

Matthew M. McCarty, Religion and the Making of Roman Africa. Votive Stelae, Traditions, and Empire. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, xx + 460 S., 88 farbig Abb., 7 Tab., ISBN: 9781107020184

McCarty's (M.) aim is ambitious: to fundamentally rewrite the cultural and religious history of Northern Africa under the Roman Empire by discussing the *molk* rites of tophetim and the carved stone stelae (mostly) connected to these. He does so from a decidedly postcolonial perspective which, although certainly not entirely new, in the consistency with which it is applied may well be the most lasting impact of his rich, very stimulating book. It includes eight chapters, a short conclusion, a short list on the (very coarse) dating of stele-sanctuaries (391–393), a concordance of ancient and modern place names (394–397), an extensive bibliography (398–446) and a most helpful index (447–460).

Chapter 1 (3–26) on 'Colonial Traditions' starts with an early 5th c. CE (pseudo?) *molk* at Hr. el-Hami, which seems to have creatively reimagined the ancient rite¹. This opens the discussion of how such *molk* rites, the votive stelae which were often erected as a part of this ritual, as well as the tophet-sanctuaries where this took place, have so far mostly been used as evidence for 'cultural continuity', 'Phoenician religious survival' and 'African permanence', even though being highly mutable. M's book focuses not on the purported continuities and their essentializing interpretations, which stem from strictly colonial frameworks and effectively dehistoricize the archaeological material, most obvious in the work of M. Le Glay²; rather, M. will discuss how the *molk*-rite and especially its most durable testimonies, the stone stelae, were used to (re)create traditions and helped imagined communities group together. His aim is to historicize the objects and actors, thus decolonizing narratives of culture and religion in Africa and placing them on more explicitly material footings (6 f.).

Chapter 2 (27–79) on 'Historicizing Stelae and Sanctuaries' sets the foundations for everything that follows by discussing the specifics in the development of tophetim and their votive stelae in four broad chronological periods: first, the 8th–6th c. BCE Central Mediterranean 'circle of the tophet', which M. seems to reframe as a 'circle of the votive stone' as it is these monuments and not child sacrifice or holocaust offerings which are characteristic (47); in this phase, the rites underlined 'Phoenician' origins, but also materialized a distinctive central

¹ Cf. already M. M. McCarty, Continuities and Contexts. The Tophets of Roman Imperial-Period Africa, *StEpigrLing* 29/30, 2012/2013, 93–118.

² Cf. M. Le Glay, *Saturne africain*, 3 vols. (Paris 1961/1962/1966).

Mediterranean community of practice and thus established connections between a good handful of sites in present-day Northern Tunisia, Western Sicily and Southern Sardinia. Second, the development of these tophetim in the 5th–3rd c. BCE and the addition of few others in the same areas, the emergence of which can be explained by movements of worshippers from sites with already established tophetim. Third, and probably most important, the North African tophet boom of the (later) 2nd c. BCE to late 1st c. CE, which raised the number of active tophetim from a mere dozen to more than 100, all of them in Northern Africa, a process which cannot be connected with the final, pre-146 BCE expansion of Carthage or the refugees created by its destruction; the new sanctuaries thus are not ‘survivals of Carthaginian culture’ but rather adaptations or recreations of the rite by a large number of local settlement communities. This process is socially and economically entangled with these sites’ development (urbanization, monumentalization, social stratification, increase of connections, etc.)³. M. thus stresses that the “stele-sanctuaries did not simply sit against a background of political and military history, but served to create new material histories” (72). Finally, another set of new tophet-sites emerges in the late 1st–3rd c. CE and is closely linked to a new wave of urbanism and colonization driven by imperial policies, in the course of which the *molks* rituals were often carried inland by people (soldiers, veterans and other settlers) from Coastal areas. This basic division of tophetim into various phases with largely diverging historical contexts, already advocated by M. earlier⁴, is very valuable, even though the chronological division may seem somewhat coarse – his concept of a “long first century BCE” (58), mostly including the entire 1st c. CE and present throughout the book, lumps various phases with rapidly changing circumstances together.

Chapter 3 (83–114) on ‘Making Africa with Punic Signs’ deals with how Northern African communities adopted, adapted and transformed the ‘sign of Tanit’, the crescent, Punic epigraphy and the title of sufetes in the ‘long 1st c. BCE’, creating a set of shared and recognizable (although locally heterogeneous) traditions, a community of signs, across the Maghreb; these cannot be considered

³ Many of these phenomena are most comprehensively dealt with by S. Ardeleanu, *Numidia Romana? Die Auswirkungen der römischen Präsenz in Numidien* (2. Jh. v. Chr. – 1. Jh. n. Chr.), AF 38 (Berlin 2021).

