and Clodius Albinus, an African general in Britian, and he ruled by transferring power from senators to the military. His son and successor was murdered by Macrinus, a Mauretanian who briefly became emperor. Emperors who succeeded him also met untimely deaths, including Maximinus Thrax who was killed (238 CE) in an uprising that originated in Africa. Gordian I, himself probably of Roman descent and a proconsul of Africa, was named emperor by leaders of a revolt in Africa that consisted largely of indigenous and lower class peoples in and around Carthage. Although Gordian and his son, Gordian II, were defeated, Gordian III would be appointed emperor, only to be challenged by another indigenous revolt in Africa, led by the proconsul Sabinianus (240) who was swiftly defeated. Roman officials would also have to face repeated revolts on the borders of Africa Proconsularis for the following decades. Firmus, from Mauretania, led an indigenous revolt that was suppressed (375) by Rome with the help of Firmus’ brother, Gildo. Later, Gildo himself rebelled against Rome (397), mustering a large following in Africa before being defeated by the emperor who was aided by Gildo and Firmus’ brother, Mascezel.

The invasion of the Vandals (428) of the fifth century and the Byzantine reconquest saw the wealth and prosperity of the provincials depleted. The constant turmoil between the empire and the indigenous peoples preceded the Arabian re-colonization of Africa in the seventh century. Looking back over the entire period, Cherry states, “Putting even the best face on the Romans’ actions in the region, it is hard not to conclude, with Broughton, that their only identifiable policy in the frontier-zone is one of ‘exploitation’... [resulting in] little immigration into the frontier-zone; hardly any change in native economic structures; limited interaction between the intrusive and indigenous cultures.”

Cherry is echoing the argument of Broughton, “The Romans adapted themselves to Africa; they gave her peace, and made her prosperous, but they never made her Roman.” The historical data suggests that around and amidst the numerous Roman colonial centers in North Africa remained a vast plethora of indigenous communities that retained much of their pre-Roman practices and customs.

1.5 The Context of Tertullian: Christianization of Roman Africa

While Tertullian is the first Christian from the context of North Africa whose writings are extant, he writes from within an already prevalent Christian community. How was North Africa evangelized, and to what extent? What were the demographics of the first Christian churches and what changes did they undergo in their history?

161 Frontier, 73.
162 The Romanization, 227-8. Similarly, see Dommelen, “Punic Persistence,” 25-48, for the Punic settlement in Sardinia, which was “Romanized” much earlier militarily, but remained Punic in “material culture.”
The history of Christian communities in ancient Africa is known through sources that report conflict with Rome. The historical data fall into a broad outline that illustrates this theme: (1) late second to early third century, which includes the *Passio sanctorum Scillitanorum*, the *Passio sanctorum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* and Tertullian’s writings; (2) mid to late third Century, which primarily consists of Cyprian’s treatises and letters; and (3) late antiquity to the early middle ages, consisting primarily of the so-called Donatist controversy. The scope of this chronology cannot extend to every aspect of North African Christianity; instead, it is hoped that the broad history, including what follows Tertullian, illuminates some factors that impacted Christian identities in North Africa.

Although the first evidence of Christianity in North Africa is the *Passio sanctorum Scillitanorum* (c. 180), scholars agree that the document indicates a previously established Christian presence. The question scholars debate, however, is the mode by which the Christian religion entered North Africa. Although North African Christians used Latin, scholars have generally rejected Roman origins in favour of either Jewish influence or the claim to Greek missions. Lacking further information in the sources, scholars have not reached a consensus, other than acknowledging the difference between African Christian practices and the contemporary forms in Rome.

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164 e.g. Barnes, *Tertullian*, 63.


The historical data becomes more substantial with the account of the martyrs from the town of Scilli. Many scholars consider the surviving account to be one of the most reliable acta from early Christendom. In seventeen lines, it tells of seven men and five women who refused to recant their Christianity, and as a result they were beheaded on orders of the proconsul of Africa. Nothing is known of the town of Scilli from where the first recorded African martyrs came, nor is there explicit reference as to how or why the proconsul arrested the Scillitans. The image portrayed is of Christians who are not surprised by the pronouncement of their sentence, exemplified by their unanimous response, "Deo gratias."

Another famous account of African Christian martyrs, the Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis, bears witness to the first general period of African Christianity. This passio is a much fuller and grander account of the incarceration, trial, torture and execution of Perpetua and her fellow martyrs. Like the account of the Scillitan martyrs, the witness of the passio is sufficiently contemporary to the events it portrays to be considered a credible source to most scholars. The date Perpetua and her companions were martyred is said to be the same day as natale Getae Caesaris (7.9) – the birthday of Geta, Septimius Severus’ son – which according to Tabbernee was on 7 March 203. The trial likely took place in Carthage, and no indication is given of the Christians’ background. Like the Passio sanctorum Scillitanorum, the account portrays the Christians in Africa in conflict with the powers of the world.

