

Articles

Beyond Culture-Historical Models: Reframing Religious Change in Second–Third Century AD North Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines the dynamics of religious transformation in North Africa during the second and third centuries AD, challenging traditional narratives rooted in culture-historical models and simplistic cultural labels, such as the purported ‘Africanisation’ of cults under the Severan dynasty. While past scholarship has often framed these changes in terms of cultural permanence, resistance, or renaissance, this study shows that they are instead deeply embedded within the broader social and economic practices of the Roman Empire and, at the same time, reflect local and micro-regional dynamics. The paper adopts a multifold approach to reinterpretation: the onomastic attributes of gods and devotees; the iconography and materiality of divine representations; the architectural forms of temples and their functions. By reanalysing key material corpora, this contribution highlights how cultic patterns were shaped by factors such as economic networks, the proliferation of stone-made monuments, and the involvement of an expanding ‘middle-class’ base of worshippers. A specific focus is placed on the cult of Saturn, often viewed as emblematic of African religious identity or continuity. This study argues instead that the second–third century boom in Saturn worship reflects broader imperial trends, including the rise in monumentalisation and shifting patterns of religious patronage. By dismantling previous assumptions and employing relational and materiality-focused methodologies, the paper offers a revised framework for understanding the interplay between local traditions and imperial dynamics in shaping religious practices in Roman Africa.

تعيد هذه الورقة النظر في ديناميكيات التحول الديني في شمال أفريقيا خلال القرنين الثاني والثالث للميلاد، متحدى السرديات التقليدية المتجذرة في النماذج التاريخية الثقافية والتصنيفات الثقافية المبسطة، مثل ما يُفترض من غافق “ الطقوس الدينية في ظل السلالة السورية. وبينما تناولت الأبحاث السابقة هذه التغيرات في إطار مفاهيم مثل الثبات الثقافي أو المقاومة أو النهضة، تُظهر هذه الدراسة أنها متجذرة، بدلاً من ذلك، في الممارسات الاجتماعية والاقتصادية الأوسع للإمبراطورية الرومانية، وتعكس في الوقت نفسه ديناميكيات محلية وصغرى إقليمية. تعتمد الورقة منهجاً متعدد الأبعاد لإعادة التفسير: سمات الأسماء الإلهية وأسماء المتعبدين، الأيقونوغرافيا والمادية الخاصة بالتمثيلات الإلهية، والأشكال المعمارية للمعابد ووظائفها. ومن خلال إعادة تحليل مجموعات مادية أساسية، يبرز هذا البحث كيف تشكلت أنماط العبادة بفعل عوامل مثل الشبكات الاقتصادية، وانتشار المعالم الحجرية، ومشاركة قاعدة متزايدة من المتعبدين المنتمين إلى غالطبة الوسطى. تركز الدراسة بشكل خاص على عبادة الإله ساتورن، والتي غالباً ما اعتُبرت رمزاً للهوية أو الاستمرارية الدينية الأفريقية. غير أن هذه الدراسة ترى أن الازدهار الذي شهدته عبادة ساتورن في القرنين الثاني والثالث يعكس توجهات إمبراطورية أوسع، من بينها تصاعد النزعة التذكارية وتحول أنماط الرعاية الدينية. ومن خلال تفكيك الافتراضات السابقة وتوظيف منهجيات تركز على العلاقات والمادية، تقدم الورقة إطاراً جديداً لفهم التفاعل بين التقاليد المحلية والديناميكيات الإمبراطورية في تشكيل الممارسات الدينية في أفريقيا الرومانية.

Keywords: ‘Africanisation’; ‘African’/‘Romano-African’ temples; glocalism; materiality; Roman Africa; onomastics; Saturn stela; terracotta statues

Introduction

The religious landscape of Roman Africa has long been analysed through the lens either of cultural continuity or rupture, often framed within colonialist and post-colonialist debates over ‘Romanisation’, ‘resistance’ and the persistence of ‘indigenous’ traditions (Gasparini and Mastino 2021; McCarty 2024, 7–23). Scholarship has traditionally emphasised ideological and ethno-cultural interpretations, positioning religious practices and monuments within a binary framework of ‘assimilation’ versus ‘survival’ (e.g., Cadotte 2007). However, such perspectives risk oversimplifying the complex interactions between local traditions and the broader structures of the Roman Empire. Rather than viewing North-African religious phenomena as relics of a Libyan, Punic, or ‘Africanised’ past, or as passive reflections of imposed Roman

models, this study seeks to situate them within the dynamic social, material and economic networks of the second and third centuries AD. In so doing, it also aims to move beyond a second binary that continues to shape the study of North Africa under the Roman Empire: the divide between cultural histories that emphasise stasis (for example, Le Glay 1966a; Hugoniot 2000, 46–57; Le Bohec 2013, 181), and socio-economic histories that stress change through Africa’s ‘economic boom’ (Hobson 2015) and changing ‘consumer culture’ (Dossey 2010).

A closer, situated examination of some religious practices at sites across Roman Africa (Figure 1) reveals a more nuanced picture, in which religious expression developed at those discrete points where local pasts, resources and lifeways articulated with imperial social ideals, shared discourses and global economies. The High Roman Empire fostered a vast interconnected world, forming a cultural *koiné* unified by military dominance, political institutions and economic networks. This globalising force encountered local diversity sparking varied reactions, from enthusiastic adoption to outright resistance. Rather than passive assimilation, local

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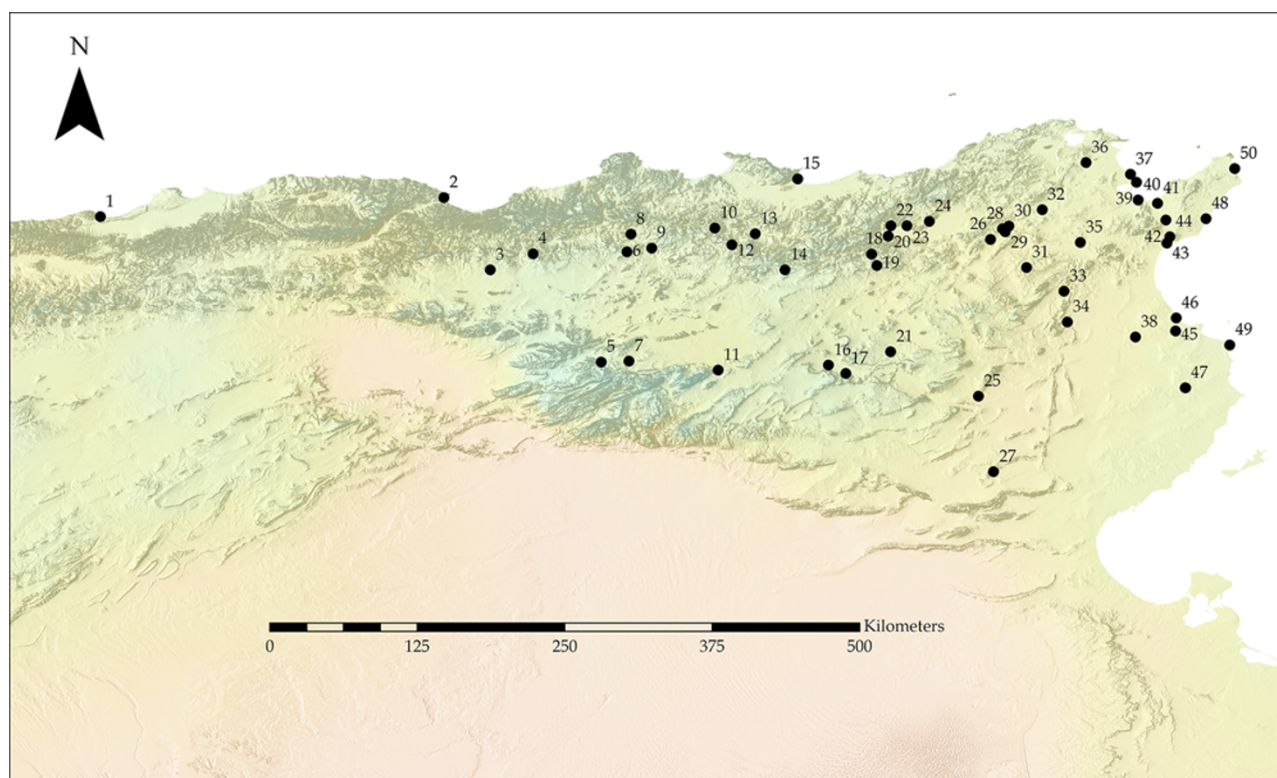


Figure 1. Sites discussed in the text. 1: Tipasa; 2: Saldae; 3: Sitifis; 4: Cuicul; 5: Lambaesis; 6: Cave of Zemma; 7: Thamugadi; 8: Tiddis; 9: Cirta; 10: Cave of Taya; 11: Khenchela; 12: Announa; 13: Calama; 14: Thubursicu Numidarum; 15: Hippo Regius; 16: Aïn Chabrou; 17: Theveste; 18: Ksiba Mraou; 19: Naraggara; 20: Bir Derbal; 21: Ammaedara; 22: Thuburnica; 23: Simitthus; 24: Bulla Regia; 25: Sufetula; 26: Thugga; 27: Majoura; 28: Aïn el-Djemala; 29: Aïn Golea; 30: Thignica; 31: Sidi Kaddou; 32: Medjez el-Bab; 33: Sivalis; 34: Aïn Djelloula; 35: Thurburbo Maius; 36: Utica; 37: Gamarth; 38: Sidi el-Hani; 39: Carthage; 40: Hammam Lif; 41: Soliman; 42: Beled Belli; 43: Pupput; 44: Thinissut; 45: el-Kénissia; 46: Hadrumetum; 47: Thysdrus; 48: Curubis; 49: Thapsus; 50: Kerkouane. (M. McCarty, with basemap using data from Esri, USGS, NOAA).

cultures actively engaged with global influences, adapting, reworking and sometimes re-exporting modified ideas in a process of mutual transformation. The concept of *glocalisation* helps explain these dynamics (Gasparini 2025a). Unlike earlier approaches based on the notions of 'Romanisation', 'hybridity', 'creolization', 'discrepant identity', 'Rome's cultural revolution', 'creolage', etc., *glocalisation* accounts for the fluid and agentic processes shaping Roman culture. It moves beyond sharp oppositions, recognising the unpredictable, multi-directional interplay of local and global elements in the ever-evolving, socio-cultural landscape of the Roman Empire. Urbanisation and mobility spurred cultural exchanges, allowing creativity to flourish in cosmopolitan hubs while reinforcing urban and rural 'subcultural' particularities.

Archaeological evidence reveals how names, objects and spaces participated in these transformations, shifting from standardised forms to locally reinterpreted expressions. This is why, in order to reach the goals of this study, we have selected four areas that continue to be understood through the previously mentioned problematic binary frameworks: the way gods are named by worshippers; the unusual assemblages of terracotta statues that served as the foci of worship in some imperial-period sanctuaries; the built spaces where cult took place, alongside the religious and social functions they performed; and the votive stelae which filled sanctuaries across the region. All have repeatedly been marked as 'African', 'Oriental', or 'Romano-African', and set within wider narratives of persistence or resistance to 'Romanisation' simply because, observationally, they just seem *different*. Of course, these aspects of cult only appear unusual when some material aspects of worship, in some parts of imperial-period Italy, by some elite subset of the population are taken as *normative*. By resituating these names, objects and spaces within more localised dynamics, it will be possible to

evaluate these differences from a less monolithic and generalising perspective. That is precisely what we aim to do here, through a series of case studies that combine close analysis of finds with social, economic and material contextualisation.

- 1 Drawing on epigraphic data, we will first examine the remarkable frequency and semantic transformation of the epithet *Augustus*, together with a few other neo-Punic, Greek and Latin 'power-related' attributes. Far from indicating imperial cult or the 'Romanisation' of local 'indigenous' gods, this widespread 'Augustalisation' reflects a complex linguistic and ideological negotiation between local religious traditions and Roman imperial symbolism, resulting in a distinctive vocabulary of divine authority.
- 2 The widespread use of terracotta figures in sanctuaries such as those at el-Kénissia and Thinissut challenges conventional interpretations that link them exclusively to cultural survival within a rural lower class. Instead, these statues should be considered within the contexts of production, global trade and the broader religious economy, where material choices were influenced by technological advancements and access to specialised craftsmanship.
- 3 Similarly, the architectural features of 'African' and 'Romano-African' temples do not communicate a specific or systematic ethnocultural connotation, but rather participate in a flexible and pragmatic adaptation of imperial models, shaped by functional, scenographic and ideological considerations. The triparticoced courtyards, elevated *cellae* and monumental altars of these sanctuaries must be understood as result of the negotiation of a wider Mediterranean architectural *koiné*, tailored to the needs of local communities.

4 The thousands of stelae dedicated to Saturn across Africa provide a specific case study of the intersection between religious devotion and socio-economic change. Traditionally interpreted as vestiges of Punic religious practices or evidence of rural, non-elite worship, these monuments in fact reveal the aspirations of an emerging 'middle class', deeply engaged in the social and economic transformations of the imperial period. Their iconographic emphasis on sacrifice, often displaying distinct regional variations, reflects both participation in imperial cultic normativity and the adaptation of these motifs within a localised (individual as well as communal) framework. Rather than being passive recipients of religious traditions, the dedicants of these stelae actively expressed their own religious and social agencies, using public acts of devotion to assert status and affiliation with broader imperial structures.

By approaching North-African religious practices through the interconnected lenses of onomastics, material culture, economic infrastructure and social mobility, this multifold study transcends rigid cultural dichotomies and explores the fluid and evolving nature of religious expression in the Roman world. The archaeological and epigraphic evidence underscores the extent to which theonymy, cultic artifacts and sacred locations were embedded within the vibrant *glocal* mechanisms of Mediterranean imperial life, trade and craft-production during the second and third centuries AD.

[BDA/VG/MM]

Naming gods

Our first case-study concerns divine onomastics. In Roman Africa, epigraphic evidence documents no fewer than 439 theonyms (for example, 'Mercury') and 593 qualifiers (for example, 'Augustus') applied to those theonyms. Most of these onomastic elements are in Latin (248 theonyms, 454 attributes), while Greek texts are less frequent (171 theonyms, 117 attributes) and neo-Punic inscriptions are quite rare (20 theonyms, 22 attributes). By far the most recurring divine epithet is *Augustus*/-a/-i/-ae. Alain Villaret's research (2019, 126) has made it possible to establish that, in *Africa Proconsularis*, almost 80% of the religious dedications make use of such onomastic attribute. This is confirmed now by the *Sylloge Inscriptionum Religionis Africae Romanae* (SIRAR: <https://humanidadesdigitales.uc3m.es/s/nuevo-sirar/page/home>; cf. López-Gómez and Gasparini 2025). At the time of writing this text, SIRAR has collected 5,752 epigraphic entries from 679 different locations in Roman Africa, of which as many as 1,686 inscriptions make use of the term *Augustus* as an adjective (and not as an anthroponymic *per se*).

Imperator/Ἀυτοκράτωρ, *Caesar*/Καίσαρ and *Augustus*/Σεβαστός represented the Latin and Greek official imperial *tria nomina*, acting as the emperor's *praenomen*, *nomen* and *cognomen*. That means that, in principle, *Augustus* should be considered an 'anthropophoric epithet' or, in other words, an epithet attributed to deities that is formed from an individual human name (Gasparini, Alvar Ezquerro and Bonnet 2025, 5). The epigraphic evidence from North Africa reveals a significant trend of assigning divine epithets derived from personal anthroponyms: 22 instances have been identified across modern Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, applied to nine Roman deities. Aesculapius, Caelestis, Genius, Juno, Mercurius, Pollux, Saturnus, Silvanus and Venus receive the epithets of *Bellensis*, *Cassiana*, *Extricianus*, *Graniana*, *Meddensis*, *Pegasianus*, *Privatensis*, *Reptentinus*, *Silvius*, *Sittiana*, *Sobarensis* and *Ulpus* (Gasparini 2020, 2025b, forthcoming). The distribution of these inscriptions is highly localised, with the majority concentrated in northeastern Tunisia, particularly in the Haut Mornag region south of modern Tunis. Except for an

early example from Lepcis Magna (mid-first century AD), all these inscriptions date between the second and third centuries AD, showing the extreme degree of individualisation that the process of religious appropriation could attain during this period.

Does the massive 'Augustalisation' of theonymy in North Africa necessarily reflect the presence of an actual imperial cultic practice behind these designations? Clearly not. This is not the formal structure of ritual devotion to the emperor, but rather a semantic and symbolic strategy, a linguistic elevation of divine names through the imperial register. The widespread use of *Augustus* as an epithet does not imply that each of these deities was worshipped as the emperor or *through* imperial cult, but rather that the authority and prestige associated with the imperial title were being rhetorically transferred to the divine realm. In other words, the epithet *Augustus* became, especially from the very end of the first century AD, so widespread that, in North Africa, its 'imperial coefficient' (Robert Schilling *apud* Dunand 1963, 349; Villaret 2019, 23) quickly swelled to the point of converting itself into a very common, honorific appellation, a sort of 'Dear Mister God/Dear Miss or Mrs Goddess'. Of course, the fact that the epithet *Augustus* became so widely used and semantically inflated during the second and third centuries AD – essentially losing its original anthropophoric connotation – does not imply that it ceased to operate as a 'power-related' onomastic attribute (on the taxonomy of divine onomastics, see Alvar Ezquerro *et al.* 2024). On the contrary, it continued to reflect the symbolic transference of human political and social authority into the divine sphere (cf. McCarty 2024, 142–52).

