

AKTI VIII. MEĐUNARODNOG KOLOKVIJA O PROBLEMIMA RIMSKOG PROVINCIJALNOG UMJETNIČKOG STVARALAŠTVA

AKTEN DES VIII. INTERNATIONALEN KOLLOQUIUMS ÜBER PROBLEME DES PROVINZIALRÖMISCHEN KUNSTSCHAFFENS

THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE 8TH INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM ON PROBLEMS OF ROMAN PROVINCIAL ART

LES ACTES DU VIII^{ÈME} COLLOQUE INTERNATIONAL SUR LES PROBLÈMES DE L'ART PROVINCIAL ROMAIN

ZAGREB 5.-8. V. 2003.

RELIGIJA I MIT KAO POTICAJ RIMSKOJ PROVINCIJALNOJ PLASTICI

RELIGION UND MYTHOS ALS ANREGUNG FÜR DIE PROVINZIALRÖMISCHE PLASTIK

RELIGION AND MYTH AS AN IMPETUS FOR THE ROMAN PROVINCIAL SCULPTURE

LA RELIGION ET LE MYTHE COMME INSPIRATION POUR LA SCULPTURE ROMAINE PROVINCIALE

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PROVINCIALE

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SADRŽAJ

PREDGOVOR _____	9	EINE SCHILDAMAZONOMACHIE AUS NASSENFELS _____	101
BY MIRJANA SANADER		VON GERHARD BAUCHHENS	
FOREWORD _____	11	BAUPLASTIK AUS DEM BEREICH DES PODIUMTEMPELS VON BADENWEILER (D) _____	107
BY MIRJANA SANADER		VON GABRIELE SEITZ	
FUNERARY MONUMENTS FROM DALMATIA, ISTRIA AND THE CROATIAN PART OF PANONNIA. A COMPARATIVE STUDY _____	13	AUGUSTA RAURICA, EINE STATUETTENGROUPE AUS WEISSEM PFEIFENTON _____	115
BY NENAD CAMBI		VON TEODORA TOMASEVIC BUCK	
LES STELES FUNERAIRES A PERSONNAGES ORIGINE DES THÈMES, MODÈLES ET DATES À TRAVERS L'EMPIRE ROMAIN _____	31	ATTIS, PARTHER UND ANDERE BARBAREN. EIN BEITRAG ZUM VERSTÄNDNIS VON ORIENTALENDARSTELLUNGEN AUF GRABSTEINEN DER NÖRDLICHEN PROVINZEN _____	121
DE FRANÇOIS BRAEMER		VON ALICE LANDSKRON	
FLEXIBLE INTENT: SHIFTING VALUES & DISCREPANT MEANINGS IN ROMANO-BRITISH RELIGIOUS SCULPTURE _____	53	BEMERKUNGEN ZU DEN FREISTEHENDEN GRABMEDAILLONS IN NORICUM _____	131
BY MIRANDA ALDHOUSE-GREEN		VON ELISABETH WALDE	
CIVILIAN SCULPTORS AND THE CREATION OF ROMANO-BRITISH CIVILISATION IN SOUTHERN BRITAIN _____	59	DIE DIONYSISCHEN DREIFIGURENRELIEFS VON HARTBERG UND BAD WALTERSDORF (STEIERMARK) _____	141
BY MARTIN HENIG		VON ERWIN POCHMARSKI UND MARGARETHA POCHMARSKI-NAGELE	
TYPLOGIE ET DÉCOR DES MONUMENTS FUNÉRAIRES DE L'ARMORIQUE ROMAINE _____	65	SPUNTI DI RIFLESSIONE SU ALCUNI ASPETTI DEL CULTO DI BELENO E DI ANTINOO _____	157
DES JEAN-YVES ÉVEILLARD/YVAN MALIGORNE		ANNALISA GIOVANNINI	
LA TOMBE MONUMENTALE DE <i>NASUM</i> (GAULE BELGIQUE): RÉFLEXIONS SUR LE SYMBOLISME DES GRANDS MONUMENTS SÉPULCRAUX DU NORD-EST DE LA GAULE _____	75	MANI ALZATE, MAINS LEVÉES, ERHOBENE HÄNDE. A PROPOSITO DI UN SARCOFAGO DELLA COLLEZIONE DI FRANCESCO DI TOPPO _____	175
DE JEAN-NOËL CASTORIO		BY FULVIA CILIBERTO/FULVIA MAINARDIS	
IUPPITERGIGANTENSÄULEN IM MUSEUM VON METZ – LA COUR D'OR _____	85	CULT AND MYTHOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS AS DECORATIVE ELEMENTS OF PUBLIC BUILDINGS IN ROMAN POLA _____	185
VON HANNELORE ROSE UND ISABELLE BARDIÈS		BY KRISTINA DŽIN	
DER SARKOPHAG DER CORNELIA IACAENA. EIN FRÜHER GIRLANDENSARKOPHAG IN ARLES _____	91		
VON STEPHANIE BÖHM			
ÜBERLEGUNGEN ZUR FORTUNA VON BERMEL _____	95		
VON PATRICIA SCHWARZ			

