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**Tertullian, the Famous Pioneer of Christian Latin Literature in
Ancient Maghreb (160-230 b. c)**

Abstract

This study aims to show that Tertullian was one the most famous preeminent theologian of early North Africa, distinguished himself through a profound intellectual and spiritual journey, renouncing his pagan background to embrace Christianity and subsequently emerging as one of its most ardent and combative defenders. His fervent “Apologeticus “ apologetics were directed not only against external persecution but also critically towards the practices of the Roman Church, which he perceived as promoting exploitation and entrenching social inequalities; this vigorous opposition was most famously articulated in his seminal work, the Apologeticus. Furthermore, Tertullian extensively addressed moral and ethical issues through the lens of the nascent Christian doctrine, advocating rigorously for chastity and virtuous conduct while simultaneously engaging in vehement polemics against groups he deemed heterodox, including Jews and proponents of what he considered deviant or heretical beliefs.

Keywords: Tertullian, North Africa, Apologeticus, Ancient Maghreb, Christian Literature, Roman church



Antik Mağrip'te Hristiyan Latin Edebiyatının Ünlü Öncüsü Tertullian (M.Ö. 160-230)

Öz

Bu çalışma, erken dönem Kuzey Afrika'nın en ünlü teologlarından biri olan Tertullian'ın, Hristiyanlığı benimsemek için pagan geçmişinden vazgeçerek ve daha sonra en ateşli ve mücadeleci savunucularından biri olarak ortaya çıkarak derin bir entelektüel ve manevi yolculukla kendini gösterdiğini göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ateşli "Apologeticus" apolojistiği yalnızca dış zulme karşı değil, aynı zamanda sömürüyü teşvik ettiğini ve sosyal eşitsizlikleri pekiştirdiğini düşündüğü Roma Kilisesi'nin uygulamalarına da eleştirel bir şekilde yönelmiştir; bu şiddetli muhalefet en ünlü eseri Apologeticus'ta dile getirilmiştir. Ayrıca, Tertullian ahlaki ve etik meseleleri yeni ortaya çıkan Hristiyan öğretisinin merceğinden kapsamlı bir şekilde ele almış, iffet ve erdemli davranışları titizlikle savunurken aynı zamanda Yahudiler ve sapkın ya da sapkın inançların savunucuları da dahil olmak üzere heterodoks olarak gördüğü gruplara karşı şiddetli polemiklere girmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Tertullian, Kuzey Afrika, Apologeticus, Antik Mağrip, Hristiyan Edebiyatı, Roma Kilisesi

Introduction

This study holds significant implications for understanding early Christian history and theology. It establishes Tertullian as a foundational figure in North African Christianity, underscoring his pivotal role in developing Latin Christian theology and terminology, exemplified by his coinage of terms such as "Trinity." Furthermore, the research illuminates the intricate socio-religious dynamics of the Maghreb under Roman rule, detailing how Christianity not only spread but also synthesized with existing cultures amidst periods of intense persecution. The study also reveals Tertullian's potent critique of institutional corruption, highlighting his strong opposition to Roman Church practices that he perceived as perpetuating inequality—a theme that resonates powerfully with contemporary discussions on religious ethics and social justice. Finally, this work demonstrates the crucial linguistic shift from Greek to Latin within early Christian literature, thereby positioning Carthage as a vital hub for theological innovation and development.

The early history of Christianity in the Maghreb is significantly obscured by uncertain origins, marked by a scarcity of archaeological evidence and contradictory historical accounts, such as Ibn Khaldoun's attribution of the region's Christianization to "Simon the Canaanite." This lack of definitive information makes it challenging to reconstruct the initial phases of Christian presence in the region. Further complicating historical understanding is the ambiguity surrounding Tertullian's legacy. Conflicting primary sources debate key aspects of his life,

including his alleged priesthood, the extent and nature of his Montanist affiliations, and ultimately, his lasting orthodoxy, thereby hindering a precise assessment of his profound theological impact. Compounding these issues is the pervasive neglect of North Africa's crucial role in the broader narrative of Western theology. Despite the undeniable influence of pivotal figures like Tertullian in shaping Latin Christianity, the significant contributions of the Maghreb often remain overlooked in conventional historical and theological analyses.