One must ask why this systematic 'Augustalisation' of religious epigraphy occurred so intensely across the North-African territory, and not in other parts of the Mediterranean world. In Rome and Italy, for instance, this phenomenon is rare or minor, with a rate of only 5% and 26%, respectively (Gregori 2009; Villaret 2019, 125–6); in the Western provinces, it appears quite sporadically, in 29% of cases (Villaret 2019, 126–7); in the Eastern Mediterranean it is altogether exceptional, with a rate of 15% and only 112 epigraphic occurrences, half of which are found in the Balkan Peninsula (Villaret 2019, 109–22; Camia forthcoming). A plausible explanation lies in the Punic substratum of North Africa, particularly in the traditional structure of Punic religious dedications, which, in the case of the *tophet*-sanctuaries, where the vast majority of these dedications came from, are generally introduced by the formula, 'To the Lord, to Baal.../To the Lady, to Tanit...' (D'Andrea 2014). The fact that this phenomenon took root so firmly in North Africa, but not in the Near East, calls for a careful consideration of the specific cultural configurations of these two regions, and in particular of their markedly different religious and institutional ecologies. The process of 'Augustalisation' does not appear to emerge spontaneously within the linguistic and socio-cultural fabric of the Greek-speaking East (Camia forthcoming), even where ostensibly 'promising' Phoenician-Punic formulae were already in place. Rather, it seems to gain traction – and indeed to 'ignite' – primarily within Roman contexts, where the interaction between imperial power, civic institutions' and religious language created especially favourable conditions for the routinised transfer of the epithet *Augustus* to the divine sphere. However, a monolithic view of the Phoenician-Punic world can be misleading, leading us to seek in the Phoenician East what actually appears to be characteristic of the Punic West. Moreover, more than 95% of Phoenician and Punic inscriptions dedicated to the Lord refer to the god of the Tophet, Baal Hammon, and we know that this type of sanctuary is absent (or at least not attested) in the Phoenician East. That is, the particular, regional practices of theonymy popular in pre-imperial Africa created the conditions and habits which encouraged imperial-period 'Augustalisation'. This was not permanence, but a *glocal* fitting of imperial terms into pre-existing practices.

If this hypothesis is correct, it would first explain the extremely high concentration of this usage in *Africa Proconsularis*, where approximately 80% of religious inscriptions contain the epithet *Augustus*. In contrast, the percentage tends to decrease considerably in regions further east and west: in the Tripolitanian area the rate drops to around 30%, in *Mauretania Caesariensis* to 50% and in *Mauretania Tingitana* to only 20% (Villaret 2019, 126).

Secondly, and more importantly, such possible extensive recalibration of the Punic dedicatory formulas suggests that, regardless of the 'ethnic' or 'linguistic identity' of the dedicants – hundreds of men and women of diverse origins and social standings (see the broad evidence collected in *SIRAR*) – the traditional structure of invocation was re-semanticised within a new shared ideological framework. That is, the inherited religious language of Punic dedications – particularly the invocation of a divine lordship – was retained, but filled with new imperial content. In this process, the sovereign figure of the Roman emperor, embodied by the title *Augustus*, came to replace or absorb the semantic function once fulfilled by local deities such as Baal or Tanit. The epithet *Augustus* thus acted as a translatable marker of divine authority, which could be inserted into the inherited formula to maintain the continuity of ritual language while adapting it to the transformed political and religious landscape of the Roman Empire. This interpretive shift illustrates not a passive absorption of imperial ideology, but rather a regional creative negotiation of older religious forms with new symbols of power. The widespread use of *Augustus* as an epithet in divine nomenclature in *Africa Proconsularis* should therefore be seen not as evidence of emperor worship or political flattery, but as a linguistic strategy of cultural mediation – one that allowed local communities to articulate continuity with their religious past while also aligning themselves with the broader hegemonic structures of the Roman Empire. From a linguistic and cultural perspective, the widespread use of the epithet *Augustus* in North-African religious inscriptions may be interpreted as a case of *code-switching*, a strategic alternation between cultural-linguistic codes: the old linguistic frame remained in place, but the content of authority shifted. The divine lordship once attributed to Baal was now increasingly expressed through the Roman imperial epithet *Augustus*, which had itself evolved from a personal imperial *cognomen* to a generalised marker of sacral authority. The result is a hybridised language of worship in which the invocation of divinity simultaneously gestures towards local tradition and imperial ideology by strategically embedding imperial authority within a locally intelligible and ritually familiar framework.

The complexity of similar dynamics of cultural negotiation is further illuminated by possible cases of what might be termed the 'pseudo-Africanisation' of religious onomastics, that is instances where new divine names appear to have been retroactively embedded within a local, autochthonous framework, yet articulated through the linguistic register of Roman imperial power. Two particularly striking examples are the deities GD (from the Cave of Zemama) and Bacax (from the Cave of Taya), both of whom are invoked with the epithet *Augustus* in third-century inscriptions from Numidia (Gasparini 2024; Kaabia 2025). These figures are entirely unattested outside their immediate and extremely restricted epigraphic contexts. Their emergence, which coincides chronologically with the reign of Septimius Severus (193–211 AD) – an emperor of African origin – has led some scholars to speculate that their promotion reflected a deliberate policy of imperial support for 'indigenous' cults (e.g., Cid López 1987, 136; cf. Dal Covolo and Rinaldi 1999, 187–272; Swain, Harrison and Elsner 2007, 401–502; Ando 2012, 122–46). However, a more convincing interpretation sees these cases not as top-down restorations of 'authentic' local religion, but rather as expressions of an 'antiquarian sacralisation': a culturally strategic and ideologically-charged process whereby the local magistrates of *Thibilis* and *Phua* sought

to construct or revive imagined ancestral cults within a Roman religious vocabulary (cf. McCarty 2024, 317–18, making a similar argument for ritual terminology). Much like the adoption of *Augustus* in wider divine onomastics functioned as a form of symbolic code-switching, the creation (or reactivation) of deities such as GD and Bacax may be understood as the (re-)invention of tradition under the guise of archaism. These gods are not survivals in a strict sense, but pseudo-archaic reconstructions, legitimised and sacralised through epigraphy and ritual in a way that made them appear local and ancient, while in fact serving contemporary political, religious and identity needs. In this interpretive framework, the invocation of *Augustus* alongside entirely local and otherwise unknown divine names becomes especially meaningful. It signals a double movement: on the one hand, a gesture towards deep cultural memory or putative ancestral legitimacy; on the other, the embedding of these invented identities within an imperial linguistic and ideological matrix. These onomastic choices represent a high level of discursive creativity, allowing local actors to craft religious forms that were simultaneously rooted in a localised past and legible within the Roman imperial religious universe. In this way, African epigraphy offers compelling evidence for how local agency actively reshaped the landscape of divine names through selective memory, linguistic hybridity and ritual innovation.

In addition to *Augustus*, twelve other epithets – for a total of 382 occurrences – emphasise divine sovereignty in Roman Africa and can be classified as 'power-related'. No fewer than five epithets and more than half of the attestations are found in neo-Punic: *ʔdn* (199 occurrences: <https://humanidadesdigitales.uc3m.es/s/nuevo-sirar/item/40966>), *rbt* (12: *SIRAR* 2057; 2059–62; 2067–69; 2259; 2278; 2281), *ʔwgsʔs* (2: *SIRAR* 2352–3), *rzn* (1: *SIRAR* 2253), *rznt* (1: *SIRAR* 2364). Beyond the frequent epithets of 'Lord/Lady' (*ʔdn/rbt*) traditionally used to refer to Baal and Tanit until the second century AD and the – earlier and much rarer – epithets of 'Prince/Princess' (*rzn/rznt*) (second–first centuries BC), it is important to highlight the early – though sporadic – instance of the direct adaptation of the term *Augustus* into neo-Punic (*ʔwgsʔs*), attested at Lepcis Magna (8 BC).

Greek attestations are exceedingly rare and belong to a particularly 'creative' category of texts. They include a magical amulet from Siddi Kaddou (*SIRAR* 5709) and a *defixio* from Carthage (*SIRAR* 5729), both dating to the second–third centuries AD, in which the invoked deities are referred to as κύριοι θεοί, 'Lord Gods', as well as another *defixio* from the second century AD, again from Carthage (*SIRAR* 5732), that uses the unusual designation βασιλίου, 'Royal/Imperial'. These Greek expressions reflect a distinctive linguistic and conceptual inventiveness, characteristic of the magico-religious sphere, where conventional divine epithets are often reshaped or newly coined to enhance the perceived efficacy of the ritual formula.

Alongside *Augustus*, the Latin 'power-related' epithets include *Dominus/-al/-il/-ae* (110), *Princeps* (1), *Rex* (4)/*Regina* (48) and *Decanus* (1). Excluding cases of uncertain attribution, in 71 instances the epithet *Dominus* is assigned to Saturnus, while all other deities – both male (Aesculapius, Baal, Malagbelus, Middon, Neptunus, Pluto, Silvanus) and female (Caelestis, Ceres, Isis, Panthea, Tellus, Terra, Victoria) – do not exceed three attestations each. In only one case is the term not used in an absolute sense, but instead specifies the domain of the deity: Neptunus as *Dominus undarum* from *Thugga* ('Lord of the waves': *SIRAR* 3641). Similarly, the epithet *Princeps* is used at *Lambaesis* to invoke Jupiter *Optimus Maximus* not only as *Gubernator omnium rerum* and *Rector caeli terrarumque*, but also as *Princeps deorum* (*SIRAR* 1012), while *Regina* – when not used as the traditional epithet of Juno as part of the Capitoline triad – likewise serves to elevate the deity to the role of *Regina tenebrarum* in two *defixiones* from *Hadrumentum* (*SIRAR* 5745–5746) or *Regina deum* in a dedication to Juno as *vera deum*

rectrix from *Naraggara* (SIRAR 5128). The meaning of the epithet *Decanus dei magni*, found in a *defixio* in Latin but written in Greek letters from *Hadrumetum* (SIRAR 3814), dating to the second century AD, is perhaps to be sought in Egyptian astrology. Finally, the term *Rex* was far more ideologically sensitive due to its negative connotations in Roman political culture, because of its strong association with monarchical rule. Nonetheless, one example found in *Saldae* applies to Jupiter the epithet of *maximus caelicolum rex summus tonans*, emphasising his supreme celestial authority (SIRAR 183). The term also appears in a second-century-AD *defixio* calling upon Chaos and Mercurius from Carthage and invoking the *reges demoniorum* (SIRAR 2544). This usage is consistent with traditional Roman religious formulations and does not challenge significantly established ideological norms. However, the other two instances are much more remarkable: in Beled Belli, the epithet *Rex Augustus* was applied to Saturnus (SIRAR 3045), and, in *Sivalis*, *Rex Magnus* was used for Pluto (SIRAR 5251). Both *Augustus* and *Rex*, albeit in completely different ways and proportions, appear to have lost their intrinsic ideological value, the former becoming inflated in usage, while the latter neutralizing its negative connotations.

The North-African epigraphic corpus offers an exceptional laboratory for understanding how divine onomastics could be strategically reshaped in response to shifting religious, linguistic and political frameworks within the Roman Empire. Among the most telling phenomena is the massive and consistent use of the epithet *Augustus* in religious inscriptions, an occurrence that, far from indicating widespread emperor worship, reveals instead the emergence of *Augustus* as a linguistic coefficient of sacral power. Originally an anthropophoric epithet rooted in the imperial *tria nomina*, *Augustus* in North Africa underwent a profound semantic shift: it was detached from its function as a personal *cognomen* and refunctionalised as a culturally intelligible marker of divine prestige. Its usage transcended social, ethnic, gendered, or linguistic boundaries, becoming accessible to any dedicant, an honorific no longer restricted by its imperial origins but resemanticised as a neutral and elevated title of divine authority. This remarkable linguistic transformation was not arbitrary, but was facilitated by the enduring vitality of local dedicatory formulas – particularly those of Punic origin – that traditionally invoked divine lordship. In this context, *Augustus* functioned as a translatable substitute for the native expression of divine supremacy, enabling a code-switching strategy in which the formal matrix of ritual address remained stable while its ideological content shifted. This ‘Augustalisation’ of divine epigraphy thus signals not passive acculturation, but active local agency in reconfiguring divine language to match both ancestral continuity and contemporary imperial allegiance.

Yet this dynamic did not move in one direction only. Alongside the inflationary use of *Augustus* in divine titlature, North Africa also witnessed a parallel phenomenon of ‘artificial Africanisation’ of divine names. In highly localised inscriptions (such as, for example, the mentioned *tituli* found in the Cave of Zemima and Taya referring to the deities GD and Bacax), we see the deliberate resurrection, if not invention, of gods with ostensibly archaic or indigenous identities by means of a process of ‘antiquarian sacralisation’ whereby local magistrates reimagined ancestral religious frameworks to bolster their own authority and articulate a distinctively African appeal for their Roman *urban religion* (on Roman *Antiquarianismus* see now Schwitter 2024).

The broader picture of divine epithets in North Africa further confirms the region’s exceptional capacity for creative negotiation. Power-related epithets in neo-Punic remained in use well into the second century AD, often coexisting with – and arguably smoothing the path for – the adoption of *Augustus* within the same linguistic register. The above-mentioned early and rare, but telling, adaptation of *Augustus* itself into neo-Punic (‘*wgʃʃs*’) marks a moment of extraordinary linguistic convergence between Roman

and local religious idioms. By contrast, the far less common Greek evidence – restricted to *defixiones* and magical amulets – illustrates a different register of creativity. In these ritual contexts, epithets such as κύριοι θεοί or βασιλιον were innovatively employed to amplify ritual efficacy through an experimental vocabulary. Finally, the use of Latin epithets such as *Dominus*, *Princeps* and *Rex* – though quantitatively limited – demonstrates how even ideologically sensitive terms could be absorbed into divine titlature when appropriately contextualised. The epithet *Dominus*, especially prevalent in connection with Saturnus, appears to have carried few problematic political overtones, functioning instead as a standard expression of divine authority. Likewise, *Princeps* and *Rex*, despite their ideological baggage within Roman political discourse, could be recontextualised to articulate divine rulership either in cosmic terms or in relation to specific domains.

In sum, North African divine onomastics reflects a landscape of extraordinary discursive plasticity and permeability. Whether through the semantic inflation of imperial epithets, the antiquarian reinvention of local divinities or the creative deployment of power-related titles across multiple languages, local actors across the region repeatedly demonstrated their ability to refashion the language of the divine in ways that were politically intelligent, ritually grounded and culturally resonant.

[VG]

Materialising gods

Materiality is often ignored or downplayed in studies of religion in Roman Africa, driven by the idealist frameworks brought to bear on understandings of the region (McCarty 2024, 16). Yet drawing more on materially-oriented frameworks is key to building deeper understandings of worship in the Roman Empire and moving beyond culture-historical paradigms (Graham 2021; Versluys and Woolf 2021), to recognise the ways that global power structures (including economies) articulated in distinctively *glocal* ways.

One of the distinctive features of some sanctuaries in *Africa Proconsularis* is their adoption of medium- and large-scale terracotta statuary, both as objects that could be offered in a sanctuary and as cult statues, the focal points of worship activity. Indeed, two sanctuaries excavated around the turn of the twentieth century that became the type-cases for ‘Oriental’ sanctuaries in Africa because of their design (Sebaï 2010; McCarty 2024, 320–26) – el-Kénissia and Thinissut (Figure 2) – provided rich assemblages of terracotta statuary depicting a variety of subjects, some of whose iconography seems to sit outside the repertoires of Classical art: bearded male deities on sphinx-thrones; winged, lion-headed female deities; female goddesses bedecked in jewellery atop their own sphinx-thrones. And (like most aspects of cult in imperial-period Africa), these statues are often explained as evidence of religious continuity, of Oriental, Punic, or generically ‘African’ survivals into the Roman period: seen perhaps most vividly in how these statues are displayed in the ‘Salle Punique’ of the Bardo Museum (Aounallah 2018, 66–71), despite their manufacture under the empire.

The evidence for terracotta statuary in North-African sanctuaries is varied and often lacks high-quality archaeological context: that is, these statues were almost always discovered during colonial-period, site-clearance excavations, or as chance finds. To the two sanctuaries mentioned above, we can add eight other ‘sanctuaries’ (the objects may have been in secondary context) where large-scale (>1 m tall) terracotta statues were excavated, and another five rich in medium-scale (~30 cm tall) terracotta statuettes (Table A; Figure 3).

