# Introduction

*[Augustine] died on 28 August 430 in his episcopal city of Hippo, while it was under siege by the Vandals, a few weeks before the surrender: what a symbol of the end of a world and—I say it once more!—of a culture.*

—HENRI-IRÈNE MARROU, *SAINT AUGUSTIN ET LA FIN DE LA CULTURE ANTIQUE*

Sixty years on from the fourth edition of Henri-Irène Marrou's seminal *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, the coincidence of Augustine of Hippo's death with the Vandal siege of his city remains a compelling symbol of discontinuity. The juxtaposition of the last days of the erudite late-antique exponent of classical civilization and the advent of a destructive military force perceived as its antithesis resonates profoundly. It sounds the end of Roman (North) Africa. Such a reading is encouraged above all by Augustine's biographer Possidius of Calama. His portrayal of these concurrent events is a brilliant evocation of the destruction of the world both he and his mentor shared. Augustine took the consequences of the invasion of Africa by the Vandal war band to heart: "More than ever tears were his bread day and night, as he led and endured those days of his life, now almost ended, which before all others were the most bitter and mournful of his old age."[1] Through those tear-filled eyes, the dying Augustine saw the whole of Romano-African society brought to naught: cities sacked; the aristocracy killed or put to flight; churches

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*Epigraph.* Marrou (1958), 702: "[Augustin] est mort le 28 août 430 dans sa ville épiscopale d'Hippone, assiégée par les Vandales, quelques semaines avant la reddition: quel symbole de la fin d'un monde—d'une culture, a-t-on volontiers répété!"

    1. Poss., *V. Aug.* 28.6 (ed. Bastiaensen: 206), adapting the translation by Weiskotten (1919), 113.

destroyed; bishops reduced to poverty; priests, monks, and virgins exiled; and all Africans facing a choice between death through torture or dishonorable subjugation.[2] Hindsight inevitably colors modern readings of the last chapters of the *Life of Augustine.* By 439, the Vandals had indeed taken over Augustine's Africa. They ruled it for the next century, until another invasion, by the armies of the Eastern Roman Empire in 533–34, resulted in another conquest of the African provinces and their subjection to Justinian's regime in Constantinople. As a consequence, few modern scholars have passed up the opportunity to summon the ailing Augustine as a tragic hero witnessing the destruction of all he held dear.[3]

Possidius's graphic amplification of the Vandal invasion has influenced both ancient authors and modern historians.[4] Its power as a piece of vivid writing is obvious; its historical merits as a description of the conquest, rather more dubious.[5] Still, even without Possidius's rhetorical violence, the mere coincidence of Augustine's death and the beginnings of Vandal Africa would instill a sense of rupture.[6] For the bishop of Hippo, more than any other writer, provides access to the minute detail of the Roman world that is said to have disappeared with his passing. Scholars have rightly lamented the lack of a Vandal Cassiodorus or Gregory of Tours, a historian willing to set events in the kingdom in a light sympathetic to its new rulers.[7] Yet this is to underestimate the importance of the unparalleled volume of sermons, letters, and tractates preserved by the bishop of Hippo's later admirers—and the richly textured accounts of late fourth- and early fifth-century Africa which they can support. What Vandal Africa truly lacks is an Augustine.

To all intents and purposes, Augustine is late-antique Africa. To describe and analyze social and political life in late Roman Africa, modern historians—in one way or another—must take in the view from Augustine's cathedra. As a consequence, conflict over the correct modes of religious observance—his recurrent concern—is formative for most accounts of the province. The most penetrating discussions of the age of Augustine stem from the literary traces of the Donatist schism, which split the African Church in the fourth and fifth centuries, since it is while detailing individual episodes of that ecclesiastical controversy that the bishop of Hippo (among others) provides the raw materials for a rather more secular sociology of (for example) urban and rural communities and hierarchies.[8] In

2. Poss., *V. Aug.* 28.4–31 (ed. Bastiaensen: 204–40).

3. E.g., P. Brown (2000), 428–30, though cf. now (2012), 400–402; Bonner (2002), 153–56; Chadwick (2009), 86–87; Evers (2010), 299; Shaw (2011), 805. For further references see Fournier (2008), 20–21; see also Vössing (2014), 43–44.