Representing the second generation of North African Christians, Cyprian of Carthage is reported to have led a church also riddled with conflict. Soon after

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169 Stated to be on 17 July in Carthage during the consulship of C. Bruttius Praesens and Claudianus. On the proconsul, P. Vigellius Saturninus, see Tertullian, Ad Scap. 3.4.
170 PSS 17.
174 Raven, Rome, 167.
175 See Jerome, De uiris illustribus 53.3, “…Cyprian was accustomed never to pass a day without reading Tertullian and would frequently say to him, ‘Hand me the master,’ meaning, of course, Tertullian” [solium numquam Cypriannum absque Tertulliani lectione unum diem praeterisse, ac sibi crebro dicere, Da magistrum: Tertulliannum videlicet significans.] For an overview of
his conversion, he took office as Bishop of Carthage (248/9), wherein he was challenged with one of the most aggressive campaigns against Christians to date under the Roman emperor Decian (249-51). Internal conflict arose after some Christians recanted their faith; they sought immediate forgiveness and restoration from the confessors awaiting martyrdom, a practice Cyprian opposed. In the Roman congregation, a dissension occurred where a certain Novatian held the view that the lapsed should not be allowed back into the Church, even at the point of death – another practice Cyprian opposed, and Novation eventually claimed for himself the bishopric of Rome and established rival congregations in Rome and in Africa. Later, another conflict arose, this time directly between the Roman and Carthaginian sees: Stephen I, bishop of Rome (254-7), declared those baptized by heretics could be accepted into the communion, while Cyprian and his fellow African bishops upheld their traditional stance against this view. The conflict was never fully resolved when the Valerian persecution resulted in Cyprian’s martyrdom (258).

For the third period of African Christianity, historians often look to the reign of Constantine and the Edict of Milan (313) as the beginning of the Donatist controversy. The beginning of the split between the Donatist party and the Catholics traces back to an internal dispute of the Christian congregation at Carthage, which resulted in Donatus, a “former bishop from the village of ‘Dark Houses’ (Casae Nigrae) in Numidia,” being appointed as a rival overseer in Carthage. The conflict climaxed in the Conference of Carthage (411) where both parties’ bishops convened, wherein, despite the portrayal of anti-Donatist accounts like Augustine and Optatus of Milevis, the council seems to have resulted in a stalemate. The Donatists, drawing on Tertullian and Cyprian, understood themselves to be at odds with the world, which was typified in the powers of Rome, seeing the collusion of the Roman church with the Roman state as foreign to the faith of the martyrs and antithetical to the impetus of African Christian tradition. Historians especially note conflict with Rome in the alliance of many Donatists to the revolts of Firmus and Gildo.

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Cyprian’s life and dates, see G.S.M. Walker, The Churchmanship of St. Cyprian, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968); for a more recent treatment of some the issues surrounding Cyprian, see Burns, Cyprian.

176 Raven, Rome, 169.


178 Tilley, The Bible, 2ff.

The disappearance of widespread practice of Christianity in North Africa presents an enigma to the scholars of Christian history. Henri Teissier asked, "How can a Christianity established in some seven hundred different dioceses, some of them so closely neighboring on Christian Europe, with all their rich doctrinal legacy thanks to Augustine and Cyprian, a Christianity steeped in the blood of the martyrs, have simply and completely disappeared?" The Vandal invasion, importing a wave of Arianism, and later the Arab expansion, introducing an entirely new religion, both contributed to the complete eradication of Christianity from Africa Proconsularis, Numidia and Mauritania.

1.6 Conclusion

The above surveys of Patristic scholarship highlight an unexplored aspect of Tertullian’s writings, namely, his Africanity, which is now open for discussion. The Postcolonial and Anthropological challenges to "re-read" history permits Tertullian’s setting to be revisited and his oeuvre to be reinterpreted. The importance of context, moreover, for Patristic and Classical studies demands that the social landscape from which Tertullian wrote be extensively researched in order to better interpret this Church father from the continent of Africa.

In order to explore Tertullian’s North African milieu and then in turn to reread some of Tertullian’s writings, the following chapters will employ specific theories from Social Anthropology on social identity, kinship, class, ethnicity and religion. These theories will serve as filters for data that scholars often tend to interpret ethnocentrically. By drawing attention away from concerns generally considered more “theological” (e.g. trinitas, persona, etc.) and by focusing instead on elements that are generally considered more “contextual” or “historical” (e.g. kinship, class, etc.), it is hoped that a fresh set of questions will inform the reading of this North African theologian.

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182 For discussion, see Frend, The Donatist Church. Cahal B. Daly, Tertullian the Puritan and His Influence: An Essay in Historical Theology, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1993), 72-3, blames Tertullian (via Cyprian) for what happened “at the hands of the Vandal and Mohammedan.”
183 See Barnes, Tertullian, vii, for a plea to focus on context. cf. John Dominic Crossan, The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 146-9, for his outline of an interdisciplinary methodology similar to that used here. Crossan begins with anthropological theory and historical context before approaching the text.