

Analysing Orthopraxy in the Roman Empire in the 1st-3rd Century AD

Name : Brinelle Cladson James

Student Number : 1602107

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In the study of Roman religion, it is essential to grasp the 'Roman understanding' of Gods. Not only did the Romans believe in mythological Gods who they symbolised in human forms, but they also considered all not understandable phenomenon or objects as 'spiritual' or 'what embodied the presence of a deity'¹

What instils the concept of orthopraxy among historians is that though the Romans easily accepted new Gods into its polytheistic culture, they rigidly kept to sacrificial rituals and prayers of their ancestors. This practice was implemented to keep the Gods happy and continue with the age-old 'contract' of 'do ut des' which explains the Roman belief in a nutshell. They understood blessings, punishments, and signs to be highly dependent on their sacrifices and prayers to the Gods rather than faith and 'perfect character.'² Livy notes the emphasis put on ritual practices and mentions various occasions where actions or festivals had to be repeated until they were done right.³ Thus we see that prior to the 1st AD the Romans had a strict orthopraxical empire

Roman acceptance of Gods.

Unlike the later centuries where the Romans actively persuaded the spread of Christianity, the Romans preferred absorbing religious differences in the cities they conquered if approved by the state, as they believed prayer and sacrifice could be improved by adopting features of other cults and removing undesirable traits in them⁴. Even so, Warrior treats the term 'toleration' with caution as she notes the suppression of the cult of Bacchus or Dionysus in 186BC⁵. Therefore, Gods that could be 'Romanised' and brought into the Roman society were easily accepted such as the cult of Apollo which gained significance during the plagues in Rome. After its initial suppression, the Goddess Isis too gained popularity in the Roman empire as she did not provoke anti-social roman behaviour and yet brought into Rome in the concept of life after death. The Romans considered religion as an affair of the state which we witness in the Lex De Colonia Genetiva found in the town of Urso written in 44 B.C, which emphasises rituals and festivals that should be held by the city and the 'religious figures' who should perform them. The tablet throws light on the rules laid upon Roman colonies to appease the Gods with no genuine regard for the beliefs of the colonists. In his book, Cato the Elder writes of agricultural prayers and sacrifices that too

¹ Sen. Ep. 41.3

² Hor. Ep.1.16.57-62

³ Livy 41.14.7, 41.16.1-2, 22.9.9-10

⁴ D.H.2.19.3

⁵ Warrior 2002:83

concentrated on practice and the repetition of prayer than the concept of an individual's faith which gained importance in later centuries.

Orthodoxy in Rome

Because the Roman religious belief gave little thought to the afterlife and the travel of the soul to heaven or hell, in the 1st century gained monotheistic religions professing faith gained momentum and gave birth to orthodoxy in Rome.

Even before the birth and spread of Christianity, monotheism attached itself to the Roman empire through Jewish and Mithraic beliefs. Though the Jews were repeatedly banned in the Roman cities due to the conversion of many Romans⁶, Judaism was considered an official religion under Julius Caesar and continued to be revered amongst the Roman population concerning its age. Thus the Jewish diaspora was present in various parts of the Roman empire such as the Greek East and the port cities of Puteoli and Ostia⁷. Jewish-Roman writer Josephus, who remains the primary source for the history and treatment of Jews in Rome, states that Jews were exempted from their military service in many occasions on the basis of religious grounds and were exempted from court on the days of Sabbath. Thus, Judaism gained popularity amongst the privileged and common people even though it differed in beliefs as a monotheistic religion, Feldman in fact lists 31 factors that persuaded the move to a monotheistic religion, factors that were not only religious but that had socio-economic benefits to the pagans as well⁸.

Mithraism too gained popularity in the 1st century, though it wasn't as widespread as Christianity. Archaeological discoveries have been made in Ostia and most military centres on the Roman border. Roman emperors widely supported the cult as it imposed loyalty to the Roman imperial house. Limitations arose when the Mithraic cult refused the participation of women and gained no firm base in the Roman empire, and thus was always treated as an imported cult⁹.

