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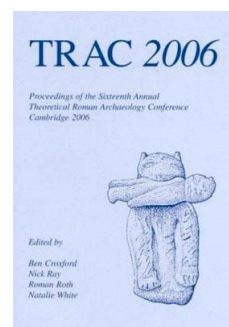
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New Images for Old Rituals: Stelae of Saturn and Personal Cult in Roman North Africa

By Günther Schörner
(Translated by Roman Roth)

Sacrifices and their representations

When discussing cultic practices in the Roman Empire, we can normally assume two recurring features: firstly, that every – or almost every – subject of the Empire worshipped gods, and secondly, that the most important component of this worship was sacrifice (animal sacrifice in particular) (see for example: Wissowa 1912: 409–432; Beard *et al.* 1998: 36–37; Rüpke 2001: 136–153; Scheid 2003: 79–106). We might therefore expect to find these practices represented frequently in Roman art across the Empire. In reality, however, the geographical distribution of such representations is by no means even (e.g. Scott Ryberg 1955; Ronke 1987; ThesCRA I 2004). While, for example, many sacrificial scenes are attested in western Anatolia, very few have been found in central and eastern Anatolia. Gaul and Germany have produced numerous representations of animal sacrifice, whereas far less are known to have come from Hispania, and virtually none are known for Greece. Most of the representations in question, however, originate from Roman North Africa, particularly in *Africa proconsularis* and *Numidia* (modern Tunisia and the eastern part of Algeria). Their uneven distribution should caution us against a blanket interpretation of such scenes. In fact, we may draw two preliminary conclusions from these patterns: first, that while sacrifice to the gods was a necessary element of divine worship everywhere, it was less universally important to represent it iconographically, and second, that the reasons for representing (or not representing) animal sacrifice may have varied from region to region.

Saturn stelae in North Africa: continuity and change

Most known representations (over 2000) of animal sacrifice come in the form of reliefs on stelae dedicated to Saturn (figs. 1 and 2), only a small proportion of which is inscribed (Le Glay 1961; Le Glay 1966a; Le Glay 1988).

Le Glay's seminal study of 'Saturne africain' lists most of these, with the aim of demonstrating how the cult of Saturn changed under Rome's rule. Thus, Le Glay identified Saturn as the successor of the Punic or Punic-Libyan god Ba'al Hamon (Le Glay 1966b). Based on a traditional model of Romanisation (for Africa: Thebert 1978; Sheldon 1982; M'charek 1995, and for stelae: Le Glay 1966b: *passim*, especially 243–244; Varner 1990; Kraus 1993: 86), Le Glay postulated that both the reliefs and the act of worship itself increasingly took on Roman forms, as it were, in a straightforward and teleological manner. In fact, it seems as though the representations of animal sacrifice were characterised by an increasing degree of similarity. The iconographical schema of the Saturn stelae that most closely resemble Roman reliefs is tripartite. At the top, Saturn and his divine companions

are shown. The centre is reserved for the representation of the person carrying out the sacrifice; this is usually the most prominent part of the relief. The sacrificial animal is shown in a smaller scene at the bottom of the stele. In addition to this emphasis on the Romanisation of the formal aspects of ritual and representation, most previous approaches to this material have focussed on the ‘personality’ of the worshipped god. Many contributions to this debate resemble psychiatric case studies; if not indeed they appear to be inspired by R.L. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in their portrayal of the relationship between ‘Dr Saturn’ and ‘Mr Ba’al Hamon’. What they have failed to do, however, is to provide a set of analyses compatible with the archaeological and historical evidence for religious practices in Roman North Africa.

