ALTAR. The English word *altar*, meaning “a raised structure on which sacrifices are offered to a deity,” derives from the Latin *altare* (“altar”) and may be related to *altus* (“high”). This ancient meaning has been further verified by the corresponding Classical Greek term *bômos* (raised platform, stand, base, altar with a base, i.e., the foundation of the sacrifice). The Latin *altaria* is, in all likelihood, related to the verb *adolorere* (“to worship”; originally, “to burn, to cause to go up in smoke or odor”), so that the word has come to signify a “place of fire” or “sacrificial hearth.”

The Classical World and Ancient Near East. The above etymology implies both burnt offerings and incense. Concerning aspects of the alphabet in Judaism and Islam, articles on religious and occult uses of the alphabet in that language is scarce. Georg Krotoff illustrates the uses of letter and number mysticism in the Islamic Middle Ages in his analysis of the *Haft Paykar* by the Persian poet Nizami in “Colour and Number in the Haft Paykar” in Logos Islamikos: Studia Islamica in honorem Georgii Michaelis Wickens (Toronto, 1984).


The shape of the hearth reflected the transformation of the sacrifice, through fire, into matter appropriate for the spiritual world. It also reflected the role of the hearth as the hallowed and central place both within the family and in society. The altar could also take the form of a burial mound in which the hole or duct that drained the sacrificial blood to the interred bodies within corresponded to the pit formerly used in sacrifices to the dead. Homer uses the word to mean “fireplace,” indicating that burnt offerings and an ash altar had been part of the cult of the dead.

The above differentiations and functions apply to altars in general, regardless of how they were constructed or shaped within different cultures and religions: whether boulders, mounds, or piles of rocks; the stepped altars of the Akkadians and Cretans; the sacrificial tables of the Minoans; the sacred hearth of the megaron, the male gathering room of ancient Greece and the prototype of the temple; the retables of the Mycenaean pit or cupola graves; or the table and grave altars of the Christian cult of the dead (Fauth, 1964). In a Pawnee house, a wealth of cosmic symbols surround the buffalo skull displayed on an earthen platform—a raised place that Western scholars commonly refer to as an altar (Welfish, 1965, pp. 63, 66f., 266; cf. Reichard, 1950, pp. xxxv, 334).

Egyptian ritual worship included both portable and stationary altars. The former had no sacred function but were simply cult accessories such as tables or stands used for holding a tray of food, an incense bowl, or a libation cup (according to the type of sacrifice involved). Such portable altars were kept in great numbers in the temple stores. Most of the extant stationary altars were used in the sun temples. These altars were surrounded by a low wall indicating the special sacred nature of their place during sun rites that were devoid of imagery. A large obelisk further underscored the importance of the place in the ancient temples dedicated to Re. Monuments of that size could only be contained in the courtyard of an ordinary temple (“the place of sacrifice”), whereas the holiest of holies, which was inside the temple and harbored the cult image, had to make do with a portable sacrificial table (Bonnet, 1952, pp. 14f.).

Hinduism. The Sanskrit word *vedi* refers to “an elevated piece of ground serving as a sacrificial altar” or “a clay sacrificial altar.” It is synonymous with *piṭha* (“seat, throne”), an altar stand or pedestal with places for several idols, each backed with a *pahāvali*, or “halo” (Liebert, 1976, p. 334). *Vedi* may also designate a shallow trench constructed especially for offerings.

The nomadic Indo-Aryans who invaded India around 1500 BCE carried with them a portable fire altar drawn on a chariot (ratha) and protected by a canopy that marked the holiness of the shrine. This eternally burning fire on a rolling base was eventually replaced by fires kindled for the occasion by rubbing sticks together. In the case of domestic sacrifices, the head of the family made the fire in the home hearth.
(āyatana). For communal offerings, a fire was made on a specially consecrated spot (śāhāṇīḍā).