RELIEFS AND SCULPTURES OF DEITIES AND MYTHOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION AS DETERMINING FACTORS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IN ANTIQUE ISTRIA _____	191	EIN JUPITERTORSO AUS DEM AUXILIARKASTELL IN IŽA (SLOWAKEI) _____	293
BY VESNA GIRARDI-JURKIĆ		VON KLÁRA KUZMOVÁ	
STATUE OF A ROMAN GODDESS FROM THE FORUM OF PULA _____	197	RÖMISCHE GÖTTER UND MYTHISCHE GESTALTEN AUS POETOVIO AUF STEINDENKMÄLERN IM LANDESMUSEUM PTUJ _____	299
BY ALKA STARAC		VON MOJCA VOMER GOJKOVIČ	
THE ICONOGRAPHY OF INDIGENOUS CULTS IN NORTHERN LIBURNIA _____	201	JÜNGLINGSGESTALTEN MIT WAFFE AUF PANNONISCHEN GEMMEN _____	305
BY ROBERT MATIJAŠIĆ		VON TAMÁS GESZTELYI	
AFTERLIFE IDEAS ON MILITARY MONUMENTS IN NARONA HINTERLAND _____	205	MACHTSPLITTER – ARCHITEKTURTEILE AUS DER KAISERRESIDENZ SIRMIMUM (SREMSKA MITROVICA) _____	311
BY RADOŠLAV DODIG		VON CHRISTINE ETEL	
RELIGION AND MYTH ON MONUMENTS FROM ZADAR AND SURROUNDINGS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM IN ZADAR _____	213	EINE NEUE BILDHAUERWERKSTATT IM OBERLAND DES BALATON (PLATTENSEE)? _____	319
BY KORNELIJA A. GIUNIO		VON SYLVIA PALÁGYI	
KULTSKULPTUREN AUS DER ANTIKEN STADT SENIA _____	223	DIE GIGANTEN VOM PFAFFENBERG BEI CARNUNTUM _____	329
VON MIROSLAV GLAVIČIĆ		VON GABRIELLE KREMER	
RELIEFS OF THE LABOURS OF HERACLES ON A ROMAN “SARCOPHAGUS” IN THE CHURCH OF ST CAIUS IN SOLIN _____	229	DURCHBROCHEN GEARBEITETE WEIHRELIEFS AUS DAKIEN _____	337
BY JASNA JELIČIĆ-RADONIĆ		VON ALFRED SCHÄFER	
RELIGIOUS TESTIMONIES FOUND ON ROMAN GEMS FROM DALMATIA KEPT IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM IN VENICE _____	237	CULT SYMBOLS AND IMAGES ON FUNERARY MONUMENTS OF THE ROMAN PERIOD IN THE CENTRAL SECTION OF DARDANIA _____	343
BY BRUNA NARDELLI		BY EXHLALE DOBRUNA-SALIHU	
HVCVSOVE – “THIS IS WHERE SACRIFICES WERE OFFERED” – ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS IN THE SUBSTRUCTIONS OF DIOCLETIAN’S PALACE IN SPLIT _____	243	DIE PLASTISCHE AUSSTATTUNG VON HEILIGTÜMERN DES THRAKISCHEN REITERS IM TERRITORIUM VON PHILIPPOLIS (PLOVDIV) _____	351
BY TAJMA RISMONDO		VON MANFRED OPPERMAN	
SOME EXAMPLES OF LOCAL PRODUCTION OF MITHRAIC RELIEFS FROM ROMAN DALMATIA _____	249	NOVAE – STELES WITH REPRESENTATIONS OF BIRDS _____	363
BY GORANKA LIPOVAC VRKLJAN		BY PIOTR DYCZEK	
DIANA AND THE FAWN _____	259	PAST AND PRESENT: NOTES ON THE IDENTITY OF ROMAN IMPERIAL SMYRNA _____	373
BY MARINA MILIČEVIĆ BRADAČ		BY CARLO FRANCO	
TPOLOGY OF MITHRAIC CULT RELIEFS FROM SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE _____	269	OMNIPOTENS ET OMNIPARENS DEA SYRIA. ASPECTS OF HER ICONOGRAPHY _____	381
BY ŽELJKO MILETIĆ		BY ILONA SKUPINSKA-LOVSET	
THE ANCIENT CULTUAL UNITY BETWEEN THE CENTRAL ADRIATIC LITTORAL AND THE DELMATIAN HINTERLAND _____	275	ANTAIOS, AN EGYPTIAN GOD IN ROMAN EGYPT: EXTRACTING AN ICONOGRAPHY _____	389
BY MARIN ZANINOVIĆ		BY DONALD BAILEY	
EINE UNVERÖFFENTLICHTE GRABSTELE AUS TILURIUM _____	281	THE PAMPHILI OBELISK: TWO NOTES ON PHARAONIC ELEMENTS IN DOMITIAN IDEOLOGY _____	399
VON DOMAGOJ TONČINIĆ		BY EMANUELE M. CIAMPINI	
FORTUNA-NEMESIS STATUES IN AQUINCUM _____	287		
BY KRISZTINA SZIRMAI			

