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Cult and Belief in Punic and Roman Africa

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Abstract: This is a second attempt at a synthesis of the main problems for the forthcoming Cambridge History of Ancient Religions. The problems are complex and still threaten to overwhelm. This version remains a *cri de coeur*: any helpful comments and criticisms are encouraged.

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CULT AND BELIEF IN PUNIC AND ROMAN AFRICA

The narrow and isolated belt of habitable lands – between Libya in the east and Morocco in the west – that lines the southern shores of the Mediterranean has always been an insular world. From their perspective, the Arab geographers logically named these lands the *Jazirat al-Maghrib*, meaning the ‘Island of the West.’ The different countries that make up north Africa today are thus collectively called ‘the Maghrib.’ The flow of sea currents and the predominant winds, the hard and rugged barrier formed by the uplifted coastal mountains, and a location between the world’s largest desert and its largest inland sea, combine to produce a peculiar mix of connectivity and isolation that has affected ideas as much as economies.¹ While constantly moderating the exposure of its inhabitants to innovations created elsewhere in the Mediterranean, these same forces have also encouraged unusually strong and fast-paced developments of these outside ideas and practices once they have entered north Africa.

One result in the realm of cult and belief of this double heritage of relative isolation and internalized intensity was the emergence of a bewildering variety, range, and local identity of ritual and practice among Africans in the long age before the arrival of Christianity. It was a diversity so varied that it precludes an

¹ Shaw, “Challenging Braudel,” “A Peculiar Island,” and *At the Edge of the Corrupting Sea*.

easy description. In an area larger than that of the Iberian and Italian peninsulas combined, every environmental niche as small as a village or a valley came to have its own spirits, deities, rituals, and festivals that were peculiar and important to it. The practices and beliefs were so integrated into the daily life of each ethnic people, village, cultural or occupational group that they formed an almost out-of-mind part of daily routine. When the local festivals, pilgrimages, parades, and other performances came under an increasingly direct threat from a Christian empire during the later fourth century CE, the one thing that provoked as much distress as any peril to beliefs was apprehension over the loss of a vital core of everyday life.

But there was another, equally strong result of these same forces, one that was encouraged by the persistent reassertion of the powers of isolation. Despite the prolific growth in the complexity and range of deities and demons, ritual practices and sacred sites, an opposite tendency – that local interpretations of these came to dominate – also asserted itself and with usual strength. The combination of these effects produced some overriding similarities in ritual and belief that were regionally specific to the Maghrib. Perhaps the most important of these traits was a tendency to a relatively rapid and uniform development of external cultural institutions once they entered Africa – more intense, that is, relative to the comparable movement and rooting of the same ideas elsewhere in the Mediterranean. In religion and ritual, this relative monism was manifested in Africa in a strong tendency to a pragmatic henotheism in belief and practice: a special emphasis on one deity who represented the core or axis around which

other gods and goddesses oriented themselves as minor players. The contradictory conflicts of local and Mediterranean-wide forces also produced strong polarities within small regions in Africa that replicated the larger pattern. Attempting to grasp the first of these processes, much less the second, and then the complex interactions between the two, by deploying the traditional heavy armament devised for understanding big religions is bound to disappoint. The problems facing the modern analyst is analogous to the tactical and operational problems presented by what is now fashionably called asymmetrical warfare.

What Was African Cult?

Although Africa came to share in a pan-Mediterranean oikoumene of belief and practice, local forces working within regional ecologies strongly conditioned the manner in which elements of an external Mediterranean culture manifested themselves in an African environment. The extent to which religion and belief for the Maghrib are perceived as peculiar for the Roman empire can be measured by the degree to which north Africa is strikingly absent from recent surveys of so-called Roman religion.² Given the principal concerns of these

² Among many general works, see, by way of example, Turcan, *Cults of the Roman Empire*; Scheid, *Religion et piété*; Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome* despite some scattered references in the seventh chapter; and Ando *Roman Religion*. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, who offers one of the finest evocations of the two worlds of religion, is still mainly devoted to this same arc of belief across the northern Mediterranean, with special emphasis on the Syria-Asia

surveys – either with Roman religion narrowly construed as having to do with Rome and Italy alone, or even with a wider Mediterranean panorama including so-called oriental cults and mystery religions – the exclusion is understandable. These general accounts of ancient religions tend to mirror an eastern and northwestern Mediterranean arc of practice, and they take *that* constellation – for example, highlighting a classic mix of mystery religions and state cult, and the central roles of divinities like Isis and Mithras – as the dominant norm. For the reasons just noted, however, Africa does not fit this paradigm. Africa had its own distinctive modes of ritual and belief which were fundamentally different from the styles and patterns – although not in specific elements of the content – found elsewhere. What can be worked with is a looser and more dynamic paradigm that highlights the different constituent elements of pre-Christian ‘religion’ in the Mediterranean world of the Roman empire.³

Whatever new developments took place in the period of Roman military and political domination of Africa that extended from the mid-second century BCE to the sixth century CE, they were certainly not inscribed on a blank slate. Insofar as additions, mutations, abatements and intensifications of belief, structure, and practice happened, they grew from and alongside an existing

Minor nexus. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, is a manifest exception. It would probably be an error, in any event, to postulate any one pattern as typically ‘Mediterranean,’ see Woolf, “Sea of Faith.”

³ Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, is, I think, provides a good model of an approach that is more useful for this investigation.

world of African and Punic religions that were dominant in the Maghrib down to the first century BCE, and later. Given the nature of the evidence, it is difficult to estimate the state of belief and rituals in Africa before the Phoenician colonization of African lands that began in the mid-eighth century BCE. The conduct of cult before the advent of the Phoenicians took place wholly in a world of oral communication. One consequence is that the history of this early African phase of religion has necessarily been lost to us. On the side of material or archaeological remains, the little that survives or can be identified with confidence does not suggest much more than a generalized connection with animating forces that were resident in this tree or that water spring, in a rock outcrop, a mountain peak, a cave or similar markers of the landscape.⁴ Where local cults were later glossed with specific Punic or Roman forms and names – as with the water cults of the Roman god Neptune, for example – one might, with some caution, presume an element of continuity.⁵ The concentration of shrines and written dedications to Neptune from the Roman period found in small

⁴ For a general survey of what little can be known or estimated, see the general overviews offered by Gsell, “Religion,” ch. 2 [in] *Histoire ancienne*, 6, 119-69; Charles-Picard, “La religion Libyque,” [in] *Religions de l’Afrique antique*, 1-25; and Bénabou, *La résistance africaine*, 267-308. Note that almost all of the reliable evidence comes from the Roman period and that most of the rest consists of ethnographic parallels and guesswork.

⁵ See Beschaouch, “Une fête populaire de Dougga,” for a convincing demonstration of one case.

villages of no formal municipal rank, hamlets that were overseen by local African magistrates like the Eleven Men (*undecimprimi*) and the Elders (*seniores*), indicates as much.⁶ Despite his name, in Africa Neptune was never a god of the sea or the ocean. He was, rather, a spirit of springs who embodied the living force of the waters that flowed from a local crevice or cliffside.