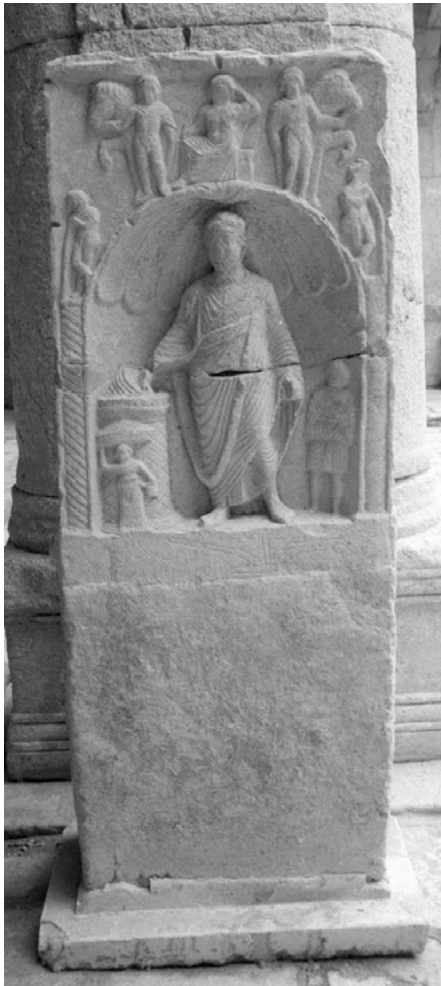


Figure 1: Stele from Ksar Toual. El Kef, Musée archéologique (as Picard 1954: fig. 13).



Figure 2: Stele from Thuburnuc. Tunis, Musée du Bardo (after Gauckler 1915: pl. 242, 3)

In this paper, I am going to leave this well-trodden path. In its place, the direction of the present study is that of ritual practice as a key to understanding the structure of ancient cults. Following Scheid (2005: 275–84), the latter can be characterised as orthopractic, owing to their emphasis on correct, ritual practice.

Excavations at several sanctuaries of Saturn, such as those at Henchir el Hami (Fig. 3) (Ferjaoui 2002), Thuburnica (Sidi Ali bel Kassem) (Le Glay 1961: 274–276), Siagu (Merlin 1910), Henchir Ghayadha (Ferjaoui and M’charek 1990), and Menzel Harb (Foucher 1966) have shown that each stele demarcated a sacrificial deposit that consisted of an urn containing cremated bone, as well as accompanying vessels.



Figure 3: Stele and deposit at Henchir el Hami (after Ferjaoui 2002: fig. 1).

The dedication of the stela, therefore, represents only one aspect of a more complex ritual, and took place as part of a sequence of cultic activities. A sacrificial animal (usually a sheep) was slaughtered and subsequently burnt (although sometimes only part of the animal was burnt, leaving some of it to be eaten by those involved in the sacrifice). The bones were then collected and buried, together with entire or broken ceramic vessels, and the place of deposition marked by a stele (e.g. Ferjaoui 2002: 65–69). As a consequence,

the stelae are not independent monuments in their own right. Instead, they refer to at least two cultic acts; the vow and its fulfilment, not only through the erection of the stele, but also through the sacrifice itself. Nor was the erection of the stelae the final cultic activity involving them; holes drilled into a number of examples from different sanctuaries suggest that they were subsequently decorated (Fig. 4). Moreover, additional sacrificial gifts were frequently deposited in front of them, sometimes on specially made platters. Finally, there is epigraphic evidence for the custom of *dealbatio*, which may refer to the whitewashing of the stelae (Le Glay 1966b: 349).



Figure 4: Stele with attachment holes from Central Tunisia. London, British Museum Inv. NPu 45.125066 (after Mendleson 2003, Fig. NPu 45).

This allows two conclusions to be drawn:

- (1) The functions of the stelae are complex and clearly different from those of Classical Greek or Roman votive reliefs, to which they have often been assimilated.
- (2) The representations on the stelae are of secondary importance, perhaps even simply decorative. A stele decorated with a ‘Romanised’ relief is no more suited to its ritual role than one showing a roughly hewn depiction of a sacrificial animal. It is the medium of the representation – the stele – that matters most, not the image itself. It is, therefore, important not to attach too much importance to the sacrificial scene as a way of understanding the cult of Saturn in its ritual complexity.

Another reason for assuming that the iconography is not the decisive element of the stelae, and that they should not be interpreted in analogy to other Roman votive reliefs may be found in the fact that while the forms of the stelae differ from one sanctuary to another, they tend to be homogeneous within each sanctuary (for example the stelae of Ain Tounga, Le Glay 1961: 126–202). On the one hand, this homogeneity may reflect the small number of local workshops involved in the production of stelae displayed at each sanctuary. Whilst on the other hand, it is striking that within these limits, factors such as the iconography, the size, or the material of the stelae do not appear to have been exploited with a view to creating distinctions among the dedicants. Apparently, the desire for – or, perhaps, peer pressure towards – conformity outweighed the concern for personalised representation; it was more important to integrate with the overall pattern of votive behaviour. Conversely, we cannot assume that the tendency towards more personalised forms of representation can be equated to a ‘more developed’, and Romanised form of relief iconography. The degree to which the latter appears to conform to notionally more ‘Roman’ ideas of votive iconography cannot be the main criterion in assessing the development of the cult itself.