This study operates under the primary hypothesis that Tertullian's distinctive integration of legal rigor, fervent moral advocacy, and incisive polemical theology played a pivotal role in the defense of early Christianity against both Roman persecution and burgeoning internal heresies, thereby solidifying the Maghreb's significance as a crucial theological center. Complementing this, two secondary hypotheses guide the investigation. Firstly, it is posited that Tertullian's literary output, particularly works like *Apologeticus*, served as a catalyst in establishing Latin as the predominant language of Western theology, thereby supplanting the earlier dominance of Greek. Secondly, the study hypothesizes that Tertullian's critiques of social inequality within the Roman Church were not merely isolated observations but rather reflections of broader underlying tensions that characterized the relationship between nascent Christian communities and established imperial power structures.

This study employed a multi-faceted analytical approach to comprehensively examine Tertullian's contributions. A textual-historical analysis involved close readings of Tertullian's key writings, such as *Apologeticus* and *Ad Martyras*, to meticulously trace the development and nuances of his theological and ethical arguments. This was complemented by contextual framing, which situated Tertullian's polemics within the broader sociopolitical landscape of Roman North Africa, specifically examining the dynamics of Roman persecution, exemplified by events like the 180 AD Scilli martyrs, and the intricate Berber-Roman relations. Furthermore, source criticism was applied to evaluate discrepancies in biographical accounts, notably comparing Jerome's narratives with Tertullian's own self-references, to clarify details of his life and his affiliations, particularly with Montanism. Finally, a comparative theological approach assessed Tertullian's doctrines against those of his contemporaries, such as Marcion, and later influential thinkers like Augustine, to accurately map the extent and nature of his enduring influence on Christian thought.

1. The emergence of Christianity in the Maghreb

The manner in which Christianity arrived in ancient Morocco remains unclear due to the multitude of narratives and the lack of archaeological evidence to support any of the hypotheses

proposed by religious historians, including Paul Monceau and François Décr . Among Islamic sources, Abdrrahman ibn Khaldun mentioned that Christianity was preached in ancient Morocco by the apostle "Simon the Canaanite," as stated in his work "The Book of Lessons" as follows: "... And among the scholars of the Christians... he was sent to the land of Africa, Philip... and to the land of Barqa and the Berbers by Simon the Canaanite" (Ibn Khaldoun, 2000, p. 2/173). The year 180 AD marks the beginning of a transformation in the Christian history of ancient Morocco, as this year witnessed the first persecutions carried out by the Roman authority against Christians in the city of "Scilli." This event is considered a pivotal moment in Christian history, not only in ancient Morocco but in the Roman world as a whole, as hostility towards Christianity became evident, and Christians began to face all kinds of persecution. This marks the beginning of the awareness of Christian spread in Morocco, as the ambiguity surrounding the spread of this religion persisted during the first and second centuries AD due to the lack of evidence and proof demonstrating the Christian presence in the region (Aude, 1881). When Christianity spread, many writers and thinkers emerged to defend this new religion. Greek became the language of the church in the East after the sacred texts were translated into it, as well as the language of the letters and writings of the early defenders of Christianity (Apologetes). Greek remained the sole language used and the spirit of both the Eastern Church and in Rome, the center of Christianity in the West, where it continued to be employed in rituals and worship, despite the necessity for churchmen to use Latin to address the general public (Almahjoubi, 2001). When Christianity spread to Carthage and ancient Morocco, it spread through the Latin language. This province may have witnessed in the second century the completion of the first Latin version of the "Bible." Writings defending the faith and affirming doctrine were composed in Latin, thus giving rise to a Christian language in Morocco. This region was, until the fourth century, a center of Western Christian thought, and among the most famous writers in Latin was Tertullian, who was one of the first to support the new doctrine (Alnaibli, 1997).

