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The Divine Presence in the *Tetrapylon* of Lepcis Magna and its Relation to the *Domus Divina**

Abstract

The *Tetrapylon* of Lepcis Magna is possibly one of the most important monuments built under the rule of Septimius Severus. Located in his homeland and in an emblematic place, at the intersection of the city's two most important streets – the *cardo maximus* and *decumanus maximus* – it is a vital example of how images were at the service of those in power. Its unique shape, in addition to being an arch lacking epigraphic texts, makes it testimony not only to be studied from a topographical or ideological point of view, but also from an artistic one. On the reliefs the imperial family is widely represented participating in triumphal processions or sacrifices in which the heirs, Caracalla and Geta, together with Septimius Severus himself, play a leading role as guarantors of imperial prosperity and stability. In our specific case study, we will focus on trying to explain the messages that emerge from the presence of the *domus divina* together with various divinities. To this end, we will not only offer a description of the main iconographic motifs, setting out the theories developed by the main studies, but we will also focus on the political messages derived from the images. We conclude that, although responding to testimony promoted by the city's elites for their most illustrious citizen, it is possible that the *princeps* was directly involved in its promotion.

Keywords: Imperial family, Severan dynasty, Gods, Roman art

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1 Introduction

The *Tetrapylon* of Septimius Severus, with a quadrangular ground plan of approximately 14.00 x 14.00 m, is made of four solid blocks of lime mortar, 5.19 and 3.89 m thick, and completed by a structure of local limestone. The total height is about 3.50 m high at 2.05 m wide. Almost 2.000 tons of Proconnesian and Pentelic marble were used to cover it.¹ Although it was suggested that it could have been crowned by an inscription – based on the discovery of letters belonging to a monumental epigraph –, this theory was discarded.² It is the sculptural panels that give it meaning and from which certain messages were intended to be conveyed. Their content can be summarised as highlighting the military successes of the *princeps*, using the theme of military triumph over the Parthians,³ the *Concordia Augustorum* with the promotion of the imperial successors, Caracalla and Geta, and the respect for religious customs through scenes of worship or sacrifice in which the *domus divina* was the protagonist.⁴

Designed in the city of Lepcis Magna (Libya), it is located at the intersection of the *cardo maximus* and *decumanus maximus*. The first one goes in a northeast-to-south-westerly direction from the ancient forum to the *Porta Augusta Salutare* and is known as *via triumphalis* because it also contains the arches of Tiberius and Trajan. The second one, known as *via in mediterraneum*, further inland and with a northwest-to-southeasterly orientation, follows the coastal road that connected Carthage, Oea and Alexandria. Regarding the arch of the Lepcitane *princeps*, one of the main aspects to consider when studying it is the intense restoration to which it was subjected. It is estimated that during the fourth century CE the structure was altered after an earthquake that affected the whole Tripolitanian area. In addition, it was practically razed to the ground during the Libyan War (1911–1912). For this reason, extensive preliminary studies and subsequent reconstruction were needed,⁵ as only two of the four pylons survived and the surrounding area was scattered with various marble materials that needed to be reintegrated.⁶

1 Daguet-Gagey 2000, 375; Mühlenbrock 2003, 212–214; Wilson 2007, 295; Faust 2012, 168; Musso 2015, 386; Mugnai 2022, 257.

2 Ioppolo 1968, 83–91; Cordovana 2007, 409.

3 Faust 2011, 113–114; Faust 2013, 495–496. Authors such as Ryberg 1955, 160 or Fähndrich 2005, 35 suggested that the tribes could be from North Africa.

4 Wilson 2007, 295; Rowan 2012, 85; Faust 2013, 494; Balbuza 2017, 275–276; Papini 2018, 77–78.

5 Bartoccini 1931, 32; Ioppolo 1968, 79–80; Mühlenbrock 2003, 206, 212; Musso 2015, 386; Ghedini 2020, 201; Mugnai 2022, 257.

6 Mühlenbrock 2003, 214; Wilson 2007, 295; Cordovana 2007, 407–408.

The elevated location of the *Tetrapylon*, thanks to a platform made up of three steps, obliged road traffic to use secondary roads in order to avoid it.⁷ Despite abundant bibliography, including works by Bartoccini, Townsend, Strocka, Parra and La Rocca,⁸ in our case we will focus on religious aspect within two main parameters. On the one hand, we will study the political connotations that emerge from the divinities that accompany the different members of the *domus divina*; on the other, we will try to explain those scenes in which the imperial family adopts a divine aspect.

2 Possible imperial intervention on the configuration of the arch

The majority of studies consider that the *Tetrapylon* was a work promoted by the decurions of the city or by prominent citizens for their most illustrious son and, by extension, for the whole *domus divina*.⁹ However, we suggest that it is possible that the imperial chancery may also have been involved in its design; the high cost being one of the arguments in favour of this hypothesis. It was during the Severan period that an important change took place with regard to the phenomenon of evergetism in the North African *civitas*. Plautianus, the emperor's praetorian prefect, was the last private individual to participate in the embellishment of Lepcis Magna. After his death in 205 CE, there is no other citizen known to have been directly involved in the promotion or restoration of new public spaces except Septimius Severus or members of his family.¹⁰ Although it is not possible to be sure and it is true that, as Bertolazzi¹¹ has pointed out, the construction of provincial arches paid for directly by the emperor was not a frequent phenomenon, we cannot rule out the direct intervention of the Lepcitane *princeps* in this specific case, especially if we bear in mind that, as for the rest of the building activities of the city at the time there is no doubt in this respect.¹²

The quality of the materials and images, which required the work of expert stonemasons and sculptors who may have been working directly for the emperor, are other reasons for reconsidering this interpretation.¹³

