

Confessing with St Augustine

Augustine's World

Dr T. R. Baylor



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Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

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Roman Africa in the Time of Augustine

- Aurelius Augustine (A) was born in Thagaste in 354 AD.
- Thagaste was a provincial town in Roman Numidia, modern Algeria.
- It was annexed in 40 BC by Caesar Augustus, A's namesake.
- Numidia had been very prosperous, with booming agriculture and extensive trade routes, but was in decline by the 4th century.
- Carthage, 150 miles to the East of Thagaste, was "second city" to Rome.



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Roman Africa in the Time of Augustine

- Thagaste was a town of a few thousand people — a trading centre surrounded by countryside, but in proximity to other towns.
- A's father, Patricius, was a Roman and a town councillor. A describes him as a townsman of little means, and notes his family went “poorly dressed” to finance his education (Brown, p. 9).
- Patricius did have some relation to Romanianus, the most wealthy patron in Thagaste, who would become a benefactor of Augustine.



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Politics and Religion in the 4th Century

- A was born under the rule of Constantius II, son of Constantine the Great.
- The Roman Empire appeared resurgent in the 4th century after a long period of crisis marked by plague, economic depression, civil war and foreign invasion.
- Constantine's victory at Milvian Bridge (312 AD) enabled him to end the Tetrarchy and consolidate the Empire.
- Famously, a vision prior to this battle led to Constantine's conversion.

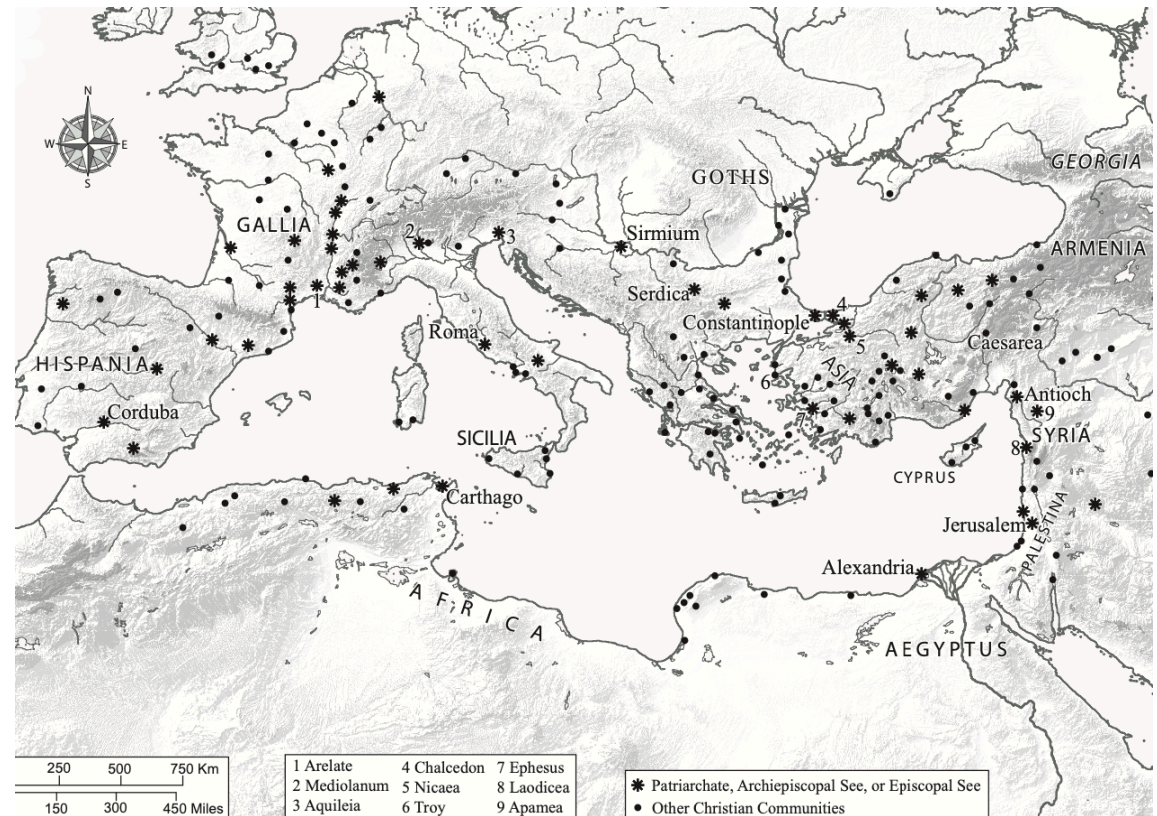


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Politics and Religion in the 4th Century

- The religious culture of the Roman Empire in the 4th C was very fluid.
- Christianity was small and spread rapidly in the 2nd and 3rd centuries (see right).
- Constantine's conversion to and toleration of Christianity in the *Edict of Milan* (313) was defining.
- It provided relief for a religious minority that had sometimes been badly persecuted under Diocletian. But this introduced a cultural division between Christians and Arians, those who favoured the Roman pantheon.



