

**The Circumcellions and Human Sacrifices**  
(A socio-cultural approach in North Africa 4th - 5th century)

Received date: 02/11/2022 Accepted date: 11/05/2024 Published date: 24/06/2024

**OULMI Rabie**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *University of Batna -1-, Algeria, Email: [rabieoulmi@gmail.com](mailto:rabieoulmi@gmail.com)*

**Abstract:**

The Circumcellions were a phenomenon in Christian Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries that has been the subject of many interpretations. Its study has been obscured by theoretical issues concerning the capacity of religious movements to include social aspects, such as their behaviour in offering human sacrifices.

This article takes up certain aspects of the question of the Circumcellions, particularly with regard to their origins, their nature and the interpretation of their actions in Numidia during the fourth and fifth centuries. The problematic of this study is based on the following questions: Why do the Circumcellions offer human sacrifices? What is it that drives them to commit suicide and consider themselves voluntary martyrs?

**Keywords:** Circumcellions; human sacrifices; North Africa; Numidia; Donatist schism

**Corresponding Author:** Oulmi Rabie, Email: [rabieoulmi@gmail.com](mailto:rabieoulmi@gmail.com)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are several indications that the Circumcellions were itinerant ascetics as early as the first half of the fourth century, as seen in a work by *Macrobius*, a Donatist bishop of Rome, devoted to the practice of continence by confessors and virgins, and up to the beginning of the fifth century, as indicated by *Possidius of Calama* and *Augustine* in the *Contra Gaudentium*. The *Agonistici*, as the Circumcellions defined themselves, seem to have originated from groups of Donatist volunteer martyrs fighting against the pagan cults that were denounced by Constantine as early as 315.

The Circumcellions, as ascetics and martyrs, posed a problem of authority for the Donatist bishops. Far from fomenting real rural revolts, they limited themselves to exercising justice of a religious nature against people supposed to be *pessimi homines*, whom they struck with their stick called "*Israels*". They constituted a new rural Christian elite in Numidia, a region structured by large private and imperial estates that were rarely promoted to the rank of city.

The Circumcellions found their ground in the Donatist schism, which arose from the protest of a part of the Christians of North Africa, and especially of Numidia, in the face of the betrayal of bishops who had handed over the Sacred Books during the persecution of Diocletian between 303 and 305. This study aims to answer the following questions: Why do the Circumcellions offer human sacrifices? What drives them to commit suicide and consider themselves martyrs? What similarities do they have with the Carthaginian Tophet? Can we detect a social component in the massacre of suicidal circumcellions by the Iuvenes (Youths)?

## 2. Events of the 4th century

Numidia was the scene of strange and violent events in Bagai



during the reign of the emperor Constant, shortly before the middle of the fourth century, as witnessed by the sources relating to Donatism. These events have attracted a great deal of attention from classical and modern historians and have given rise to a large number of hypotheses, often contradictory. An overview of the question and an extensive bibliography can be found in Yves Congar's introduction to the edition of the anti-Donatist treatises of Saint Augustine.

The Circumcellions, the extremist and military wing of the Donatist party, had spread disorder in the countryside by attacking landowners' farms and debt holders; they had forcibly opposed the application of the measures taken by Constant against the schismatic church. The counts of Africa, Taurinus around 340, Silvester around 345-347, had sent troops against them and drowned their insurrection in blood (Augustine, 1963, pp. 32-37).

The victims of this repression were considered martyrs by their companions. But the latter then adopted a disconcerting behaviour: the voluntary search for death. The Donatist church exalted martyrdom; it claimed to be the heir of the heroic confessors of the faith at the time of the persecution, *ecclesia martyrum* (P. Brown, 1971, pp. 32-34), and saw the Catholic church only as a community of renegades, *ecclesia traditorum*. Some Circumcellions, probably traumatised by the bloody crushing of their movement (Optat, 1893, p.81-83), considered voluntary death tantamount to martyrdom, interpreting the teaching of their church in a very crude sense (Filastrus, 38, p. 45). Hence the savage scenes described by Optat of Milev and Augustine, who were happy to find in the evocation of this aberrant conduct a strong argument to discredit the opposing church.