⁴ Cf. M. M. McCarty, *Soldiers and Stelae: Votive Cult and the Roman Army in North Africa*, BdA Online 2010, 34–43; J. C. Quinn – M. M. McCarty, *Echos puniques: langue, culte, et gouvernement en Numidie hellénistique*, in: D. Badi (ed.), *Actes de Colloque International Massinissa, au coeur de la consécration du premier Etat numide* (Constantine 2015) 167–198; M. M. McCarty, *Africa Punica? Child Sacrifice and Other Invented Traditions in Early Roman Africa*, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 3, 2017, 393–428; M. M. McCarty, *The Tophet and Infant Sacrifice*, in: C. López-Ruiz – B. Doak (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Phoenician and Punic Mediterranean* (Oxford 2019) 310–325.

indicators of earlier Carthaginian control or of cultural permanence, but must be historically situated as acts of meaning-making which took and transformed signs related to a destroyed Carthage to create a common 'Third Space' not connected to either the growing Roman influence or the Numidian kings. This basic argument, likewise already anticipated by M. elsewhere⁵, certainly most helpfully advances the discussion; his individual arguments may not always be entirely convincing. That the 'sign of Tanit' generally evolved from a performative sign (up to the destruction of Carthage) to a representative, iconic one in the 'long 1st c. BCE', for example, may be a too general conclusion which is at odds with M.'s argument against "a fixed evolution or teleologically determined march toward anthropomorphism" (96). In any case, M. stresses repeatedly that what the various signs ultimately 'meant' was much less important than that they were used across a wide geographical space and that they referred back in time. Again, the reader would hope for a slightly higher level of chronological resolution within these most interesting processes of the 'long 1st c. BCE', which effectively reaches at least from the latter part of the 2nd c. BCE to the early 2nd c. CE.

Chapter 4 (115–175) on 'Making a God' is based upon the understanding that deities are not pre-existing, ontologically distinct objects, but are constructed via relational signs in specific historic contexts. The first part argues extensively that Baal Hammon and Saturn are not equivalent, sometimes overstressing the evidence⁶. More convincing is M.'s result that it is distinctly doubtful if Baal Hammon was a 'supreme' god, that there are no indications that he was an agricultural or rural god, and that various facets of Saturn do not add to an all-encompassing personality of a unified deity, but rather are various specifically local aspects (124–130). Prior to the 1st c. BCE, stelae lack images or specific attributes of deities, and thus do not denote, describe or define them, but rather more generally feature markers of divine presence (131–134). In the 1st c. BCE/CE, M. notes a shyness of stelae to invoke a god by name in permanent,

⁵ Quinn – McCarty 2015; McCarty 2017; McCarty 2019 (see above n. 4).

⁶ For example, M. mentions evidence for separate sanctuaries to Saturn and Baal Hammon at three sites, but the actual evidence referred to is hardly suggesting such a thing (120); he states that „Baal Hammon and Saturn may have share a predilection for stele-offerings [...] but rarely did they share the same physical space“, as there are few sites where both gods are mentioned in the inscriptions – just before acknowledging that “the dominant language used on dedications often dictated how a god was signified by a name” and that few sites have Latin as well as Neo-Punic inscriptions (121); or he argues that a stele with Latin inscription from Thuburnica did not mention Saturn, but recorded the dedication of a Saturnus, because of “the fragmentary condition of the stele and local practice of naming dedicants”, although the stela is missing only its top (separated from the inscription by a 'sign of Tanit') and the dedicant's name, Diodorus, is already mentioned before the v(otum) s(olvit) Sat(urno); the following statement that “at Thuburnica, [...] no one explicitly named the god worshipped” then is just not correct.

inscribed forms, as the Latin inscriptions mostly refrain from naming the deity at all, preferring less determination, less articulation, less specificity (136–139), and considers this as a strategy creating a ‘Third Space’, as it refuses to situate the god on either side of a binary cultural or linguistic opposition (141). This result seems most interesting, but may have even been more specifically stated: Since Neo-Punic inscriptions (which very probably date to the 1st c. BCE as well as the 1st c. CE) frequently name Baal Hammon, but Latin inscriptions (of which very, very few will predate the 40s BCE) significantly less often mention Saturn (137), M.’s strategy seems to be either more commonly used in latinophonic communities (and/or) a phenomenon more specifically of the Early Imperial period – the ‘long 1st c. BCE’ again seems somewhat imprecise as a level of investigation. Be that as it may, M. reveals that Saturn was given the title *augustus* only from the late 1st c. CE onwards, but that it then rapidly became most popular, and that this has nothing to do with an ‘Oriental’ predilection for near monotheism, but is a new idea which manifests the power structures of empire and the centrality of the emperor (142–147). Although his conviction that the title *dominus* only emerged in the 2nd c. CE (150) can be refuted in its general validity⁷, the title *sanctus* is likewise late (and implies a military milieu: 150 f.). Just as such titles, the three major images of Saturn (as a bust, enthroned, or reclining) emerged relatively late, probably only in the late 1st or 2nd c. CE, although “precise chronologies are elusive” (153 f.). Worshippers thus overall embraced new sign systems that defined Saturn within the structures of the empire. The Saturn of (a specific site of) the 2nd or 3rd c. CE is not just a veneered-over translation of the Punic Baal Hammon or even a transtemporal African supreme god, but results from specific historical circumstances.