Since detailed knowledge of local African practices is not ordinarily found for pre-Roman or pre-Punic times, inferences must be made from iconic representations or physical design. Such inferences are possible, but risky. In the Roman period, there are some instances where such material remains are accompanied by written records that make more explicit the structure and meaning of cultic practice. In these few cases, it is possible to gain greater certainty. For example, there were once hundreds, if not thousands of cave sanctuaries that existed all over north Africa. For exactly two of these, there exists critical written documentation from the high Roman empire. One is the cave on Jebel Taya (or Taïa), the mountain that overlooked the Roman town of Thibilis in east-central Algeria. In the years of the third century CE, the magistrates or *magistri* (ordinarily two of them) from the village of Thibilis made annual pilgrimages to the cave to offer sacrifices to the local deity Bacax who lived in it. On the rock surfaces of the corridor-like entrance to the cave, notices

⁶ A. Cadotte, *Neptune Africain*, and "Neptune, africain," ch. 8 [in] *Romanisation des dieux*, 307-24; cf. Bénabou, "Neptune africain et le problème de l'eau," [in] *La résistance africaine*, 356-58; Shaw, "The Elders," 27-29; and, on a closely related theme, Arnaldi, "Culto delle Nymphae."

were written in Latin in which the magistrates of Thibilis recorded their annual votive promises, marking the precise day and year of their visits. Since all of the attested pilgrimages date to the *kalends* (the first of the month) or the evening before the *kalends*, of March, April, or May, the annual journey to the mountain cave seems to have been a local spring ritual, albeit one now modulated to fit with the Roman imperial calendar.⁷

A similar cave sanctuary was found on the Jebel Chettaba, to the southwest of the city of Cirta. Here inscriptions in Latin dating to the Roman period were inscribed or painted in a crude manner over the walls of the rock shelter as dedications to a local deity named Giddaba.⁸ These, too, were made by the magistrates or *magistri* of the nearby town of Phua to the god that was a patron deity of the village and its surrounding rural lands. If the kinds of evidence that survive from the Roman period are extrapolated backwards in time, they suggest a pre-contact field of religious and ritual behavior that was intensely fragmented and represented by cults that were primarily limited to

⁷ Monceaux, "La grotte du dieu Bacax"; ILAlg. 2.2, pp. 407-21, nos. 4502-4585 (the inscriptions date from 210 CE [no. 4502] to 284 CE [nos. 4557-58]) ; J. & P.

Alquier, *Le Chettaba*, 141-68, nos. 1-70; Toutain, *Cultes païennes*, 48, 59-61. The god is often noted by the abbreviation G.D.A.S. (which is understood to mean *Giddabae Deo Augusto sacrum*).

⁸ J. & P. Alquier, *Le Chettaba*; Gsell, *Histoire ancienne*, vol. 6, p. 136; for the inscriptions, see CIL 8.6267-6302; 19249-19281; AE 1901: 54, and BCTH (1917), 227-38, nos. 60-63.

specific topographical locales. As much appears to be true from a host of other indicators. The seven African deities named on a stele from the Roman period found near Baga (Roman Vaga) – Macurtam, Macurgam, Vihinam, Bonchor, Varsissima, Matilam, and Iunam – are as good an example as any of the general pattern. There are seven of them. Individually and collectively, they are absolutely unattested anywhere else at any other time.⁹ Or there is the list of gods called the *Dii Magifae* found at a small locale west of Tébessa (Roman Theveste) – Masiden, Thililva, Suggan, Iesdan, and Masidicca – another five African deities known nowhere outside of this small place.¹⁰ The phenomenon can be documented time and time again.

Opening to the Mediterranean

When the Phoenician settlement of colonies on north African shores began, not only did profound social and economic changes take place, but religious ones did too. The colonists from Tyre, Sidon, and other places in the Levant, who began establishing colonial settlements along the African coast in the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, brought to the western Mediterranean a rich

⁹ Merlin, “Divinités indigènes”; cf. Charles-Picard, *Religions de l’Afrique antique*, 22-23.

¹⁰ CIL 8.16749 (Henshir Mektides); see Toutain, *Cultes païennes*, p. 40 (and his list of such single occurrences of local deities on p. 41); and Charles-Picard, *Religions de l’Afrique antique*, 24, with another dozen examples of the local deities known nowhere except for the one place where they are attested.

and fully developed panoply of deities. Along with the colonists, these were implanted along its shores from Tripolitania, through Sicily, Sardinia and the Balearics, to the southern coasts of Iberia. The settlements in Africa were part of this larger process. New Phoenician cities, from Lepcis and Carthage in the east to Lixus and Volubilis in the west, were parts of the greater Phoenician colonial world in the west. Founded as colonies, by the sixth and fifth centuries BCE these settlements had developed their own distinctive social, cultural and political order – one that we call Punic. Although divinities, practices, and beliefs had been transplanted from their eastern homelands, in Africa they developed in distinctively regional ways. The local western Mediterranean versions of Punic beliefs and rituals became core elements of western Phoenician self-identity. In a colonial society that was suffused with Greek and Hellenistic elements, it was Punic language and Punic religion that provided the people with their cultural identity.¹¹

In its eastern Mediterranean homes, the Phoenician divine economy was already henotheistic, sharing a typical northwest Semitic emphasis on El, the one great god. This emphasis seems to have become only more pronounced in its overseas colonial developments in the western Mediterranean. The rapid spread and intense growth of western Phoenician cult in Africa produced a divine system that matched the greater sameness of the colonial culture of which it was a part, just as the latter developed a new and more uniform Punic identity in its western Mediterranean home. The result was a strongly henotheistic cosmic

¹¹ Lancel, *Carthage*, 193.

order, lorded over by a supreme earth-sky-underworld deity, Adôn or *the* Lord as he was called. The name of this great and powerful Lord was Ba'al Hammon or BL HMN in Punic.¹² He had a consort, a female deity who, like Ba'al, was at once Queen of the Skies, Queen of Nature, and Queen of the Underworld. In an important sense, she was not much more than his female alter ego, his 'face' as she was often called: TNT PN BA'AL in Punic, Tinnit Pene Ba'al, meaning Tinnit the Face of Ba'al. Most often, however, she was named, simply, Tinnit.¹³ Other spirits and deities, such as we hear of from time to time, like Shadrappa ('Shad' the Healer), Eshmûn, and Melqart ('God of the City'), were lesser bit players in this dominant single-god system. The latter two deities continued to have an important presence in the Roman period when they were identified with Aesculapius and Hercules.¹⁴

¹² Although it is usually asserted that the 'Hammon' means 'of the perfumed ones,' this is far from an established fact. There have been numerous conjectures about the significance of the name: see Lancel, *Carthage*, 195-198.

¹³ There is uncertainty about the vowels in her name. She is most often called Tanit, but the Greek texts on the El-Hofra stela vocalize her name as *T(h)innit(h)*.

¹⁴ Cadotte, "Eshmoun/Esculape et Eshmoun/Apollon" and "Melqart, Milkashtart et Hercule," ch. 4 and ch. 7 [in] *Romanisation des dieux*, 165-200; 283-305.

For the people who communicated with these deities, there can be little doubt that the ritual of sacrifice was at the very heart of practice.¹⁵ It was the blood sacrifice of living beings that was the core sacred ritual in the cult of Ba'al Hammon.¹⁶ The sacrifice assumed an exaggerated and extreme form that required more than just an animal blood sacrifice. Of living beings, it was the sacrifice of humans that ranked as the most meaningful and powerful. It was *the* prince of sacrifices, so to speak, and so was known as *mulk* or 'royal.' Amongst these blood rituals, it is the rite of the sacrifice of living infants and children to the god Ba'al that has drawn most modern attention. In Africa, the main evidence comes from the Sanctuary of Tinnit (Tanit) at Carthage.¹⁷ It is clear that these

¹⁵ Recognized by Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 130: as he noted, the vast majority of material records that we have are related to votives meant to memorialize a sacrifice.

¹⁶ The eastern origin of the rite, however, seems to be more in the manner of a prompt. No clear cut evidence of a *tophet* has yet been found in Phoenicia. At Carthage, the role of Tinnit was later and peripheral. Mosca, *Child Sacrifice*, 99: 'It was Baal Hammon who was and remained the great Punic god, the head of the Punic pantheon, and it was primarily to him that children were sacrificed.'