4. On the ancients see Courtois (1954), 70; Lancel (2002a), 19–20; Fournier (2008), 142–43.

5. See pp. 5–8.

6. Fournier (2008), 20–21.

7. E.g., Courtois (1955), 11–12; Clover (1986), 1; Shanzer (2004), 271. See too Merrills (2004b), 19–20.

8. See esp. Shaw (2011). See too Lepelley (1979–81), which also draws on the rich corpus of fourth-century epigraphic material; Dossey (2010); Magalhaes de Oliveira (2012).

such accounts, Augustine's death remains a pivotal chronological marker.[9] Even Brent Shaw, a scholar committed to the sympathetic reappraisal of unfairly maligned historical actors, bookends his superlative recent book on "sacred violence" in late Roman Africa with appeals to Vandal destruction and "a social and religious world that disappeared in 430."[10] Historians of Roman Africa are seemingly so used to seeing the world through the eyes of Augustine that they too must look upon the Vandal conquest through his veil of tears.

In fact, the late-antique Africa that Augustine brings to life is still visible in the Vandal period. Sustained recent attention to its rich and diverse evidence has produced a very different vista to that which Possidius had his Augustine survey. Vandal Africa has profited from a belated integration into the broader revisionist project that has rewritten the transition from later Roman Empire to barbarian successor kingdoms as a "transformation of the Roman world."[11] It now appears as a world tantalizingly close to that of Augustine. An Africa still operating within a recognizably late Roman framework maintained its cultural, social, and economic complexity throughout the Vandal period. The overriding implication of the past generation of work is that any appeal to Possidius's decisive break risks being nothing more than an empty gesture.

Yet for historians looking back from the early medieval West, Vandal Africa retains a peculiarity that sets it apart from supposed post-imperial overachievers such as Theoderic's Italy or Clovis's Gaul, encouraging an equal and opposite sense of disjuncture. The Vandals' arrival provoked a conflict between groups that most surviving texts describe as Catholic and Arian Christians. The adherence of the Vandal kings and many of their followers to a form of Christianity understood by hostile contemporaries as "Arian heresy" was not unusual among barbarian rulers and groups. However, the occasional periods of hostility visible in other kingdoms contrast strikingly with the ongoing controversy in Africa. This Christian conflict has always been at the center of the problem with Vandal Africa. Scholars have conventionally made it emblematic of the kingdom's failure and its discontinuity with Roman Africa. The heresy of the new rulers (in this view) provoked discord with the Catholic population and prevented effective and stable government. As a result, Vandal Africa has traditionally been seen as a sort of "failed state" of the post-imperial West.[12] Recent reassessments, while convincingly asserting far greater political success, have tended (correspondingly) to downplay or to compartmentalize the

9. Dossey (2010) is a notable exception.

10. Shaw (2011), 1 (quote), 772–73, 802–6.

11. The title of the influential European Science Foundation project (1993–98) that resulted in a series of fourteen volumes published by Brill. On the absence of the Vandals from this project and their more recent fitting into its parameters, see Berndt (2007), 44–51; Merrills and Miles (2010), 20–22.

12. E.g., Courtois (1955), 153–271, 357; Geary (1999), 121–22; Collins (2010), 125; Kershaw (2011), 82. Cf. Heather (1999), 248.

effects both of Christian controversy and of Christianity in general. The Vandals have become effective successors to imperial rule almost in spite of their involvement in Christian politics. The historiographical irony is manifest. For scholars of late Roman Africa and the Donatist schism, the Vandal conquest is a fundamental break; for historians of Vandal Africa, the deep channels of continuity traversing the fifth century are choked by Christian conflict.

First and foremost, this book seeks to examine what it meant to be Christian in post-imperial Africa. It considers the implications of debates over the true Christian faith for the prominent social and political actors who shaped the kingdom and whose perspectives on their own religious affiliations are most visible: kings, aristocrats, and bishops. It proceeds on the basis that Vandal Africa's Trinitarian debates, like its structures of governance, are best understood with reference to their broader late-antique context.[13] The sophisticated culture of ecclesiastical disputation that had developed in late Roman Africa—and across the Mediterranean—continued in the Vandal kingdom.