7 Musso 2015, 386.

8 Bartoccini 1931, 32–152; Townsend 1938, 512–524; Strocka 1972, 147–172; Parra 1978, 807–828; La Rocca 1985, 2–11.

9 Lichtenberger 2011, 76; Rowan 2012, 85; Faust 2013, 494; Bertolazzi 2020, 209.

10 Cordovana 2007, 324.

11 Bertolazzi 2020, 209.

12 Cordovana 2012, 70; Wilson 2007, 297; Rowan 2012, 90.

13 Cordovana 2012, 70; Musso et al. 2018, 111.

In fact, some of the craftsmen from the Aegean area or Aphrodisias who contributed to works of the period – such as the forum, basilica, colonnade street or nymphaeum – also collaborated in the decoration of the arch.¹⁴ This does not mean that local craftsmen were not involved, since there are elements in the reliefs of the pilasters common to the decoration of the arch of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus at Oea that show the reproduction of local patterns.¹⁵ However, we propose that the coexistence of public and private capital, a theory put forward by Pensabene¹⁶ among others, must have been more frequent than historiography thinks. An example of this can be found in the city of Lepcis Magna itself. Although the arch dedicated to Marcus Aurelius, dated 174 CE, was mainly paid for by Avilius Castus, who contributed 120,000 sesterces, additional capital from the city itself was needed to complete it.¹⁷ Finally, it is interesting to note the symbolism of the Arch of Septimius Severus, as it is not only one of the main monuments put up under his rule, but also because it was located in his homeland. Although it is true that the citizens of Lepcis Magna were the protagonists and the building of the arch was the perfect occasion to show gratitude to its most illustrious citizen, as well as to remind all other cities from where he came, there is no doubt that Septimius Severus was informed about the project at all times, at least as far as the figurative content of the reliefs of the arch goes.¹⁸ This exchange of ideas between the imperial chancery and the various city administrations or prominent figures in society is one of the fundamental characteristics of Roman art which, in turn, differs from the current conception of propaganda.¹⁹

3 Sculptural panels: their political transcendence from religious imagery

The attempt to contextualise the scenes due to the lack of literary and epigraphic information has generated an intense historiographical debate regarding the monument's chronology. Two proposals have been put for-

¹⁴ Strocka 1972, 171; Musso 2015, 386; Mugnai 2022, 257.

¹⁵ Meyers 2017, 110.

¹⁶ Pensabene 2001, 101–102.

¹⁷ Di Vita-Évrard 1963, 398, 400–401 (dating it to 174 CE); Birley 2011, 84 (dating the arch to 174 CE); Meyers 2017, 120–121 (dating the arch to 173 CE). On the inscription, cf. *IRT*, 1011 = *AE* 1967, 536.

¹⁸ Lichtenberger 2011, 76, 144; Rowan 2012, 86.

¹⁹ Zanker 2002, 10.

ward in terms of the supposed visit of the *domus divina* to North Africa. The first one in 202–203 CE and a later one in 206–208 CE.²⁰ Regardless of the problems of dating, we agree with Fährdrich²¹ that it is impossible to establish a specific chronological period due to the lack of written evidence. It is true that iconographic criteria can help establish an approximate time frame. However, we must not forget that we are dealing with a large-scale construction in which a great deal of time was invested from its planning to its completion. This idea could be corroborated by the iconographic evolution proposed by Cordovana.²² The portraits of Caracalla and Geta on the attic panels could be dated to the years 200–203 CE, coinciding with the beginning of urban reforms in the city. On the other hand, the representations of the *domus divina* on the pylons are more mature and should be dated to a later period. Therefore, although the absence of Plautilla and Plautianus in the representation may help to establish a chronology,²³ we cannot rule out the possibility that while at the time that the monument was designed both were considered for inclusion, as events and construction work developed, they were finally discarded. In addition, we must take into account the problems deriving from the identification of figures and the significant gaps in some reliefs, especially those located on the pylons. Perhaps Plautilla and Plautianus were originally integrated, but their representations were either broken or not found.

As far as possible parallels are concerned, Musso²⁴ proposes that the monument should be dated between 205 and 209 CE. The manner in which the figures of the Lepcitate *princeps* and Julia Domna are developed is similar to the images of the imperial couple on the *Porta degli Argentarii* in Rome. In both examples, as well as the arch designed in honour of Septimius Severus in the forum, the victories against the Parthians recur. This allows us to consider that these images belong to a similar context, despite the fact that they evolved in different ways. It is even possible that this connection of themes and iconographic motifs was the result of an interaction between the imperial chancery and the corporations or individuals in the provinces and in Rome itself. The emperor, as the highest authority, controlled and supervised their content, especially when there were scenes linked to the *domus divina*, whose symbolism and political connotations were important for the legitimacy of his rule.

20 Papini 2018, 79. On the different positions, cf. Cordovana 2007, 418 n. 213 and 214.

21 Fährdrich 2005, 32.

22 Cordovana 2007, 419.

23 Stročka 1972, 169–170; Musso 2015, 387; Bertolazzi 2020, 210, 212.

24 Musso 2015, 387.

4 The reliefs of the attic

Four large reliefs located in the upper part of the frieze, measuring 7.30 m wide and 1.70 m high, and eleven smaller ones, 3.5 m high and 2 m wide, installed inside the pylons, are the most representative iconographic elements of the monument.²⁵ For our analysis, following Bertolazzi's recent structure,²⁶ we will begin with the upper ones and then move on to those on the pylons.

1. Northwest frieze (fig. 1). The scene is dominated by the emperor on a chariot with his sons.²⁷ Bartoccini²⁸ identified the structure in the background, slabs D and E, as the lighthouse of Lepcis Magna. He considered it to be an event that took place inside the city wall, or, although unlikely, a procession that the Lepcicians had longed for, but that never happened. What seems clear is that it was not a triumph because of the absence of lictors and the costumes worn by the soldiers. Townsend,²⁹ also assuming that it was Lepcis Magna, proposed the triumphal entry of the *domus divina*, adding that the prisoners correspond to the African border tribes that were defeated. Bianchi Bandinelli³⁰ opted for the *reditus* in Ostia, while Ghedini³¹ placed the procession in Rome. The latter author took into consideration the presence of chained prisoners, trophies, military and civilians preceding the imperial chariot. It is possible that this was an allusion to the *decennalia* commemorating the victory against the Parthians, interpreting the polemical structure with the representation of the tower-lighthouse of Ctesiphon. Beyond the problems derived from the topographical and historical setting, we are interested in the message that was intended to be conveyed. The chariot was decorated on the front with deities typical of Lepcis Magna (Hercules, Liber Pater and Tyché) and on the side with a winged Victory wearing a floral crown.³² A lost slab probably completes the scene with a trophy and a Victory.³³ The presence of the divinities on the chariot can be interpreted as the promotion of the emperor by these deities, as well

25 Faust 2013, 494. Recently, Ghedini 2020, 14 has proposed measurements of 2 m wide and 5.60 m high for the reliefs of the pylons.