¹⁷ Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice*, Sheffield, 1991; Hurst, "Child Sacrifice at Carthage"; Stager, "Rite of Child Sacrifice"; Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 25-49.

areas were specially delineated and defined 'sacred places.'¹⁸ Here vases containing the bones of infant humans and animals (mainly sheep and goats) have been recovered in layers dating from the late eighth to the late second century BCE. In the period for which the most abundant evidence is available at Carthage, it has been estimated that up to 100 children were sacrificed to Ba'al Hammon and Tinnit every year.¹⁹ From descriptions of sacrificial sites found in the Hebrew Old Testament, modern students have labeled the sacred place of the sacrifice a *tophet*: a site specially set aside for the most regal of all blood sacrifices, the *mulk*.²⁰

The *tophet* at Carthage was the largest of a number of such sacrificial sites known from various locales in the Phoenician western Mediterranean. Other one have been found at Hadrumetum and Cirta in Africa; at Motya and Lilybaeum in Sicily; and at Nora, Sulcis, Monte Sirai, and Tharros in Sardinia. The geographical distribution of these sites is, notably, also a neat mapping of Carthaginian political, military, and cultural power. No *tophet* has yet been found either in southern Spain or in the far western parts of north Africa to the west of direct Carthaginian control. At Carthage, in a series of excavations strung out between the 1920s and the 1940s, and then resumed again in the late 1970s, about 3000

¹⁸ Bénichou-Safar, *Tophet de Salammbô*, pp. 150-51: it was called a *shr hqdsh*, 'a cut-off or defined holy place'; in other words, a *temenos*.

¹⁹ Stager, "Rite of Child Sacrifice," 3.

²⁰ They were places set aside for this peculiar type of 'royal' sacrifice: Mosca, *Child Sacrifice*, 102-03.

burials in urns and an equal number of stelae connected with them were uncovered.²¹ The first analyses of the contents of the urns in which the remains of the sacrificed were contained revealed a mixture of animal and human bones, the latter mainly those of infants and small children.

The same nature of these sacrifices has been confirmed by the detailed work done on the sacred precinct at Monte Sirai in Sardinia where the urns contained either the bones of infants and small children alone (some up to six months old) while others – about a third to a half of them – contained the bones of both animal sacrifices, mainly kids and lambs, mixed with those of infants and children. It is now clear that this type of sacrifice was a central, permanent, and normal part of Punic cult.²² When the offerings are described in writing on the accompanying stelae, they are designated as sacrifices that have been made as return payment for a promise or a vow that the devotee had made to the deity.²³ There has emerged a vibrant debate over whether or not, in a demographic regime already marked by high infant mortality, the infants were already

²¹ For a survey of the historical background of the excavations, see Lancel, *Carthage*, 227-56.

²² Mosca, *Child Sacrifice*, p. 97; see 24-25, 102, where he explains the propensity of some classical authors to identify these sacrifices with 'great crises.'

²³ Bénichou-Safar, *Tophet de Salammbô*, p. 151-53: the words *ndr* (he vowed) and *zbh* (a sacrifice) are used.

deceased at the time of their sacrifice.²⁴ Any final view on this will depend, ultimately, on a much better analyses of the osteological data than has so far been performed. In this writer's view, the weight of the evidence clearly suggests the sacrifice of living infants and young children.

There is little doubt that this rite of human sacrifice continued deep into the Roman period. In a famous if tendentious passage in his *Apology* (ch. 9), the Christian writer Tertullian claims:²⁵

In Africa, infants were openly sacrificed up to the proconsulship of the governor Tiberius [?] who had the priests crucified alive on votive crosses, on the same shady trees of the sacred area where they had committed their crimes. I have my own father as a witness to this fact. He was among the soldiers who served the proconsul in this task. Even today, this same sacred crime is still being perpetrated, although in secret.

²⁴ Moscati, a supporter of the revisionist school – i.e. that the majority of the infants were foetuses or stillborn birth – arraigns the evidence and arguments in support of this view in his *Gli adoratori di Moloch*, esp. 63-69; cf. Bénichou-Safar, *Tophet de Salammbô*, esp. 159-63, who also supports this view, developed by Fantar, Richibini, and others.

²⁵ Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 132-33; for a summary of problems with the text, including some new ones of his own, see Rives, "Child Sacrifice."

Despite well-known problems with this passage, the following is reasonably certain: that for regions in proximity to Carthage, the provincial metropolis, human sacrifice continued in public until some time in the lifetime of Tertullian's own father, that is, as late as the 170s and 180s CE when a few known human sacrifices were made the object of official repression. In Tertullian's own day, that is in the 190s to 210s, human sacrifices were still being performed, even if as a secret ritual. Sacred burials from the town of Lambafundi, which probably date to this same time, confirm the continuity of the practice.²⁶ Since sacrifices requiring the spilling of the blood of living beings were central to almost all Mediterranean religions of the time, there is nothing unusual in the fact that this was also true of Africa. What is different is the peculiar intensity of the ritual in Africa. Here it involved human life – a human blood sacrifice that was central to the whole of the henotheistic system focused first on the worship of Ba'al and later on his Roman continuator, the omnipotent god Saturn. And it continued long after the rite of child sacrifice had been abandoned in Israel (Judaea), Phoenicia, and elsewhere.

In response to both official Roman repression and cultural pressure, it came to be felt that the actual blood sacrifice of humans was unacceptable and that a substitute for human life was both possible and desirable. A series of five

²⁶ Leglay, *Saturn africain. Monuments*, 2, 114-24, esp. 114-15: some of the vases buried in front of each stele contained the bones of infant children, while others contained the bones of sheep or of small birds. Leglay dated the stelae to the late second and early third century CE.

stelae set up to the god Saturn, dating to the end of the second and early third century CE – that is, the lifetime of Tertullian – from the Roman town of Nicivibus (modern-day N'gaous) in south-central Algeria, speak specifically of the *mulk* 'immor or the 'regal sacrifice' of a sheep or a lamb as a substitute for a human life.²⁷ The texts on the stones name the sacrifice, calling it variously a *molchomor*, *morchomor* or *mochomor*, and they specifically mention the nature of the substitution: 'spirit for spirit, blood for blood, life for life' (*anima pro anima, sanguine pro sanguine, vita pro vita*). The sacrifice is accompanied by a vow of the devotee, itself often provoked by a dream or a vision. The victim, however, is now a lamb which is specifically spoken of as a substitute for a human, 'the lamb serving in the place of another' (*agnum pro vikario*).

The practice of substituting animals for humans might eventually have taken place by the third century of the Common Era. But the long-term record of the *tophet* at Carthage, covering the entire period from the eighth century BCE to the second century CE, surprised and confuted any easy ideas about the ameliorating or humanizing of such rituals by so-called civilizing forces. In fact, the propensity to infant sacrifice only grew and intensified as time passed.²⁸ In the worship of the supreme deities Ba'al and, later, Saturn, there was a strong

²⁷ Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 135-36; Carcopino, "Survivances par substitution"; Février, "Molchomor" and "Rite de substitution."

²⁸ Stager, "Rite of Child Sacrifice," 4-5, and Table 1; his results are questioned by Janif, "Sacrifices d'enfants," on the basis of the trends reported by Richard, *Etude médico-légale*, which I have not been able to consult.

attachment to the idea of human blood sacrifice. The hypersacrality of the human victim and of the priest who made the sacrifice remained at the core of local religious beliefs and values. There was a peculiar intensity in which a quasi-monotheism reinforced the power and meaning of the human sacrifice and the surrogates for this human blood. It is hardly accidental that in Christian times Africa became the land of the martyrs.

The Post-Punic Roman World

Both trends remained true of African cult and practice after its seizure by Roman imperial power in 146 BCE. In another wave of Mediterranean colonization, Greek and Roman deities were imported in abundance and began to populate African towns and their rural territories. The day-to-day reality of belief and practice in any one of a myriad of places was one of the association, mixing and merging of gods and spirits with others or aspects of others.²⁹ This mixing and migration of types was not so much a conscious or even a subversive syncretism as it was a series of associations and convergences suggested by local forces that are mostly beyond our reach or understanding. The Roman state did have an impact on official ritual, at least at the three levels at which it was

²⁹ They are measured in epigraphical terms by Cadotte, *Les syncrétismes religieux en Afrique romaine*; in part 3.1, "Les associations divines," 416-76, the author notes dyads, triads, and even more complex juxtapositions and assimilations, groupings of imperial and local divinities, as just some of the ways in which these mixings happened.

officially represented: as an imperial state, as a provincial administration, and at the local level of municipal government. But these influences were just as insular as the terrain in which they worked.

