



## Early Christianity in North Africa

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In the spring of 146 BCE, after victory in its third war against Carthage, Rome established its rule in Africa. Under the orders of Scipio, who faithfully carried out the mission of the warring clan of Marcus Porcius Cato (*Delenda est Carthago*, "Carthage is destroyed"), prestigious Carthage— heir to the legacy of Tyre and Sidon and dominant in the previous centuries in the western Mediterranean world—was destroyed, its walls razed and population exterminated or reduced to slavery. Following a ceremonial salting or cursing of the land, Carthage was deemed eternally cut off from men and doomed to the...

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On July 17, 180, twelve Christians from the region of Scilli appeared before the governor's tribunal in Carthage. Undoubtedly, this process put into practice Trajan's rescript of ca. 112, which set a precedent for formally charging Christians with apostasy and prescribing torture if charges were brought by a known accuser. The *Acts of the Scillitanis*, which have survived in several Latin manuscripts as well as another Greek version, recount the rather dry administrative process of interrogation carried out by the proconsul Vigilius Saturninus. We observe the proconsul's promise of pardon if the prisoners would abandon their faith to return to...

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Tertullian's life, his dates of birth and death, as well as the chronology of his writings, cannot be known with certainty. It is generally accepted that Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus was born at Carthage around 160. Both of his parents were pagans and, according to Jerome, his father was a centurion or proconsul probably attached to the troop appointed to Carthage. He carried out his command in the garrison that served the governor of Proconsularis. As a youth, Tertullian was a devoted pagan who led a rather free life that included frequenting the "cruel games" of the arena. He seemed...

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In the forty years that followed the persecution and subsequent death of Septimius Severus, the African church grew and developed considerably. This development was particularly evident through the African church councils—the habitual synodal gatherings of the African church leaders—which increased in frequency especially during Cyprian of Carthage's episcopate (249-256). Synods and councils are synonymous terms—the first is taken from the Greek, while the second is derived from the Latin *concilium*. These gatherings afforded sister churches the opportunity to meet and study common problems facing their respective communities. At the september 1, 256, council of Carthage, the...

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When referring to Cyprian, Jerome simply called him an African (*Cyprianus Afer*), which meant that he came from the roman province of Africa, later renamed *Africa Proconsularis* because it was governed by a proconsul. Based on other evidence from Lactantius, Augustine, Jerome, and Cyprian's own writings, a great deal is known about Cyprian's life—much more than what we know about his contemporaries. Considered the Cicero of Latin Christianity, Cyprian was the first bishop to contribute to the African literary tradition.

Cyprian's writings include a corpus of eighty-four letters, which provide rich detail about his work as a bishop and...

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Cyprian's correspondence certainly documents well the church councils that took place at Carthage between 220 and 256. More importantly, his letters give the names of bishops present at the councils—an indication of the development of the churches and the overall expansion of Christianity in Africa at this time. Any numbers from Cyprian's letters pertaining to the African episcopal dioceses, however, should be accepted with caution, as precise statistics are impossible to determine. As a result, varying numbers have been proposed due to the difficulty of knowing the precise geographic location for each bishop and church. Nevertheless, in a recent...

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Among the myriad issues raised in Roman African studies, the Donatist crisis is by far the subject that has elicited the largest amount of scholarly work. Theses and dissertations—new and old, and often arriving at contradictory conclusions—continue to be published despite the inability to reach a firm conclusion on this movement that surged in Africa over the course of the fourth century prior to its disappearance two centuries later. Though the Donatists were initially deposed at a council presided over by the pope in rome in 313, they were still being condemned in 596, when another pope, Gregory...

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Already quite large in Cyprian's day, the African *catholica* continued to grow after the peace of Constantine, and the church became quite an enterprise, complete with all of the associated ambiguities. While the entire African population included six million inhabitants in the first half of the fifth century, the Christian population—including Catholic and Donatist churches—never surpassed one-third of the total population, and probably numbered around two million.

Let us first consider the role of paganism at this time. Despite the religious policies carried out by the emperors following Constantine, and Theodosius' edict of February 18, 380, which made...

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In his letter to Augustine around 390, Maximus of Madauros arrogantly boasted about the Roman gods whose statues adorned the center of his city. The rather unknown pagan rhetor also considered it his spiritual duty to point out how ironic it was that the Christian martyrs in his province had "barbaric" names (*odiosa nomina*), though, in fact, they were of Punic or Libyan origin. In his sharp reply, the future bishop of Hippo, who had not yet been ordained a priest at the time of writing, communicated a proud African spirit that was always alive in the hearts of his...

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A seasoned traveler, Augustine wrote: "the ultimate voyage—death—is the only one that should occupy our thoughts." Amid the misfortunes of the mid-fourth century, Augustine personally wished that this ultimate journey would not be delayed. In his biography of Augustine, Possidius recounted:

On one occasion he said, as we sat with him at table and were discussing these matters: "You know that during our present disaster I pray God to deliver this city from the enemies that surround it or, should he decide differently, to make his servants strong in accepting his will or at least to take me..."

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