There were no temples during the Vedic period, but a sacrificial hall (yajgātālā) could be erected on holy ground that had first been thoroughly leveled. It consisted of a framework of poles covered with thatching. The sacred area, which like the domestic hearth was called āyatana, included subsidiary enclosures and a sacrificial stake (yāpā) to which the victim was tied. This stake, which represented the cosmic tree, constituted an intermediate station between the divine world and life on earth. The vedi was constructed either inside or outside the sacrificial hall, as a mound of bricks or as a shallow pit where the sacred fires were lit. Burnt sacrifices and libations were offered to the gods who were supposed to attend the ceremonies, sitting on sacred grass (kusa) spread over part of the altar or on its sides. The vedi was constructed so as to be narrower in the middle and was likened to a female torso with a womb (Walker, 1968, vol. 1, p. 30).

The āsava sacrifice, performed by priests, was founded on Vedic āsuta ("heard") revelation; it is the subject of much discussion, especially in Satapatha Brāhmana. The practice calls for three different fire altars arranged around the vedi, which serves to hold oblations and sacrificial utensils not in use. The circular garhapatya altar located to the west symbolizes the earth and its fire; it holds the "fire belonging to the lord of the house" that is used for preparing the sacrificial food. The quadrilateral abhavantya altar to the east represents the sky with its four directions. It usually holds "the fire of offering." The semicircular dakṣiṇā, or southern altar, symbolizes the atmosphere between the heavens and the earth. It wards off hostile spirits and transmits the offering to the ancestors. The fire god Agni is thus present on all three altars in three different manifestations—as terrestrial, celestial, and aerial fire—uniting the three worlds on one sacred plane. The omnipresent Agni, as all gods in one, provides the link between heaven and earth by conveying the food cooked on earthly fire to the heavenly fire, the sun.

All sacrificial rites are said to be included in and summed up by the stratification of the agnicaya (fireplace) or the uttaravedi (high altar) to the north with its rich symbolism. It represents the rejuvenation of the exhausted creator god Prajāpati, "the lord of offspring," and hence of all the cosmos, his body. The Agnicayana sacrifice re-creates the cyclic rhythm of the universe: from birth or coming into being to death or annihilation, at which point life begins anew. The sacrificial ceremonies thus serve a triple purpose: at the same time they restore Prajāpati himself, the universe, and the master of the offering (yajamana).

The fire altar in this case is constructed of five layers of bricks, 10,800 in number (one for every hour of the Hindu year). The creator god represents the year with its five seasons. The five layers also symbolize the five regions of the universe. The basic notion behind these cosmic representations is of Prajāpati himself: his hair, skin, flesh, bone, and marrow, as well as another pentad: the god's spiritual self together with the senses. The fire, taken from the āhavanīya altar to the uttaravedi, lifts the master of the offering to heaven, making him immortal. His spiritual flight is sometimes symbolized by an altar built in the shape of a flying bird. He thus manifests himself simultaneously in time, space, and creation/creator (Gonda, 1960, pp. 141, 190ff.; Hopkins, pp. 18f).

The Agnicayana ritual may still be studied in India as a living tradition. Its principles, as manifested in the Vāsupuruṣa-māndala, a diagram of the incarnation of Puruṣa (Primordial Man), are found in the building symbolism of the Hindu temple (Gonda, 1960, p. 328; cf. Eliade, 1958, secs. 142, 154, 171; 1978, secs. 76ff.).

ISRAELITE RELIGION AND EARLY JUDAISM. The Hebrew term for altar is mizbeḥah ("a place of sacrificial slaughter"), which is derived from zabūh ("to slaughter as a sacrifice"). In time, the animal slaughter came to be performed beside, not on, the altar. Other kinds of oblations offered on the altar were grain, wine, and incense. The altar sometimes served a nonsacrificial function as witness (Jot. 22:26ff.) or refuge (1 Kgs. 1:50ff.) for most crimes except murder.

The altars, if not made from natural or rough-hewn rocks, were constructed from unhewn stone, earth, or metal. The tabernacle, or portable desert sanctuary of the Israelites, had a bronze-plated altar for burnt offerings in the court and a gold-plated incense altar used within the tent. Both of these altars were constructed of wood, and each was fitted with four rings and two poles for carrying. The altar for burnt offerings was hollow, like its Assyrian counterpart, to make it lighter. Both had horns on all four corners, offering refuge to anyone who grasped them.

