

An Eye for an Eye

Religious Violence in Donatist Africa

Isaac, a Christian of Carthage, had publicly confessed his faith and defied the authority of the persecuting magistrates. The enraged proconsul immediately had him seized and put to the torture. Scourged, beaten, his joints broken, his sides torn by iron claws, Isaac wore down the strength of the torturers with the endurance given him by Christ. His spirit rejoiced even as his body suffered. Isaac had seen all of this, we are told, in a vision that had come to him the previous night as he lay in prison:

Now when he had been held for a little while by the quiet of sleep, it seemed to him that he had a contest with the ministers of the emperor. . . . His devotion therefore stood guard, engaged in the efforts of virtue, and more firmly beat back the ministers of wickedness [*ministros nequitiae*] with their imperial orders, even though they fought him boldly. After he had overcome them in a long conflict, [Isaac] caught sight of the emperor himself suddenly approaching. While he was being pushed by the emperor to fulfill his command, he bravely rejected the authority of the sacrilegious order and the menace of savage tortures. With frequent threats, that terrible man also promised to tear out his eye. Since they had fought such a long and ferocious battle between them, it was not enough [for Isaac] simply to be declared the victor. Throwing in a strong hand, he pushed aside the delay to his threats: violently tearing out [the emperor's] eye, he left the bereaved face with its seat of light empty.¹

Following his victory in this struggle, Isaac received a shining crown from a “youth of splendid radiance” and then felt himself lifted up toward

heaven.

The vision presented little difficulty of interpretation: “For as he had seen himself fighting alone against the ministers of the king at night, so by day he now showed us how he had torn out the eye from the emperor, and thus blinded him and defeated him.”² Isaac would defeat the devil and his servants, and receive the crown of martyrdom. The story, up to this point, is thoroughly typical of its genre. Magistrates and torturers rage like savage beasts, their uncontrolled fury smashing helplessly against the serene jubilation of the martyr.³ The dream recalls that of Perpetua, one of North Africa’s most famous martyrs, who saw herself as an athlete of Christ, wrestling and overpowering the devil in the form of an Ethiopian.⁴ For Isaac, the adversary appears in the persona of the emperor in the face of whose sacrilegious command the martyrs chose to die rather than submit. The proconsul orders the bodies of the martyrs dumped into the sea, in a vain attempt to prevent the faithful from venerating their relics.⁵

But this is no typical martyrdom. The persecuting emperor is not Diocletian or Galerius, but Constans. The year is 347, a full generation after Constantine’s conversion. The “sacrilegious command” that the emperor sought to impose on the Christians of Africa did not demand sacrifice to idols or renunciation of Christ but rather the celebration of a Christian mass in “unity” with the church that the emperor and most of the rest of the Christian world recognized as true, legitimate, universal, and “Catholic.” Isaac, Maximian, and their companions, though they themselves undoubtedly never recognized any name other than “Christian,” are known to us more commonly as Donatists.⁶ Constantine, father of Constans, had been unable to reunite a North African church bitterly divided between two factions. The schism between Donatists and Catholics would persist for generations, long after the original *traditores* were dead and buried. This chapter explores the continuing confrontation between two opposite visions of religious community embodied in the two churches. The Donatists sought to separate themselves, a pure and zealous minority, from a corrupt world and especially from the corruptions of imperial power. The

Catholics, true to their name, wished to unify the world and transform it in their image—and were willing to compromise with power to that end.⁷

The aftermath of Diocletian's persecution had given rise to similar schisms elsewhere, most notably the Melitians in Egypt and the Novatians in Rome and Asia Minor. But the North African schism was distinguished by its scope—for most of the fourth century the clear majority of Christians in the region were Donatists⁸—as well as its long history of violence on both sides. The time of Macarius, when Isaac had dreamed himself tearing out the eye of the emperor, also saw the appearance of militant Donatists known as "Circumcellions," who were as prepared to inflict violence as the martyrs had been to suffer it. By the first decade of the fifth century the Circumcellions were seizing Catholic clergy and blinding them by forcing a caustic mixture of lime and vinegar into their eyes—an act that, said Augustine, "not even the barbarians" could have thought up.⁹ We turn now to these Donatist extremists, and their role in the religious violence that divided Roman North Africa in the fourth and early fifth centuries. A study of the Donatist-Catholic conflict will illuminate the relationship between the ideology of martyrdom that shaped the identity of the Donatist church, and the real violence carried out by its zealots.

"UNITY"

The imperial commissioners Macarius and Paul arrived in North Africa in 347, sent by the emperor Constans to distribute alms to the poor and to bring the church back into unity.¹⁰ A rumor quickly spread among the Donatists that as Macarius presided over mass he placed imperial images upon the altar, so that all those who approached to celebrate the eucharistic sacrifice would instead be participating in an act of idolatry very much like that which the pagan persecutors had demanded of the Christians a generation earlier.¹¹ As the agent of the Christian emperor Constans, Macarius may simply have followed usual custom in setting up imperial images wherever he was acting in his formal capacity as an

imperial official, not realizing that in the context of a Christian mass such an act would be interpreted in a very different way. Though hardly evidence of a hidden agenda for restoring paganism, Macarius' act was certainly a public-relations blunder that showed considerable insensitivity to local religious concerns. Macarius' very presence at the occasion, and his address to the congregation in favor of unity, constituted a usurpation of the proper role of a bishop—an unacceptable intrusion of secular power into the religious sphere.¹² Donatus of Carthage, instructing his followers not to accept the alms offered by these “ministers of unity,” angrily remarked, “What has the emperor to do with the church?”¹³ Donatist resistance to the mission of Macarius led to confrontation, violence, and the persecution in which Isaac, among numerous others, attained martyrdom.