26 Bertolazzi 2020, 209–210.

27 Strocka 1972, 150; Wiggers and Wegner 1971, 88, 113.

28 Bartoccini 1931, 111–112, 114.

29 Townsend 1938, 217; Strocka 1972, 166; Faust 2013, 496.

30 Bianchi Bandinelli, Caffarelli and Caputo 1964, 47; Musso 2015, 386.

31 Ghedini 1984, 69; Ghedini 2020, 211–212; Musso 2015, 386.

32 Ryberg 1955, 160; Strocka 1972, 150–151; Rowan 2012, 86; Bertolazzi 2020, 209.

33 Bober 1943, 36; Rowan 2012, 86.



Fig. 1: Attic Reliefs. Northwest frieze. Triumphal procession of Septimius Severus with his sons. Tripoli (Lybia). Assaraya Alhamra Museum. Neg. D-DAI-ROM-61. 1695.

as a tactic undertaken by the Lepcitans in order to link imperial power with the city.³⁴

Although it is true that Hercules also figures in the foundation myths of other places, as Lichtenberger³⁵ pointed out, his appearance with Liber Pater is barely documented in the imperial monuments of the period. It is doubtful that, in addition to Lepcis Magna, he could be included in the arch of the forum in Rome. Hercules with a genius is on the door of the *Argentarii*, while on the relief of the Via Paola in Rome he is by himself.³⁶ This indicates that we are dealing with a direct allusion to the city, something that is even more pronounced with the presence of the Tyché of Lepcis Magna, as its presence is only documented on the Lepcitane monument. However, these three deities have been on city coins since the first century BCE. This would confirm that the local elites were able to emphasise autochthonous elements in the decoration of the arch, although this did not mean that the emperor was oblivious to what was being developed; on the contrary, it was part of the exchange of ideas or *consensus* between the centre and the provincial leaders mentioned above. Moreover, the *princeps* also used Liber Pater and Hercules in his own interests, as the coins beaten in the context of the civil war show.³⁷ In addition, in the Quirinal area at Rome, a large temple dedicated to both Liber Pater and Hercules was installed in the reign of

³⁴ Rowan 2012, 90–91.

³⁵ Lichtenberger 2011, 32, 74–76.

³⁶ On the relief of Via Paola, cf. Lichtenberger 2011, 80–83.

³⁷ Rowan 2012, 32, 42.

Septimius Severus.³⁸ This allows us to reconsider the incorporation of these gods as an exclusive allusion to Lepcis Magna, and it could also be part of dynastic politics. In short, the *princeps* was interested in showing that he was the victor, that he had achieved a pacified and lasting empire and that all this was endorsed by the divinities themselves.

2. Southeast frieze. Despite its fragmentary state, it is possible to interpret the relief with another procession, being related to the preceding one in its compositional scheme, although with some variations. Once again, soldiers and prisoners surround the chariot with Severus and his sons, with the novelty of a Victory flying over the imperial figures.³⁹ Starting from slab D, three of the four horse in the foreground make up for the missing chariot, which would be led by a young man in a short tunic; a similar situation to the previous panel. In that we can see that the boy, carrying a bulla, was to be identified as an allegory of the *gens Septimia*, a *Genius Legionis*, *Honos*, a *Lar Militaris*, a *Lar Familiaris* or a simple *camillus*.⁴⁰ In the background there are a number of soldiers, and, unlike the preceding image, on the foreground there is Julia Domna as a personification of Victory (fig. 2).⁴¹ The identification of the Augusta with the goddess may not have been a spontaneous or local act but may have originated in a decision of the imperial chancery itself. As well as finding precedents with regard to her predecessors,⁴² she also adopted the form of the goddess in other examples, such as a relief now in Warsaw.⁴³ In this example, Julia Domna is with Caracalla, thereby lending legitimacy to her son's rule. In the panel from Lepcis Magna the *Virtus Augusti* is celebrated with the Augusta embodying a double maternal facet: mother of the imperial heirs and *mater castrorum*, extending her maternity to the soldiers and, therefore, guarantor of military victories. This symbolic aspect allowed her inclusion in the representation. Given her gender, it would otherwise have been impossible for her to participate in a military scene, which would explain why she is surrounded by divinities. Specifically, she is flanked by Hercules and a female figure with a helmet, interpreted as the *Virtus* of the Roman people or the personification of Rome.⁴⁴ Bearing

38 D. C. 76, 16, 3–4 (Boiss., 1901, 371).

39 Bartoccini 1931, 111; Cordovana 2007, 426; Musso 2015, 386; Ghedini 2020, 212.

40 Bartoccini 1931, 114; Townsend 1938, 515–518; Ryberg 1955, 160; Strocka 1972, 151; Cordovana 2007, 412; Rowan 2012, 86.

41 Ghedini 1984, 69; Lichtenberger 2011, 77, 357; Musso 2015, 386.

42 Lichtenberger 2011, 358–359.

43 Warsaw, National Museum, inv. nr. 139678. A recent study with bibliography. Cf. Ghedini 2020, 220–222.

44 Faust 2011, 206.



Fig. 2: Attic Reliefs. Southeast frieze. Central slab of the southeast relief depicting the triumphal procession of Septimius Severus. Tripoli (Lybia). Assaraya Alhamra Museum. Neg. D-DAI-ROM-61.1704.

in mind that the scene is set in Rome⁴⁵ and that Liber Pater is not present, we might suppose that Hercules does not appear as one of the *dii patrii* of Lepcis Magna.