ROMANIZING BAAL:
THE ART OF SATURN WORSHIP
IN NORTH AFRICA _____ 403
BY ANDREW WILSON

THE SYNCRETISM OF BELIFES
AS EXPRESSED IN ROMAN
PROVINCIAL SCULPTURE _____ 409
BY CLAIRE K. LINDGREN

ÜBERALL (GÖTTER)GLEICH? –
THEOMORPHE BILDNISSE
DER FRAUEN
DES RÖMISCHEN KAISERHAUSES _____ 415
VON ANNETTA ALEXANDRIDIS

‘DIE TREFFLICHE GRUPPE DER FLUCHT
DES ÄNEAS’. EIN TROIANISCHES THEMA
IN DER PROVINZ: DIE AENEAS-GRUPPE
IN STUTTGART UND VERWANDTE
DARSTELLUNGEN. ZU IKONOGRAPHIE
UND BEDEUTUNG. _____ 423
VON JUTTA RONKE

DIE BEFRACHTUNG GÄNGIGER
GRIECHISCH-RÖMISCHER SYMBOLE
MIT NEUEN RELIGIÖSEN INHALTEN
AUF DEN RELIEFS
DER MITHRASMYSTERIEN _____ 433
VON MARIA WEISS

RÖMISCHE STEINDENKMÄLER
IN DER WEB-PLATTFORM
WWW.UBI-ERAT-LUPA.ORG _____ 441
VON FRIEDERIKE HARL UND KURT SCHALLER

‘STEIN – RELIEF- INSCHRIFT’. KONTUREN
EINES FORSCHUNGSPROJEKTES _____ 449
VON CH. HEMMERS, ST. TRAXLER, CH. UHLIR
UND W. WOHLMAYR