2. The Life of Tertullian

The scholar Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus was born (between 155 and 160 AD) in Carthage and died (between 225 and 230 AD). His father held the position of a commander of a Roman cohort in Africa and was titled (Centurion Proconsula) (Abdalmasih, 1999). Turtullian is the first major Latin author of Christianity (and his sparse writings in Greek are lost). He was born in Carthage (c. 160 CE) and died at a relatively high age (c. 220). As the son of a pagan family, he was given a good rhetorical and legal education. He is said to have stayed

in Rome (cf. Eus. *Hist.Eccles.* 2,2,4), where he may also have worked as a lawyer. (Hunink & Binder, 2016). He lived a life of luxury, which he spoke about when he became a Christian, saying: *"Indeed, I know that the body with which I committed adultery now strives with all its might to maintain chastity"* (Arnold, 2000, p. 218). He acquired a high level of Latin and Greek culture, and his writings demonstrate a wide knowledge of history, philosophy, poetry, ancient literature, legal terminology, and all the arts of advocacy. He practiced law after dedicating his life to the study of law, and later became a professor of rhetoric in his homeland. (Petitmengin, 1971). His position is relative with those of Latin antiquarians who consider tribunate as a plebeian magistracy (Verrius Flaccus). In his opinion, tribunate cardinally differs from magistratus cum imperio: the authority of tribunes has a different nature (in relation to magistratus), their main purpose is to protect from magistracy, they possess the sacral nature distinct from magistratus; tribunes possess both negative and positive powers. Plutarch closely coordinates functional differences of the tribunate to their other social nature (Kargaltsev, 2014). Tertullian is often portrayed as a prescient figure who accurately anticipated the Nicene consensus about the Trinity. But when he is examined against the background of his immediate predecessors, he falls into place as a typical second-century (Logos, 2019).

2.1. His conversion to Christianity

He entered Christianity in the late second century, and by the early third century around 195 AD, he devoted all his knowledge, abilities, and eloquence to serving the church. He became a fervent debater, resisting both pagans and Jews, as well as heretics, with great zeal, whether from those in authority or the general public (Abdalmasih, 1999). Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus or Tertullian, as he was affectionately called (155–230 AD), was a church leader and author of many writings during the early days of Christianity. He studied literature, law, rhetoric and philosophy in Rome. He was also famous as a lawyer in Rome because of his intelligence, which surpassed those of his time. (Pakpahan & Hasiholan, 2024). Tertullian wrote the first text of Christian literature in ancient Morocco, in which he discussed the trial of twelve Christians from the city of "Cillium" (present-day Kasserine), who insisted on remaining in the Christian faith and were sentenced to death by the sword. This text represents a solid and concise piece written in a straightforward style, as if it were a report of events, where rhetorical devices did not corrupt the truth of the statements and positions (Alnaibli, 1997). Tertullian did introduce some important innovations. His trinitarian language of 'substance' and 'person', rooted in Stoic metaphysics, offered the church a new way to be monotheistic while retaining the full deity and consubstantiality of the Word. Tertullian also significantly developed the

concept of a divine oikonomia, God's plan to create and redeem the world. Tertullian gave himself fully to the defense of the new movement as its most articulate spokesperson. Even the Montanists, however, were not rigorous enough for Tertullian. He eventually broke with them to found his own sect, a group that existed until the 5th century in Africa. According to tradition, he lived to be an old man. His last writings date from approximately 220, but the date of his death is unknown (Wilkan, n.d.).