For the same reason, there are clear limitations to the types of sociological interpretations that are frequently applied to the Saturn stelae. For instance, while a *vilicus* (probably of servile status) was able to set up a well-sculpted stele in the rural settlement of Djemila (Le Glay 1966a: 224, No., 26 Pl. 34.2), reliefs of a comparably high quality are not known from the large city of Hippo Regius (Le Glay 1961: 434–451, Pl. 17–18). Similarly, the stelae erected by a *vir clarissimus* from La Mohammedia (Le Glay 1961: 76, No. 3, Pl. 2.4) and by a *vir egregius* from the sanctuary of Dschebel Bou Kornin (Le Glay 1961: 64, No. 116, Pl. 4.4) do not differ from those placed at the same sites by dedicants of considerably lower social status, at least not in terms of the quality of their sculpture. Therefore, the usual correlation between the quality and Romanised appearance of the relief sculpture and high social status does not describe this situation adequately.

The decisive factors in understanding the wider significance of the stelae, however, are the patterns of continuity in the cult practices involving them. Archaeological evidence from the sanctuaries of Ba'al Hamon documents identical sequences of ritual activity for the Punic and the neo-Punic periods (Rives 1995: 142, example: Ferjaoui 2002: 72–73, and still stressing the discontinuity between Punic and Roman times: Saint-Amans 2004: 76). As during the Roman period, the stelae from both the Punic and the neo-Punic phases were used to mark the deposition of urns containing burnt sacrificial remains. In some cases, such as at Thuburnica (Le Glay 1961: 274–276), or the newly excavated section of Henchir el Hami (Ferjaoui 2002: 72–73), there is evidence for the continuous deposition of such remains that in turn suggests continuity in the ritual practices that produced them. These

traditions carry on into later phases, despite changes to their physical setting; both sanctuaries had initially been enclosed open spaces lacking architectural structures. More elaborate buildings were erected only as late as the late second or the early third centuries A.D. (Eingartner 2005). These new architectural forms must in some way have been integrated into the existing ritual, the main components of which, however, seem to have remained the same. Archaeologically, this is shown by three elements:

- (1) Urns containing burnt sacrificial remains;
- (2) Broken table wares;
- (3) Demarcation of the deposit by a stele.

The stelae are thus embedded in a continuous system of cultic activity. With regard to the significance of the stelae as ritual media, this means that they remained an integral part of the cult by retaining their function as markers of a specific set of practices.

So, what did change during the Roman period? Latin inscriptions on some of the stelae suggest that the language of the cult changed, at least insofar as its epigraphic manifestation is concerned. In many ways, the designs and themes shown on the stelae underwent notable developments. Reliefs displaying both god and dedicant are more frequently found during the Roman period; the extent of this, however, varies geographically, and is not primarily a chronological indicator. As previous approaches have been based on the assumption that Romanisation was a progressively increasing phenomenon, the cultural interpretation of the reliefs according to their stylistic chronology is bound to result in a circular argument. Rather than as a reflection of wider chronological patterns, or indeed, of social hierarchies, however, the use of characteristically 'Roman' styles should be seen in the context of factors influencing the production of the stelae at the local level.

As mentioned before, Saturn stelae were typically erected to mark dedications by individuals; less commonly, we find them in groups of two or more, when they can represent dedications made by entire families. Similarly, the urns containing burnt sacrificial remains were always buried individually. During the Roman period, this individual, even private aspect of the Saturn cult seems to have become even more prominent. Three factors, in particular, point towards this development:

- (1) The inscriptions on stelae from the Roman period put a greater emphasis on the protection of the dedicant's family, particularly their children, than is the case in Punic times.
- (2) According to the epigraphic evidence of the stelae, the vow to make a dedication to Saturn was the result of immediate contact between the god and his worshipper in a dream; this is indicated by the frequent use of phrases such as *ex visu*, *visu monitus* and *iussi visu* (Le Glay 1966b: 341–342).
- (3) Bone analyses of the deposits from some of the larger Punic sanctuaries show that newborn to four-week-old lambs were the sacrificial victims of choice (Fedele and Foster 1988: 40–42; Docter *et al.* 2001/02: 424). Most of these sacrifices must therefore have taken place in the spring. The bones deposited in urns during the Roman period have not been subjected to such analyses yet. However, there are a considerable number of inscriptions on stelae (e.g. some from the sanctuary of Djebel Bou Kornin, Le Glay 1961: 36–73) that give the day of their dedication.

