

The Origin of Cannibalism

Ethnology

E. HANBURY HANKIN in *The Cave Man's Legacy* (Dutton):

How did cannibalism arise? Why should primitive man be distinguished from apes and monkeys by his addiction to this repulsive practice?

In seeking for a possible answer to this question, let us first make a guess as to early man's mode of fighting. It is recorded of the Irish Celts that they used to eat their enemies while keeping the heads as trophies. Also it is said that "In some cases the victor tore the features with his teeth as did the Prince of Leinster in Fitzstephen's time." Similarly, according to Dr. N. A. Dyce Sharp, an angry gorilla has been known to tear a man into ribbons. Our earliest human ancestor, if he lacked the gorilla's strength, probably rivalled both him and the Prince of Leinster in his capacity for hating his enemies. We can imagine him biting and tearing his enemy, and even his dead enemy, with his teeth. He had not yet elaborated flint weapons and, for a certain period, his teeth must have been his chief weapon of offence, as is the case with children of to-day. He had a very servicable lower jaw, far larger than ours, if we may judge from the Piltdown and Heidelberg fossils. The use of his teeth in biting and tearing the enemy would naturally lead to tasting blood and thence, by an easy transition, to eating human flesh.

If cannibalism had this origin, and if a man was chosen to be a leader owing to his proficiency in brutal fighting, and if such a leader after his death was deified, his followers might honour him by putting enemy prisoners to death in front of his grave or shrine in the way that he did when fighting. The following facts supply very slight evidence in favour of this suggestion as to the origin of human sacrifice:

In Greece, a vase painting has been discovered that shows a Thracian tearing a child with his teeth in the presence of the god.

In Crete, "in the Dionysic rites . . . in order to be identified with the god who had himself been torn by Titans, the worshipper tore and ate the raw flesh of a bull or goat. But occasionally a human victim represented the god and was similarly treated."

In India, with the Khonds, "a girl representing the goddess Tari was sacrificed and torn limb from limb by the worshippers."

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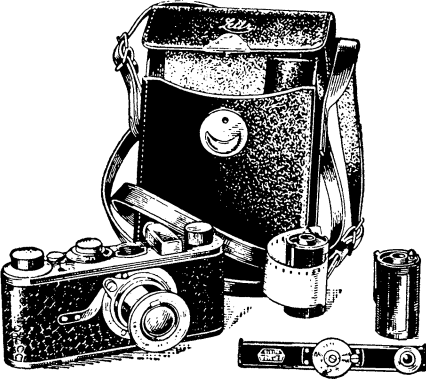
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According to Porphyry: "In Chios likewise they sacrificed a man to Omadius Bacchus; the man being for this purpose torn in pieces; and the same custom, as Euelpis Caryotius says, was adopted in Tenedos."

It may be explained that originally the sacrificed man or animal was merely a victim. Later, the sacrifice came to be regarded as sacred or even as part of the god.

The fact that religious cannibalism is almost always confined to eating enemies is in favour of the above suggestion.

Another suggestion may be made. If, as is highly probable, primitive man suffered from a restricted food supply, cannibalism may have appealed to him as a welcome means of avoiding hunger.

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