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Matthew M. McCarty

Soldiers and Stelae: Votive Cult and the Roman Army in North Africa

Introduction

In the study of networks in the ancient world, the diffusion of cults plays an especially important role in understanding how such networks moved not just people and objects, but also ideas; how worldviews and *façons de penser* could be spread, could impact each other, and create cultural transformations extending beyond superstructure and veneer. Exploring the full depth of such cultural transformations requires two steps: first, establishing the webs which allowed such transmissions of ideas, and second, studying the reception and adaptation of the moving ideas. This paper will focus on the former, and will explore the mechanisms by which ideological connectivity was created. In so doing, it will look not at networks on the "global" scale, but instead at those networks essential to the maintenance of the Roman Empire, those smaller, inter-provincial systems of exchange.

In order to tackle this problem, I will examine the spread of one particular cult - that of Saturn - through one particular part of North Africa - the military zone north of the Aurès. The worship of Saturn was a phenomenon that was particularly pronounced in Africa, from Mauretainia to eastern Proconsularis. In my examination, I will dispel at least two myths born of French colonialist scholarship which maintain a wide degree of currency: that of the cult of Saturn as "pan-African," tied to African identity, and that of the cult as primarily a non-military, peasant cult¹.

My argument is simple: that Rome created the networks which allowed even the small-scale spread of ideas in a manner that had not been seen before, and, in the case of the cult of Saturn in Africa, that the mechanism which caused the diffusion of the cult was the movement of the military and its recruitment patterns². To make this argument, I will do three things: first, review the cult of Saturn in Africa and show the correspondence between the military and the cult in the Aurès; second, use the iconography to demonstrate that soldiers were the vehicle which encouraged the spread of the cult; and third, by comparing the Aurès with the previous legionary headquarters, suggest that new recruitment patterns of the second century were responsible for this diffusion.

Cult Spread

The cult of Saturn in North Africa originally developed out of the Punic worship of Baal Hammon. This Phoenician deity received a particular form of cult in which offerings of infants and/or small animals

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¹ E.g., TOUTAIN 1920, III, 2; LE GLAY 1966, 486; BENABOU 1976, 370–5.

² *Pace* LE BOHEC 1989, 548.

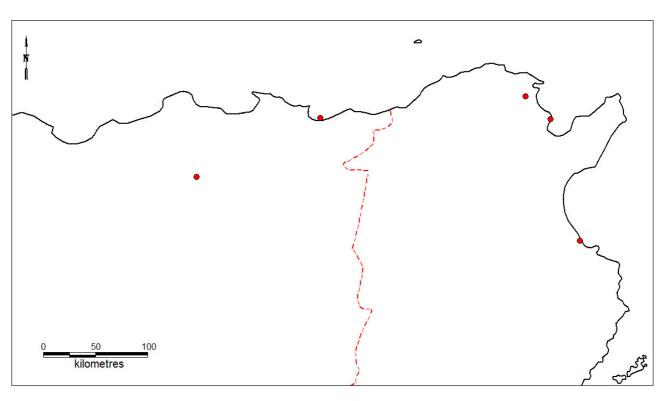


Fig. 1 – Tophets attested prior to 146 BC (author).

were incinerated and then buried in sanctuaries known by convention as tophets with inscribed or figured votive stelae erected over them³. Prior to the fall of Carthage, the worship of Baal, as attested archaeologically, was

limited to a relatively small number of predominantly Punic settlements and those urban centres where Punic culture was "in vogue," such as Cirta (fig. 1)⁴. Following the destruction of Carthage in 146 BC, there was a boom in the number of sanctuaries dedicated to Baal, and in this particular kind of worship, which extended into the hinterlands of Cap Bon, the Sahel, the Tunisian Tell, and northern Numidian territories (fig. 2). By the mid first century AD, even at those sanctuaries where cult continued to be offered, the name of the deity to whom the urns and/or stelae were dedicated was generally changed to Saturn⁵. In addition, more new sanctuaries were founded over the course of the first two centuries AD, in sites ranging from the forum of Thugga to the rural mountaintop of Djebel Bou Kournein⁶.