These suggest that the ritual was regularly performed all year round. An official, or semi-official occasion, such as a religious festival, on which many worshippers practiced the ritual at once, no longer seems to have been observed.

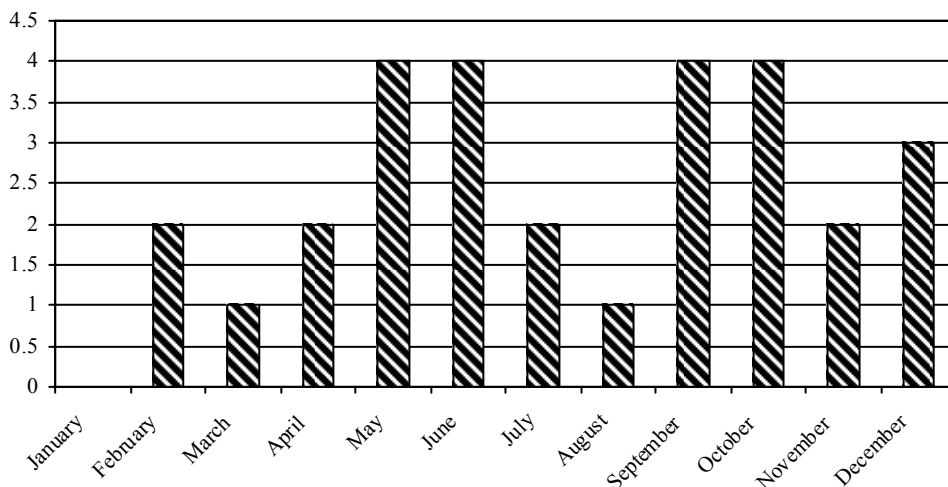


Figure 5: Distribution of Sacrifices to Saturn

Public and private forms of the cult of Saturn

Where on the scale from ‘public’ to ‘private’ does the North African cult of Saturn fit in? Roman cults, the *sacra*, were classified as either *sacra publica* or *sacra privata* (Rüpke 2001: 27–45). *Sacra publica* were performed for the prosperity of a city and were financed through public funds. All other *sacra* were *privata*. According to this definition, the cult of Saturn falls into the latter category. This is suggested by a number of factors, for example: the sacrifices were not carried out on behalf of a city, a dynamic supported by the fact that very few municipal priests of Saturn are attested (Le Glay 1966: 374–376; Rives 1995: 144 [overemphasizing the evidence]). The temples and sanctuaries of Saturn were, on the other hand, paid for by a combination of public and private funds, although private money (*de pecunia sua*) seems to have been the more common financial source. In most cases, therefore, private individuals provided sanctuary space for the performance of private rituals by themselves and others (Le Glay 1966b: 294–295). In addition, it is worth asking whether the erection of a temple (in the Roman style) in a sanctuary decisively affected the nature of the cult itself, since it merely required a sacrificial area, not an *aedis*. At Henchir el Hami, for example, the building of a temple during the late second century A.D. does not seem to have changed the way in which the cult was practiced, at least insofar as this can be said on the basis of the archaeological evidence (Ferjaoui 2002: 70–71).

Nevertheless, there are reasons to question this definition of private cults (i.e. in its diametrical opposition to public ones). In their primary function, the Saturn stela served as media for the memory of individual worshippers. In their sum, however, these worshippers

shared the same, or at least, very similar memories as all of them had made a vow, carried out a sacrifice, and set up a stele. In this way, monuments to individual memory acquired collective meanings (Assmann 1997: 48–63; Erll 2005: 123–142). In this collective context, each stele functioned as a ‘medial cue’ for the individual memories of those present: visitors who had themselves participated in the cult of African Saturn, as well as those who were merely familiar with its rituals. Therefore, we can draw a fundamental distinction between four different groups of potential recipients (or viewers) of the stelae:

- (1) The person who had set up a stele; for them, it demarcated an individual, personal and private ritual that they had performed on behalf of their own and their family’s wellbeing.
- (2) Worshippers of Saturn at the same sanctuary; this group was able to recognise clearly the type of ritual performed and was familiar with the design of the stelae.
- (3) Worshippers of Saturn from other sanctuaries in North Africa; they were familiar with the type of ritual of which the stele formed a meaningful part.
- (4) Other people who were unfamiliar with the cult; they may have had considerable difficulties recognising the function of the stelae. Like modern archaeologists, they may have focussed on elements of secondary importance, such as the relief decorations of the stele, and compared them to what they knew from religious practices elsewhere in the Roman world.

