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Sacrifice in the Mahābhārata and beyond or

Did the author(s) of the Mahābhārata understand Vedic sacrifice
 better than we do?

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Sacrifice is an oft recurring theme in the Mahābhārata. Several sacrifices are carried out in the epic story, and the notion of sacrifice even pops up in places where one might least expect it. The Mahābhārata war itself is compared to a sacrifice, or if we can believe Danielle Feller (1999: 99), this war is presented as “a full-fledged, albeit peculiar sacrifice”.¹ This claim is correct, but must be treated with care. Heesterman (2010: 389) rightly observes that “when we turn to sacrifice for a basic pattern of the epic’s story, we run into difficulty. The late Vedic manuals of sacrificial ritual confront us with a highly detailed and rationalized system of sacrifices organized according to their increasing complexity, the simpler being integrated into the next more complicated one in the manner of Russian puppets fitting into each other. It is hard to see how the cut-and-dried rigidity of this sacrificial system should relate to, let alone provide, the design of the epic.”²

In order to arrive at a better understanding of the epic war as sacrifice, I propose to look at some of the passages in detail. First we consider two passages

¹ Cp. Biardeau, 2002: 23: “C’est dans la dernière partie du Livre IV que la guerre en préparation est apparue comme une guerre sacrificielle, comme un sacrifice de la guerre. Le terme de *yuddha-yajña*, ‘guerre-sacrifice’, ‘sacrifice de la guerre’, sera de plus en plus commun, et le vocabulaire sacrificiel débordera même le cadre des comparaisons explicites.”

² Cp. Biardeau, 2002: 23: “[le combat] est un sacrifice d’un type tout à fait à part, un sacrifice propre au guerrier, où le brâhmane ne peut s’immiscer que sous l’armure du guerrier.”

that present the approaching war in this manner.³ In the first one Duryodhana addresses his father Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Van Buitenen translates it as follows (1978: 325):⁴

I am not putting the burden of war on you, or on Droṇa, or on Aśvatthāman, or on Saṃjaya, or on Vikarṇa, or on Kāmboja, or on Bāhlika, Satyavrata, Purumitra, Bhūriśravas, or any others of your party, when *I* make this challenge! I and Karṇa, father, have laid out the sacrifice of war (*raṇayajña*) and here we stand consecrated *with Yudhiṣṭhira as the victim*, bull of the Bharatas. This chariot is the altar, this sword the spoon, this club the ladle, this armor the *sadas*. My steeds are the four sacrificial priests, my arrows the *darbha* grass, my fame the oblation! Having offered up ourselves in war to Vaivasvata, O king, we shall triumphantly return, covered with glory, our enemies slain. I, Karṇa, and my brother Duḥśāsana, we three, father, will kill Pāṇḍavas in battle. I shall kill the Pāṇḍavas and rule the earth. I should rather surrender my life, wealth, and realm, steadfast king, than ever dwell together with the Pāṇḍavas! We shall not cede to the Pāṇḍavas as much land as you can prick with the point of a sharp needle, father!

This passage suggests that the comparison with sacrifice expresses Duryodhana's intention to vanquish his opponents. At first sight this makes perfect sense. Just as a sacrificer kills the sacrificial victim in his sacrifice, Duryodhana and Karṇa intend to kill the Pāṇḍavas in the battle for which they are preparing themselves.⁵

³ Cf. Feller, 1999; 2009.

⁴ Mhbh 5.57.10-18: *nāhaṃ bhavati na droṇe nāśvatthāmani na saṃjaye/ na vikarṇe na kāmboje na kṛpe na ca bāhlike//10// satyavrate purumitre bhūriśravasi vā punaḥ/ anyeṣu vā tāvakeṣu bhāraṃ kṛtvā samāhvaye//11// ahaṃ ca tāta karṇaś ca raṇayajñaṃ vitatya vai/ yudhiṣṭhiraṃ paśuṃ kṛtvā dīkṣitau bharatarṣabha//12// ratho vedī sruvaḥ khaḍgo gadā sruk kavacaṃ sadaḥ/ cāturhotraṃ ca dhuryā me śarā darbhā havir yaśaḥ//13// ātmayajñena nrpate iṣṭvā vaivasvataṃ raṇe/ vijitya svayam eṣyāvo hatāmitrau śriyā vṛtau//14// ahaṃ ca tāta karṇaś ca bhrātā duḥśāsanaś ca me/ ete vayaṃ haniṣyāmaḥ pāṇḍavān samare trayāḥ//15// ahaṃ hi pāṇḍavān hatvā praśāstā pṛthivīm imām/ māṃ vā hatvā pāṇḍuputrā bhoktāraḥ pṛthivīm imām//16// tyaktaṃ me jīvitaṃ rājan dhanam rājyaṃ ca pāṛthiva/ na jātu pāṇḍavaiḥ sārḍham vaseyam aham acyuta//17// yāvad dhi sūcyās tūkṣṇāyā vidhyed agreṇa māriṣa/ tāvad apy aparitājyaṃ bhūmer naḥ pāṇḍavān prati//18//*

