

CONFESSING WITH SAINT AUGUSTINE

HPRS5094/6094

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2 – AUGUSTINE'S BIOGRAPHY I



OUTLINE

1. The cultural and religious context of Late antiquity
2. Augustine's early life until his conversion in 386
3. Augustine's intellectual and spiritual conversion: Manichaeism, Neoplatonism and Christianity



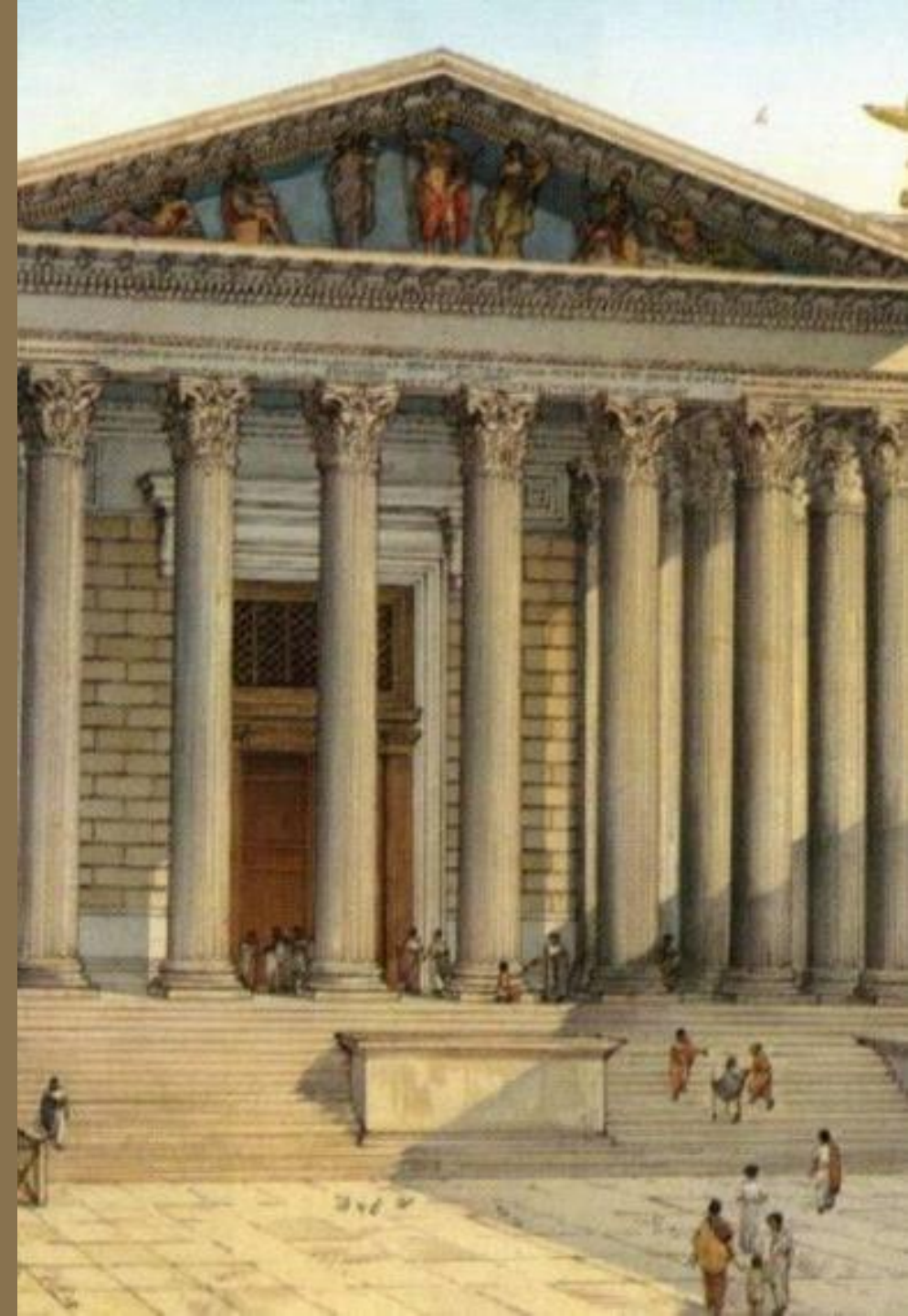
THE CONTEXT OF THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

