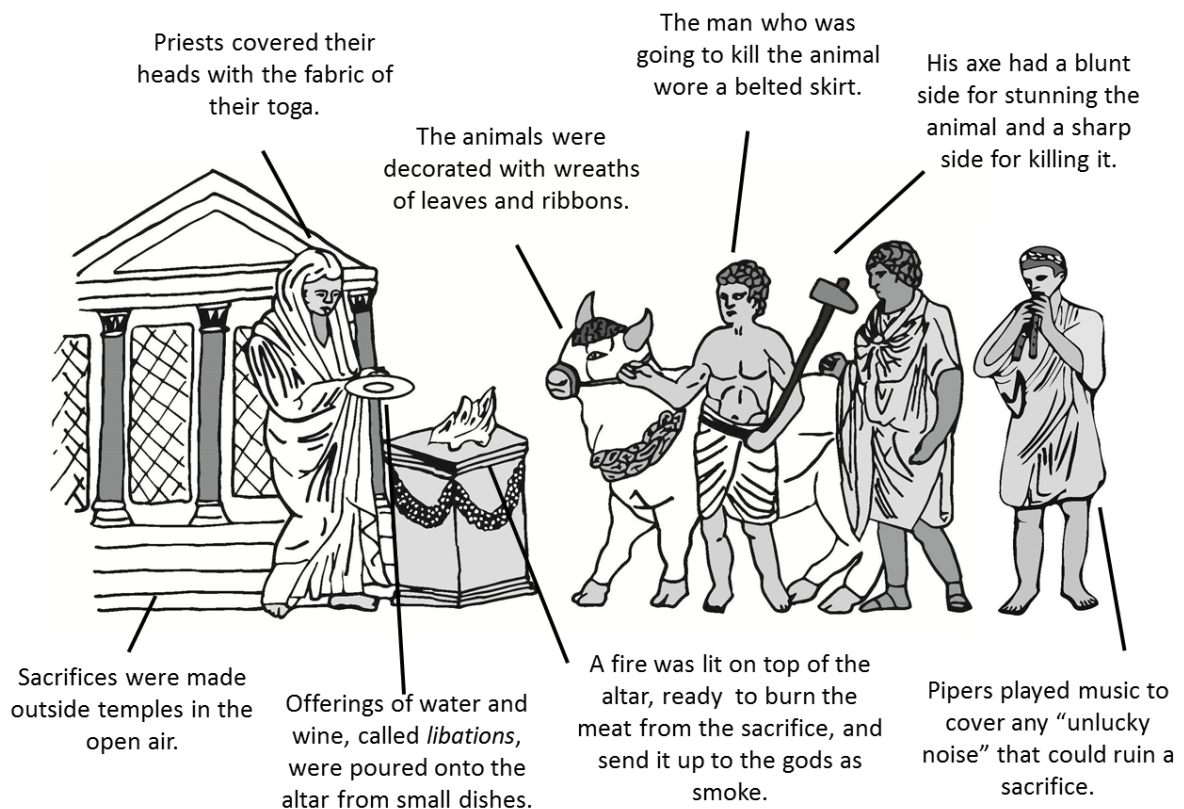


# ROMAN ANIMAL SACRIFICE – Teacher’s Notes

## Slide 1:



## Notes:

Animal sacrifice was an important part of Roman religion, but you will be able to judge best how much information your class will want to know!

- More usually, the Romans made sacrifices of food and drink as part of their religious practice at home. Animal sacrifices were for special occasions, and usually part of public or shared celebrations.
- Very special events might involve the sacrifice of several animals. A *hecatomb* (pron. ‘hekkatoom’) was the sacrifice of 100 oxen.
- Animals were killed by having their throats cut. Since it was considered unlucky for the animals to struggle or show fear, it was common to stun large animals with the blunt end of the axe first.
- After its death, the animal might be cut open and have its insides inspected by a *haruspex*. Healthy organs were a sign of divine favour.
- ‘Unlucky noise’, like animals moaning or someone sneezing could mean the sacrifice was spoiled. Musicians, including pipers and singers were used to make covering noise.
- Certain parts of the animal were burnt on the altar as a gift to the gods. Often the rest of the animal was divided up among the worshippers for a religious feast. At a time when meat was expensive, and could not be stored for long periods, this was a real treat, and one of the reasons that animal sacrifices were so popular.
- If a sacrifice went wrong, or the animal’s organs didn’t look good, the worshippers had to start all over again with a new animal.

#### Slides 2-4:

*Scenes of sacrifice. Let you students look closely at these images, and identify the traditional elements, e.g. the priest with covered head, the musicians, the decorated animal, etc.*

- **Romans bringing an ox to sacrifice.** This relief probably once belonged to a triumphal arch for the Emperor Hadrian (AD 117- 138). It shows attendants leading an ox decorated with ribbons. The bare-chested men are the ones who will kill the ox – you can see the remains of the axe handle in the hand of the man on the right. This relief is now in the Louvre in Paris (inv. no. Ma 992). You can read more about it here: <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/fragment-architectural-relief>
- **The Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, making a sacrifice.** The scene is taken from the arch of Marcus Aurelius. It shows the emperor (AD 161-180 AD) in front of the Temple of Jupiter in Rome. This relief is now in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. Notice how simple the altar can be – here it's just a dish on a tripod.
- **A Roman family sacrificing food and drink.** Not all sacrifices were of animals. Here a family is making an offering of fruit on the altar, and the father is pouring a libation. This little relief comes from a cremation urn from c. AD 150. The faces of the mother and father figure have not been carved. The sculptor would make this kind of urn in advance, and then carve portrait heads to suit the person who bought it. This urn is now in Boston (inv. no. 2002.25). You can read more about it here: <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/cinerary-urn-with-offering-scene-346670>

#### Slides 5-6:

*Roman Altars. In addition to the tripod altar, seen in the previous slides, the Romans used both rectangular and drum-shaped altars. The following two examples are among the many that can be seen on display in the Ashmolean Museum.*

- **Drum-shaped altar from Roman Delos:** Delos is a Greek island in the Aegean. Round altars were very common in the Greek-speaking parts of the Roman Empire. The proper, archaeological name for carved ox-heads (or ox-skulls) is *bucrania*. You can read more about this altar, including who set it up and why, here: <http://bit.ly/AshLI-Delos>.
- **Red sandstone altar from Roman Chester:** The altar was dedicated in AD 154 to Jupiter-Tanarus, a combination of the Roman god and a Celtic thunder god. The man who set it up was an officer of Spanish origin serving in the Roman legion XX Valeria Victrix who were stationed at Chester, near the border with Wales in the north-west of England. The hole on the top is modern. You can read more about this altar, and how the AshLI team read the disappearing inscription, here: <http://bit.ly/ChesterAltar>.