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# BISHOP SEPTIMIUS FLORENCE TERTULLIANUS AND THE ISSUES OF HIS ERA

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the thought and influence of Bishop Septimius Florence Tertullianus within the context of the Roman Carthage during the second and third centuries ADs. Drawing on his extensive writings, this research analyses Tertullianus's engagement with key social, moral, and religious issues of his time, including abortion, divorce, remarriage, public spectacles, and women's adornment. It highlights his efforts to assert Christian doctrine in opposition to dominant pagan practices, revealing the complex dynamics among faith, society, and authority. The paper concludes that Tertullianus's legacy lies in his rigorous defence of Christian values and his significant contribution to shaping early Christian identity in North Africa.

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## KEYWORDS

Tertullianus, Roman Carthage, Early Christianity, Social Issues, Christian Doctrine, Pagan Customs

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## Introduction.

Religious sources of various kinds constitute one of the most important references for the history of ancient North Africa, both in terms of events and civilisation. From the sacred scriptures to the writings of pagan or Christian clerics, to the resolutions of religious councils in the Roman, Vandal, or Byzantine periods, including lists of ecclesiastical bishoprics, as well as royal and imperial decrees and edicts, and official religious correspondence between the papal authority in Rome or the Orthodox Church in Byzantium, on the one hand, and the local religious authority and its representatives, such as bishops and their leaders in Carthage, on the other hand. Historical data concerning the religious situation of the region and its inhabitants, whether related to persecution, schism, religious controversy, ecclesiastical organisation, spiritual life, the moral dimension of the Christian community, preaching, guidance, or the call to righteousness and adherence to the teachings of Christ and the Catholic Church, are thus available.

However, these diverse religious sources were not limited merely to addressing such aspects, particularly the writings of Christian clerics since the second century AD, whose works, in addition to the theological and doctrinal issues they discussed, which formed the core of their compositions, also contained various accounts of the different civilisational features that characterised the social context in which they lived and which left their mark on their writings. Christian clerics were not solely entrusted with the task of guiding and educating the members of the Christian community for whom they were responsible in terms of spiritual care and religious direction. At the same time, they considered themselves followers of the apostles and equally responsible, as the apostles were, for calling the majority pagan population, among whom they formed a small minority to the faith of Christ.

The duality of this mission, which they were convinced had been entrusted to them and regarded as their foremost purpose and calling in life, led them into confrontation with the various social phenomena that prevailed in their era and formed the foundation of daily life in the society in which they lived. Given that

those ways of life and moral and social customs regarded by non-Christians, and often by many Christians as well, contrary to the teachings of their religion and creed, were dominant and widespread in society, these clerics, by their mission, considered it incumbent upon themselves to advocate for their reform, to oppose them, and to eradicate them from the community. Their aim was not only to prevent such practices from infiltrating the Christian congregation and thereby corrupting its faith and values but also because they viewed these as demonic behaviours that contradicted human nature and the divine will behind the creation of humankind and the cultivation of the earth by a virtuous human society.

From this perspective, the historical and civilisational-civilisational-civilisational-civilisational-civilisational-civilisational-civilisational-civilisational significance of religious sources becomes apparent, as they contain valuable information related to various aspects of daily life in ancient North African society. These details are not found in other contemporary historical sources. Although bishops and clerics did not intend to address these matters as established customs among members of that society, their treatment of such issues, whether by opposing or denouncing them from a purely religious standpoint, drew attention to them and provided us with information that would otherwise not have been available with such richness and clarity. Thus, these writings acquire their importance, particularly when they constitute the sole sources to have documented that era or those phenomena.

Tertullianus, an impassioned and, at times, fanatical cleric, addressed a wide range of social issues that he considered to contradict and deviate from the teachings of Christianity. He regarded it as his duty, both as a devoted Christian and as a responsible cleric, to advocate for their rectification, regulation, or elimination, should they fall outside the value and moral framework of society and not solely Christian doctrine. These issues were numerous and complex, forming the subject of many of Tertullian's writings, in which he sought to address them from a religious, ethical, and doctrinal perspective. He endeavoured to explain them in light of the sacred texts and to demonstrate the extent of their incompatibility with these scriptures but ultimately did not fail to guide how they should be addressed and regulated by his faith and creed.

## Methodology.

This study adopts a qualitative, historical-analytical approach to examine the thought and societal engagement of Bishop Septimius Florentius Tertullianus within Roman Carthage during the second and third centuries AD. The research is grounded primarily in a critical reading of Tertullianus's extant writings, with particular attention given to his major treatises, sermons, and letters. These primary sources are contextualised within their historical, social, and religious frameworks through reference to relevant secondary literature, including recent scholarship in patristics, Roman North African studies, and early Christian history. Primary texts by Tertullianus were accessed in both their original Latin and authoritative modern translations to ensure accuracy in interpretation and citation. Where possible, textual analysis was supplemented by contemporary commentaries and critical editions, with a particular emphasis on works that addressed key issues such as abortion, divorce, public spectacles, and women's conduct. Secondary sources were selected on the basis of their scholarly rigour and relevance, utilising major academic databases and peer-reviewed publications in the fields of early Christianity and Roman history. The analytical process involved thematic coding of the primary texts, allowing for the identification and categorisation of Tertullianus's positions on various social and doctrinal matters. Comparative analysis was employed to situate his perspectives within the broader context of early Christian thought and to highlight both continuities and divergences with contemporary and later ecclesiastical authorities.

