

Circumcellions

By Chance Bonar, Harvard University

Entry tags: Religious Group, African Religions, Christian Traditions, Early Christianity, Ancient Mediterranean, Monasticism

The Circumcellions (sometimes called Agonistici) are a subgroup of Donatists in northern Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. In general, Donatists are remembered for their rigorous stance on Christian clergy's baptismal and ethical practices, particularly in the wake of persecution, in order for their ministry and sacraments to be deemed valid. Donatists, including Circumcellions were primarily active around Carthage and spread throughout the broader North African province of the Christianized Roman Empire. This group believed, in the wake of Diocletian's persecution of Christians, that those who denied Jesus's lordship or repudiated Christian scriptures by handing them over to Roman authorities had given up the ability to function as leaders within North African Christian communities. Augustine, Optatus, and Filastrius of Brescia comment on the Circumcellions as a more radical branch of Donatist thought and practice emerging from Numidia that were characterized by their opponents as being rural hooligans, local mobs, and inciters of violence. They first appear in written record in the early fourth century in Numidia, and seemed to have been a more vocal subgroup within Donatist thought regarding the importance of changing the material circumstances of Christians. They particularly took violent action against traffickers of enslaved people and local landlords. They are often remembered (sometimes incorrectly or polemically) for seeking out martyrdom through violence, and for provoking soldiers, travelers, and courts to hasten their death -- all of which complicated late ancient Christian discussions of what types of martyrdom were acceptable. Unfortunately, much of what is known about the Circumcellions comes via the writings of those who saw them as a threat, so it is difficult to tease out what is rhetorical and what is historical reality about the group. Additionally, Circumcellions were primarily rural Donatist Christians who took aim at urban Catholic Christians, providing evidence that some Christian beliefs and practices were split along geographic and demographic lines. Because of their rural center, Circumcellions were remembered as comparable to bandits and highwaymen because of how they purportedly harassed urban travelers and soldiers across North Africa. By the seventh century, the Circumcellions' reputation spread such that their name was associated with non-North African clerics whose opponents wanted to label them as dangerous.



Date Range: 315 CE - 500 CE

Region: Peregrine_NorthAfricanProtoHistoric

Region tags: Africa, Northern Africa

From Peter N. Peregrine's Encyclopedia of Prehistory.

Status of Participants:

- ✓ Religious Specialists
- ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Leslie Dossey, *Peasant and Empire in Christian North Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).
- Source 2: Raul Serrano Madronal, *Los circunceliones: fanatismo religioso y descontento social en el African tardorromana* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2020).

– Source 3: Paul Schulten, *De circumcellionen: een sociaal-religieuze beweging in de late oudheid* (Scheveningen: Edauw & Johannissen B.V., 1984).

Online sources for understanding this subject:

– Source 1 URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Circumcelliones>

– Source 1 Description: Britannica entry on the Circumcellions

– Source 2 URL: <https://www.princeton.edu/~pswpc/pdfs/shaw/020603.pdf>

– Source 2 Description: A pre-print publication of Brent Shaw's work on the fictive accusations of violence attached to Circumcellions

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes



Is the cultural contact competitive:

– Yes

Notes: Catholics, particularly in North Africa, understood themselves to be in direct competition with Circumcellions and other Donatists. Optatus even writes a treatise called *Against the Donatists* that attempts to highlight differences between his group and other North African Christians in rural areas that he disagrees with.



Is the cultural contact accommodating/pluralistic:

– No



Is the cultural contact neutral:

– No



Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

– Yes

Notes: There is some evidence of Circumcellions using force to emancipate enslaved people and harass urban Catholic Christians as they travel through rural areas, and Catholic polemical writings against them argue heavily for their insanity and bloodlust. While some of this rhetoric is exaggerated, there is good reason to believe that some Circumcellions were involved in violent disruption of North African urban practices of enslavement, as well as had physical contact with some opponents.



Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It is unclear how far Circumcellion influence spread from the 5th century CE onward, and so little can be said about their spread into other areas of the Mediterranean. However, their infamy did spread onto the European continent in the early middle ages.

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

– Yes

↳ Assigned at birth (membership is default for this society):

– No

↳ Assigned by personal choice:

– Yes

Notes: Like many other Christian groups in late antiquity, membership is assigned through baptism and a longer process of catechesis in order to prepare the person for inclusion within the group. Likewise, participation in sacraments like the eucharist was expected.

