vaunted fluency in Greek acquired as it would be by a well-educated Roman. The seemingly contradictory self-identity seen in these two representatives of African new elites signifies the tension in which people of this category found themselves. While these individuals were African in one sense and clearly understood themselves in terms of an African self-identity, the new elites also sought and often attained a Roman status.

From this analysis of North African social identities, one can inquire as to which category Tertullian belonged. An initial reading of his background and education seems to indicate that Tertullian deserves to be classified as a new elite. Nevertheless, the following re-reading of Tertullian’s works understands Tertullian to have considered himself an indigenous African, rejecting the pursuits of the North African new elite in favor of recovering an identity which in some ways was subversive to the Roman system. Before proceeding to Tertullian’s writings, however, the succeeding section will explore the Christian community of North Africa to which Tertullian belonged in order to address the identities of groups and individuals who understood themselves to be both Christian and African.

2.3 Ancient African Christians and Social Identity

In exploring the historical data of Christians in ancient Africa the discussion will invoke the three previously established categories of social identities (Roman colonizers, indigenous Africans, and new elites). These will serve as perspectival categories for reviewing the sources on early Christianity in Africa. The Christianizing of Africa, however, introduces a new category of social identity, and, therefore, contributes to the complicated web of individual and group identity constructions.

Christian history in North Africa has been presented as an overall tradition of a community that understands itself to be in conflict with those designated as outsiders. The ancient African Christian sources – primarily from the first period of African Christian history and secondarily from the second and third periods as outlined above (section 1.5) – will be surveyed for elements of Christian self-expressions. First, the discussion of Christians’ social identities includes a review of data illustrating how Christians were deemed by outsiders as the “Other.”

50 “General Introduction,” 1.
51 Dunn, Tertullian, 5; Stewart-Sykes, Tertullian, 14; and Wright, “Tertullian,” 1027.
52 Markus, “Christianity, 28, and 32-5. Also, Trevette, Montanism, 69-70, points out that African Christianity may not have suffered more actual persecution than other regions, but they did understand themselves as such in Tertullian’s time.
2.3.1 Roman Colonizers and Christians

Robert L. Wilken explains how he came to write his book, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*: “The more I read the apologists... the more I realized that they could not be understood without first studying the attitudes of outsiders to Christianity.” In an attempt to interpret the Christian social identities in North Africa, this section will outline the way in which Christians were seen by non-Christians in North Africa. With the three categories of social identity at the forefront, representatives of North African society will be surveyed to determine the various perspectives toward Christians.

The introduction of a Christian identity into North African society in a sense could require a duplication of the three categories: (1.a) Non-Christian Roman Colonizers, (1.b) Christian Roman Colonizers, (2.a) Non-Christian indigenous Africans, (2.b) Christian indigenous Africans, (3.a) Non-Christian new elites and (3.b) Christian new elites. Because, however, non-Christians tended to assume the monolithic constitution of Christianity, Christians can be construed as representing a new category of social identity in North Africa: (1) Roman colonizers, (2) Indigenous Africans, (3) new elites and (4) North African Christians. Although it is true that not all members of any one of these categories, such as Roman colonizers, thought and acted unanimously, general stereotypes did exist among certain groups which provide a frame of reference to which we can compare individual attitudes. The ancient context will be discussed with the understanding of a Christian community which sees itself at odds with the oppressive forces of the outside world, or more specifically, the forces of Rome, both “pagan” and Christian.

Direct evidence for Roman views of Christians in North Africa is sparse at best, and so the historian must look to examples of Roman stereotypes of Christians elsewhere in order to suggest analogous perspectives in Africa. The fact that many in the Roman Empire did not welcome Christian proselytism goes without saying. The question, more specifically, is “How did non-Christian Romans view the members of this new and seemingly atheistic religion?” A few writers’ comments are extant which present some possible answers to this question.

