CHAPTER THREE

SATURNUS AND THE SATURNALIA

Liminal symbols tend to be ambiguous, equivocal, neutral, ambisexual rather than classificatory reversals. This is because liminality is conceived of as a season of silent, secret growth, a mediatory movement between what was and what will be, where the social process goes inward and underground for a time that is not profane time.

V.W. Turner

1. THE EVIDENCE

1. Saturn

The many conspicuous features that Roman Saturn and Greek Kronos had in common encouraged an early assimilation. We are well-informed about some common traits, especially the nature of their festivals, the Saturnalia and the Kronia. But the gods share enigmatic aspects too: the mystery of their ‘original’ nature; their provenance; and the question of alleged derivations of cult elements from foreign sources. I shall first give a survey of the most relevant evidence—for full information the reader should consult the abundant modern literature1.

Like Kronos in Greece, Saturn had scarcely any cultic reality in Italy *pace* Dion. Hal. 1, 34, 5\(^2\). In Rome his cult was restricted to one sanctuary, the famous temple\(^3\) on the slopes of the Capitoline hill, eight columns of which are still *in situ*. The treasure of state, the *aerarium Saturni*, was kept in the cellars of this temple. It was also the place where the quaestors administered the mint. Various series of Roman coins bore the portrait of the god. There was an official pair of scales in the temple and official charters are reported to have been published on walls in the immediate neighbourhood\(^4\). This unique temple of Saturn constitutes one of the oldest cult places of Rome. Before its foundation there had been a very ancient altar\(^5\) and the temple itself was said to have been founded in or around 497 BC\(^6\),

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\(^{2}\) Dion. Hal. 1, 34, 5, tells us that sanctuaries of 'Kronos' were ubiquitous in Italy, but archaeology by no means confirms this view. Nor does epigraphy: in his appendix 'Inscriptions à Saturne hors d' Afrique', Le Glay 1966, 340-3, records only 33 instances. As far as they are Italic (27 \(x\)) there are only 7 inscriptions from central Italy; the rest are from North Italy, where a Celtic God hides behind this name. Cf. C. B. Pascal, *The Cults of Cisalpine Gaul* (Bruxelles 1964) 176-9; F. Sartori, Un dedica a Saturno in Val d'Ega, *Atti VII Ce SDIR* (1975-6) 583-600.


\(^{5}\) Fest. 430, 35 (L); Serv. *Aen.* 2, 116; 8, 319; Macrobr. *Sat.* 1, 8, 2; Varro *L. L.* 5, 42: *fanum in faustibus*. Cf. Guittard 1980a and the discussion below p.179.

\(^{6}\) Dion. Hal. 6, 1, 4; Liv. 2, 21, 2, with Ogilvie's note. Pensabene *o.c.* (above n.3) 12-5, gives the full evidence. Cf. E. Gjerstad, *The Temple of Saturn in Rome: Its Date of Dedication and the Early History of the Sanctuary*, in: *Hommages A. Grenier* II (Bruxelles 1962) 757-62. Latte 1960, 254 n.2, thinks that the temple was founded circa 400 BC, but this must be the second temple.