As Macarius and Paul approached southern Numidia, bishop Donatus of Bagai took even more drastic steps than had his namesake in Carthage. He sent heralds around the countryside to summon an army of supporters, a raging mob of *circumcelliones*—the first mention of the infamous fighters who would come to be known as Donatism's militant wing.¹⁴ These malcontents, Optatus tells us, had a history. Only a few years previously, led by two self-styled “Captains of the Saints,” they had terrorized the countryside and threatened public order before being ruthlessly suppressed by military force.¹⁵ It is unclear whether the authorities at the time recognized them as religious extremists or simply as bandits, for whom, in any case, the treasure carried by the imperial almsgivers would have made a tempting target. Either way, Macarius was sufficiently worried to request and receive military protection from the *comes Africae*, Silvester. The Circumcellions, meanwhile, gathered around a large basilica in which they had stockpiled provisions in expectation of the impending confrontation. Scouts travelling ahead of Silvester's main army met with a very hostile reception, and were beaten and forced to flee. When the scouts returned to the army and told of their mistreatment, the soldiers

became so enraged that their officers were unable to restrain them from perpetrating a massacre.¹⁶

This episode seems to have provided the pretext for a wholesale repression of Donatism, which even in Augustine's time was still remembered as the *Tempora Macariana*.¹⁷ Optatus, even as he ridiculed Donatist comparisons to the pagan persecutions, nevertheless acknowledged a coercive subtext to Macarius' call to unity. While the persecutors had forced Christians into the temples of the idols and had demanded that they renounce Christ, Macarius merely "compelled" the lazy into the basilica and encouraged them to pray to God, all together, in one church.¹⁸ This strategy, compulsion for the sake of unity, concealed lethal violence under a benign rhetoric of disciplinary "correction."¹⁹ Optatus, and Augustine after him, justified Macarius' heavy-handed enforcement by arguing that the Donatists had brought it upon themselves through their rash actions, while at the same time denying that the Catholic church bore any responsibility for actions carried out by the secular authorities. The Donatist bishops would later use a similar *quid ad nos?* ("what has that got to do with us?") strategy in distancing themselves from the Circumcellions and from unsavory characters such as Optatus of Thamugadi²⁰ while at the same time professing to be unaware of any certain wrongdoing by the latter.²¹

Even if it claimed no responsibility, the Catholic church clearly derived great advantage from the Macarian repression. The Catholic clergy were able to take over basilicas that the imperial authorities confiscated from the Donatists.²² Donatus of Carthage and other major Donatist leaders were sent into exile, many of them not to return until the reign of Julian.²³ Their powerful rivals gone, in 348 the Catholic bishops prematurely proclaimed an end to schism.²⁴

The Donatists did not go quietly. Maximian, in Carthage, tore up the imperial edict of unity, in a gesture of defiance that imitated, perhaps deliberately, the action of the unnamed Christian of Nicomedia in the opening days of the Diocletianic persecution.²⁵ Isaac, inspired by his

example, publicly denounced the imperial authorities as *traditores*.²⁶ Through these acts of provocation, both men obtained the martyrdom they sought. Meanwhile, Macarius took up residence at Vegesela, a rural estate near Bagai, and began to attack the Donatist episcopacy of southern Numidia. Bishop Donatus of Bagai, we are told, was thrown down a well and killed, either during the massacre at Bagai or soon afterwards.²⁷ The Donatist *Passion of Marculus* describes how Marculus and nine other local bishops came to Vegesela in order to negotiate. Macarius immediately had them seized, stripped, bound to posts, and beaten savagely with cudgels. Marculus was then dragged through various Numidian towns and displayed “as a spectacle of their cruelty.” One night, in the hours before dawn, soldiers came to remove him from the prison at Nova Petra. One of the guards told him of having had a dream in which he saw himself untying Marculus’ bonds. “Because of this,” he reassured the prisoner, “hope for a pardon.” Marculus, however, was not fooled: he, too, had had a vision, in which he received the crown of martyrdom. The guard’s dream meant simply that Marculus would soon be released from his worldly body. Before the light of dawn could expose their crime, the soldiers took Marculus up a nearby mountain and hurled him from a cliff.²⁸

What the *Passion of Marculus* presents to us, clearly, is not a formal execution but rather a discreet judicial murder. A public execution is a graphic demonstration of the power and authority of the state, a reminder of the legitimate violence in store for those who defy its laws. If it is not done before the eyes of all, it is pointless. A hidden killing, by contrast, expresses illegality through its very secrecy. By acting in secret, not only do the agents of the state forgo any claim to legitimacy, but they implicitly acknowledge a shameful quality in their action. The soldiers came for Marculus in the dead of the night. If the story of the guard’s dream is more than hagiographical hyperbole, it may mean that they removed him from the prison under the pretext of releasing him. In a telling phrase, the author of the *Passion* likens the executioners to “bandits attacking before dawn” (*antelucano latrocinio*).²⁹ They chose their method of killing in the

hope that his body would never be found amid the jagged rocks at the base of the precipice. “In the silence of the night they stealthily completed the crime” so that no one, not even those at the prison, would have known what happened—until a divine miracle revealed the location of the martyr’s remains.³⁰