↳ Assigned by class:

– No

Notes: While not class-based, there is a heavier rural population counted among the Circumcellions.

↳ Assigned at a specific age:

– No

↳ Assigned by gender:

– No

↳ Assigned by participation in a particular ritual:

– Yes

Notes: As noted, baptism and other Christian communal practices like the eucharist are treated as central to Circumcellion membership. Some polemicists also claim that a desire to be martyred is another defining feature and ritual that Circumcellions are encouraged to seek out and accomplish.

↳ Assigned by some other factor:

– No

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

– Yes

Notes: Proselytization for Circumcellions does not appear to be coercive or required, but is part of their general practice of convincing other rural North African Christians to join their cause and actively disrupt the actions of their urban opponents. See Harold A. Drake, "Monotheism and Violence," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6.2 (2013): 251-263 on the use of violence among Circumcellions and other North African Christians in the fourth century CE, as well as on tactics to convince Christians to join the Circumcellion cause.

↳ Is proselytizing mandated for religious professionals:

– No

↳ Is proselytizing mandated for all adherents:

– No

↳ Is missionary work mandated for religious professionals:

– No

↳ Is missionary work mandated for all adherents:

– No

↳ Is proselytization coercive:

– No

Does the religion have official political support

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There is not official support from Catholic religio-political structures, but some Donatist institutions and prominent figures seem to support their group.

Is there a conception of apostasy in the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: There appears to be a concept among Circumcellions of heightened expectations of group members and more rigorous standards of inclusion than their Catholic counterparts.

↳ Are apostates prosecuted or punished:

– Field doesn't know

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population,

numerical):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Those within the field would estimate between a few hundred to a few thousand, but the fact that only polemical accounts against them have survived and that they were primarily rural makes it difficult to ascertain. The only scholar to venture a guess at population has been Paul Schulten, *De Circumcellionen: een sociaal-religieuze beweging in de late oudheid* (Scheveningen: Edauw & Johannissen, 1984), based on the estimated population of major cities like Carthage and estimated conversion rates in fourth-century Egypt.

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (% of sample region population, numerical):

– Field doesn't know

Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also “oral scriptures” (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– Yes

↳ Are they written:

– Yes

↳ Are they oral:

– No

↳ Is there a story (or a set of stories) associated with the origin of scripture:

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellions share similar scriptural collections with other North African Christians, which include many texts that are now part of the Bible, as well as apocrypha and martyrdom narratives that circulated. An example offered by Jennifer Glancy (*Slavery as a Moral Problem: In the Early Church and Today* [Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2011]) is that Circumcellions may have read Galatians 3:28 (“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”) as a calling for post-baptismal manumission of enslaved Christians. As such, the call to be one in Christ before the second coming could be imagined as being partially enacted through helping other Christians fulfill what post-baptismal life ought to look like.

↳ Revealed by a high god:

– Yes

- ↳ Revealed by other supernatural being:
 - Yes
- ↳ Inspired by high god:
 - Yes
- ↳ Inspired by other supernatural being:
 - No
- ↳ Originated from divine or semi-divine human beings:
 - No
- ↳ Originated from non-divine human being:
 - Yes

Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– No

Notes: Particularly given that this is a mostly rural movement, there are little to no known architectural projects associated with them.

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– No

Is iconography present:

– Yes

Notes: Given the rise of the cult of the saints in Egypt, Asia Minor, and North Africa in the 4th and 5th centuries CE, we know that other Donatist Christians are involved in producing saint shrines that may have had iconography. Circumcellions and their association with martyrdom makes it likely that they participated in local shrines for martyrs.

- ↳ Where is iconography present [select all that apply]:
 - Only religious public space

- ↳ Are there distinct features in the religious group's iconography:
 - No

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer “no” only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Yes

Notes: Like many other late ancient Christians, Circumcellions held that the soul was distinct from other aspects of the body and was capable of existing beyond the body. This is particularly relevant for their conception of martyrdom and death as leading the soul to heaven.