EIN NEUFUND AUS DER STEIERMARK _____ 455
VON BERNHARD HEBERT

PROGRAM KOLOKVIJA
(PROGRAMM, PROGRAM, PROGRAMME) _____ 457

SUDIONICI (TEILNEHMER,
PARTICIPANTS, PARTICIPANTS) _____ 459

ROMANIZING BAAL: THE ART OF SATURN WORSHIP IN NORTH AFRICA

BY ANDREW WILSON

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with stelai from North Africa dedicated to Baal / Saturn in fulfilment of a religious vow, and examines the development of their iconography as the region was incorporated into the Roman empire. The monuments in question range in date from the second century B. C. until the fourth century A.D., and are found throughout modern Tunisia and eastern Algeria – ancient Africa Proconsularis and Numidia, but not Tripolitania. Many of the Roman-period stelai have been collected and catalogued by Marcel Leglay in his book *Saturne africain*,¹ and this paper owes much to that work. However, the Berber/Punic stelai have been studied separately, obscuring some of the developments between them and those of the Roman period. Considerations of space prevent full illustration here of all the examples discussed, and the reader is referred to Leglay's study for pictures of many of the stelai.

A difficulty with the study of the stelai is the poor chronological data available; they are usually from old or poorly-controlled excavations. Dating the monuments is therefore difficult, and relies usually on a combination of onomastics, features of dress and hairstyle, and artistic 'style' – the latter an unreliable indicator in what is largely a naïve and schematic mode of representation. Nevertheless, some are dated by consular references, and others with more or less precision by their archaeological context.² These enable a seriation

in which developments in artistic style, composition, cult objects and the formula of the inscription can be traced. In the following, a distinction should be kept in mind between artistic or stylistic changes, which might be signalled through a shift in representation or in visual language; and changes in religious practice evidenced by the appearance of new or different forms of ritual equipment, offerings, or the attitude in which the dedicant is represented.

PUNIC AND BERBER STELAI DEDICATED TO BAAL

The basic elements of the Saturn stelai of the Roman period are already present on Punic/Berber stelai of the pre-Roman period. The pre-Roman stelai dedicated to Baal consist of a representation of the dedicant, usually with arms raised and either holding offerings interpreted as a lozenge-shaped cake and/or a pretzel-type cake, or accompanied by various religious symbols, notably a palm branch. The deity, Baal, is usually represented by a crescent moon at the top of the stele. Sometimes a rosette or sun symbol, also of celestial significance, may appear. Many stelai are anepigraphic, but where inscriptions do appear, they are simple dedications to Baal, giving the name of the dedicant and recording that he or she has paid their vow or made a sacrifice. The visual focus of the stelai is on the dedicant, and not the deity, a feature which is unusual by comparison with other cults.

¹ M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Monuments*, Vol. 1, Afrique proconsulaire (Paris 1961). – M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Monuments*, Vol. 2, Numidie et Maurétanies (Paris 1966). – M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Histoire* (Paris 1966). – cf. also M. K. Orfali, 'De Baal Hammon à Saturne africain: les traces du culte en Algérie.' In C. Sintès/Y. Rebahi (Eds.), *Algérie antique. Catalogue de l'exposition 26 avril au 17 août 2003. Musée de l'Arles et de la Provence antiques* (Arles 2003) 142–50.

² M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Histoire* (Paris 1966) 14–57.

The simple composition of Punic/Berber Baal stelai is well illustrated by a group from ancient Thabarbusis, modern Aïn Nechma, near Guelma in Numidia. Numerous funerary and *ex voto* stelai, including both neo-Punic dedications to Baal-Hammon and Roman dedications to Saturn, were discovered here in the 1940s and 1950s, and a temple has been identified on the hill overlooking the findspot of the stelai.³

The Punic/Berber stelai are uniform in composition: the dedicant is represented nude, schematically depicted with nipples, navel and genitals, and a round face with holes for the eyes and mouth (fig. 1). The arms are raised, and their extremities merge into the offerings (usually interpreted as cakes) which the figure is holding, without the hands being represented. In the example shown, the dedicant is flanked by a palm branch on one side, and an inscription in neo-Punic on the other. A lunar crescent, representing Baal, caps the stele. The carving is in very flat relief, almost two-dimensional, and the composition is entirely frontal.

ROMAN STELAI FROM AÏN NECHMA

Fig. 2 shows a Roman period stele from the same site; remarkably little, really, has changed. The dedicant is now clothed in a tunic and mantle, and inscribes in Latin: L. FLAVIVS DEXTER SATVRNO V(OTVM) S(OLVIT) L(IBENS) M(ERITO).