### 1. His birth and upbringing:

Septimius Florence Tertullianus was born between 155 and 160 AD in Carthage, the son of a father who served as a commander of one of the units of the Third Augustan Legion in Numidia. Tertullianus led a tumultuous life and indulged in all worldly pleasures, especially as he came from a wealthy and distinguished family. His parents spared him nothing, providing him with every comfort and delight that life could offer. Although born in Carthage, he was often inclined to travel and wander in his youth, visiting numerous cities and countries. From an early age, he was enrolled in school, where he studied Latin literature and the sciences known in his time, excelling to the point of surpassing his peers. He continued his studies, broadening his knowledge, mastering Latin as fluently as Greek, and acquiring the fundamentals of medicine and medical sciences. He was particularly well versed in law, eventually becoming a brilliant advocate.<sup>1</sup> His oratorical talents enabled him to achieve considerable renown and prestige in Carthage, and everything pointed to his becoming one of the greatest legislators and jurists of his era. Nevertheless, he chose to pursue a different path by embracing the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. His Conversion to Christianity and Defence of the Faith:

The circumstances surrounding Tertullianus's conversion to Christianity remain unknown. It may have been the result of his excessive fervour, as manifested in the actions he undertook throughout his life; whenever he perceived a truth, he pursued it wholeheartedly and with intensity, often to the point of extremism and an inclination towards the Montanist sect that emerged in his era. His thinking was uncompromising, and his character disposed him to struggle. He was a brilliant and incisive critic who was unmatched in his ability to debate. He counted among the triumphant Roman converts, displaying traits characteristic of the indigenous population, such as resilience and resistance to authority. He depicted the Christian religion as a continuous undertaking, urging his brethren to renounce all things to labor for the advancement of Christianity, thereby encouraging martyrdom and evasion of military service. He also cautioned believers against attending games and public festivities, maintaining that "a Christian cannot be a soldier, and it is the duty of a soldier who converts to seek refuge in flight." Furthermore, he warned against accepting positions that would implicate one with the powerful and the authorities.<sup>3</sup>

His appointment as bishop enabled him to play a significant role in guiding the Christians under his authority, particularly during times of persecution, when he demonstrated excellent resistance and steadfastness in his positions, defending the truth without fear of threats from the Roman authorities, whether imprisonment, exile, or even death. Nor did these threats deter him from fulfilling his duty towards his imprisoned brethren and offering them comfort. He would visit them in prison, extend a helping hand, and raise their spirits, thereby attesting to the nobility of his character and the generosity of his nature.<sup>4</sup>

Tertullian was an ascetic man, as evident from his writings, in which he expresses his concern most candidly regarding the imbalance brought about by the predominance of agricultural life and urban development. He states, "Day by day, the world becomes more cultivated and increasingly wealthy; everywhere there are houses, in every place inhabitants, and in every direction, towns; it is life in all its aspects." In another passage, he remarked, "Large estates have encroached upon the desert, and fields and orchards have spread at the expense of forests." Tertullianus recorded these impressions on the basis of his daily observations of his African surroundings, thereby demonstrating that he lived fully within his era, closely observing the changes occurring within society. From the perspective of his faith, he regarded these developments as distancing humanity from God and causing people to become immersed in pleasure and indulgence.<sup>5</sup>

He was also regarded as a philosopher who saw no contradiction whatsoever between reason and religion, considering philosophers pioneers who had ultimately betrayed themselves. In his theological scholarship, he approached the most critical and intricate subjects, steadfastly maturing through adherence to virtuous morals and the exercise of self-control. He also sharply criticised, with biting sarcasm, the ostentation of women in their adornment and how young women wore their veil; thus, he advocated chastity. His preferred

<sup>1</sup> Braun, "At the Origins of African Christianity: A Man of Combat, Tertullian," *Bulletin of the Association Guillaume Budé*, no. 2 (June 1965): 194.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>3</sup> Saxer, V. *Morts, martyrs, reliques en Afrique chrétienne aux premiers siècles: Les témoignages de Tertullien, Cyprien et Augustin à la lumière de l'archéologie africaine*. Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1980, 136.

<sup>4</sup> Monceaux, P. *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique du Nord depuis les origines jusqu'à l'invasion arabe*. Tome I, Tertullien et les origines. Paris: Leroux, 1901, 180–93.