These authors thus mention groups of circumcellions who collectively rushed down steep mountains and crashed into precipices (Augustine, p.472-473). Series of Christian epitaphs have been found at the foot of the Nif-en-Nser and Anouda djebels in central Numidia. A. Berthier and L. Leschi thought that these sixty-five inscriptions

marked the tombs of voluntary martyrs who had thrown themselves from the top of the mountains above their graves (Leschi, 1940, pp. 30-36). Other fanatics preferred to drown themselves in lakes or burn themselves on pyres that they lit themselves (Berthier, 1942, p. 215). Some, more subtle, sought to give their suicide the appearance of martyrdom. They attacked unarmed provincial governors on their way through the countryside with their escort, and were killed by the soldiers (Augustine, CLXXXV, 3, 12). Some spiritual governors had them bound as if to be put to death, and then let them go, and sometimes, on a main road, they attacked a traveller who was travelling with a weapon and forced him to kill them, on pain of being killed himself if he refused (Filastrius, LXXXIII, p. 45).

### **3. The Circumcellions in the literary sources**

In this study, I shall attempt to examine two passages of St Augustine relating to the voluntary death of the Circumcellions, which are of considerable interest to the historian of ancient Africa, but which have remained unnoticed until now. The first of these documents dates from 417 and is found in a letter from St Augustine, to the military tribune and future count of Africa, Bonifacius. This officer was in charge of the fight against the stubborn Donatists who had not submitted to the imperial measures, taken following the conference of 411, ordering the dissolution of the schismatic church. *Bonifacius* knew little about the problem, and Augustine, in this long letter, gave him the history of the conflict and the grievances of the Catholics, as well as his arguments as to the legitimacy of the use of public force against the Donatists. The passage that interests us is situated in the historical account, after the account of the origins of the schism. The events recounted thus belonged to an already distant past (Monceaux, 1923, p. 141).

Above all, when idol worship still existed, huge crowds went to the most frequented festivals of the pagans, not to break the idols, but to

be killed by their worshippers. Indeed, if they had wished to do so, accepting legitimate authority, and if they had happened to be killed, they might have obtained some semblance of the name of martyrs; but they came with the sole intention of perishing themselves, the idols remaining intact. Indeed, the very sturdy idol-worshippers were in the habit of vowing to these same idols all those they could kill (Augustine, 185, III, 12).

The second passage is found in the treatise *Contra Gaudentium*. *Gaudentius* was the Donatist bishop of Thamugadi. He had succeeded the famous Optat in 398 and was still in his episcopal see in 420: in this fortress of Donatism which was Timgad, the imperial measures could not be applied. The authorities resolved to liquidate this island of resistance and entrusted a tribune named *Dulcitus* with the task of enforcing the law, if necessary (*manu militari*) (Augustine, 32, pp. 491-505). Rather than surrender his basilica, the large church built by Optat and located west of the site of Timgad, *Gaudentius* locked himself in with his followers and threatened to set fire to it, evoking the example of the Donatists who had preferred suicide to communion with the '*traditors*' (Albertini, 1938, pp. 100-103; Marrou, 1978, pp. 145-148).

Events of this kind took place during the liquidation of the schism after 411, though far less numerous than during the great suicidal epidemic of Constantine's time (Optat, 1893, p. 81). The tribune *Dulcitus* was reluctant, in these circumstances, to make the assault, and he opened up to Augustine about his scruples. Augustine wrote to him not to give in to *Gaudentius*' blackmail, even if there were casualties (P. Brown, 1971, pp. 397-398). He wrote the treatise *Contra Gaudentium*, the latest of his anti-Donatist writings, to refute the arguments of the bishop of Timgad. Much of the book deals with suicide, which some Donatists considered a form of martyrdom. Here is the passage that interests us: "At a time when the licence of idol worship was boiling everywhere, these people rushed upon the crowd



of pagans in arms who were celebrating their festivals, and the young pagans dedicated to their idols all those they could kill. They ran in bands from all sides; like wild beasts exposed to the hunters in the amphitheatre, they threw themselves on the stakes that were set against them; in their furious madness they found death, in putrefaction, a tomb, in their imposture, people to worship them" (Augustine, I, pp. 580-583).