But the flat relief, frontality and crudely naïve representation of the figure, with a disproportionately large round face and schematic features, and the attitude with raised arms merging into the objects held, remains the same. A ram is represented as sacrifice; and once again a lunar crescent surmounts the composition. Although the dedicant here bears the *tria nomina*, he could well be of African descent; the name Flavius may place him in the later first century or early second century A.D.⁴

Other Roman stelai from Aïn Nechma are closely similar, to the extent that Leglay's no. 12 from this site could well have been carved by the sculptor of the previous stele.⁵ The composition is almost identical, even down to the curved double border framing the scene at the top; it differs only in that it represents a cock



FIG. 1 STELE TO BAAL WITH PUNIC INSCRIPTION FROM THABARBUSIS (AÏN NECHMA), ALGERIA. (A. WILSON).

rather than a ram. The inscription, TILAVCA AN(imo) is an incomplete phrase, and the name Tilauca is non-Roman. This stele belongs to an early series carved in low relief with schematic features, in all of which the dedicants carry palms.⁶ A second series is slightly more

³ M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Monuments*, Vol. 1, Afrique proconsulaire (Paris 1961) 404.

⁴ Leglay (note 3) 408 no. 13.

⁵ Leglay (note 3) 408 no. 12 Pl. XV, 3. If this and no. 13 are by the same sculptor, Leglay's date for no. 12 of first century B.C. – first century A.D. needs to be revised to late first century/early second century A.D.

⁶ E.g. Leglay (note 3) Pl. XV, 1–2.



FIG. 2 ROMAN PERIOD SATURN STELE FROM THABARBUSIS (AÏN NECHMA), ALGERIA. (A. WILSON).

developed, with deeper relief and greater detail in the treatment of the hair, clothes and face; palm branches are replaced by bunches of grapes, but the lozenge and crown-cakes persist.⁷ Roman influence on the Aïn Nechma stelai remains superficial, affecting perhaps clothes and language, but not the art or the basic religious conception behind these monuments.

KSIBA AND MAKTAR

Progressive but still very limited Roman influence is visible in a similar series from Ksiba, in Africa Proconsularis.⁸ The earlier series (Leglay 1961 Pl. XVI.1-3) remains very close to the neo-Punic tradition, although with some architectural mouldings betraying Hellenistic or Roman influence. A second series (Leglay 1961 Pl. XVI.4-8) has marginally more elaborate treatment of the clothes, and the figures are a little less schematic, with more attempt to represent facial features. They are shown framed within an aedicula, and Roman-style altars are sometimes represented (Leglay 1961 Pl. XVI.7-8), indicating some Roman influence on the ritual equipment of the cult.

Roman influence is minimal even in the second century A.D. on the stele from Maktar in Tunisia.⁹ Here the orants are clothed in the manner of the Aïn Nechma or Ksiba stele, but schematically represented with massively thick necks and very crude treatment of drapery; they are placed in a simple architectural frame, but the inscriptions are still in neo-Punic, not Latin.

STELAI FROM COLONIAE AND MILITARY SITES

Rather different, however, are the stelai from several military sites or new colonial foundations, which betray a greater degree of Roman influence. From the vicus around the headquarters fort of the Third Legion at Lambaesis (Numidia) come numerous votive stelai of the second/third centuries A.D. The male dedicants are shown in togas, in one case holding a scroll (Fig 3),¹⁰ and often a bunch of grapes. The attitude of the figures is now different; instead of standing with raised arms, their stance is more formal and restrained, typical of Roman offering poses, sometimes with one hand making an offering on an altar. A ram is represented below, as sacrificial offering. Figures are now shown in greater, more rounded relief, and the treatment of faces, hairstyles and posture is markedly more realistic and developed than in the stelai from Aïn Nechma or Ksiba; and, within the limitations of this category of provincial art, the woman depicted in Leglay 1966 Pl. XXIV.7 even

⁷ Leglay (note 3) Pl. XV, 4-6.

⁸ Leglay (note 3) 420-30 Pl. XVI.

