioned concept of communication with the supernatural. If we see that, we see sacrifice or offering, perhaps both at the same time. The choice of what, at what cost, and how exactly is given and what happens to it next is prescribed and inevitable for practitioners – these aspects derive from the cultural tradition of the particular society. The characteristics that look so important for contemporary scholars for making a distinction between sacrifice and offering might not be an issue for the practitioners themselves. That is why finding universal definitions and ways of distinguishing sacrifice and offering is intrinsically problematic if not impossible. Instead, it is necessary to explicitly think about the use of specific words in and concepts applied to particular cultures and languages, keeping in mind both the contemporary context of a particular practice and the influence of the scholarship tradition.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AI – collection of archaeology at the Institute of History, University of Tallinn
ERA f – Estonian Folklore Archives, Estonian Literary Museum

NOTES

¹ <http://www.oed.com>, last accessed on October 10, 2013.

² <http://www.oed.com>, last accessed on October 10, 2013.

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