A public execution, of course, would have been highly risky: popular sympathy in southern Numidia was very much on the side of the Donatists, and some sort of demonstration or even attack by Circumcellions might have been feared. More importantly, the imperial government did not wish to be seen with the blood of a bishop on its hands. Christian clergy, even those judged heretical or schismatic, were almost never executed under the Christian empire. Exile was normally the worst a bishop could expect, even when his more humble lay followers suffered far worse.³¹ Macarius had already overstepped the norms of late Roman justice by subjecting the Donatist bishops to a brutal beating that effectively degraded them to the level of the *humiliores* for whom such corporal punishments were normally reserved. Above all, though, the authorities did not wish to give the Donatists a martyr—here, as with Maximian and Isaac in Carthage, they tried to dispose of the body in such a way as to prevent any recovery of relics—and yet a martyr is exactly what they got. On the very same day a large crowd of believers found Marcus’ miraculously intact body. Both literary and archaeological evidence attests the rapid spread of the cult of Marcus throughout southern Numidia in the late fourth century.³²

Augustine disbelieved the Donatist account of the deaths of Marcus and Donatus, claiming that the authorities could not have put them to death, because hurling people from cliffs or throwing them down wells were not recognized methods of execution under Roman law: “The Roman authorities never did employ such punishments: for had they not the power to put them to death openly?”³³ But that is precisely the point: these killings were not meant to be lawful executions. The Roman authorities had the power to put them to death openly, but feared the political consequences of using that power. Interestingly, Augustine appears to

place the death of Donatus of Bagai in the same category as that of Marculus, treating both as dubious Donatist claims to martyrdom. Although no *Passio* of Donatus has survived to give us the Donatist version of his death, we might speculate that the authorities decided to dispose of the bishop of Bagai in the same quiet and embarrassed way that they had done with Marculus.

The case of Marculus merits the lengthy attention I have given it, because according to the Catholic sources it served as inspiration or pretext for what they describe as a wave of ritual mass suicides by Circumcellions motivated by a desire to be venerated as martyrs. The same Circumcellions, a few years later, would be implicated in dramatic acts of violence against Catholic churches and clergy. Current scholarship has not attempted to explore connections between Donatist expressions of martyrdom and the terroristic violence of the Circumcellions. But modern experience has shown us all too clearly that some who are willing to die for their faith may also be prepared to kill for it.³⁴ Making sense of the Circumcellions requires that we situate them within the context of the Donatist ideology of martyrdom, a zealotry that found expression both in dramatic self-sacrifice and in vengeance against persecutors and *traditores*.

MARTYRDOM OR SUICIDE?

Marculus—whether he had intended to die or not—had apparently inspired imitators. The Catholic bishops who assembled at the Council of Carthage in 348, while celebrating their restoration to power, took time to condemn the cults of certain “unauthorized” martyrs, particularly the “insane cliff-jumpers” (*insania praecipitatos*).³⁵ For Optatus, writing in the 360s, spectacular suicide had come to seem almost characteristic of Circumcellions: “To this class [the Circumcellions] had belonged those who, in their false desire for martyrdom, used to bring assailants on themselves

for their own destruction. From this source also came those who used to cast their vile souls headlong from the peaks of the highest mountains.”³⁶

Augustine expanded the characterization further: “It is their practice to commit suicide in various ways, particularly by leaping off cliffs, by drowning, or by fire, and they seduce others whom they can, men or women, to follow the same madness; and at times, in order that they themselves may be killed by others, they threaten the latter with death, unless they do what they are bidden.”³⁷

This issue poses many difficulties of interpretation. Clearly the Donatist emphasis on martyrdom was sufficiently strong to produce on occasion behavior that others might regard as suicidal. At the same time, however, we must be careful not to take our sources at face value.³⁸ They belonged to the side that benefited from military repression of the Circumcellions, but they were uncomfortable with the use of lethal force. Accordingly, it served their purposes to believe that all the responsibility for bloodshed rested with the other side: violence suffered by the Donatists was either the regrettable but necessary result of their own intransigence or, even better, actually self-inflicted. The Circumcellions “live as bandits and claim to die as martyrs.”³⁹ This phrase sums up the Catholic strategy of discrediting the Circumcellions—and, by extension, the entire Donatist movement—by painting them on the one hand as common *latrones*, living by violence and driven by greed and lust, and on the other hand as fanatics who carry religious imperatives too far.

The case of Marculus illustrates the problem. In Augustine’s time, some fifty years later, it was still a matter of dispute whether he had jumped from the cliff, or had been thrown by the imperial soldiers in whose custody he had last been seen.⁴⁰ Since the Donatists claimed that Marculus had in fact been murdered, it seems difficult to imagine how his example could have inspired others to suicide. And yet a variety of Catholic sources mention cliff-jumping as a habitual Circumcellion practice.⁴¹ Nevertheless, even if the extent of the practice was exaggerated by our sources, there does seem to be some evidence for cases of suicide or “voluntary

martyrdom,” and the motives behind this curious practice deserve investigation.

The Circumcellions who “courted death” seem to have regarded themselves not as suicides but as following in the footsteps of the martyrs. A close look at their specific actions suggests that they had a very clear sense of the difference between suicide and martyrdom and took care not to cross over the line. The manner of Circumcellion death bears little relation to classical Roman Republican or early imperial traditions of suicide, which was normally done in private or among close friends, by a method—usually poison or slitting wrists—chosen for an easy, peaceful, and painless exit. The Circumcellion “suicides” as reported by our sources employed a variety of methods: jumping off cliffs, or into fire or water, or forcing others at swordpoint to be their executioners.⁴² All these methods were highly public and spectacular, exactly as had been the martyrdoms of the pagan period. Their styles of death reflected those found in traditional accounts of martyrdom. By forcing other people, and particularly magistrates, to kill them, the Circumcellions recalled martyrs who rushed forward without being sought out, to proclaim their Christianity before the persecuting authorities and demand the appropriate punishment.⁴³ This had the additional effect of compelling the magistrate to enact the role of “persecutor” to which Donatist ideology had already consigned him, and forcing him to assume the guilt for the crime. Such a demonstration served to heighten the contradictions between the ideal and the reality of Christian empire, by revealing more clearly the “true” persecuting nature of the regime.⁴⁴

