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Female martyrs of the third and fourth centuries CE in the light of African ecclesiastical records

Les martyres des IIIe et IVe siècles apr. J.-C. à la lumière des archives ecclésiastiques africaines

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Abstract

Influenced by several major spiritual and social crises, the African church experienced notable upheavals in the third and fourth centuries CE. A significant portion of adherents remained resolute in their belief, opting for giving their lives rather than reverting to paganism that was imposed by the Roman authorities. One of the most notable religious developments was the rise of the veneration of Christian female martyrs who held a subliminal reputation within their communities for their steadfast faith and spiritual resilience. During their struggles in that pagan society, these women were held up as examples of courage and devotion, becoming a powerful reminder of the deep faith and agency of African women who stood their ground under Roman rule. As a result, their courage led the Christian community to regard them as role models and powerful symbols of faith. These acts of martyrdom, they resisted imperial authority and embodied the strength and spiritual resolve of African Christian women under Roman rule.

In this research paper, the researcher tackles the rise and flourishing of female martyrs' veneration in the medium of the African Church, specifically during the second and third centuries CE. Light is shed on the motives that led to the emergence of this spiritual act. At the same time, the study looks into its documentation in African ecclesiastical records by looking into the lives of well-known Christian female saints, figures whose names were remembered among African martyrs, influencing how they understood and expressed their faith.

Through the implementation of a historical-analytical approach, the study's objective is to look into patristic writings, ecclesiastical sources, and historical testimonies that value the lives and sacrifices of early female saints. Modern scholars' interpretations were also taken into consideration in order to situate the subject within its proper context and present it clearly. In addition, it explores the religious crisis in Roman Africa, putting more emphasis on the women's role in formation of early Christian memory and identity. Central to this investigation are figures such as Saint Vibia Perpetua, Saint Salsa, and Saint Crispina. These women were counted among the earliest martyrs venerated in the African Church. Dwelling upon the ways these women were remembered and honored assists in elucidating the deeper spiritual significance and social dynamics that informed their veneration within early Christian communities.

The findings of this investigation reveal that honoring female martyrs was not just about responding to religious persecution, as it marked an important change that led to new ways of affirming Christianity and reshaping women's spiritual role within that context. Therefore, martyrdom came to be highly valued, and women who resisted were elevated to positions of honor. It also transcended individual sacrifice and became a notable way of expressing faith and standing together in a shared spiritual struggle against oppression.

Keywords: African Church, Christian Female Martyrs, Ecclesiastical Records, Veneration.

Résumé

Aux IIIe et IVe siècles apr. J.-C., l'Église d'Afrique a traversé une phase de profondes transformations religieuses, liées à des crises spirituelles et sociales intenses. Face aux persécutions romaines, certains croyants ont affirmé leur fidélité à la foi chrétienne, préférant la mort plutôt que de retourner au paganisme. Parallèlement, l'émergence du culte des martyres féminines est devenue l'un des faits religieux les plus notables, mettant en avant des femmes reconnues pour leur force morale et leur persévérance spirituelle. Ces femmes se sont élevées comme modèles de vertu et figures morales, leur courage et leur dévouement face à une société païenne servant de référence pour la communauté. Elles représentaient la foi forte et l'indépendance spirituelle des femmes africaines sous la loi romaine. Cette bravoure a consolidé leur statut

de symboles inspirants de foi au sein de l'Église. En choisissant le martyre, elles ont non seulement défié l'oppression impériale, mais ont aussi mis en évidence la force, la détermination et la résilience spirituelle des femmes chrétiennes africaines, illustrant la capacité de résistance à la domination romaine.

Cet article examine l'apparition et l'évolution du culte des martyres féminines au sein de l'Église africaine entre le IIe et le IIIe siècles apr. J.-C. Dans cette perspective, l'étude explore les causes de l'essor de ce phénomène ainsi que sa représentation dans les documents ecclésiastiques africains. Par ailleurs, elle analyse les saintes chrétiennes les plus influentes inscrites parmi les martyres africaines et l'effet de cette vénération sur leur identité spirituelle.