<sup>5</sup> Monceaux, P., *op. cit.*, 206.

field, where his talents were most evident, was in attacking opponents and criticising certain circumstances, directing severe reproaches against the Jews who incited the authorities and against pagan Christians.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. His works:

Tertullianus left behind a substantial legacy of religious, theological, and literary writings, addressing a wide range of subjects that touched upon the condition of Christians, the persecution they endured, and the problems arising from periods of oppression. His works also include his efforts in Christian doctrine and his attempts to theorise defend this faith against Jews and their intrigues, as well as against the power and tyranny of Roman officials and rulers. Each significant event served as an opportunity to write a book, clarify the circumstances and offer solutions. The total number of his works reached thirty-nine, among which the most notable are the "Apologeticum," which encompassed his theological endeavors and commentaries on the sacred scriptures; the "Ad Nationes," a letter to the nations; and the "Ad Martyras," a letter to the martyrs, written in 197 AD.<sup>2</sup>

There is also his treatise on baptism, "De Baptismo," in which he addressed the question of inviting apostates back to Christianity and the necessity of rebaptising before readmitting them to the faith. He also authored a work refuting the Jews and exposing their conspiracies against the Christians and the harm they caused them, entitled "Adversus Judaeos," both of which were written between the years 200 and 206. Finally, there is the "Ad Scapulam," composed in 202 AD, in which he legally defended the Christian faith against the Roman authorities in the proconsulate and its representative, the Proconsul Scapula.<sup>3</sup> His most excellent apologetic work, however, is his book entitled "Defence of Christianity," in which he explored in depth the root of the conflict between pagans and Christians, rejecting the persecutions that targeted Christians alone on the basis of fictitious crimes for which no investigation was made, as well as their contempt for the official religion and their refusal to worship the emperor.<sup>4</sup>

Although Tertullianus played a significant role in the history of the Church in the Maghreb and the history of Christianity in general, he did not escape criticism from writers and Catholic clerics of his time and in later periods owing to his adoption of Montanism. This heretical doctrine originated in Rome with Bishop Montanus and later spread throughout ancient North Africa.<sup>5</sup>

### 4. His Stance on Social Issues:

As a son of his era, Tertullianus held numerous positions regarding the issues of his society and time positions rooted in his Christian values and his sense of duty as a Christian cleric, entrusted with the mission of conveying the faith and calling people to the true religion and monotheism espoused by himself and the Christian community in Carthage.<sup>6</sup> It is hardly surprising that his efforts to propagate Christian teachings among the pagan circles of Carthage or even to correct the misconceptions held by some Christians who harboured understandings and practices at odds with the tenets of the new faith they had embraced would shape such positions.

These stances addressed various aspects that arose on numerous occasions, requiring his intervention to clarify the Church's position on specific matters or to defend Christians against accusations of adopting customs and engaging in practices contrary to those of the wider society, thereby inciting hostility against them.

His writings allow us to identify the following key aspects:

#### 4.1 The Issue of Abortion among Women

The Fathers of the early centuries unanimously condemned abortion; nevertheless, there were notable differences in the judgments they issued against it. Some, such as the Cappadocian Fathers, regarded it as murder at any stage of the embryo's development in the womb. Others, relying on a passage from the Book of Exodus,<sup>7</sup> considered it murder only if "that which is in the womb" was "formed in the image" (as was the case for many Antiochian bishops). A third group, drawing on the perplexity of theologians and philosophers concerning the moment when the soul is infused into the foetus, refused to regard the suppression of an unborn

<sup>1</sup> Durant, W. The Story of Civilisation. Part IV, The Age of Faith. New York: Simon and Schuster, (1950), 302.

<sup>2</sup> Monceaux, P., op. cit., 208.

<sup>3</sup> Monceaux, P., op. cit., 209.

<sup>4</sup> Durant, W., op. cit., 312.

<sup>5</sup> Monceaux, P., op. cit., 177–86.

<sup>6</sup> Turcan, M. "Le mariage en question? Ou les avantages du célibat selon Tertullien." In *Mélanges de philosophie, de littérature et d'histoire ancienne offerts à Pierre Boyancé*, 712. Rome: École Française de Rome, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus, LXX, 21–22.



being as murder. Bishop Tertullianus initially adopted a middle position among all these views, recognising the legitimacy of therapeutic abortion in certain circumstances and preserving the mother's life.<sup>1</sup>

However, as the phenomenon became more widespread, he subsequently prohibited abortion entirely, considering it a grave crime against human life.<sup>2</sup> Tertullianus states, "These people, thirsting for the blood of Christians (referring to the pagans), kill their newborn children. In addition, if there is still a distinction to be made concerning the manner of death, I would say that it is certainly more cruel than torturing their souls by drowning them in water, or exposing them to cold, hunger, or dogs."<sup>3</sup> For him, it was a matter of principle since, as he says, regardless of the stage of the embryo's development, "What difference does it make whether we extinguish a soul already born, or destroy it at the moment of its birth?"<sup>4</sup>