The first part of this book uses a cache of understudied Christian polemical texts that preserve the efforts of contemporary churchmen to establish the legitimacy of their ecclesiastical institutions. These texts display the telltale signs of late-antique heresiology (that is, Christian writing about orthodoxy and heresy). They use arguments honed in previous controversies over correct Christian doctrine and practice. Christian controversialists in Vandal Africa drew on the history and heresiology of both the Donatist schism in Africa and the Arian controversy which had provoked so much conciliar wrangling throughout the fourth-century Mediterranean church (and continued to haunt its fifth-century agents). The textual traces of these debates (unsurprisingly) privilege one side over the other. Nonetheless, even from the polemic of the (so-called) Catholics, it is clear that the (so-called) Arians of post-imperial Africa could put forward a plausible claim to ecclesiastical legitimacy. This is, of course, part of the reason why so many texts were produced seeking to undermine that claim. At the root of Vandal Africa's new ecclesiastical controversy was a genuine contest over the identity of the true church, one often unnervingly like the Donatist schism that had preceded it. The resemblance is no coincidence: the consequences and cultural resources of that conflict helped to shape this new ecclesiastical controversy.[14]

The second part of this book evaluates the ramifications of these Christian debates for society and politics under the Vandals. It is underpinned by a sense of overriding continuities in the methods and modes of ecclesiastical controversy. These ongoing confrontations between churchmen cannot be firewalled from the

13. See esp. Fournier (2008), 269.

14. For discussions of specific influences from, consequences of, and similarities to the Donatist schism, see pp. 35–38, 96–98, 104–8, 130–34. For a synthetic account see Whelan (2014a).

rest of the transformation of late-antique Africa. Vandal Africa's ecclesiastical controversy retained the wide-ranging implications—both for the identities of individual Christians and for social and political life in the region—evident during the Donatist schism. These late Roman precedents should ward off any recurrence of earlier accounts of a dysfunctional polity riven with unbridgeable hostilities. Part 2 considers how the existence of two Christian communities influenced the formation of relationships among kings, bishops, and other elites. Drawing on recent work on ethnic and Christian identities in late antiquity and the early middle ages, its chapters show both how and why the demands of Christian uniformity and exclusivity might have been important to these influential social and political actors and, at the same time, how and why they might not. This was not simply a case of their Christianity being just one part of their identity (although there was that); there was also space for mutual recognition of Christian piety, authority, and prestige across (supposed) heresiological boundaries. The existence of this space allowed Vandal Africa's passionate ecclesiastical confrontations to fit into the functioning late-antique polity that has emerged in recent scholarship. All in all, this book argues that the kingdom's two Christian orthodoxies were key elements in its transformed but recognizably late Roman world, not catalysts for disastrous or disruptive change. It is my central contention that Vandal Africa, like the late Roman province it succeeded, was the site of a vibrant and often violent Christian conflict while remaining a viable political entity.

## AFRICA UNDER THE VANDALS

The Vandal Africa that has emerged in recent years defies Possidius's bleak prognosis. Inspired by pathfinding work by Christian Courtois, a number of recent studies have rethought post-imperial Africa.[15] The region profited from the late Roman economy's "Indian summer" and maintained considerable prosperity well into the sixth century.[16] Various documentary texts show property rights, legal transactions, and practices of estate management upheld in the countryside.[17] Changes in Africa's cities closely paralleled those in other urban centers across the Mediterranean: the progressive abandonment of many traditional public spaces and monuments must be set alongside upkeep and commercial reuse.[18] At various sites, elegant townhouses were refitted with new

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15. Courtois (1954); Courtois (1955); on his influence see, e.g., Merrills and Miles (2010), 20.

16. Wickham (2005), 708–12, 720–23; Leone (2007), 127–65; Von Rummel (2008), 164–73; Dossey (2010), 23–24, 62–97; Merrills and Miles (2010), 141–76 ("Indian summer" at 176); Conant (2012), 137–41; Bockmann (2013), 175–76, 242–45, though see also 238–40.