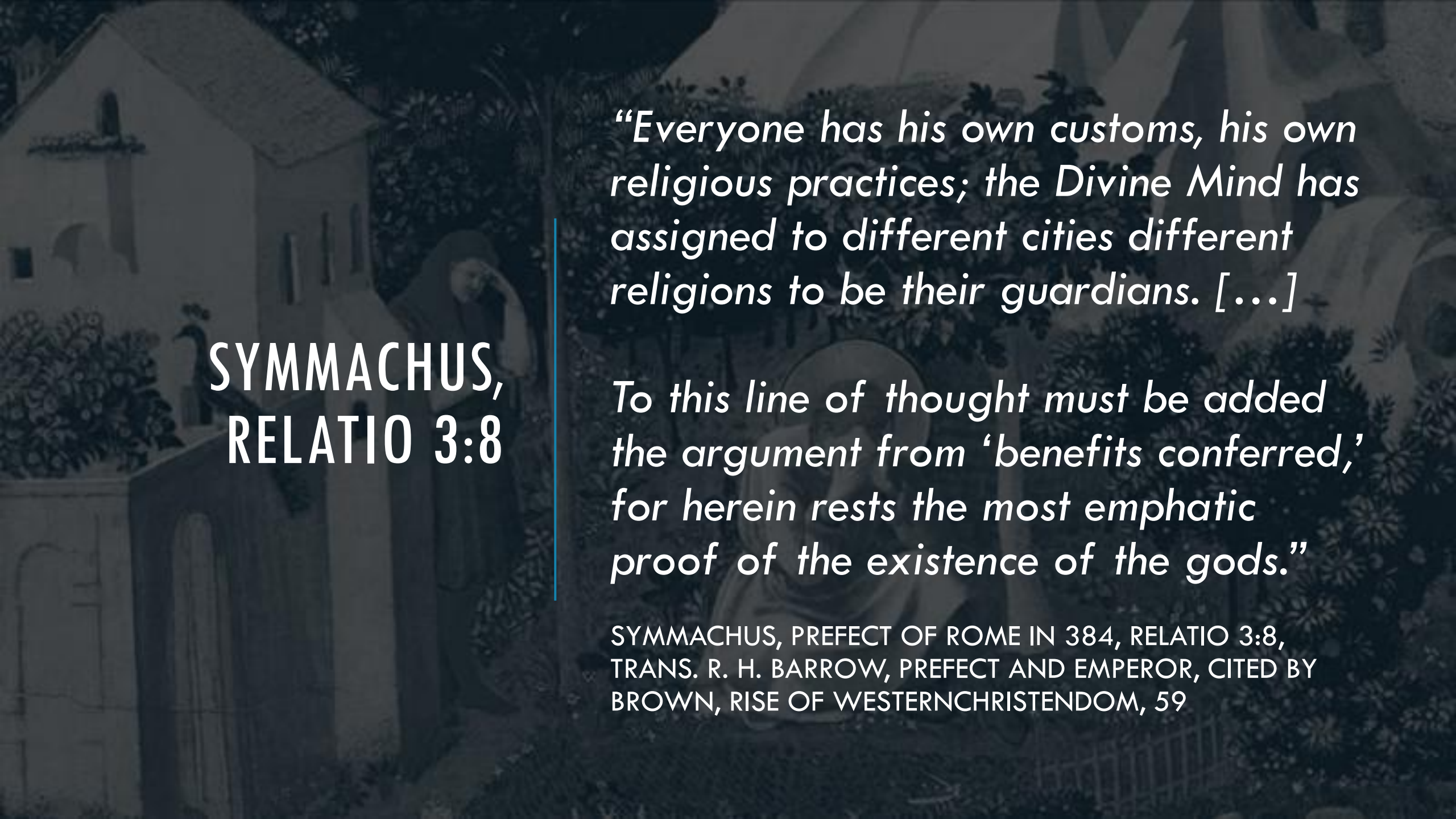
POLITICS, CHRISTIANITY AND RELIGION IN LATE ANTIQUITY (C. 250-C.350)