This form of suicide was certainly the closest to genuine martyrdom, since the victims were killed by pagans in a religious ceremony. Augustine states that the event was repeated many times and involved many Donatists ('huge crowds they came in flocks from all sides). But several points are noteworthy. Firstly, the many pagans who celebrated these festivals were armed, which is surprising for a religious ceremony. These weapons were, at least for the most part, stakes, i.e. the weapon of the hunters, especially those in the amphitheatre. The killing of the circumcellions was carried out in the manner of the killing of animals in the venationes: when they were attacked, they were skewered on the brandished stakes.

Their murderers, are called by Augustine *Iuvenes* (*valentissimi iuvenes cultores idolorum*, 'the very robust idol-worshipping youths'; *pagani Iuvenes*, 'the pagan youths'). The use of this term does not only mean that the pagans who took charge of preventing the profanation of the ceremony by putting to death the attackers were the youngest, and therefore the strongest, of the faithful present. These young pagan men were certainly members of the associations of *Iuvenes* (G. Picard, 1957, pp. 77-95).

There are several reasons for this identification. First, Augustine's insistence on the presence of these 'young men' and the important role they played in the festival. Secondly, the fact that the pagan faithful carried weapons during the ceremony. Finally, the allusion to the games in the amphitheatre. It is known that the *Iuvenes* brotherhoods had a sporting purpose and that their members received training which

could, if necessary, enable them to serve as municipal militia. An inscription from *Saldæ* (Bougie) commemorates an assault by the *Iuvenes* of the city, who succeeded in putting to flight enemies who were besieging the ramparts (L. Leschi, 1927, pp. 293-419).

It seems that, with Louis Leschi, this document should be dated to the time of the great revolt of the *Quinquegentanei* of Kabylie, under the reign of *Diocletian* (between 290 and 297) (L. Leschi, 1957, pp. 357-359). The military role of the *Iuvenes* should probably not be exaggerated (M. Rostovtzeff, 1957, p.77-95), but it is certain that they learned to handle weapons, which enabled them to replace professional hunters in the amphitheatre by confronting wild animals, thus demonstrating their courage and skill to their fellow citizens (Mansuelli, 1954, 348-349). The essential role played by the African *Iuvenes* in the events that led, in 238, to the proclamation of the proconsul *Gordian* as emperor is well known (G. Picard, 1957, p. 93-95). *Herodian* states that the emperor *Maximin* mocked Gordian by calling him an emperor of amphitheatre parades, a Caesar of carnival as it were, supported by supporters whose only weapons were small spears for fighting beasts (Herodian, VII, 8, 5).

#### **4. The Circumcellions according to epigraphy**

Augustine states here that the weapons opposed to the circumcellions were *venatores* stakes, used by people skilled in handling them. There seems to be no room for doubt. The ceremonies that the circumcellions disturbed were the *Iuvenalia*, and if they chose them in preference to other pagan festivities, it was because they knew that the participants carried weapons, and were trained to use them. The religious role of the associations of *Iuvenes* is known from numerous documents. Each brotherhood was placed under the patronage of a protective deity. In Mactar under Domitian, the *Iuvenes* called themselves *cultores Mariis Augusti* (A.E., 1959, 172).



In Italy, Mars, as a warrior god, but also Hercules, because of his exploits, or Diana, in her capacity as a huntress, are found as tutelary deities. In her important study on the *collegia iuvenum*, Maria Jaczynowska has compiled all the epigraphic documentation on the subject (Jaczynowska, 1964, pp. 158-196).