3. Southwest frieze (fig. 3). This panel has been interpreted as a staging of the *Concordia Augustorum*. According to the most widespread theory, Septimius Severus holds out his right hand to Caracalla (*dextrarum iunctio*), while Geta stands in between them.⁴⁶ However, in 1931 Bartoccini⁴⁷ proposed that the *princeps* offers his hand to his younger son, a hypothesis that was later discarded by Townsend.⁴⁸ The latter pointed out that, due to portrait criteria and the difference in height between the heirs, the original proposal could not be accepted. However, there are authors such as Cordovana who maintained or did not reject this hypothesis.⁴⁹ Septimius Severus holds a *lituus* in his left hand, possibly an allusion to the establishment of a new epoch. Nonetheless, it is also possible that it was intended to allude to the renewal or extension of the territorial limits of Lepcis itself.⁵⁰

As far as the gesture of *dextrarum iunctio* was concerned, Walter, Kampen and, more recently, Rowan⁵¹ asserted that it was not meant to be the embodiment of a real event, but rather the symbolic concept that two *Augusti* did not imply division in government. On the contrary, both constituted a single entity based on the idea of concord. Ghedini,⁵² on the other hand, did consider that it could be a specific event, the inauguration of the joint consulship between Caracalla and Geta in 205 CE, while Cordovana favoured the presentation of Geta to the Lepcitane people as the new Augustus, co-regent with his father and brother. If the latter hypothesis is accepted, it would not only validate Barsocchini's theory,⁵³ but would also explain the frequent error in Geta's Tripolitanian inscriptions in which he appears invested as Augustus after 201 CE, while his official sanction took place in September or October 209 CE.⁵⁴ In the background, in a central position between the three

45 Strocka 1972, 171–172; Faust 2013, 496.

46 Townsend 1938, 517; Ryberg 1955, 161; Wiggers and Wegner 1971, 150; Strocka 1972, 150, 159; Bonanno 1976, 150; Walter 1979, 271–272; Ghedini 1984, 63; Kampen 1991, 227; Fähndrich 2005, 39–40; Lichtenberger 2011, 76–77; Faust 2011, 119; Rowan 2012, 91; Musso 2015, 385; Ghedini 2020, 204; Bertolazzi 2020, 209.

47 Bartoccini 1931, 116–122.

48 Townsend 1938, 517.

49 Cordovana 2007, 414.

50 Bartoccini 1931, 116; Strocka 1972, 159; Townsend 1938, 518; Ghedini 1984, 63, 68; Ghedini 2020, 204; Fähndrich 2005, 39; Faust 2013, 499.

51 Walter 1979, 276; Kampen 1991, 227; Rowan 2012, 91.

52 Ghedini 2020, 205–206.

53 Cordovana 2007, 414–415, 420–422.

54 Kienast, Eck and Heil 2017, 160; *IRT*, 913–915, 292.

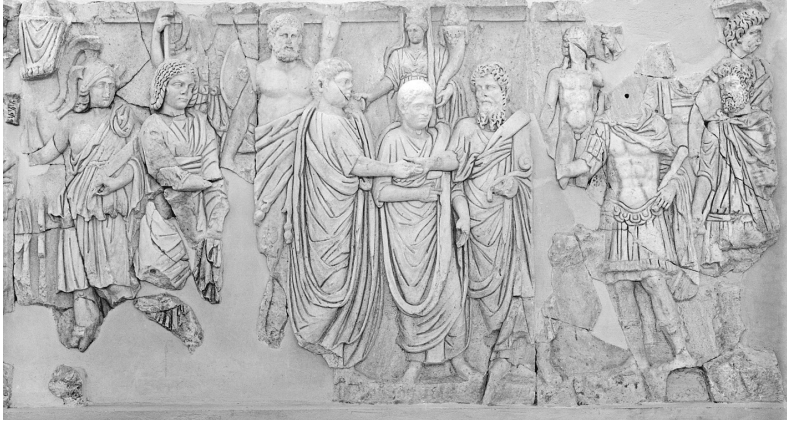


Fig. 3: Attic Reliefs. Southwest frieze. Central section of the relief depicting a scene of Concordia Augustorum. Tripoli (Lybia). Assaraya Alhamra Museum. Neg. D-DAI-ROM-61. 1701.

imperial males, is a crowned, veiled female figure holding a cornucopia. Her identification has been debated, with Concordia, the Tyché of Lepcis Magna, Tyché of the Severan *domus* or the Virtus of the Roman people being proposed.⁵⁵ In this sense, we believe that the approach offered by Ghedini⁵⁶ may be valid. The goddess is blessing dynastic unity and, therefore, it would be logical for her to be the Tyché of the *domus divina*.

In the background, slightly to Septimius Severus' left, is Liber Pater, while behind Caracalla Hercules and Minerva can be seen, the latter holding shield, spear, and aegis with *gorgoneion*. In the foreground, to the right of the first-born, is Julia Domna and immediately behind her is a female figure with the appearance of an amazon, Virtus.⁵⁷ The goddess of war, and we could also say Virtus, seems to give the Augusta a bellicose connotation that can only be explained by her status as *mater castrorum*. Ghedini⁵⁸ considered that this anomaly of incorporating a woman in representations recreating a public act was due to the strong personality of Septimius' wife. However, this assertion ought to be further explained. One of the fundamental pillars of the *princeps'* policy was to show a united and strong family. Moreover,

55 Concordia: Townsend 1938, 519; Tyché of Lepcis Magna: Strocka 1972, 159, 167; Fähndrich 2005, 39; Lichtenberger 2011, 77; Rowan 2012, 91; Tyché of the Severan *domus*: Ghedini 1984, 68; Ghedini 2020, 206; Virtus of the Roman town: Cordovana 2007, 415.

56 Ghedini 1984, 68; Ghedini 2020, 206.

57 Strocka 1972, 158; Cordovana 2007, 414–415.

58 Ghedini 1984, 65–66.

literary sources report Julia Domna's participation in the *ludi Saeculares* of 204 CE. Specifically, she led a procession of 110 matrons to the Capitoline area where banquets were held in honour of Diana and Juno Regina.⁵⁹ This point makes it possible to consider that, due to the Augusta's fundamental role in imperial politics, she could not be absent from a representation in which family unity was extolled. In fact, the proximity of the divinities to the central nucleus of the scene is logical. Not only is it presided over by the Tyché of the *domus*, blessing the act of concord performed by Septimius Severus and his sons, but Liber Pater and Hercules, beyond appearing as *dii patrii* of Lepcis, also assumed a prophylactic function for the successors⁶⁰ and the entire imperial family.