The Catholics, clearly, could not allow this claim to stand. If they conceded Donatist martyrdom, they made themselves into collaborators in persecution, *traditores*. Augustine’s assessment of Circumcellion motives, therefore, cannot be taken at face value. Certainly their choice of methods of death carried symbolic significance. The scriptural analogies adduced by Augustine, however, were entirely negative: the devil telling Jesus to throw himself off a wall, the demon-possessed Gadarene swine who ran off a cliff,

and a similarly possessed youth who threw himself into fire and water.⁴⁵ Of the cliff-jumpers, Augustine said, “What martyrs? They are not doves, but they tried to fly, and fell onto the rock.”⁴⁶ Augustine’s intention was to deny the Circumcellions any claim to legitimate martyrdom: they were misguided, insane, and possibly possessed by demons, rather than inspired by the Holy Spirit. They went to their deaths driven by fanaticism rather than zeal, superstition rather than religion, Satan rather than God. But Augustine’s comparisons surely tell us more about his own rhetorical strategy than about the Circumcellions’ true motives, and we ought rather to try to make sense of their actions as they themselves might have understood them.

When speaking in general terms about the Circumcellions’ “habit” of suicide, the Catholic sources tried to present it as utterly inexplicable by any rational motive. We must, however, set these remarks alongside our evidence for specific cases of Donatists who actually committed, attempted, or threatened suicide. In their presentation of Circumcellion martyr-suicides as a manifestation of insane fanaticism or demonic possession, the Catholic sources tried their best to obscure the fact that those involved might have had good reasons for choosing death. Some of the Donatist “suicides” may have believed that the imperial authorities were going to put them to death anyway.⁴⁷ All of the Donatist “suicides” known to us in any individual detail were people who either expected that they would be killed anyway, or saw death as the only alternative to forced apostasy.⁴⁸ Circumcellions who jumped from cliffs or threw themselves into lakes may well have had imperial soldiers pursuing them. Or, as in the case of Marculus, the military or civil authorities may simply have found it convenient to report the killing of Circumcellions, or people they identified as such, as “suicides.”

An important feature common to the various forms of Circumcellion voluntary death—assuming that they did in fact happen as the sources describe—is that they seem carefully chosen so that one could arguably deny the name of “suicide.” In no case did the Circumcellion die by his own

hand. Instead he threw himself, sometimes literally, into a situation where an external force, be it the rocks at the bottom of the cliff or the swords of the *apparitores*, would do the actual killing. This distinction may seem rather dubious, and indeed the Catholic sources ridiculed it. But it is clear that both Donatists and Catholics believed that martyrdom and suicide were two very different things, the one praiseworthy and the other not. The difference between the two sides lay in where they drew the line between martyrdom and suicide.⁴⁹ When Donatists such as Maximian and Isaac actively sought out and provoked the persecuting powers, rather than waiting to be caught and punished by them, they claimed as martyrdom actions that Catholics rejected as suicidal.⁵⁰ A suicide was guilty of his own death—but for the martyr, innocent by definition, the blood was on the hands of the persecutors.

In times of pagan persecution, or even in its absence, some zealous Christians had taken the battle to the demons' very homes, seeking martyrdom by smashing idols. In this respect the Circumcellions show themselves to be very much in tune with extremist tendencies found elsewhere in the fourth-century Christian world. Catholics and Donatists alike claimed to be dedicated to the destruction of idolatry, and both had their share of clashes with North African pagans. In Augustine's eyes, however, there was a right way and a wrong way to attack pagan worship. The correct method was to employ the power of the state: to seek imperial legislation, and convince the local authorities to enforce it, in order to stop sacrifice, remove idols, and close temples in a lawful and orderly manner. In this way, in 399, the imperial officials Gaudentius and Jovius had demolished the pagan temples of Carthage without provoking any disturbance.⁵¹ In the same year, Augustine himself presided over the lawful destruction of idols on rural property that the formerly pagan owner had given to the church upon his conversion to Christianity.⁵²

The wrong way, by contrast, was the Circumcellions' way. They simply rushed in and began smashing, and without the permission or protection of the authorities they risked being killed by angry pagans. Indeed, Augustine

suggests, the Circumcellions' primary motive was in fact to secure a dramatic martyrdom, and it mattered little to them whether they actually succeeded in smashing the idols.

Here we must keep in mind Augustine's polemical strategy. He accepted that the suppression of idol worship was a praiseworthy enterprise that helped to advance the Christian faith. But he did not wish to concede any of the credit to his Donatist rivals. Accordingly he implied that they did not even seriously try to stamp out idolatry: they simply threw themselves on the swords of the pagans, leaving the idols undisturbed. Their method was not only illegitimate but also ineffective. Augustine even made the Circumcellions into unwitting facilitators of pagan ritual by asserting that the pagans "vowed" (*vovebant*) those whom they killed to their gods.⁵³

In claiming that the Circumcellions were more interested in suicide than in idol-smashing, Augustine probably distorted their motives. It might perhaps be more accurate to say that they were determined to smash idols and did not fear the consequences. But having no fear of death, and actively seeking death, are two quite different things. We do not know, in fact, that every Circumcellion attack on a pagan temple ended in failure and a one-sided massacre of Christians. If the Circumcellions brought the same degree of violence to bear against the pagans as they did against the Catholics, we can suppose that they probably destroyed their fair share of idols. However, Catholic sources would be loath to give them the credit. In any case, the Circumcellions would have understood their own actions within a paradigm of martyrdom, not suicide.⁵⁴