The plain fact is that there is very little evidence for the formal institution of Roman or Italic cults in the Roman province of Africa from its inception in 146 BCE to the end of the Republic in the 40s BCE. In the entire period to the reign of the first Roman emperor, Augustus, such influences appear to have been purely private and to have emanated from the practices of individual Romans and Italians who came to Africa as settlers, businessmen, and soldiers, and from the collective groups in which they associated. The large-scale and deliberate importing of official cult begins in the Augustan Age, with the triumviral period at the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Principate, when powerful *generalissimos* were contending to assert their control over Africa and its strategic resources. In Africa, the effect of this Roman struggle was marked by the refoundation of Carthage as the great Roman colony that was to become the imperial metropolis of all Africa. Everywhere else, the evidence indicates the continued practice of Punic cult, which only gradually abated over the course of the first century CE. At Hadrumetum, the *tophet* continued to receive typical inhumed burnt offerings – albeit of animals only – that were marked by stelae until the 80s CE.³⁰ Further to the east, the same practice also continued to the end

³⁰ Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 103-4, reporting the excavations of Cintas.

of the first century at Sabratha in Tripolitania.³¹ The widespread formal introduction of Roman deities and cult on a large scale only began in earnest in the reign of Augustus, an age also marked by a generalized Roman imperial development observable around the whole circuit of the Mediterranean.³²

The formal establishment of the cults of the deities of the Roman state at Carthage after its refounding as a Roman colony in the 30s BCE, was signaled by one of the most massive and striking demonstrations of brute imperial power on African soil. The entire top of the great high hill at the center of Carthage, the so-called Byrsa, was systematically leveled to provide a large flat surface analogous to the acropolis at Athens. Extensions of the platform formed at the top of the leveled Byrsa were supported by massive stone revetments and buttresses. The platform itself was a great stage of more than 30,000 square meters in area – one and a half times the combined size of the forums of Caesar and Augustus at Rome. It was a state project of staggering scale. On this stage were built the major structures of the Roman state: the forum, the basilica and law court buildings, and the temples.³³ The shrines that celebrated the imperial family and the cult of Concord (*Concordia*) had a visual perspective that looked out both over the harbors that were located to the southeast and over the city and its vast agricultural hinterland to the southwest – all from the focal point of the *groma* or

³¹ Taborelli, *L'area sacra di Ras Almunfakh presso Sabratha*, 69-78: sacrifices only of animals such as goats.

³² Woolf, "Unity and Diversity."

³³ Deneauve, "Le centre monumental de Carthage."

the Roman surveyor's central sight-point from which all of the colony's territory had been systematically measured. Facing the provincial judicial basilica at the eastern end of the platform was the temple of the Capitoline triad on the western side.³⁴

Everything on this high platform of state echoed not only the religious architecture of the imperial capital of Rome, but also that of the rebuilt Roman colony at Corinth. Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans in the same year that they had obliterated Punic Carthage, so it too was rebuilt in tandem. All of the cult innovations, like the systematic destruction of both cities in 146 BCE, was the result of both artifice and deliberation.³⁵ At both places, constructed as new imperial centers of the western and eastern Mediterranean, religion and the state intersected. To the very last years of Roman Africa, the imperial tribute for the province was brought to be displayed in front of the Capitolium on the height of the Byrsa.³⁶ And it was before the Capitolium that the Christians, in the first state-driven persecutions, were compelled to come to demonstrate their loyalty by making public sacrifice.³⁷ Even from a great distance out in the countryside, anyone could look up to the monumental high place that defined the new

³⁴ Accepting the arguments of Ladjimi Sebaï, *La colline de Byrsa*, 260-66; they are, however, far from certain, as she herself admits; see Rives, *Religion and Authority*, 42-45, favoring a temple of Concordia.

³⁵ Purcell, "The Sacking of Carthage and Corinth."

³⁶ *Codex Theodosianus* 11.1.34, dating to 429 CE, the year of the Vandal invasion.

³⁷ Cyprian, *Ep.* 59.13.3 (CCL 3C: 358); *De Lapsis*, 8 (CCL 3: 225).

metropolis of Africa. Lit up at night, it would have presented a brilliant spectacle: the African subjects of empire would have witnessed a symbol of imperial political unity and concord.

As the sign of a manifest and conscious identification with the Roman imperial state by local ruling orders, the building of Capitoline temples was one measure of ‘becoming Roman’ in the province of Africa. The building of such temples, usually in the main public square or forum of a town, was a common project undertaken and funded by wealthy members of the local political elite. At Thugga, a city of mixed Roman-African status, which was located about 100 miles inland of Carthage, a Capitoline temple was built by L. Marcius Simplex in the 160s CE.³⁸ The act and its timing are typical, so it is important to note the drag in the timing of these developments. The cult of the Capitoline deities in the form of formal temples was a delayed phenomenon that was correlated with the solid wealth and power of local municipal elites in Africa in the Antonine age and later – and had little to do with official city status as such.³⁹ It was more a measure of the final acceptance of Roman identity by the urban elites of the

³⁸ Barton, “Capitoline Temples,” 278-79; Toutain, *Cultes païennes*, 187-95; Rives, *Religion and Authority*, 118-22; Brouquier-Reddé, p. 285.

³⁹ Février, “Religion et domination,” 801-03, believed that none were earlier than the Antonine age; Barton’s list, “Capitoline Temples,” 270-72, reveals some instances probably of Trajanic date. But they are few. Almost all are of Antonine date, and later – as admitted by Ladjimi Sebaï, *La colline de Byrsa*, p. 264n821, who makes the one at Carthage ‘a sort of peculiarity.’

African provinces than it was any pre-emptive strike by either side to incite a new sense of belonging.

Divine Forces and their Ecology

The manner in which strands of belief were linked to different spirits and deities is marked by the intensity of the devotion and by the promiscuous mixing or heterogeneity of the deities. Textbooks often isolate the gods and goddesses and represent them and their histories as if they were separate and discrete things. In this way, of course, it is possible to make headcounts of the principal deities. A census of the official gods of a Romano-Mediterranean pantheon celebrated in epigraphical texts reveals a not-surprising top-down normal order, with Jupiter and other members of the Capitoline triad, Victory, and the Fortuna Augusta at the head of the list. Of the private or unofficial deities, a similar top-to-bottom order can be established: Saturn, Mercury, Magna Mater, Caelestis, Pluto, Frugifer, Hercules, Aesculapius, the Cereres, Mars, Neptune, Silvanus, Liber and Sol Invictus, approximately in that order.⁴⁰ Again, there are palpable differences in Africa that distinguish it from other areas of the Latin west of the empire.⁴¹ And even within Africa. In the core 'western' provinces of Proconsularis, Numidia and the Mauretaniae, for example, dedications to the chief Roman deity Jupiter came only from official functionaries and soldiers because the Saturn cult had usurped all the 'high ground'; in

⁴⁰ Toutain, *Cultes païennes*, 17; Smadja, "L'Empereur et les dieux."

⁴¹ MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, fig. p. 6.

Byzacena and Tripolitania, on the other hand, some local African adherents are found.⁴² Cult centers of Aesculpius did exist in Africa. Although some of them, such as the one at Thuburbo Maius, might have been impressive, they were not numerous when compared with the god's Mediterranean profile. The same observation applies even more to the cult of Isis and Serapis, while other deities like Mercury and Silvanus seem to have been more heavily represented in Africa than elsewhere, although it is unclear why this was so.

There are two problems with these simple lists. One is the fiction of the representation of deities as isolated individuals; the other is how they occlude degrees of local intensity. The case of Isis, for example, is particularly problematic. The pilgrim's progress, from black magic to the true revelation of Isis, reported by the African philosopher Apuleius in his novel *The Metamorphoses*, is one of the best-known and most striking cases of conversion described for the high Roman empire.⁴³ But for Africa, the story is misleading. Apuleius is indeed a good representative of a new cosmopolitanism, a bearer of the so-called Second Sophistic that identified proper culture and belief: the pervasive ones shared in common by the metropolitan classes of imperial Graeco-Roman society. It was a cultural movement that paralleled broad Mediterranean-wide fashions that linked the social elites in the powerful arc

⁴² Leglay, *Saturne africain, histoire*, 233-34; cf. Foucher, "Paganisme en Afrique," 3.

