

Translator's Preface

Nearly a decade ago, while working on a Master's thesis on early African Christian theology, I came across François Decret's book *Le christianisme en Afrique du Nord Ancienne*. Appropriately so, I found it at a Christian bookstore run by Kabyle Berbers (from Algeria) in Paris. Since that time, my research on North African Christian history and theology has been greatly aided by Professor Decret's work.

Presently, in my work as a professor of Christian history, students have often asked me about resources for doing research on the early African church. My response has been to ask them if they read French, because Decret's work always came to mind as the best place to start. After some conversations with Decret's publisher Seuil (Paris) and the American publisher Wipf and Stock (Eugene, Oregon), the project to make Decret's work available in the English-speaking world as *Early Christianity in North Africa* became a reality.

Someone has said that *traduction* ("translation") is *trahison* ("treason"). Indeed, the process of translating an author's thoughts and expression from one language to another is quite difficult, if not impossible. My aim has been to be faithful to Professor Decret's words and arguments while making them accessible and readable for an English-speaking audience. I am grateful to Dr. Emily Heady, director of the Liberty University Graduate Writing Center, who carefully proofread each chapter and was especially helpful in working out the "woodenness" of the translation. My hope is that English-speaking students will find this scholarly primer on early African Christianity, something that has previously not existed in English, as a helpful resource in their research.

A final note on style: whenever the reader encounters bracketed comments in the footnotes, please note that these are comments made by the translator

Edward L. Smither, PhD
Assistant Professor of Church History & Intercultural Studies
Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary (Liberty University)

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Preface to the English Translation

The African church entered the pages of history on July 17, 180, as twelve martyrs—five women and seven men—from the village of Scilli in Proconsularis (modern Tunisia) were sentenced to death by the Roman Proconsul Vigelius Saturninus. The proconsul had offered the Scillitans a period of thirty days to reflect upon their decision, essentially allowing them to abandon their faith and to return to the official religion. “In a matter so straightforward there is no considering,” the accused responded. After the proconsul pronounced his sentence, the Scillitans were tortured and then beheaded. Unlike the first martyrs in Gaul—believers originally from Asia and Phrygia who were put to death in Lyon in 177—the martyrs of Scilli were not Christian immigrants from the East; rather, they were 100 percent African.

In some well-known passages of his *Apology* (ca. 197),¹ Tertullian provides us with the most important indication of Christianity’s rapid expansion in Africa. Writing to a pagan audience that was angered over the constant growth of the African church—“the outcry is that the state is filled with Christians”²—the polemicist replied:

If we are enjoined, then, to love our enemies, as I have remarked above, whom have we to hate? If injured, we are forbidden to retaliate, lest we become as bad ourselves: who can suffer injury at our hands? . . . Yet, banded together as we are, ever so ready to sacrifice our lives, what single case of revenge for injury are you able to point to, though, if it were held right among us to repay evil by evil, a single night with a torch or two could achieve an ample vengeance? . . . We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place

1. [All English quotations of Tertullian are from *ANF* 3–4.]

2. Tertullian *Apology* 1.7.

among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum . . .³

Many have reacted to Tertullian's account with skepticism, especially modern historians who demand more statistical evidence, and his testimony has been dismissed as the exaggerations of an African Christian lawyer. However, we should recognize the significant growth and dynamic nature of the African Christian community at the beginning of the third century, even if the church was still a minority. How could Tertullian, addressing fellow citizens, a group that included pagans and Christians, manage to distort a commonly understood reality?

In light of the number of participants, the church councils that took place in the middle of the third century also attest to the significant growth of the African church. In the fall of 255, thirty-one bishops from Proconsularis gathered for a council in Carthage and, afterward, they wrote a letter to eighteen of their Numidian colleagues, stating their opinion on the issue of baptizing heretics. In the spring of 256, seventy-one bishops met for a council. On September 1 of the same year, eighty-seven bishops met. This number did not include those who were absent due to age, illness, distance, or because a particular church was without a pastor at that time. Harnack argues that there were 150 bishops in Africa during this time. When Cyprian was consecrated as bishop of Carthage in 249, he quickly became one of the most influential leaders in the global church, and his advice was sought by church leaders from Spain and Gaul. However, persecution sought its victims. Arrested at his home and taken to the Proconsul Galerius Maximus, Cyprian was ordered to sacrifice and give honor to the Roman deities. He replied, "I will not sacrifice . . . do what you have been ordered to do," and the executioner knew what he had to do. Hence, the faces of Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine become permanent fixtures in the African Christian story.

Augustine, born in 354 in Tagaste (modern Souk Ahras, Algeria) recounted his disappointing encounter with the Manichean bishop Faustus. With his spiritual hopes fading, he became completely absorbed in his career as a rhetor—in Carthage, Rome, and in Valentinian II's court in Milan—until his baptism in Milan. On the eve of Easter, 387, Augustine (then thirty-two years old) and his son Adeodatus (fifteen) were baptized

3. Tertullian *Apology* 37.4.

by Ambrose, the great bishop of Milan who had played a decisive role in Augustine's conversion. With nothing keeping him in Milan he made plans to return to his homeland. During the return journey to Africa, his mother Monica died at Ostia, and shortly after his return to Tagaste his beloved Adeodatus also passed away.

After returning to Africa, he was ordained as a priest at Hippo (Annaba, Algeria). In 395, he was named co-bishop of Hippo before becoming the city's sole bishop the following year—a role that Augustine would occupy for the rest of his life. Apart from 236 letters (some of which were discovered and edited in 1981) and his sermons, his literary works included ninety-three indexed titles—some of which were considerable in size—that amounted to 252 books. The perspective of Possidius, Augustine's friend and the bishop of Calama (Guelma, Algeria), should be noted:

So many were the works he dictated and published, so many the sermons he preached in church and then wrote down and revised—whether directed against heretics or devoted to interpreting the canonical books for the building up of the church's holy children—that even a student would hardly have the energy to read and become acquainted with all of them.⁴

Possidius concluded with this remark about his master's work: "I believe, however, that they profited even more who were able to hear him speaking in church and see him there present, especially if they were familiar with his manner of life among his fellow human beings."⁵

In conclusion, scholarship on ancient Africa only continues to increase. For example, in a recent edition of the *Bibliographie analytique de l'Afrique antique*, over 700 books, studies, and reports covering various disciplines were listed. Hence, there is still much time for scholars to investigate the *terrae incognitae* of early Africa. Christians like Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, and Augustine of Hippo—now famous in the Mediterranean world and known throughout the world—serve as the skillful narrators who communicate the African Christian story with imagery, severity, and passion. Augustine, originally from the modest village of Tagaste in the High Numidian Plains, sharply reprimanded his country-

4. Possidius *Life of Augustine* 18.9.49.

5. *Ibid.*, 31.9.

men for despising Christian martyrs, while taking delight in silly Roman myths: “You have stumbled to the point of forgetting that you are an African!”

François Decret

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