4. Northeast frieze. Situated on the margin leading into the city, at each end of the relief are two bulls in different positions to be slaughtered. The one on the right-hand side is being led towards the centre, while the one on the opposite side has its head lowered and is being held by a *victimarius*, while another individual raises an axe in order to execute him. Once again, a group of soldiers (slabs A–C) act as spectators. Slab D, positioned in the central part, is the one in the worst state of preservation, and its interpretation has been a subject of discussion.⁶¹ While in one of the most recent works, Musso⁶² considered that Septimius Severus and Julia Domna were performing a sacrifice, Ghedini,⁶³ to the contrary, maintained that the Augusta was the only celebrant. This has been the most accepted theory. She is holding an incense box (*acerra*) in her left hand and in the other hand, which has not been preserved, it is speculated that she was holding a patera. Her central position, once again, highlights Julia Domna's importance in dynastic politics (fig. 4). In the damaged part, in addition to the altar or tripod on which the relevant libations were made, Septimius Severus, Caracalla and Geta may also have been incorporated.⁶⁴ The absence of the Lepcitane *princeps* in the relief allowed him to be identified with a crowned, bearded head on the far right of the fragmentary part. However, Strocka⁶⁵ modified the approach on the basis of the enthroned female figure inserted behind the Augusta, proposing that it was Juno. If the presence of the goddess is accepted, it would be

59 Ghedini 1984, 11; Bertolazzi 2020, 212.

60 Rowan 2012, 92–93; Ghedini 2020, 206.

61 Ryberg 1955, 161; Strocka 1972, 161; Alexandridis 2004, 203 no. 227; Rowan 2012, 94.

62 Musso 2015, 386.

63 Ghedini 1984, 57; Ghedini 2020, 207.

64 Ryberg 1955, 161; Strocka 1972, 161–162; Ghedini 2020, 207; Faust 2011, 119; Bertolazzi 2020, 209.

65 Strocka 1972, 163, 168. Theory accepted by Bonanno 1976, 150. Prior to Strocka, Wiggers and Wegner 1971, 89.

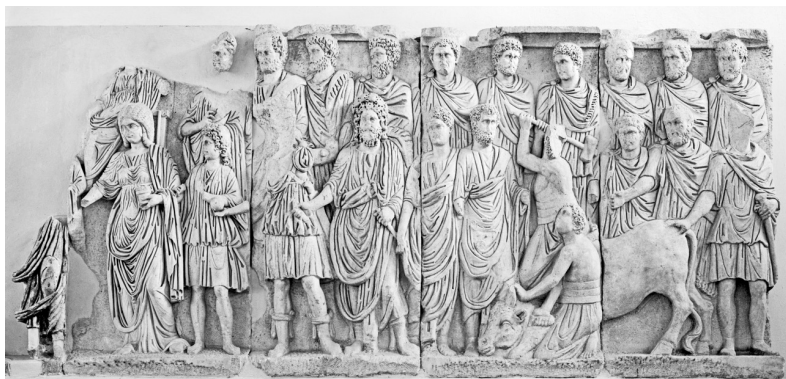


Fig. 4: Attic Reliefs. Northeast frieze. Right section of the relief depicting a sacrificial scene. Tripoli (Lybia). Assaraya Alhamra Museum. Neg. D-DAI-ROM- 61. 1699.

logical to assume that her husband was also present. Strocka maintained that the head attributed to the emperor, due its idealised treatment and smaller size, would be in the space reserved for the divinities; the identification with Severus was ruled out and Jupiter was proposed instead. A spear positioned in slab C would be held by a divinity, possibly Mars,⁶⁶ with Minerva standing in an intermediate space between the god of war and her father. To the left of Julia Domna are a series of divinities, beginning with the infant figure identified as Honos, then Virtus, with the Dea Roma proposed as an alternative, and finally a bearded and crowned figure, the *Genius Senatus*.⁶⁷ Septimius Severus's absence in the representation could be due to the fact that the beneficiary of the sacrifice was the *princeps* himself. There seems to be a *consensus* among the scientific community that, given the divinities represented, the setting had to be Rome.⁶⁸ Accepting this interpretation, Ghedini considered that it was the *supplicatio* and *sellisternium* performed by Julia Domna during the *Ludi Saeculares* of 204 CE in honour of Juno Regina and Diana. This does not imply that the generic content represented by this sacrifice, the *pietas* of the imperial family and, therefore, the guarantee of the *pax deorum* for all the Roman people, was the main element

⁶⁶ Ryberg 1955, 162; Strocka 1972, 164; Rowan 2012, 93–94; Bertolazzi 2020, 209; Ghedini 2020, 208. Recently, Faust 2011, 119 affirmed this interpretation when he noted a bearded head with a Corinthian helmet in the deposits of the Tripoli Museum.

⁶⁷ Strocka 1972, 164–165. He was identified as Septimius Severus by Ryberg 1955, 161; Rowan 2012, 94 or Bertolazzi 2020, 209.

⁶⁸ Ryberg 1955, 134; Strocka 1972, 168; Lichtenberger 2011, 78; Faust 2013, 498–499.

expressed.⁶⁹ In fact, we believe that we must be cautious in formulating hypotheses, since we do not know whether the *princeps* and his sons were originally represented in this frieze.

5 The reliefs of the pylons

As for the minor reliefs their attachment to the arch is more problematic due to their fragmentary situation.⁷⁰ Due the context, similar to the context of the attic panels, La Rocca's proposal regarding their location is maintained.⁷¹ We will not analyse all of them individually, but instead select those in which the imperial family is present alongside divinities, or those in which the members of the *domus divina* are represented as gods.