The first mention of Christianity by a non-Christian did not occur until eighty-years after the death of Christ. The Governor of the province in Bithynia-Pontus named Pliny the Younger (c.62-113) wrote to his emperor Trajan to inquire as to the proper treatment of Christians. Born in Italy and a citizen of senatorial class, Pliny represents a Roman colonial perspective in a Roman province. Moreover, the actions of Pliny towards the Christians set precedence

---

55 Ibid, xii.
56 *Epistula* 10.96; (and Trajan’s response, 10.97).
Social Identity

for the Roman officials in Africa and served to inform the understanding of Romans in Africa Proconsularis.\textsuperscript{57} Wilken argues that the description of the Bacchic orgies in Livy’s history, written during the reign of Augustus, influenced later Roman attitudes such as Pliny’s towards Christians.\textsuperscript{58} Perhaps Pliny has excesses of the Bacchic sort in mind when he asks, “...whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even if innocent of crime, or rather the crimes associated with the name.”\textsuperscript{59} Pliny does not elaborate on what “crimes” had been associated with the Christians, but his account does indicate that he is drawing on a general stereotype available to him as a Roman colonizer.

Several non-Christian writers from the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire attest to the sort of charges that shaped the stereotypes of many Roman colonizers. Writing in the mid-second century, Lucian, a Syrian who lived for some time in Athens, provides an account of a Christian stereotype available to inhabitants of the Roman Empire. In a work entitled, The Passing of Peregrinus, Lucian portrays Christians as gullible and ignorant. No crimes (\textit{flagitia}) are mentioned, but the overall picture is negative. Barnes postulates that Lucian is intentionally countering the general understanding of Christians as culpable of horrendous crimes by showing them to be “credulous simpletons.”\textsuperscript{60} The sophist Aelius Aristides (c. 117-c.180) expatiates on the stereotype by comparing Cynic philosophers whom he is denouncing to “those impious men of Palestine” who “do not believe in the higher powers,” and Aristides suggests that the Cynics resemble the Christians because they too “have defected from the Greek race, or rather from all that is higher.”\textsuperscript{61} In an Egyptian papyrus dating to the second century a certain Lollianus presents a more gruesome view of Christians where “initiates” (\textit{μνουμενο}) are engaged in promiscuous intercourse and ritual murder.\textsuperscript{62} Towards the end of the second century, Christians were often portrayed as incestuous and cannibalistic in their secret meetings.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{57} See below, section 4.2.5.
\textsuperscript{59} Epistula 10.96.4: nomen ipsum, si flagitiis careat, an flagitia cohaerentia nomini punitur.
\textsuperscript{63} For Christian defenses against such charges, see Justin, \textit{1 Apologia} 26.7; Athenagoras, \textit{Legatio} 3.1ff.; 31-32; and Minucius Felix, \textit{Octavius} 9. Wilken, \textit{The Christians}, 19-20, conjectures that such charges actually have some warrant and probably represent early Christian sects that did practice “clandestine rites” that gave rise to the accusation against all Christians. As evidence,
In the third Century, the general accusations against Christians were both specified and generalized. They were specified in the writings of Celsus and Porphyry (232/3-c.305) who wrote treatises that moved beyond the accusations of hearsay and attacked particularities of the Christian faith. The accusations against Christians were generalized in that the persecutions required only the name “Christian” for arrest and trial, and no evidence of any crime was necessary for a conviction. Until the Edict of Milan, the predominant posture of non-Christian Roman colonizers towards Christians was one of suspicion.

The indigenous Africans’ perceptions of Christians are available to historians only through the accounts of Roman colonizers and new elites. While the views of the Romans did not undergo dramatic change until the third period of African Christian history, the view of the *populus* changed much quicker. Most inhabitants of North Africa in the early period of Christianity, like the inhabitants of the empire on a whole, were largely uninterested in the activities of the Christians. The views of non-Christian indigenous Africans begin to become perceptible, however, in the trials and persecutions of the Christian martyrs. In speaking of the masses outside of North Africa, Barnes comments,

After the first quarter of the third century, Christians were in practice rarely persecuted for their religion. Popular hostility toward them, however, may have continued to be widespread for a little longer. The attitudes of the inarticulate strata of any society are usually hard to measure, but the authentic Acts of the early martyrs provide an index of changing popular attitudes. In the second century, the crowd in the amphitheater at Smyrna demanded the arrest of Polycarp, asked the Asiarch Philippus to set a lion on him, settled for burning the bishop and finally constructed a pyre themselves, while popular agitation was behind the executions at Lyon.