Where excavated as assemblages, the excavations were conducted by amateur archaeologists during the colonial era (el-Kénissia, Thinissut and Bir Derbal), and sometimes not described

Table A. Sites with medium- and large-scale terracotta statuary

Site	Scale	Number of Statues	Context/Discovery	Chronology	Lamps	Main Publication
Aïn Chabrou	large	8	chance	unknown	?	Gsell 1899, 76
Bir Derbal	large	(several)	sanctuary/colonial excavation	1st c. BC–3rd c. AD	X	Carton 1918; D'Andrea 2014, 189–90
Carthage	medium	>5	secondary deposit/early excavation		secondary context	Gaukler 1899, 159–60
Curubis	large	2	chance	1st–3rd c. AD	?	Cintas 1949, 188
el-Kénissia	medium	>32	sanctuary/colonial excavation	1st c. BC–3rd c. AD	X	Carton 1903; Carton 1907; D'Andrea 2012; McCarty 2024, 354–64
Gamarth	large	>30	Roman ruins/chance	1st–3rd c. AD	?	Zehnacker 1965
Hadrumetum (Hr. Biniana)	medium	>14	colonial collection	1st c. BC–3rd c. AD	maybe? (in same collection)	Cagnat 1885, 27–29
Hammam Lif	large	>60	sanctuary(?)/chance	1st–3rd c. AD	X	Carton 1912–1913
Khanguet el-Hadjaj	large		tomb(?)/chance	2nd–3rd c. AD	X ('en nombre assez considérable')	Renault 1909, 68–76
Medjez el-Bab	large	1(?)	chance	4th c. AD	?	Gaukler 1902, 18
Pupput	large	(several)	sanctuary (secondary context?)/colonial excavation	1st–4th c. AD	X (number uncertain)	Merlin 1912
Simitthus	large	>2	sanctuary/excavation	2nd–4th c. AD	X	Khanoussi 1994, 49–50
Soliman	large	>20	chance	1st–3rd c. AD	?	Charles-Picard 1957
Thinissut	large	>19	sanctuary/colonial excavation	1st c. BC–4th c. AD	X	Merlin 1909; Merlin 1910; D'Andrea 2014, 122–32; McCarty 2024, 364–75
Thugga	large	>1	sanctuary/colonial excavation	1st c. BC–4th c. AD	X	Carton 1897, 30
Thysdrus	medium	>7	sanctuary(?)/chance + colonial excavation	1st c. BC–3rd c. CE	?	Cagnat 1909
Utica	medium	1	chance	unknown	?	Le Glay 1961, 25, no. 1

Roman imperial period, although the chronology of the excavated sanctuaries remains debated (McCarty 2024).

Scholars have generally explained the appearance of these terracottas through the two second-order categories that underpin most accounts of religion in the ancient Maghreb: cultural origin and economic class, with the two often imagined as heavily overlapping. With their iconographies and media, the statues are taken to represent the survival or persistence of indigenous or Oriental traditions of mentality or practice at odds with any 'Romanisation', or as being the downmarket substitutes commissioned by the rural poor who could not afford marble deities (Merlin 1910, 51; Le Glay 1966a, 216; Bullo and Rossignoli 1998; Dridi and Sebaï 2008, 112–13). For Alfred Merlin (1910, 54–55), such statues were evidence of 'popular religion', differentiated from the 'official' religion of the Roman state, marked as much by medium as iconographies: 'local beliefs' held by a rural population. For Marcel Le Glay (1966a, 274), such images were equally part of rural cults marked by their 'Orientalism'.

Such views are compounded by the approaches taken to studying such statues: almost exclusively from iconographic and art historical perspectives (Merlin 1910; Bullo and Rossignoli 1998; Zeghal Yazidi 2019, with the exception of Zehnacker 1965). In his account of North-African pottery that covers nearly every other type of ceramic object from Africa, including architectural

terracottas and mould-made figurines, Michel Bonifay (2004) leaves aside these larger sculptures, perhaps as 'art objects'. Silvia Bullo and Cinzia Rossignoli (1998) use the iconographies and styles to argue both for an early date of the sanctuary at Thinissut and for the persistence of Punic mentalities and traditions under a light gloss of adopting some Hellenistic elements. Of course, both iconography and style could be reprised and appropriated at later moments to add a surplus of meaning to images: this has even been seen as the defining feature of art produced under the Roman Empire (Hölscher 2004).

Three problematic ideas underlie such interpretations: first, the emphasis on culture-historical categorisation; second, a supposed class-based disjunction between a Romanised elite and stubbornly resistant rural subalterns; and third, that marble was automatically preferable to clay. The culture-historical approach has been problematised and rejected on a host of theoretical grounds that we have raised elsewhere: it imposes modern categories born of colonialist endeavours that rarely seem to have mattered to ancient worshippers; it homogenises; it dematerialises (McCarty 2016; Ardeleanu 2021, 10–12; McCarty 2024). The second two ideas can easily be problematised even with a cursory look at the material itself. A life-size terracotta statue of a cuirassed male tentatively identified as Constantine, discovered near Medjez el-Bab (Gaukler 1902, 18; Gaukler and Poinssot 1907, 161, no. 262), suggests that terracotta

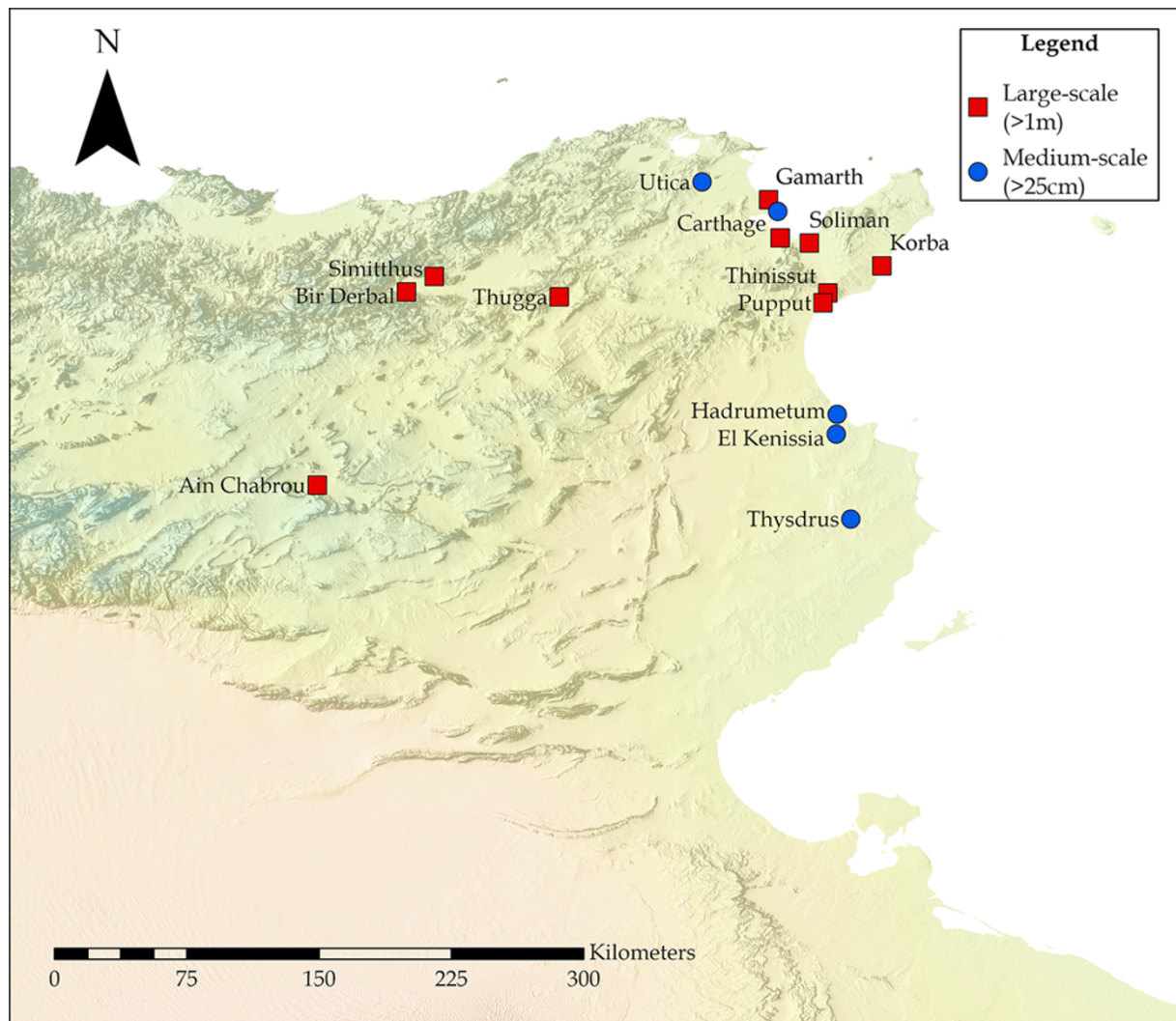


Figure 3. Distribution of terracotta statuary assemblages from Africa (M. McCarty, with basemap using data from Esri, USGS, NOAA).

statuary could be a full participant in the dynamics of honour, commemoration and imperial power – hardly opposed to any sense of ‘Romanisation’. A second, three-quarters-lifesize cuirassed figure from Ain Chabrou may also have represented an imperial figure (Gsell 1899, 76), and Theodor Kraus identified a just-under-lifesize terracotta statue from *Simitthus* as a possible imperial portrait in the guise of Hercules (Khanoussi 1994, 49). Large-scale terracottas were hardly anathema to Roman imperialism. As for the supposed ruralness of terracottas, a large assemblage of terracotta statuary comes from a late-antique deposit of cult materials at Carthage – seemingly gathered intentionally and hidden, rather than awaiting reuse (Gauckler 1899). That is, urban consumers in a metropolis could select terracotta as a medium for figured dedications just as readily as rural populations. *Pupput*, *Thysdrus* and *Hadrumetum* were also all significant cities. And more generally, rural populations of imperial-period Africa could be remarkably well informed and agile at negotiating with imperial power-brokers in epigraphic documents (Kehoe 1988), connected to luxurious cosmopolitan foodways (De Grossi Mazzorin *et al.* 2019) and consumers of other widely-circulating goods (Dossey 2010). As for being downmarket, the terracottas excavated at Gamarth and Bir Derbal were gilded, no doubt substantially increasing their cost. Terracotta statuary in sanctuaries was not necessarily poor, rural or resistant to Roman authority.

We need other explanatory frameworks to understand these objects, their users and their place in North-African history. And

so, I argue that these objects are better understood as parts of much broader chains of production, technology and meshworks of practice and consumption that developed under the Roman Empire.

The use of clay to produce cult statues seems, in general, to be part of a much wider, microregional ‘terracotta habit’. The production and consumption of figured terracottas had a visible geographic circumscription in North Africa. That is, making, dedicating and depositing terracottas was a regional phenomenon, both in temple and in funerary contexts, as Solenn de Larminat (2019; 2020) has noted. I rely heavily on the painstaking work she did to collate and catalogue over 800 terracotta statuettes from the region, even if there are some key objects and sites missing from her data set. Large numbers of terracotta figures of different scales – from almost lifesize to under 20 cm in height – were discovered in sanctuaries across the region (Table A). A single piece of a terracotta statue was also excavated in the Temple of Saturn at *Thugga* (Carton 1897, 30) and parts of a large-scale statue (perhaps a portrait of the deceased?) from a tomb at *Khanguet* (Renault 1909, 74). Statuettes appear more widely, especially in burials (Figure 3). Plastic vessels – head vases, zoomorphic vases – also have a wider distribution, not considered here. In both sanctuaries and burials, terracotta figures appear regularly primarily from *Utica* to *Thysdrus*, along the African coast and immediate interior; the key exceptions come from the sanctuaries at Bir Derbal, near *Thuburnica*; *Simitthus*, in the same region; and Ain Chabrou, near *Theveste*.

The distribution of this ‘terracotta habit’ does not seem to be a product of excavation, recognition or publication bias, although the Tunisian littoral has been the focus of many of the largest and best-published excavations. Despite large-scale excavation in the necropolis of *Sitifis* – which was published in its entirety (Guéry 1985) – and at *Thamugadi* (which was largely published in short annual notes) – no terracottas are recorded. The only figured terracotta objects known from Thamugadi are mould-made plaques and antefixes (Ballu and Cagnat 1903, 30; Le Glay 1966a, 129–30). The same is true of *Lambaesis*, where the necropolis was briefly explored (Cagnat 1893, 24), *Tiddis* (Février 1970) and *Tipasa* (Baradez 1957). In more recent, but largely unpublished, excavations in Algeria, figured terracottas seem similarly to be absent from burials. Figured objects – even fragmentary ones – were far more likely to draw the eyes of colonial archaeologists (professional and amateur) than other kinds of material, which also suggests that this absence from some sites is not merely the product of terracottas being ignored. There was a historical, regional terracotta habit in imperial-period Africa, closely connected with the littoral of modern Tunisia.

It is also worth noting that the worship practices around large-scale terracotta statues were themselves also tightly tied to terracotta objects. When found in sets, the large-scale terracottas are generally not found alongside sculpture in other media besides votive stelae: whole statue groups and sanctuaries selected this medium to the exclusion of others when figuring central deities. But beyond that, wherever these terracotta statues have been excavated in primary contexts, they were tied to specific ceramic offerings, usually of lamps. At *Simitthus*, a deposit of more than 150 lamps, collected over centuries, was found in the east-slope sanctuary that was filled with terracotta statuary (Khanoussi 1994, 44). At Bir Derbal, a host of lamps was dedicated in front of the niches that framed the terracotta statues (Carton 1918). And at Thinnissut, lamps were not only found at the bases of the statues, but even deposited inside the statue of a woman-and-child, using the production holes that were left open in its base to insert the objects (Merlin 1910, 21). While the use and deposition of lamps in African sanctuaries has often been tied solely to ‘Oriental’ gods or Punic persistence, such lychnocentric practices are actually attested in a very small number of sanctuaries, most of them Roman imperial period (McCarty 2024, 373–74). And with the exception of Sidi el-Hani (Gridel 1927), all are the sanctuaries replete with large assemblages of figural terracottas. There were specific ways of consuming terracotta lamps in ritualised practices tied to terracotta statues. Not only was there a microregional ‘terracotta habit’, there was a tighter connection of terracotta deities and terracotta lamps that went beyond merely using such objects as vernacular offerings (*pace* Mendes 2021).

While one could generally connect this zone of the ‘terracotta habit’ to the region of Carthaginian control and culture, as part of a ‘*permanence punique*’, there are three strong reasons to search for alternative explanations. First, scale and function: although small-scale terracotta statuettes and other figured objects were regularly used as sanctuary offerings and grave-goods in Punic Carthage and Cap Bon (Cherif 1997), there is no evidence either for the kinds of large-scale statues found in these imperial-period sanctuaries, or for terracotta figures serving as the focus of worship. The largest terracottas known from Carthage fall into the 40–50 cm tall range (Cherif 1997, 170).

Second, iconography: some of the terracotta statues have precedents from earlier periods from Carthage and the Punic world, especially the lion-headed goddess with *klaft* and vulture-wings from Bir Derbal and Thinnissut (Figure 4). Similar figures appear on seals and amulets from the fourth century BC (Redissi 1990), and later on *denarii* minted by Metellus Scipio in Africa on the eve of the Battle of *Thapsus*, where the figure is perhaps labelled as the

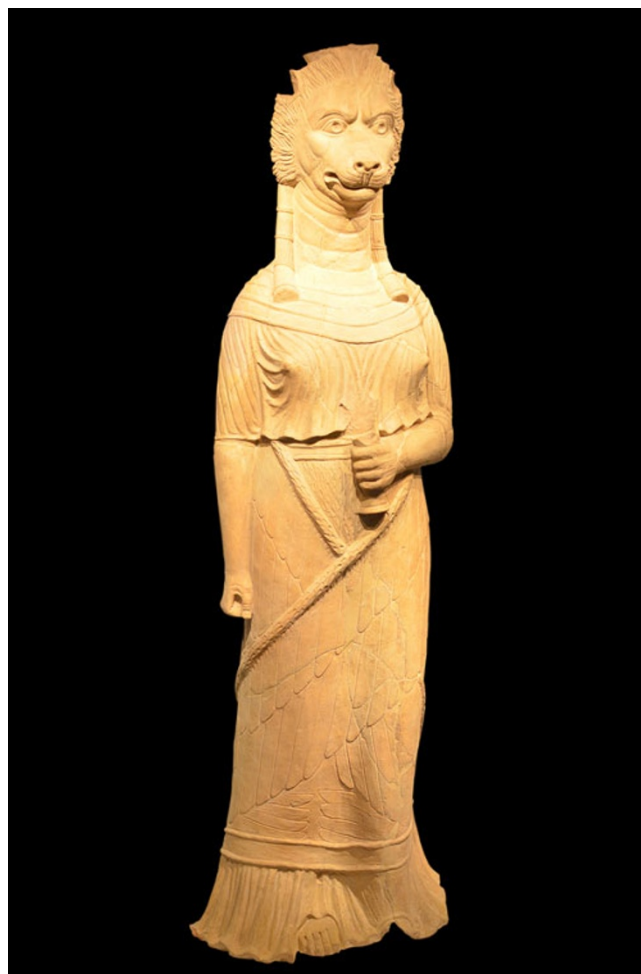


Figure 4. Statue of a lion-headed goddess. From Thinnissut. First/Second century AD. Terracotta. Musée du Bardo. Photo: Alexander van Loon, CC-BY-SA 4.0.

G(enius) T(errae) A(fricae) (RRC 460/4). Likewise, the enthroned female figures in long tunics – including those whose veils flare out behind their heads – participate in much older and more widespread iconographic traditions, generally related to Demeter (Olcese 2021). But even if some of the statues drew on these earlier iconographies, there are also adaptations. The lion-headed goddess at Thinnissut, for example, seems to hold a distinctive attribute clutched to her chest, its top broken but its bottom a flared cylinder: although difficult to identify, it is not the *ankh* or lotus held by earlier iterations of the figure. The terracotta is not a ‘replica’ of earlier versions, but an adaptation of earlier iconographic traditions. The seated women with children on their laps are rarely found in pre-imperial-period contexts in Africa; there is one example from Kerkouane (Fantar 1986, 309, no. 8). The context of examples from Carthage demonstrates that they are imperial-period in date (Villefosse and Delattre 1891, *pace* Bullo and Rossignoli 1998), though they enjoyed popularity in Sicily from the archaic period (Pedrucci 2015). And similarly, the goddess standing atop a lion from Thinnissut has no direct parallels from the pre-imperial period in Africa. In short, even if individual figure-types and iconographies had a long history, their appropriation and recombination in individual figures – and ultimately into assemblages – is a phenomenon of the imperial period. Redeploying earlier figure-types and iconography in images of gods was a means of attributing both particular qualities to the god and a sense of antiquity to a cult; the terracotta goddesses of Africa are no more ‘Punic’ than every bronze and stone Mercury in Gaul that reprises a Polykleitan pose and iconography is ‘Greek’.