The description of the altars in King Solomon's temple (the First Temple) is incomplete (cf. 1 Kgs. 6ff.; 2 Chr. 4:1). Two hundred years later Ahaz replaced the sacrificial altar of Solomon with a copy of a Damascene altar (2 Kgs. 16:10ff.) that resembled an Akkadian temple tower not only in its staid structure but also in references to the top as "the mountain of God."

Ezekiel's vision of the altar of the new temple may be directly modeled on that of Ahaz, unless it refers to the postexilic altar dating from 515 BCR or is a free construction. Ezekiel calls the incense altar "the table that is before the Lord" (Ez. 41:22). The Temple Scroll of the Qumran texts from the beginning of our own era contains a detailed description of the true Temple and its rites, presented as the original revelation of God to Moses that was never realized. Unfortunately, the text dealing with the altar is badly damaged (Maier, 1978, pp. 67, 76).

The function of the Israelite altar was essentially the same as in other sanctuaries of the ancient Near East but with some important differences. While sacrifices were still referred to as "the bread of your God" (Lv. 22:25) and "a pleasing odor to the Lord" (Lv. 1:17), the notion of actually feeding Yahveh was not implied. This ancient pagan idea has
acquired with the passage of time a strictly metaphorical meaning, as in later references to “the Lord’s table” (e.g., Mal. 1:7). Furthermore, the altars of Yahweh could be erected only in the Promised Land.

The altar itself was sanctified in extensive consecration rites culminating in a theophany described in Leviticus 9:23–24: “The glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the whole offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people came out from before the Lord and consumed the whole ward the sacred land, the sacred city, and the Temple.”

The place from which prayers ascended to God—even in foreign battles, provided that the worshipers turned to the altar first used in the Septuagint. The commonly used term for altar in Greek was the “divinely-appointed instrument of effecting expiation for taking animal life” (Milgrom and Lerner, 1971, col. 765). The sanctuary of the altar forbade stepping on it and required that the priests wear breeches to cover their nakedness (Ex. 20:26, 28:42f.). Talmudic sources maintain the distinction between the sacrificial bronze altar in the Temple court and the golden incense altar in the sanctuary by referring to them as “outer” and “inner” altars.

Iron could not be used in the construction of an altar, according to rabbinical literature, since the iron sword represented disaster while the altar was a symbol of atonement and peace between Israel and God. The word mizbeah resembles four other words meaning “removes evil decrees,” “sustains,” “endears,” “atoners.” The four consonants of mizbeah are sometimes also interpreted as the initial letters of four words meaning “forgiveness,” “justification,” “blessing,” “life.” Both the terminology and the legends associated with the altar have given rise to countless metaphors.

Abraham’s binding of Isaac on the altar in the land of Moriah is considered the supreme example of self-sacrifice in obedience to God’s will, and the symbol of Jewish martyrdom throughout the ages. Abraham himself was, from this point of view, the first person to prepare for martyrdom, and his offering was the last of the ten trials to which he was exposed. According to Jewish tradition, the Temple was later built on that very spot (Jacobs, 1971, cols. 480f.); hence the expression “Whoever is buried in the land of Israel is as if he were buried beneath the altar.” Already in Exodus 25:9 and 25:40 we read of a heavenly pattern for the tabernacle and its furniture. Earlier still, the Sumerian king Gudea (fl. c. 2144–c. 2124 BC) had built a temple in Lagash in accordance with a divinely inspired plan. Rabbinical sources have further developed this correspondence: the archangel Mikha’el, serving as high priest, is described as celebrating a heavenly rite on the altar before God, offering the souls of the saints who after death have found rest under the heavenly altar (Kohler, 1901, p. 467; cf. Rv. 6:9).

The Jewish table has been looked upon as a kind of altar even since the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. The saying “Now that there is no altar, a man’s table atones for him” helps explain many of the table customs in halakhah (Milgrom and Lerner, 1971, cols. 767ff.).