⁵ The same sentiment, but this time from the side of Yudhiṣṭhira, finds expression in the Vanaparvan, Mhbh 3.242.13-15: *tadā tu nrpatir gantā dharmarājo yudhiṣṭhiraḥ//13// astraśastrapradīpte 'gnau yadā taṃ pātayiṣyati/ varṣāt trayodaśād ūrdhvaṃ raṇasattre narādhipaḥ//14// yadā krodhahavir moktā dhārtarāṣṭreṣu pāṇḍavaḥ/ āgantāras tadā smeti ...//15//* "Then indeed Yudhiṣṭhira the King Dharma shall go [to Duryodhana's sacrifice, JB]! When he [Yudhiṣṭhira] tumbles him [Duryodhana] in the Fire that has been lit with swords and spears at the Session of war (*raṇa-sattra*) after the thirteenth year [of exile],

With hindsight we know that this intention was never realized. Quite on the contrary, Duryodhana and Karṇa themselves were killed in that battle, and the Pāṇḍavas came out victorious.

Karṇa did not need hindsight to know the outcome of the battle. Foresight allowed him to predict the disaster that was going to befall him and Duryodhana. Interestingly, he too compares the approaching battle with a sacrifice, and in this sacrifice, too, Duryodhana is the sacrificer. This is what Karṇa says (in the translation of Van Buitenen, 1978: 446-447):⁶

Vārṣṇeya, the Dhārtarāṣṭra will hold a grand sacrifice of war (*śastrayajña*). Of this sacrifice you shall be the Witness, Janārdana, and you shall be the Adhvaryu priest at the ritual. The Terrifier with the monkey standard stands girt as the Hotar; Gāṇḍīva will be the ladle; the bravery of men the sacrificial butter. The *aindra*, *pāśupata*, *brāhma*, and *sthūṇākarṇa* missiles

when the Pāṇḍava [i.e. Yudhiṣṭhira] gives vent to the Oblation of his wrath upon the Dhārtarāṣṭras, then we shall have come!” (tr. van Buitenen)