Politics and Religion in the 4th Century

- ‘Arianism’, a form of Christianity that denied the equality of Jesus with God, became a kind of half-way point between Christianity and the old Roman religion.
- Constantine would convene the Council of Nicaea in 325 to settle the Arian controversy, but religious tensions persisted for centuries.
- Constantius II would promote a form of Arian Christianity; Julian the Apostate would reject Christianity and advocate a return to paganism; Valentinian I was a Nicene Christian but his wife was Arian.



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Augustine's Childhood

- A's mother, Monica, was the prevailing moral and spiritual influence on his life.
- Though Patricius was Roman, Monica was likely of Berber descent. (See next slide)
- Monica's marriage to Patricius seemed to have been mixed. He was not abusive, but he was not faithful to her.
- A had a somewhat cold relationship with his father, possibly an indifference born out of his respect for Monica.
- Though Patricius was pagan, Monica was Christian and raised her children in the African church.



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African Christianity in the 4th Century

- The African church had been bitterly divided by 'Donatism'.
- Christians in Africa had been forced, under Diocletian, to hand over their copies of the Bible. Priests who complied to avoid persecution were regarded as traitors and apostates.
- Caecilian was consecrated Bishop of Carthage by an alleged apostate.
- 80 Numidian Bishops refused to recognise him, holding his consecration to be invalid, and appointed Donatus instead.



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African Christianity in the 4th Century

- In 312, Constantine backed Caecilian, but this failed to unify the church.
- The Donatists regarding such moral compromise as corrupting the apostolic succession, and thus the church's ritual purity. As a result, they insisted on re-baptising converts.
- Though A was raised Catholic, this created a culture in the church that was protective of tradition, suspicious of outsiders, and marked by authoritarian tendencies.
- The character of the young Augustine's faith (and the extent of his misbehaviour/sin) is disputed.



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Augustine's Education

- In Thagaste, A was schooled in literature: Vergil, Cicero, Sallust & Terrence. These would have been read intensively.
- At 17 (371), A would go to Carthage to study rhetoric. Patricius dies shortly after, in 372.
- In Carthage, A would read Cicero's *Hortensius* and Aristotle's *Categories*. He would also meet a woman who would be his common law wife. Together they would have a son, Adeodatus (373), born "against the parents' wishes" (*Conf.* 4.2.2).



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Augustine Becomes a Manichee

- New found interest in philosophy leads A to the Manichees.
- A would soon bring Romanianus & many friends into the Manichean orbit.
- Brown suggests A was attracted by (1) liberation from the narrowness of the African church, (2) critiques of the Old Testament, which A found offensive, (3) freedom from guilt and responsibility for his moral failings.



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Ambition, Success, and Misery

- After teaching in Thagaste (375) and Carthage (376-383), A lies Monica and sails to Rome w/ friends (*Conf.* 5.8.15).
- A remains w/ the Manichees, but increasingly drawn to the Skeptics.
- In 384, the pagan Prefect of Milan (and cousin of Ambrose), Symmachus, appoints A Prof of Rhetoric, a position serving the imperial court as a kind of Press Secretary, giving the annual panegyrics of the Emperor (Valentinian II).
- Monica returns (385) to marry A to a high-born woman. A sends away his concubine.



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Platonism and Conversion

- Augustine comes under the teaching of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. Intrigued by his reading of the Bible, he becomes a Catechumen (385).
- Reading Porphyry and Plotinus forces a break with the Manichees but deepens his spiritual crisis.
- In the throes of a nervous break-down, he hears of the life of St Anthony & retires to Cassiciacum w/ friends to pursue an ideal of contemplative leisure.
- There he is dramatically converted.



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Baptism and the Death of Monica

- After his conversion, A writes a number of religious dialogues — *Contra Academicos*, *De Beata Vita*, *De Ordine*, *Soliloquia*.
- In 387 he returns to Milan w/ Monica to receive baptism alongside Alypius & Adeodatus.
- In Ostia, Monica & A have a mystical vision of “*That Which Is*”.
- Monica dies shortly thereafter.
- A returns to Thagaste to retire as a “*servus Dei*”.



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