One area from which this modality of religious observance remains distinctly absent is southern Numidia, the area around the Aurès. No pre-second century AD tophets have been noted in the region, but this could be due to less exhaustive exploration than elsewhere. Yet no stelae, objects in which the authors

³ Punic tophet rites: BÉNICHOU-SAFAR 2004, 151–9. Post-146 BC sites where these rites are in evidence: Althiburos: unpublished; currently under excavation by M. NABIL KALLALA of the *Institut National du Patrimoine*. Announa: GSELL 1914, 31. Bou Kournein: TOUTAIN 1892. Cirta: BERTHIER, CHARLIER 1955. Hadrumetum: CINTAS 1948. Henchir el Hami: FERJAOUI 2002; 2007. Henchir Ghayadha: FERJAOUI, M'CHAREK 1990. Ksiba: GUEY 1937, 86–7. Lambafundi: LE GLAY 1961, II, 114–5. Thinissut: MERLIN 1910. Thuburnica: CARTON 1908. Thugga: CARTON 1897; LANTIER, POINSSOT 1942. Le Glay 1961, I and II provide a gazetteer of sites on which stelae have been found.

⁴ Pre-146 tophets: Carthage: BÉNICHOU-SAFAR 2004; Hadrumetum: CINTAS 1948; Utica: CINTAS 1951, 77–9; Cirta: BERTHIER, CHARLIER 1955.

⁵ E.g., at Thinissut: MERLIN 1910.

⁶ Thugga: *IIAfr* 558; KHANOUSSI, MAURIN 2000, no. 23: *L(ucius) Manilius L(ucii) F(ilius) Arn(ensi) Bucco IIvir dedicavit / L(ucius) Postumius C(aii) F(ilius) Arn(ensi) Chius patron(us) pag(i) nomine suo et Firmi et Rufi filiorum / forum et aream ante templum Caesaris stravit aram Aug(usti) aedem Saturn(i) / arcum d(e) s(ua) p(ecunia) f(aciundum) c(uravit)*. The location of the temple to Saturn is not specified, but given that Chius' works seem to focus around the forum area, it is probable that the temple stood there as well. The inscription can be dated to AD 36/7. Bou Kournein: TOUTAIN 1892; LE GLAY 1961, I, 32–73.

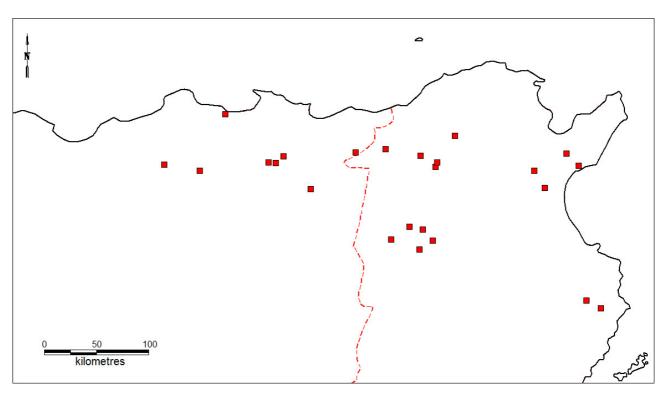


Fig. 2 – New tophets attested in 2nd-1st centuries BC (author).

of the *Atlas archéologique* were quite interested, have been found that would point to the presence of this cult practice in honor of Baal/Saturn⁷.

By the end of the second century AD, however, at least 10 different sites have been recorded as having multiple stelae either with inscriptions or images that link them to Saturn (fig. 3)⁸. Since stratigraphic evidence is entirely lacking for the stele-sanctuaries in the region, the dating of these cult centres is based on external evidence provided by inscriptions, when available, on the carving techniques used, and on the forms of the togas worn by the figures shown on the stelae⁹. Unfortunately, only rarely are the stelae themselves inscribed in this region, and dated temple dedications to Saturn often postdate the period of use of the stelae precincts¹⁰. The method of carving provides a useful, if broad, dating tool: in general, stelae which were engraved or carved in flat relief appear to be earlier than those carved in high relief, a technique

⁷ GSELL *ET AL.* 1911, fe. 27, 28, 37, 38.