These two statements are fundamental to understanding Tertullianus's firm stance as a Christian on the issue of abortion, which he addressed in his treatise on the soul. He maintains, "The soul possesses equal dignity at the moment of its birth, that is, at conception, when the embryo is formed, then at some later stage, whether through its development and finally after birth." Hence, one may find a theoretical justification for the fact that the ancients were, for the most part, unable to determine precisely when the soul enters the embryo. For us, killing is forbidden once and for all; we are not even permitted to kill the child in the womb since the blood continues to flow (deliberator) to form the living being.<sup>5</sup>

This principled stance involves various considerations, some of a physiological and scriptural nature concerning the moment life is imparted to the fetus and others of a practical nature concerning the potential necessity for abortion. Thus, Tertullianus was the first among the Latin Fathers to raise the theoretical question of the moment at which life is imparted to embryos in the womb. He addresses this issue in the remainder of his treatise on the soul by supporting the theory of the preexistence of souls in bodies, where he states:

"Is the soul generated through the seed to be its principle or essence, or does it have another origin? In this case, is it generated? Or not? Is it placed from without into bodies, or not? This matter has not yet been sufficiently clarified by ecclesiastical preaching."<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, the other restriction, in Tertullianus's view, imposed on the principle of rejecting abortion pertained to therapeutic requirements. Thus, recognising the importance of medical necessities and adapting Christian teachings accordingly to serve the public good, he believed it essential to classify cases that were very numerous at the time, where pregnancy posed a definite risk to the mother's life. Tertullianus also acknowledged the permissibility of abortion even in certain situations where the child remained in the womb. The harsh necessity of sacrificing the child was unavoidable, such as when the foetus was lodged in a position that made delivery impossible and thus became, in effect, the cause of the mother's death unless it was destined to perish during childbirth itself.<sup>7</sup>

Among the Latin bishops, Tertullianus challenged the prevailing opinion of his society at that time, declaring that the moment at which the soul was infused into the foetus was of little consequence in regard to condemning abortion.<sup>8</sup> He asserted his disagreement with the wording of the Septuagint translation of the Torah, which recognises the strict sense of only the abortion of a fully formed foetus as a homicide. He states, "It is thus established that the foetus in the womb is a human being from the moment it is fully formed. In fact, Mosaic law applies the penalty of retribution to anyone guilty of abortion because the formation of the living being has already begun."<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.2. Tertullianus on Divorce and Remarriage:

Among the social issues addressed by Tertullianus in his writings, which he examined as both religious and social matters, was the practice of remarriage after divorce, a custom deeply rooted in the pagan society

<sup>1</sup> Pouderon, B. "L'interdiction de l'avortement dans les premiers siècles de l'Église." *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 87, no. 1 (January–March 2007): 55.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, IV, 17, 5. Trans. E.-A. de Genoude, 1852. Reprint, Paris: Cerf, 1990–94, 3 vols.; Maré, J.-P. "Tertullien et l'Épistola Marcionis." *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 45, no. 4 (1971): 366.

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 9.6. Trans. Frédéric Chapot, in *Premiers écrits chrétiens*, Les Belles Lettres, Gallimard, "La Pléiade," 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 9.8.

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *De anima*, 25.1–2; 25.5–2; 25.8–9. Trans. A.-E. de Genoude. Paris, 1852.

<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *De anima*, 25.4.

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 9.8.

<sup>9</sup> Tertullian, *De anima*, 37.2.

of Carthage. This practice appears to have influenced members of the Christian community to such an extent that it required his urgent intervention.<sup>1</sup>

Did Tertullian, in some instances, recognise the right of divorcees to remarry? Did he consider it a legitimate right or merely a concession subject to circumstances? In which situations is divorce permitted, and when is remarriage allowed? Did this bishop particularly find in the sacred texts anything that permitted a wronged spouse to seek a divorce and contract another marriage?<sup>2</sup>

Upon returning to his treatise on monogamy, which he wrote specifically concerning this issue over which there was much controversy among the Christian minority in Carthage, divided between supporters and opponents owing to the influence of pagan customs and Roman law, both of which did not oppose the practice, we find that he unequivocally condemned any repetition of the marriage ceremony for divorcees.<sup>3</sup>

The exact position is evident in the first paragraph of the ninth chapter of his work. For him, the goal is to demonstrate that if divorce is contrary to the will of God, who unites spouses, then remarriage is no less a desecration; the person who remarries after divorce seeks to regain a state from which divine providence deprived him through the death of his spouse, thus continuing to disregard the will of God.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, he presents the prohibition of divorce as a divine will that must not be opposed, even if the marital bond is severed, and this inevitably raises difficulties. For if divorce, especially remarriage after divorce, could in some cases be considered a form of tolerance, Tertullianus found it challenging to identify texts that unequivocally supported his view, particularly as the opposition of other bishops was based on an analogy with the pagans, whose customs Christian teachings commanded them to reject.<sup>5</sup>