Political context c. 250-400 –crises followed by renewal
(centralisation, loyalty to the imperial court and Roman state)

Diocletian's empire (284-305): polytheistic culture; public worship
of many gods.

- Roman *religio* pertains to different specific gods – each god has its *religio*.
- *Religio* (Latin)= “reverence for God (the gods)”; piety –“both inward piety and that which is manifested in religious rites and ceremonies”; “the holiness, sacredness, sanctity inhering in any religious object (a deity, temple, utensils, etc.)”; “a system of religious belief”.
- *Religiones* –“precise ways of worshipping the gods” (Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 70)





SYMMACHUS, RELATIO 3:8

“Everyone has his own customs, his own religious practices; the Divine Mind has assigned to different cities different religions to be their guardians. [...]

To this line of thought must be added the argument from ‘benefits conferred,’ for herein rests the most emphatic proof of the existence of the gods.”

SYMMACHUS, PREFECT OF ROME IN 384, RELATIO 3:8,
TRANS. R. H. BARROW, PREFECT AND EMPEROR, CITED BY
BROWN, RISE OF WESTERNCHRISTENDOM, 59

SUOVETAURILIA

Suovetaurilia (sacrifice of a pig, sheep and bull) to the god of Mars.

Roman relief from the panel of a sarcophagus. 1st c., first half.

Cf. the Suovetaurilia relief and the Imperial sacrifice relief on the base of the Five Columns monument in the Roman Forum, dedicated in 303



DIOCLETIAN,
COLLATIO LEGUM
ROMANARUM ET
MOSAICARUM
15:3

“The ancient religion ought not to be censured by a new one. For it is the height of criminality to reverse that which the ancestors had defined, [...] things which hold and preserve their recognized place and course.”

DIOCLETIAN, COLLATIO LEGUM ROMANARUM ET MOSAICARUM 15:3, TRANS. DODGEON AND LIEU IN THE ROMAN EASTERN FRONTER AND THE PERSIAN WARS, 1991, 135. CITED BY BROWN, RISE OF WESTERN CHRISTENDOM, 59-60

RELIGIONS AND RELIGIOUS CULTS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Characteristics of pagan gods/goddesses: human appearance; appear in dreams to the pious; transmit messages (by oracles, signs); aid humans in everyday life; a part of local traditions (festivals, rituals).

Emphasis on ritual; presence of images of the gods; buildings and offerings for the gods

Social and political activities involve the worship of the gods.

Collegia –social groups; associations usually (not always) connected to worship of a deity; priest/priestess; recognised by the state; accommodates various worshippers of various deities



RELIGIONS AND RELIGIOUS CULTS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Provincial cults: syncretism and localisation

Double name of gods: indigenous and analogous deity (in Anatolia – Zeus Abozanos, Zeus Alsenos etc.)

Each region (Egypt, Syria, Greece etc.) has its own religious traditions.

Traditional cults are expressed through ritual, especially animal sacrifice.

For example, Emperor Decius in 249 orders all inhabitants of the empire to express devotion to the gods, stipulating an offering of sacrifice.



CHRISTIANITY IN THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE: PERSECUTION

The name for this group —“Christians” —already in use by 112 (when Pliny the Younger reports to Emperor Trajan about Christian “superstition” in his province).

250: Diocletian’s persecutions — emperors sense a need to protect the gods and thus suppress Christianity by imperial edicts.

303: The Great Persecution by Diocletian (11 years, extends to Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt).

Arrests of Church bishops and clergy; forcing sacrifice; executions in 250, 257 and 303.