Christian sources throughout the Roman world boasted of incidents in which the destruction of a temple brought about a mass conversion of pagans.⁵⁵ Accordingly, a contest between Donatists and Catholics to attack paganism was understood at least potentially as a competition for converts. Such high stakes explain the urgency with which Augustine had to deny and delegitimize all Donatist anti-pagan activity. But reckless idol smashing was hardly unique to the Circumcellions. In many cases, Christians did not wait for the sanction of imperial law or the protection of

magistrates and soldiers to begin breaking idols and destroying temples.⁵⁶ In the western church, at least, attitudes were lukewarm toward this method of attaining martyrdom. The Council of Elvira stated simply that those who were killed for breaking idols would not be received into the number of the martyrs.⁵⁷ Of course, if people had not been doing it the prohibition would not have been necessary. Augustine found it necessary to reprimand his fellow Catholics on this point. He reminded his listeners that this was no way to true martyrdom, and warned them not to act “like Circumcellions,” a remark that suggests that the Circumcellions had no monopoly on the practice—or perhaps that the lines dividing Donatist from Catholic were not so clearly drawn down at the level of ordinary laity.⁵⁸

This insight may help set in context a mysterious incident that took place at Sufes in 399, known only from one tantalizingly brief letter of Augustine. Christians apparently destroyed a cult statue of Hercules, and the ensuing pagan reaction left sixty Christians dead. We are not told whether all sixty had taken part in the attack on the statue or if some of them were innocent victims of indiscriminate pagan vengeance, nor whether the idol smashers were residents of Sufes or outsiders. One thing conspicuous by its absence was a strong Christian reaction. One might expect sixty martyrs—more than were ever killed on any single occasion in North Africa during the Great Persecution—to receive lavish commemoration, mention in many sources both inside and outside Africa, and angry calls for imperial retaliation against the pagans of Sufes.⁵⁹ The event may be contrasted to another incident of anti-Christian violence at Calama in 408, when despite days of rioting and the burning of a church by a pagan mob, only one person actually died, but the pagans of the town were so terrified of the emperor’s anger that they begged Augustine to plead with the authorities to save them from capital punishment.⁶⁰ At Sufes, however, not only was there no discussion of punishment but the pagans apparently had the nerve to demand compensation for their statue.⁶¹ At Calama the pagans were clearly in the wrong, and the Christians could expect the full weight of the law to come down on their side. At Sufes, the lack of evidence for any legal

retaliation or even threat thereof, after a much bloodier incident, might plausibly be explained by supposing that the Christians had less of a case. Those who were killed could reasonably be said to have brought it upon themselves by smashing the idol, an act of provocation that the Catholic establishment in North Africa considered to be beyond the pale of legitimate Christian zeal. If this supposition is correct, we may envision a group of zealous Christians, who gathered for the express purpose of destroying a pagan cult object and met with violent resistance from the pagans. It is impossible to tell whether or not these people were aligned with the Donatist cause. But it is significant that the Christians killed in Sufes had acted in a manner that Augustine elsewhere characterized as reckless, misguided, suicidal, and thoroughly characteristic of the Circumcellions. In this context, writing against pagans and not Donatists, Augustine could identify himself with the dead Christians, whichever church they may have represented, in order to condemn the pagans as murderers.⁶²

In order to place some limits upon the charismatic authority that might be claimed by martyrs and confessors, ecclesiastical authorities throughout the Roman world endeavored to keep for themselves the power to decide who might and might not rightly be called a true martyr.⁶³ In situations where claims to martyrdom formed a politicized discourse, controlling its meaning became all the more important. Catholics challenged and contested Donatist martyrial ideology in order to delegitimize the religious zeal that drove Donatist violence—a violence directed increasingly against the Catholics themselves.

CLEANSING THE TEMPLE: DONATISTS IN POWER

In 362, the pagan emperor Julian allowed the Donatist bishops who had been exiled in 347 to return home. Julian knew exactly what would happen: “No wild beasts are as vicious to men as most Christians are to each other.”⁶⁴ Optatus reports a wave of Donatist attacks on churches that

broke out as soon as the bishops returned.⁶⁵ The Donatists sought to gain control of church buildings and expel Catholic clergy. Many of these churches had probably once been Donatist before being seized by the Catholics in 347–348. Control of worship space was often the primary object of struggle between rival Christian groups throughout the Roman Empire in the fourth century. Battles for basilicas could be quite bloody.⁶⁶ In an urban setting, large groups fighting in enclosed spaces could produce heavy casualties. Nevertheless the purpose of the fighting was to seize the building, and bloodshed was an incidental consequence. People were hurt or killed largely insofar as they resisted, or were simply unlucky enough to get in the way. This seems to have been the case in the one such incident described by Optatus in some detail, a Donatist attack upon the church in the *castellum* at Lemella in which a Catholic priest was killed defending the altar.⁶⁷

Having secured possession of formerly Catholic worship space, the Donatists then began a series of symbolic actions that can be broadly interpreted as purifications. The need for such rituals arose from the particular nature of the Donatist-Catholic split, and the Donatist argument that sacraments performed by *traditores* were invalid. This included the sacrament of ordination, and therefore the entire Catholic hierarchy was seen as illegitimate even in Augustine's time when the original *traditores* were long dead.