Finally, there is other evidence that the 'terracotta habit' was tied to wider networks of imperial-period consumption rather than a particular cultural background. Thinissut is the only sanctuary that offers more archaeological context for the statuary, and here the catalogued lamps also point to a regionalised material *koiné*. Several of the lamps bear stamps, and these stamps are generally from workshops whose products are heavily concentrated along Cap Bon and the coast of *Byzacena*, even if they travel more widely.¹ That is, other terracotta objects in the sanctuary suggest that there was a *koiné* of product distribution and consumption in the second–third centuries AD that roughly overlaps with the use of figurines in sanctuaries and tombs, rather than some pre-existing cultural background.

Instead of Punic persistence, this geography of terracotta assemblages can be linked to the patterns of ceramic production, the technical competencies and the infrastructure of imperial-period Africa than to any form of survival. The lack of detailed technical analysis of the large-scale terracotta statues makes drawing this connection with certainty impossible; it does, however, point to the necessity to conduct new work on these statues with a focus on their technical (rather than iconographic) qualities, a project which is currently under proposal.

In the most general terms, the growing number and spread of terracottas in sanctuaries can be tied to the enormous boom in ceramic production and consumption across Africa in the imperial period (Dossey 2010): a phenomenon itself tied to changing patterns of landholding, investment and connection to Mediterranean-wide markets. In other words, this was a phenomenon deeply tied to empire – but one equally grounded both in regional geologies and pre-Roman traditions of production. The number of excavated kilns and workshops for ceramic production – especially of amphorae – continues to grow for Punic, imperial-period, and late-antique Tunisia, gradually filling in the still-lacunose picture of ceramic production in the region (Bonifay 2004; Ben Moussa 2007; Chelbi 2010). The vast majority of workshops seem to have specialised in particular kinds of products, given the range of both material (fabric) and technical (potting/firing) demands of making slipped tablewares, cookwares/amphorae/storage vessels (Bonifay 2004), or mould-made objects (Figure 5). Indeed, for the imperial period in particular, one of the oft-noted truisms is that ARS could be produced in inland villas, while amphorae were (almost) always made close to the coasts: a marked geographic division of production tied to the particular patterns of trade, distribution and specialisation in the empire. This pattern, of course, is not without exceptions, especially in smaller workshops that provisioned more local or regional markets (Bonifay 2022). At the same time, excavated kilns from Roman Africa show evidence of specialisation as either amphora/coarseware or ARS kilns. Still, this was not always the case. At Carthage, Gauckler excavated a series of Hellenistic kilns and a workshop that seemed to make everything from storage vessels, to tablewares decorated with appliques, whose moulds were excavated, to figurines: an unusually broad spectrum of technically diverse wares (Gauckler 1915, 512–16). Nevertheless, specialised production seems to have been the norm, even in the pre-imperial period. At Kerkouane, for example, part of the city's major sanctuary complex was given over to producing small, mould-made statuette offerings (Fantar 1986, 155–60, 177–78). This is the only evidence to date in Africa, though, for craft production happening within a sanctuary, and such close connection of coroplastic-making to temple spaces is also rare in the wider Mediterranean.²

If this general uptick in ceramic production, especially for amphorae along the coast, provided the baseline infrastructure for the terracotta boom and the statues found in imperial-period sanctuaries, the kinds of skills and competencies necessary for making

large-scale terracotta statues stretches into a host of adjacent industries as well. Neither regional ceramic consumption patterns, nor the production boom alone, can wholly explain the popularity of large-scale ceramic statues.

The process and skill involved in making terracotta statuary differed substantially between large-scale, hand-made statuary and smaller-scale, mould-made figurines, suggesting the probability of different craftspeople, even when iconographies might be repeated. For mould-made objects, the crafting skill generally lay in making the mould, preparing the clay and firing. The latter two skills were shared with potters creating other kinds of objects, and explains why the production of mould-made statuettes was often a small industry set adjacent to larger pottery industries across the ancient Mediterranean, which might provide the infrastructure of levigation tanks and kilns (Muller 2014). The actual moulding of terracotta statuettes and lamps – activities that were linked by their shared reliance on moulds and sometimes attested in the same workshop space (e.g., the 'Commercial Building' in the Athenian Agora: Handler 2012) – might take place in small spaces, using relatively unskilled labour (Muller 2014; 2018, 159); children are even attested working in a late-antique, Egyptian lamp-moulding shop (Dzierzykraj-Rogalski and Grzeszyk 1991). In Africa, there is evidence for lamp- and figurine-making connected to ARS production sites in general, but no evidence for the precise relationship between spaces and personnel where these activities took place. The connection between mould-made products and amphorae is much rarer, but can be seen at Majoura (near *Capsa*), where wasters from amphorae, cookwares and lamps were all found together (Nasr and Capelli 2018). This site may be the exception that proves the rule.

The production of larger-scale terracottas, made by hand, demanded a much more specialised set of craft skills. In general, large-scale, hollow terracotta statuary was made in pieces with a range of techniques: the main trunk sections were often created by coiling to allow for a hollow body, with some parts pushed out from the inside to give contours; then clay for surface details and relief elements – drapery, arms, heads, etc. (sometimes even made by moulding) – added; and finally, the surface finished for textures and patterns (Jeammet 2003). Verification of the methods used to create the African examples in new analysis will allow a more detailed picture of the variety of production steps (and their potential variability across objects/sites/time), but for now this seems the most likely process, at least for the Thinissut and Gamarth assemblages. Both of these have a number of large holes pierced in the sides/back of figures, of varying shapes; while these have variously been interpreted as vent holes and ways of lightening the statues (Merlin 1910, 8; Zehnacker 1965), at least some were most probably also used as finishing holes, to allow the sculptor to insert hands/tools into the trunk for manipulating the shape and contours by pressing outwards from inside the hollow trunk, or to attach separately-made parts (Jeammet 2003). In other words, the production of these larger scale images would have been a very different affair from the small-scale, moulded terracottas, requiring different techniques (coiling), the skill to do fine sculptural finishing work in the clay and to attach elements. Although coil-making could be connected to local ('Libyan' or 'African') traditions of hand-made pottery produced in the imperial period (especially in *Byzacena*: Morel 1998), both the fine fabric and skilled kiln-firing distinguish the statuary from this tradition (Bonifay 2004, 75–76). The finishing sculpting skills may well have overlapped with those of artists working to produce metal (bronze) sculpture; the gilding found on the Bir Derbal statues may also speak to close connections with metalworkers, both for the gold itself and for application of the gilding (which, in antiquity, could be attached to bronze and terracotta using similar binding agents; mercury-gilding metals was far

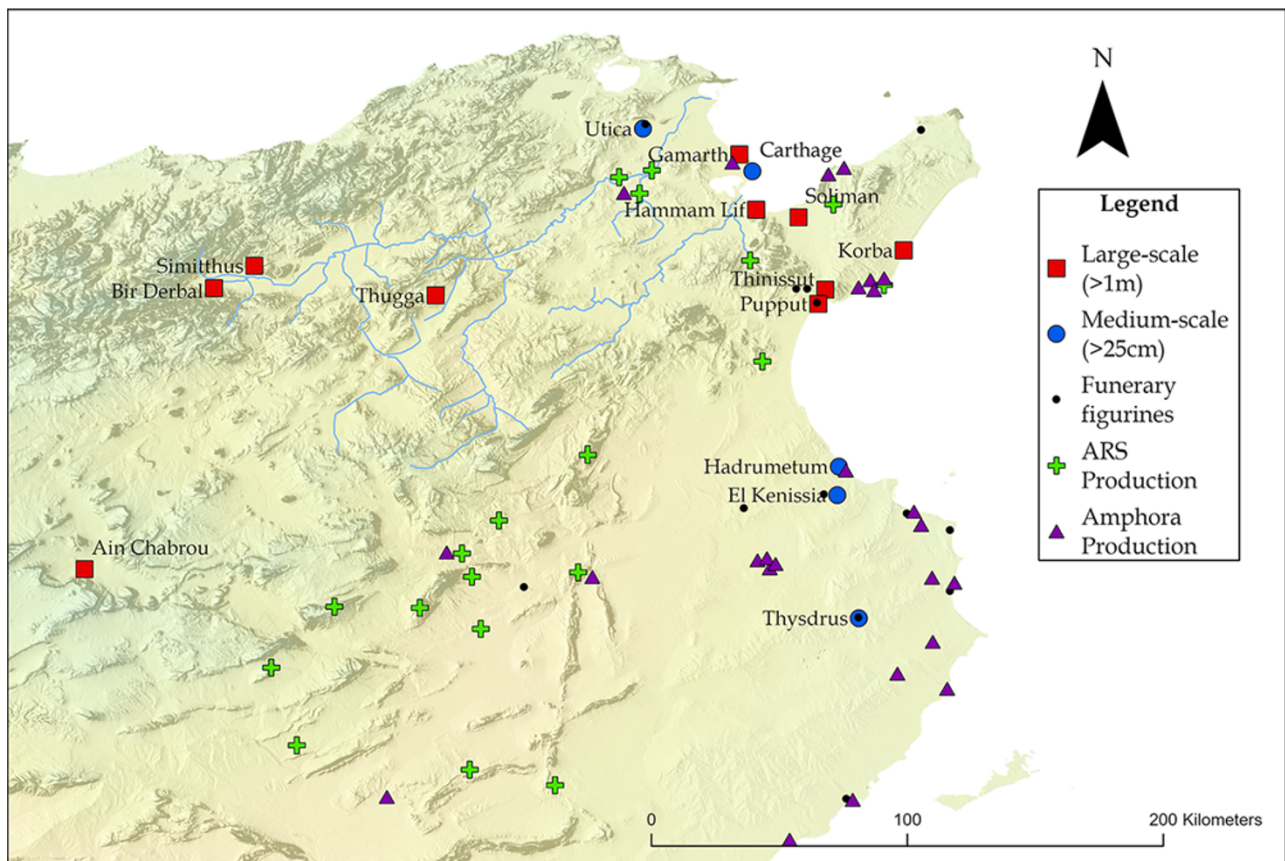


Figure 5. Terracotta statuary assemblages plotted against known ARS/amphora production sites (M. McCarty, with basemap using data from Esri, USGS, NOAA).

rarer as a practice, reserved for the most deluxe objects: Darque-Ceretti *et al.* 2013). That is, different craft experts were needed from those who produced either mould-made terracotta objects or ceramic vessels.

Even the finishing and firing process of some of the terracotta statues distinguished them from other ceramic vessel production. The enthroned deity from Thinnissut, for example, is coated in a red slip that recalls those used on ARS tablewares: evidence for similar material preparation that might be linkable to particular regional workshops with scientific analysis, but for the moment simply confirms that the makers of the statue had access to the kinds of levigation infrastructure used in making ARS. This may hint at ties to ARS production. On the other hand, the firing must have occurred under different conditions from ARS wares. In ARS kilns, the fire box vented directly into the furnace; the ceramics being fired were protected from the smoke and fire by being loaded into *saggars*, stackable terracotta boxes that are routinely found at ARS production sites. The larger amphora kilns, used without *saggars* (but perhaps with ceramic spacers when firing cookwares), may have been necessary for firing such large-scale objects. Still, with both ARS and amphora kilns connecting the firebox to the kiln interior via ceramic floors, a slipped object like the deity from Thinnissut would probably have needed a stand to prevent it sitting directly on the grate, and protection from the smoke and ash rising through the kiln that would have altered the slip – perhaps even a custom-made *saggar*, or an alternative system for venting the kiln. In other words, finishing and firing these statues drew on pyrotechnical infrastructure and expertise from multiple industries, and cannot be tied to just one.

A graffito scratched in the back of the statue of the goddess atop a lion from Thinnissut may also hint at how specialist production was sought for the statues in the sanctuary. The interpretation of

the graffito is not certain, but Raimondo Zucca (2005) has proposed seeing it not as a votive dedication, but rather as a craftsman's signature and location: *Saturninus P(ublii) fil(ius) Phae[radi]tanus Maius*. Although there was a host of pottery-producing areas closer to the Thinnissut sanctuary, and such geographically proximate workshops may have provided other objects dedicated there (like the lamps), the commissioner of the goddess-statue went further away to obtain his dedication. And while Pheradi Maius became an important ARS C/D production site in late antiquity, attested in field survey and kiln excavation (Ben Moussa 2007, 108–31), there is possible evidence for earlier ARS A and cookware production (Hasenzagl and Capelli 2019). The site may have had both the craft infrastructure, developed over the course of the imperial period, and a specialist sculptor who was sought to provide at least one of the large-scale images at Thinnissut.

In short, the production and use of large-scale terracotta statues, with an especially heavy concentration from Carthage to *Byzacena*, was part of a larger 'terracotta habit' of consumption and the boom in ceramic production that developed in this region in the imperial period, rather than the result of preexisting cultural traditions. Still, linking the statues to any one of the specialised ceramic-making industries – or even solely to ceramic-making itself – is impossible. Rather, the statues demanded a range of complementary technical competences and infrastructure connected to a variety of industries. The statues emerged from this wider industrial landscape, rather than from a single type of craft production.

The wider microregional consumptive 'terracotta habit' and proximity to other ceramics and metalworking industries each offer partial explanations for the choice of terracotta statues and their use, but neither offers a full explanation for the choices and practices that led to these objects becoming foci of worship in imperial-period sanctuaries. How and why did terracotta become

the medium of choice, especially in sanctuaries like Thinissut, Bir Derbal and *Simitthus* that also hosted distinctive lychnocentric rites?

And here, the specific portfolios and concerns of the deities worshipped in these spaces may have been entangled with the medium chosen to materialise these gods for their worshippers. The vast majority of the terracotta assemblages feature statues of figures iconographically related to agriculture, childhood and human reproduction. Without wanting to restore the vague and homogenising notions of 'fertility cults' born of nineteenth-century anthropology that recent works have compellingly rejected (e.g., Carroll 2019), it is worth noting that metaphors and practices linking agricultural and personal fertility were a regular feature of the Graeco-Roman world that could be mobilised in cult contexts (e.g., Ovid, *Fasti* 4.633–34; Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.12.20–21. Cf. DiLuzio 2016, 47–49, 111–13). De Larminat (2019, 330) notes that enthroned goddesses are the second most common ceramic figure-types in sanctuaries (after the 'human with offering' category); although she names the figures 'Tanit', they also draw on the iconographies of Demeter/Ceres and Juno, with *polos*, piglet (at *Curubis*) and veil. Indeed, the sanctuary assemblages from Soliman, *Thysdrus* and *Pupput* focus on enthroned women, while those from *Curubis* and Gamarth may focus on Pluto, Ceres and Proserpina, with Pluto in Africa often cast as a deity of agricultural fertility (Cadotte 2007, 341). Images of children are the next most common type in de Larminat's sanctuary assemblages. To these, we might add at least some of her 'worshipper' figures, as well as all the *lunula*-wearing figures she identifies as the Phrygian moon-goddess Men (an identification based wholly on homogenising Orientalism), given that the *lunula* is marked in North-African art as an attribute of young girls, and perhaps even the dove statuettes, since these birds also serve as a regional marker of girlhood (McCarty 2024, 233–43). The sanctuaries at Thinissut and el-Kénissia were tied to *tophet*-like rites that revolved around children, and at Thinissut, the seated, nursing deity was a clear locus of ritualised activity and lamp-dedication. Even the sanctuary at *Simitthus*, where a figure in the guise of Hercules is the best-preserved terracotta statue, seems to have been concerned with children, based on fragments of a baby's leg in terracotta (Khanoussi 1994, 50, no. 3). At Aïn Chabrou, the set of deities and iconographies is even more diverse than in the Thinissut assemblage, but includes an enthroned woman with breast bared, an enthroned Ceres-like figure and two ithyphallic males, perhaps tied to fertility like the marble, ithyphallic Priapus from Aïn Djelloula who holds a tunic full of agricultural wealth (Foucher 1956). De Larminat (2020) also notes that terracotta figurines from tombs are almost exclusively connected to children's burials. The ceramic figures of imperial-period Africa, and especially the terracotta gods, are closely linked to a specific set of concerns and cults tied to terrestrial fertility, reproduction and childhood.

Here, the medium may well be part of the message, as materials were incorporated into semiotic practices of meaning-making. Both medical texts and popular metaphors in the Roman Mediterranean speak of the physical and moral mouldability of children (Holman 1997), comparing their bodies to clay. Galen (*De Semine* 2.5.29–32), for example, speaks of an embryo as clay being shaped by a moulder in the womb. The preference for terracotta offerings around reproduction is also not a materialised metaphor confined to Africa; lifesize votives of children made from terracotta are found in Italy and Britain, though they are more often represented as swaddled and perhaps related to a distinctive phase in a baby's life-course. In Hellenistic Italian sanctuaries, such figures are even linked to a similar set of deities as appear in these African clay sanctuaries: besides nursing goddesses and Ceres/Juno, Minerva, Apollo and Aesculapius seem to be major deities (Graham 2013). From the Hippocratics on, the uterus could be compared to a

clay pot: perhaps a metaphor expanded in the material of these hollow nursing figures, played upon further by the placement of lamps within the goddess at Thinissut, and visible elsewhere in ritualised practices related to childbirth in the Roman world. After all, children's burials regularly played on the metaphorical slip-page between tomb and womb as infant bodies were interred in modified clay vessels, especially amphorae (Graham 2016).