17. Conant (2004); Conant (2013); Merrills and Miles (2010), 159–62.

18. See esp. Ben Abed-Ben Khader and Duval (2000), 179–206; Wickham (2005), 635–44; Leone (2007), 134–65; Leone (2013), 98–99; Dossey (2010), 24; Merrills and Miles (2010), 152–55, 206–11; Conant (2012), 132–33; Bockmann (2013); Von Rummel (2016), 110–16.

mosaic floors, depicting scenes of hunting, villa life, and charioteers.[19] The extent of civic institutional continuity is difficult to evaluate; the numerous references to long-established offices and honorific titles are at least suggestive.[20] Contemporary literary activity similarly suggests a traditional patterning to elite civic life. Late fifth- and early sixth-century Africa saw an outpouring of classicizing texts, often characterized as a "Vandal renaissance."[21] African writers continued traditions of panegyric (now praising Vandal kings), epigram, and epic, as well as Christian poetry.[22] These texts show the persistence of a classical education system.[23] They extol opulent suburban villas and satirize the colorful urbanity of the Vandal capital. Certainly, the traditional lifestyle of the Romano-African elite did not perish in 430.

Awareness of the vitality of African society has gone hand in hand with reappraisal of the Vandals themselves.[24] Discussions have moved progressively further from their stereotypically destructive image.[25] The bleak picture of savage northern barbarians incompatible with Romano-African society has been jettisoned. The Vandals have benefited from new approaches to interactions between barbarians and Romans in late antiquity, symbolized above all by changing scholarly usage of the term *barbarian* itself.[26] It is now widely deployed—in lieu of a better replacement—as an apparently neutral term, without intentional reference to the ancient Greco-Roman discourse of barbarism.[27] Fierce debate persists on several issues, but most scholars emphasize the reciprocal interchanges across the frontiers

19. Clover (1982), 13–15; Leone (2007), 160–62; Merrills and Miles (2010), 211–12; Bockmann (2013), 76–82, 159–62, 170–72.

20. Overbeck (1973), 53–74 (with caution); Chastagnol and Duval (1974); N. Duval (1984); Merrills and Miles (2010), 78–81, 212–13; Conant (2012), 46.

21. Riché (1976), 37–39, with n. 142; Hays (2004); Hen (2007), 59–93, phrase at 74.

22. Courtois (1955), 228 n. 6; Clover (1982), 5–6, 10; Clover (1986), 8–10; Clover (1989), 62–69; George (2004); Hays (2004); Merrills (2004a); Miles (2005); Hen (2007), 71–72, 74–87; Merrills and Miles (2010), 213–27; Conant (2012), 146–48.

23. Conant (2004); Conant (2012), 133–36, 141; Hen (2007), 69–72; Merrills and Miles (2010), 213–19.

24. Important works include Clover (1993); Modéran (1998a); Modéran (2003); Modéran (2006); Liebeschuetz (2003); Berndt (2007); Howe (2007); Fournier (2008); Steinacher (2008); Steinacher (2011); Merrills and Miles (2010); Conant (2012); Bockmann (2013); Vössing (2014).

25. On this image see Bourgeois (1980); Merrills (2009).

26. See pp. 171–75, 183–84. Halsall (2007), 10–19, and Merrills and Miles (2010), 16–22, are succinct introductions.

27. The sense of *barbarian* implicit in recent scholarship remains somewhat problematic because of its ancient use as a subjective, extraordinarily flexible, and generally derogatory concept. It can cause confusion by naturalizing a far more fluid status. An individual like the Ostrogothic king Theoderic, who is a barbarian in modern scholarly terms, might or might not have been called or considered by specific contemporaries a barbarian in ancient terms. In this book, *barbarian* is generally used with the latter meaning. Where necessary, it is also deployed for the former; it should then be understood (rather like the similarly problematic *pagan*) as a word that "generates its own scare quotes": McLynn (2009b), 573; cf. Alan Cameron (2011), 25–32.

of the empire. A consensus has formed that barbarian groups were subject to considerable Roman influences both outside and inside the empire and used the Roman vocabulary of power and status to articulate their claims within it. An appropriately balanced synthesis would stress the real sense in which newcomers to the fifth-century West were accommodated and integrated, without ignoring the violence and upheaval inevitably part of this process.[28]