So much we already knew from the Donatist polemics of Parmenian, Petilian, Cresconius, Gaudentius, and others, as preserved in the responses of Optatus and Augustine. But actions should speak at least as loudly as words, and these symbolic actions show us the polemicists' arguments being put into practice at the ground level. The Donatists regarded Catholic sacraments not only as invalid and lacking in divine grace but as actively evil and polluting. Thus the entire Catholic clergy and everything they touched were defiled and damned by the "original sin" of Felix and Caecilian. They could only be redeemed by purification. For most people, this took the form of rebaptism, which (both Optatus and Augustine

charged) the Donatists often administered by force. Sometimes, also, they forcibly “scraped” the heads of Catholic clergy, and compelled consecrated virgins to exchange their veils for new, “pure” ones.⁶⁸ Simultaneously public humiliation, purification, and degradation, scraping the priests’ heads may have been a symbolic removal of the oil of consecration. All of these rituals served to wipe away the taint of *traditio*.

The buildings themselves had to be purified as well. Thus the Donatists either scraped off, smashed up, or simply removed the altars, whitewashed the walls, and either actually washed out the interior of the building or symbolically sprinkled it with salt water.⁶⁹ Chalices and other serving vessels used by Catholic priests in their perverted sacraments had to be melted down. The Donatists regarded the Catholics’ consecrated host as useless and tainted, and accordingly they threw it to the dogs, which the Catholics of course considered to be terrible sacrilege.⁷⁰

A parallel to the Donatists’ extreme emphasis on purity and cleansing can be found in the universal Christian concern to avoid or wipe out the pollution associated with pagan blood sacrifice.⁷¹ Christian attacks on pagan sites usually aimed for the destruction of statues, sacred trees, or other cult objects, and often an entire temple might be physically dismantled, stone by stone.⁷² Such awareness of the pollution of pagan worship seems to have been particularly characteristic of ascetic zealots who conceived of life as an unending struggle against demons. Since it was believed that demons actually dwelled within the very statues and stones, the physical destruction of these objects could be seen as a form of exorcism. We have seen that the Donatists regarded Catholicism as little more than paganism in a clever disguise: rites designed to cleanse Catholic persons and places from the taint of *traditio* may well have had a similar exorcistic form and purpose. Optatus himself recognized this in a backhanded way when he accused the Donatists of “exorcising the Holy Ghost” by such rituals.⁷³

We have seen, in sectarian struggles elsewhere in the Roman world, the ways in which displays of violent power within the walls of a church were

understood as sacrilegious violations of sacred space. The first blood of the Donatist schism, a generation earlier, had been spilled inside the basilica at Avioccala.⁷⁴ To the Catholics, the violent “cleansing” now perpetrated by the Donatists fit neatly into this pattern, an armed invasion of the church.⁷⁵ But to the Donatists, Catholic clergy and sacraments were themselves a source of pollution, tainted by their complicity with persecuting secular powers. Barring actual bloodshed within the walls of a church, there is little indication that parties to sectarian conflicts outside North Africa ever felt the need to reconsecrate a church building simply because it had previously been used by a rival sect. In this the Donatists were unique. In their eyes the violence of their cleansing served to create a purified church that symbolized the purified community of the faithful.

DONATIST DISSENTERS

Following the Donatist resurgence under Julian, it seems that for the remainder of the fourth century the Catholics posed little challenge to Donatist ascendancy in large parts of North Africa.⁷⁶ Imperial coercion against the Donatists came only occasionally and had little effect. Circumcellion violence now directed itself against several schismatic movements that split away from the larger Donatist Church during this period. The Rogatists, a small cabal of Mauretanian bishops, broke away in the 360s specifically because they disapproved of the conduct of the Circumcellions.⁷⁷ Tyconius, a grammarian excommunicated by the Donatist bishops for his “heretical” opposition to rebaptism, wrote his critical remarks against the Circumcellions around 380.⁷⁸ Tyconius remarked disparagingly upon Circumcellions who sought out violent death either through misguided admiration of the martyrs or in the hope of themselves being venerated as martyrs. He did this in the context of discussing *superstitio*, which he defined as religious devotion taken to excess, beyond what is commanded.⁷⁹ In 392–394 a schism developed out of a disputed election to the bishopric of Carthage. Primian, the successful

candidate, offended many by his abusive behavior and his violent treatment of opponents.⁸⁰ The followers of Maximian split away from the larger Donatist church, and as a result they suffered savage persecution at the hands of the Circumcellions over the next decade.

Much of the existing scholarship suffers from the tendency to treat the Circumcellions as a tightly organized, cohesive, and homogeneous group in which all members must have been recruited from the same sources and driven by similar motives, an assumption that creates considerable difficulty in making sense of inconsistent and contradictory behavior reported by the sources.⁸¹ The concern of some Circumcellions to avoid literal “bloodshed” by using only blunt weapons was not shared by others.⁸² A better model may lie in Zeev Rubin’s conception of a core group of religiously committed *agonistici*, surrounded by a much larger and less stable body of followers, diverse in origins and motives and uncertain in discipline and loyalty, whose numbers would rise and fall in tandem with the fortune and reputation of their charismatic leaders.⁸³ It is even possible that the same sort of thugs who moved on the outer fringes of the Circumcellion movement might occasionally have shown up in the service of Catholic bishops. Given the frequency of savage Donatist attacks on Catholic clergy, it is reasonable to suppose that the latter would have begun recruiting some sort of bodyguards.⁸⁴

Such a model would begin to make sense of the inconsistent and ambiguous evidence we have regarding the degree of control that the Donatist clerical hierarchy exercised over the movement. Axido and Fasir, the “Captains of the Saints,” had a complex relationship to the Donatist bishops, who eventually appealed to the imperial authorities to crush their uprising. Some people, including at least one priest, wished to venerate the fallen Circumcellions as martyrs, but the Donatist episcopal leadership forbade it.⁸⁵ That incident had no obvious connection with the Donatist-Catholic struggle except insofar as the followers of Axido and Fasir were the same sort of people whom Donatus of Bagai recruited a few years later to resist Macarius and provoke another massacre.⁸⁶ At least a few

Donatists objected to the excesses of the Circumcellions.⁸⁷ In other situations, however, Circumcellion violence was clearly deployed in the Donatist cause. Seizures of basilicas and attacks on Catholic clergy obviously served Donatist interests and in some cases were personally directed by Donatist bishops and clergy. Moreover, the symbolic meaning of particular acts of violence on these occasions can only be understood within the context of Donatist ideology. Nevertheless, the Donatists' disclaimers of *quid ad nos?* were not always as disingenuous as Augustine would like us to believe.