CHRISTIANITY. Paul contrasted the Christian service with the pagan sacrificial meal by stating that we cannot partake of the Lord’s table and the devil’s table at the same time (1 Cor. 10:21). He thus distinguished between pagan sacrificial altars and the table at which Christ celebrated the last supper with his disciples. The New Testament constitutes the dividing point between Judaism and Christianity: Christ has, once and for all, made the full and sufficient sacrifice of himself (Heb. 8–10). The terminology of the sacrifice is used figuratively in reference to the dedication of Christian life (Rom. 12:1) and to the mission of Paul himself (Phil. 2:17).

The early church was thus able to refer to the Eucharist as thiasia, (Gr., “sacrifice”). The table at which it was celebrated was the thiasistéron (“place of sacrifice”), the term for altar first used in the Septuagint. The commonly used term among the Christians was trapeza (“table”). We find the term bombos used throughout the Bible to designate the altars of the pagan gods (Behm, 1964–1976 p. 182).

Construction of separate rooms for the divine service was a rather late development owing to the persecutions of the first few centuries. The early Christians used portable tables that possessed no special sacred or ritual connotations for the eucharistic meals. This did not change until around 200 CE, when the altar became stationary and was sanctified by a special anointment with oil (muron). Under Constantine, Christianity became first a tolerated and later a favored religion, resulting in a rapid rise in church construction.

The Western church eventually settled on the Latin term altare (“a raised place”) since it corresponded not only to the sacrificial altars of the Temple-centered Israelite religion but also to the various non-Christian cults of the Roman world. The Christians differentiated their altars from pagan ones by using the terms altare and mensa instead of ara, and by referring to their altar in the singular, reserving the plural altaria for pagan places of sacrifice. As late as the fourth century, Christian apologists listed the specific characteristics of Christianity: there were no temples, no altars, and no sacrificial rites, that is, in the pagan sense (see Steuber, 1978, p. 309).

Following the adoption of the altar by the early Christian churches, its sacred nature became increasingly emphasized. It was the foundation of the elements of the Eucharist, and the special presence of Christ was expressed in the epiclesis of the eucharistic liturgy. A rich symbolism could there-
fore develop. The altar could be seen as a symbol of the heavenly throne or of Christ himself: the altar is made of stone, just as Christ is the cornerstone (Mt. 21:42). It also could be his cross or his grave. The martyr cult of the period lent another symbolic dimension to the altar: it was shaped like a sarcophagus, on top of which the communion table was placed. The statement in Revelation that the prophet sees under the altar the souls of those who were martyred for the Word legitimized the practice of incorporating relics in the altar. This latter development may be illustrated by Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. Excavations have shown that a small funeral monument was erected on the simple earthen tomb of the apostle Peter around 150 CE. The altar in Constantine’s fourth-century basilica and later the main altar of the sixteenth-century cathedral were centered on top of the original tomb. During the construction of the former, the bones of Peter were wrapped in a gold-embroidered purple cloth and deposited in a marble niche. On the wall an unknown hand has carved the following words in fourth-century Greek: “Peter inside.” An altar of this kind was also referred to as confessio (“witness”) after the witness to the faith or the martyr buried there.

During the Middle Ages a document giving the year of dedication was often placed along with the main relic in a hollow place in the top of the altar. This was covered with a stone and referred to as a sepulcrum (“grave”). In conjunction with the dedication ceremony it was customary to chisel a cross in each corner and one in the middle of the stone top.

The Middle Ages added little that was new to the symbolism of the altar but rather served to reiterate and sum up the thinking of the church fathers on the subject. The greatest popular preacher of the German Middle Ages, Berthold von Regensburg (c. 1220–1272), provides a good summary of the Christological interpretation:

The altar manifests Christ. It is built of stone, anointed in a holy way; it stands in an exalted place and serves as a container for the relics of the saints. So is Christ too a rock (1 Cor. 10:4); anointed with the Holy Ghost (Ps. 44:3); the head of the whole church (Col. 1:18), in him the life and glory of the saints lie hidden (Col. 3:3). To the extent that it is sacrificed on the altar, it signifies the cross on which Christ offered himself, not only for our sins but for the sins of the whole world. (quoted in Maurer, 1969, p. 36)

After the Reformation, with its opposition to relic worship and to the conception of the Mass as a sacrifice, it was primarily the Eucharist of the early church that came to be associated with the altar table. The reformers emphasized the importance of the true and pure preaching of the word of God, with the result that the pulpit gained a more prominent position, sometimes at the expense of the altar.