While nothing is reported about the crowd in the Scillitan passion, Barnes portrayal of the role of the “inarticulate strata” is reflected in the African

---

64 Celsus was believed to have written in the mid second century, but his works impacted later generations such as Origen through whom Celsus’ words survive.

65 See Barnes, “Pagan Perceptions,” 232, who says “Most inhabitants of the Roman Empire in A.D. 100 were either unaware of or uninterested in the Christians in their midst.” He then contrasts this to the “educated pagan attitudes” of Pliny the younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius.

66 Ibid, 237; ref. Martyrdom of Polycarp, 3.2; 12-13, and Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica, 5.1.7ff.
indigenous populations present at the martyrdom of Perpetua and her companions. The Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis reports, "At this [the martyrs’ words] the crowds became enraged and demanded that they be scourged." As argued above, it is likely that the majority of the population of Carthaginian commoners – and even more so throughout the rest of North Africa – would have consisted of indigenous Africans, and therefore, the crowd's actions in the passio probably portray the views of many indigenous Africans at the time of its writing.

The "changing popular attitudes" to which Barnes refers becomes apparent in the trials of the African Christian martyrs in the mid to late third century. Raven observes, "The crowd which had watched St Perpetua and her companions die in the amphitheater at Carthage had been hostile to them. Half a century later, the crowd which escorted St Cyprian to the scene of his martyrdom outside the capital had almost rioted in support of their bishop." Although the picture of masses of indigenous Africans choking the streets of Carthage in support of the city's Christian bishop may be rhetorical exaggeration, the views of the masses of indigenous Africans does seem to have significantly shifted during this period. Raven cites the archaeological evidence of the once numerous inscriptions in Punic to non-Christian gods which completely cease during the mid to latter half of the third century.

The views and attitudes of the indigenous Africans in late antiquity largely continue in the trajectory outlined above. Because of the complication the Edict of Milan presents for interpreting Roman views of Christians in North Africa in late antiquity, this subject will be revisited after other theories have been discussed. The views of the new elites of North Africa, however, are more transparent in the three periods of ancient African Christian history.

2.3.3 New Elites and Christians

Because of the new elites' tenuous loyalties and varying modes of self-identification, no single stereotype of new elites in Africa towards Christians can represent the group on a whole. Those individuals who have more completely inserted themselves into the Roman system and mental framework most likely ascertained the same general stereotypes as many Roman colonizers. Specific views of African new elites on the other hand provide firsthand accounts of

---

67 PSPF 18.9: ad hoc populus exasperatus flagellis eos uexari ... postulauit.
68 Rome, 167.
69 Imagery drawn from the account of Pontius, Vita Cypriani.
71 See chapter six.
individuals who interact with groups capable of adopting both Roman and African social identities.

One example is Fronto, the new elite who has been shown to be fully conversant in the Roman system and yet still loyal and connected to the people of his hometown in North Africa. Minucius Felix, the Roman Christian apologist writing in the third century, claims to be quoting an anti-Christian treatise written by Fronto. Champlin argues for the reliability of Minucius Felix in reporting Fronto, saying that *Octavius* 9.6-7 is “certainly Frontonian.” Champlin bases his arguments on the fact that Athenagoras and Eusebius both document the accusations against the martyrs of Lyon in terms of Oedipan intercourse and Thyestean banquets. Champlin states,

These precise references are something definitely and arresting novel in anti-Christian propaganda: they are a subtle refinement on the older and more simple standard allegations of cannibalism and sexual orgies. They may well suggest the influence of Fronto’s anti-Christian remark, the invention of a practiced orator turning naturally to myth for a striking and appropriate image, and there is some confirmation.

