

The Early Fathers of the Church of Carthage – A Descriptive Study

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Abstract:

The Church of Carthage is considered one of the most important Christian centers in North Africa during the early centuries of the Common Era. It played a prominent role in the emergence and development of Western Christian theology. Its early Fathers were distinguished by their use of the Latin language in theological writing, their focus on the practical and moral aspects of Christian life, and their defense of the faith in the face of persecution and paganism.

Among the most prominent early Fathers of the Church of Carthage is Tertullian, regarded as the first major Christian theologian to write in Latin and who contributed to the formulation of fundamental theological concepts. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, emphasized the unity and authority of the Church and defended repentance and reconciliation after persecution. Arnobius and Lactantius also stood out for their rational and philosophical defense of Christianity in an elevated Latin style.

The Fathers of the Church of Carthage contributed to consolidating the foundations of Latin theology, affirmed the unity of the Church, stressed the importance of Christian ethics, and upheld steadfastness in faith. Their thought paved the way for later Fathers such as Saint Augustine, which gave the Church of Carthage a profound and lasting influence in the history of Western Christianity.

Keywords: History, Christianity, North Africa, doctrines, early fathers, Carthage.

Introduction:

The region of North Africa witnessed profound intellectual and religious activity during the first three centuries of the Common Era, coinciding with the spread of Christianity and its interaction with the prevailing social, political, and cultural conditions of the time. A number of African thinkers and theologians made significant contributions to shaping Christian thought and defending it against paganism on the one hand, and internal doctrinal divisions on the other.

Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Cyprian, Arnobius, Emeritus of Caesarea, Augustine, and Petilianus are among the most prominent figures who represented this intellectual current. Their positions varied between doctrinal defense, ecclesiastical organization, and polemical confrontation with religious and political opponents. From this perspective, this research seeks to shed light on these figures and clarify their intellectual and religious roles in North Africa, adopting a descriptive approach in presenting and analyzing their historical and intellectual data.

Research Problem:

The research problem is based on the following main question:

What was the role of Christian theologians in North Africa during the early centuries of the Common Era in spreading and defending Christianity, and what was the nature of their positions toward paganism, doctrinal divisions, and Roman authority?

From this problem arise several subsidiary questions, the most important of which are:

- What were the historical and religious circumstances in which these scholars emerged?
- How did some of them convert from paganism to Christianity, and what impact did this have on their writings?
- What was the nature of the conflicts they engaged in, whether with pagans, Jews, or dissenting Christian sects?
- To what extent did their writings contribute to consolidating Christian thought in North Africa?

Research Methodology:

This research adopted the descriptive method, as it is the most appropriate for studying historical religious and intellectual figures. This method is based on describing the phenomenon as it is within its temporal and spatial context, and analyzing its characteristics without intervening to direct or judge it.

Through this method, the biographies of prominent Christian theologians in North Africa were presented, highlighting their religious backgrounds, intellectual standing, and most significant positions and works, followed by an analysis of their roles in defending Christianity and confronting opponents. Historical sources and academic studies that addressed early African Christian thought were also relied upon.

Discussion:

First: Tertullius or Tertullianus ⁽¹⁾ Tertullianus:

- Name: Tertullius or Tertullianus
- Date of Birth: around 170 CE
- Date of Death: 240 CE
- Original Religion: Paganism.
- His relationship with Christianity: He embraced Christianity and became prominent in it.
- His importance among Christian scholars: He is considered one of the most important theologians in the ancient region of Tamazgha.
- His adversaries: He opposed the Roman Church that called for exploitation and the consolidation of class inequality.
- His major confrontations: He urged the Amazigh to abandon military service in the Roman army, considering it a pagan army that worshipped other than the God worshipped by Christians.
- His most important works: Apologeticus (Defense of the Faith), in which he addressed a number of moral issues in light of the new Christian doctrine, calling for chastity and virtuous morals, and opposing Jews and deviant and misguided heretical groups. ⁽²⁾

Second: Minucius Felix ⁽³⁾:

- Name: Minucius Felix.
- Date of birth: around 180 CE.
- Place of birth: Numidia.
- Date of death: around 250 CE.
- Original religion: He was pagan for part of his life.
- His relationship with Christianity: It is said that he converted to Christianity at the beginning of assuming official responsibilities.
- His importance among Christian scholars: He is considered one of the most important Christian theologians.
- His adversaries: Unlike many Christian scholars who openly opposed pagans, and since he held an administrative position, he sought to accommodate his adversaries without openly declaring hostility toward them.
- His most important works: He authored a book entitled Octavius, which consists of religious and doctrinal dialogues and debates, in which the author defends Christianity against the common objections directed at this new religion during that particular period. ⁽⁴⁾

Third: Saint Cyprian:

- Name: Cyprian or Cyprianus, also known as Thascius.
- Date of birth: around 210 CE.
- Place of birth: Carthage.
- Date of death: around 260 CE.
- Social status: He was born into an aristocratic family, completed his studies in rhetoric, and became a lawyer.
- How did he convert to Christianity? : He was influenced by a priest named Caecilianus and embraced Christianity around 245 CE.
- The impact of Christianity on him: It is reported that he said: “A breath descended from heaven and revived me with a second life, making me a new man.” The Church made use of his talents in influencing believers and sent him to councils of bishops. He wrote in support of Christianity and in refutation of the Jews.
- His adversaries: He had skirmishes and polemical exchanges with the Jews of the Maghreb who opposed the new religion.
- Positions he held: Around 249 CE, he assumed church responsibilities in Carthage and began organizing it in a firm manner.
- His method of church administration: “When the Bishop of Carthage died, the people compelled him to succeed him in his position around 248 CE ⁽⁵⁾, so he initially attempted to impose a genuine order throughout the Church. He offered advice to church guardians who had not been appointed by

civil law, took interest in training young representatives through a Christian artist, and also concerned himself with a rebellious deacon and some virgins, urging them to beware of the snares of adornment”⁽⁶⁾.

Fourth: Arnobius the Elder (Arnobius):

- Name: Arnobius the Elder or Arnobius.
- Date of birth: Not precisely known, but it is said to be around the middle of the third century CE.
- Place of birth: He was born in Numidia.
- Date of death: Not precisely known, but it is said that he died around 330 CE.
- Original religion: Paganism.
- His relationship with Christianity: It is said that he converted to Christianity in his old age.
- His importance among Christian scholars: He is considered one of the most important scholars in the Mediterranean basin due to his relentless and continuous defense against the enemies of the new religion.
- His adversaries: He wrote extensively about paganism and strongly criticized idol worship.
- His call: He called for faith in Christ in order to attain success and salvation in this world and the Hereafter.
- His most important works: *Adversus nationes* (Against the Pagans), which he composed around 300 CE, in which he refuted paganism and emphasized the necessity of faith in God in word, deed, and conduct, as it is the path to salvation.⁽⁷⁾

Fifth: Emeritus of Caesarea:

- Name: Emeritus of Caesarea.
- Date of birth: Not precisely known, but around 350 CE.
- Place of birth: He was born in Caesarea.
- Date of death: Not precisely known, but around 420 CE.
- His importance among Christian scholars: He was a great orator distinguished by enthusiasm, firm belief, and enduring patience. He was a leader of the Donatist party, acting as its advocate and defender in Mauretania. Augustine testified to his high standing among the members of his community and people.
- His adversaries: One of the most important figures who opposed him was Augustine, whom he considered an enemy of his people. This led to polemics, responses, attacks, and defenses between them, primarily due to political disagreement, followed by doctrinal disagreement, as Donatism was considered a heresy outside Christianity.
- His most important works: A collection of sermons entitled *Wisdom*, prepared in 394 CE for the Council of Bagai, as well as a collection of homilies delivered at the Council of Carthage⁽⁸⁾.