2. 2. His Works

“Historic Christianity is much indebted to Tertullian who provided us with the fundamental articulation of the doctrines of the Trinity, of Christology, of anthropology; and of Christian practice such as baptism, prayer and of righteous suffering in the face of persecution. Nearly all his works were written in response to the immediate needs and challenges facing Christians, which addressed critical matters involving apologetics, doctrine, polemics, morality and liturgy. He certainly saw himself as a defender of orthodox catholicism against Pagan religion, against Marcionism, and against various gnostic groups. There are also devotional essays on prayer, baptism, penitence and martyrdom, as well as small treatises, many from his pro-Montanist period, on what constitutes appropriate Christian practice (monogamy, chastity, veiling of unmarried women, etc)” (Williams, 2008). He wrote most of his writings in Latin, before Latin became the official language of the Church of Rome a century and a half later, and he provided a rich repository of philosophical, historical, apologetic, and scientific writings. Among his works:

2.2.1. Apologetic Works

He directed them to pagans, Jews, and the rulers of the Roman provinces. Among his apologetic writings to the pagans (Ad Nationes), Tertullian clarifies in this book that the official measures taken against Christians are unjust and contradict all principles of justice. He adopted an aggressive approach, writing critically about paganism in general and Roman beliefs in the gods in particular. He discussed the concept of God and demonstrated that the pagan gods are merely human inventions according to their whims, far removed from the Creator and the guide of life (Athnasyus, n.d.).

One of Tertullian's most important works is the Apologeticum, in which he laid out interconnected ideas, and the argumentation took on a legal form, as it was directed at the governors of the Roman provinces. Tertullian attacked them but at the same time tried to convince them to reconsider the issue of Christians, denying the existence of a legal basis for their persecution and responding to the accusations against them. (Tartlyanus, 2001). Tertullian

argued before the Roman governors to treat Christians fairly by giving them a chance to express their viewpoint. He emphasized that all this hostility is a result of blind fanaticism born of ignorance. If people would just stop for a moment to reflect and look at the facts of this issue, they would see things from a completely different perspective (Daniel, 2008). Tertullian called for freedom of belief in his work "To Scapula," where he stated: "It is a fundamental human right and a privilege of nature that every person worships according to their belief; a person's religion neither harms nor benefits any other person." This appeal for freedom of conscience and worship can be found in the introduction of the letter Tertullian sent to Scapula, the governor of Africa (211-213 AD)¹⁷, who began to persecute Christians, throwing them to wild beasts and burning them to death. Tertullian warned him of divine punishment and demanded religious freedom. It seems that this defense was written around the year 212 AD (Bashari, n.d.). Tertullian wrote a book titled "Against the Jews" (*Adversus Judaeos*) coinciding with a debate between a Christian and a Jew that lasted a whole day until evening. Tertullian saw the necessity to formulate this topic in a book, where he directed harsh blows at the Jews who were inciting the authorities and the people against the Christians (André, 1969). Tertullian's book, on Prayer [*De Oratione Liber*], describes how North Africans kneel when praying on the Sabbath. The kneeling posture is considered a form of humility that must be observed on the Sabbath, but kneeling during the Resurrection and Pentecost services is unnecessary. However, some Christians do not want to kneel because they think it is unnecessary.

His works are strongly influenced by the pastoral or controversial concerns of the moment. Tertullian is always aware of his audience and his opponents. He tries to reach them by using their language, by appealing to their tastes. So he tried to reach the gilded classes among the Christians by writing a version of the *de spectaculis* in Greek (O'Malley, 1967). Examines Tertullian of Carthage's (160-220 C.E.) Writings on dress within Roman vestimentary culture. It employs a socio-historical approach, together with insights from performance theory and feminist rhetorical analysis, to situate Tertullian's comments in the broader context of the Roman Empire (Macmillian, 2011).

2. 2.2. The Controversial Treatises

Tertullian authored a collection of controversial works, including "On the Prescription of Heretics" (*De Praescriptione Haereticorum*). Through this book, Tertullian aimed to end the debate between the orthodox church and the heretics by presenting organized logical arguments and proofs that refute all heresies at once. One of Tertullian's longest works is his book "Against Marcion" (*Adversus Marcionem*), which is one of the books he promised to write against the

heretics at the end of his book "On the Prescription of Heretics," and it contains sharp comments on the ideas of these groups.