The accusations of Fronto being more aggressive in his portrayal of Christian *flagitia*, as Champlin argued, seem to indicate a heightened aggression towards Christians by a new elite than the common stereotype of the Romans. Although such a conclusion is still tenuous at this point in that (1) Fronto could have been referring to Christians in Rome, and (2) his statements could merely represent the artistic exaggeration of a rhetorician, the plausibility remains that Fronto represents a new elite utilizing his education and skills to attack Christians.

Another new elite from the early period of African Christian history whose comments on Christians are extant is Apuleius. Barnes, like many scholars, reads Apuleius’ account of a woman who practiced a private religion to be referring to a Christian. Similarly, Birley thinks Apuleius is referring to Sicinius Aemilianus in his *Apologia* as a “secret Christian.”

---

73 Champlin, *Fronto*, 160 n.18.
75 Champlin, *Fronto*, 160; cf. Barnes, *Tertullian*, 161, note 2, who believes Fronto did refer to Christians in a speech, but did not write an entire oration against the Christians.
76 *Tertullian*, 60; ref. *Metamorphoses* 9.14: “...she used the false sacrilegious presumption of a god, whom she would call ‘one and only,’ to invent meaningless rites....” [sacrilega praesumptione dei, quem praedicaret unicum, conflictis observationibus]. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women*, 7, comes to the same conclusion and discusses the implications of this view of Christian women for the Roman household.
77 *The African Emperor*, 32; ref. *Apologia* 16, “...whereas you in turn are kept out of my sight by your lowly life that shuns the light” [cum ipse humilitate abdita et lucifuga non sis mihi mutuo conspicuus.]
describes Aemilianus' 'secluded way of life' with the word *lucifugus* - shunning the light of day - the very expression used about the Christians in the Octavius of Minucius Felix, where they are described as *latebrosa et lucifuga natio*. Besides this, the description in Minucius Felix of the Christians' refusal to pay their tribute to the shrines of the gods closely matches Apuleius' description of the behaviour of Aemilianus."

Another scholar who has detected anti-Christian themes in Apuleius is P.G. Walsh, who suggests that the African new elite wrote the *Metamorphoses* as a counterblast to the meteoric spread of Christianity in Africa in the later second century. ...It seems probable that in Rome he encountered Christian apologies proliferating there; that composed by Marcianus Aristides contains a scathing attack on Isis, who by this date had been accepted as an honoured inmate in the *curia deorum*. His return to Carthage coincided with the extraordinary flowering of Christianity in North Africa. Madauros, Apuleius' own birthplace, is mentioned as the first focal point of Christian witness; more important, however, is evidence of Tertullian's Apology, which claims that the whole province of Africa was in ferment in the 190's because of the inroads made by Christianity.

Given the fact that so many scholars read Apuleius to hold negative and even aggressive views towards Christians, one could deduce that he represents a common trend among the new elites of Africa. As with Fronto, Apuleius traveled widely and could be referring to Christians in other parts of the empire. Given, however, Walsh's argument of chronological correlation coupled with the fact that Apuleius returned to Africa and claimed Carthaginian identity, the most likely conclusion is that Apuleius is referring to Christians in North Africa, against whom he aimed portions of his rhetorical vitriol.

The views of Roman colonizers, African indigenous and new elites, while varying in intensity, reflect an overall pattern of suspicion. The level of intensity of animosity towards Christians in North Africa by new elites is notable when compared with the views of Roman Colonizers such as Pliny and with the indigenous Africans such as the fickle spectators of the Christian persecutions.


80 cf. *Flor.* 9.36-40, where Apuleius represents himself as a spokesman for the province of Africa, or at least the new elite of Africa, and *Flor.* 16 (esp. 16.35), where he appears to have regularly attended meetings of the Carthaginian senate.

81 Compare the emphasis on the *flagitia* by these new elites with the Roman emphasis on *superstition*: Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, for Christians as simply "a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition" [*genus hominum superstitionis nouae ac maleficae*]; and Suetonius, *Vita Neronis* 16.2, where accusation of *flagitia* is made by the *ulgus*, but the only crime of the Christians is a "pernicious superstition" [*exitabilis superstition.*]
At this point one can inquire whether or not the Christian sources from North Africa reflect a similar pattern.