According to mneseological terminology, the stelae may strictly be described as monuments, since as cultural artefacts, they conveyed a message not only to the present, but also to the future (Assmann 1991: 14). For this reason, they were fashioned in stone with sculpted reliefs, and not in a perishable material such as painted wood. Both of these aspects – the public display of a ritual performed and its monumental, permanent character – contrast with our concept of the private nature of the North African cult of Saturn.

Public verses private

In terms of Roman law, the cult of Ba’al Hamon/Saturn may usually be regarded as private. It is necessary, however, to draw out the contrast between public and private in greater detail. In this context, North has established a useful list of criteria for the classification of religions within polytheistic systems (1992: 184). These involve:

- (1) The existence of autonomous groups with their own organization or authority structure.
- (2) The level of commitment asked of the members of the group in terms of loyalty to the cult or the rejection of other or past modes of behaviour.
- (3) The existence of separate values and principles, unacceptable to other members of the society but required of members of the cult.
- (4) The degree of separation from the normal life of the city to be marked by different rituals, different calendars, different dietary rules (North 1992: 184).

In terms of these criteria, the North African cult of Saturn provides a good example of an ‘embedded religion’, since it is not in any way characterised by a separation from other religious or public activities. While it is possible that its priesthood was organised in some

fashion, the documented number of *sacerdotes* is too large as to make the existence of any complex hierarchy among them plausible. It is much more probable that the priesthood was a largely egalitarian affair, perhaps even to the extent that most worshippers could act as priests on their own or their families' behalf. This would even make it feasible to think of individualist approaches to the performance of the cult. The strongest evidence against any significant degree of separation between the cult and other aspects of public life comes from the dating of inscriptions; their dates are indicated by referring either to the relevant provincial calendars or, just as in the capital, to the consular year. In addition, the fact that almost every epigraphically attested dedication was addressed to Saturnus Augustus (and thus explicitly linked with the Emperor) provides further proof of the integration of the cult with other aspects of religious and public life. In this way, the cult of Saturn was a successful, private form of worship that was at the same time, publicly visible and not deliberately isolated.

There is more to it, however, as the cult of Saturn fundamentally questions the conventional model of the polis-based religion (fundamental, Woolf 1997). It should, in fact, be regarded as an alternative to this ideal, since despite its unambiguous status as a *sacrum privatum* in Roman law, this well-documented cult of Roman Africa is inadequately described by the term 'private', for which there are two principal reasons. First, we explicitly, or at least, implicitly associate with 'private cult', vernacular or invisible forms of worship, such as that within the household. Second, by classifying the cult of Saturn as 'private', we marginalise it, and as a result, implicitly subscribe to the hierarchies imposed by the *Imperium Romanum*. The least that we should be able to do is to draw a terminological distinction between the *religio* of only one *familia* in one single Roman town, and the 'private' cult observed by thousands of inhabitants of the African provinces of the Empire. It would, furthermore, be misguided to play down the role of these worshippers within their society by confining them to lowly social status (Le Glay 1966b: 402–406). Conversely, we must ask ourselves precisely what we wish to classify as 'private' and 'public' cult beyond Roman legal terminology, which involves assessing criteria such as the sources of funding for the building of temples, the size and composition of the communities involved in worship at any one time, and the motivations behind the observance of the cult.

Although the sanctuaries of Saturn may appear to be Romanised, the rituals performed there were largely the same as they had been during the Punic period. The cult was treated as *sacrum privatum* by the Roman authorities, and indeed, the archaeological and epigraphic evidence suggests that it was characterised by an increasing degree of individualisation and personalisation during the Roman period. With regard to the usefulness of the modern concept of 'private' to grasp the nature of the North African cult of Saturn, however, more questions remain open than can be answered here.

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