⁹ A. M. Bisi, *Le stele puniche*. Studi semitici 27 (Roma 1967) Tav. XXXV. - cf. Leglay (note 3) 242-3.

¹⁰ M. Leglay, *Saturne Africain. Monuments*, Vol. 2, Numidie et Maurétanies (Paris 1966) 103 no. 75 Pl. XXIV, 5.



FIG. 3 SATURN STELE FROM LAMBAESIS (LAMBÈSE), ALGERIA, SECOND OR THIRD CENTURY A.D., SHOWING TO-GATE DEDICANT HOLDING A SCROLL AND A BUNCH OF GRAPES. (LEGLAY 1966A, PL. XXIV.5.).

achieves a certain elegance. The influence of Roman art and customs on the stelai from Lambaesis is evident, as one might perhaps expect at a major military centre. But figures are still represented frontally, just as in the stelai from elsewhere, and indeed as in Roman funerary stelai from all over the empire. Indeed, at places like

Lambaesis there may be some cross-over with funerary art, the same workshops perhaps being involved in the production of votive stelai to Saturn and of grave markers.¹¹

The same pattern is borne out at Timgad, the colony founded in A.D. 100 just 15 miles from Lambaesis.¹² With the exception of the simple composition of Leglay 1966a Pl. XXVII.2, which is doubtless early, and depicts only the lunar crescent symbol for Saturn and the sacrificial offerings, the second-century A.D. stelai from Timgad all show many of the indicators of Roman influence we have already identified. The focus is still on the dedicant, but the deity makes more of an appearance: Saturn is now depicted more usually as a head than as a crescent symbol. The dedicants are shown in Roman dress and in postures typical of Roman religious monuments, sometimes making offerings at altars, and framed within niches. The figures are much less two-dimensional than those of the stelai in the neo-Punic tradition. The overall composition may also become more elaborate, as in Leglay 1966a Pl. XXVII.4, with three registers – Saturn, the Sun and the Moon in upper (celestial) register. The dedicant is shown in the central register, holding a bunch of grapes and a bird, flanked by genii carrying long palms. In the lowest register a ram is led to sacrifice.

At Djemila, a colony founded in the reign of Nerva, we have a series of stelai running into the fourth century A.D. Most of the known stelai from Djemila were found re-used face-down as paving slabs for streets, and in many cases faces have been deliberately hacked off, probably in the anti-pagan Christian fervour of the mid to late fourth century. The stelai show similar trends to those from other coloniae – figures in full relief, making offerings at altars, and, significantly, couples portrayed together, sometimes with children as well.¹³ The compositions recall in this respect the arrangement of family members on Roman funerary monuments, although the bearded head or bust of the deity generally presides over them. Other Roman cults may also make an appearance, as with the representation of the Dioscuri in the early fourth-century stelai.¹⁴

¹¹ Leglay (note 10) 113 nos. 156–7 Pl. XXIV, 9–10 illustrates monuments of caisson design looking very like funerary markers, although Leglay insists they are dedications to Saturn.

¹² Leglay (note 10) 125–61 Pl. XXVII–XXVIII.

¹³ Leglay (note 10) 226 no. 30 Pl. XXXIV, 3.

¹⁴ Leglay (note 10) 229 no. 36 Pl. XXXIV, 6.

GHORFA

More elaborate stelai come from Ghorfa, between Dougga, El Kef and Maktar, in north-west Tunisia. These stelai, of the first and second centuries A.D., have a markedly more complex and crowded composition than those we have so far looked at, in several registers (Fig. 4). They represent the dedicant standing within a temple, rendered in some architectural detail, with the coffering of the porch rendered in flat perspective, below a pediment with sculpture. A pantheon of deities is shown in the upper part of the stele, arranged in a pyramidal composition. Other deities besides Saturn are also represented – Dionysos holding a thyrsos, and Venus. Figures are less two-dimensional, but the pose, holding an offering against the chest, is carried over from Punic tradition.

The arrangement of these stelai is clearly quite different from both the neo-Punic style and also from the stelai from the Roman colonies; the emphasis on architectural ornament, and the relatively high quality of the relief carving, may in some sense be a product of the highly urbanized region of the Tunisian Tell from which these stelai come.