L'étude adopte une méthodologie historique et analytique. Dans ce cadre, elle analyse les écrits patristiques, les sources ecclésiastiques et les témoignages historiques valorisant la vie et les sacrifices des premières saintes féminines, tout en intégrant les analyses contemporaines pour contextualiser le phénomène. Par ailleurs, elle vise à mettre en lumière la crise religieuse survenue en Afrique romaine, notamment en soulignant l'influence des femmes sur la mémoire et l'identité des premières communautés chrétiennes. Elle met également en avant des figures emblématiques telles que Sainte Vibia Perpétua, Sainte Salsa et Sainte Crispine, parmi les premiers martyrs reconnues et honorées dans l'Église d' Afrique. En examinant la manière dont ces femmes ont été commémorées et honorées, cette recherche révèle les significations spirituelles et les enjeux sociaux qui ont structuré leur vénération.

L'analyse révèle que le culte des martyres féminins ne se limitait pas à une simple réponse aux persécutions religieuses. Ce phénomène constituait en réalité un bouleversement qui a conduit à une stratégie visant à affirmer le christianisme et à redéfinir l'autonomie spirituelle des femmes dans ce contexte. Ainsi, le martyre fut glorifié et le statut des femmes résistantes rehaussé. Le martyre ne se limitait pas à un sacrifice individuel ; il constituait un témoignage fort de foi et un acte commun de résistance, unissant les individus dans une lutte spirituelle et sociale contre l'oppression.

Mots clés: Église d'Afrique, martyres chrétiennes, archives ecclésiastiques, vénération

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Introduction

The history of the Ancient Maghreb has always contained periods shrouded in mystery and ambiguous events. There is a lack of accurate and authentic sources that discuss these historical events in many ways, which in turn gives rise to many questions, particularly those related to the Christian faith. At the dawn of the second century CE, the latter was successful in taking root and spreading in the African provinces, as many embraced it and refused to adhere to the demands of the Roman emperor. Instead, they chose to fight and resist the Roman authorities and avoid abandoning Christianity. In this regard, Saint Tertullian remarks, "This faith extended to every level of society, the wealthy and the noble, merchants, craftsmen, farmers, especially the young and the old, in addition to slaves in towns and countryside."

The number of converts in the African territories continued to surge, pushing the Roman authorities to dedicate their available forces and means to suppress them. Several oppressive edicts were issued against the Christians who stood firm and sacrificed their lives in order to protect their religion. Consequently, the names of several Christian female martyrs were recorded by the African church, and the uncovered graves were evidence of that, where they appeared on some epigraphic inscriptions. Despite what has been said about these Christian female martyrs, the true nature of their role is still vague; was it a mere religious resistance and a defiance of Roman persecution, or did it exceed that to include other social and spiritual functions?

After the number of saintly female martyrs in African provinces increased, the matter turned into a deep religious issue that hindered the functionality of the African church, which diverted it from its main objective of spreading Christian teachings. The phenomenon of martyrdom became a sacred act among Christians, and those who sacrificed their life for the sake of defending their faith were excessively venerated and glorified. With that, they gradually strayed away from the worship of God and the teachings of Christ. As a consequence, their religion was affected by these practices, resulting in a departure from core Christian principles that drew church leaders away from their duties, turning their sights to the church's internal concerns.

The third century CE was a decisive period in the history of the African church. It focused on consolidating its internal organization and called for holding ecclesiastical councils among its bishops with the end goal of addressing the major religious issues that ravaged the Christian communities. Therefore, this study explores the church's ability to account for a range of historical dynamics related to this religious crisis by approaching it from a different angle. The researcher uses reflective inquiry to analyze a sample of African Christians who had a notable impact on the Christian community, specifically by discussing the case of female saints who were a major point of debate in modern writings that delved into topics such as their origins, ethnic affiliations, and the historical disagreement that has sparked from this issue. By examining the historical roots that led to the emergence of saints' veneration among African Christians, the researcher strives to present an idea that can help open the way for new readings and understanding of these female saints who resisted the imperial cult. Female martyr-saints are thus taken as a case study, although there are many other martyrs whose blood was shed across the lands of Roman Africa.

This problem leads to the following research questions: How far did religious persecutions deepen the struggles of African Christians who stood firmly against the Roman authority? What was the Christians' response to this deteriorating religious landscape? What were the historical factors that led to the rise and spread of martyr veneration? What were the forms of this phenomenon? And who were the most prominent female martyr-saints whose names were inscribed in the records of the African church?