Sixth: Saint Augustine:

- Name: Aurelius Augustine, Augustine, or Augustin (Saint Augustine).
- Date of birth ⁽⁹⁾: He was born on 13 November 354 CE.
- Place of birth: In the city of Thagaste (Souk Ahras), Algeria (Numidia); some say Augustine was born in Thagaste.
- Lineage ⁽¹⁰⁾: He was born to a Berber Christian mother named Monica and a pagan Roman father who was a simple notary.
- Date of death: Augustine died on 29 August 430 CE in the city of Annaba (Hippo). Al-Biruni (440 AH) ⁽¹¹⁾ said: “He is the most eloquent Latin orator and the greatest thinker of all time.” Saint Augustine lived until the Vandal invasion. He was besieged in Hippo among those under siege. He was able to escape but refused to do so for the sake of himself and his position. He remained with the besieged until his death in the year 430 ⁽¹²⁾.
- His condition before embracing Christianity: He passed through two stages:
 - ✓ In his early years, he was a reckless, debauched youth immersed in desires and pleasures and influenced by doctrines far removed from Christianity.
 - ✓ Due to his sharp intelligence, keen mind, and broad thought, he repented of the recklessness of his youth and turned to Christianity, in which he showed remarkable brilliance. This led him to combat the ideas whose consequences he had experienced and suffered, so he fought sensual doctrines ⁽¹³⁾ and deviant ideas, and became particularly prominent in confronting heresies, among the most famous of which, in his view, was Donatism.
- His original belief ⁽¹⁴⁾: Before traveling to Italy, he was influenced by Neoplatonism.
- His original language ⁽¹⁵⁾: Augustine’s language was Numidian, influenced by Phoenician-Canaanite, or Amazigh-Numidian with Canaanite roots. However, his culture was Latin, and he had only limited knowledge of Greek.
- His education and studies: His education passed through stages before he reached what he eventually became, as follows:
 - ✓ He received his initial education in his birthplace around the age of sixteen, then moved to Carthage.
 - ✓ After drawing from the sciences of his region, he moved to Carthage, where he acquired the rational sciences he needed, then proceeded directly to Italy, studying in Rome and Milan.
 - ✓ After fulfilling the necessary requirements and acquiring extensive knowledge and learning, he devoted himself to teaching in Carthage, then moved to Annaba around 388 CE. He remained devoted to worship there and built a monastery until he was appointed Bishop of Annaba around 395 CE, after which he became a Father of the Latin Church.
- His importance among Christian scholars: As previously noted, Christianity in North Africa gained wide acceptance, though not in the same form and status as in Rome, especially according to Byzantine state historians, who considered Christianity in North Africa a true beacon. They based this view on the great figure of Augustine, arguing that a weak and declining Christianity could not produce a great intellectual edifice like Augustine. In fact, whoever examines Augustine’s life will find that his formation did not take place in this region, but rather outside it ⁽¹⁶⁾.

- His adversaries: Saint Augustine, considered the foremost theorist of Catholic Christianity during the period under study, conveyed to us through his debates with his Donatist opponents and through his numerous letters the intense conflicts between the two Christian parties of ancient North Africa. Each side claimed legitimacy in ecclesiastical representation and the administration of Christian churches in ancient North Africa, as well as positions related to issues such as the rebaptism of apostates, which the African Church had adopted since the beginning of the third century CE, and the martyrdom of Christians under the repression of authority. His writings also enabled us to learn about many events associated with the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth century up to the end of Roman occupation of the region ⁽¹⁷⁾.

- His efforts to reform relations with the Donatists: Augustine employed various means through which he aimed to conclude a reconciliation with the Donatists. This, ostensibly, while some view it as merely an attempt to extend influence and establish stability in the region. The means he used are as follows:

- ✓ (During the period extending from 393 CE to 419 CE, Augustine convened many conferences and councils to discuss the disputes between him and the Donatists, numbering eighteen conferences. The most important of these was the Council of Hippo in 393 CE.
- ✓ These conferences addressed most of the issues related to teaching and discipline in both churches.
- ✓ Augustine attempted to offer many concessions to the leaders of the Donatists, such as recognizing the overseers of their church and the disciplinary methods practiced within it.
- ✓ One of the most important matters Augustine sought in order to achieve reconciliation and to demonstrate his good intentions was his insistence to the Roman authorities that they should not treat the followers of the Donatist Church with harshness and violence.
- ✓ Augustine encouraged the followers of the Donatist Church to join the official Roman Catholic Church.
- ✓ This approach adopted by Augustine in winning over the hearts of the Donatists came as a reaction to the methods used by the Roman authorities in dealing with this group and its followers, both in its military wing represented by the Circumcellions and its political wing represented by priests and bishops) ⁽¹⁸⁾.
- ✓ • His major confrontations: Augustine strongly defended the principles of official Catholic Christianity affiliated with the Roman Church, and stood against the Donatist movement with its popular revolutionary features.