The Vandals fit this model well, as a heterogeneous war band whose collective identity formed in the provinces of Gaul, Spain, and Africa.[29] The military force that captured Carthage in 439 under the leadership of Geiseric was an amalgamation of elements of several groups. As well as the Hasding Vandals, from whose ruling dynasty Geiseric stemmed, it incorporated members of the Siling Vandal, Sueve, and Alan contingents who had also crossed the Rhine into imperial territory in 405/6 and had been the Hasdings' fellow travelers, though often as rivals, through Gaul (406–9) and into Spain (409–29). A series of unpredictable encounters with Roman armies, culminating in the defeat of the Roman general Castinus in 422, established the Hasding dynasty as the rulers of this diverse group. By the time Geiseric took his war band into Africa, it had also picked up some Goths and Hispano-Romans. As Guido Berndt has rightly stressed, whatever sense of group solidarity these Vandals had acquired by 439 was a product of those years on imperial soil. After the conquest, Geiseric's followers were settled on expropriated land, the much-disputed *sortes Vandalorum.* From then on, many leading Vandals seem to have adopted the lifestyles of late-antique Mediterranean aristocrats.[30]

The Vandal kings, once derided, have reemerged as plausibly legitimate political actors presiding over a viable late-antique polity.[31] Scholars grow ever more confident in attributing to Geiseric and his successors a combination of prudent continuity, intelligent innovation, and, above all, political success. The Vandal kings appropriated the norms of contemporary political culture and existing administrative structures (notably the legal system).[32] After initial conflict, the new rulers of Africa secured and maintained the support of the Vandal military elite and the remaining Romano-African aristocracy.[33] The political framework of aristocratic life in the region was reshaped: the African elite (both Vandal and

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28. The most influential recent English-language contributions are Heather (2005); Heather (2009); Ward-Perkins (2005); Halsall (2007); Kulikowski (2007). Maas (2012) is a useful survey.

29. Heather (2005), 451–52; Berndt (2007); Berndt (2010); Merrills and Miles (2010), 27–55, at 47–50; cf. Modéran (2014), 43–130.

30. On the *sortes* see p. 173 n. 37; on these lifestyles, pp. 171–75.

31. See p. 6 n. 24.

32. On the administration see Jones (1964), 259–60; Barnwell (1992), 120–24; Aiello (2006); Merrills and Miles (2010), 77–81; Conant (2012), 45–46, 143–46. On the legal system see Merrills and Miles (2010), 218–19; Conant (2012), 137–39.

33. See esp. Merrills and Miles (2010), 56–82; Conant (2012), 142–59.

Romano-African) derived prestige from service in the court at Carthage and the broader royal administration. Geiseric's Hasding dynasty looks less and less like an aberrant exception in comparison with more celebrated barbarian rulers in Italy and Gaul. Moreover, the Vandal kings look ever more like their imperial contemporaries and predecessors. Nonetheless, their relationship with late Roman power was no simple *imitatio imperii*. Vandal kings exploited Roman means of representing power, but did so to distinguish themselves as the legitimate rulers of Africa, whether by introducing new dating eras that began with the conquest of Carthage and their individual accessions or by using ancient Carthaginian images on coins. Panegyrics delivered by court poets similarly tied the legitimacy of the Hasding dynasty to the flourishing of its capital city.[34] Vandal rule in Africa was based on a distinctive appropriation of the heritage of late Roman governance.

Finally, setting aside issues of confession, it is clear that African Christianity was not affected in the way Possidius stated. The vast quantity of ecclesiastical literature produced throughout the Vandal period defies his prognosis. These sermons, letters, doctrinal tractates, biblical *testimonia* collections, conciliar acta, psalms, poems, histories, and saints' lives demonstrate African Christianity's continued vigor. The evidence for destruction or abandonment of churches is extremely limited, and its connection to the Vandals is far from certain. Churches remained in use throughout the period.[35] It is more difficult to isolate contemporary building work, partly because prescientific archaeology removed the stratigraphic record at many sites. Nonetheless, refurbishments and new constructions have been identified amid the mass of undatable churches.[36] The most densely Christianized province of the Roman West—home to more than six hundred bishops in the early fifth century[37]—did not receive anything like Possidius's reversal until several centuries after the Vandal conquest.[38]

## A HISTORY OF A PERSECUTION

A number of vocal contemporary observers struggled to leave aside issues of Christian doctrine. For one particularly outspoken commentator, the details of the

34. Chalon et al. (1985); Clover (1986), 8–10; Clover (1989), 62–69; Miles (2005); Berndt and Steinacher (2008b), 262, 270–71; Merrills and Miles (2010), 73, 168–75, 219–25; Conant (2012), 43–66, 142–59.