He also authored a book on baptism (*De baptismo*): this work is of exceptional importance as it is the only book that addresses baptism and chrismation, and it can be classified within the literature against heresies since it was written against a lady from Carthage named Quintilla, who attacked holy baptism. Tertullian responded to her in the work composed of twenty chapters. During the persecution of Scapula, Tertullian wrote the book: *Scorpiace*, in which the author clarified that death is better than abandoning faith, as martyrdom is a new birth that grants the soul eternal life (Athnasyus, n.d). The book "On the Body of Christ" (*De carne Christi*) is closely related to the book "On the Resurrection of the Flesh" (*The Resurrection of the Flesh*) as they together represent a strong argument for the resurrection of the body against those who deny the resurrection of the bodies, including pagans, Sadducees, and heretics (Athnasyus, n.d).

2.2.3. Moral and Ascetical Works

One of Tertullian's earliest works is "To the Martyrs" (*De martyras*), which is a short book consisting of six chapters, written in a simple style, and has impressed successive generations. It was written to emphasize the importance of struggle and martyrdom for the sake of religion. (Davies, 2009). The work "On Spectacles" (*De spectaculis*) is a comprehensive condemnation and rejection of all public games in theaters and athletic contests, and it consists of two parts: a historical section and a moral section (André, 1969). Tertullian placed these games in the category of prohibitions that Christians should not engage with, as they, in his opinion, invite idolatry. While he describes the processions of the games as processions of the devil, he regarded the African amphitheaters as temples of the devil, all of them, due to the statues of gods and images of the deified emperor they contained (Tertullien, 1852, p. 7). As for my book on women's clothing (*De cultu feminarum*) and on the veiling of virgins (*De virgibus velandis*), Tertullian addressed the idea of renouncing paganism and adopting a Christian lifestyle, and he sharply criticized the adornment of women in their finery or how girls wore their veils (André, 1969). He called upon them to embody the ideal of Christian womanhood by not participating in any role in the church, remaining at home, and adhering to modesty so as not to tempt men. He also urged men to separate themselves as much as possible from women to please their Lord, all for the sake of chastity, which is considered a fundamental virtue for Christians (Monceaux, 1901). The works of Tertullian include some philosophical concepts and scientific approaches in writing, such as the book on prayer (*De oratione*), which focused on

internal and external training in prayer (Davier, 2009). The book on patience (*De patientia*) is an important source for understanding the author's character, and Saint Cyprian referred to it in his work "On Good Patience" (Davier, 2009). Tertullian wrote no less than three books on marriage and remarriage titled: *To His Wife (Ad uxorem)*, *On Chastity (De eshortatione)*, and *On Monogamy (De monogamia)*, in which he advocated for celibacy and rejected marriage except in cases of necessity, meaning for those who cannot control their sexual urges or avoid romantic relationships outside of marriage. Even for widows and widowers, he also condemned their second marriage and only permitted it out of necessity. It seems that the Montanist (Daniel, 2008). The movement, which Tertullian adopted around 203 AD, believed that the end of the world was imminent, thus seeing no importance in marriage as the world would soon come to an end. He emphasized virginity, chastity, and generosity with a readiness to martyrdom in defense of the faith (Monceaux, 1901). He also did not permit mixed marriages between Christians and pagans, which he described as "Stuprum," likening it to adultery or incest, and he only accepted marriages where the beliefs were unified. Although many marriages at that time were between people of different religions, society generally leaned toward adopting Tertullian's viewpoint (Athanasius, n.d.). Yet Tertullian never makes a point of it. Although both Christians and criminals were tried by the same legal process, the punishment of common criminals was originally laid down by law while that of Christians was not. Though it would be a good legal point, Tertullian does not make an argument of it but contends that Christians are not in the same category as other criminals because they are treated differently by the magistrate. Therefore, Tertullian condemned the makers and worshippers of pagan images, as well as every profession or art related to paganism in his book: *On Idolatry (De idololatria)* (Daniel, 2008).