2.3.4 Christians and Roman Africans

Having surveyed the North African Christian landscape, and having explored the stances of various social groups towards North African Christians, one can ask about how the Christians perceived, constructed and responded to the non-Christian “Other.” As Christian converts, Africans assimilated a new social identity into their former understandings of self. Moreover, many African Christians perceived that the threat to their existence came not only from members of other religions but specifically from Roman colonizers and the new elites loyal to them. In the context of North Africa where Christians are on trial or undergoing torture for their membership to the new religion, the “Other” is the non-Christian “world” which is understood to be allied with the devil. One complication, however, in identifying outsiders as such is the probability that most Christians in North Africa were indigenous Africans and most persecutors were Roman colonizers.

In the *Passio sanctorum Scillitanorum*, rather than preserving only the perspective of a Christian narrator or redactor, two parties have a voice: that of the proconsul Saturninus and of the Scillitans.\(^82\) The proconsul begins with an invitation to recant: “If you return to your senses, you can obtain the pardon of our lord the emperor” (*Potestis indulgentiam domni nostri imperatoris promereri, si ad bonam mentem redeatis*, 1.) The possessive pronoun, *nostri*, seems to be inclusive rather than exclusive, for two reasons.\(^83\) First, the proconsul invites the twelve individuals to “return,” not only to their “senses,” but to a previous state of allegiance. Second, any proconsul would have assumed that the reign of the emperor extended throughout Africa Proconsularis, Tripolitania, Numidia and Mauretania, making anyone in the provinces able to claim him as *domni nostri*. Therefore, in the view of the proconsul “*nostri*” includes all those faithful to the emperor. The proconsul’s words betray another indication of his inclusive social identity:

Saturninus the proconsul read his decision from a tablet: “Whereas Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda and the others have confessed that they have been living in accordance with the rites of the Christians, and whereas though

\(^{82}\) See above, section 1.5, for the reliability of this document and how it has been seen as reliant on official court transcripts.

\(^{83}\) cf. Tertullian, *Adu. Prax*. 11-12, and below, section 6.4.2, on scholarly attention to pronoun usage.
given the opportunity to return to the usage of the Romans they have persevered in their obstinacy, they are hereby condemned to be executed by the sword.\textsuperscript{86}

Saturninus' construction of outsiders obviously includes the listing of the six who "have been living in accordance with the rites of Christianity." However, the phrase, "usage of the Romans," also signifies an identity which Saturninus does not, at least in this instance, place himself.\textsuperscript{85} The name of the proconsul also suggests African origin, and the use of the word Romanorum in outsider phraseology lends itself to the understanding that Saturninus was a new elite serving under the dual consulship of Praesens and Claudiens. Although such a conclusion could be challenged, the use of social identity highlights the data in the text and provides a consistent methodology for interpreting the proconsul's construction of group identity.

The salient identity of the Scillitan Martyrs is repeatedly shown to be that of Christian, as seen in the repeated declarations of Christiana(-us) sum (9-13). The individuals involved construct their identity through the encounter with non-Christians, highlighted in the declaration of allegiance to Christ. Such a thin description seems insufficient, however, given Speratus' immediate reaction to the proconsul's offer of pardon from "our lord the emperor": "We have never done wrong... for we hold our own emperor in honour" (Numquam malefecimus,... propter quod imperatorem nostrum obseruamus, 2.) One could interpret this statement as indicative of the Christian's acceptance of the "pagan" emperor. Perhaps, Speratus is reflecting the understanding that Christians are to submit to governing authorities as established by God.\textsuperscript{86} This approach does not seem to be primary in Speratus' reaction, however, given his later statement. When asked to swear "by the Genius of our lord the emperor" (per genium domni nostri imperatoris, 5), Speratus declares, "I do not recognize the empire of this world. ...for I acknowledge my lord who is the emperor of kings and of all nations" (Ego imperium huius seculi non cognosco. ...quia cognosco domnum meum, imperatorem regum et omnium gentium, 14).\textsuperscript{87} Speratus seems to have
rejected Saturninus’ attempt to apply an inclusive “our lord the emperor” to the Christians by responding with an exclusive “our own emperor.”