⁶ Mhbh 5.139.29-51: *dhārtarāṣṭrasya vārṣṇeya śastrayajño bhaviṣyati/ asya yajñasya vettā tvam bhaviṣyasi janārdana/ ādhvaryavam ca te kṛṣṇa kratāv asmin bhaviṣyati//29// hotā caivātra bībhatsuḥ saṁnaddhaḥ sa kapidhvajaḥ/ gāṇḍīvam sruk tathājyam ca vīryam puṁsām bhaviṣyati//30// aindraṁ pāśupataṁ brāhmaṁ sthūṇākarṇam ca mādharma/ mantrās tatra bhaviṣyanti prayuktāḥ savyasācinā//31// anuyātaś ca pītaram adhiko vā parākrame/ grāvastotraṁ sa saubhadraḥ samyak tatra kariṣyati//32// udgātātra punar bhīmaḥ prastotā sumahābalaḥ/ vinadan sa naravyāghro nāgānikāntakṛd raṇe//33// sa caiva tatra dharmātmā śasvad rājā yudhiṣṭhiraḥ/ japair homaiś ca saṁyukto brahmatvam kārayiṣyati//34// śaṅkhaśabdāḥ samurajā bheryaś ca madhusūdana/ utkṛṣṭasiṁhanādāś ca subrahmaṇyo bhaviṣyati//35// nakulaḥ sahadevaś ca mādrīputrau yaśasvinau/ sāmitraṁ tau mahāvīryau samyak tatra kariṣyataḥ//36// kalmāśadaṇḍā govinda vimalā rathasaktayaḥ/ yūpāḥ samupakalpantām asmin yajñe janārdana//37// karṇinālīkanārācā vatsadantopabṛṁhanāḥ/ tomarāḥ somakalaśāḥ pavitrāṇi dhanūṁṣi ca//38// asayo 'tra kapālāni puroḍāśāḥ śirāṁsi ca/ havis tu rudhiraṁ kṛṣṇa asmin yajñe bhaviṣyati//39// idhmāḥ paridhayaś caiva śaktyo 'tha vimalā gadāḥ/ sadasyā droṇaśiṣyāś ca kṛpasya ca śaradvataḥ//40// iṣavo 'tra paristomā muktā gāṇḍīvadhanvanā/ mahārathaprayuktāś ca droṇadrauṇipracoditāḥ//41// prātiprasthānikaṁ karma sātyakiḥ sa kariṣyati/ dīkṣito dhārtarāṣṭro 'tra patnī cāsya mahācamūḥ//42// ghaṭotkaco 'tra sāmitraṁ kariṣyati mahābalaḥ/ atirātre mahābāho vitate yajñakarmani//43// dakṣiṇā tv asya yajñasya dhṛṣṭadyumnaḥ pratāpavān/ vaitāne karmani tate jāto yaḥ kṛṣṇa pāvakāt//44// yad abruvam aham kṛṣṇa katukāni sma pāṇḍavān/ priyārtham dhārtarāṣṭrasya tena tapye 'dya karmanā//45// yadā drakṣyasi mām kṛṣṇa nihataṁ savyasācinā/ punaś citis tadā cāsya yajñasyātha bhaviṣyati//46// duḥśāsanasya rudhiraṁ yadā pāsyati pāṇḍavaḥ/ ānardaṁ nardataḥ samyak tadā sutyam bhaviṣyati//47// yadā droṇam ca bhīṣmaṁ ca pāñcālyau pātayiṣyataḥ/ tadā yajñāvasānam tad bhaviṣyati janārdana//48// duryodhanam yadā hantā bhīmaseno mahābalaḥ/ tadā samāpsyate yajño dhārtarāṣṭrasya mādharma//49// snuśāś ca prasnuśāś caiva dhṛtarāṣṭrasya saṁgatāḥ/ hateśvarā hatasutā hatanāthāś ca keśava//50// gāndhāryā saha rodantyaḥ śvagrdrhakurarākule/ sa yajñe 'sminn avabhr̥tho bhaviṣyati janārdana//52//*

will be the spells employed by the Left-handed Archer. Saubhadra, taking after his father, if not overtaking him, in prowess, will act perfectly as the Grāvastut priest. Mighty Bhīma will be the Udgātar and Prastotar, that tigerlike man who with his roars on the battlefield finishes off an army of elephants. The eternal king, law-spirited Yudhiṣṭhira, well-versed in recitations and oblations, will act as the Brahmán. The sounds of the conches, the drums, the kettledrums, and the piercing lion roars will be the Subrahmaṇā invocation. Mādri's two glorious sons Nakula and Sahadeva of great valor will fill the office of the Śamitar priest. The clean chariot spears with their spotted staffs will serve as the sacrificial poles at this sacrifice, Janārdana. The eared arrows, hollow reeds, iron shafts and calf-tooth piles, and the javelins will be the Soma jars, and the bows the strainers. Swords will be the potsherds, skulls the Puroḍāśa cakes, and blood will be the oblation at this sacrifice, Kṛṣṇa. The spears and bright clubs will be the kindling and enclosing sticks; the pupils of Droṇa and Kṛpa Śāradvata the Sadasyas. The arrows shot by the Gāṇḍīva bowman, the great warriors, and Droṇa and his son will be the pillows. Sātyaki shall act as Pratiprasthātar, the Dhārtarāṣṭra as the Sacrificer (*dīkṣita*), his great army as the Wife. Mighty Ghaṭotkaca will be the Śamitar when this Overnight (*atirātra*) Sacrifice is spun out, strong-armed hero. Majestic Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna shall be the sacrificial fee when the fire rite takes place, he who was born from the fire.