In the first panel a sacrifice is recreated (fig. 5). Although the composition is bipartite, it has to be understood as a whole. In the upper scene the emperor and his sons are found in priestly attire (*capite velato*) in front of a temple. In the lower plane two bovinds around a central altar where the animals are to be sacrificed are accompanied by *togati* and two *victimarii*. It is possible that the scene with the members of *domus divina* was part of the rituals prior to the immolation of the bulls. Otherwise, it would have been necessary to include an altar on which to make libations.⁷² In total there are nine figures. To the left of Septimius Severus is Caracalla and, between them, in the background, Hercules carrying the *leonté*. On the other side of the Lepcitan *princeps*, the damaged part, there is a female figure identified as Julia Domna and, behind her, Geta. The deities between Septimius Severus and his wife, and between the latter and the emperor's youngest son, cannot be identified. It seems logical to consider that between Geta and the Augusta would be Liber Pater, especially if we bear in mind that Hercules is incorporated in the representation.⁷³ The head between Severus and his wife is more problematic since, although the vast majority of historiography considered it to be the Tyché of Lepcis Magna, Ghedini,⁷⁴ considering its proximity to the panel of the *dextrarum iunctio*, proposed the Tyché of the *domus divina*. This hypothesis could be accepted by the fact that the four representatives

⁶⁹ Ghedini 2020, 209; Bertolazzi 2020, 212.

⁷⁰ Cordovana 2007, 415.

⁷¹ La Rocca 1985, 10.

⁷² Ryberg 1955, 135; Ghedini 1984, 76–77; Parra 1978, 807; Alexandridis 2004, 200 cat. 221; Faust 2011, 115, 118; Faust 2013, 497–498.

⁷³ Faust 2011, 116; Faust 2013, 497.

⁷⁴ Ghedini 1984, 77; Ghedini 2020, 216.



Fig. 5: Relief from a pylon of the Arch of Septimius Severus. Sacrifice by Septimius Severus and his sons before a temple. Tripoli (Lybia). Assaraya Alhamra Museum. Neg. D-DAI-ROM-61. 1711.

of the imperial family seem to show their right hands clasped. The scene is flanked on the right side by the Virtus or Roma in amazon costume and, on the opposite side, a Silvanus sculpture.⁷⁵ Ryberg⁷⁶ considered the latter to be ‘an amalgamation of Silvanus and the *Genius Augusti*’. The crown and the bouquet would be attributes of Silvanus. The fact that he is dressed would fit in with the iconography of a Genius which, due to its proximity, would be the Genius of Caracalla. This hypothesis was refuted by Parra,⁷⁷ as there are parallels in which Silvanus is dressed, as in the arch of Trajan at Benevento. Faust,⁷⁸ to the contrary, proposed that he was a priest with branches, as there were precedents in the eastern part of Rome.

Harmony and family unity are the main ideas of the composition, especially if we accept that all the members of the *domus divina* had their hands clasped. The respect for customs and, specifically, for religious acts, is visible in the attitude of the male members of the imperial family in their priestly dress and the presence of the gods around them. Although the scene is set in Lepcis Magna,⁷⁹ and therefore the inclusion of Hercules and Liber Pater would be justified because they are the *dii patrii* of the city, we should not forget their role as gods protecting the *domus*. Their proximity to Caracalla and Geta shows that the *princeps*’ sons had divine support. It is therefore difficult to accept that the male figure on the left could be a priest or devotee, as Faust argued, as this would break with the harmony and symmetry prevailing in the representation.⁸⁰ It would be more logical to consider that there are gods on both sides, especially when Silvanus is on a pedestal.

The panel in fig. 6 is another rather damaged cult scene in which only Julia Domna is recognisable. The Augusta, with her right arm outstretched, could be holding a patera or, in correspondence with the previous panel, forming a scene of *dextrarum iunctio* with a member of her *domus*. Two *togati* are next to her, difficult to identify.⁸¹ Among the interpretations, in addition to Septimius Severus and one of his sons, they could also be Caracalla and Geta, as Alexandridis pointed out, although there is no absolute certainty.⁸² On the far right is a nude male figure on a pedestal, with his

⁷⁵ Bartoccini 1931, 74, 76, 78; Townsend 1938, 522; Ryberg 1955, 135; Parra 1978, 807–808, 810–813; Faust 2011, 115–117; Faust 2013, 497–498; Bertolazzi 2020, 210; Ghedini 2020, 214–216.

⁷⁶ Ryberg 1955, 135.

⁷⁷ Parra 1978, 810.

⁷⁸ Faust 2011, 116; Faust 2013, 498.

⁷⁹ Bartoccini 1931, 78; Faust 2013, 499.

⁸⁰ Parra 1978, 816; Ghedini 1984, 77.

⁸¹ La Rocca 1985, 6–7; Faust 2011, 120; Faust 2013, 499; Ghedini 2020, 216.

⁸² Alexandridis 2004, 200 cat. 220.