The altar also came to be relegated to a secondary role within the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, when the increasingly opulent ornamentation of screens, paintings, and sculptures was introduced. This development was furthered during the Renaissance and the Baroque era, when the focus increasingly shifted to the sacramental presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

SEE ALSO Agnii; Fire; Hestia; Sacrifice; Shrines; Stones.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


The Aḻvars are a group of Hindu religious poets of South India. Their name in Tamil means "sages" or "saints." As devotees of Māl, a deity who combines attributes of the Kṛṣṇa of the Bhagavadgītā and earlier Purāṇas with those of Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa, they differ from a second, contemporary group of poets, the Saiva Nāyakārs. Yet in other respects both groups are closely related and together must be regarded as responsible for the formation of a devotional, vernacular Hinduism.

The only reliable source on the Aḻvars is the corpus of their own poetry, which the semilegendarv Nārāhamuni compiled in the early tenth century CE (and which was somewhat modified in the twelfth century). This corpus is known as the Nālāyira-divya-prabandham (Sacred poetic collection of four thousand); "four thousand" refers to the total number of stanzas. The Prabandham consists of twenty-three separate works, arranged in four books (in imitation of the four Vedas), among which the Tiruvāyimoli by "Cātakōpan" (as the poet calls himself) is the longest and most important. This compilation and the preservation of the poems were begun, the picture thus revealed is very different, though no less colorful. Traditionally, twelve Aḻvars are listed, but in the Prabandham only eleven works bear a poet's name (yielding a total of seven different authors), while the remaining twelve works are anonymous. These seven poets provide information in their verses from which we can infer that two were brahman temple priests, Viṭṭuĉittan (or Periyāḻvar in familiar Śrī Vaiṣṇava parlance) and Toṭaraiṭippōti (Bhaktāṅghirēṟu); one a brahman woman, Kōtai (Anṭāl, "the lady"); two chieftains; Kulacekaran (almost certainly not the author of the Mukundamāda) and Kalikanri (Tirumāṅkai-āḻvar, a "robber knight" in hagiography); one a regional landlord, Cātakōpan (Nāmāḻvar); and one a bard, Maturakavi. According to legend, the remaining five poets were all male low-caste bards and yogins. Geographical references in the poems cover most of what is today Kerala and Tamil Nadu, along with the southern part of Andhra Pradesh. The period from the sixth to the tenth century CE is the most likely one for the composition of the poems in the Prabandham.

Against the background of the bhakti yoga as found in the Bhagavadgītā, that of Vedānta, Pāṇcatātra, and Vaikhānaṇa ritualism, of earlier folk Kṛṣṇaism and sophisticated secular Tamil culture, the Aḻvars evolved a form of religion with intense emotive flavor. Māl (also known as Tīrumāl, Māṇṭō, Perumāl, etc.), who is the object of this devotion, manifests himself on earth in three different modes. There are his mythical exploits, many of them known from stories of the classical avatāras, especially the amorous Kṛṣṇa. Then there are his incarnations in the statues of numerous South Indian temples (approximately ninety-five such shrines are mentioned by the poets), and finally there is his dwelling within the hearts of his devotees. These three modes provide the emotional and intellectual stimuli that gave rise to Tamil songs and poems (which in turn were intended as further stimuli). The characteristics of eroticism and ecstatic drive, which were subduced in the terse earlier anonymous poems, reached their culmination when Nammalvar drew on Tamil secular love poetry and transformed it into a novel type of mystical literature. Later Aḻvars such as Anṭāl, Kalikanri, and Viṭṭuĉittan developed this genre further and gave it new shape in the form of folk songs and children's songs. The Prabandham contains no systematic theology or philosophy, but its general orientation of thought is in the direction of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. This latter school, however, had little scope for an ecstatic form of devotion. It was the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (a South Indian text of about the tenth century CE, by an unknown author) that adopted the Aḻvar devotion and gave it a Sanskrit mold, in fact by translating or paraphrasing poems of the Aḻvars.