The insults I heaped on the Pāṇḍavas, to please Duryodhana, those I regret. When you see me cut down by the Left-handed Archer, it will be the Re-piling of the Fire of this⁷ sacrifice. When the Pāṇḍava drinks the blood of Duḥśāsana, bellowing his roar, it will be the Soma draught. When the two Pāñcālyas fell Droṇa and Bhīṣma, that will be the Conclusion of the sacrifice, Janārdana. *When the mighty Bhīmasena kills Duryodhana, then the great sacrifice of the Dhārtarāṣṭra will end.* The weeping of the gathered daughters-in-law and granddaughters-in-law, whose masters, sons, and protectors have been slain, with the mourning of Gāndhārī at the sacrificial site now teeming with dogs, vultures, and ospreys, will be the Final Bath of this sacrifice, Janārdana.

The richness of details in these comparisons, especially the second one, shows that the author(s) of these passages had something similar to the Vedic sacrifice in mind. This makes it all the more surprising, at least at first sight, that the sacrificer in the second sacrifice is identical with its victim: Duryodhana initiates the sacrifice, which ends with his death.

However, a closer look at these two passages changes the perspective considerably. The sacrificial victim in most Vedic sacrifices, as in many other sacrifices elsewhere in the world, is a substitute for the sacrificer. That is to say,

⁷ Van Buitenen has *their* instead of *this*.

the ideal victim is the sacrificer himself. It is therefore perhaps not so surprising that the instigator of the sacrifice that figures in Karṇa's comparison, Duryodhana, is also its victim. And the really surprising comparison, seen this way, is the one proposed by Duryodhana, who looks upon the sacrificial victim not as a substitute for the sacrificer, but as his enemy, in this case Yudhiṣṭhira. Yudhiṣṭhira cannot possibly be looked upon as Duryodhana's substitute in that imaginary sacrifice. Yudhiṣṭhira is his victim in the worst sense of the term. Substitutes in sacrifice are beings or objects that are dear to the sacrificer: one of his children, one of his domesticated animals, some of his possessions. Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇḍavas are not dear to Duryodhana, they are his enemies, whom he wishes to destroy.

Do we have to conclude that there is something wrong in Duryodhana's comparison of the approaching battle with a sacrifice? We will return to this question below. First, however, we must note that Duryodhana's kind of sacrifice is not the only example of its kind in the Mahābhārata. As a matter of fact, the Mahābhārata reports that it was itself first recited at a sacrifice organised by someone called Janamejaya. This was a Snake Sacrifice (*sarpasattra*), and its aim was the destruction of all snakes.⁸ The sacrifice did in the end not succeed in this aim, but that is less important at present.

Minkowski (1991: 385) sums up how this sacrifice came about as follows:

The story of Janamejaya's *sattra* belongs to the Āstīka *parvan* of the Mahābhārata's first book (1.45-53). The events of the Āstīka *parvan*, the curse of Kadrū (1.18), the death of Parikṣit (1.36-40), and the birth of Āstīka (1.33-44), culminate in the story of the snake *sattra*, which begins with Janamejaya learning that his father Parikṣit was killed by the serpent Takṣaka. Seeking revenge, Janamejaya asks his priests whether they know a rite that would enable him to propel Takṣaka and his relations into blazing fire (1.47.4). The priests reply that there is a rite that will accomplish such a task, created by the gods especially for Janamejaya (*tvadartham devanirmitam*), known as the *sarpasattra*, and described in the Purāṇic lore (*purāṇe kathyate*) (1.47.6). Janamejaya is the only man

⁸ Fitzgerald (2010: 79) makes the following tentative suggestion about this sacrifice: "Whoever framed the epic narrative with this account might well have used the snakes as a stand-in for foreign invaders and may have meant to suggest that Janamejaya's rite at this gateway should spell an end to such invaders in Bharatavarṣa ..." This suggestion is necessarily speculative and impossible to verify.

eligible to sponsor this rite, and the priests have the training to perform it (1.47.7). Janamejaya agrees and orders the priests to prepare (1.47.8-9).

This short description suffices to show that Janamejaya's Snake Sacrifice was of the same kind as Duryodhana's imagined sacrifice. Just as Duryodhana fantasized about a sacrifice in which his enemy Yudhiṣṭhira, and by extension the Pāṇḍavas, would be the victim, in the same way Janamejaya prepares a sacrifice in which his enemy, the snake Takṣaka, and by extension all snakes, will be the victim. Both Duryodhana's imagined sacrifice and Janamejaya's in the end unsuccessful sacrifice were meant to destroy enemies, not *by means of* the sacrifice, but in the sacrifice itself, as its victims. These victims are not substitutes for the sponsor of the sacrifice, but they are his enemies.