In Africa, the last two testimonies are, on the one hand, an inscription from Sitifis mentioning a dedication made by two *Maiores Iuvenum* in the year 204 of the province of Mauretania, 243 of the Christian era (A.E., 1910, 7; B.C.T.H., 1909, p. 183), on the other hand the already quoted inscription of Saldae, most probably dating from the time of *Diocletianus* (A.E., 1928, 38; B.C.T.H., 1928-1929, p. 145). In Italy, a later document is known: it is a patronage table found in Amiternum (IVth region), dated by the consuls' inscription to the year 325. This inscription refers to the performances given on the occasion of the *Iuvenalia (Iuvenaliorum spectacula)* (A.E., 1937, 111; Notiz, degli Se, 1936, pp. 94-97).

No later epigraphic documents are known. The two passages of St. Augustine that we are commenting on here are therefore the latest testimonies on the institution. They do not, of course, allow us to affirm that the *Iuvenes* still existed in the African cities at the time of the bishop of Hippo, since in both cases Augustine specifies that they are facts of the past, which in any case predate the prohibition of pagan worship by Theodosius.

If we follow Optatus chronology, of the suicide epidemic, following his account of the suppression of the Circumcellion insurrection in the time of *Paulus and Macarius*, around 345-347, we can assume that the *Iuvenalia* in question took place at the end of Constantine's reign, shortly before the middle of the fourth century (W. Friend, 1952, p. 175). What happened to the institution afterwards? It may be assumed that it survived until the time of Theodosius and that its resolutely pagan character, well attested here by Augustine, led to its disappearance; this can only be a hypothesis, as documents are



lacking. In any case, Augustine's two texts show the enduring vitality of these associations in Roman Africa.

It is also worth mentioning another allusion in a work by the Eastern bishop Theodoret of Cyr, Y Abridgment of Heretical Errors, a catalogue of heresies written around 451. In his brief note on the Donatists, Theodoret speaks mainly of voluntary martyrdom, which he mistakenly considers the main characteristic of the sect, showing that this frenetic behaviour had greatly struck contemporaries (Theodoret of Cyr, IV, 83, col. 424). Theodoret especially describes a specific mode of suicide, that of forcing a traveller to choose to kill or be killed. The Eastern bishop refers to the traveller as a "young man". Theodoret's sources were certainly other catalogues of heresies, the earliest of which was based on the original African authors. Of course, errors and confusions had crept in during this transmission. Nowhere do Optat and Augustine say that the travellers chosen by the Circumcellions as improvised executioners had to be 'young': age, in this case, mattered very little, nor did membership of the Iuvenes associations.

Clearly, Theodoret or his sources confused two modes of suicide: the call to a traveller on the road and the desecration of the ceremonies celebrated by the Iuvenes. But despite this error, Theodoret's mention of young men as instruments of the Donatists' voluntary death is a trace of the role played by the Iuvenes in this singular affair. Can we detect a social component in the massacre of the suicidal circumcellions by the Iuvenes? The Iuvenes have been described as young members of decurion families, i.e. of the social elite of the cities (P. Gilbert, 1957, pp. 92-95). One might assume, therefore, that their eagerness to kill as many circumcellions as possible with stakes was fuelled by the desire to take easy revenge on people who, a short time before, had attacked the great landowners, burned the farms, and destroyed the Ious.



## **5. CONCLUSION**

The Circumcellion movement really took the form of a jacquerie in the 340s; it coincided, in Constantine's time, with an economic crisis, as shown by the extreme rarity of urban inscriptions mentioning edilitary work. Subsequently, and particularly in the time of St Augustine, this social character almost completely disappeared, and the Circumcellions were no more than a fanatical brotherhood with almost exclusively religious concerns.

Martyrdom, for the Donatists, was the fundamental criterion of the authentic church, and the Circumcellions pushed this conception to its most extreme consequences; for them, the sacrifice, even voluntary, of one's own life was the true door to salvation, the surest way to please God. A document, unfortunately marginal, explicitly mentions the sacrificial character of circumcellion suicides: in his Abridgement of Heretical Errors, Theodoret of Cyr tells us that the candidates for voluntary martyrdom announced their intention to their companions long beforehand. The latter took care of them, brought them plenty of food and 'fatted them up like sacrificial victims' (Theodoret of Cyr, IV, col. 424).