Admittedly, the direct evidence for these child-as-clay and mother-as-pot metaphors comes from literary and practical traditions found outside of North Africa. And, as in all parts of the wider Roman world, imaginations of corporeality and regimes of bodily care in Africa sat along a spectrum between cosmopolitanism and localism (for example, Thébert 2003 on baths; Benseddik 2010 on healing cults) – much like the religious practices examined throughout this article. Still, there is some evidence for the presence of these metaphors in Africa. After all, cosmopolitan medical traditions and ideals circulated among the physicians attested epigraphically in the region (Gummerus 1932), and by the fourth century AD, Carthage was a (if not the) major centre of Hippocratic training (Sabbah 1998): a situation that is unlikely to have emerged overnight. More directly, the use of clay vessels for burying infants is widely attested across North Africa in both pre-Roman and imperial-period Africa; these kinds of material metaphors were widespread and deeply engrained in popular imagination.

In other words, the specific set of concerns around reproduction and children that worshippers brought to these sanctuaries, perhaps the portfolios attributed to the deities worshipped there, shaped the choice of materials to fashion gods, votaries and votives. It was not the 'Africanness' of these gods or the poverty of their worshippers, but rather – in a much more cosmopolitan manner – that clay and vessel were appropriate for matters related to children and childbirth.

Reducing worship at Thinissut, Bir Derbal, or any of these sanctuaries to a mere cultural phenomenon, to persistent Oriental or African mentalities, ignores the plurality of the entanglements objects like these terracotta statues had in much wider sets of productive, consumptive, ritual and conceptual chains. It was not that earlier traditions and practices were wholly meaningless here. In one way, many of the statues reprise, appropriate and adapt earlier and distinctive regional iconographies: claims of antiquity, and – with the lion-headed figures – a marked strangeness and differentiation from other statuary gods. At the same time, the use of figured terracottas ties worship practices at these sanctuaries to a wider regional pattern of consumption, a 'terracotta habit' that knits together tombs, temples and workshops primarily in coastal *Byzacena*. These practices depended on the ceramic industries that grew up in this region, both for raw materials and infrastructure: industries that were part-and-parcel of an imperial export economy and economic boom. The terracotta habit cannot be excised from the economies and infrastructure of the Roman Empire as cultural survival or persistence. But even so, the distinctive large-scale terracottas that dominated certain African sanctuaries were not only enmeshed in the labour, technology and economy of empire, but in a host of metaphors and discourses around materiality and the immediate needs, hopes and concerns of worshippers. Understanding religion in Roman Africa requires understanding the full array of such entanglements and relationships, the interplay between global and *glocal*.

[MM]

Housing gods

Sanctuaries, too, are often interpreted via cultural (or accultural) labels that possibly obscure more than they reveal. A highly debated and historiographically significant typology in scholarly

Table B. Main temples associated with the presumed 'African' and 'Romano-African' typology

Temple	Foundation	Main Publication
Ammaedara (Saturn)	198–208	Le Glay 1961, 323–24; McCarty 2024, 347–50
Bulla Regia (Apollo)	Second half first century (?)	Merlin 1908; Bonzano 2019, 210–14
el-Kénissia (phase 2, Saturn?)	Late first–second century (?)	Carton 1906; D'Andrea 2014, 98–109
Hippo Regius (Saturn?)	?	Le Glay 1961, 431–34; D'Andrea 2014, 269–70
Sufetula ('temple à cour')	Second–third century	Bonzano 2019, 224–25
Thamugadi (Saturn)	Second century	Le Glay 1966b, 126–29; McCarty 2024, 342–46
Thinissut (phase 2, Saturn?)	Late first–second century (?)	Merlin 1910; D'Andrea 2014, 269–70
Thuburbo Maius (Ceres? Saturn?)	Last quarter of the second century (?)	Le Glay 1961, 113–15; Lézine 1968, 24–27
Thuburnica (Saturn)	Late first–second century	Carton 1907; D'Andrea 2014, 184–85; McCarty 2024, 351–53
Thubursicu Numidarum (Saturn)	Last quarter of the second century	Le Glay 1961, 366–67
Thugga (Concordia, Frugifer, Liber Pater, Neptune)	First half second century	Saint-Amans 2004, 222–26, 287–348; Aounallah and Golvin 2016, 477–564
Thugga (Fortuna, Venus Concordia and Mercury)	First half second century	Aounallah and Golvin 2018, 372–89
Thugga (Mercury)	Last quarter of the second century	Saint-Amans 2004, 307–12
Thugga (Saturn)	Late second–third century	Carton 1897; Le Glay 1966b, 191, 207–12; D'Andrea 2014, 157–68
Thugga (Tellus)	261	Aounallah and Golvin 2018, 565–87

discourse is that of the so-called 'African' or 'Romano-African' temples (Charles-Picard 1954, 152–64; Lézine 1959; Le Glay 1966a, 275–78; Pensabene 1990; Brouquier-Reddé 1992, 228–31; Saint-Amans 2004, 222–36; Ritter 2006, 555–56; D'Andrea 2014, 309–10; 2017a; 2018a; Bonzano 2019; McCarty 2024, 320–83). These sacred spaces are characterised by a longitudinally developed tripartite courtyard that opens, on its unporticoed side, onto one or more rooms, generally three (Table B; Figures 6–7). In most cases, these rooms protrude from the portico and may be elevated (as in the 'Romano-African' type) or not (as in the 'African' type) on a podium, which in some cases supports the entire structure. They are generally interpreted as *cellae*. However, especially in the case of multiple rooms, it would be more appropriate to avoid the interpretation as *cellae*, as their exact function sometimes remains uncertain. The Antonine temple of Mercury at Thugga, for example, possesses three such rooms, but the dedicatory inscription explicitly speaks of two *cellae* (DFH 34).

The earliest attestations of this assumed architectural type date to the late first century AD, though its widespread adoption occurred in the following century, and especially in the first half of the third century. Marcel Le Glay (1966a) associates these sanctuaries with the cult of Saturn and situates them within a culturally characterised evolutionary three-step framework. The first step would consist of a 'Semitic' type proposed by Alexandre Lézine (1959), later named 'pseudo-African' and understood within a framework of resistance to Hellenism. These 'Semitic' temples were open-air sanctuaries featuring a porticoed courtyard with a central *betyl*. However, the only possible evidence of this type is at *Cirta* (Berthier and Charlier 1955, 221–30; D'Andrea 2014, 271–74) – but even this is hypothetical. The second step of this evolutionary process would be the 'African' temples (Figure 6; *Hippo Regius*, *Thinissut*, *Thugga* and *Thuburbo Maius*; maybe *el-Kénissia* during the first half of the second century AD; D'Andrea 2014, 100–101); the third the 'Romano-African' ones (Figure 7; *Ammaedara*, *Cuicul*, *Thamugadi*, *Thubursicu Numidarum* and *Thuburnica*). Some examples of the presumed typology have also been identified in Tripolitania (Pensabene 1990; Bonzano

2019). The 'Romano-African' temples incorporate an unmistakably Italic architectural feature: elevation on a podium. As argued by Johannes Eingartner (2005), the *aedes* on a podium, either inscribed within a porticoed courtyard or positioned at its rear, attested in North Africa from the first century AD, undoubtedly has Italic origin. So, it makes sense that they served as a source of inspiration for the application of similar architectural solutions in the sanctuaries under examination. Whereas Gilbert Charles-Picard (1954) associated the 'African' type with Roman culture, viewing it as a fundamental break from Punic tradition, Le Glay argues that its origins lie in a Semitic tradition, later acquiring architectural elements from the Roman world. The predominant orientation of these sanctuaries along an east–west axis – more specifically, northwest–southeast – seems to fit into a local tradition and, more generally, a Phoenician and Punic tradition (Fantar 1986, 198–214; Perra 1998; D'Andrea 2017b), while the north–south orientation of the temple at *Thuburnica* frequently occurs in the Italic tradition. Once again, however, rather than being connected to ethno-cultural 'norms', the orientation of these temples should be considered in relation to the city planning and local topography. From the second century AD, both typologies exhibit structural and decorative elements – bases, columns, capitals and entablatures – that are characteristic of Roman architectural tradition (Pensabene 1990; Saint-Amans 2004, 228).

This interpretation has been questioned for several reasons. First, it does not appear possible to establish a definitive architectural typology, as the sacred places in question merely exhibit recurring elements that are variously combined rather than forming a consistent structural pattern (Rossignoli 1994, 588–89; D'Andrea 2014, 309; Bonzano 2019, 227). The same variety can be seen in the location of these sanctuaries, which are generally located in urban centres (in central or relatively peripheral areas), but also in rural areas, as in the case of *Thinissut*. In this regard, however, it should be noted that it is hard to apply a rigid dichotomy between urban and rural (or intermediate forms such as peri-urban and suburban) in second–third-century Roman Africa, where the urban phenomenon took different forms depending

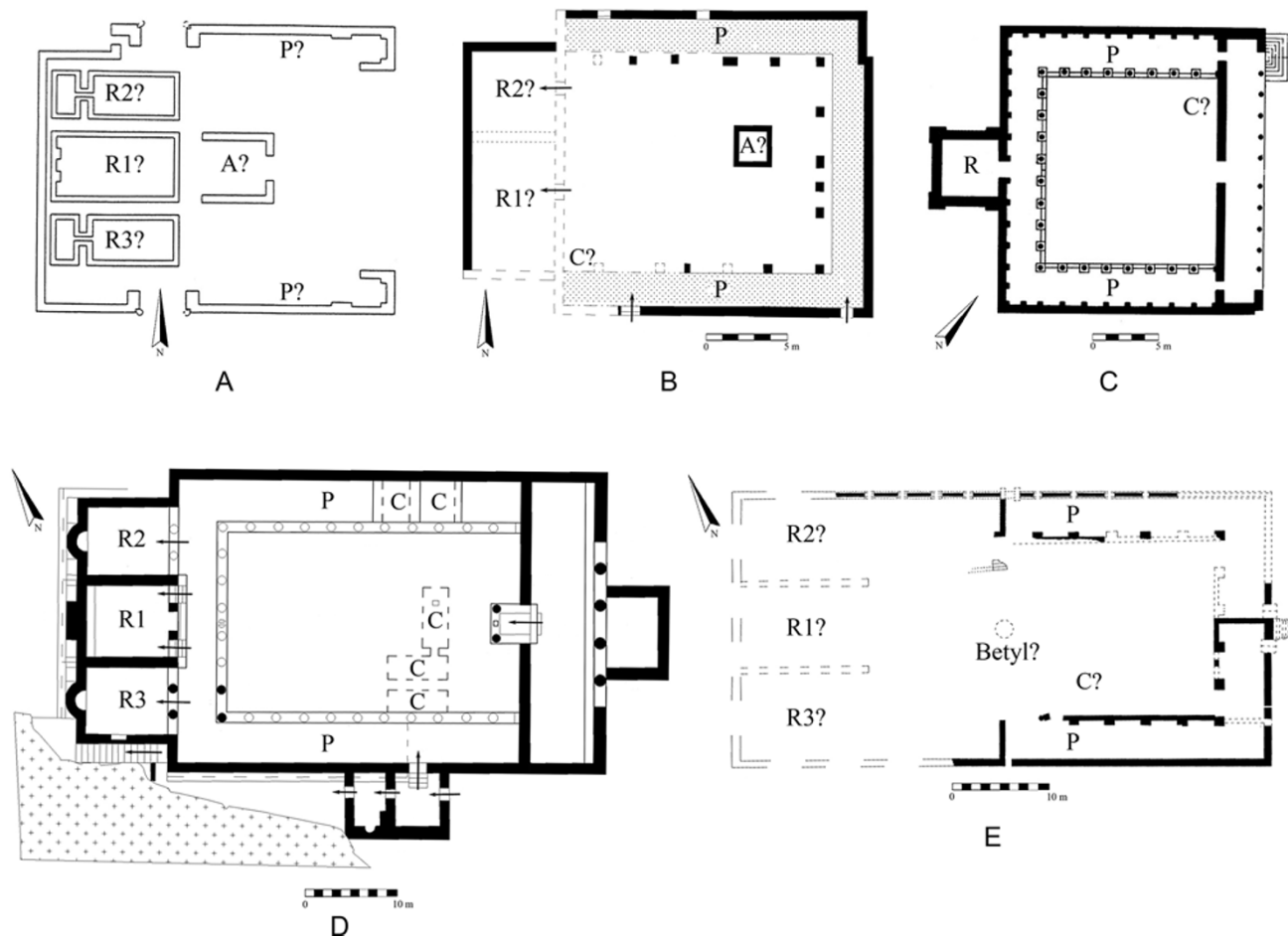


Figure 6. 'African' temples. A: *Hippo Regius* (B. D'Andrea, after Rossignoli 1994, 568, figure. 4). B: Thinissut, hypothetical reconstruction of the temple in phase 2 (see D'Andrea 2014, 121–30; B. D'Andrea, after Merlin 1910, pl. I). C: *Thuburbo Maius* (B. D'Andrea, after Lézine 1968, figure. 6). D: *Thugga* (B. D'Andrea, after Carton 1897, 369, figure. 1; Poinssot 1955, 33, figure. 1). E: el-Kénissia, hypothetical reconstruction of the temple in phase 2 (see D'Andrea 2014, 97–109; B. D'Andrea, after Carton 1906, pl. I). Caption: A, Altar; C, Cistern; P, Portico; R, Room (usually interpreted as *cellae*). The dotted structures are hypothetical reconstruction proposals.

on the (micro)regions considered (e.g., Hobson 2019; Scheduling 2020). Both the location and orientation of these sanctuaries were undoubtedly influenced by the settlement and topographical characteristics of the sites and micro-regions where they were established. Second, the supposed typology is not exclusively associated with the cult of Saturn; rather, it encompasses sanctuaries dedicated to other deities, as occurs in *Bulla Regia*, *Thugga* and probably *Sufetula* (Table B; Pensabene 1990; Brouquier-Reddé 1992, 229–31; Saint-Amans 2004; Bonzano 2019; for *Thugga*, see also Ritter 2006). Furthermore, some Saturnine temples included by Le Glay within this type (*Hippo Regius*, *Thuburbo Maius*, *Thuburnica* and *Thubursicu Numidarum*) should be excluded due to the lack of sufficient data regarding their architectural complexes and/or their actual association with the cult of Saturn. Third, the alleged Semitic origin of these temples has been contested, given the non-existence of a monolithic 'Semitic world', which is itself a product of a Western, Orientalist and homogenising perspective that should be abandoned. Additionally, as argued by Meriem Sebaï (2010), no Levantine typology corresponding to the one proposed by Lézine can be identified (see also Vella 1998).

The evolutionary framework hypothesised in the transition from the 'African' to the 'Roman-African' typology is in fact inapplicable, as they are located in distinct sites and regions. Certain elements, as we have seen, have cultural and religious roots in Phoenician-Punic traditions (such as the betyl cult and, maybe, temple orientation) and Italic-Roman traditions (such as elevation on a podium). Others, such as the presence of porticoed

courtyards and one or more *cellae* in religious contexts, are attested both in the Levantine (Pensabene 1990) and Phoenician worlds (D'Andrea 2017b; Chiarenza 2019) as well as in the Classical tradition (De Vincenzo 2013, 209–82). Yet others, such as the adoption of the peristyle in both public and private architecture, were a pan-Mediterranean phenomenon from the Hellenistic period onwards.³ Moreover, as argued by Stefan Ritter (2006), a clear distinction between the Italic and African typology is often difficult to make, given that they share several structural and decorative elements.

In light of this, it is evident that, alongside the deconstruction of these typologies, it is necessary to abandon the ethnocultural labels that have accompanied them and that have unduly centralised and polarised the debate around the binary concepts of 'old/new = Libyan (or Punic)/Roman', 'persistence = resistance' and 'innovation = Romanisation' (Ritter 2006; Ardeleanu 2021, 10–12; McCarty 2024, 322–23). These interpretations often constitute overgeneralisations based on modern mental frameworks that seek to categorise, schematise and 'nationalise' highly diverse phenomena, which in second–third century AD North Africa were shaped by the interaction between local and micro-regional dynamics and Mediterranean networks. This is further compounded by the fragile documentary basis upon which these theoretical constructs – mere houses of cards – have been built, including site plans, chronologies, and interpretations that frequently do not withstand re-examination of the evidence and new archaeological research.