The Mahābhārata mentions another sacrifice of the same type. About King Jarāsandha of Magadha, we read (tr. Van Buitenen, 1975: 60):⁹

After he had defeated them all, [Jarāsandha] imprisoned the kings in his mountain corral, Girivraja, as a lion imprisons great elephants in a cave of the Himālaya. King Jarāsandha wants to sacrifice the lords of the earth, for it was after he had worshiped the Great God that he defeated the kings on the battlefield. Whenever he defeated kings in battle, he took them in fetters to his own city and built a corral for men!

About these imprisoned kings we read (tr. Van Buitenen, 1975: 61):¹⁰

What joy of life is left to the kings who are sprinkled and cleansed in the house of Paśupati as sacrificial animals ...?

Kṛṣṇa reproaches Jarāsandha in a later chapter that, having imprisoned the kings, he wishes to sacrifice them to Rudra.¹¹ According to Kṛṣṇa, there has never been

⁹ Mhbh 2.13.62-64: *tena ruddhā hi rājānaḥ sarve jītvā girivraje/ kandarāyāṃ girīndrasya siṃheneva mahādvipāḥ/62// so 'pi rājā jarāsaṃdho yiyakṣur vasudhādhipaiḥ/ ārādhyā hi mahādevaṃ nirjitās tena pārthivāḥ/63// sa hi nirjitya nirjitya pārthivān pṛtanāgatān/ puram ānīya baddhvā ca cakāra puruṣavrajam/64//*

¹⁰ Mhbh 2.13.17: *prokṣitānāṃ pramṛṣṭānāṃ rājñāṃ paśupater gṛhe/ paśūnāṃ iva kā prītir jīvite bhāratarṣabha//17//*

¹¹ Mhbh 2.20.8cd: *tad rājñāḥ saṃnigṛhya tvaṃ rudrāyopajihṛṣasi.*

witness to a human sacrifice, and he disapproves of it strongly.¹² Jarāsandha’s defence that he takes no king for sacrifice whom he has not first defeated¹³ does not convince his opponents, and he is subsequently killed in battle.

Further examples of sacrifices of the kind where the sacrificer immolates himself, where he is both sacrificer and victim, can also be found in the Mahābhārata. Ambā and Aśvatthāman put an end to their lives in this manner.¹⁴ Ambā, surprisingly, is a woman, but this fact should not be taken to mean that self-sacrifice was looked upon by the authors of the epic as a particularly feminine activity. As a matter of fact, Ambā takes recourse to this act to be reborn as a man, this in order to kill Bhīṣma.¹⁵ Elsewhere, a fallen warrior is described as “having sacrificed his own body in battle”.¹⁶

It appears, then, that the authors of the Mahābhārata recognized two kinds of sacrifice. In one of these two, the sacrificer sacrifices himself; in the other, he sacrifices his enemy. Scholars have been aware for some time that many Vedic sacrifices are of the first kind: the sacrificer sacrifices himself, or rather, he sacrifices a substitute for himself.¹⁷ But what about the other kind of sacrifice, in which the sacrificer sacrifices his enemy? Are there Vedic sacrifices that follow this pattern? Or is it nothing but a fantasy of the authors of the Mahābhārata, with no link whatsoever with any sacrificial reality?

It is not. A number of Vedic sacrifices do indeed fall in the second category. That is to say, in a number of Vedic sacrifices the victim is not a

¹² Mhbh 2.20.10: *manuṣyānām samālabho na ca dr̥ṣṭaḥ kadācana/ sa kathaṃ mānuṣair devaṃ yaṣṭum icchasi śaṃkaram//*

¹³ Mhbh 2.20.25ab: *nājitān vai narapatīn aham ādadmi kāṃścana.*

¹⁴ For Aśvatthāman, see Mhbh 10.7 (tr. Johnson, 1998: 28 ff.)