To resolve this dispute, Tertullianus interpreted Christ's words in the scriptures to mean that the sin of adultery is incurred merely by exposing oneself to the risk of adultery; expulsion itself does not constitute adultery, but it encourages it and places the rejected party in the position of betrayal. What truly renders a person guilty is remarrying. From these definitions, Tertullianus derived an unequivocal condemnation of any new marriage after divorce. For him, it was more important to establish the necessity of adhering to monogamy than to use these arguments to elucidate the divine commandment prohibiting adultery. As these definitions were formulated in such a way as to lead to this conclusion, Tertullianus thus settled the controversy in his favour of this issue.<sup>6</sup>

The tenth chapter of his work is vibrant; in it, Tertullianus first claims to have demonstrated that separation by death constitutes, even more so than separation by divorce, a barrier to any new marriage.<sup>7</sup>

This passage is of interest for two reasons: it reaffirms the prohibition of any new marriage after divorce, and it does not confine the causes of divorce to marital infidelity alone but extends them to include marital discord, personal animosity, insults, neglect, and mutual or unilateral aversion between spouses.<sup>8</sup>

It is thus evident, from the considerable attention Tertullianus devoted to the issue of divorce and subsequent remarriage in his treatise on monogamy, that this phenomenon held significant importance in his era and society. In response, Tertullianus strictly prohibited remarriage after divorce. This prohibition was in line with Christian tradition, which upholds the principle of monogamy; however, it should not be assumed that it was derived directly from this tradition. As will become apparent in later years, the issue will grow increasingly complex. In the matter of divorce, as in his comprehensive defence of monogamy, the Bishop of Carthage placed men and women on equal footing.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Schamp, J. "Tertullien. Le mariage unique (De monogamia)." *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 69, no. 1 (1991): 215.

<sup>2</sup> Mattei, P. "Le divorce chez Tertullien. Examen de la question à la lumière des développements que le *De Monogamia* consacre à ce sujet." *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 60, nos. 3–4 (1986): 207.

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, *De monogamia*, 5.1. Trans. E.-A. de Genoude. Paris: Louis Vivès, 1852. Proposed by Roger Pearse, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Munier, Ch. "Tertullien face aux morales des trois premiers siècles." *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 54, no. 2 (1980): 176.

<sup>5</sup> Mattei, P., loc. cit., 210.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *De monogamia*, IX.1–2: "Recogitemus enim repudium aut discordia fieri aut discordiam facere, mortem vero ex lege Dei non ex hominis offensa evenire, idque omnium esse debitum, etiam non maritorum."

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *De monogamia*, 14.2–4.

<sup>9</sup> Mattei, P., loc. cit., 217.

### 4.3. Tertullianus on Games and Venues of Entertainment Games and Performances

Tertullianus composed his treatise on games<sup>1</sup> to dissuade Christians from attending the performances and games that were presented to the public in his era. He not only opposed theatrical performances and gladiatorial combats, which had already aroused the disapproval of many pagan consciences due to their obscenity or brutality<sup>2</sup> but also extended his opposition to athletic competitions in stadiums and horse races in the circus, as he regarded all these spectacles as inseparable from paganism and moral corruption. These were the principal grievances he held against the pagans, and he provided us with numerous examples, thereby furnishing valuable information about the customs of his time and society.<sup>3</sup>

This work is among his earliest treatises, dating back to the end of the second century. The final two chapters (29–30), in particular, complement each other and together form the conclusion of the treatise. In contrast to the immoral pagan manifestations that permeated the games and entertainment spectacles described by Tertullian in the preceding chapters, these chapters present the actual festivities of the Christians.

The bishop meticulously addressed the different social groups who attended or participated in the various spectacles, namely, political or intellectual authorities punished for idolatry and their contempt for the truth; deified emperors and persecuting rulers;<sup>4</sup> philosophers with erroneous beliefs about divine providence, the soul, and its fate (including those who denied its survival or the resurrection of the body);<sup>5</sup> false poets; actors in various types of performances; comedians and suggestive (theatrical) actors; charioteers; and athletes.

Tertullianus's aim in this critique was to demonstrate that the scene of the Day of Judgment is far more genuine and confident than the spectacles offered by the authorities, regardless of their horror, the degradation of human dignity, the mockery of the human spirit, the violation of public morals resulting from the mingling of men and women in the stands and theatres, and the appearance of women adorned and unveiled with their hair exposed.<sup>6</sup>

In the third chapter, he openly declares his opposition to the lifestyle of entertainment and leisure that prevailed among the people of Carthage, urging members of the Church to reject it and not to follow the example of the pagans. He states, "In reality, the faith of some, whether simple or profound, seeks evidence from the scriptures before refraining from attending spectacles, and thus hesitates to abstain from pleasures that are not explicitly forbidden to the servants of the Lord by clear scriptural texts. There is no doubt that we do not find anywhere in the scriptures a prohibition expressed in unequivocal terms such as: do not go to the circus, or to the theatre; do not attend games or spectacles, or literally as in the following commandments: 'Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not worship a graven image; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not steal.'"