⁴³ The classic case, even before Nock, "The Conversion of Lucius," ch. 9 [in] *Conversion*, 138-55, made it central to modern conceptions.

between Asia Minor and Rome – styles like the worship of Isis. As a scion of the social elite, Apuleius was educated in Athens, and was widely traveled, having resided in both Alexandria and Rome. Despite the fact that he was African born and raised, and long remembered in Africa for his involvements in philosophy and magic, Apuleius is only modestly representative of most Africans and their beliefs. Moreover, the cosmopolitan cultural movement that he exemplified was to die a hard death in the generation after his death. Trying to generalize about Africa from this exception is risky. For it was not Isis, Mithras, Jupiter, or any of the other big gods and goddesses of the standard Graeco-Roman pantheon, who dominated in Africa.

In the general patterns of more intense concentrations of power and identity, it was the distinctively local in African belief and practice that held sway. It was a combination of African, Phoenician, and Punic beliefs that produced the dominant cult of Ba'al and his consort Tinit. During the whole of the succeeding Roman period, this same collation of forces manifested itself in Roman form in the widespread and equally dominant cult of the Romano-African deity Saturn and his consort Caelestis.⁴⁴ Saturn and Caelestis were living continuators of Ba'al and Tinit.⁴⁵ Connections with the Italic or Roman deity Saturn are very tenuous in any particular aspect and almost meaningless in general. Apart from his Latin

⁴⁴ For what follows, see Leglay, *Saturne africain* and *Saturne africaine. Monuments*, vols. 1-2.

⁴⁵ On the nature of the translation from the one to the other, see Cadotte, "Baal Hammon/Saturne," ch. 1 [in] *Romanisation des dieux*, 25-64

name, this Saturn is an African creation who was the Roman period manifestation of Ba'al Hammon, the single great deity of the previous Punic age. The cult of Saturn was *the* pervasive and dominant African practice of the Roman imperial age. The ecological frontiers of Saturn worship can be mapped with reasonable accuracy. Evidence of the cult is concentrated in the main heartland of the Maghrib, between the plains of Sétif in the west and the borders of Byzacium in the east. This was the weight of its center and its peripheries. The cult of Saturn was not rooted elsewhere in Africa – not in Tripolitania to the east nor in Mauretania Tingitana to the west.⁴⁶ These two parts of north Africa belonged to different circuits of Mediterranean communications in antiquity and their religious worlds reflect this fundamental difference. Distinctions, however, were not just geographic; they were also social. New evidence has not fundamentally altered the analysis of social catchment of Saturn worshippers done a century ago: members of the upper strata of Roman urban society under the empire – from emperors and governors and their imperial bureaucrats, to army officers and the local senatorial, equestrian, and municipal elites – are almost entirely absent from the recorded worshippers.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Toutain, *Cultes païennes*, 89-90. For Tripolitania, see Brouquier-Reddé, *Temples et cultes*, who cites one possible, but questionable instance; cf. Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 181. For Tingitana, see Shaw, *Edge of the Corrupting Sea*, 18-19.

⁴⁷ Toutain, *Cultes païennes*, 98-102. For example, of the ten military men, all are footsoldiers whose names mark them as indigenous Africans (e.g. M. Porcius

From the numerous portraits, symbolic associations, and descriptions that survive of Saturn, it is manifest that he was a god who was perceived as ruling over all aspects of nature – skies, soils, and springs – that were the basis of the great agricultural wealth of Africa. Insofar as any Roman influences might be discerned, Saturn could be said to be a divine projection of the harder Afro-Roman version of the patriarchal Roman *paterfamilias* or household head. His portrait was a local innovation, pastiched out of the elements of a common Hellenistic repertoire of physical characteristics that were expected in an anthropomorphic representation of a dominant male deity. He is portrayed as a heavily-bearded mature man, often armed with a harvester’s sickle that represented his role as a harvest-god, a divine reaper. One of his most frequent epithets indicated that he was, indeed, *the Lord*, just like Ba’al Hammon whose cultural successor he was. Saturn was the *Dominus* – *the Lord*. This divine Lord was the owner of all lands, plants, and animals, and the patriarchal head of all humans. Saturn was called *Frugifer*, the bringer of bounty and plenty to the land and to each household. Finally, and importantly, Saturn was also known as the *Senex* or ‘the Old Man.’ In an African social system that manifestly recognized and rewarded old age much more than any other circum-Mediterranean culture, Easuctan, a centurion from Calama: CIL 8.2648). Toutain notes that at the Saturn sanctuary at Thurburnica there is not a single dedication from the imperial administrators of the mines at Simitthus, only ten kilometres away. Of the more than 1400 dedicators to Saturn, at an absolute maximum there are only thirty who might have had any formal link with the Roman imperial order.

where councils of elders or *seniores* governed the myriad hamlets and villages in which most Africans lived, and where, in a later age, the highest ranking Christian bishop in each African province would also be called the *Senex* or the 'Old Man,' Saturn was the exemplar of the power of seniority.⁴⁸

In the Roman period, the other half of this divine power couple, the direct successor to Tinit, was the universal sky-earth-and-nature deity, Caelestis. But, if anything, her presence and power had diminished considerably from Punic times. Her main temple at Carthage, however, was nothing to be despised. It was only finally decommissioned by imperial force in 399 CE, at which time the description of it by the Christian bishop of Carthage vividly evoked the image of a supreme deity around whom other quite lesser spirits oriented themselves: 'There is at Carthage a vast temple to Caelestis, surrounded by lesser sanctuaries of the other gods of the country. The area is decorated with rich mosaics, beautiful stones, high columns, and a walled enclosure that is over two-thousand feet in length.'⁴⁹ It was to be the end of almost a millennium of the goddess's dominant presence on African soil.

Urban Power and Metropolitan Cult

In gradual development from the Augustan Principate onwards, but taking special hold with the concerns of the upstart Flavian emperors and their

⁴⁸ Shaw, "The Elders."

⁴⁹ Quodvultdeus, *Liber promissionum*, 3.38 (CCL 60: 185-86); cf. Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 106-07.

new dynastic rule of the empire, the worship of the emperors added to the legitimation of their rule in the provinces. Even so, it can be reasonably argued that the worship of the emperor and of the imperial family had such a peculiar function that its general impact on religious life in general was not only very specific in scope, but also limited in effect. Despite its apparent significance for the central government, imperial ideology, and the identity of local elites, the general importance of the imperial cult or emperor worship is perhaps less than is sometimes suggested by the modern attention lavished upon it.⁵⁰ Most of the spectacular evidence, like the votive altars erected by imperial freedmen and their friends and associates, are Augustan in date and located in the large imperial urban centers anchored on the Mediterranean coast: Lepcis Magna, Carthage and Caesarea.⁵¹ So too, evidence for the deliberate cultivation of an imperial cult in terms of representations of the *domus divina* in statuary or in special shrines in town forums, with some exceptions, are also located in cities on the Mediterranean coast that functioned as important administrative centers, again like Lepcis Magna in Tripolitania. Apart from honorific dedications to the

⁵⁰ Much that follows has been made clear by the studies of Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West*, esp. vol. 1.2, chs. 6 & 8; vol. 3.1, pp. 128-32; 190-92; and vol. 3.2, ch. 6, from which the foundational importance of the Augustan period, the importance of Flavian innovations, and yet the relative marginality of Africa in the whole apparatus of the cult when it is compared with the other western provinces of the empire; cf. Foucher, "Paganisme en Afrique," 24-28.

⁵¹ Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 170-74.

emperor, which were just as much if not more a part of a system of secular patronage, there is little to suggest the widespread impact of the cult as a pervasive form of religious belief and practice.