Earlier studies focused on the Roman authority's response to the spread of Christianity in African lands and local communities, yet they neglected tackling the topic of Christian martyrs, their numbers, and other factors that contributed to the rise of martyrdom. As scholars of ancient history, we are obliged to study the history of our ancestors. This paper uses a historical approach which is based on the narration of events and the analysis of religious developments linked to the third and fourth centuries CE. It analyzes examples of female saints who resisted and stood firmly against the harsh persecutory edicts, while, at the same time, referring to a plethora of related historical sources and previous studies.

1. The Origins of Martyr Veneration

1.1. What is Martyr Veneration

Martyr veneration was a religious phenomenon that characterized the African Christian communities. It started to appear in the late second century CE. It first emerged when the proconsul of Carthage ordered the execution of twelve Christians on July 17, 180 CE, in the village of *Scilli*, near Carthage. The names of the executed were later commemorated as cherished witnesses of the faith (Decret, 2009: 29). During the same year, another group was sentenced to death in Madauros (modern-day *M'Daourouch*) (Ḥārish, 1992: 225). These executions further deepened the fervor of these African Christians, as they became more inclined to sacrifice themselves to defend their faith. Consequently, they were viewed as established symbols of resistance and commitment to religious belief, as Augustine declared, "The land of Africa is replete with the cherished names of saintly martyrs" (Jūliyān, 1958: 256).

Since that year, 180 CE, the lands of ancient North Africa were soaked with the blood of persecuted victims. These martyrs came to exert a deeper influence on the hearts of Christians than those who are still alive. They were classified among the elect, or the purified Christians and veneration rites began to be practiced at their tombs and gravesites, which had little to do with the actual beliefs and doctrines of Christianity (DanieL, 1999: 210).

The martyrs' names were preserved in the *Liber Memoriae* (Book of Memory) of every African church. Church leaders and clergy often referenced their words and deeds in written texts to honor them and ensure that their memory lives on among the living Christians. Their memories were celebrated annually, in ceremonies that involved public readings of the accounts of their acts and virtues. From his exile in Carthage, Bishop Cyprian urged African churches to record their martyrs'

death dates and burial locations to celebrate their anniversaries with appropriate solemnity (Daniel, 1999: 208–210).

A marked increase in the number of martyrs accompanied the intensification of religious persecutions. The situation worsened to the point that each day of the year, there was a commemoration of one of the individuals who had laid down their lives for the faith. Going through all the daily lists of names and the associated accounts proved to be a daunting process. As a result, writers and preachers opted for the bridging of these narratives. They recomposed the texts, which had led to the emergence of multiple versions of the same martyr's story, often varying across churches. This process also gave rise to many discrepancies when it comes to the dates of birth or death of the saintly martyrs. Thus, Christians came to observe the date of a saint's death as their spiritual birthday that should be commemorated and celebrated.

Over time, objects associated with martyrs came to be regarded as sacred or venerated, and sometimes even worshipped with a kind of superstitious reverence. The acquisition of such relics, including garments, bones, or books, was considered a great honor. A prominent example was the execution of Bishop Cyprian; handkerchiefs and cloths were placed around him as he knelt in anticipation of the sword falling upon his neck. The reason for bringing such possessions was to catch every drop of his blood and preserve it. Another notable case is that of the Carthaginian woman Lucilla, since she developed the unusual habit of kissing a human bone believed to belong to a martyr (Monceaux, 1902: 15–16).

Following these developments, people flooded from distant lands to visit the shrines of these martyrs, where their sacred relics were preserved. They came to pray and seek divine guidance because they were attracted by the sanctity that permeated these locations. In addition, Christians also wanted to be buried near the graves of these martyrs. They believed that such proximity would allow them to be resurrected alongside them in the last days. In this respect, Saint Augustine wrote:

> Cruelly they were tortured, and violently persecuted, yet they stood firm unshakable believers, that Christ has risen, that all people will rise in the life to come, and that the body will live forever. With their belief declared without fear, it bore fruit everywhere, for the blood of the martyrs was the seed that brought forth the harvest (Daniel, 1999: 211–218).