⁸ Stelae at Lambaesis: LE GLAY 1961, II, 80–113; LE GLAY 1971; Lambafundi: LE GLAY 1961, II, 115–24; Thamugadi: LE GLAY 1961, II, 130–61; Mascula: LE GLAY 1961, II, 164–77; Verecunda: GSELL *ET AL.* 1911, fe. 28, 10; Diana Veteranorum: LE GLAY 1961, II, 77–8; Calceus Herculis: LE GLAY 1961, II, 184–98; Ksar el Haïmeur: GSELL *ET AL.* 1911, fe. 28 no. 69; LE GLAY 1961, II, 182–3; Hr. Sidi Yahia: GSELL *ET AL.* 1911, fe. 28, no. 240; Lamiggiga: DOMERGUE 1892.

⁹ Seriana poses a unique problem in the region; stelae were seen here prior to 1892, and only a cursory description given of their decoration, which was used to suggest a pre-Roman date: "le pavot, le pomme de pin, la grenade, le raisin, symboles de la fécondité; la main levée, le croissant et le disque, le caducée, le palmier, le gâteau divin, le gros et menu bétail des sacrifices, dont les images sont toujours les mêmes; la pose, le tenue, le vêtement des personnages indiqueraient des ex votos puniques," (DOMERGUE 1892, 122). Unfortunately, there is no graphic record of the stelae, and according to Le Glay future expeditions to the site did not encounter any such stelae (LE GLAY 1961, II, 179, n. 1). All of the symbols cited by DOMERGUE, however, also appear on Roman imperial stelae from the region, and thus may not necessarily indicate a pre-Roman date. At the same time, DOMERGUE also describes one stele in particular as being in high relief and showing two figures pouring libation over an altar, in a style he attributes to Greek influence (p. 122); this would seem instead to fall well within the series of imperial-period reliefs from the region.

¹⁰ E.g., at Thugga, where the temple of AD 194/5 replaced the open stele-field, and at Henchir el Hami, where the building of the temple in the late second century seemed to mark the end of regular use of the precinct with stelae. Thugga: CARTON 1897; LANTIER, POINSSOT 1942. Henchir el Hami: FERJAOUI 2002, 70; 2007, 86–7.

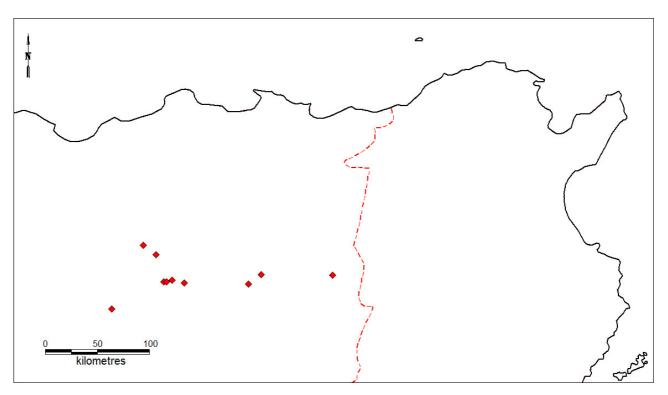


Fig. 3 – New stelae sanctuaries in the Aurès region in the 2nd century AD (author).

that only appears on the stelae in the late first or second century AD¹¹. All of the documented stelae from the Aurès were carved in high relief, suggesting a relatively late date for the practice of stele-erection there. Finally, the togas worn by figures on the stelae from these sites are always the high- or late-imperial types, confirming the likelihood of a later chronology¹².

Most of the new, second century AD sanctuaries are located around new urban centres formed in the period: at Lambaesis, Lambafundi, Thamugadi, Mascula, Verecunda, Diana Veteranorum, Calceus Herculis, and Lamiggiga. Although for the majority of these sites, nothing is known of their pre-Flavian settlements, all developed closely in conjunction with the military presence. In the cases of Lambaesis, Thamugadi, Mascula and Calceus Herculis there was a direct relationship with the legion¹³. The other sites show a large presence of veterans, and suggest similarly close ties to the *Legio* III¹⁴.