3. His Writing Style

Knowledge of the life of Tertullian is based almost wholly on documents written by men living more than a century after him and from obscure references in his own works. On this basis a general outline of his life has been constructed, but most of the details have been continually disputed by modern scholars (Wilkan, n.d.). During the next 20 to 25 years—i.e., from his early 40s to mid-60s—Tertullian devoted himself almost entirely to literary pursuits. Developing an original Latin style, the fiery and tempestuous Tertullian became a lively and pungent propagandist, though not the most profound writer in Christian antiquity (Wilkan, n.d.). Charles André Julien described Tertullian by saying: *"An excellent biting critic unmatched in debate, he immerses himself completely in it. He is a converted barbarian, but he still retains—*

alongside the spirit of Christianity that has been imprinted on him—the passions of the barbarian, his toughness, and his aversion to order" (André, 1969, p. 258)

He also says: "As for his true originality, it must be sought in his language; he was logical, inclined to sarcasm, a sharp debater with precise expressions, combining various qualities and adopting a straightforward, forceful style, rich in metaphors, alive with the vitality of its author, characterizing the intensity of his thought and overflowing with vigor." Tertullian was remarkably well-versed in knowledge, writing in Greek and Latin, mastering debate with terrifying skill, and distinguished by his zeal and excessive enthusiasm in defending his ideas. (Alnaibli, 1997).

4. Tertullian's Thought

From Tertullian's writings, we can infer some characteristics of his thought, as he displayed rigidity and strictness in debate, along with a strong attachment to logic in upholding principles. This led him to criticize Christians for their complacency during the times of persecution and to demand that followers of Christianity cling to chastity and fasting for life. He also urged Christian women to reject vanity, elegance, and adornment, and emphasized the imposition of the veil on girls (Aude, 1881). He did not criticize the Catholic Church for its tolerance; rather, he attacked and rejected it and adopted the extreme Montanism, later establishing a doctrine similar to it. Nevertheless, the rigid church towards heretics showed him incredible tolerance, as he used all arguments in his attack on paganism. The converted church was able to overlook the faults that no longer posed a threat and remained cautious, especially regarding Tertullian's demonstrated sincerity of faith and eloquence (Arnold, 2000). Tertullian is called the founder of Western theology, but this is an exaggeration because he did not establish any systematic framework as he lacked the organized logical arrangement of the truths of faith. Although any reader of his apologetic writings cannot deny his contemplative and dialectical abilities, he was not concerned with reaching an agreement between reason and faith (Petitmengin, 1971).

Conclusion

Least not last, Tertullian (160-230 AD) is a pivotal figure in the emergence of Latin Christian literature in Roman North Africa, with his unique contributions manifesting at three fundamental levels. On the linguistic foundation level, Tertullian led the critical shift from the dominance of Greek to Latin as the primary language of Western Christian thought, being the first to formulate essential Latin theological concepts such as the term "Trinity," thereby laying the groundwork for the translation of the Bible into Latin in Carthage. At the level of apologetic

defense, Tertullian skillfully employed his legal and rhetorical background as an effective weapon to resist the increasing Roman persecution, especially following the events of the Scillitan Martyrs in 180 AD, and he directed sharp criticism at the practices of the Roman Church, which he deemed exploitative, focusing on issues of social justice in his influential work "Apologeticus." Finally, in the realm of moral-doctrinal formation, Tertullian articulated a strict ethical vision based on principles of chastity and the fight against "heresies," both Jewish and various heretical movements, despite the controversy surrounding his later classification between orthodoxy and the Montanist movement. Although the origins of Christianity in ancient Maghreb remain obscure and fraught with contradictions among historians such as Ibn Khaldun and a lack of archaeological evidence, Tertullian remains a living testament to the region's transformation into a significant center of Western intellectual radiance that continued until the fourth century, embodying the unique interaction between Amazigh-African particularity and global Christianity.

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