2. The Reasons Behind the Emergence of Martyr Veneration

2.1. The Deteriorating State of the African Church

The African Church went through periods of unrest and deterioration after the Roman emperors imposed repressive measures during the second and third centuries CE. These circumstances were significantly influenced by the growing number of people converting to Christianity. These converts cut ties with all forms of devotion to Roman deities and the sacrality of the imperial cult. Christianity called for monotheism and rejected all forms of polytheism and idolatry; thus, pagans revolted against these converts, denouncing them to Roman authorities as atheists and infidels (Al-Aʿẓamī, 2003: 316). Moreover, Christians refused to participate in emperor worship or perform imperial rituals that included burning incense before the statues of the pagan gods, which were considered acts of allegiance to the Roman Empire (Al-Nāṣirī, 1991: 386).

Additionally, the Roman state became highly suspicious of the idea that Christianity was turning into a subversive social revolution, threatening to undermine the main foundations of the Roman order and its traditions (Decret, 2009: 3). According to ʿabd Al-Ḥamīd (1975: 33–34), this fear was exacerbated when Christians began to distance themselves from administrative and military duties and refused to enroll in the Roman army since they believed that military service was against the teachings of their faith, considering it as a form of loyalty to a pagan empire. ʿabd Al-Ḥamīd adds that they saw themselves as the soldiers of Christ and that pledging allegiance to any other power was, in their eyes, to equate it with the devil, as devotion was only meant for Christ alone, not Caesar. At the same time, the bishop commanded greater reverence than the Roman governor. A Christian soldier from *Tébessa* named Maximianus expressed the same conviction clearly by declaring, “I cannot serve the military, I cannot commit evil, I am a Christian” (ʿagūn, 2008: 286–287).

It is worth mentioning that these religious practices embraced by African Christians pushed the Roman authorities to tighten their grip on the situation through several oppressive decrees and laws. The reason was to stop this outlandish religion from spreading within the province, eliminating all of those associated with it. According to Decret (2009: 3), Emperor Septimius Severus (193–211 CE), infamously known as "the executioner of Christians," was one of the most zealous emperors who persecuted the converts. In the year 202 CE, he passed a decree that prohibited both Jewish proselytism and Christian evangelism. Decret adds that this decision led to the daily prosecution of Christians in Roman tribunals; some were exiled to remote islands, while others were executed in different brutal ways: torn apart by wild beasts, burned alive, or summarily put to death. This wave of repression went on throughout the third century CE. For instance, the decree of 250 CE issued by Emperor Decius (249–251 CE) forced all inhabitants of the empire to demonstrate their loyalty publicly through offering sacrifices, vows, and public acts of gratitude to the Roman gods, in exchange for a special certificate to be presented to the authorities upon request. ʿabd Al-Ḥamīd (1975: 42) clarifies that anyone who refused to present this certificate was immediately identified as a Christian and subjected to harsh measures. He adds that the decree also demanded participation in supplications to the pagan gods, who were believed to have long protected the empire from looming threats. Nevertheless, the aim was to put all elements of the population under a single banner, against the enemies of Rome. Those who did not fall in line were punished, and those with questionable loyalty were obliged to attend before the authorities and offer sacrifices to the gods in order to obtain a certificate of good conduct (Le Bohec, 2005: 190).

However, the most brutal and violent emperor toward Christians was Diocletian (284–305 CE), who implemented policies that caused severe ruptures within the African Church and triggered internal division across the Christian community, precisely after the passing of Bishop Paul of *Cirta* in March 305 (Renan, 1863: 91). A series of internal crises rose after these tensions, such as the problem of the *Lapsi* (Christians who had given up their belief under persecution) and the debates over the rebaptism of individuals (Chārn et al., 2012: 236). These issues originated from the edict of 303 CE issued by Diocletian. It sought to prevent Christian gatherings, demolish churches, confiscate Christian writings, and get rid of sacred scriptures used in worship. At the same time, Christians were declared outlaws, their properties were seized, and many were imprisoned and subjected to flogging, as occurred in Numidia, particularly in *Cirta*, where the property of the church's priests and council was confiscated, including items such as clothing and footwear (Mercier, 1988: 121). Christians had to live with a savagery that had never been precedent, giving this period the name "the Era of the Martyrs," after the large number of Christian victims and the cruelty of the persecution imposed on them (Al-Maghlūt, 2007: 176).