¹⁴ Verecunda, closely linked to Lambaesis, also seems to have been populated largely by veterans, e.g., *CIL* VIII, 4197, 4238-4248; see GSELL *ET AL*. 1911, fe. 28, no. 240. The name of Diana Veteranorum, so-named in the Antonine Itinerary, is shown by its name to have been a veteran settlement; GSELL *ET AL*. 1911, fe. 28, no. 62. *CIL* VIII, 4590 demonstrates that the legion was active here from at least

¹¹ Cf. LE GLAY 1966, 18–9. Engraving and flat relief continued to be used at some sites until a late date; nevertheless, high relief provides a rough *terminus post quem*.

¹² The dating is based on the ankle-length of the toga and the sinus falling below the knee. Many also display a triangular, cross-chest *umbo*, characteristic from the Trajanic period onwards, but which LE GLAY mistakenly takes for a late second or early third century date as a "preliminary" *toga contabulata*. For dating of togas: GOETTE 1990; STONE 1994.

¹³ Lambaesis served as a camp for at least a detachment of the legion since the Flavian period, and as its headquarters from the Trajanic/Hadrianic period; even its civilian population was largely made up of veterans and maintained close ties to the garrison through intermarriage; others settled there from other urbanized parts of Africa: GROSLAMBERT 2003, 179; 196. The circumstances of Thamugadi's foundation are known from *CIL* VIII, 2352+17842, which specifies the city *per Leg III Aug condidit*. Although it has been argued that the site was founded as a veteran colony (e.g., FENTRESS 1979, 126, with earlier bibliography), an opinion challenged (e.g., LE BOHEC 1984, 101–2), it is certain that from a very early point, Thamugadi had a mixed population and close ties to Lambaesis: see FENTRESS 1983, 163. An epitaph of Flavian date from Mascula for a member of the Cohors II Thracum (*CIL* VIII, 2251) suggests a possible military presence from that period, and it seems probable that the site garrisoned at least a cohort (LE BOHEC 1989, 424). Calceus Herculis was the site of a legionary detachment from ca. AD 158, when a dedication was set up there to Antoninus Pius and the legate, L. Mattucius Fuscinus (*CIL* VIII, 2501; LE BOHEC 1989, 381).

At one well-explored site, Lambaesis, the epigraphy and archaeology related to the placement of the temple and the dedicants also bespeak a close tie to military personnel. There, the stelae were recorded as being found largely in one location: south of the temple of Aesculapius, near the camp used by the detachment of the *Legio* III sent here in AD 81¹⁵. An inscription referring to a *"templum et ara et porticus"* for Saturn and Ops, built between AD 211 and 217, was found near Aïn Nemeur, northwest of the Hadrianic Grand Camp, while two small dedications were discovered south of the Grand Camp, although perhaps as *pierres errants*; it is worth noting that one of these altars was dedicated by a prefect of the legion after AD 198¹⁶. The central cult area to Saturn, however, seems to have been here; although far from the Grand Camp, the whole area, surrounded by a civilian settlement that grew up around the camp, seems to have been the site of much of the "non-official" military religion in the area, with a Capitolium (probably of the second century AD), a temple to Aesculapius in which numerous legionaries made dedications and which



Fig. 4 – Stele from Lambaesis. Limestone. 2^{nd} -early 3^{rd} century AD (photo courtesy of N. Benseddik).

developed into a large multi-temple religious complex, and a temple to Neptune established by the legion by the Aïn $Drinn^{17}$.

The correlation, both temporally and geographically, while it does not prove that the military presence directly *caused* the diffusion of the cult and brought it to the region, does point to a strong correspondence between the two. Of course, the appearance of so many stelae in the region in the second century may be the result of the apparent increase in all varieties of stone-cut monuments in North Africa at that time¹⁸. Nevertheless, given that relatively well-dated stelae of the first century BC-first century AD are documented on numerous sites, generally in great quantities and thus seeming to buck this general trend, the absence of any stelae in the Aurès prior to the second century is still striking¹⁹.