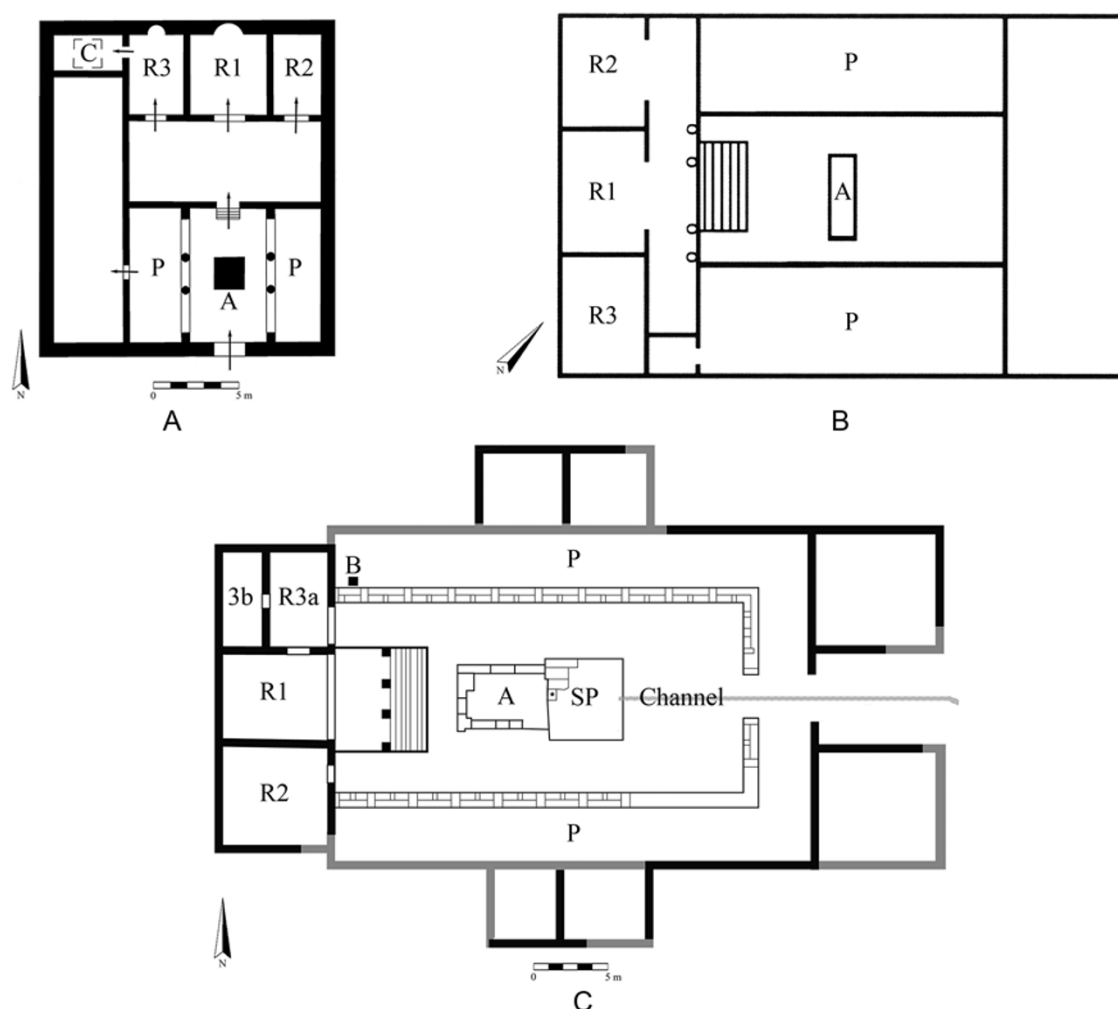


Figure 7. ‘Roman-african’ temples. A: *Thuburnica*, hypothetical reconstruction of the temple (see D’Andrea 2014, 183–88; B. D’Andrea, after Carton 1907; Euzennat and Hallier 1986, 77, 3c). B: *Ammaedara* (see McCarty 2024, 347–50; M. McCarty, after Le Glay 1961, 326, figure. 6). C: *Thamugadi* (see McCarty 2024, 342–46; M. McCarty, after Le Glay 1966b, 127, figure. 4; the light grey walls are hypothetical reconstruction proposals). Caption: A, Altar; B, Base; C, Cistern; P, Portico; R, Room (usually interpreted as *cellae*); SP, Sacrificial Platform.

Therefore, this deconstruction must be accompanied by a reconstruction that starts from the archaeological contexts, aiming to understand the functional, religious, economic and social factors that may have influenced the choice of specific architectural solutions within the broader framework of an imperial-era ‘global market’. This market offered a wide range of options that, rather than being dictated primarily by ethnocultural criteria – though these may have played a role, were more often shaped by practical needs and the stylistic tastes of a *glocal elite* and the craftspeople they employed. This dual perspective – local yet situated within a global network that facilitated the extensive circulation of people, ideas and fashions – provides the framework within which the study of these religious contexts should be situated.

In religious contexts such as those under consideration, the organisation of space and functional logistics largely correspond to ritual requirements, especially in the changing contexts of empire (cf. McCarty forthcoming). The courtyards of these sacred spaces were quite large (ranging between 300 and 900 m²)⁴ and well suited to the needs of a cult centred on animal sacrifice. The key place of the courtyard in these ritual performances is attested by the images and inscriptions on votive stelae dedicated to Saturn (D’Andrea 2018b; 2020a; McCarty 2024; see *infra*), as well as by the prominence and monumental nature of the altars, which were often positioned at the centre of the courtyard and aligned with the entrance to the *cella* – the central one when there were three, as

seen in the examples of *Ammaedara*, *Thamugadi*, *Thuburnica* and, probably, *Hippo Regius* and *Thinissut*.

The case of *Thamugadi* is particularly illustrative: at the foot of the altar, there was an area featuring a functional setup for tethering animals with a rope (Le Glay 1966b, 126–28; McCarty 2024, 342–46). It was connected to a small channel, which probably served to drain water used for cleansing the space after sacrifices. The *chaîne opératoire* of sacrifice required large, open-air spaces to accommodate the various actions involved, including the transport of live animals, their slaughter and butchering (with all the associated challenges, such as sanitation and odours), the preparation and cooking of the meat, the offering to the deities and human consumption by priests and worshippers. The fundamental role of water in these practices is demonstrated by the presence of cisterns, such as those found at el-Kénissia, *Thinissut*, *Thuburbo Maius*, *Thugga* and *Thuburnica* (although the contemporaneity with the imperial-era temple remains doubtful for some of them; D’Andrea 2014, 101, 124–27, 142–43, 158–41, 184–85).

Regarding the human consumption of sacrificial meat, there is a notable lack of evidence related to kitchens and ritual banquets in these sacred spaces. However, this absence may be partially due to the lack of systematic excavations and to the absence of immovable and non-perishable material traces associated with these activities (McCarty *et al.* 2025). This raises the issue of the audience that witnessed and participated in these sacrificial practices. In this regard,

it is important to distinguish between private rites, which were numerically predominant in a votive cult such as that of Saturn, and public rites, which are nonetheless attested by inscriptions. In the case of private rites, it is likely that small, predominantly familial, groups visited the temple either spontaneously or on specific dates, leading to a sequence of private sacrificial acts, presumably conducted under the supervision of priests. In fact, *sacerdotes* were particularly numerous in the cult of Saturn, although various functions have been proposed for this title (Le Glay 1966a, 359–400; McCarty 2024, 212–25). Public, communal rites may have involved much larger numbers of worshippers, and the spacious courtyards probably accommodated this need. In this regard, two factors must be considered: on the one hand, the general population increase during the imperial period; and on the other, the greater economic resources available both to those who participated in these rites and to their promoters. It is plausible that the designated space for the audience was the portico, which, being covered and adorned with various decorative and cultic installations, provided a suitable setting for collective ritual observance. At *Thamugadi*, for example, a base probably used to support a statue that has been identified at the end of the northern corridor of the portico (Figure 7; see Le Glay 1966b, 127). Furthermore, the role of the portico's roof in shielding the public from the sun should not be underestimated, given the climatic conditions of the region.

Beyond their functional purpose, the areas of these temples frequented by the audience also served scenographic criteria, designed to stage the sacrificial *pièce* in the most effective way possible. The entrance, typically located on the short side – usually the eastern side – aligned with both the altar and the (principal) *cella* of the temple, provided an ideal theatrical setting for the arrival of the sacrificial procession and the sequence of ritual acts preceding and following the animal's slaughter (for the ritual sequence of the *sacrificium*, see Prescendi 2007, 31–51, 71–135). The architectural solution of a triportico open on the side opposite the entrance facilitated the gathering of the public and directed their attention towards the central scene (the altar) while maintaining a visual connection with the *sancta sanctorum* in the background. The economic, social and political significance of the cult, and particularly of the sacrificial ritual, fully justifies the adoption of these architectural solutions without the necessity of attributing them to specific ethnocultural influences, as has been done in the past. North Africa's specificity in the imperial context is rooted both in earlier cultural-religious traditions and in local, micro-regional and regional dynamics of the imperial period. However, cultural labelling of these phenomena is both impossible and methodologically unfounded, even more so when it is based on binary dichotomies such as those previously evoked.

The *cellae* represent the most sacred part of a differentiated cultic space, where the priestly and political elite reaffirmed their power by elevating the holiest areas, as in the 'Romano-African' temples. Although, as we noted previously, the adoption of the podium in these cases undoubtedly originates from the Roman architectural tradition, it clearly responds to functional, ideological and scenographic considerations (as for the Isiac cults, see Gasparini 2018) – enhancing the temple's aura while simultaneously increasing the perceived distance between the deity and worshippers. The tripartition of the *cella* has been associated with the need to venerate multiple deities (Bonzano 2019, 228–29), but this interpretation cannot be universally applied. The presence of niches at the back of these chambers, particularly in the central room but sometimes also in the lateral ones (as observed in the temple of Saturn at *Thugga* and at *Thuburnica*), suggests that these spaces indeed functioned as *cellae*, but this assumption cannot be systematised, and they could also have been used for other liturgical purposes. Furthermore, the multiplication of *cellae* does not

necessarily indicate the multiplication of the deities housed in the temple.

The selection of structural and decorative elements from the Classical tradition responded not only to aesthetic preferences but also to the availability of these architectural solutions – and the specialised craftsmen who implemented them – within the newly-expanded global market facilitated by the Roman Empire. Dedication inscriptions clearly demonstrate that the construction, renovation, decoration and embellishment of Saturnine sanctuaries had strong euergetic and politico-administrative implications, aimed at expressing adherence to cosmopolitan tastes (Pensabene 1990; Saint-Amans 2004, 228). While in some cases this may have reflected divisions within local communities – at *Thignica*, for example, two different sanctuaries of Saturn are probably in use during the same period (D'Andrea 2017a, 11–12; 2018a, 50) – such adherence was primarily driven by pragmatic considerations. The monumentality and architectural investment in porticoes, *podia*, enclosures, *cellae*, entablatures and other decorative elements reflect significant economic expenditures, which are again documented by inscriptions and were feasible only within the context of the economic boom experienced by North-African provinces during this period (Hobson 2015). For instance, the sum of 150,000 HS was spent on the reconstruction/restoration of the 'African' temple of Saturn at *Thugga*, a project jointly dedicated by the *pagus* and *civitas* in 194/195 AD (CIL 8.26498 = *ILTun* 1400 = *SIRAR* 3595). By way of comparison, the highest recorded expenditure for a public building in North Africa is the 600,000 HS spent on a temple dedicated to the *Genius* of *Lambaesis* (CIL 8.18226-7 = *SIRAR* 867 and 1055). This latter case represents an exceptional sum, as the average cost of constructing a public building in North Africa, based on epigraphic evidence, is estimated at 43,500 HS (Duncan-Jones 1982, 63–119). In this regard, it is interesting to note that the *summae honorariae* mentioned in connection with sites in North Africa are generally below 10,000 HS and exceed 20,000 HS only in one case (30,000 to 38,000 HS in Carthage; see Briand-Ponsart 1999). In 164/165 AD, at *Theveste*, two members of a local family spent 63,000 HS (50,000 for construction and 13,000 for decoration) for a *cella* dedicated to Saturn (Le Glay 1961, 333–35 = *SIRAR* 5407), if we accept the proposed interpretation of this inscription. Comparatively more modest was the 13,180 HS expenditure by the *civitas Pophensis* for the *templum cum orna[mentis]* dedicated to Saturn at Ksiba Mraou (*ILAlg* I, 1109 = Le Glay 1961, 421–22 = *SIRAR* 4724), though this case clearly reflects a completely different social and economic context than major centres such as *Thugga* and *Theveste*. In these instances, the investment was deemed a worthwhile endeavour, given the prestige it conferred and its significant social and political repercussions.

In conclusion, the 'houses of the gods' adapted to the world they belonged to – an expanded world that provided new architectural repertoires, a new political and cultural frame of reference and new economic opportunities. Ultimately, however, this broader framework enclosed a reality that remained mostly local/(micro)regional, where power dynamics changed only minimally and where public religion, as always, faithfully reflected the structures of power and prevailing socio-political relationships.

[BDA]

From 'African peasants' to an imperial middle class: the case of the stelae to Saturn

As with sanctuaries, the thousands of stelae dedicated to Saturn from *Africa Proconsularis* to *Mauretania Sitifensis* in the second and third centuries AD (Le Glay 1961; 1966a; 1966b; Schörner 2007; D'Andrea 2015; McCarty 2024) have often been examined in terms of continuity with Punic or African pasts: as synonymous

with ‘permanence’, ‘Africanisation’, or ‘Punicisation’, ‘Romanised’ only in iconographies that replace old signs with new ones. As with the terracotta statues, culture has also been tied to assumptions about the class of worshippers, separating a ‘Roman’ or ‘Romanised’ urban elite from populations of poor, rural Africans. However, if we turn from analysing these stelae as a homogeneous group and approach them more contextually, we realise that the material, epigraphic and iconographic choices made by both producers and dedicators are entangled with a host of wider social, cultural and economic changes that were simultaneously driven by ‘global’ Mediterranean social economies and expressed in very local and microregional ways. The votive stelae dedicated to Saturn over the course of the imperial period demonstrate both key ruptures with the earlier stele-cults to Baal Hammon and entanglement with the ways that a growing ‘middle class’ sought to establish its power and prestige in the growing urban centres of the province. That is, they, too, were integral parts of the productive, consumptive and social revolutions that reshaped North Africa in the imperial period.

A host of differences creates a clear break between the stelae dedicated to Saturn in the imperial period and the earlier traditions of Baal Hammon worship in *tophet*-like stele sanctuaries of the second–first centuries BC, hinting that the cult of Saturn ought to be seen in the context of the empire (Figure 8; cf. McCarty 2024). First, there is a chronological gap: most stele-sanctuaries with Latin dedications to Saturn date from the late first century through to the fourth century AD, although this dating is based primarily on onomastic, stylistic and epigraphic grounds, save for the handful of sites where dates are offered by consular or provincial year (McCarty 2024, 74, 142–52, 391–93); the neo-Punic stelae to Baal Hammon seem, by contrast, to be a phenomenon of the first century BC–first century AD, and die out as Punic ceases to be a language of epigraphic display (Wilson 2015; D’Andrea 2014; 2015). This already hints at the ways stele-cults were enmeshed with wider linguistic and commemorative practices and their shifts in the imperial period, rather than isolated from those changes. Second, there is a broad geographic distinction between where Baal Hammon was worshipped and where Saturn was worshipped: stele-sanctuaries to the former cluster from the Tunisian Tell to the Tunisian littoral, while the latter has a much wider range, stretching west into northern Algeria (D’Andrea 2018a). Much of this geographic difference, especially the development of stele-cults on the frontier along the Aurès and in the urban centres of eastern Mauretania, can be explained via the large-scale, imperial-period migration to these zones, driven by military recruitment patterns and imperial colonisation projects (McCarty 2011); again, entanglement with empire shapes these regionalised practices. Even at individual sites where stelae are dedicated to both Baal Hammon and Saturn, these stelae seem to come from different parts of the site and undergo different processes of archaeological deposition, as at *Thignica*, where most of the Saturn-stelae were deposited in a *favissa* (Berger and Cagnat 1889), but occasional stelae to Baal Hammon are found as stray objects across the site (Ben Hassen 2006, 120–32; Ben Hassen and Ferjaoui 2008). Indeed, there are very few sanctuary assemblages that include both deities. And even when iconographies on stelae might be maintained through this period, they are emptied of their original significances and paired with a host of new referents; for example, the so-called ‘sign of Tanit’ could be transformed into a goddess in the *Thusca* region, an altar-table at *Thugga* or a compositional divider at *Thignica* (Figure 9; cf. D’Andrea 2014, 209–11; McCarty 2024, 92–98).

Three other features of the stelae, though, also hint that they are best seen as entangled with local and regional social, economic and ideological dynamics: the infrastructure of production; a growing ‘middle class’ able to purchase these expensive display objects; and

the ways stelae focus on iconographies of sacrifices and sacrificers as consumers of particular forms of social capital.

Across Africa, the quarrying of stone blocks and their carving into figured or inscribed stelae was closely connected to wider patterns of landholding and the development of specialised carvers with both the tools and technical competence to produce such monuments (Wilson 2005). This can perhaps be seen most clearly at *Calama*, where the pink onyx from La Mahouna becomes one of the materials used for Latin votive stelae. This quarry was only exploited from the early imperial period, offering not only a *terminus post quem* for the stelae, but suggesting that new patterns of power, landholding and display drove this stone-working boom: the quarries seem to have sat on an imperial estate created with the organisation of the new province (AAA fe. 9, 18–19; Toubal 1995, 60), and the first attested monument using La Mahouna onyx is an imperial *tropaeum* at *Hippo Regius* (Hermann *et al.* 2015, 164–65; Ardeleanu 2021, 203–205), which may be one of the few examples of ‘state art’ in Africa (Baratte 2005, 155). And while the growth of stone-cutting workshops in many inland regions seems connected to the rise of local elites in the late-Hellenistic period – people like the commissioner of the Numidian tower-tomb ‘of Atban’ at *Thugga*, who flags the stone-cutters as part of the prestige package of the inscription (RIL 1; Camporeale 2016); or those who used blocks of coloured stone to pick out the door frames of their elite residences (Ardeleanu 2021, 148) – stone-quarrying and -cutting industries across the urban centres of Africa boomed to support the rapid monumentalisation of these towns and euergetic practices of the second and third centuries (Jouffroy 1986; Laurence, Esmonde Cleary and Sears 2011, 132).