Rayner states that by the 1st Century A.D, Roman polytheism was under attack due to the lack of correlation between religion and morals and its disability to

⁶ V.Max.1.3.3

⁷ Price 2012: 4

⁸ Feldman 1993: 370-381

⁹ Klauck and McNeil 2003: 148

satisfy intellectuals and failure to offer immortality¹⁰. The Christian peasant movement that started in the 1st century began to gain momentum in the Roman Empire, which was not received well by the state. The popularity of the Christian movement led to the Romans fearing a political upheaval (similar to the fear and oppression of the Bacchic cult in 186 BCE) which is witnessed the letters of Pliny the Younger, who though found no evil in the cult felt threatened enough to seek permission for the slaughtering of Christians in the Bithynia-Pontus region for which he was governor¹¹. The oppression of Christians as an 'imperial policy' continued well into the 3rd Century AD under the rule of emperors such as Decius and Valerian who forced every Roman citizen excluding the Jews to sacrifice to the pagan gods as a method to determine the followers of Christ. Persecution continued well unto the 4th Century until Constantine took the throne in 312, and Christianity was recognised as an official religion with the Edict of Milan in published 313AD.

Thus, in conclusion, the era between the 1st-3rd Century AD saw a change in religious beliefs due to the mobility of its citizens across the Roman empire which led to the shift from a polytheistic to a monotheistic culture where faith and character overweighed rigid religious practices.

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¹⁰ Rayner 1942: 113

¹¹ Plin.Ep.10.96

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Analysing the La Ghorfa Stelae and its Implications on Our Understanding of Roman Africa

Name: Brinelle Cladson James

Student Number: 1602107

Module: CLAH7017

During the Carthaginian period in North Africa, not much of the inland was occupied. Though cities with commercial importance grew, the Carthaginians left the local Berber population to themselves. Even so, Neo-Punic inscriptions of later centuries show that Punic influences were strong in regions such as Maktar, Thugga, and the westward areas. After the Carthaginian Empire's defeat to Rome in 146 BC, and after the inclusion of Juba, the territory came to be known as Africa Proconsularis. Even so, Roman influence did not develop until the latter part of the 1st century AD; when Roman sovereignty was extended among the nomadic interiors and so the imperial cults spread inwards to the mountains of Central Tunisia¹².

The La Ghorfa stelae were discovered in the 19th Century, and since then more than 40 of them have surfaced. The name La Ghorfa itself seems to be a problematic term as the stelae were not found in the plains of Ghorfa as it was first believed but came from the Maktar region in central Tunisia¹³. Moore agrees with the conclusions of M'Charek as it places the group in an agricultural zone where votive offering was crucial to a good harvest. The western part of this agrarian zone became a hub of cross-cultural identity as Punic, Numidian and Roman groups met, and this gave rise to the La Ghorfa stelae. Pickard states that he saw the 1st half of the 2nd Century AD as a 'renaissance' in the Numidian kingdom as the La Ghorfa stelae show their figures more anthropomorphic and natural, yet they were distinct from Greco-Roman art due to the blurring of real and supernatural, using frontality, symmetry and showing no concern for space and proportions.

The stelae are found in various sizes, though their shape mainly remains consistent, they have a rectangular body of 0.38m wide, 0.15m thick and an average height of 5m. Due to the Roman influence on their art, the stelae began to look decorated and natural compared to abstract Punic style. The stelae started to look more compartmentalised and had a strict layout¹⁴. The stelae now consisted of three registers, the top register contained deities, the middle register included the dedicant and an altar, and the last register consisted of the animal that had been offered and/or Atlantes who seem to be carrying the offering scene on their hands.

Registers

Unlike stelae found in other regions of the African Proconsularis, the top register in the La Ghorfa stelae show no indication that the offerings were indicated for Ba'al or Saturn. In fact, the stelae are a combination of Punic beliefs and Roman culture. On top of the undamaged stelae, we see the Punic symbol of the 'Sign of Tanit,' though it could be believed that the sign indicates that the stelae were