"However, we do find in David's first word a phrase suggestive of such a prohibition: 'Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of corruption!' The scriptures always allow for a broader interpretation wherever the moral meaning appears to be in harmony with the meaning conveyed in the message so that there is nothing to prevent these words from being considered a prohibition against witnessing pagan spectacles. If the prophet could refer to a small number of Jews as a company of the wicked, how much more should he have mentioned the vast multitude of the pagan people? Are the pagans any less disbelieving, any less sinful, or any fewer enemies of Christ than the Jews were at that time?<sup>7</sup> The sloping terraces that separate the horsemen from the people are called 'ways,' and the front seats reserved for the senators in the orchestra are called 'seats.' Thus, by extension, we say: 'Woe to anyone who joins any company of the wicked, stands in the way of sinners, whoever they may be, and sits on any of these seats of corruption!'"<sup>8</sup>

Tertullianus continues to denounce the pagans for their veneration and celebration of these spectacles, their eagerness to attend them, and the vast sums of money spent by the wealthy to bring gladiators and animals

<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *Les spectacles (De spectaculis)*. Introduction, critical text, translation, and commentary by Marie Turcan. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1986, 368 pp. ("Sources chrétiennes," 332).

<sup>2</sup> Lagouanère, J. "Les usages du stoïcisme dans le *De spectaculis* et le *De pallio* de Tertullien." *Vita Latina*, nos. 189–190 (2014): 139.

<sup>3</sup> Nautin, P. "Tertullien. Les spectacles (*De spectaculis*)." *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 206, no. 3 (1989): 312.

<sup>4</sup> Hornus, J.-M. "Étude sur la pensée politique de Tertullien." *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 38, no. 1 (1958): 14.

<sup>5</sup> Refoulé, F. "Tertullien et la philosophie." *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 30, no. 1 (1956): 44.

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, XXIX–XXX.

<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *Against the Jews (Adversus Judaeos)*, XII–XIII. Trans. E.-A. de Genoude. Paris, 1852; Aziza, Claude. "Quelques aspects de la communauté juive de Carthage au II<sup>e</sup> siècle d'après Tertullien." *Revue des études juives* 137, nos. 3–4 (July–December 1978): 491–92.

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, III.



from the farthest provinces to be slaughtered and killed with cold indifference before the eyes of frenzied crowds, clamouring for more bloodshed to satisfy their thirst. He investigates the historical origins of these spectacles to warn members of his community about their association with pagan customs, stating, "Since the origins of the games are obscure and unknown to most of our brethren, that is, the Christians, it has been incumbent upon us to seek them, not in the literary remains of the pagans, for we have many of their authors who have dealt with this subject. The first games were established by Lydians, who settled in Etruria. The Romans adopted the custom of holding games. Even the name given to them, 'ludi,' is derived from Lydians. They were also formerly called the Lupercalian games, as they were celebrated by running here and there." Nevertheless, he links these youthful games to the celebration of specific festivals, the dedication of some pagan temples, or religious motives.<sup>1</sup>

#### **The Circus (Amphitheatre):**

With respect to circus games, Tertullian saw an opportunity for the consecration of pagan deity worship. The use of horses, which in the past had been simple and common to all, was once free of any wrongdoing, but once it became associated with the celebration of the games, divine gifts became an instrument of demons. Thus, the credit for this new invention is attributed to Castor and Pollux, as Stesichorus tells us, to whom Mercury gave horses for this purpose. Next comes Neptune, who dedicated the four-horse chariot to the sun and the two-horse chariot to the moon.<sup>2</sup>

#### **The Theatre (Theatrum):**

Tertullianus regarded theatre as the source of moral and social calamity. According to him, "It is similar to the circus in its origins, its management, and the activities that take place within it, as attested by its original name, Theatrum. Its function differs little, if at all, from that of the Circos. To reach either venue, one must, after leaving the temples, altars, the blood of the victims, and the criminal incense, pass among flutes and trumpets under the supervision of the priest and the astrologer both infamous officials, one responsible for sacrifices, the other for funerals."<sup>3</sup>

The bishop of Carthage's warning to Christians against approaching the theatre stemmed from several considerations. First, it was a place of ill repute, frequented by both the Roman aristocracy and the general populace of Carthage, owing to the indecent scenes displayed and the themes portrayed, which glorified pagan deities. Second, for him, the theatre, in the strict sense of the word, was the sanctuary of the goddess Venus. In the past, whenever a new theatre was built, censors often destroyed it to safeguard public morals, aware of the grave danger posed by the licentious performances it hosted. For this reason, after building his theatre, Pompey the Great, fearing censorship, converted the building into a temple and, by decree, summoned all citizens to dedicate what he called not a theatre but a temple of Venus. He added, "We have added a few steps for performances." In this way, under the guise of a temple, he concealed a building that was condemned by moral standards, thereby contravening the law by hiding behind spurious religious pretexts.<sup>4</sup>