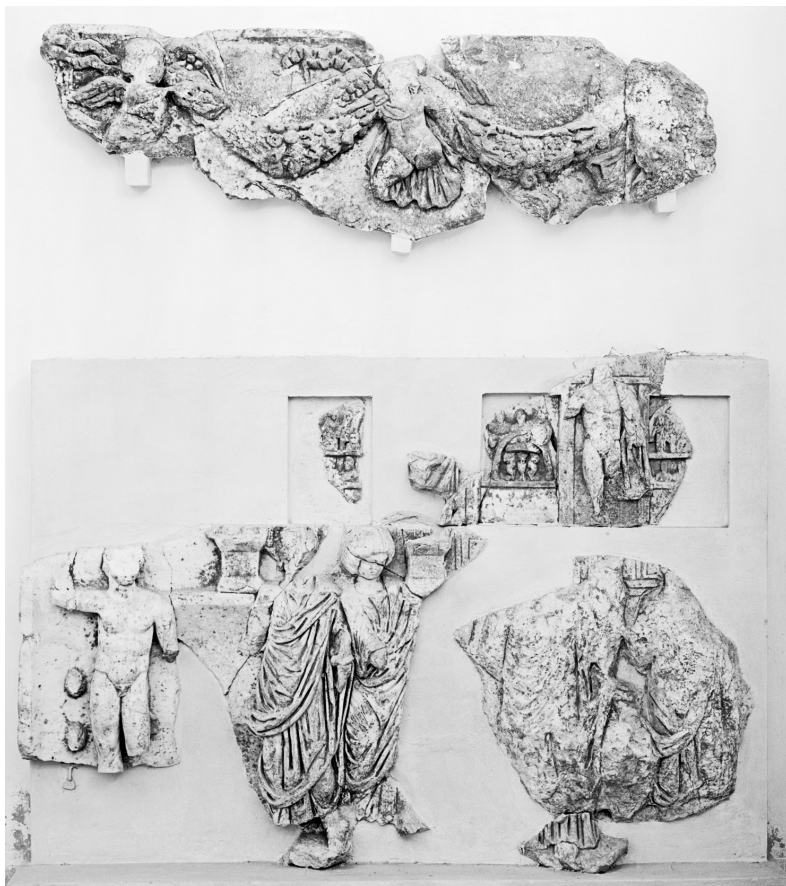


Fig. 6: Relief from a pylon of the Arch of Septimius Severus. Sacrifice in the cella of a Temple. Tripoli (Lybia). Assaraya Alhamra Museum. Neg. D-DAI-ROM-61. 1712.

right arm flexed and projected towards a higher plane, which has been identified as Liber Pater or Dionysos–Liber Pater. Behind the Augusta is a cornice-shaped structure in the left corner of which is Hercules naked with the lion skin, flanked by two small panels. On the right-hand panel is a banquet, while on the opposite divided panel, there is an arch with standing figures in the upper margin and two busts in the lower side. As for the fragments located in the space above the pedestal, positioned towards Julia Domna's right, there is a niche and inside it the drapery of a goddess carrying a cornucopia. This element was decisive in identifying her with the

Tyché of Lepcis Magna.⁸³ La Rocca⁸⁴ proposed some correspondence with the previous relief in which the *domus divina* is performing a sacrifice in front of a temple. Furthermore, the meaning would be similar. Once again, the theme of *pietas* and the *concordia* of the imperial family is reproduced, something that would be confirmed not only by the space in which the scene is recreated, in front of a podium with sculptural bases, but also by the way the imperial family appears if it is accepted that their hands were clasped.

The last three reliefs to be analysed are characterised by a tripartite structure with four figures on each level. The first two panels allude to the imperial successors and repeat the same compositional scheme: a young man is crowned by a Victory and is accompanied by different divinities, ten in each panel. In the first of them, specifically at the top, there is a togated man who has been identified as Caracalla owing to his proximity to Jupiter, although with reservations (fig. 7).⁸⁵ The god seems to be showing him the globe or extending his arm in order to shake hands with the *Augustus*. On a lower level, at the ends are Apollo and Diana and, in a central position, Liber Pater and an enthroned goddess identified as Ceres. In the last, starting from the right side of the panel, is Cybele accompanied by Attis performing a sacrifice. In the second relief the young man crowned by Victory is identified as Geta, provided he is not again Caracalla. He wears military garb and turns his head to his right where Liber Pater is. Behind Victory is Hercules (fig. 8). On the second level only two figures survive in good condition on the left margin, Mercury and the Virtus in amazon costume. The drapery of a female figure on the right could correspond to Minerva. Bearing in mind that Virtus is there, it could be proposed that originally Honos would have completed this level.⁸⁶ In the lower area, on the right-hand side, two individuals can be identified. La Rocca⁸⁷ considered the first to be the *Genius Populi Romani*. The female figure could not be recognised due to its fragmentary state.

In the last panel, on the second level Septimius Severus is enthroned as Jupiter. To his right Julia Domna stands, depicted as Juno, with a peacock at her feet. On the opposite side of the *princeps* is Minerva holding an aegis with a *gorgoneion* and an owl in the lower plane. At the other end, a female figure, standing and holding a cornucopia, has been identified as the Tyché

⁸³ La Rocca 1985, 6–7; Faust 2011, 120–121; Faust 2013, 499.

⁸⁴ La Rocca 1985, 7.

⁸⁵ Faust 2011, 126; Faust 2013, 502. For example, La Rocca 1985, 4 considered that in this relief Geta could be represented and in the following one, Caracalla.

⁸⁶ Bartoccini 1931, 86; La Rocca 1985, 3–4; Faust 2011, 126–127; Faust 2013, 502.

⁸⁷ La Rocca 1985, 4.



Fig. 7: Relief from a pylon of the Arch of Septimius Severus. Coronation of Caracalla by Virtus. Tripoli (Lybia). Assaraya Alhamra Museum. Neg. D-DAI-ROM-61.1714.



Fig. 8: Relief from a pylon of the Arch of Septimius Severus. Coronation of Geta by Virtus. Tripoli (Lybia). Assaraya Alhambra Museum. Neg. D-DAI-ROM-61.1715.

of Lepcis Magna.⁸⁸ However, following Ghedini's approach,⁸⁹ we consider it to be more logical to interpret her as the Tyché of the *domus divina*, especially if we bear in mind that this panel depicts a Roman theme and that what the goddess is doing is to praise the central nucleus of the dynasty. On the third level only a fragment has survived on the far right depicting Mars and Venus.⁹⁰ As for the manner in which Septimius Severus is represented, although he is depicted in Serapis' typology due to his hairstyle and beard, he is more reminiscent of fashions developed during the Antonine dynasty. However, the attribution to Jupiter may also be problematic, as he is not depicted as the god would normally be. These alterations are due to the provincial nature of the monument, since, as mentioned earlier, a similar situation also occurred with Hercules, who does not show the naked chest.⁹¹ The presence of Julia Domna as Juno and Minerva allows us to corroborate that this is a staging of the Capitoline Triad (fig. 9).