¹⁵ Mhbh 5.188.16-18: *tataḥ sā paśyatām teṣāṃ maharṣiṇām aninditā/ samāhṛtya vanāt tasmāt kāṣṭhāni varavarṇinī//16// citām kṛtvā sumahatīm pradāya ca hutāśanam/ pradīpte ’gnau mahārāja roṣadīptena cetasā//17// uktvā bhīṣmavadhāyeti praviveśa hutāśanam/ jyeṣṭhā kāśīsutā rājan yamunām abhito nadīm//18//* “Thereupon, while the great seers were looking on, the blameless, fair-complexioned maiden gathered firewood from that forest, made a very high pyre, and set fire to it. When the fire was blazing, great king, she spoke with her heart on fire with wrath, ‘For Bhīṣma’s death!’ and entered the fire, did the eldest daughter of Kāśi by the bank of the Yamunā, king.” (tr. Van Buitenen, 1978: 520-521; cp. Scheuer, 1975: 70)

¹⁶ Mhbh 18.1.14: *yuddhe hutvātmanas tanum.* Cp. Heesterman, 2008: 133.

¹⁷ Hubert & Mauss, 1899/1929: 45.

substitute for the sacrificer, but for his enemy. It is true that, with one exception (see below), in none of these sacrifices an enemy of the sacrificer is literally put to death; but then, the sacrificer himself is not put to death either, with very few exceptions. The most prominent example of a Vedic sacrifice in which a substitute of the enemy of the sacrificer is killed is the Agniṣṭoma sacrifice. Here the Soma plant is “bought” from a “Soma merchant”, who is really either a Brahmin or a Śūdra. This “merchant” is subsequently beaten, but the plant is henceforth treated like a king. This “king” is seated on a royal throne, and hospitality is offered to “him”, but in the end “he” is “killed”. The fact that the “Soma merchant” is beaten reinforces the idea that “King Soma” represents a prominent inhabitant of enemy territory, who is then ritually put to death.¹⁸

Things become more serious in the Puruṣamedha, the “human sacrifice” of Vedic literature that follows the same pattern as the Soma sacrifice. This sacrifice concerns a real human being, who must belong to one of the two highest classes and is bought from his family. He is treated well for a year, but killed at the end.

It seems reasonably clear that these two sacrifices are of the kind that figured in Duryodhana’s imagination: these are sacrifices in which the victim is an enemy of the sacrificer, not his substitute.¹⁹

To avoid confusion of categories, or rather to show that these categories were often combined, let it be clear that there are many Vedic sacrifices that aim at the destruction or subjugation of enemies, but in which the victim is yet a substitute for the sacrificer. Consider the Vedic Horse Sacrifice (*aśvamedha*). Its obvious aim is to assert the supremacy of the kingly sacrificer over neighbouring rulers, who have to tolerate that a horse, followed by an army of four hundred warriors, roams freely in their territories for a year. However, neither these neighbouring rulers themselves nor their substitutes are in the end put to death. It is the horse that is put to death, and the fact that the chief queen is supposed to have sexual intercourse with the dead horse indicates that the horse is a substitute

¹⁸ See further Bronkhorst 2016.

¹⁹ Is it possible that the distinction between sacrifices in which the victim is a substitute for the sacrificer and those in which the victim is the enemy corresponds to the distinction in Vedic sacrifice in which the victim is cooked resp. not cooked? See on the latter distinction Bergaigne, 1878: 261 ff.; Malamoud, 1989: 35-70.

for the sacrificing king, not for his bested neighbours. It follows that the two kinds of sacrifice we are talking about are ideal types, which in reality frequently join up in real sacrifices.

As a matter of fact, many Vedic sacrifices have the aim of destroying the enemy or enemies of the sacrificer, while yet the victim is a substitute of the sacrificer. The example of the Horse Sacrifice, just considered, illustrates that Vedic sacrifices can have the tendency to present themselves in the style of Karṇa, even when their obvious aim is the Duryodhana-style subjugation or even destruction of enemies.

These reflections put us on an interesting trail. The Mahābhārata is aware of two kinds of sacrifices — the destruction of the sacrificer or his substitute on one hand, the destruction of his enemy on the other. This scheme fits the sacrifices depicted in Vedic and para-Vedic literature up to a point. It fits a lot better if we accept that real sacrifices (or at least the sacrifices described in Vedic and para-Vedic literature) are often combinations and rearrangements of elements that make up the ideal types. In real sacrifices, to begin, the victim is rarely identical with the sacrificer or his enemy: substitutes take their place. What is more, the two fundamental types of sacrifice are regularly combined in ways that even sacrifices that clearly impose the superiority of the sacrificer over his enemies — among them the main royal sacrifices: *aśvamedha*, *vājapeya* and *rājasūya* — do not immolate those enemies themselves, nor substitutes of those enemies, but a substitute of the sacrificer. Further and more complicated rearrangements can no doubt be identified, but this is a task I leave for future research.