2.2. The Fierce Zeal of the Early Christians

According to Ḥāfiẓ (2009: 119), the major factors that allowed martyrdom to spread among early Christians were their zeal and unwavering commitment to the core tenets of their faith, as they had an apparent hostile attitude toward paganism and the Roman Empire. Ḥāfiẓ (2009) adds that, despite initial attempts by Roman authorities to overlook their refusal to burn incense or bow before imperial statues, Christians continued to hold clandestine gatherings in hidden places, such as tombs and underground catacombs. These acts stimulated imperial suspicion, especially when these secret rites suggested the possibility of rebellions and conspiracies, and their intentional withdrawal from public life and refusal to integrate with Roman civic society further angered the urban population in the cities where they dwelt.

2.3. Unwavering Faith in the Principles of the Christian Faith

The steadfast belief and perseverance of early Christians in the one true God defeated their fear of death; instead, they viewed dying for the sake of the Lord as a path to eternal salvation and chose the life of martyrdom rather than returning to paganism (Camps, 1992: 73). They were inspired by the words of the Gospel of Matthew: "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or

father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life".

On this foundation, Christians held firmly to the tenets of their new faith and endured the extreme violence and torture inflicted by the Roman authorities who used all means possible to suppress conversion and force them to recant. This persecution was aggravated to the point where Christians were executed by being thrown from the top of the Carthage amphitheater before the public eye. Saint Vibia Perpetua faced that same fate, and her courage and devotion to Christianity deeply moved the spectators, including Carthaginian bishop Tertullian, who immortalized her name in the local church and from the steps of that theatre issued his famous saying: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed" (Ismaʿīlī, 2018–2019: 365)

3. Exemplary Figures of Christian Female Saints in Africa

Since the third and the fourth centuries CE, numerous female martyrs stood as prominent figures in the African context. They became potent symbols of sacrifice and steadfastness in the face of Roman authority. The authorities aimed to prevent people from converting to Christianity and force those who had already converted to renounce their faith and embrace paganism once again. These hard times only strengthened the perseverance of the Christian community. Specifically, Christian women stood alongside their male counterparts, offering support in all matters to varying degrees. They chose to sacrifice their lives instead of submitting to paganism and the demands of the Roman rule.

3.1. Saint Vivia Perpetua

Saint Vivia Perpetua is considered one of the major figures in religious resistance. She reflected the state of the African Church during the third century CE, a period that coincides with the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus (193–211 CE). Under his rule, the decree that prohibited both Jewish proselytism and Christian evangelism was issued, and many Christians were imprisoned and executed, including the famous Saint Vivia Perpetua (Decret, 2009: 3).

She was originally from the city of *Thuburbo Minus* and descended from a pagan aristocratic family. She became the wife of a wealthy man and gave birth to one child. Perpetua was familiar with both Greek and Latin cultures, and she acquired Christian teachings under the guidance of her instructor Saturus. She held numerous dialogues with her father, a testament to both the strength of her character and her unwavering adherence to Christianity. Also, she inspired other pagans to embrace Christianity. These traits were captured in her famous words: "Stand firm on your belief, love one another, and do not be disheartened by our sufferings." In another statement, she declared: "We call things by their true names." (Ismāʿīlī, 2018–2019: 365)

This very situation did not last, as Roman authorities continued imprisoning and persecuting those who opposed their rule, thus reinforcing the cult of the Emperor. As a result, the authorities imprisoned many Christians, including Vivia Perpetua, who was only twenty-two years old at the time. She, as stated in Ḥārish (1992: 225–226), was arrested alongside her servant Felicitas, her teacher Saturus, and her companions Saturninus, Secundulus, and Revocatus, and soon after, they were voluntarily joined by a sixth person. Ḥārish adds that they were all transferred to the military prison in Carthage, where, on March 7th 203 CE, they were thrown to wild beasts in the Roman amphitheater during the games held in honor of the Emperor, which served as a warning to anyone thinking of swaying away from the Roman religion in favor of the new faith.

Many researchers have tried to identify key historical events linked to the role of women in the spread and support of Christianity in Africa. Archaeological excavations serve as good evidence, especially the one conducted by F. Delattre at the site of *Messidfa* in Carthage. Such efforts led to the discovery of several inscriptions believed to date back to Saint Perpetua and her servant Felicitas, located in a structure thought to have been a Christian church, where the relics of the two martyrs were reportedly placed. Even though the discovered artefacts had a noticeably damaged surface, the inscription clearly bears the name of Saint Perpetua and other martyrs executed with her, namely Felicitas, Saturus, Saturninus, Secundulus, and Revocatus (Delattre, 1907: 518).