Chapter 5 (176–228) on ‘Making Sanctuary Communities’ shifts the focus on the individuals erecting stelae and how these objects negotiated their communality or individuality. M. dismisses earlier suppositions that the worshippers of Saturn were mostly ‘African peasants’, stressing that most of the stelae-sanctuaries were located in towns and that the large majority of dedicants seem to have been Roman citizens. While the highly standardized Carthaginian stelae of the 3rd and 2nd c. BCE created a largely horizontal, equal community of worshippers, the stelae of the Imperial period created more hierarchical communities of worshippers by shifting the visual attention to the image of the dedicant (differentiated from others) as well as by commonly stressing the dedicant’s status as a

⁷ See ICAesMaur I, 59 and very probably 69 as well as CIL 20969a (= Le Glay 1966, 319–321 Nr. 10. 11. 16), all almost certainly datable before 50 CE, which are not taken into account in Table 4.1, which is explicitly stating that there are no dedications with the title *Dominus* in Iol-Caesarea. The fact that this early evidence for the title originates from this particular site with its close connections to Rome is telling, and may imply that M.’s result may still be correct in many other sites.

sacerdos (interpreted not as some sort of initiate, but the holder of a new honorific office). This again underlines the new conceptions of North African votive stelae emerging in the Imperial period (although the differentiation of the dedicants' images, which is central for M.'s result of stelae creating "competitive zones for individuation and the manufacturing of social prestige", 226, argued for by discussing two of the most peculiar of the large and exceptional La Ghorfa stelae, may be slightly exaggerated given the relative homogeneity of the stelae from many other sites). Again, the reviewer's impression is that the graduality of these changes (still relatively standardized monuments for most of the 1st c. BCE, emergence of conceptually new, but mostly rather simple figured images at the beginning of the Imperial period, further differentiation with the rise of more complex stelae starting in the late 1st c. CE) could have been more forcefully underlined.

Chapter 6 (229–269) on 'Making Children Subjects of Empire' argues that some of the figures shown on votive stelae of the Imperial period represent children explicitly identified as social persons; various iconographic formulae (nudity in the 1st c., later *bullae*, *lunulae*, pets, missing overcloths, sleeves slipping from shoulders, oversized pieces of clothing, hairstyles, small figures in large niches, overly large heads, fleshy, round cheeks), of which multiple are sometimes combined, suggest so. These depictions have a strong sense of futurity (of what the children might become), and these imagined futures are firmly tied to their social and juridical status (as citizens) within the empire: "This was hegemony." (262). All this is hardly surprising. What is, though, rather unexpected is that M. – based on a 1st c. CE (?) stele from Calama showing a naked female child with a much-disputed Neopunic inscription which mentions either the offering of a female lamb or of a female child (249) – argues without any sort of basis that the many children on stelae of the 2nd and 3rd c. CE cannot represent the dedicants (or beneficiaries of offerings) but must be considered 'nude objects' which themselves are the offering (253–260). This seems doubtful since they are usually depicted holding grapes or other objects "visually marked as offerings within sanctuaries of Saturn" (259), together with obvious sacrificial animals such as rams⁸ or even sacrificing at altars (254)⁹. M.'s result that children can be cast as

⁸ Cf. M.'s fig. 6.14, which he most curiously takes as evidence for "two bodies [which] visually blend together: The line between child and offering is blurred" (259) although this very iconography reappears in various contexts with figures which can most probably be interpreted as those of adults, probably most numerous (and significantly as to their interpretation!) among the hundreds of rock-cut reliefs of Simitthus (Th. Kraus, *Die Felsreliefs am Tempelberg*, in: *Simitthus 1: Die Steinbrüche und die antike Stadt* (Mainz 1993, 71–90), which strangely do not feature in M.'s book, at all.

⁹ This does not only apply to the 2nd/3rd c. CE (cf. the examples from Thamugadi which M. references), but also to the earlier naked figures from which M.'s argument develops,

objects being offered and as social beings and future citizens at the same time (260) thus may need adjustment.