- His most important works: Sources indicate that Augustine's writings are numerous due to his vast knowledge and social standing. Among the most notable works mentioned by the sources are the following:

- ✓ Confessions (or My Confessions): One of his most famous works is entitled Confessions ⁽¹⁹⁾, which is an engaging book that provides a biography of his life) ⁽²⁰⁾.
- ✓ His work The City of God, in which he envisions the Christian Church as a new emerging empire rising upon the ruins of Rome ⁽²¹⁾.
- ✓ The Holy Trinity, a religious work in which he discusses the heavenly mystery of the Trinity. It is considered among the earliest writings on this issue, and some believe that he laid down and elaborated its foundations.
- ✓ There are other works for which the researcher could not find detailed descriptions, but only brief references, such as The City of God and Grace.

Seventh: Petilianus of Constantine:

- Name: Petilianus.
- Date of birth: Born around 365 CE.
- Place of birth: Born in Cirta (Constantine).
- Date of death: Around 430 CE.
- His importance among Christian scholars: He played an important role in the conflict between Donatists and Catholics, as he was an eloquent lawyer and gifted orator who defended the ideas of his people against the Catholics.
- His adversaries: From his episcopal seat, he attacked the Catholics, then the official Church and all its representatives in Africa, and engaged in direct polemics against the great Bishop of Hippo.
- His call: Due to the strength and distinction of his sermons, the Donatists of the city of Constantine decided to appoint him as their bishop around 395 CE.
- His most important works: His principal writings include a critical treatise against the Catholic Church, a letter on the Catholic Church, a treatise against Augustine, a study of the Maximianist schism, a study on baptism, and many sermons delivered at the Council of Carthage. His work was particularly polemical, and Petilianus was the only truly worthy opponent of Augustine, who acknowledged the value of the Bishop of Constantine ⁽²²⁾.

Conclusion:

This study concludes that the early Fathers of the Church of Carthage constituted a fundamental pillar in the history of Christianity in North Africa and contributed effectively to shaping Western Christian theology during the early centuries of the Common Era. Their thought was distinguished by combining doctrinal defense of Christianity in the face of paganism and Roman persecutions with the treatment of moral and organizational issues that accompanied the emergence and expansion of the Church in the African environment.

The study shows that the diversity of the religious and cultural backgrounds of these Fathers, and the conversion of some of them from paganism to Christianity, had a clear impact on their polemical methods and intellectual production. They employed the Latin language, philosophical reasoning, and legal rhetoric in consolidating and defending Christian doctrine. Their role was also prominent in organizing the African Church, affirming the unity and authority of the Church, and addressing doctrinal divisions, particularly those related to the Donatist movement.

It also becomes clear that the thought of the Fathers of the Church of Carthage was not isolated from the political and social context of their time, but rather reflected the interaction of the new religion with the reality of Roman occupation and social tensions. This gave African theology a distinctive practical and moral character. These intellectual and organizational efforts paved the way for the emergence of major figures, foremost among them Saint Augustine, who represented the peak of theological maturity of the African Church.

Accordingly, this study affirms that the Church of Carthage was an influential scholarly and theological space in the history of Western Christianity, and that the legacy of its early Fathers

constitutes an important source for understanding the development of religious thought in North Africa and its role in general ecclesiastical history.

Footnotes:

(1) Father Camillo Ballin, *History of the Church from the Dawn of Christianity to the End of the Fifteenth Century*, 1st ed., 2004, Dar Sharqiyat, p. 122.

(2) Jamil Hamdawi, *Religion among the Amazigh*, previous source, p. 21. See also: Mohammed Chafiq, *Thirty-Three Centuries of Amazigh History*, n.p., p. 85.