The reasons for the *princeps* and his wife being depicted as gods, which could be extrapolated from the scene in which Domna assumed the role of Victory, may derive from the provincial character of the monument. In the epigraphic testimonies of the Severan period, especially those from the eastern part, unconventional epithets such as *theos/theotatos*, appear to designate members of the *domus divina*. This fact, in addition to demonstrating a special link between the imperial family and the gods reflected in the art,⁹² allows us to consider that, in the provincial territories, practices were absorbed that, in principle, were not contemplated in the *urbs*. It was unthinkable that a member of the *domus divina* that was still alive would be represented as a god. What is interesting about this exceptional case, as Lichtenberger⁹³ emphasised when referring to the representation of Julia Domna as Victory, is that possibly the imperial chancery promoted these exceptional representations. In contrast to the preceding dynasties, the members of the *domus divina* who were still alive are represented in public monuments with a divine aspect. Therefore, we can point out, as Ghedini⁹⁴ suggested, that there was a great iconographic originality in the use of con-

88 La Rocca 1985, 6, 8; Alexandridis 2004, 200 cat. 219; Faust 2011, 123; Faust 2013, 501; Rowan 2012, 94; Papini 2018, 79, 81. For the description of the figures, cf. Ghedini 1984, 80–81; Ghedini 2020, 218–219; Bertolazzi 2020, 210.

89 Ghedini 1984, 81; Ghedini 2020, 219.

90 La Rocca 1985, 8; Alexandridis 2004, 200 cat. 219; Faust 2011, 123; Rowan 2012, 95.

91 Lichtenberger 2011, 114–117; Rowan 2012, 94–95; Lusnia 2014, 104.

92 Papini 2018, 79. On the inscriptions of Julia Domna with the main *corpora*, cf. Kettenhofen 1979, 117–122; Nadolny 2016, 92–98.

93 Lichtenberger 2011, 358–359.

94 Ghedini 2020, 219–220.



Fig. 9: Relief from a pylon of the Arch of Septimius Severus. Scene of the Capitoline Triad. Tripoli (Lybia). Assaraya Alhamra Museum. Neg. D-DAI-ROM-61.1713.

ventional elements, but with a different meaning, with the aim of highlighting dynastic politics.

Faust⁹⁵ proposed two possibilities as to the meaning of the panel. The first would be that the unlimited power of the father of the gods was analogous to the rule exercised by Septimius Severus, the virtues of the goddess being similar to those of the Augusta. Secondly, her connection with Minerva, constituting the Capitoline Triad, could be the staging of the Roman empire, of Rome in particular. The presence of Tyché, if it is accepted that she is that of Lepcis Magna, would be an allusion to the *princeps*' birthplace. However, as previously announced, we consider that it would be the Tyché of the *domus divina* by analogy with the previous panels. In this particular case, the protection of the main nucleus of the dynasty and its connection with the imperial capital is extolled. In turn, it would connect with the previously analysed reliefs in which Caracalla and Geta are crowned by a Victory, accompanied by Hercules and Liber Pater. The latter gods were the ones who gave protection to the imperial successors, beyond their connection to the North African city as their *dii patrii*.

Conclusions

The sculptural reliefs of the Arch of Lepcis Magna are considered to be the embodiment of the Severan ideology through the exaltation of the 'divine' aspects of the dynasty and its military triumphs. As Cordovana⁹⁶ pointed out, the emperor and his wife are accompanied, assisted, and protected by deities or guardian gods, which allowed them to acquire almost superhuman dimensions; the relief of the Capitoline Triad being their highest expression. In the arch of Septimius Severus there were certain innovations. Not only can we see mortals and gods sharing the same place, but also, in some cases, it was the representatives of the *domus divina* themselves who adopted a superhuman form. This did not mean that they considered themselves to be gods, but rather that they embodied ideas linked to the dynasty, the result of the political situation experienced during the rule of Septimius Severus. It is precisely this last aspect which is one of the most innovative and which has rarely been dealt with by historiography when it comes to the iconographic analysis of the monument. Despite imposing a universal ideology extended to the whole empire, in which the family plays a prominent role, Septimius

95 Faust 2013, 501–502.

96 Cordovana 2007, 424.

Severus was also able to adapt himself to the specific forms of each territory, which would explain the allusions to the tutelary gods of the city, such as Hercules and Liber Pater. This attitude was not typical of this dignitary, so scholarship has proposed that the term propaganda should not be used in Roman art, and it would be better to use other terms that adjust more properly the reality of the ancient world, such as the concept of *consensus*. It is possible that the imperial chancery aimed to show the harmony of the whole family with these images – i.e., that government was robust and strong and that it was blessed by the divinities. To achieve this, they developed elements that would make it easier for passers-by to understand the message they were trying to convey. It is precisely this aspect that, as Zanker⁹⁷ pointed out, would differentiate Roman art from contemporary propaganda. Although the emperor was an active part of the projection of the motifs reflected in the arch, he also had to take into account the particularities of the town in which the monument was located.

The Lepcitane *princeps* came to power after defeating his opponents in a bloody civil war. That is why the army was one of his main columns of supports that guaranteed the stability of his reign and also that of his successors. Hence, the presence of soldiers of different ranks and prisoners presided over by him and his sons. Moreover, in this war context, the inclusion of Julia Domna incarnating Victory, or together with Minerva, would be conceived in order to signal her status as *mater castrorum*. It was her double motherhood, that of the imperial successors and that of the army itself, which made stability possible for an empire based on a peaceful dynastic succession, while embodying military victories. War and the family were precisely the two fundamental pillars that can be seen in this monument, which would fit in with the ideological policy developed by Septimius Severus. The *dextrarum iunctio* represented in various scenes involving not only the emperor and his sons, but all the members of the dynasty, was a symbolic way of expressing the *Concordia Augustorum* and the unity above all virtues linked to the *domus*. It was intended to convey to the people contemplating the monument that a new ‘golden age’ was beginning, sustained by the family and, most importantly, that it was endorsed and supported by the divinities. It is precisely this religious focus that managed to dispel all doubts about the government of the Lepcitane emperor. It is for this reason that we can affirm that, beyond the innovations or alterations produced as a result of the provincial context, in the Arch of Septimius Severus of Lepcis Magna the *princeps* was directly involved. This is due not only to the fact

97 Zanker 2002, 10.

that there is no doubt about it in the other buildings of the period, but also to the iconographic motifs, which combine an exaltation of elements directly related to the city of Lepcis Magna and also to the imperial capital. Finally, we can conclude that his fusion of forms of this building was the result of the *consensus* between the central administration and the local elites, a fundamental characteristic of Roman art, as we have tried to explain, and which the Lepcitane emperor was able to develop in his native city.

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