The interconnection of the boom in quarries, stone-carving workshops, general monumentalisation, a rising ‘middle class’, and stele-sanctuaries can be seen most clearly in the cities of imperial-period Africa. Onomastic analysis has demonstrated that the dedicators of stelae were rarely among the civic elite and public benefactors: there is only one dedicant of senatorial rank and one equestrian (Le Glay 1966a, 402), and stelae dedicants can rarely be associated with other monument-dedicators at the same sites. Yet dedicants were certainly wealthy enough to dedicate carved-stone monuments, and may even have developed honorific titles and positions like *sacerdos* calqued on those of the civic realm to distinguish themselves from their peers (McCarty 2024, 212–25).

At Ain Golea, for example, the votive practices of a small community can be linked to the changing social and economic patterns of empire. Only three stelae were discovered here (Le Glay 1961, 205, nos 1–3), all dedicated in Latin to Saturn *Augustus* – offering a probable second-century AD *terminus post quem* (McCarty 2024, 142–52) – by figures with peregrine names (itself unusual in the dedications to Saturn, where a vast majority of dedicants bear the *tria nomina* of citizens) and double filiation (Gascou 1999). Two of the dedicants make their offerings to celebrate their achievement of sacerdotal status. Remains visible on the surface suggest a villa or village centre, replete with ashlar structures, a monumental entrance arch, a bath building, a battery of cisterns and a number of press- and mill-elements (De Vos Raaijmakers and Attoui 2017, site DU395, identified as a small ‘city’). Without excavation, the chronology of the site’s development remains unclear. Still, the dedication of an honorific arch celebrating Hadrian by a local, Philoxenus, whose son was adlected to the *ordo* of a town (perhaps *Thugga*, whose *civitas* had an *ordo* from the first century AD: DFH 49), suggests increased wealth, a building boom and new honorific practices in the early second century AD (CIL 8.25955). The growing wealth and prestige of residents at Ain Golea could even be tied directly to the changes in land-tenure and agricultural management under Hadrian; not only was he the emperor honoured here, but the village may even have served as the centre of

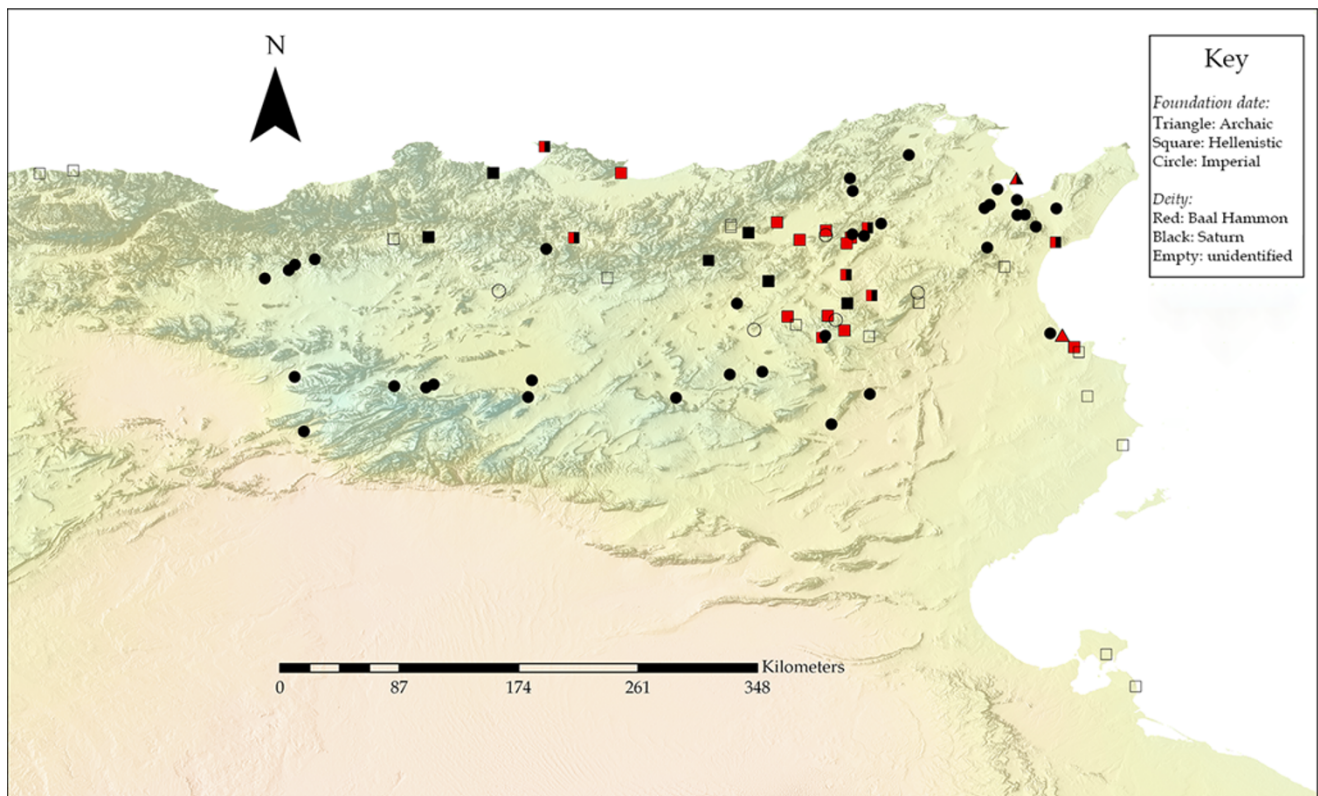


Figure 8. Stele-sanctuaries across Africa, by date and deity (M. McCarty, with basemap using data from Esri, USGS, NOAA).

an imperial estate in the region where the Aïn el-Djemala inscription was erected (Carcopino 1906, 429–30). Instead of seeing the stele-sanctuary in this village as a product of the ‘indigeneity’ or ‘Africanness’ of the dedicants, the votives dedicated here instead suggest the increased wealth of the inhabitants, changing patterns of consumption (purchasing stone monuments) and even an appropriation of the kinds of honorific hierarchies of neighbouring urban centres which drove the boom in imperial-period Saturn sanctuaries.

The boom in monumental stonework at Aïn Golea, including this group of Saturn stela, also hints at the problems with another conceptual framework often applied in histories of North-African religion: the (false) binary between rural and urban cult patterns (most recently, Mattingly 2023, 493). The agricultural boom of the second–fourth centuries AD generated surpluses of wealth; particular practices among those benefiting from this wealth led to investment in what became one of the empire’s densest tapestry of monumental civic centres, which in turn generated new social interactions and institutions and ultimately led to some centres gaining municipal and colonial status (Dufton and Fentress 2022). Even rural centres such as Aïn Golea – almost certainly dependent on *Thugga* – developed stone-working industries and sanctuary spaces where local inhabitants could erect their own prestige monuments, rather than travelling to and dedicating at *Thugga*. That is, the inhabitants at Aïn Golea appropriated practices from nearby towns, and deployed them in their own community; they replicated urban institutions, spaces and rites as soon as they had the wealth and infrastructure to do so. Still, as worshippers at Aïn Golea established a temple and moved towards stele-dedication, worshippers at *Thugga* shifted their cult away from a stele-field and towards a new, monumental courtyard temple for spectacles of animal sacrifice (McCarty 2024, 332–42), of the kind discussed in the previous section. Practices of socio-economic differentiation and segregation continued to change, but in ways that expanded the continuum of status distinction. Like the large-scale terracottas, these Saturn

stelae not only suggest that the urban/rural divide is one imposed by modernity, but also point to the deep social, economic and cultural integration (without equivalence) of these realms.

The greater wealth of dedicants and the adoption of new models by both buyers and producers – driven by the global markets of the imperial era (Hobson 2015) – can also be observed in the choice of iconographies. Perhaps the most distinctive and innovative feature of Saturnine stela from the second–third centuries AD is the centrality of the sacrificial act, whose depiction largely conforms to the cultic and iconographic norms of Roman tradition. The scene represented is the *praefatio*, with a focus on the animal designated for sacrifice and the altar upon which it will be offered, towards which it willingly proceeds (D’Andrea 2020a, 35–39). By the second century AD, this became the most common scene on stelae across Africa: over 500 surviving votive stela repeat such scenes (McCarty 2024, 270–71). The precursors to the adoption of this new model are already evident in a series of six stelae, dated to the first century AD, discovered in the *tophet* of Sousse/*Hadrumentum* (D’Andrea 2014, 92–93; Ben Abid 2014; McCarty 2024, 296–311). On the one hand, as suggested in the previous section, this representation simply reflects practices that were performed in Saturnine sanctuaries during this period. On the other hand, while responding to a private votive act, sacrifice was also a public ritual with significant economic and social dimensions. Through this act, the dedicant reaffirmed their position within the community as well as their adherence to the (new) ritual and cultural model.

On the second–third centuries AD stelae, cattle appear in percentages equivalent to ovicaprine. This importance of cattle contrasts sharply with earlier Saturnine stela, where ovicaprine were overwhelmingly dominant, and even more so with stela dedicated to Baal Hammon (Figure 10; cf. D’Andrea 2020a, 32–33). Once again, this trend is reflected in ritual reality, as evidenced by certain votive inscriptions that record offerings *ex vitulo* or *ex pecoribus* (e.g., Le Glay 1966b 6, no. 1 = *SIRAR* 1500, from

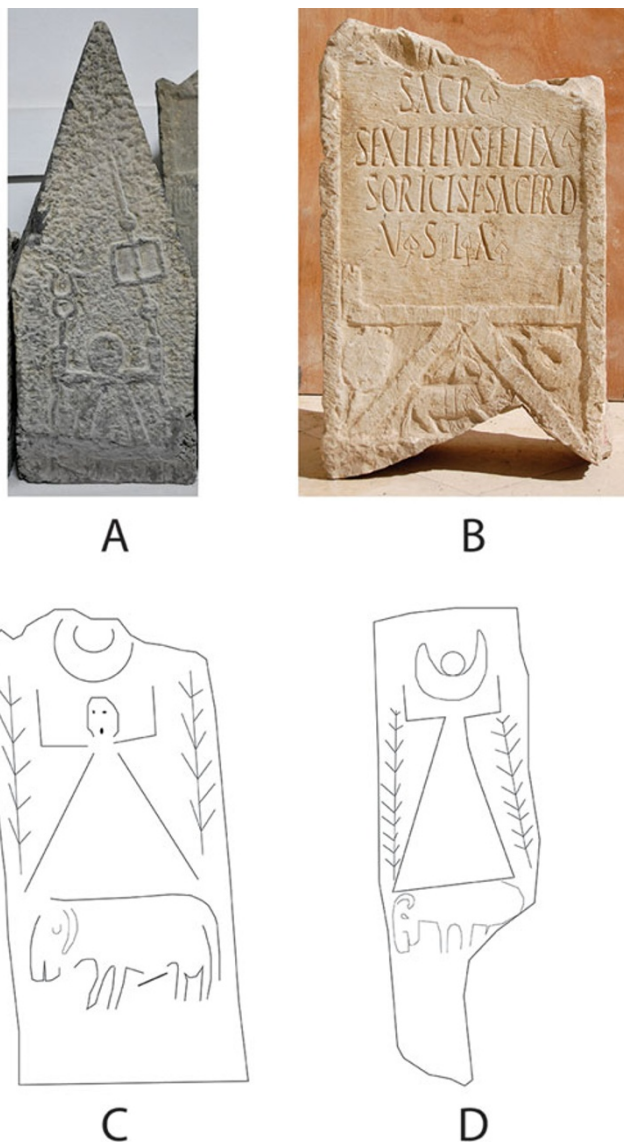


Figure 9. Adapted 'signs of Tanit'. A: From *Cirta*, second–first century BC. Limestone. Constantine, Musée National de Cirta. B: From *Thignica*, late first–third century AD. Limestone. Carthage, Musée de Carthage. C–D: From *Thugga*, first century BC/AD. Limestone. A: Photo: M. McCarty. B: Photo: M. McCarty. C–D: M. McCarty, after photos in the Fonds Poinssot, INHA, Paris.

Announa; 165–70, nos 2, 6–7, 9, 12 = *SIRAR* 1456–58, 1460, 1462, from *Khenchela*; Ben Abid *et al.* 2024, nos 18, 144, 206, 225, from *Thignica*). At the time, and perhaps more significantly, this shift towards showing bovines aligns with the dedicant's desire for social self-representation. The economic disparity between the sacrifice of a bovine and that of a caprine, as well as the substantial difference in the quantity of meat provided, underscores the symbolic value of the choice. In the sacrificial tariff from Hellenistic Carthage (*CIS* 165, 167–70, 3,915–17), the fee paid for a bull was ten times, and a calf five times, higher than for a ram; a two-year-old bull might yield 375 kg of meat and offal, while a young ovicaprine might yield 6 kg (Von den Driesch 1976). Offering a bovine, in practical and economic terms, was a significantly more costly endeavour, and one that could feed a much larger group: a hint at the way claims of bull-sacrifice could carry very different implications for the status of the offrand (McCarty 2024, 317).

This focus on public, elite offerings can be seen clearly on the stelae from *Thignica*, where over 300 stelae date to the two centuries under examination (D'Andrea 2014, 194–99; McCarty 2022;

Ben Abid *et al.* 2024). Here, cattle are almost systematically represented, to a much greater extent than ovicaprines (Figure 11; cf. Ben Abid *et al.* 2024, 289–98). The association with actual sacrifices is suggested by some inscriptions, as we have seen, but it is highly unlikely to assume that every depicted bull represented the 'real' offering made. The representation of the cattle indicates rather an 'ideal' sacrifice, and it is precisely for this reason that the inscriptions emphasise the reality of sacrifice in certain specific cases. A similar observation has been made for the Greek world, where the idealisation of ox sacrifice in texts and images is not reflected in the ritual practices attested archaeologically in sanctuaries (McInerney 2010, 2–12; Ekroth 2014, 157–58; Klöckner 2017, 209–12; Chandezon and D'Andrea 2025).

To sum up, we can say that these stelae are inspired by the ritual reality of the imperial age, and the new focus on public acts of sacrifice-at-altar that we also see in temple architecture. However, on the one hand, it seems mistaken to seek an automatic correspondence between images, texts and ritual practices actually performed. On the other hand, the stelae themselves, their images and their texts work to create new ideals and norms revolving around wealth and public benefaction-through-sacrifice. Regardless, the votive stele itself serves as tangible evidence of the economic capacity of this emerging 'middle class' of dedicants and their adherence to successful models circulating in this new imperial world. Returning to the example of *Thignica*, the near-systematic presence of the epithet *Augustus* associated with Saturn, along with the remarkable frequency of *sacerdotes* of Saturn (appearing on 66% of the stelae), exemplify how this cult was employed as a means of expressing and reinforcing alignment with elite and imperial models of religious and social prestige (Gordon 1990; McCarty 2024, 212–14).

However, as with the architectural and decorative choices of sanctuaries, the possibilities offered by the imperial global market were adapted within local and regional contexts. In the case of sacrificial representations, this adaptation introduced variations to the classical scheme attested in the Roman world. The most intriguing innovation, characterising particularly the stelae production in central Tunisia (Haut Tell and floodplains of the *oudian* Khalled, Siliana and el-Kebir), is the depiction of scenes in which the animal (tied up and/or in an attacking position) seems to be trying to escape its impending fate (i.e., for *Thignica*: Ben Abid *et al.* 2024, nos 4, 80, 103, 112, 133, 159, 169, 192, 260) or where the *victimarius* is about to slaughter the animal (Figure 11; see also D'Andrea 2020b, nos 22, 25, 540, 557, 1,107, 1,259, 1,407).⁵ More broadly, the quantity and variety of sacrificial representations associated with the cult of Saturn in North Africa have no parallel in other regions of the empire; there are more such scenes from Africa than Italy, the Gauls and Germanies combined (Huet 1992; 2017). This suggests a distinctly regional specialisation and an appropriation of an imported iconographic motif and ritual act, reshaped and popularised within a local framework.