The theatrical performances staged in the theatres of Carthage, attended by large crowds from all segments of the city's population, were, according to Tertullianus,<sup>5</sup> tainted with pagan beliefs and inspired by Greek theatre, which he characterised as theistic. For this reason, he deemed them prohibited, particularly as they represented, in his view, one of the most effective means of introducing idolatry into the world: alienating people from their Creator and binding them to the worship of such idols. Furthermore, these performances encouraged marital infidelity, inciting husbands and wives alike to follow their desires and passions and to take lovers and paramors. This, in turn, threatens the cohesion of family ties, leading to the disintegration of society and the spread of depravity and moral corruption.<sup>6</sup>

#### **The gymnasium (Gymnasia):**

The gymnasia sports halls of Carthage, which were numerous, did not escape Tertullianus's criticism. Although he was not opposed to the principle of engaging in physical exercise, as it did not conflict with his religion, he objected to how these activities were conducted and the way athletic competitions were organised. Perhaps unintentionally, he reveals many details about sporting activities that are not typically depicted in mosaics. He noted, "These games share nearly the same origins as the other games. They are divided into funeral games and sacred games; the former are dedicated to the dead, whereas the latter are dedicated to the

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., V–VIII.

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, IX.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., X.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., X–XI.

<sup>5</sup> Adhémar D'Alès. "Tertullien helléniste." *Revue des Études Grecques* 50, nos. 236–237 (July–September 1937): 333.

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, X.

gods of the nation. Hence, their pagan designations: the Olympic games are held in honour of Jupiter and are called the 'Capitoline Games' in Rome. Apollo has his 'Pythian' games; Hercules, the 'Nemean'; and Neptune, the 'Isthmian'.<sup>1</sup> The others are celebrated in the commemoration of the dead. It is hardly surprising, then, that the worship of idols should contaminate the spirit of these games, which are presided over by high priests and attended by priests sent by their respective congregations to represent them. Finally, the blood of consecrated victims flows abundantly to inaugurate the games. To complete the picture of this venue, as in the circus or theatre, troupes of flute players dedicated to Minerva, Apollo, and the Muses perform, accompanied by groups of young men and women devoted to Mars, with the sound of trumpets stirring enthusiasm among the competitors in an arena that is itself a temple. Notably, Castor, Hercules, and Mercury were regarded as the inventors of wrestling. Moreover, athletes customarily practised or competed entirely naked, which constituted, in Tertullianus's view, an affront to morality and to the sanctity of the human body, which the Lord had commanded to be preserved.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Glatorial Contests:**

The scenes of gladiators fighting one another or wild beasts constituted the most popular form of entertainment addressed by Tertullianus in his era. His stance towards these spectacles was marked by vehement opposition, owing to their bloodiness and disregard for human life, even if that life was not Christian. He discussed their original purpose, namely, that human blood was believed to appease the souls of the dead.<sup>3</sup> He also identified the sources of the individuals who were slaughtered in these contests, noting that they were captives or unworthy slaves purchased for this purpose. He described how they were trained in the use of weapons and in killing each other. Tertullianus spoke at length about the administrative apparatus of the cities composed of notables and municipal officials such as judges, treasurers, high priests, and clerics, who organised contests and oversaw the honour of victorious gladiators with purple garments, linen robes, crowns, and acclamations, as well as the banquets and festivities held on the eve of the games.<sup>4</sup>

Tertullian regarded these contests as the height of moral and social decadence and as evidence of the inhumanity prevalent among Roman society in Carthage during the second and third centuries AD. Everyone was complicit in them, whether the authorities and their administrative apparatus or the population, who encouraged them by their attendance and their constant demands for more human victims to be thrown into the arena. Thus, he insisted that such spectacles must be brought to an end and that Christians guard their mouths and stomachs against consuming forbidden meat.<sup>5</sup> should all the more guard their eyes and ears, their noblest faculties, from all such pleasures and impure scenes dedicated to the dead and pagan deities.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, regarding these games and drawing on his background as a former lawyer before his conversion, Tertullianus sharply criticised the Roman legal system, highlighting, even in the form of a scathing attack, its standards for determining who would be condemned to death in the arena and who merited a less severe, more humane punishment. He also denounced its tendency, whether due to a judge's vengeance, a lawyer's negligence, or protracted legal proceedings, to equate the innocent, sentenced for minor infractions, with those guilty of serious crimes, subjecting both to the same punishments by transforming them into hardened killers or by casting them to the gladiators and wild beasts in the arena to satisfy the crowd's pleasure, instead of imprisoning them and seeking their reformation.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4.4. The Issue of Women's Adornment and Veiling**