An equally interesting question is why the Mahābhārata battle itself is presented as a sacrifice. This clearly indicates that its authors — and its characters, including Duryodhana and Karṇa — were aware of its solemn nature. This was no run-of-the-mill war, but one with transcendental significance. As has been pointed out elsewhere (Bronkhorst 2017), ritual activities are different from ordinary activities in that they anchor a worldly situation in a higher reality, and thereby give that worldly situation a permanent and transcendental status. In the case of sacrifices, this worldly situation is normally the hierarchical relationship

between the participating parties (Bronkhorst 2012). A war that is conceived of as a sacrifice does not just lend temporary victory to the winning party, but a victory that is lasting and anchored in that higher reality.

A final question needs to be addressed. It has frequently been observed that sacrificial victims, if they are animals, are domesticated animals, not wild ones. Jonathan Z. Smith, for example, observed: “I know of no unambiguous instance of animal sacrifice performed by hunters. *Animal sacrifice appears to be, universally, the ritual killing of a domesticated animal by agrarian or pastoralist societies.*” (Hamerton-Kelly, 1987: 197; see further pp. 202 ff.; Beattie, 1980: 30 f.; Hénaff, 2002: 223). This is not surprising if we consider that these animals are substitutes for the sacrificer, and must therefore be closely associated with him. Indeed, human sacrifices are known in which parents sacrifice their first-born child,²⁰ or their own finger.²¹

However, we have come to think that there may be sacrifices in which the victim is a substitute, not of the sacrificer, but of his enemy. Is it possible that in this latter case non-domesticated animals might be sacrificed, animals that may have to be obtained during hunting expeditions, just as enemies have to be captured in war?

There may indeed be examples that illustrate this latter situation. Walter Burkert observed with regard to the sacrifice in ancient Greece that “[f]or the ancient world, hunting, sacrifice, and war were symbolically interchangeable”.²² Mark Edward Lewis (1990: 18 f.) cites this observation with approval, and adds that in early China, too, warfare *and* hunting were identified with sacrifice, adding that prey was taken in the hunt to be used as sacrificial victims.²³ The identification of warfare and sacrifice does not surprise us, given what we know

²⁰ Römer, 1999. We learn from the Mahābhārata (3.128.1 ff.) that King Somaka sacrificed one son to obtain a hundred.

²¹ Hamerton-Kelly, 1987: 178; Burkert, 1996: 34 ff.

²² Cited in Lewis, 1990: 18 from the English translation of Walter Burkert’s *Homo Necans* (not accessible to me); cf. Burkert, 1972: 22 ff., esp. p. 59.

²³ Lewis (1990: 150) speaks of “the old Zhou identification of hunting as a form of warfare and in the equation, as potential sacrifices, of prey taken in the hunt with prisoners captured in combat.” “[T]he Zhou had emphasized hunts as ... a practical means of securing sacrificial victims ...”

from the Mahābhārata. If Burkert and Lewis are right, we have to add hunting, at least for ancient Greece and early China. The hunted animal, no need to add, is in that case a substitute for the enemy.

By way of conclusion I propose that the question that is the subtitle of this article can be answered affirmatively. Yes, the author(s) of the Mahābhārata understood Vedic sacrifice better than we do.²⁴ This does not necessarily mean that they knew the details of this or that sacrifice better than we do on the basis of the ancient sacrificial manuals. It means that, where we may lose sight of the wood for the trees, they knew very well what the wood was like. They were still very much aware of the fundamental structures that underlie all — or at any rate most — Vedic sacrifices. We may be well advised to learn from them.

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²⁴ Cp. Hildebeitel, 2011: 277: “one conclusion worth exploring would be that, rather than the standard view that the epic’s references to Vedic ritual, and particularly Vedic royal rituals, are distanced by desuetude and confusion about them, we should look at epic depictions of Vedic rituals, at least where they are narrated, as deft and cunning.”

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