Togas and the Army

Arguing such a correlation between the cult practice and the military presence from the absence of evidence is always dangerous. Yet the representations of the dedicants on the stelae also suggest that the dedicants were largely Roman citizens, and thus probably tied to the military. At Lambaesis, of the stelae showing male dedicants in which their costumes could be made out, over 92% wear the toga, and most of these are the standard second century togas (figs. 4-5). At Thamugadi, a settlement founded by the *Legio* III in AD 100 and which maintained close ties to the military

the joint reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. At Lamiggiga, the presence of veterans is attested in numerous epitaphs, e.g., *AE* 1969, 711–713; 1979, 677; see DOMERGUE 1892, 126. Almost nothing is known of Lambafundi beyond the stelae, although its location - directly between Lambaesis and Thamugadi - may suggest close ties with the two military settlements; if nothing else, it appears to have been near imperial estates, for an epitaph, *CIL* VIII, 2439, records the son of a procurator.

¹⁶ Temple: *CIL* VIII, 2670; LE GLAY 1961, II, 82, no. 6. Dedications: *CIL* VIII, 2666-7; LE GLAY 1961, II, 82–3, nos. 2-3.

¹⁷ GSELL *ET AL.* 1911, fe. 28, nos. 222-4. Settlement: JANON 1973, 217–8 Capitolium: JANON 1985, 37; see DUPUIS 1994, for date relative to the "*temple anonyme*." Temple of Aesculapius: JANON 1985, dated to ca. AD 160-2 by a dedication in the back of a side chapel by D. Fonteius Frontinianus, a legate of the legion (*CIL* VIII, 18089). Neptune: *CIL* VIII, 2654.

¹⁸ E.g., as seen in PEYRAS' survey of the northern Tunisian Tell: PEYRAS 1991, 194–5.

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¹⁵ Date of move: *AE* 1954, 137, recording building of stone walls and camp for a cohort; see LE BOHEC 1989, 354. GSELL *ET AL*. 1911, fe. 27; 20. For the camp: JANON 1973.

¹⁹ It should be noted that Peyras also catalogues at least one possible first century AD stele to Saturn at Hr. R'mel: PEYRAS 1991, 234.

and Lambaesis in particular, 86% of the figured dedicants are shown togate. At Calceus Herculis, the site of a detachment of the legion from the Antonine period, the proportion is 65%. For comparison, another site which provided a series of nearly 40 stelae of the imperial period, Tiddis, in the more heavily urbanized north near the Numidian capital of Cirta, has only 10% of the male dedicants wearing togas; the rest wear tunics or long robes²⁰. The proportion of togate figures at the military sites around the Aurès, then, is significantly higher than elsewhere. While it is impossible to determine whether every figure shown in toga was actually a Roman citizen - or simply had aspirations to citizenship - it seems most likely that a majority *were* Roman citizens. Since the settlement of Lambaesis did not receive colonial status until some time after AD 197, and the togate figures do not wear the *toga contabulata* that would have been standard after the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, they were probably citizens who had moved into this area, rather than residents of the region, or groups of citizen-settlers moved in large numbers, the presence of legionaries - required to be Roman citizens - provides the most plausible explanation for this²². Such a view receives further support from the representation on a stele from Lambaesis of a figure wearing a cuirass²³.

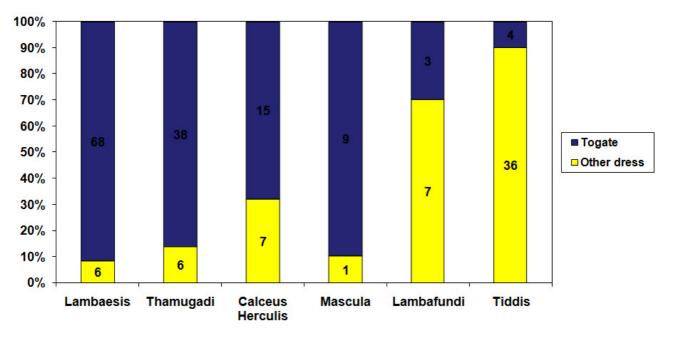


Fig. 5 - Percentage of identifiable togate males at selected sites (author).