Figure n° 1:
An epigraphic inscription bearing the name of Saint Perpetua alongside the names of the martyrs executed with her.



Source: (Ismaʿīlī, 2018–2019: 366)

3.2. Saint Salsa

As mentioned in Mehentel (2013: 1), the name Salsa is linguistically derived from the Latin adjective salsus/salsa, meaning "salty," or from the verb sallire, meaning "to salt" or "the salted one," while some have linked it to the local name "*Mālḥa*" (meaning salty). However, Mehentel mentions that the Latin Salsa can signify "spiritual" or "pure of thought" when looked at figuratively or terminologically, which better reflects the saint's character. Moreover, her name may imply a moral attribute ascribed to her posthumously. Saint Salsa lived in the coastal city now known as *Tipasa*. She was mainly associated with the wave of martyrdom that Christian communities had witnessed during the third century CE. At just the age of fourteen, she chose to be a martyr over adhering to paganism, which was inherited from her parents.

In the African provinces, holding religious festivals and performing rituals venerating the cult of the emperor regularly was a common practice in pagan societies. According to historical accounts, the young girl Salsa initially refused to accompany her parents to such festivities held in the temple of the dragon god. However, she came to agree to attend out of compassion for them. Observing the obscene rituals performed by the pagans, she tried in vain to warn her parents and those around them of such immoral behavior, but they mocked her and refused to halt the celebration (Daniel, 1999: 215).

Figure n° 2

An epigraphic inscription bearing the name of the saint.



Source: (Mehentel, 2013: 46)

Many archaeologists have debated the true identity of Saint Salsa, asking several questions: Was she genuinely a Christian martyr who resisted pagan thought, or merely a figure born of oral tradition and legend passed down among the people? Stéphane Gsell (S. Gsell) was one of the earliest essential figures who initiated archaeological inquiry concerning this question. In 1891, he conducted excavations at the eastern necropolis of the city of Tipasa, where he uncovered an inscription that formed part of the mosaic pavement of the Basilica of Saint Salsa. It was set in a frame located behind the tombstone of a pagan woman named Fabia Salsa. During the translation process, scholars discovered eleven lines of poetic verse that commemorated a dedication that was made by a man named Pontentius. The name of the saint appeared in the text through the following line: *Martyr hic est Salsa dulciornectare semper*, which translates to: Here lies the martyr Salsa, ever sweeter than nectar.

Salsa refused to participate in the rituals honoring the local deity known as the Dragon. The latter was a pagan god displayed in the shape of a bronze serpent idol with a golden head. His temple stood on a rocky cliff overlooking the sea. As stated by Daniel (1999: 216), at the end of the feast, when the abundant wine libations were poured in the idol's honor, Salsa took her chance during

midday rest, when all had fallen asleep, and she stealthily entered the sacred shrine. Inside, she separated the golden head from the idol's body and threw it down the cliff into the sea.

Salsa was determined to finish what she had started. She returned to the temple and disassembled the bronze body of the serpent in an attempt to destroy the whole idol by casting it into the sea from the cliff. However, this time the pagans caught her. Her actions enraged them, pushing them to attack her furiously and brutally tearing her body to shreds, hurling her from the cliff's summit.

In the wake of this tragedy, Christians hurried to recover her body, and, according to the local Passio, they found her body intact three days after being thrown into the sea, an event that the locals regarded as sacred and a divine sign. Salsa was buried near the port where the remains of her mosaic-adorned and inscribed tomb still exist to this day. However, since the saint's name does not appear in the Carthaginian calendar where most names of African saints are recorded, researchers still cannot determine the exact date of her passing. Based on MEHENTEL's research, her cult did not extend beyond the city of *Tipasa*, whereas other sources did not mention her; it is believed that her fame never reached even Caesarea (Mehentel, 2013: 42).

In his 1954 study on the lives of the saintly martyrs, researcher Courtois suggested that the martyrdom of Saint Salsa occurred in 320 CE, which was linked to a martyr from *Tipasa* by the name of Victorinus. Yet, many scholars have dismissed it. They objected, saying that the Salsa's hagiographic text has no mention of Victorinus. They also claim that the latter was buried in the western necropolis, unlike Saint Salsa, who was interred in the eastern one
(Courtois, 1954: 109–110).