Chapter 7 (270–319) on ‘Making Offerings’ deals with how the stelae mediate, but also reshape ritual performances in their respective sanctuaries. Partly arguing through the case study of Hadrumetum, M. underlines that up to the 2nd c. BCE, the stelae describe rites primarily in terms of individualized acts operated through the votary’s voice (as the recurring formulae of the inscriptions, but also raised forearms, ears and mouths, as well as a singular figurative stele from Hadrumetum suggest, and as three extraordinary pieces from 3rd/2nd c. BCE Carthage with figures fronting altars may also indicate). Then, in the 1st c. (rather CE than BCE), a small number of figures sacrificing at altars appear on stelae from Hadrumetum. These shift the focus from individual engagement with the deity to group activity mediated through a high-status individual at a fixed altar and thus reconceptualize ritual practice, stressing the status of the offrand (confirming results of chapter 5). Beyond Hadrumetum, stelae focusing on animals (at altars) as well as the frontal figures standing beside an altar, which are most common on North African votive (and funerary) stelae – much more so than in other areas of the Roman world – underline that material offerings at an altar are the center of attention.

Chapter 8 (320–383) on ‘Remaking Spaces and Societies’, finally, turns to the changing spatial configurations of stelae-sanctuaries. Challenging the interpretation that ‘Semitic’ open-air sanctuaries became ‘Romano-African’ sanctuaries (with temples of types which remained ‘Punic’) through romanization, M. focuses on how the often observable process of monumentalization brought new modes of interaction: Although there is no fixed path or evolutionary trajectory, as a number of very different case studies suggest, the end of burying burned deposits, the creation of monumental altars as stages for animal sacrifice, of porticoes creating spaces for large groups of spectators, and of statues of deities looking down upon events in the courtyard are recurring aspects, and individual benefactors foregrounding their own elevated roles can frequently be recognized as the agents of these changes. Thus, even though the sanctuaries did not reproduce a fixed temple design, they did reproduce the hierarchical shape of imperial society.

The succinct conclusion on ‘Making Empire’ (384–390) reviews the main results, stressing that *molk* rites cannot be considered part of an unchanging ‘African’ mentality or related to a monolithic ‘African Saturn’, but that both practices and

which do not only consistently carry various objects which are usually considered votives, but of which at least one (Le Glay 1961, 391 Nr. 19) interacts with an altar.

deities were constantly reimagined under the impact of imperial hegemony, with the stelae finally turned into vehicles of prestige and individuation. On the one hand, the traditions of worship created by civic elites first made the 'Third Space' of a common Africa and then made it part of the Roman Empire; on the other hand, they always existed in many localized variants. In short: "Molk-style rites and stele-sanctuaries enjoyed their long popularity because of the plasticity of traditions [...which] could be adapted to sustain social systems, inequalities, and particular imaginations of the past [...and] not because they became fossilized" (390).

These results are significant, as they significantly reframe discussions of Northern African religious history, and the undercurrent of consequent postcolonial critique will be inspiring also for readers familiar with the general topics the book covers. The various fitting anthropological analogies and the wealth of theoretical approaches not only referred to, but made practical use of likewise contribute to making M.'s book remarkable. Admittedly, they sometimes overshadow his aim to set worship practices on a more direct material footing; at least, detailed discussions of the many local groups of stelae do not figure prominently in it, and the very basis of M.'s evaluations remains unclear: Although he often gives quantitative results which presuppose some sort of catalogue or list of Northern African votive stelae, this neither features in the book nor is its basis explained: Is it Le Glay's data? Has every effort been made to include as many stelae as possible from the same sites published elsewhere? In how far have the many unpublished stelae visible in some Algerian museums been added? This does not imply that consideration of more stelae would necessarily change M.'s results, but that if one is interested in the figures given by M., one is effectively forced to redo his analyses to understand them. The underuse of footnotes, mostly not referring to specific pages, likewise complicates effectively working with M.'s book. A final comment: M. is exceedingly skeptical about possibilities to date stelae (36–40) and makes very little effort to deal with style or changes in motives; the consideration of related funerary stelae may have proven helpful in this regard. It generally seems unfortunate that the countless funerary monuments of the late 1st c. BCE to 3rd c. CE, which are not only closely comparable in their images, but also their function as representational media of civic elites and sub-elites, are only very rarely referenced in passing – because this interchangeability of images (and the related problem of identifying pieces without inscriptions as either funerary or votive) is among the most notable facets of North African stelae of the Imperial period. The funerary stelae would have almost certainly added further weight to some of M.'s arguments. But then again, his book surely already deals with an impressive amount of aspects. Its value lies not so much in providing access to the enormous quantity of data available

(Le Glay remains fundamental in this regard, even though being outdated also in this respect) but in challenging previous interpretative frameworks and providing a host of novel approaches – and it is this field in which M. excels. „Religion and the Making of Roman Africa“ deserves to be widely read not only by specialists on the archaeology of Northern Africa and the history of religion, but by Roman archaeologists more generally.

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