New Cult Spread and Recruitment in the Legio III

A comparison between the sites in the northern Aurès region with the earlier legionary camp sites at Theveste and Ammaedara further illustrates the mechanisms by which the cult of Saturn, and associated ideas, spread around Lambaesis. At both sites, evidence for military participation in the cult of Saturn is extremely limited, suggesting that its connection to military personnel was a second century AD phenomenon and tied to new recruitment practices.

²⁰ Tiddis: Berthier, Le Glay 1958.

²¹ Gascou 1972, 194–5.

²² At the same time, the presence of the military no doubt spurred the economic development of the region and no doubt drew merchants and others; see FENTRESS 1979.

²³ LE GLAY 1961, II, 108, no. 95.

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At Ammaedara, the evidence for cult to Saturn is practically non-existent during the period of the legion's occupation: from before AD 14 to AD 75²⁴. A handful of stelae have been found at the site; four show figures wearing high-imperial togas, thus datable to after the legion had decamped²⁵. The other figures, mostly on stelae that are undatable but which may belong to the first century, are all tunicate; while this does not preclude citizenship or belonging to the legion, it seems unlikely that a citizen dedicant would not advertise this fact more prominently. Prior to AD 75, there was thus little engagement between soldiers in the legion and the cult of Saturn.

Theveste, the main encampment of the legion from AD 75 until the 120s, presents a slightly different picture. Most of the evidence for the cult of Saturn comes from a *favissa* at Henchir Rohban, 700m. northwest of the forum area²⁶. At least one of the stelae shows a toga commensurate with late first century AD styles, and may date to the period of legionary occupation²⁷. A veteran, P. Vettius Saturninus, also dedicated a statue of Saturn there, although the date of the dedication is uncertain and nothing precludes him being a veteran who settled in Theveste in the second century AD²⁸. Nevertheless, a minority of the practitioners of the cult at Theveste seem to have been affiliated with the military, though more than at Ammaedara. Only a third of the stelae from the site with male figures show *togati*, and these may not have been citizen-soldiers. Most tellingly, a list of priests found in the area around the *favissa* contains only two men with both *nomen* and *cognomen*; the rest have only *cognomina*, suggesting that they were not citizens, nor soldiers, but instead indigenes²⁹. If nothing else, the local population controlled the cult as *sacerdotes*; while not precluding the participation of soldiers in this local cult, the religion lacked strong ties to the garrison at Theveste.

The differences between the eastern military camps at Theveste and Ammaedara and those of the second century are clear: in Lambaesis, a much closer connection between soldiers, veterans, and the cult of Saturn is attested by the geographic and temporal correlations as well as a greater proportion of dedicants who showed themselves as Roman citizens. The reason for the appearance of the cult of Saturn in the region north of the Aurès in the early-mid second century AD was thus not simply tied to the presence of the legion there; if that were the case, similar patterns might be expected at Theveste or even Ammaedara. Instead, the popularity of the cult of Saturn was connected not only with the movement of the legion into this area, but also with new recruitment practices of the second century onwards.

In the first century AD, only 28% of soldiers in the *Legio* III who recorded their place of origin in their epitaphs came from within Africa; the majority came from the Gauls (table 1). Under Hadrian, however, this pattern of recruitment changed dramatically; over 58% of the soldiers recorded came from Africa, the majority from northern Proconsularis and the Sahel, where the cult of Saturn was well-ensconced, and most of the others from settlements like Ammaedara³⁰. Unfortunately, the lack of inscriptions on the stelae from the military sites prevents the direct confirmation that soldiers moving to the region from other parts of the

²⁴ Legion at Ammaedara: AD 14 milestones calling it *castra hiberna*: *CIL* VIII, 10012; 10018. See LE BOHEC 1989, 341–2; MACKENSEN 1997, for evidence of a late Augustan date for the camp.