Scripture is ordered to be burned —targeting the Church’s code of “divine law.”



CHRISTIANITY IN THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE: SHIFT FROM PERSECUTION TO TOLERATION

The third century: beware exaggeration —converts include those surrounding the imperial court; Christians not always persecuted.

The fourth century: Constantine the Great (306-337): a “Christian emperor”?

- From 306-312: considered a “tolerant pagan with monotheistic tendencies”; some consider Constantine committed to Christianity from 306 (citing his toleration of Christians); positive support for Christianity — after the defeat of Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge (312).
- Edict of Milan (313): declares freedom of worship for non-Christians; explicitly states the toleration of Christians; property to be restored to Christians across the Empire.





ROMAN NORTH AFRICA

Augustine is born in Roman North Africa in 354AD, to parents Patricius and Monica (a devout Christian)

A wealthy Roman province – commerce, grain and olive oil export

Mixed population: Berbers, Greek-speaking traders; Latin the language of the administration and the educated

Culture: theatre; poetry competitions; grammarians (teachers of literature); authors – Apuleius of Madaura, *The Golden Ass* (2nd c.)

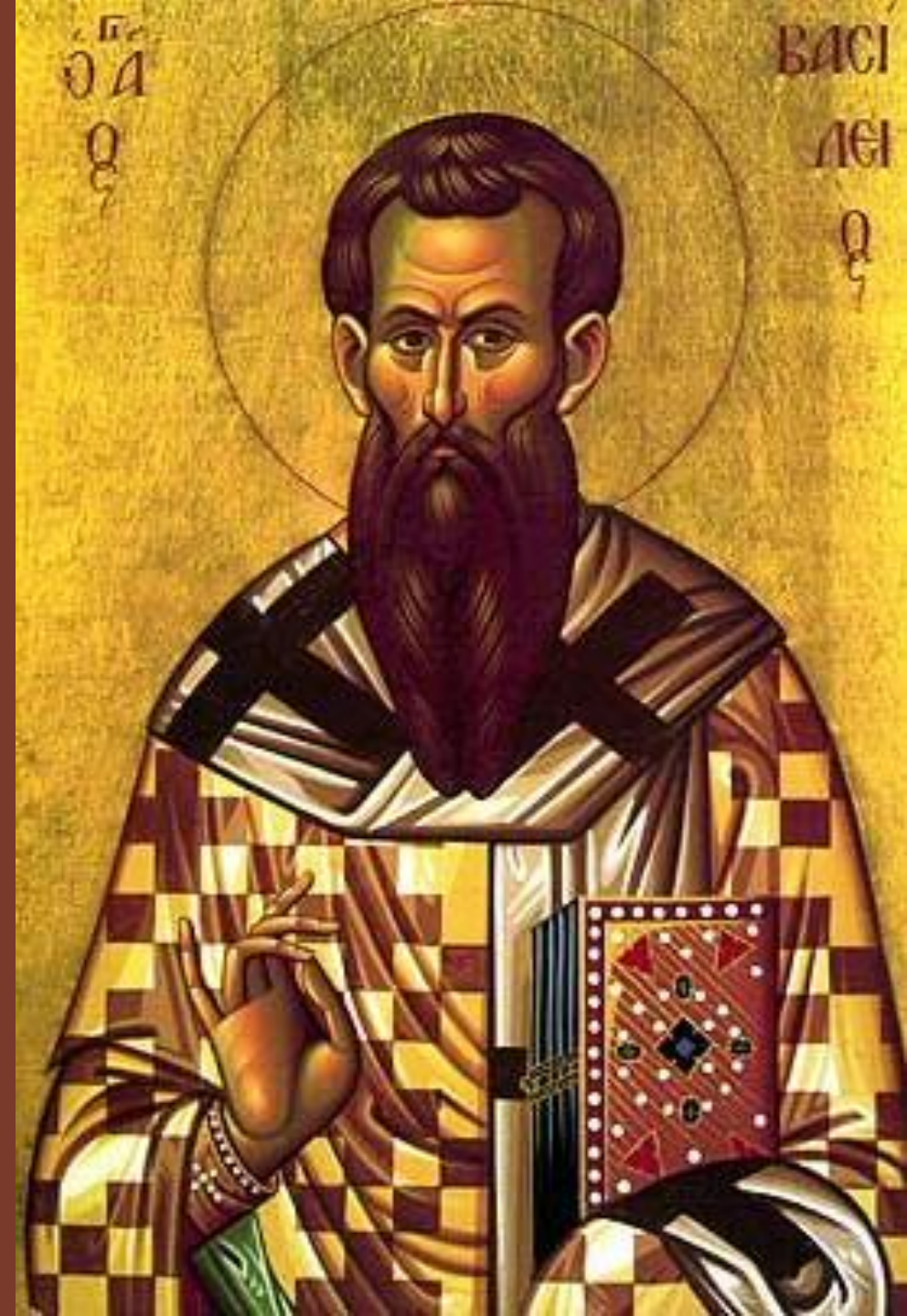
CHRISTIANITY IN NORTH AFRICA

2nd c.: Christian mission results in establishment of churches

2nd-3rd c. converts and theologians

- Tertullian (born 160), theologian; establishes the grammar of Christian theology
- St Cyprian (c. 200-258), bishop of Carthage; prolific writer; martyr

4th c.: defence of the Christian faith (Ambrose, Lactantius) against pagan philosophers





AUGUSTINE'S EDUCATION AND INFLUENCES

AUGUSTINE'S EARLY EDUCATION

The aim of Augustine's education was to master rhetoric – the norm for Augustine's time.

Early education – in Thagaste (learning Greek);
later – in Madaura and Carthage

Contents of education: pagan literature (Greek and Latin authors – Homer, Virgil, Horace and Cicero).

Various evaluations of Augustine's early education:

- positive (Henry Chadwick);
- narrow scope – no philosophy, science or history (Peter Brown).