↳ Spirit-mind is conceived of as having qualitatively different powers or properties than other body parts:

– Yes

↳ Spirit-mind is conceived of as non-material, ontologically distinct from body:

– Yes

↳ Other spirit-body relationship:

– No

Belief in afterlife:

– Yes

Reincarnation in this world:

– No

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Beyond typical late ancient North African Christian burial practices, it is unclear if Circumcellions performed any additional rituals or concerned themselves with corpses differently if they had achieved martyrdom. North African Christians more broadly produced cemeteries and cemeterial churches from the third century CE onward, often having various associations that tended to burial sites, visitations and meals at cemeteries on particular days of mourning or celebration, and likely some burgeoning traditions around martyrs whose graves would function as shrines for intercession, storytelling, and gathering. See Stephen E. Potthoff, *The Afterlife in Early Christian Carthage: Near-Death Experiences, Ancestor Cult, and the Archaeology of Paradise* (Taylor & Francis, 2016), ch. 5-6; David L. Stone and Lea M. Stirling, eds., *Mortuary Landscapes of North Africa* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

– No

Are grave goods present:

– No

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

↳ As cenotaphs:

– No

↳ In cemetery:

– Yes

Notes: Late ancient North Africa, particularly when a Roman province, is well known for its mausoleum burial culture and production of elaborate ways to house the dead.

↳ Family tomb-crypt:

– Yes

↳ Domestic (individuals interred beneath house, or in areas used for normal domestic activities):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Recent research on urban burial practices in North Africa has demonstrated the commonality of burials below houses, churches, and other buildings. However, given the rural population of Circumcellions, it is unclear how many would participate in such a practice.

↳ Other formal burial type:

– No

Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

↳ A supreme high god is present:

– Yes

- ↳ The supreme high god is anthropomorphic:
– Yes
Notes: The anthropomorphism of God's body was debated by both Christian and pagan intellectuals, particularly from the third century CE onward -- best exemplified by writers like Plotinus and so-called "Gnostic" Christians in Egypt influenced by Alexandrian philosophy. However, Circumcellions were seemingly not part of this mostly urban theological debate.
- ↳ The supreme high god is a sky deity:
– Yes
- ↳ The supreme high god is chthonic (of the underworld):
– No
- ↳ The supreme high god is fused with the monarch (king=high god):
– No
- ↳ The monarch is seen as a manifestation or emanation of the high god:
– No
- ↳ The supreme high god is a kin relation to elites:
– No
- ↳ The supreme high god has another type of loyalty-connection to elites:
– No
- ↳ The supreme high god is unquestionably good:
– Yes
Notes: Circumcellions's own rigorist stance influences how they approach God's goodness, seemingly understanding God as breaking down traditional hierarchies between the (mostly urban) elite and others. This differed from contemporaneous rabbinic treatment of God, which was capable of taking a more skeptical stance regarding God's goodness because of the loss of land, autonomy, and hegemony for Jewish people in the Mediterranean (e.g. see Lamentations Rabbah). Circumcellions, on the other hand, seem to have viewed Christian scriptural texts and Jesus's teachings as indicators of God's goodness and eschatological plans of renewal for the world -- particularly for the poor and enslaved.
- ↳ Other feature(s) of supreme high god:
– No

↳ The supreme high god has knowledge of this world:

– Yes

↳ The supreme god's knowledge is restricted to particular domain of human affairs:

– No

Notes: Like with many other late ancient Christians, the Circumcellion God is conceptualized as universal in scope and knowledgeable about all human affairs.

↳ The supreme high god's knowledge is restricted to (a) specific area(s) within the sample region:

– No

↳ The supreme high god's knowledge is unrestricted within the sample region:

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god's knowledge is unrestricted outside of sample region:

– Yes

Notes: The God of Circumcellions is conceptualized as the God of Israel who rules over other deities (of various non-Jewish people), and whose power and influence extend throughout the world.

↳ The supreme high god can see you everywhere normally visible (in public):

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god can see you everywhere (in the dark, at home):

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god can see inside heart/mind (hidden motives):

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god knows your basic character (personal essence):

– Yes

Notes: As a branch of Donatist thought, Circumcellions understand God to know human motives and essence, and so expect that those internal characteristics are reflected through the ethics and practice of Christian clergy.

↳ The supreme high god knows what will happen to you, what you will do (future sight):

– Yes

Notes: Particularly given the Circumcellion understanding of God's punishment for those who too quickly (by their standards) renounced their faith in the face of persecution, they share an understanding that very few of the so-called "traditores" will escape future punishment held against them. God's knowledge about the future circumstances of both Circumcellions and their opponents is thought to be able to be discovered through proper reading of scriptural texts and sacramental life.