All of this is true despite the presence of some striking examples of the iconography of the Augustan restoration. These include two altars whose reliefs feature members of the Augustan imperial family, and sacrificial scenes that reflect the program on the great Altar of Peace at Rome itself. Both were found in neighborhoods lying directly below the great imperial monumental complex atop the Byrsa at Carthage.⁵² Although these do exist and are evidence of the direct impact of the new imperial religious ideology in the one great Augustan colony in Africa, they probably signify a lot less than is usually suggested. They were erected by freedmen, some of whom were the emperor's own servants, who were directly connected with the imperial family and whose economic interests made them direct beneficiaries of the new order. Naturally, they were energetic celebrants of its triumphalist ideology.

Despite this significance, it seems that the reaction to the imperial cult in Africa was much less comparable to that in Asia Minor (for example) than it was in Phoenicia, Syria and Judaea. That is to say, whatever examples of municipal adherence to the cult do exist, it is manifest that there is very little evidence for the typical bearers of the imperial cult in the imperial age – the so-called *seviri Augustales*, under whatever name they were known. Unlike the other western

⁵² Poinssot, *L'Autel de la gens Augusta*; Zanker, *The Power of Images*, 313-16 & fig. 247.

provinces and Italy, they are hardly attested at all in Africa. On the basis of the present evidence, it is safe to say that these core institutions of emperor worship are almost unknown in Africa.⁵³ A possible exception is the provincial council or *concilium provinciae*, which appears to have emerged from a general reform and regularization of the imperial cult by Vespasian and the Flavians—a more uniform re-organization that stressed the general western Mediterranean dimensions of the cult. Each city in the province that held the official status of a colony or a municipality chose a representative to this council, probably the same man who served as the local *flamen Augusti* or priest of the imperial cult. The council itself choose one man who was the *sacerdos* of the whole group, a particularly high honor which they seem to have done their best to circulate amongst the various cities who were members of the council. The cult was very important to the imperial court, and the ranks of its local administrators.

Other official cults, however, had a wider reach and deeper impact. The worship of the Cereres, principally of the grain goddess Ceres, through the whole rural region of the new Roman colony at Carthage established by Julius Caesar and confirmed by his adoptive son Octavian in 38 BCE, was one of the official cults introduced in this axial age that was to have a long life.⁵⁴ Its priests and priestesses are found throughout the abnormally large *pertica* or rural surveyed lands that formed the territory of Carthage. It encompassed dozens of

⁵³ Février, *Approches du Maghreb romain*, vol. 1, 195-96.

⁵⁴ Cadotte, “Les Cereres,” ch. 10 [in] *Romanisation des dieux*, 343-62 for a survey; see Gascou, “Les Sacerdotes Cererum,” for a more specific study.

towns and cities, like Thugga (mod. Dougga) and Thuburbo Maius (mod. Tébourba), that would only become independent municipalities in their own right at an artificially late date.⁵⁵

Elsewhere in Africa, outside of Carthage and its district, from Flavian times onward we find the steady elevations of towns to the formal status of colony (*colonia*), all of whose citizens become Roman citizens, or to the status of municipality (*municipium*), where only the members of the ruling elite became Roman citizens. In addition, there were many self-styled ‘Romanizing’ towns (*res publicae*) whose elites sought to mimic the forms of Roman public life. All of these towns provided milieux in which the urban elites developed their local forms of official cult. In this new urban context, the public face of religion – the temples, shrines, nymphaea, statues, and public altars – the whole visual panoply that constituted the urban skyline depended on the generosity of powerful and wealthy local citizens. This was particularly true in Tripolitania, where almost all the big temples and their iconic art was the result of such private subventions.⁵⁶ In the proconsular province of Africa, counts have shown that about three out of

⁵⁵ Pflaum, “La romanisation de l’ancien territoire de la Carthage,” yet another regional and administrative peculiarity that helped determine the configuration of official cult in a large number of towns and villages in the whole hinterland of Carthage.

⁵⁶ Brouquier-Reddé, *Temples et cults de Tripolitaine*, 285-87.

every five large temple constructions were the result of private benefactions.⁵⁷ The general significance that gods and deities had as measured by these local elites must be seen in the wider context of their patronal interests. Where did they put most of their money? The overwhelming bulk of the evidence shows that they were more interested in investing in the ‘living deities’ of the super wealthy and the super powerful among the living who could assist them and their communities. By far, most laudatory dedications were set up to imperial, senatorial, and other such elite patrons rather than to gods or goddesses.⁵⁸

If there was any single deity whom the urban elites of the burgeoning towns and cities of Africa, especially in its ebullient Antonine age, associated with their celebration of wealth, power, success, and general ambience of improvement, it was Bacchus – Dionysus in his world-conquering form, in his triumphal and festive mood.⁵⁹ Dionysus is found everywhere and in every form

⁵⁷ Rives, *Religion and Authority*, 178; and at 178n6, where he notes that Duncan-Jones, “Who Paid for Public Buildings?,” at p. 30, found that the financing of all public building was divided roughly half and half between private benefaction and public expenditure.

⁵⁸ Rives, *Religion and Authority*, 179. In his ‘rough survey,’ Rives counts 18 dedications to deities as such, as against 162 to emperors and members of the imperial family, and 144 to civic patrons.

⁵⁹ Remarkably, there is still no in-depth study of this most important subject. Bénabou, “Bacchus africain,” [in] *La résistance africain*, 351-58 has some relevant remarks, as does Charles-Picard, *Religions de l’Afrique antique*, 115, 194-209,

of middle-rank kitsch: in statues and paintings, in lavish and brilliant floor and wall mosaics, and in countless bric-a-bracs made of wood, marble, bronze, and glass. It is usually argued that Dionysus, as Liber Pater, simply continued the cult of Punic Shadrapha and also Melqart, 'the God of the City.'⁶⁰ There is some truth to the claim, but it does not tell us more than that this particular continuity was found to be useful.⁶¹ What we are witnessing in this profusion of Dionysiac representations is a heady celebration of wealth and fecundity – one that drew on a cosmopolitan Hellenistic repertoire of images to rejoice in real African achievements. In his raucous celebration of the Happiness of the Times, the *Felicitas Temporum*, Dionysus rose above isolated individuals and individual communities to offer a general and unifying spirit of joy, one in which the civic elites of Africa in their Roman heyday could share.⁶² If one is seeking the one divinity drawn from the classic Graeco-Roman pantheon in which the well-off

where he remarks on the profusion of mosaics alone. On the latter, see Dunbabin, "Dionysus," who remarks on the unusual importance of Dionysus in Africa, the exceptional profusion of artistic representations of the god and his story: a representational art that has serious cultural significance.

⁶⁰ Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 194-95

⁶¹ Cadotte, "Shadrapha/Liber," ch. 6 [in] *Romanisation des dieux*, 253-82, for some of the complexities involved; cf. Foucher, "Paganisme en Afrique," 8-13, for a survey of the depth and range of Dionysian worship in Africa.

⁶² Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 195-205, with a host of examples.

urbanites in Africa's heyday of empire invested their best sentiments, that god was Dionysus.

In general, however, the process of identification, adaptation, continuity, innovation, synthesis and mutation was a volatile and messy mix. The funerary monument built by the family of the Flavii at Cillium (modern Kasserine) is as good an example as any of the problems.⁶³ The classic Afro-Punic mausoleum constructed in three-stages was meant to house the body and the soul of the deceased, Titus Flavius Secundus, the 110-year-old *paterfamilias* of the family. He had served in the auxiliaries of the Roman army in the mid-first century CE, and he had in consequence received citizenship from one of the Flavian emperors. A professional Latin poet was hired to compose a long eulogy in hexameters to the deceased – it is in fact the longest piece of verse epigraphy surviving in Latin. It was carved, although somewhat carelessly, on the face of the monument. The resulting cultural *mélange* of poem and monument can be seen either as a botched attempt at cultural identity or as a strange but powerful cultural amalgam. The Roman poet completely misunderstood the religious cult inherent in the monument. In consequence, he failed to mention the all-important rooster, perched on the peak of the pyramid-shaped top that crowned the whole monument.