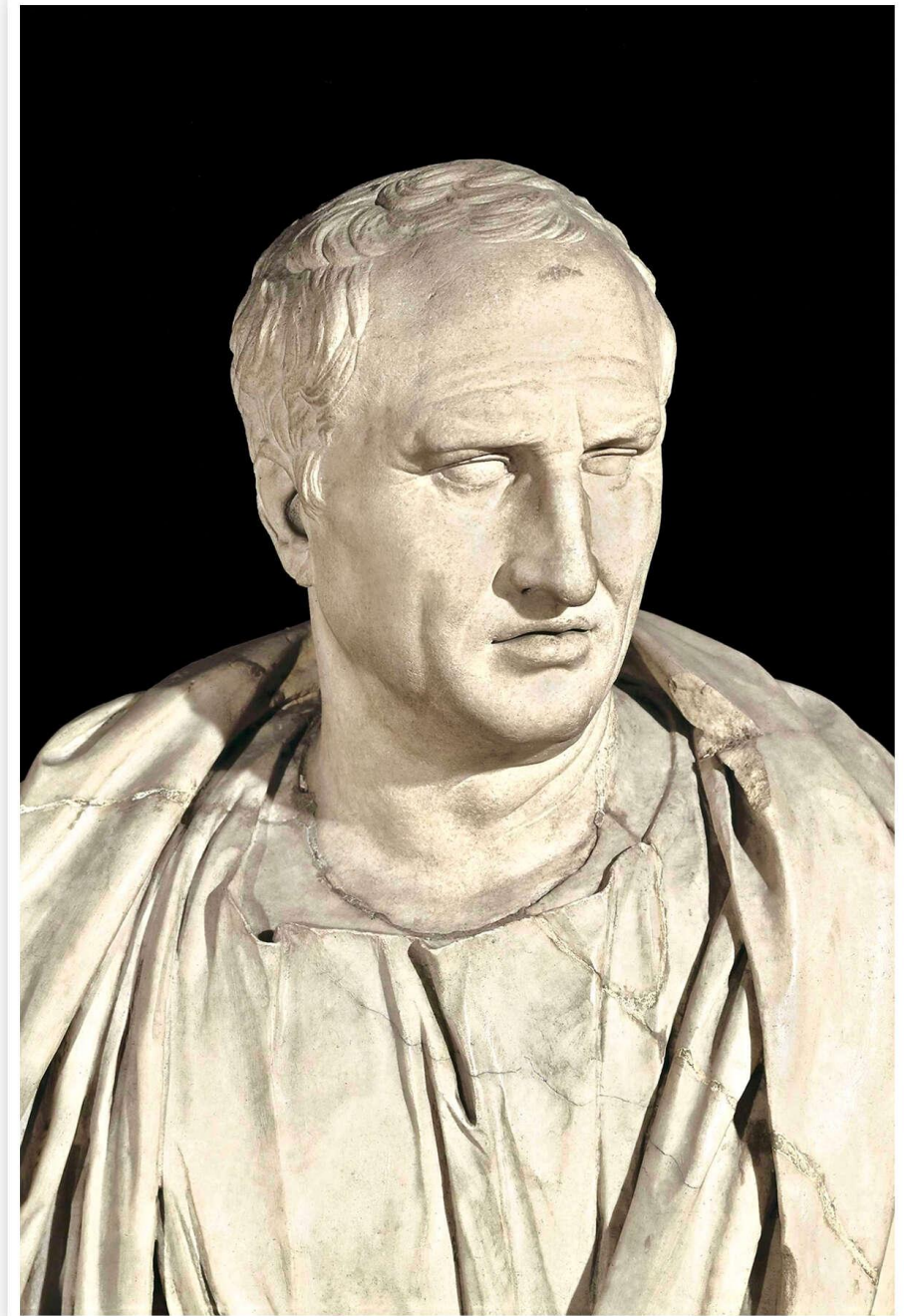


THE INFLUENCE OF CICERO (106 BC-43 BC)

Arrival in Carthage at 17: “I came to Carthage and all around me hissed a cauldron of illicit loves.”
(ConfessionsIII:1, p. 35)

Augustine’s reading of Cicero’s Hortensius (45 BC) leads Augustine towards the idea of the necessity of studying philosophy; warning against bodily pleasures; teachings on human happiness and misery definition and causes. (ConfessionsIII:4)

Unimpressed with the style of the Latin Bible.
(Confessions III:5)



MANICHAEAN STAGE

Augustine's twenties: associated with the Manichees for 10 years while in Carthage and later in Rome.

Mani, gnostic (216-c.277) – self-described Apostle of God and ultimate authority for Manichaeans.

Rejects the authority of the Old Testament and the notion of Jesus as a historical person.

- Metaphysical materialism