New models, new economic opportunities and new social and religious dynamics – mediated by a constant tension between individual, local, regional and global dimensions – emerge as the fundamental elements shaping these phenomena. These cannot, and should not, be examined as homogeneous, identity-based groups defined in opposition to one another or strictly categorised along ethnic or cultural lines. Le Glay's so-called 'African peasants' are, in reality, the expression of a new middle class, one that, through votive rituals and the cult of Saturn, articulates its aspirations and claims visibility, breaking free from the silence to which it might otherwise have been consigned. In the religious sphere, a 'popular' phenomenon of such scale and deliberate visibility as the cult of Saturn finds few parallels in the ancient world. Rather than reflecting a static, rural society or the 'impossible romanisation des âmes' (Le Glay 1966a, 485), it stands as a testament to a dynamic and

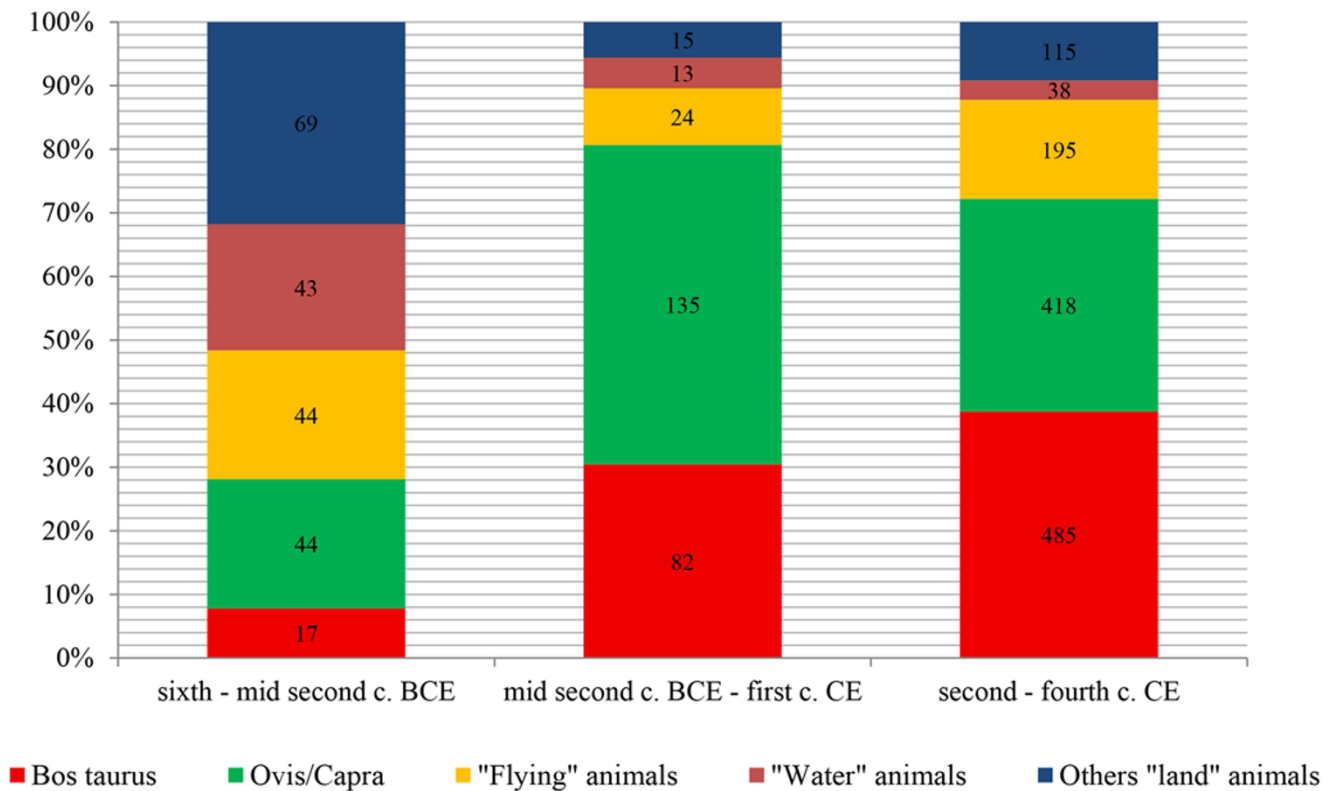


Figure 10. Animals (numbers and percentages) represented on steles dedicated to Baal Hammon and/or Tanit and on steles dedicated to Saturn (B. D'Andrea, based on the database available at <https://doi.org/10.13125/caster/4416>; see D'Andrea 2020a; 2020b).

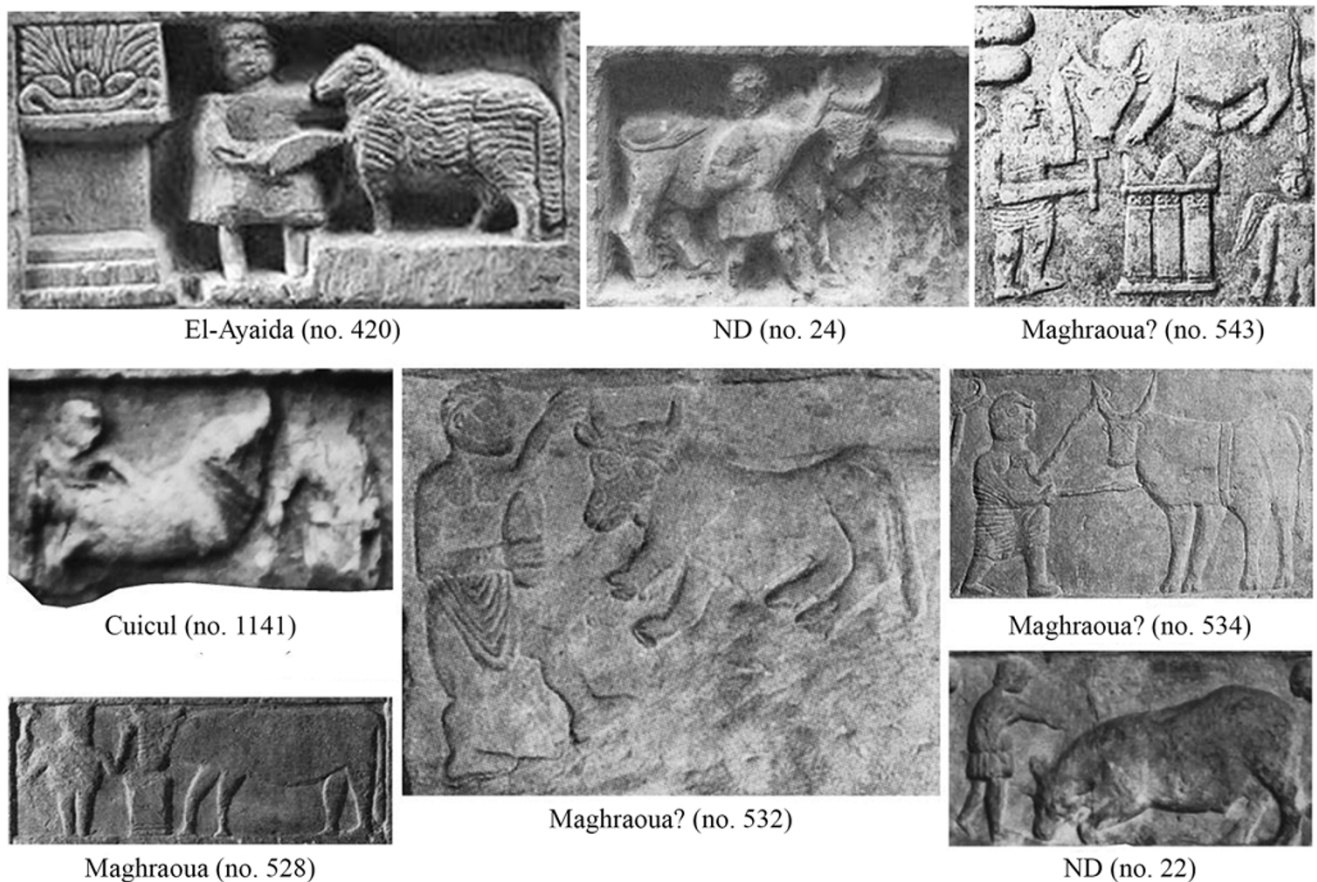


Figure 11. Details of Saturnine stela in which the *victimarius* is about to slaughter the animal (B. D'Andrea, based on the database available at <https://doi.org/10.13125/caster/4416>; adjusted after D'Andrea 2020a, 38, figure 9).

vibrant reality – one that was open to the global innovations of the empire while remaining firmly anchored in its own traditions.

[BDA/MM]

Conclusions

The four cases analysed in the previous sections clearly suggest that the religious practices and architectural choices in North Africa during the second and third centuries AD cannot be thoroughly understood through simplistic models of cultural survival, resistance to 'Romanisation', or linear evolution from Libyo-Punic traditions. Instead, the cultscapes of Roman Africa are better understood as fluid and relational: drawing on both regional and *koiné* traditions, symbol-systems and practices, but refashioning them in dialogue with one another. That is, religion in the imperial-period Maghreb should be seen as thoroughly *glocal*.

The study of divine onomastics in Roman North Africa reveals a remarkably dynamic and creative religious landscape. The epithet *Augustus* emerges as the most widely-used divine attribute, appearing in nearly 80% of dedications in *Africa Proconsularis*. Originally an imperial *cognomen*, *Augustus* underwent a semantic shift: detached from its personal association with the emperor, it became a generalised marker of sacral authority accessible to individuals of any ethnicity, gender or status. This transformation was probably enabled by the persistence of Punic linguistic frameworks of invocation, allowing a form of code-switching in which traditional religious formulas were retained but infused with imperial symbolism. Concurrently, a phenomenon of 'artificial Africanisation' saw local magistrates resurrect or invent deities with archaising names framed within Roman religious grammar. The broader onomastic landscape includes continued use of traditional neo-Punic titles and rare but inventive Greek and Latin epithets, often stripped of their political connotations. Overall, these strategies highlight a high level of local agency, showcasing North Africa as a site of ritual innovation and hybridised expressions of divine sovereignty.

The presence of large-scale terracotta statuary in sanctuaries reflects not a mere survival of pre-Roman traditions, but an integration into the economic and technological networks of the empire. The so-called 'terracotta habit' – a widespread preference for terracotta in both funerary and religious settings – was deeply embedded in regional consumption patterns and ceramic production infrastructure. Far from being an indicator of rural poverty or cultural resistance, these statues were closely tied to trade networks, specialised artisans and the economic boom of North Africa in this period. Beyond material considerations, the choice of terracotta as a medium for cult images appears to have been conceptually significant. The association of clay with metaphors of formation and transformation, well established in ancient medical and philosophical thought, suggests that materiality itself played a role in shaping religious experience. This perspective challenges rigid ethno-cultural interpretations of North African religion, emphasising instead the full spectrum of material, economic and ritual interactions that shaped these practices. These sanctuaries and their terracotta assemblages were not static relics of an indigenous past but dynamic components of an evolving imperial religious landscape, reflecting both local traditions and broader economic and technological trends.

Similarly, the architectural and decorative elements of 'African' and 'Romano-African' temples should not be viewed as vestiges of a pre-Roman past or markers of an imposed 'Romanisation'. These religious structures were shaped by the practical realities of an interconnected imperial world, where architectural choices were influenced as much by economic and material conditions as by aesthetic and ideological considerations. The integration of classical

decorative elements in these sanctuaries was not simply a matter of cultural influence, but a reflection of the economic infrastructure and availability of skilled, specialised artisans under the empire. These temples functioned as active religious spaces, where large-scale sacrificial rituals reinforced both communal worship and elite authority. Their porticoed courtyards, monumental altars and multiple *cellae* were not dictated solely by ethnic or cultural traditions, but by functional, scenographic and ideological factors. The financial investment in these temples, as attested by inscriptions, underscores their role as centres of political and social engagement, with local elites often funding their construction and decoration as a means of expressing civic identity and imperial affiliation. Rather than being seen as evidence of a linear cultural evolution, these religious buildings should be understood as the product of complex interactions between local traditions and the broader imperial economy.

The thousands of stelae dedicated to Saturn across North Africa further illustrate how religious practices were embedded within these shifting socio-economic dynamics. Rather than representing simple continuities with Punic religious traditions or a rigid dichotomy between Romanisation and indigenous resistance, these votive monuments must be examined in relation to the economic expansion and social mobility of their dedicants. The widespread dedication of carved stone stelae reflects the increasing wealth of a middle class that was neither part of the traditional elite nor among the impoverished rural population, but was actively engaging in new forms of religious patronage and self-representation. This trend was closely tied to the expansion of quarries, the growth of stone-carving workshops, and the monumentalisation of urban centres, highlighting the materiality of these objects as a key factor in understanding their significance. The iconographic choices displayed on these stelae, particularly their emphasis on sacrificial rituals, demonstrate how North-African worshippers adopted and adapted Roman religious imagery. While these representations generally conform to standard Roman cultic conventions, they also introduce regional variations, such as depictions of the victimarius preparing to slaughter the sacrificial animal or the animal attempting to resist its fate. The sheer number and variety of these sacrificial representations distinguish the North-African Saturnine stelae from those found elsewhere in the empire, revealing a localised reinterpretation of imported religious motifs.

Ultimately, the religious changes analysed in this article challenge reductionist views of the region's religious life as either a static holdover from Punic tradition or a passive reflection of 'Romanisation'. These religious practices, whether expressed through divine onomastic, terracotta iconography, temple architecture or dedicatory stelae, were shaped by the tension between local traditions and the imperial framework, reflecting the agency of worshippers in negotiating their position within a changing world. The case studies examined here do not merely reveal patterns of adaptation or resistance, but illustrate the fundamentally *glocal* nature of religious life in second- and third-century North Africa. *Glocalism*, as mentioned in the introduction, is not merely a spatial dialectic between the global and the local: it is a social and temporal process, rooted in relational interactions among individuals and groups. As these examples suggest, temporalities matter: societies and individuals responded differently to imperial frameworks at different moments, generating new, context-specific religious expressions. This article ultimately aims to show that, in North Africa, the standardisation of goods and ideas within the globalised market of the second and third centuries AD did not erase local religious preferences, nor did the global market absorb and override the region's cultic diversity. The religious landscape of Roman Africa emerges as a dynamic matrix in which cultic choices and individual acts of devotion were rarely imposed from above, but stemmed from a wide spectrum of local possibilities and

personal agency. Far from being a peripheral reflection of Roman religious norms, Africa's epigraphic, material, and architectural evidence highlights how religious traditions were continually co-produced through social practice. *Glocalisation*, then, is not only a heuristic to frame cultural transactions; it is a lens through which to understand the creative and dialogic essence of Roman religion itself.

[BDA/VG/MM]

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Notes

1. For stamps at Thinissut, Merlin 1910, 15–16. The distribution of C. IUN. DRAC. lamps (some perhaps produced in Italy, but many seemingly in *Byzacena*) is wide, but has a strong concentration in *Byzacena*: Carton 1916, 24; Bailey 1988, 98; Bonifay 2004, 80. AUFFRON (sometimes AUFI. FRON.) is rare everywhere except Puppit: Bonifay 2004, 77. AUGENDI lamps have wide distribution (Bailey 1988, 96), but are concentrated in *Byzacena*, including at Puppit (Bonifay 2004, 33), *Sabratha* (Joly 1974, 147), and Carthage (Deneauve 1969, no. 1146). There are no other matches for the EX OFFICINA STERCULI (= STERCEI?) stamp, but Stercei stamps only otherwise appear on 3rd-century lamps in northern Tunisia (Bonifay 2004, 334). HONORATI appears at *Sabratha* (Joly 1974, 78–81) and Carthage (CIL 8.104718.17). The others are less diagnostic: MUN. HEL. appears once at Carthage (Deneauve 1969, no. 1025); NPC likewise appears once at Carthage (Deneauve 1969, no. 859); the *Pullaeni* owned land by *Uchi Maius*, but their products are widely distributed, especially in *Africa Proconsularis*, but also in Sardinia and Sicily (Ben Moussa 2007, 58–61).
2. Outside Africa, examples of coroplastic workshops physically within or connected to sanctuaries include: Artemis at Aulis (Threpsiadis 1960); Mother of the Gods at Pella (Lilibaki-Akamati 2000, 37); Apollo at Eretria (Huguenot 2013). Examples of temple workshops from the Roman imperial West are far rarer (de Cazanove et al. 2023, 9–10; Flohr 2023), perhaps due to the changed configurations of work, worship and social power (McCarthy and Rask forthcoming).
3. Francesca Bonzano (2019) proposed tracing the models for the porticoed courtyard with three rooms at the rear to the tradition of Hellenistic palace architecture.
4. The temple of *Thuburnica* is significantly smaller in scale, occupying a total surface area of no more than 300 m², approximately one-third of which consisted of the courtyard (Le Glay 1961, 274–77; D'Andrea 2014, 184–85). Similarly, the temple of *Ammaedara*, for which the exact dimensions remain unknown, also had a reduced size (McCarthy 2024, 347–50).
5. The scene, although attested, is relatively rare in non-African contexts (Huet 2005). Traditionally attributed to a deliberate effort to obscure the violence inherent in the 'comedy' of sacrifice (Burkert 1972), this scarcity of representations of the act of killing is more plausibly explained by the intent to emphasise the central moments of the sacrificial ritual – namely, the consecration of the animal, the offering and, where applicable, the communal sharing of its meat (Georgoudi 2005).

Abbreviations

AAA 1911. *Atlas archéologique de l'Algérie. Édition spéciale des cartes au 200.000^e du Service Géographique de l'Armée*,

avec un texte explicatif rédigé par S. Gsell. A. Jourdan and Fontemoing & Cie, Algiers and Paris.
 CIL 1863–. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin.
 CIS 1881–1962. *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars prima, Inscriptiones phoenicias continens*. Republicae typographeo, Paris.
 DFH Khanoussi, M. and Maurin, L. (eds) 1998. *Dougga, fragments d'Histoire*. Ausonius, Bordeaux.
 ILAlg I Gsell, S. (ed.) 1922. *Inscriptions latines de l'Algérie, I: Inscriptions de la Proconsulaire*. Champion, Paris.
 ILTun Merlin, A. 1944. *Inscriptions latines de la Tunisie*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris.
 RIL Chabot, J.-B. 1940–1941. *Recueil des inscriptions libyques*. Imprimerie nationale, Paris.
 RRC Crawford, M. H. 1975. *Roman Republican Coinage, I–II*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
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