(3) Hassan Bennaqiyeh, *Minucius Felix the Alienated African*, Tiwiza website, accessed on 17/10/2021 at 22:10.

(4) Jamil Hamdawi, *Religion among the Amazigh*.

(5) (After the election of Saint Cyprian as Bishop of Carthage around 248 CE, he carried out several actions to organize the Church, including the following:

- ✓ He presided over councils that organized dioceses and churches in the Maghreb. The most famous of these councils was the religious council of 256 CE, which was attended by 87 African bishops.
- ✓ He selected main headquarters for leading and guiding the people religiously by choosing suitable cities and dividing them into two main regions, eastern and western:
- ✓ The eastern region included: Cirta, Milev, Cuicul, Thifast, Bagai, Timgad, Lambaesis, and Badiyas.
- ✓ The western region included: Sétifis, Uziza, Tipasa, and Caesarea.
- ✓ Church buildings during his era were characterized by prosperity and a unique aesthetic character, especially the churches of Thifast, Hippo, Timgad, and Tipasa.
- ✓ After this organization carried out by Saint Cyprian, Christianity spread throughout Numidia, experienced greater activity in the cities, and the number of Christians increased among the Berber tribes. Even those that had been distant were reached by the new religion) (abridged and adapted from: Mahfoudh Qaddash, *Algeria in Ancient Times*, National Book Institution, 1st ed., 1993, p. 206).

(6) Charles-André Julien, *History of North Africa*, translated by Mohamed Mezali and Bachir Ben Salama, Tunisian Publishing House, 4th ed., 1983, pp. 279–280.

(7) Jamil Hamdawi, *Religion among the Amazigh*, previous source, p. 22.

(8) Mahfoudh Qaddash, *Algeria in Ancient Times*, National Book Institution, 1st ed., 1993, pp. 212–213.

(9) (Born in 354 in “Numidia,” west of the city of Carthage; he did not embrace Christianity until 387, after having been a proponent of Neoplatonism; seven years after his conversion he was ordained bishop of the city of “Hippo,” which was a second Phoenician colony in North Africa, and he remained in this position until his death in 430 CE) (Mohammed Ibrahim Al-Fayoumi, *History of Pre-Islamic Religious Thought*, Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi, 4th ed., 1994, p. 226).

(10) (Augustine strongly defended his Amazigh identity and his Semitic Canaanite roots in a letter to the people of Rome, in which he said: “If you ask the inhabitants of our countryside in Numidia, they

say: we are Canaanites.” This means that Augustine’s language was Numidian, influenced by Phoenician-Canaanite, or Amazigh-Numidian with Canaanite roots. However, his culture was Latin, and he knew only a small amount of Greek) (Dr. Jamil Hamdawi, Religion among the Amazigh, Alukah Network, n.d., p. 17).

(11) Al-Biruni: Muhammad ibn Ahmad, Abu al-Rayhan al-Biruni named after (Birun) from the land of Sindh al-Khwarizmi, a contemporary of Ibn Sina, died in his homeland in 440 AH. He authored many books, including: Al-Athar al-Baqiya ‘an al-Qurun al-Khaliya, Al-Jamahir fi Ma‘rifat al-Jawahir, History of the Eastern Nations, Al-Qanun al-Mas‘udi, History of India, Determination of the Coordinates of Places for the Correction of Distances, Tahqiq ma li-l-Hind, Al-Tafhim li-Sina‘at al-Tanjim, and Extraction of Chords in the Circle.

See: Yaqut ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Hamawi (626 AH), Mu‘jam al-Udaba’, vol. 5, p. 2330; Ibn Abi Usaybi‘a Ahmad ibn al-Qasim (668 AH), ‘Uyun al-Anba’ fi Tabaqat al-Atibba’, ed. Nizar Rida, Dar Maktabat al-Hayat, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 459; Al-Dhahabi Muhammad ibn Ahmad (748 AH), Tarikh al-Islam wa Wafayat al-Mashahir wa-l-A‘lam, ed. Bashir ‘Awwad Ma‘ruf, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1st ed., 2003, vol. 9, p. 489.