When this critical deficit was drawn to the poet's attention by his patrons, he added another twenty lines of verse to compensate. Although ostensibly done to make up for his fault – and also to mention the all-important rooster –

⁶³ The studies in *Les Flavii de Cillium* are an insightful guide.

the poet did this somewhat disdainfully, in elegaic couplets. He finally did note the rooster, in passing, otherwise using his new verses to unveil a disdain for local beliefs by suggesting that elite Roman values of secular memory were far more important than their odd Punic superstitions. Perhaps not fully understanding the implied insult, the African Flavii dutifully had the additional verses carved on the face of their tomb. Even if the Latin verses simultaneously misunderstood and mocked their beliefs, as a form of imperial writing the formal and elevated publicly proclaimed the middling success of the Flavii. The rooster, however, was not insignificant. Whereas the tomb itself housed the man's *nephesh*, his body, the bird represented the *rouah*, his eternal soul.⁶⁴ What Flavius Secundus held most significant in life and death was simply not transcribed by the Latin poem that was meant to celebrate his life and death.

Microreligion and Individual Practice

With our attention drawn to the more visible and well-documented public levels of communal cult, it is easy to forget that there was a far more pervasive micro-level of daily religious practice that was centered on the immediate concerns of by far most Africans. Their day-to-day worries focussed on personal health and the well-being of one's friends and family, the fate of love and marriage, the birth of children, success in gaming and gambling, and the chance that one would succeed in confronting personal enemies and threats to one's

⁶⁴ Fantar, *Eschatologie phénicienne-punique*, 32-38, whose ideas are significantly modified and extended by Bessi, "Il significato del gallo nel mondo semitico."

household, brutishly in the streets or more civilly in the courts.⁶⁵ A wide and compelling range of belief and practice therefore depended on the technical knowledge of experts outside the formal system of priests and temples. Such men and women were private entrepreneurs who could manipulate the power of amulets and apotropaic devices that protected the person, or, more aggressively, they could summon the darker forces of the underworld, demonic powers, to attack and to coerce an intended victim.

The surviving evidence on these private practices point to a division between urban and rural in these manipulative forces.⁶⁶ In the rural world, where such powers had been recognized and managed by holy men and holy women for a long time – in the second century BCE, the mother of the African king Massinissa was a renowned woman of magic – the same continued to be true in the Roman period. In the larger urban centers, on the other hand, professionals whose expertise could be acquired on the market for a price were now available. Experts, it was known, commanded such powers that could both harm and protect. Ennia Fructosa, a modest and much-loved wife of a tribune in the Third Augustan legion at Lambaesis, was killed by curses – curses that first

⁶⁵ See Sichel, *La magie en Afrique du Nord*, who has a near-comprehensive collection of the texts and material evidence relevant to the problem.

⁶⁶ Most of the *tabellae defixionis*, for example, come from larger urban Mediterranean port centers in Africa and of these almost all are from Carthage and Hadrumetum.

blocked her voice and then turned her into a mute.⁶⁷ Such powers could now be mobilized not just by someone who had patronal access to the mother of an African king, but by anyone who could pay.

The divine experts had access to a trans-Mediterranean body of technical knowledge and skills. A partial record of such curses-for-hire survives in the so-called *tabellae defixiones* or ‘binding tablets.’ These magical texts were inscribed, often on lead, before being sold to the patron.⁶⁸ A typical example, found at Carthage, was inscribed on a thin leaden sheet that was rolled up and buried in a grave. The client had purchased a curse whereby the charioteer of the Blues racing team at Carthage would be impeded from winning by demonic spirits.⁶⁹

SEMESILAM DAMATAMENEUS IESNNALLELAM LAIKAM

ERMOUBELE IAKOUB IA IOERBETH IOPAKERBETH EOMALTHABETH

ALLASAN. A curse. I invoke you by the great names so that you will bind every limb and every sinew of Victoricus – the charioteer of the Blue Team, to whom the earth, mother of every living thing, gave birth – and of his horses which he is about to race. . . Bind their legs, their onrush, their bounding, and their running. Blind their eyes so that they cannot see.

⁶⁷ CIL 8. 2756 (Lambaesis) = Gager, *Curse Tablets*, no. 136, pp. 246; cf. Ogden, “Binding Spells,” p. 27.

⁶⁸ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 20 f., and Ogden, “Binding Spells,” pp. 54-60 on ‘professionalism and specialisation.’

⁶⁹ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, no. 12, pp. 65-67 = CIL 8.12511 (Carthage)

And twist their soul and heart so that they cannot breathe. Just as this rooster has been bound by its feet, hands, and head, so tomorrow bind the legs and hands and head and heart of Victoricus the charioteer of the Blue Team . . . Also, I invoke you by the god above heaven, who is seated upon the Cherubim who divided the earth and separated the sea. IAO ABRIAO ARBATHIAO ADONAI SABAO so that you might bind Victoricus the charioteer of the Blue Team and the horses which he is about to race. . . so that they may not reach victory tomorrow in the Circus. Now! Now! Quickly! Quickly!

Another leaden curse tablet, rolled up and provided with a hole through which it could be nailed into the ground, was found in the cemetery at Hadrumetum. Marked with a mixture of Greek and Latin found in the tablets from this city, the text also reveals a not-atypical admixture of traditional magical spells along with elements from Graeco-Jewish holy texts emanating from an Alexandrian milieu. Here, too, there is manifest evidence of the pervasive hybrids found in all other aspects of religious life. Copied out of a book of standard magical curses by the professional *magus*, it was provided for a female customer, on this occasion to deal with a matter of the heart.⁷⁰

I invoke you *daimonion* spirit who lies here, by the holy name AOTH
 ABAOTH, the god of Abraham, and IAO, the god of Jacob, IAO AOTH

⁷⁰ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, no. 36, pp. 112-15 = Maspero, "Deux *tabellae defixionis*."

ABAOTH, god of Israma, hear the honored, dread, and great name. Go to Urbanus, to whom Urbana gave birth, and bring him to Domitiana to whom Candida gave birth so that loving, frantic, and sleepless with love and desire for her, he may beg her to return to his house and become his wife. I invoke you, the great god, eternal and more than eternal, almighty and exalted above the exalted ones. I invoke you, who created the heaven and the sea. I invoke you who set aside the righteous. I invoke you, who divided the staff in the sea to bring Urbanus, to whom Urbana gave birth, and unite him with Domitiana, to whom Candida gave birth, loving, tormented, and sleepless with desire and love for her, so that he may take her into his house as his wife. . . Unite them in marriage and as spouses in love for all the time of their lives. Make him as her obedient slave, so that he will desire no other woman or girl apart from Domitiana alone, to whom Candida gave birth, and will keep her as his spouse for all the time of their lives. Now! Now! Quickly! Quickly!

These texts were urbane and answered to the citified concerns of courts and courting. But magical experts were also found out in the countryside. One of them was working in the area around the village of Aradi, deep in the hinterland of Carthage, and provided assistance to a landowner in the technical magical language of Greek.⁷¹

⁷¹ AE 1984: no. 933 (Aradi). Ferchiou and Gabillon, "Une inscription grecque magique de la région de Bou Arada"; cf. Rives, *Religion and Authority*, 193.

SSSEXI OREOBAZAGRA, OREOBAZAGRA, ABR SAX, MAKHAR,
 SEMESEILAM, STENAKHTA, LORSAKHTHE, KORIAUKHE, ADONAI,
 LORD GODS, prevent and turn away from this land and from the crops
 growing on it—the vineyards, olive groves, and the sown fields—hail,
 rust, the fury of Typhonian winds and the swarms of evil-doing locusts, so
 that none of these forces can gain a hold in this land or in any of its
 crops—all of them wherever they might be. Rather, keep them always
 unharmed and undamaged as long as these stones, engraved with your
 sacred names, are placed under the ground which lies around.