An important point to consider is that the mausoleum built over her burial site continues to be visited by Christians from diverse regions. These visitors come from the same country and abroad, including Gaul, Spain, Italy, and beyond. Many Christians wanted to be buried close to Salsa's tomb with the intent of honoring the cause for which she was martyred. The most compelling archaeological evidence of this is the dense concentration of graves in the eastern necropolis of *Tipasa*, where her tomb is located, a practice known as burial *ad sanctos* (near the saints), which is well-documented. Furthermore, each year, certain churches in North Africa and parts of Europe still commemorate Salsa's martyrdom anniversary every year (Monceaux, 1902: 164–167).

3.3. Saint Crispina

According to Mercier(1988: 12), Saint Crispina hailed from one of the wealthiest aristocratic families of senatorial rank in the Numidian city of *Tagura*. In addition, she was a married woman and mother of several children. She was sentenced to beheading by sword when she refused to comply with the 303 CE edict issued by Emperor Diocletian, which prohibited Christian gatherings, mandated the destruction of churches, the confiscation of Christian documents, and the burning of sacred scriptures used in worship. Mercier adds that, during that time, Christians were considered outlaws, and authorities imprisoned and flogged many of them and seized their properties. Such measures occurred in Numidia's city of *Cirta*. The belongings of priests and council members, such as clothes and footwear, were confiscated, while other Christians were compelled to offer sacrifices to the emperor.

Crispina refused to be part of the official celebrations held in honor of the emperor. As a reaction to this rejection of offering sacrifices and gifts to him, the proconsul of Carthage issued an order to have her beheaded by sword on the fifth of December 304 CE in Theveste. This execution worked as a warning to anyone who was thinking of abstaining from participating in the imperial cult (Ismaïli, 2018–2019: 309).

4. Bishops and Clergy in the Face of Martyr Veneration

Martyrs who stood firm in their belief and demonstrated an unwavering commitment to Christianity were viewed with sublime reverence, honor, and even exaggerated glorification. Christians designated a special day to commemorate their martyrdom and venerate their belongings.

It is worth noting that the seventh of March of each year was dedicated as the anniversary to celebrate the martyrdom of Saints Vibia Perpetua and Felicity (Ruinart, 1989: 692).

Starting from these practices, Christian martyrs became guiding lights of the Christian community, as was put by Bishop Cyprian. People sought these martyrs in prayer and supplication, an act that gradually swayed them from direct worship of the lord. This change in religious habits risked the eventual undermining of Christianity, precisely at the time of Roman threats and persecution. Additionally, practices that involved the relics and memorials of the martyrs raised the concerns of church leaders and bishops such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Saint Augustine. These clergy members showed their dissatisfaction with these superstitious practices. They advised Christians not to place their hope in the merits of the martyrs rather than in the atonement and sacrifice of Christ, reminding them that gatherings at the tombs of martyrs were not meant to venerate the martyrs themselves, but rather to worship God (Daniel, 1999: 210).

According to Decret (2009: 67), this tradition spread and stimulated the phenomenon of voluntary martyrdom that no longer supported the core principles of the African Church during the third and fourth centuries CE. Decret adds that it began to reflect similar pagan religious practices, as some Christian wanderers deliberately threw themselves off cliffs, burned themselves, subjected themselves to beatings, or adopted certain pagan practices such as the use of amulets, veneration of spirits (jinn), ritual dancing, and feasting at shrines. Famous examples included the Carthaginian woman Lucilla, who was known for a peculiar habit that consisted of kissing a human bone believed to belong to a martyr, and Monica, the mother of Saint Augustine, who brought food and drinks to shrines, consuming part of it and offering the rest to the dead
(Al-Mubakkar, 2001: 164).

In light of these practices, Bishop Optatus of Milevis (modern day *Mila*) urged the need to avoid the veneration of saints' relics. He criticized the Carthaginian woman Lucilla because he saw that her acts resembled pagan customs that contradicted the principles of the African Church. In the same vein, the historian François Decret mentioned that such traditions are pagan in nature. Tracing them back will lead to a deeply rooted cult, which is the veneration and deification of the dead. Pagan inscriptions are clear evidence in this context, as some of them often begin with the phrase "*Dis Manibus Sacrum*", meaning "Sacred to the Spirits of the Dead" (Decret, 2009: 78).