↳ The supreme high god has other knowledge of this world:

– No

↳ The supreme high god has deliberate causal efficacy in the world:

– Yes

Notes: While the deity is primarily understood as an entity that rewards and punishes after death, there is some conception of acting in the world before this time through Jesus's incarnation.

↳ The supreme high god can reward:

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god can punish:

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god has indirect causal efficacy in the world:

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god exhibits positive emotion:

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god exhibits negative emotion:

– Yes

Notes: While God expresses emotions like anger, often they are conceptualized as justified or righteous, and thus may not be clearly "negative."

↳ The supreme high god possesses hunger:

– No

Notes: A strong polemic against pagans (and a pre-70 CE conception of Jews, when the

Temple still stood in Jerusalem) was that deities that required or appreciated sacrifices must experience hunger -- or at least be wrongly perceived to experience hunger. As such, North African Christians generally believed that deities, particularly God, could not experience hunger.

↳ Is it permissible to worship supernatural beings other than the high god:

– No

Notes: There is a concern within Circumcellion thought with martyrs, who seem to take on an elevated status, but this does not seem to extend to the point of divinization or veneration as a minor deity. This point becomes more complex through late ancient North African Christian history, as angels become saints with shrines who can be celebrated, brought offerings, and be turned to in moments of intercession. The distinction between martyr, angel, and hero becomes more blurred from the fifth century onward. See Charles King, *The Ancient Roman Afterlife: Di Manes, Belief, and the Cult of the Dead* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020).

↳ The supreme high god possesses/exhibits some other feature:

– No

↳ The supreme high god communicates with the living:

– Yes

↳ In waking, everyday life:

– No

↳ In dreams:

– Yes

Notes: Although sometimes condemned by urban elite leaders, there are dream practices or incubation practices within which interaction with the deity can occur.

↳ In trance possession:

– No

↳ Through divination practices:

– Yes

↳ Only through religious specialists:

– No

Notes: Religious specialists in North Africa tended to claim a monopoly on some aspects of interaction with the deity through texts and rituals, but

"magical" practices and other ritual specialists were often sought out as alternatives.

↳ Only through monarch

– No

↳ Other form of communication with living:

– No

↳ Previously human spirits are present:

– No

Notes: This is a point of contention with the burgeoning cult of the saints across the ancient Mediterranean. While most human spirits are not conceptualized as actively interacting with humans after the person dies, some spirits or manifestations of important biblical figures (e.g. Mary the Virgin) or martyrs were conceptualized as being actors in the cosmic sphere who could hear supplications and act before God on a Christian's behalf. It is likely that Circumcellions interacted with some of these early martyr cult practices, although it is unclear how developed this practice was and how active the saints were understood to be.

↳ Non-human supernatural beings are present:

– Yes

↳ These supernatural beings can be seen:

– Yes

Notes: Angels and demons are understood in Circumcellion thought to be visible at times, but occasionally invisible or disguised as humans. See David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of a Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). While Brakke focuses on fourth-century Egypt, such concerns about the spiritual and demonic landscape of the desert in particular was widespread in North Africa.

↳ These supernatural beings can be physically felt:

– Yes

Notes: Particularly in the case of demons, they are understood to be able to be physically violent against humans.

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge of this world:

– Yes

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge restricted to particular domain of human affairs:

– No

Notes: While angels and demons are capable of knowing things about the future or past of North African Christians, this knowledge is usually explained in narratives about demons through either their extreme age (i.e. that they have existed from creation) or that God revealed some aspect of human life and experience to them.

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge restricted to (a) specific area(s) within the sample region:

– No

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge unrestricted within the sample region:

– Yes

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge unrestricted outside of sample region:

– Yes

↳ Non-human supernatural beings can see you everywhere normally visible (in public):

– Yes

↳ Non-human supernatural beings can see you everywhere (in the dark, at home):

– Yes

↳ Non-human supernatural beings can see inside heart/mind (hidden motives):

– Yes

↳ Non-human supernatural beings knows your basic character (personal essence):

– Yes

↳ Non-human supernatural beings know what will happen to you, what you will do (future sight):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There is debate whether angels or demons are conceptualized as having future sight, or are reliant upon God to inform them of future events just like humans. Particularly in the case of intercession or prophetic requests, especially

through entities like the Holy Spirit, some North African Christians believed that future events could be known. See, for example, Tertullian's acceptance in the third century of a Phrygian Christian movement in North Africa known as the New Prophecy (Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1971]).