There may well have been some truth in Augustine's charge that the Donatist bishops were afraid to condemn the misdeeds of the Circumcellions lest they lose what tenuous degree of influence they possessed over them, or even become a target of their attacks. Once called forth in the service of the Donatist church, such violence was difficult to control and occasionally turned inward.⁸⁸ When Tyconius wrote a history of the Donatist-Catholic schism, he gave it the telling title *De Bello Intestino*, "The Civil War."⁸⁹

DONATISM ON THE DEFENSIVE

The Donatists had dominated much of North Africa for several decades, effectively tolerated if never formally supported by an imperial government distracted elsewhere. By the turn of the fifth century, that had started to change. The powerful Donatist bishop Optatus of Thamugadi had aligned himself with Gildo, Count of Africa, whose armed uprising against emperor Honorius was suppressed in 398. Both men were executed for treason.⁹⁰ The imperial regime might ignore the ecclesiastical equivalent of rebellion, but was not about to tolerate the real thing. Longstanding Catholic complaints now found a more receptive ear in Ravenna. For the first time since 347, the Catholic bishops were able to enlist the power of state on their side in a sustained effort to force the Donatists into "unity." Around 400, the Catholic church under the effective leadership of Aurelius of

Carthage and Augustine of Hippo began a much more aggressive strategy against the Donatists. Under the pretext of investigating Donatist violence against the Maximianists, the Catholics sent bishops and priests to missionize in areas that had long been left to the Donatists.⁹¹ In the first decade of the fifth century, they finally succeeded in convincing the imperial government in Ravenna to apply its existing anti-heretical laws against the Donatists.⁹² In 411 the imperial commissioner Marcellinus presided over a formal disputation between Donatist and Catholic bishops in Carthage, which resulted in the official condemnation of Donatism.⁹³ Learning from the experience of Macarius, the Catholics were careful to avoid violent and deadly repression that might only give the Donatists more martyrs.⁹⁴ Instead, they petitioned the secular authorities to impose economic penalties and legal disabilities. This heavy coercive pressure triggered a savage response from the Circumcellions, who now directed their violence entirely against their “persecutors” among the Catholic clergy.

It becomes immediately apparent that their tactics had taken a decidedly more violent turn since the time of Optatus, shifting toward brutal physical attacks on the persons of the Catholic clergy. This move toward more terroristic tactics, the violence of opposition, reflected the new political climate of the imperial crackdown. Seizing buildings would have done the Donatists little good, since they would not have been able to hold them. They shifted rather to hit-and-run ambushes targeting the leadership among their opponents. No longer were Catholics’ injuries simply incidental to attacks on basilicas. Now the Circumcellions actively sought out Catholic clergy, pulling them from their homes or ambushing them on the road.⁹⁵ Restitutus, a former Donatist priest who had joined the Catholics, was pulled from his house, severely beaten, rolled in a muddy ditch and covered in straw, and dragged around to be displayed in a cage for several days. Maximian of Bagai, dragged away from the altar, beaten, stabbed in the groin and left for dead, lived to travel to Italy and shock the imperial court by displaying his scars. Possidius was ambushed

and severely beaten at the behest of his Donatist rival, Crispinus of Calama.⁹⁶ The Catholics, it could be argued, were asking for it: this new wave of violence followed directly upon the Catholic bishops' decision in 401 to send missionaries into areas such as southern Numidia formerly conceded to the Donatists.

Some aspects of Circumcellion violence appear fairly straightforward and need no special explanation in terms of religious symbolism. Beating and burning of houses were common ways of using force to chase away a rival, or to intimidate the lay population and prevent them from supporting the Catholics. This sort of activity, aimed at harassing and intimidating enemies, was characteristic of power relations throughout the Roman world, particularly in the countryside where effective law enforcement was almost nonexistent.⁹⁷ Such force would normally be characterized by those on the receiving end as *latrocinium*. Rolling a victim such as Restitutus in mud and straw and displaying him in a cage served an obvious purpose of public humiliation, perhaps the North African equivalent of tarring and feathering.

Other features of Circumcellion personal violence deserve special comment. Augustine referred time and again to their "terrible clubs," which they called "Israels."⁹⁸ There are indications that some of the Circumcellions emphasized the fact that they did not "shed blood" with swords and therefore claimed that they could not be accused of "violence."⁹⁹ There are, equally, indications that this rule was not consistently followed among all those whom Augustine classed under the term "Circumcellions": "Look at your mobs, who are not armed only with clubs, after the old way of their parents, but have added axes, lances and swords."¹⁰⁰ Some of those who had more recently joined the Circumcellions felt no restraint on the kinds of weapons they could use, and the violence intensified in direct response to the escalation of Catholic and imperial persecution.¹⁰¹ This calls into question the degree of unity and cohesion among the Circumcellions, and the measure of control that the Donatist leadership exercised over them. It does seem, however, that in

what we might call “normative” Donatist ideology there was a distinction between “bloodshed,” which seems to connote use of weapons specifically designed to kill, and other forms of violence, which could be characterized as “nonlethal” and therefore less objectionable, even if in practice people were sometimes killed thereby. Their intent, usually, seems to have been not to kill, but to cause pain and injury for purposes of coercion and intimidation. But they do not seem to have been particularly concerned that some of their victims did in fact die of their injuries.¹⁰²

There were more practical reasons for eschewing certain weapons: a sword was a sword and had no plausible use other than killing people. Anyone caught with a sword, who was not a soldier or otherwise authorized to have one, could be considered a *latro* and punished accordingly. But there were any number of commonly available tools with legitimate nonviolent uses that could nevertheless be used to smash skulls when the situation demanded, most obviously the Circumcellions’ infamous “Israels,” which may well have been the same sort of long sticks used to knock down the olives at harvest time.¹⁰³ The need to avoid being caught with an undeniably lethal weapon was particularly important for the Circumcellions, whose activities had no legal sanction.