5. Analysis of the Findings

African Christians made martyr veneration a central tradition at the beginning of the 3rd century CE. They opted to stand firmly in the face of Roman persecution since it aimed to halt the spread of Christianity in the African provinces by all available means. The Roman authorities concluded that martyrs had a greater influence on the hearts of Christians than that of the living themselves. Consequently, they spent no effort to suppress the veneration of martyrs by forbidding Christians from visiting the graves of martyrs whose words and actions became a beacon of inspiration and glorification. A telling example is that of the Carthaginian governor who prohibited visits to the tomb of Bishop Cyprian, who had been sentenced to death in 285 CE.

Throughout history, African women showed remarkable courage and resilience in the face of adversity. They played a major role in expressing their stance on the political, social, and cultural developments within their societies. This was apparent in several critical religious events during the third century CE in the provinces of Proconsular Africa and Numidia.

Most young African female saints embodied sacrifice and unwavering devotion to the Christian faith, and departed, leaving a lasting and remarkable legacy. With the passage of time, the vast African lands served as a refuge for converts and those eager to embrace martyrdom until the region became known as the "cemetery of martyrs." However, it is essential to mention that this phenomenon was not limited to women, as men, too, played a crucial role in this religious struggle against the Roman authorities and their efforts to suppress Christianity.

Martyr veneration can be considered as one of the key religious crises that swept the African provinces during the second and third centuries CE. It created deep rifts between bishops and

members of the Christian clergy, prompting them to utilize all possible means to contain the ecclesiastical turmoil that threatened to undermine the African Church.

Conclusion

The period from the late second to the fourth century CE was decisive in the history of the African church. A series of developments and religious crises almost shook the church's foundations. Although the bishops and the clergy spared no effort, acts of martyrs' veneration gradually penetrated the Christian community and caused several gaps in their religious beliefs. African Christians refused to revert to the imperial cult or participate in its pagan rituals, and instead, they chose martyrdom and sacrificed their lives for the sake of Christianity. Therefore, the following key findings can be drawn:

Saint Salsa and other female martyr-saints were a solid example of the devotion of African Christians to Christianity, enduring with resolve in the face of Roman persecution. As time passed, they exceeded the status of local heroines and became revered figures among other Christians. Despite the lack of gravestones containing their names, these female martyrs were commemorated in the ecclesiastical records.

The Roman authorities' use of brutal force and oppression against the Christian community stimulated the Christians' emotions and pride while sparking a profound resentment towards the former. Thus, the Christians became more attached to the principles of Christianity and refused to revert once more to paganism. They also opted for sacrificing their lives and became beacons for the Christian faith. As their status elevated in the eyes of God, many Christians were inspired to embrace martyrdom.

Christians held their martyrs in high esteem and saw them as righteous saints. The pursuit of martyrdom became, for many, a way to achieve glory and eternal reward. This proved to be a strong motive that reinforced their attachment to their faith despite the fact that others chose apostasy. Nevertheless, Christians who fell victim to the treachery of Roman authorities during the third century CE were treated as heroes.

Certainly, the martyrdom of Salsa and other female martyrs during the third century BC strengthened the faith of many. Due to their courage and devotion to their religion, they were considered symbols of sanctity and, at the same time, contributed to the instilment of the idea of martyrdom in the remainder of Christians at the dawn of the fourth century BC. One of the most significant impacts of this change is that the idea of martyrdom took a distinct heroic character among converts who opposed the Roman authority. This evolving commitment to the Christian doctrine was reflected in the words of Saint Cyprian, who said: "Remain faithful unto the death."

Drawing upon what has already been discussed; researchers in the field of history are invited to suggest ways and strategies with the objective of adding to the body of literature in religion and politics. This can be done through studying and examining historical texts found in ecclesiastical records that narrated major events during the spread of Christianity in the Ancient Maghreb. Targeting this area would allow for new interpretations of these historical records in a way that respects the historical and religious context in which they appeared, including their political, societal, and economic dimensions. Historians who work on ecclesiastical history must thus undertake the responsibility of conducting a renewed reading of the ecclesiastical African archive in a way that avoids retrospective distortions and utter dependence on the perspectives of bishops and clergy.

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