- Dualistic: forces of Light and Dark in conflict – and the origin of evil
- Evil inherent in the material world
- Extreme asceticism: strict food laws

THE RELIGION OF THE MANICHEES

Francis Crawford Burkitt

Donnellan Lectures for 1924

DISILLUSIONMENT WITH THE MANICHEES

Simplistic understanding of human nature —no discussion of human doubt, ignorance, nuances of the human will.

Death of Augustine's friend --“a better and more real person than the [Manichee] phantom in which I would have been telling my soul to trust.” (Confessions IV:4, p. 58)

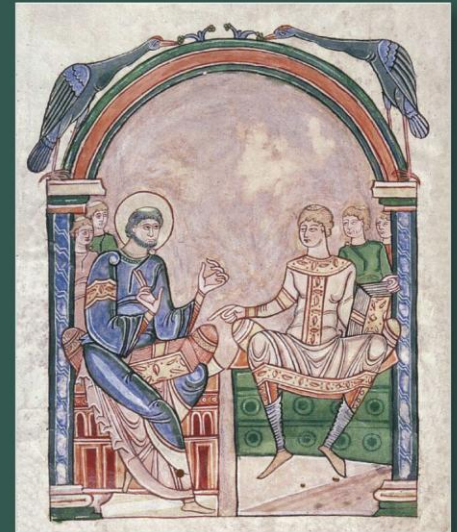
Reading Aristotle's Ten Categories —Augustine attempts to understand the universe and God according to this framework. (Confessions IV:15-16)

Augustine's doubts regarding the Light-Dark conflict and Manichaean assertions about astronomy.