When Saturninus missed this hint and continued to apply an inclusive first person plural a second time, Speratus explicitly clarifies the opposition between the two groups. A natural reading of the social identity for Speratus seems on the surface to highlight the contrast between the “Lord” of the Christians and the “lord” of the world. Such a conclusion, however, does not take into account the description Speratus gives of his lord as over *omnium gentium*, a phrase often used in ancient Latin to describe the non-Roman peoples. As indigenous Africans who could take on the broad social identity of *omnium gentium*, the Scillitans also recognize the Romans and any supporters of Rome as outsiders in conflict with the African (Christian) collective.

A reading of the account of the martyrdom of Perpetua and her companions finds both similarities and differences with the account of the Scillitan martyrs. Like the earliest Christian martyrs, Perpetua, Felicitas and the other martyrs are characterized “as one against a single foe, the Devil, aided by his minions the Romans.” Moreover, in two sections the narrator gives voice to the martyrs themselves in what purports to be autobiographical accounts of imprisonment. Listening to the voice of the narrator involves more than a simple observation of pronoun use in order to determine the social identities of the martyrs, as when, for example, the narrator can speak of the martyrs in the third person and still claim that “they” are part of the shared Christian identity. The narrator’s identity is primarily the Christian community who adhere to the same faith as the martyrs. Instances also arise, however, where the narrator indicates other social identities salient for the Christians.

---

88 Musurillo evidently attempts to emphasize this aspect in Speratus’ response by the translation “our own emperor” despite the absence of any emphasizing reflexive in the Latin.

89 e.g. Cic., *De div. I. 1.11, 1.12, 1.36, 1.46, 1.84, 1.95; De haruspicum responso* 19; cited in Krostenko, “Beyond (Dis)belief,” 361. Similarly, in Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 6, Caecilianus declares the Romans worship the gods of *uniuersarum gentium*, and (8) *omnium gentium* are in agreement with Rome’s religious/military superiority. cf. Tert. *Ad nat.* 1.15.7, where *omne gente* is used in contrast with Rome. Also, *Apol*. 21.6, where in a chapter invoking explicitly Roman imagery, after mentioning Tiberius (21.1), Tertullian distinguishes how Christ choose “from every race, community and region” [ex *omni iam gente et populo et loco*]. Elsewhere, Tertullian characterizes his opponent’s argument, contrasting Rome (via Tiberius) and “all nations”: “Marcion lays it down that there is one Christ who in the time of Tiberius was revealed by a god formerly unknown, for the salvation of all the nations” [*Constituit Marcion alium esse Christum qui Tiberionis temporibus a deo quondam ignoto revelatus sit in salutem omnium gentium, Adu. Marc.* 4.6.3]. cf. *Adu. lud.* 7.4: “universal nations” [*uniuersae gentes*] in reference to the list from Acts 2:9-10 which includes “inhabiters of the region of Africa which is beyond Cyrene” [*regiones Africae quae est trans Cyrenen inhabitants*] and “Romans” [*Romani*]. Tertullian can also use similar phraseology when distinguishing “all nations” from the Jews or Samaritans: *Adu. lud.* 2.1; 9.20; and *Adu. Marc.* 4.16.11; 5.5.7.

90 Tilley, *The Bible*, 43.

91 e.g. *PSPF* 1.6, and 16.2-4.

92 See esp. the final paragraph.
The narrator’s “Other” is evident in three passages of the account of the martyrs’ trial and persecution. When the catechumens are confined to the dungeon, the narrator tells of the confrontation that occurred:

While they were treated with more severity by the tribune, because, from the intimations of certain deceitful men, he feared lest they should be withdrawn from the prison by some sort of magic incantations, Perpetua answered to his face, and said, “Why do you not at least permit us to be refreshed, being as we are objectionable to the most noble Caesar, and having to fight on his birth-day? Or is it not your glory if we are brought forward fatter on that occasion?”