¹² Broughton 1968: 88

¹³ M'Charek 1995: 247

¹⁴ Moore 2000: 33

dedicated to the Punic gods Ba'al and his counterpart Tanit, Moore states that it is unclear to whom does this divine symbol indicate¹⁵. The abstract sign is further 'romanised' as it is having hands that hold grapes and pomegranates and its rectangular body transforms into a robe. Yet, this humanised form lacks and distinctive sexual features that would help determine the God or Goddess worshipped here. Sculpted above the sign are the images of a disc and crescent which could represent Sol and Luna. Replacing the disc in some stelae is a wreath that contains a human face. It is not clear if these faces represent either a male or female form further confusing the object of the stelae. The top register next contains Greco-Roman gods such as Dionysus, Venus, and Eros. The Hellenistic figure of Dionysus could also be interpreted as Liber Pater who shared his appearance and functions with Dionysus. Though he was a minor Roman god, the cult of Liber Pater was rather prominent in Roman Africa identifying him as the god of proper civic behaviour¹⁶. Liber Pater is coupled with Venus who was very prominent in the Proconsularis. These gods, along with Eros, represented fertility and fecundity. In some stelae, these gods are replaced with Jupiter and the Dioscuri. These stelae have a formal setting as Jupiter is seated along with the Dioscuri, holding his bolt and his eagle is placed next to him. These formal stelae seem to represent a formal relationship between the dedicant and the god.¹⁷

In the middle register, our attention is drawn to a structure and a dedicant within the structure. The structure itself seems to have undergone some transformation during the century. While the Punic stelae are architecturally simple, stelae from the Roman period are intricate. The aedicula or temple consists of a pediment, columns and a niche. The pediments in the La Ghorfa stelae are detailed with a bird or bust. The bird varied between an eagle or a rooster, both these birds signified authority and strength¹⁸. Apart from the birds, the busts could be either male or female. While the male busts suggest Jupiter, the female busts give no clear indication of the Goddess they represent, speculation of the image range between Tanit or Caelestis to Venus. The dedicants are not restricted to men, and some stelae show a couple giving their offering to the gods. Roman influence on the stelae is witnessed in the clothing of the dedicants where the men wear the Roman togas and women are dressed in a tunic. The dedicants seem to be holding their fruit offerings with them. Unlike Roman culture, the dedicants in Roman Africa do not cover their head while making their sacrifice. Questions arise as the identity of most of the dedicants in the La Ghorfa group is hidden. Therefore, it becomes difficult to categorize the status of these people. Moore suggests that due to the quality of the La Ghorfa stelae the dedicants were probably well off though they had no political or economic ranking. Wilson though indicates that considering Ba'al and Saturn were the prominent gods in Roman Africa; they appealed to the middle and lower classes¹⁹.

¹⁵ Moore 2000: 43

¹⁶ Moore 2000: 53

¹⁷ Moore 2000: 60

¹⁸ Moore 2000: 70

¹⁹ Wilson 2005: 408

The lower register is where we see the animal that was offered to the god. Most stelae depict images of bulls while others show a sacrificial scene prior to the killing of the bull. Evidence from these images may point that the sacrifices may have been made to the goddess Cybele who seemed to be very popular in Roman Africa. Apart from the animal, the lower register also pictures Atlantes who seem to be holding the middle register. The reasons for doing so are not clear and speculative; the Atlantes seem to be protecting the sacred aedicula or the sacrifice of the dedicant.

The La Ghorfa stelae, seem to still be a mystery as they throw no proper light to the gods that were recognised by the local population nor did they indicate the life of the dedicant. While a handful of stelae have inscriptions on them, they do not prove anything. Inscriptions are found both in Neo-Punic and Latin and use cursive lettering. Names such as Bellicus and Rogatus that have been inscribed may indicate that they were Roman citizens though Moore notes interestingly that their name suggests that the locals may not wish to appear 'roman.'²⁰ Broughton states that African families took forms of Roman names though they were used incorrectly as we also evidence in the La Ghorfa stelae²¹. Within Africa the local cults continued to prosper without 'romanising' their beliefs, such as in the stelae of Ain Nemcha where the 'change' seems superficial; though the inscriptions became Latin and the figures wore a Romanised attire, its posture, and ritual elements did not change²². This thought is validated by Moore who notes that though the appearance and the divine symbols of the La Ghorfa stelae are influenced by Roman art, the character of the stelae and type of people that sacrificed did not change substantially. Thus, the study of the La Ghorfa stelae it shows that though Roman art styles were welcomed in the Proconsularis, cultural identity did not shift.

²⁰ Moore 2000: 146

²¹ Broughton 1968: 113

²² Wilson 2005: 408

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