35. See, e.g., Ben Abed-Ben Khader and Duval (2000), 176–78; Baratte and Bejaoui (2001); Leone (2007), 148–57; Bejaoui (2008), 200–203; Von Rummel (2008), 156; Merrills and Miles (2010), 195–96; Conant (2012), 163–64.

36. Bockmann (2013), esp. 87–117, 163–66, 185–92, 200–214, 215–25, 227–35, 240–42. See also Leone (2007), 150–54, and Dossey (2010), 217 n. 96, for modern catalogues of church constructions attributed, sometimes rather dubiously, to the Vandal period.

37. Shaw (2011), 354, 807–11; cf. Dossey (2010), 125.

38. Handley (2004); Conant (2012), 362–70.

Trinitarian beliefs of the Hasding dynasty and of many other Christians in the king-dom outweighed any of the good they might have done. In the mid-480s, the Nicene ("Catholic")[39] priest Victor of Vita wrote the *History of the Persecution of the African Province* (*Historia persecutionis Africanae prouinciae*), covering events in the region from 429 to 484.[40] It is the only detailed contemporary African narrative of events in the kingdom, and, as a result, it is central to all histories of Vandal Africa. For Victor of Vita, the doctrinal affiliations of these kings colored everything: the continuities that modern historians have identified were overlooked or overturned as proof of the barbarity of the Vandals and the darkness into which Africa had plunged.

Victor's *History of the Persecution* is shaped by the intent signaled in its title. It begins with the end of Roman Africa, a Vandal conquest equally as brutal as that in the *Life of Augustine*.[41] Familiar modes of Christian apologetic discourse characterize ensuing events.[42] Victor's Vandal Africa is a world of black-and-white distinctions, populated by "Vandal" "Arian" "heretics"—"their people"—and "Roman" "Catholics"—"us."[43] The actions of Vandal kings and the Arian churchmen they backed are represented as a ruthless persecution of the true church; the kings, Gei-seric (r. 428–77) and Huneric (r. 477–84), as illegitimate tyrants, who rival the stock hate figures of biblical and early Christian history. Their Catholic Roman subjects are the suffering martyrs and confessors of the true faith.[44] Victor's narrative culminates in the terrors of 484. Huneric called a conference between the two conflicting groups of churchmen, to take place in Carthage in February of that year. In the aftermath of this turbulent (and apparently inconclusive) meeting, the Vandal king promulgated an edict which proscribed Nicene Christians throughout the kingdom as heretics. He ordered all of his subjects to adhere to his favored form of Christianity, seen by Victor as Arian heresy, by 1 June or face severe punishments.[45] Much of the third book of Victor's *History* narrates, in gory detail, the experiences of recalcitrant Nicene bishops and laypeople in different cities of the kingdom as they were exposed to the enforcement of this law. The deployment of coercive force against African Nicene Christians is not the sole topic of the history. Victor does sometimes treat the broader politics of the kingdom, yet these episodes too are used to support his cen-tral thesis: Vandal rule was a persecution of the African provinces.[46]

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39.  See 10–12.

40.  On the *Historia*'s date and Victor's known biography see (best) Howe (2007), 28–119; Vössing (2011), 11–16.

41.  *HP* 1.1–12 (ed. Lancel: 97–102).

42.  Fournier (2015).

43.  Howe (2007), 120–55; Heather (1999), 245; Fournier (2008), 207; Conant (2012), 192.

44.  Shanzer (2004); Howe (2007), 125–44, 255–63, 283–301; Fournier (2008), 164–211, 221–39; Stei-nacher (2008), 251; Merrills and Miles (2010), 184–92.

45.  *HP* 2.38–3.14 (ed. Lancel: 139–81).

46.  See esp. Merrills (2011).