Magicians and astrologers, often not distinguished, were professionals who represented themselves as skilled technicians who sold their expertise at a price. They were not priests. They had no temples. They practiced openly in the streets and alleyways of the towns, and in the fields and forests around them, where they sold their technical expertise to anyone who wanted access to their knowledge and power.⁷² But here, too, because of cost, expertise, and communications, there appears to have been a distinctive ecology of belief and practice. Almost all the known *tabellae defixionis*, for example, are found in Mediterranean port cities like Carthage and Hadrumetum, and so they reveal the presence of a more cosmopolitan and technically proficient aspect of magic. But there were other means by which this power could be accessed that were

⁷² Madden, *Pagan Divinities*, 18, citing Aug. *Tract. in Evang Ioh.* 8.11 (CCL 46: 89).

cheaper, and required less expertise. These material repositories of magical power, like symbols of phalluses, little statuettes, images of the god Mercury, models of scorpions, eyes, lizards, sphinxes, and peacocks, are much more widely distributed, especially in the rural centers of the African hinterland.⁷³

What must be emphasized is the fact of diversity. This was both a strength and a limit of cult. The enormous range of choice meant that each rural site, neighborhood, town, social, ethnic or professional group, could have its own deities and sacred things selected, as it were, from a smorgasbord of possibilities. If the modal commonalities in the whole repertoire of these choices were widespread, then the deity appears to have been a very popular one with a ubiquitous presence and cult. But this is a misleading impression. The effect is produced by the serial replication of similar circumstances. If they did not exist, the deity remained more narrowly confined. Serapis, for example, is indeed attested in Africa, but was limited to certain venues like the port areas of Carthage and to worshippers who were mostly expatriate Alexandrians. Both reveal how much Serapis remained a niche deity. The same is true of Mithras – no competitor at all for Christianity – whose cult is found sporadically and specifically in army camps and in urban milieux where the military servants and bureaucrats of the state found in its cult a heavenly and more perfect replication

⁷³ Sichel, *La magie en Afrique du Nord*, vol. 1, pp. 363-485; cf. Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 247: mostly associated with 'small people,' likes slaves and freedmen, and town and village commoners.

of their own hopes and values.⁷⁴ And that was that. Even more restricted were some Syrian deities, like the god Malagbel, that were found in a small army encampment on the edge of the Sahara where Syrian detachments had been sent to serve the empire.⁷⁵ So profuse and fragmented and mixed were the deities and their various presences, and so fragmentary is the evidence about them, that in most cases all we *can* see is this effect. We cannot understand what peculiar combination of local or personal interests produced the results that we witness in

⁷⁴ Other than dedicatory inscriptions and some altars (all by military men and administrative slaves), only three Mithraea known, including one in the port city of Rusicade, a port where the *Familia Caesaris* was present, and another in the army base at Lambaesis: Clauss, "Africa," [in] *Cultores Mithrae*, 246-52. Others probably existed in similar milieux, at Carthage and Hadrumetum for example, but they were certainly specific in kind and never numerous. The locations conform with the known social catchment of Mithraic adherent: see Gordon, "Who Worshipped Mithras?"; Clauss, "Anhängerschichten," [in] *Cultores Mithrae*, 261-79, and "Recruitment," ch. 6 [in] *Roman Cult of Mithras*, 33-41, and distribution map, pp. 26-27.

⁷⁵ Charles-Picard, *Religions de l'Afrique antique*, 221-22, from his own excavations of Castellum Dimmidi: the unit of archers from Palmyra constructed a shrine with a painting of the god in Iranian costume; similarly, the god Theandrios was worshipped by Arabs at Manaf, Illyrian immigrants in Numidia honored their Medaurus.

the surviving record. As with the unusual presence of the goddess Bellona in Cirta and its environs, the explanatory connections are simply missing.

What Was Happening?

The core problem, then, is that the defining characteristics of these practices, their great diversity and pliability, their morphing and matching, the fragmentation and disconnectedness of their parts tend to frustrate analysis. What we have to confront is a huge and ever-changing kaleidoscope of possibilities. The forms of approach to them can be defined by what we today might label toleration, but misleadingly so.⁷⁶ There was a huge and varied repertoire from which each individual and community over time could create their own worlds of practice and belief. In center-periphery studies it has been argued that indigenous and other local cults represented a focus of resistance to the cultural impact of Romanization.⁷⁷ It is just as possible to make a compelling case for cult as an integrative force that was successfully manipulated to modulate and to mediate cultural difference.⁷⁸ So appeals made to the 'Gods of the Moors,' the *Dii Mauri*, can be interpreted as having to do with soliciting the benevolence of indigenous deities, as examples of the continuity of African cult that betokened a kind of resistance to foreign power, or as a way of

⁷⁶ Garnsey, "Toleration" and O'Donnell, "Paganism" are model attempts.

⁷⁷ Bénabou, "La résistance religieuse."

⁷⁸ Février, "Religion et domination."

manipulating the dedicators' picture of their African world – and for all of these interpretations to be simultaneously true.⁷⁹

What, for example, is the significance of the cult of Neptune in Africa? Because the process of cultural change was complex and contradictory, it was rarely so much as any element – 'this spring should be identified with Neptune' – being consciously taken by any persons as sign of their own subjugation or domination. Not at all. They surely thought of many of these elements as part of a cosmopolitan culture in common from which everyone had an equal right to filch ('to appropriate') with no necessary impairment of their own identity.⁸⁰ Was the worship of Neptune therefore a straightforward adaptation and sign of Romanization? A touchstone of African resistance? Did the cult serve an accommodating and enabling function? Or was it an instance of the 'creolization' of cult? Or was it none of these, but rather a practice being manipulated by both sides in power negotiations over values and representations? The fact is that all of these were possible in the same world and all were present to some degree – one modern interpreter is as right on resistance as another is on integration, since each catches part of how this dynamic and fragmented world could and did function in different contexts. As the monument and poem of the Flavii at Cillium dramatically demonstrates,

⁷⁹ Fentress, "*Dii Mauri*"; Camps, "*Le problème des Dii Mauri*" and "*Qui sont les Dii Mauri?*"; and Bénabou, "*Le problème des Dii Mauri: un culte ambigu,*" [in] *Résistance africaine*, 309-30.

⁸⁰ Veyne, *Sexe et pouvoir*, 18 f., is insightful on the process.

they were both badges of Romanization and they were not. Our interpretation is both manifest and problematic.

Since every African, whether indigenous or settler, peasant or merchant, town councilor or imperial administrator, could continually select from a very wide and varied repertoire, the sum of all choices could add up to anything from resistance to accommodation, from tradition to revolution. The kaleidoscope of belief and practice in Africa kept shifting over time and in fundamentally different patterns from one region to the next. The pattern of the more than one hundred different cults, and as many temples and shrines, attested for Tripolitania has almost nothing to do with the system of dozens of gods and numerous temples and shrines known for a well-defined rural region just to the north of Carthage.⁸¹ Not only do the individual parts and building blocks of each matrix shift, but the whole that was produced for each region formed its own peculiar identity and cannot, despite some specific connections and analogies – and therefore the ability of any participant readily to translate from the one to the other – be made the same as that of its neighbor. It is these regionally contained forces written on a larger scale for all of Africa which reveal why the Maghrib cannot be easily assimilated into the religious narrative of the rest of the

⁸¹ Brouquier-Reddé, *Temples et cultes*, 311-15 and “La place de la Tripolitaine,” for Tripolitania, as compared to Peyras, *Le Tell nord-est*, 340-53, 425-27, for the region north of Carthage. The same could be said, for example, of whole region of Mauretania Tingitana when compared to the rest of Africa, see Shaw, “A Peculiar Island,” 106-16, and *At the Edge*, 16-19.

Mediterranean. The interrelated elements of worship and cult in Africa formed a world of shared characteristics that had more in common with each other than with those of the other regions of the empire. The sum made this system separate from all the rest. Despite all of the prompts, similarities, and analogies, it was just different. And this distinctiveness was decisively to shape the contours of African Christianity.

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