DISCUSSION

This has of course been a brief and highly selective overview of a fraction of a very large group of monuments. Nevertheless, some basic trends are apparent, that may reveal insights into the ways in which Roman culture affected the populations of North Africa under Roman rule. The onomastics of the dedicants suggest that the cult of Saturn appealed in particular to the middle and lower strata of society, and the relatively unsophisticated and repetitive nature of these monuments supports this view. Many of the dedicants carry African names, or Roman names commonly borne by North Africans – Felix, Fortunatus, Iulia Vernula – and very few have the *tria nomina*. The emphasis on frontality is noted by Leglay as a feature of Romanization, since it is characteristic of Italian funerary and *ex voto* stelai of the second and first centuries B.C. but he also points out that it is present in Punic/Berber art.¹⁵ His



FIG. 4 SATURN STELAI FROM GHORFA (TUNISIA) – FIRST / SECOND CENTURIES A.D. (BARDO MUSEUM, TUNIS.).

discussion of the Roman and African origins of frontality, though, fails to confront the idea that it may simply be a hallmark of simplistic artisan work, affordable by the lower strata of society who set up these stelai. Johns points out that features such as frontal representation, over-large heads, lentoid eyes, diagrammatic treatment of drapery – all of which are characteristics of many of the Saturn stelai – are typical of naïve art.¹⁶ That we are dealing in some cases with artisans of limited technical ability is confirmed by the confusion of limbs with the objects they hold, or the sideways portrayal of feet belonging to a frontal figure.¹⁷ The art of the Saturn stelai,

¹⁵ Leglay (note 2) 44–6.

¹⁶ C. Johns, *Art, romanisation and competence*. In: S. Scott/J. Webster (eds), *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art* (Cambridge 2003) 20.

¹⁷ Leglay (note 2) 19.

then, is not elite art, nor of course the art of that sector of the population too poor to afford these monuments, but the art commissioned by a lower to middle segment of society.

In some regions, especially the sanctuary of Aïn Nemcha, Roman impact on the cult appears minimal; the figures are portrayed in the same postures as in the pre-Roman period, with the same naïve representation, and the same ritual equipment; all that has changed is that they are now clothed and speak Latin. Elsewhere, in the Roman colonies and in the more urbanized parts of Africa Proconsularis, the iconography of the stelai undergoes progressive change, reflecting changes both in artistic styles and in religious ritual. The figures become more rounded and are shown in greater relief; more detail is represented in clothing and physical features, and there are close similarities with Roman funerary art. Indeed, the most developed relief is found in stelai at the colonies of Djemila, Zana and Timgad; and at Djemila, Timgad and Lambaesis all the men wear togas.¹⁸ At the same time, elements of the cult are transformed: the posture of the dedicants changes from the neo-Punic stance with arms raised, to a more restrained togate pose, making an offering at an altar. Some of the ritual offerings change too – the palm branches disappear and bunches

of grapes are shown with greater frequency. Other deities appear from time to time in supporting roles – Dionysos, Venus and the Dioscuri. During the second century, dedications become increasingly influenced by mainstream Roman practice – they are addressed to the divinity, with his titles, then they give the name of the dedicant and the reason for the vow, and then the *ex voto* formula *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) a(nimo)*.¹⁹

In contrast to the highly Romanized public architecture funded by urban elites in North Africa, the Baal/Saturn stelai suggest that the impact of Roman religion, culture and art on the middle and lower strata of society who made these offerings varied across North Africa. In some areas of Numidia it was apparently very limited and superficial, with the essential elements remaining unchanged since the Punic period and Roman influence appearing almost as a veneer of language and dress habits, but leaving artistic expression and cult practice (posture of the dedicant, ritual equipment) as it was. But at the same time, *coloniae* and military *vici* in Numidia, and centres in the highly urbanized regions of Africa Proconsularis, exhibit a much greater degree of cultural assimilation both of Roman artistic styles and of religious habits and cult practices into the iconography of the Saturn cult.

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¹⁸ Leglay (note 2) 19, 23.

¹⁹ Leglay (note 2) 31.