Tertullianus addressed another important matter concerning women's adornment, dress, and display of beauty. He authored a two-part work between 197 and 201 AD entitled "On the Adornment of Women,"<sup>8</sup> The principal message of this was to call upon women to refrain from wearing jewellery and precious ornaments and to forbid them from using cosmetics, as this constituted an alteration of the image in which the Lord had created them and a violation of divine nature.<sup>9</sup>

Many sacred authors have insisted upon the danger that women pose to men. The malice of a man is preferable to the kindness of a woman. Moreover, in specific passages of both the Old Testament and the New

<sup>1</sup> Vermander, Jean-Marie. "La polémique de Tertullien contre les dieux du paganisme." *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 53, no. 2 (1979): 114–15.

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, XI.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, XII.

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, XIII.

<sup>5</sup> Munier, Ch., loc. cit., 176.

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, XI.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, XIX.

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *On the Adornment of Women (De cultu feminarum)*, I and II. Trans. M. Charpentier. Paris, 1844.

<sup>9</sup> Fredouille, J.-C. "Sur la genèse et la composition du *De cultu feminarum* de Tertullien." *Vita Latina*, no. 121 (1991): 37.

Testament, a woman is indeed presented as the primary agent responsible for the moral downfall of society. Woman is the origin of sin, and because of her, we all die, as one Antiochian bishop observes. Nevertheless, nowhere in the scriptures is it indicated that a woman should be restricted to no activity other than raising the next generation. Furthermore, in numerous passages from both testaments, women are also generally depicted as dangerous, historically culpable, and existentially inferior.<sup>1</sup>

The consequences reached by many sacred authors on the basis of these considerations are exceedingly grave. Convincing of the danger inherent in a man's company with a woman, they not only demanded that women exercise the utmost reserve but also advised men to adopt the greatest caution. They recommended that a man never fall in love with a woman, should avert his gaze from a beautiful woman, and should never sit near a married woman.<sup>2</sup>

Tertullianus was even more stringent in his demands upon women than Paul himself, who, although he fully agreed with him on the necessity of urging women towards chastity, did not go so far as to advise them to avoid physical intimacy even with their husbands. While Paul requested that women "dress modestly, adorning themselves with propriety and chastity; not with braided hair, or gold or pearls or expensive clothing, but with good works and piety," he did not, as Tertullianus did go so far as to recommend that women wear mourning attire or, in the case of young girls, don a long veil reaching the waist upon reaching puberty, in addition to growing their hair long.<sup>3</sup>

How can we explain that Tertullianus, in the rigour of his demands upon women, went further than the sacred texts he cited and beyond most Christians and Jews of his time, even though the evolution of pagan society could have led him in the opposite direction? His stance cannot be fully understood without considering other factors and the specific problems he encountered. Perhaps he would not have exerted such effort to induce feelings of guilt in women had he not himself felt remorse in committing adultery. He would not have judged them so harshly or felt such a need to diminish their allure by requiring so many precautions had he not adopted an ideal of sexual chastity that far exceeded even the strictest commandments of the New Testament and wished to impose it even on those who had not received the gift, even those who preferred marriage or were already married.<sup>4</sup>

Tertullianus would not have been so concerned with making women feel guilty and restraining them had he not been afraid of them himself, remaining torn between attraction and mistrust. However, without knowing more about his personal history, we cannot explain more clearly why his reactions were so intense and why he reached such an extreme rejection of femininity and sexuality. Unsurprisingly, a man's thinking is shaped by his own experiences. However, in the case of someone such as Tertullianus, this is a result of his fervour and his talent for defending his convictions, which, despite their severity, lent considerable support to misogynistic prejudices that, even when not as extreme as his own long dominated the West and caused much suffering, almost up to the present day. Aside from Bishop Ambrosius, few in the Church would be fairer towards women. In the fourth century, Petrus Chrisologus, Archbishop of Ravenna, did not hesitate to say: "Brethren, woman is the cause of evil, the way of death, the gravestone, the gate of hell," in some way echoing Tertullianus's phrase: "Tu es diaboli ianua," that is, "You are the gateway of the devil."<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusions.

In conclusion, this study, which sought to trace certain aspects of Roman society in the city of Carthage through the writings of the Carthaginian bishop Tertullianus during his lifetime, revealed that this cleric actively engaged with the issues of his era and society. He adopted distinct positions on these matters as a Christian leader, defending his faith and doctrine while combating all social phenomena that conflict with them. Nevertheless, several other aspects of society addressed by our bishop have not been covered here owing to time constraints. They may serve as the subject of independent studies in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Rambaux, ©. "Le jugement de Tertullien sur les femmes." *Vita Latina*, no. 122 (1991): 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *De l'ornement des femmes*, I.2.

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, *De l'ornement des femmes*, I.1–2.

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