The source of the Eastern bishop is unknown, and his testimony cannot therefore be considered fully credible. However, the African texts give a clear impression of a self-sacrificial offering on the part of the circumcellions. As we have seen, the assault on the Iuvenes had become a customary occurrence, and it could be said that there was a kind of connivance between the murderers and their willing victims: both felt in their own way that the religious act most pleasing to the Divinity was the offering of human blood.

On both sides, the event took the form of a rite. However, it should be recognised that the part played by African tradition in explaining this behaviour is much less obvious and decisive for the Circumcellions than for their opponents. The epidemic of suicides certainly had other causes, other components, and first of all the

amplification by simple and exalted minds of the apology of martyrdom proper to the Donatist church. Optat, as we have seen, relates these facts following the account of the insurrection in the countryside and the violent clashes with the troops of the counts Taurinus and Silvester. Suicidal behaviour can therefore be seen as a consequence of the repression. The Circumcellions had dreamed of establishing the triumph of the 'pure' Donatist church by force and, to a certain extent, of crushing the power of the big landlords, of liberating the peasants ruined by debt 4. Their movement had twice been drowned in blood.

## **6. Bibliography List :**

1. Albertini, E., (1939), Un témoignage épigraphique sur l'évêque donatiste Optât de Thamugadi. C.R.A.I., 83<sup>e</sup> année, N. 1, pp. 100-103.

2. Augustin, St. (1963), Contra epist. Parmeniani, III, 6, 29 (B.A., t. 28)

3. Ballu, A., (1911), Les ruines de Timgad, sept années de découvertes. Paris.

4. Berthier, A, (1942), Les vestiges du christianisme antique dans la Numidie centrale. Alger.

5. Brown, P., (1971), La vie de saint Augustin, traduit de l'anglais par Jeanne Henri Marrou, éd. du Seuil, *Paris*.

6. Congar, Y., (1963), Traités anti-donatistes de saint Augustin, vol. I, Paris, Bibliothèque Augustinienne.

7. Fierce battles broke out, claiming a number of victims, they were added to the list of martyrs in a period known by the Donatists as "the time of Macarius" (*Tempora Macarius*). After "the time of Paulus and Macarius" (Optat (St.), III, 1), all that remained was the exalted cult of their martyrs and an illuminist conduct. The suicidal epidemic would therefore be a measure of the trauma suffered during the repression. Events of this kind have occurred at other times in history.



8. Leglay, M., (1966), *Saturne Africain, Histoire*, Paris, édition de Bocard.

9. Lepelley C., (1979), *Les cités de l'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire*, t. 1, Paris.

10. Leschi, L., (1927), Les «Juvenes» de Saldæ d'après une inscription métrique. *R. Af.*, t. 48, pp. 293-419.

11. Leschi, L., (1940), A propos des épitaphes chrétiennes du Djebel Nif-en-Nser. *R. Af.*, t. 84, pp. 30-36.

12. Leschi, L., (1957), *Etudes d'épigraphie, d'archéologie et d'histoire africaines*. Paris.

13. Marrou, H.I., (1962-1965), *B. A. A.*, t. 1, pp. 235-238 = *Christiana témpora*. Rome, 1978, pp. 145-148.

14. Monceaux, P., (1923), *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, t. 7, Paris.

15. Optat St. (1893), *de schismate donatistarum*, III, édition C. Ziwsa, C.S.E.L., Vienne.

16. Pallu, de Lessert, (1901), *Fastes des provinces Africaines sous la domination romaine*, t. 2, Paris.

17. Picard, G.-C., (1948), *Les sacerdotés Saturni et les sacrifices humains dans l'Afrique romaine*, R.S.A.C., t. 66.

18. Picard, G.-C., (1954), *Les religions de l'Afrique antique*. Paris.

19. Rostovtzeff, M., (1957), *Social and economic History of the Roman Empire*, 2e éd., Oxford.

20. Ruinard, Th., (1689), *Acta primorum martyrum sincera*, 1re éd., Paris.

21. Tengström, E., (1964), *Donatisten und Katholiken*. Göteborg.

22. Théodoret de Cyr, (1686), *Haereticarum fabularum compendium*, IV, 6, P.G., 83, col. 424.