²⁵ LE GLAY 1961, I, 329, no. 12; 330, no. 13; BARATTE AND BENZINA BEN ABDALLAH 2000, 69, nos. 11-2.

²⁶ Dedication: *AE* 1933, 233. Hr. Rohban: POULLE 1878, 455 (discovery); FARGES 1879; FARGES 1884; LE GLAY 1961, II, 332–3. The walled, decorated "*sacrum*" was found filled with fragments of statues, stelae, and inscriptions, and given the amount of intentional mutilation done to many of the images, it seems likely that the collection was formed after the mid-fourth century AD. Only a handful of the objects have to do with Saturn, contra LE GLAY 1961, I, 332, and it is probable that they were culled from multiple sanctuaries, and not necessarily from a sanctuary in the immediate vicinity of the "*sacrum*," which was surrounded by a necropolis.

²⁷ LE GLAY 1961, I, 339, no. 12.

²⁸ FARGES 1879, 229, as *P(ublius) Vettius Saturninus / Veteri Iovi Optimo Maximo / Saturno / v(otum, s(olvit) I(ibens) a(nimo)*; a more probable reading is *veter(anus)*; see LE GLAY 1961, I, 336, no. 3.

²⁹ Publ. GSELL 1917, 329, no. 44; IIAfr 3018: ...[sa], erd(otes, quos inposui(t, /... [n]on(is, lun(iis, ipse ascendit / [...] G(aim, Porcium Felicem /[...]em Hiberanu(m, Datulu(m, Augurinu(m, / [...] Privatu(m, Felicissimu(m, / [...] Exceptu(m, Vernulu(m, / [...]u(m, / [...]ai Atelliu(m, / [...]mu(m, Dextru(m, fil(ium, et Silvanu(m, / [...]ulian(um, et Pullaenianu(m, / [...Vi]ctorinu(m, / [...]un Donatu(m, Saturninu(m, / [...]nu(m, Dextru(m, / [...]an Maiu(m, et Caccaban / [...]an Rufinu(m, et Rufinianu(m, / [...]art Rufione(m, / [...]un lucundu(m, et lucundu(m, fil(ium, et Nivasiu(m, / [...]nu(m, Fortunatu(m, Priscu(m, filios / [...Sa]turninu(m, et Inventu(m, libertu(m, / [...]e(m, fil(ium, /[...]toniu(m, et Ciripittate(m, fil(ium, /[...] co(n, s(ulibus, XV K(alends, lun(ias, Aureliu(m, Lollian(um, ...)

³⁰ Recruitment statistics: LE BOHEC 1989, 494–508.

province brought the cult of Saturn with them; nevertheless, the balance of evidence seems to point this way. If nothing else, the new recruitment patterns ensured the wide popularity of the cult and its physical manifestation on the stelae of the region.

ORIGIN	AD 0-100	AD 100-161	AD 161-192	AD 193-238
Non-African	72%	41%	5%	4%
Northern Proconsularis & Sahel	28%	34%	61%	30%
Camp	-	14%	23%	36%
Other African (e.g., Numidia, Tripolitania)	-	11%	11%	30%
SAMPLE SIZE	25	281	56	524

Table 1 – Recruitment statistics for the III Legio Augusta (after LE BOHEC 1989, 494–508).

Conclusions

These correlations suggest that the army played an important role in creating networks by which ideas could be exchanged within a province. The Roman military was not simply the bearer of centralized "Roman" cults and culture, nor of foreign, imported cults. The cults it spread were local, and this occurred not, as with most of the "oriental cults", at the level of officers, only one of whom made a dedication to Saturn within the entire province, but more likely at the level of simple citizen legionaries themselves³¹. In this way, the central institution of the Roman army served to create ties to Rome, but to more tightly link the individual microregions of a single province.

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Matthew M. McCarty Lincoln College, University of Oxford E-mail: matthew.mccarty@arch.ox.ac.uk

³¹ See DANIELS 1975; STOLL 2001, 199 for officers as key in cult transfers. Dedication to Saturn by Ti. Teltonius Marcellus, prefect of the legion: *CIL* VIII, 2666, from Lambaesis.

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