

A Mosaic of Daniel in the Lions' Den from Borj el Youdi (Furnos Minus), Tunisia: Martyrdom and Spectacle in Roman North Africa

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A striking mosaic hangs in the Christian hall of the Bardo Museum in Tunis. On an octagonal white ground a nude *orans* stands on a raised platform, while four lions leap up walkways towards him. Below the platform an inscription reads: *MEMORIA BLOSSI - HONORATUS INGENUS ACTOR PERFECIT CIL VIII, 25817; Diehl ILC, 585 (Tomb of Blossus -Honoratus (his) agent of free status brought it to completion)*. Since its discovery in 1898 in a Christian mausoleum at Borj el Youdi (Tunisia), it has been identified as depicting the biblical story of Daniel in the lion's den. But the mosaic is unusual. Images of biblical stories, which are very common in other artistic media, are rare in Christian mosaics. The Borj el Youdi mosaic is one of only two extant mosaics in Roman North Africa that represent the story of Daniel in the lions' den. More importantly, the portrayal of Daniel on this mosaic is unique. It draws on two distinct iconographic traditions and combines them to make a single striking image. First, it shares in the traditional iconography of Daniel that appears on 4th-6th century North African terracotta lamps, pottery, tiles, and Christian sarcophagi. In these images, Daniel is frontal, *orans*, and approached by lions. But it also draws the iconography of amphitheatre spectacle, such as *ad bestias* executions, which are represented in similar popular media. The nudity or partial nudity of the victim, and the aggression and multiplication of beasts are key elements in these images. Furthermore, the platforms which support the Borj el Youdi Daniel and the attacking lions appear in no other depiction of the prophet, but instead find parallels in visual and literary representations of the *pulpita* or *pontes* on which execution victims appear, and on which gladiators fought. Thus, the Borj el Youdi Daniel looks like a man set upon by lions in the arena—a Christian martyr. He is represented in this way—identifiable as the biblical prophet and as Christian martyr - to recall the bloody religious violence between Catholics and Donatists that plagued North Africa from 3rd through the 5th century CE, which created a new crop of martyrs. The patron who commissioned this mosaic chose Daniel in the lions' den to reference the familiar biblical story of Daniel with its implications of life after death—very appropriate for a funerary context - but he also chose to reference a popular amphitheatre spectacle - *damnatio ad bestias*, in which criminals were sentenced to death by animals in the arena—and to which Christians were actually subject in earlier persecutions. Although there is no clear evidence that the mausoleum at Borj el Youdi was a *memoria* for martyrs, religious persecution and martyrdom inform its conception. Thus, mosaic art reflects the culture of North African Christians who were steeped in popular stories, new and old, of the sufferings of Christian martyrs, and in the lore and gore of the amphitheatre.

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Figure 1. Borj el Youdi Mosaic, Bardo Museum, Tunis