Meeting with the renowned Manichaean teacher Faustus of Milevis (Confessions V:3-VII)

Mani and Augustine

Collected Essays on Mani,
Manichaeism and Augustine



By
JOHANNES VAN OORT

BRILL

ROME AND MILAN, 382-387

Moves to Rome in 382; meets Symmachus, prefect of the City, who recommends Augustine as professor of rhetoric at Milan.

Milan, 384-387 (with interruptions)

- Professor of Rhetoric
- Meeting with Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-c.397): Bishop of Milan, theologian

Augustine's concubine sent away so that Augustine can secure an advantageous marriage —a failed venture.



INFLUENCE OF NEOPLATONISM

Neoplatonism –a “modern” Platonism; represented by Plotinus (205-270) and his pupil and editor Porphyry (c. 250-c.305). The dominant philosophy in late antiquity.

Informed by Plato, Aristotelian logic, Stoic ethics

Eternal principles exist besides this world

All things have one source: the rest is multiplicity (the many) and disintegration

The One, Mind and Soul –a divine hierarchy

Man can rationally ascend to the realm of ideas.

Augustine in contact with Neoplatonic books (“books of the Platonists”) in Milan in 386 – although which books these were and who gave these to him remains unknown. (See Confessions 7:9)



INFLUENCE OF NEOPLATONISM

The One can interact with the many in space and time, and still be distinct from them – God is transcendent.

Emphasis on interiority and introspection; the possibility of the soul's ascent to divine light by purification and by setting aside external perceptions





AUGUSTINE'S CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

CIRCUMSTANCES OF AUGUSTINE'S CONVERSION

Augustine's rejection of skepticism: it is possible to know "true philosophy."

Turning to the writings of St Paul (Confessions 7:21)

Inward conflict between a desire for attaining higher spiritual realities and carnal pleasure. (Confessions 7:17; 8:1)

Learns about the asceticism of Egyptian desert monks. (Confessions 8:6)

Crisis: account in Confessions 8:8-12 --entering the garden in Milan; deliberating about serving God; dissociated from himself.



AUGUSTINE,
CONFESSIONS
VIII:12, PP. 152-
153.

“I threw myself down somehow under a certain fig tree, and let my tears flow freely. [...]

[Suddenly] I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting, [...] saying and repeating over and over again ‘Pick up and read, pick up and read.’ [Tolle, lege...][...]

I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find. [...]

[And] in silence [I] read the first passage on which my eyes lit: ‘Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts.’ (Rom. 13:13-14)”

AUGUSTINE, CONFESSIONS VIII:12, PP. 152-153.



A gradual conversion.

The account of his conversion in Confessions 8 displays a combination of rhetorical embellishment and literal account.

INTERPRETING AUGUSTINE'S CONVERSION



INTERPRETING AUGUSTINE'S CONVERSION

The motive of conversion:

- ethics (regarding sexual passion) and dissatisfaction with himself as opposed to an intellectual shift (for instance, an attempt to reject philosophical scepticism in favour of the authority of the Church).

To what/from what Augustine converts:

- acceptance of specific Christian affirmations about God and man (Chadwick, Augustine, 30)
- or “away from sex and ambition.” (Fox, Augustine: Conversions and Confessions, 289)

READING

Confessions, Book III *Confessions*, Book IV

North, John. "The Religious History of the Roman Empire." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. 19 December 2017

Mallard, William. "Reality of God, Reality of Soul: (Confessions V through VII, 10)." In *Language and Love: Introducing Augustine's Religious Thought Through the Confessions Story*, pp. 63-80. University Park, USA: Penn State University Press, 1994