As imperial persecution intensified, the Circumcellions struck back by imitating Isaac’s triumph over the emperor. Around 406, they began blinding Catholic clergy by forcing a mixture of powdered lime and vinegar (*calce cum aceto*) into their eyes.¹⁰⁴ Because it is so unusual, and presents no obvious practical purpose, we may suspect that the Circumcellions chose this method of attack in order to make a point.¹⁰⁵ The explanation should be sought in the special prominence in Christian thought and expression given to seeing and light as metaphors for understanding and faith, and blindness and darkness for the lack thereof. This imagery finds its center in Acts 9, the story of the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul, a persecutor of the Christians, was stricken with blindness so that he might see. Petilian, the Donatist apologist,

invoked this story to support his argument that the Catholics, like Saul, were persecutors:

Therefore, as we said, the Lord Christ cried to Paul: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? But Paul said, Who are you, Lord? And the answer to him: I am Christ of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. And he, trembling and stupefied, said: Lord, what do you want me to do? And the Lord said to him: Get up and go into the city, and it will be told you what you are to do. And further on: Saul got up from the ground but although his eyes were open, he could not see anything [*apertisque oculis suis nihil videbat*]. O blindness, the punishment of madness [*o ultrix furoris caecitas*], you obscure the light from the eyes of the persecutor, to be removed only by baptism! Let us see then what happens in the city. Ananias went in, it says, to Saul, and when he laid his hands upon him, he said: Saul my brother, the Lord has sent me, Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, so that you might see and be filled with the Holy Spirit. At once it was as if scales fell away from his eyes, and he received vision and arising, was baptized. When, therefore, Paul, freed by baptism from the crime of persecution, put on innocent eyes, why should you, persecutor and *traditor* blinded by false baptism, not wish to be baptized by those whom you persecute?
[106](#)

Augustine also employed the language of sight and blindness, at one point in almost identical words. Advocating the use of coercion to bring people into the true church, he asked:

For who can possibly love us more than Christ, who laid down His life for His sheep? And yet, after calling Peter and the other apostles by His words alone, when He came to summon Paul, who was before called Saul, subsequently the powerful builder of His Church, but originally its cruel persecutor, He not only constrained him with His voice, but even dashed him to the earth with His power; and that He might forcibly bring one who was raging amid the darkness of infidelity to desire the light of the heart, He first struck him with physical blindness of the eyes . . . since he had been wont to see nothing with his eyes open.
[107](#)

Augustine frequently justified religious coercion with reference to the “good physician” who must inflict pain in order to save the patient.
[108](#) In a sermon of 404 we find a metaphor that is not just medical but specifically ophthalmological:

Imagine a man, blinded by a certain darkness. . . . The doctor [says to him]: “I am about to apply some stronger eye-salves, which will wash away the darkness from you, and from their harshness you will feel some pain. But it is necessary for you to bear this health-giving pain [*dolorem salubrem*] patiently, and not to push away my hands anxious and unable to bear the discomfort . . . I warn you that you will suffer something troublesome together with the

increase of illumination.”[109](#)

Such language, pervading the polemic of both sides, provides a context in which to view the Circumcellions’ actions.[110](#) The Catholics, as persecutors (and the only attested victims of this practice were Catholic clergy), were “blind” even if their eyes were intact. The Circumcellions, with an extreme literalism, had taken a metaphor common to Christian discourse and made it a physical reality, reenacting both Isaac’s triumph over the emperor and Christ’s conversion of Paul.

In the end, however, the emperor won. The escalating savagery of Circumcellion violence and the suicide threats of Gaudentius and the priest Donatus signalled desperation in the face of a relentless imperial crackdown.[111](#) In the last years of his life, Augustine made little mention of the Donatists. After the Vandal conquest of 429–435 we hear no further mention of the Circumcellions.[112](#) Brutal repression of both African churches by the Arian Vandals may finally have caused Donatists and Catholics to bury their differences.[113](#) It was a bitter irony for the Catholics, who themselves could now claim to be a persecuted “Church of the Martyrs.”[114](#)

The collapse of Donatism, ultimately, can be traced to the failure of the “Church of the Martyrs” to co-opt the power of that same state that it saw as “persecutor.” In theory, the late Roman state commanded far more violent power than any potential rival: even the most fanatical zealots would be no match for trained and armed soldiers. Nevertheless, as we shall see in chapter 5, in practice the state rarely made any serious attempt to repress the activities of revered holy men in the same way that it would stamp out an outbreak of “banditry” where no religious issues were involved.[115](#) In North Africa, by contrast, it was the relentless application of the state’s coercive power that finally put an end to the power of the Donatists and their Circumcellions. This became possible only because one of the two rival church organizations in North Africa, the Catholic, finally managed to convince the imperial authorities to recognize

it as the sole legitimate Christian church—making the Circumcellions the religious equivalent of bandits and creating the ideological justification for their merciless suppression. Isaac may have plucked out its eye, but the Constantinian empire endured.