93

The narrator, via Perpetua, portrays those who are influencing the arrest and treatment of the Christians as not only devious but treacherously allied with the Roman officials. The sarcasm of nobilissimus Caesaris and tua gloria should not be missed in this passage. The account expresses more than the notions that non-Christians are outsiders; the passage intonates animosity specifically towards individuals – be they new elites or colonizers – in allegiance with “Caesar” and Rome.

The very next paragraph of the Passio indicates further the social identity of the narrator by distinguishing a “We” from a “They.” When describing the “last supper” of the martyrs, the narrator insists on redefining Roman colonizer phraseology:

Moreover, on the day before, when in that last meal, which they call the free meal, they were partaking as far as they could, not of a free supper, but of an agape; with the same firmness they were uttering such words as these to the people, denouncing against them the judgment of the Lord, bearing witness to the felicity of their passion, laughing at the curiosity of the people who came together.

94

93 PSPF 16.2-3: cum tribunus castigatius eos castigaret, quia ex admonitionibus hominum sanissimorum verebatur ne subroherentur de carcere incantationibus aliquibus magicis, in faciem ei Perpetua respondit: Quid utique non permittis nobis refrigerare noxis nobilissimis, Caesaris scilicet, et natali eiusdem pugnaturis? aut non tua gloria est, si pinguiores illo producamur?

94 PSPF 17.1: Pridie quoque cum illam cenam ultimam quam liberam uocant, quantum in ipsis erat, non cenam liberam sed agapem cenarent, eadem constantia ad populum uerba iactabant, comminantes iudicium Dei, contestantes passionis suae felicitatem, inridentes concurrentium curiositatem. (Wallis’ translation is again used over Musurillo, who translates uocant, “it is called.”)
What “they call” [uocant] the free meal, the narrator abrogates as an Agape feast, as if to say “in spite of the fact that it comes from the Romans.”

The sentence resonates with the same tone towards the Romans as the previous paragraph for “they” does not simply mean the non-Christians, but suggests Roman colonizers who have imported foreign phrases and terms. In this instance, rather than “certain deceitful men” who must be new elites or Roman colonizers, the populus is portrayed as allied with the Romans, at least in the level of morbid curiosity. Later in the narrative, the crowd takes a clearer defined outsider role, especially in the final scenes.

During the account of the torture and killing of the Christians, the narrator again highlights the role of the populus. Revocatus, Saturninus and Saturus enter the arena preaching to the crowd about the judgement of God that is to come. Only after the Christians rebuke the Roman official, however, does the narrator state, “At this the crowds became enraged and demanded that they be scourged before a line of gladiators” (ad hoc populus exasperatus flagellis eos uexari per ordinem uenatorum postulauit, 18.7-9). In this scene, the narrator not only portrays the populus as non-Christian but as defenders of Roman colonizers.

Although the sources of the second and third period of Christian history in North Africa are too numerous for the present discussion, we can deduce from the outright disputation of Cyprian and the African bishops against the decisions of Stephen of Rome and the complete schism between the Donatists and the Catholics that anyone with connections to Rome could be considered “Other” for many African Christians. The history of Christianity in North Africa highlights the perennial recurrence of groups whose social identities include a posture of conflict with the powers of Rome.

From this analysis of African Christian social identities, one can inquire as to what factors constitute Tertullian’s identity as an African Christian. The following reading interprets Tertullian as a part of the Christian trend in ancient North Africa which perceives outsiders in terms of the “world” that has not accepted Christ as Lord, which simultaneously allows Tertullian to understand himself as an indigenous African rejecting the Roman colonizers as puppets of the devil as well as denouncing the pursuits of the new elite who supported them.

2.4 Tertullian and Social Identity

From the survey of North Africa under Roman colonization, the resultant understanding is that of conflict between two social groups, Roman colonizers and

---

95 It should be noted that the martyrs are in the Roman “military camp” [castrensem, 7.9-10.] On “abrogation” as a subversive strategy often utilized by indigenous writers under colonization, see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back, 38-9.