Al-Safadi, Khalil ibn Aybak (764 AH), Al-Wafi bi al-Wafayat, ed. Ahmad al-Arnaout and Turki Mustafa, Dar Ihya’ al-Turath, Beirut, Lebanon, 1420 AH–2000 CE, vol. 8, p. 91.

(12) Mubarak al-Mili, History of Algeria in Ancient and Modern Times, previous source, vol. 1, p. 306.

(13) The doctrines that Augustine fought were mainly two: (he used all means to combat the Donatist doctrine (Donatism), which accused Catholics of allowing weakness to infiltrate their religious belief; he also fought the Manichaean doctrine (Manichaeism), which was later adopted by the leader Genseric, king of the Vandals).

(14) (He studied in Madaurus, then moved to Carthage, then went to Milan in Italy, and later returned to his birthplace in 388. He settled in his father’s house and turned it into a monastery for worship. In 391 he was appointed priest in Hippo and was granted land outside the city on which to build a monastery; he was then appointed bishop and made his own house a monastery. This monastery became famous, and about ten bishops graduated from it, among them Alypius of Thagaste, Severus appointed in Milev in 396, Fortunatus appointed in Constantine in 402, Possidius appointed in Guelma in 397 who was the biographer of Augustine Evodius in Uzalis around 400, and Nefatus in Sétif before 411. It is said that Saint Augustine was the first to establish monasteries in Africa, and he belonged to the orthodox (orthodox) party and stood up to defend Christianity. He replied to the writers of his time who attacked it with a book entitled The City of God, in which, among what he presented in proving the existence of God, he said: “I am certain of my existence, and I do not fear that it may be said that I am mistaken in that, because error itself is proof of existence.”)

(15) (In general, most of the books authored by Saint Augustine were written in Latin; however, his religious sermons were delivered by Augustine in the Phoenician language or the local language understood by the Amazigh people, since Latin was restricted to senior intellectuals and administrative officials affiliated with the Roman government. In this regard, Saint Augustine says: “The Roman state, which knows how to rule peoples, did not impose its authority alone upon the conquered, but also its language.”)

(16) (Mu'nis Hussein states that historians of Christianity in general, and historians of the Byzantine state in particular, exaggerate in portraying the extent of the spread of Christianity in the province of Africa, relying on the fact that this region produced one of the greatest thinkers of early Christianity, namely Saint Augustine, the author of *Confessions* and *The City of God*. Saint Augustine is undoubtedly one of the leading thinkers of the Middle Ages; however, he was an individual case in Africa. Moreover, he was a member of a Latin community in Africa and was never truly one of the native inhabitants. He lived in a purely Latin Christian environment, far removed from the Berbers and the local population) (Badi'a al-Kharrazi, *History of the Church in the Far Maghreb*, Al-Ma'rifa al-Jadida Press, 1st ed., 2007, p. 15).

(17) Imran Abd al-Hamid, *Christianity in Ancient Morocco: Origin and Development (180–430 CE)*, previous source, p. 9.

(18) Robin Danya, *Christian Heritage in North Africa: A Historical Study from the First Century to the Middle Ages*, trans. Samir Malik, Dar Manhal al-Hayat, Beirut, 1999, p. 244.

(19) Some commentators remarked about the book, saying: (It is considered the true beginning of autobiographical writing in human thought. This means that the author is the first writer whose work has reached us in the field of spiritual autobiography with a religious character intertwined with a historical dimension. In it, the author presents his confessions with complete honesty and frankness, details his unusual life, and clarifies his surrender to passions and desires, especially in the city of Carthage, where he was fond of theater, love, and sex. He also explains how he came to know God and how he later moved toward Christian thought. Moreover, he reveals his conception and stance regarding the doctrinal, social, and historical conflict in which Augustine lived during the period of Amazigh–Roman conflict).

(20) Mohammed Ibrahim al-Fayoumi, *History of Pre-Islamic Religious Thought*, Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 4th ed., 1994, p. 226.

(21) The same reference, p. 226.

(22) Mahfoudh Qaddash, *Algeria in Ancient Times*, National Book Institution, 1st ed., 1993, p. 211.