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have other knowledge of this world:
– No

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:
– Yes

↳ These supernatural beings can reward:
– Yes

↳ These supernatural beings can punish:
– Yes

↳ These supernatural beings have indirect causal efficacy in the world:
– Yes

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit positive emotion:
– Yes

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit negative emotion:
– Yes

Notes: As demons in North Africa were often conceptualized as more materially bound than God (or than angels), they are often understood to experience the passions that the material world is infused with. See Matthew Crawford: "The Hostile Devices of the Demented Demons: Tatian on Astrology and Pharmacology," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 29.1 (2021): 31-60.

↳ These supernatural beings possess hunger:
– Yes

Notes: Demons are conceptualized as requiring sustenance, and are often equated with Greek and Roman deities who consume via sacrifice.

↳ These supernatural beings possess/exhibit some other feature:
– No

↳ Does the religious group possess a variety of supernatural beings:

– Yes

↳ Organized by kinship based on a family model:

– No

Notes: While God's relationship to angels is often not conceived through a kinship model, occasionally the devil's relationship to some demons is.

↳ Organized hierarchically:

– Yes

Notes: There is a clear conception of a hierarchy with God at the top, followed by angels, humans, demons, and the devil.

↳ Power of beings is domain specific:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Other organization for pantheon:

– No

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

– Yes

↳ There is supernatural monitoring of prosocial norm adherence in particular:

Prosocial norms are norms that enhance cooperation among members of the group, including obviously "moral" or "ethical" norms, but also extending to norms concerning honouring contracts and oaths, providing hospitality, coming to mutual aid in emergencies, etc.

– Yes

Notes: There is a shared conception among North African Christians in late antiquity that the deity and their assistants monitor human ritual and ethical action in order to determine future reward and punishment based on those actions and norms.

↳ Supernatural beings care about taboos:

– Yes

Notes: As a subset of Donatism, Circumcellions especially considered the handing over of scriptures to non-Christian Roman authorities (as a form of denying one's faith) or a repudiation of Jesus as taboo to the point that they are called a "traditor" (traitor; one who hands over) who

should not have a substantial leadership role in Christian communities. There is a belief that God is capable of monitoring whether such Christians have betrayed their more rigorous Christian counterparts, and that some who are given sacraments like baptism or the eucharist may be unknowingly or unintentionally at risk of God's disapproval.

↳ Food:

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellions seemed to have held similar food taboos to other North African Christians, particularly regarding meat sacrificed to pagan deities (although this increasingly became less of a problem as the provinces were Christianized and temples became defunct), as well as meats that were strangled or that had blood in them in accordance with the so-called Council of Jerusalem that met in the mid-first century (see Acts 15).

↳ Sacred space(s):

– Yes

Notes: There is an expectation that churches and other shrines (e.g. for martyrs) will be treated with reverence.

↳ Sacred object(s):

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about other:

– No

↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of coreligionists:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of members of other religions:

– Yes

Notes: By the fourth and fifth centuries CE, we see a heightening in anti-Jewish rhetoric in particular and a blaming of the death of Jesus on Jews, which leads to a particular interest in Jewish deaths.

↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of members of other polities:

– No

↳ Supernatural beings care about sex:

– Yes

↳ Adultery:

– Yes

Notes: Late ancient North African Christians were particularly invested in the question of adultery and marriage, and whether one could re-marry at all or if this was considered adulterous.

↳ Incest:

– Yes

↳ Other sexual practices:

– Yes [specify]: Homosexuality

Notes: Like many North African Christians, Circumcellions likely did not approve (and did not believe that God approved) of same-sex relationships. However, given how late ancient Roman imperial conceptions of gender and sexuality differ from the 21st century, it is possible that some Christians had sex with enslaved people of the same sex/gender without seeing this as a contradiction. By the fourth century, Christians further east (John Chrysostom in Antioch and Constantinople; Gregory of Nyssa in Asia Minor) were beginning to question and reformulate Christian treatment of enslaved people. It is also likely that Circumcellions did not approve of pederasty given the Roman laws they inherited that limited and condemned sex with adolescent freeborn males.

↳ Supernatural beings care about lying:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about honouring oaths:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about laziness:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about sorcery:

– Yes

Notes: There is a particular concern and polemic against North African "magicians," healers, and ritual specialists whose abilities overlap with and compete with those of local ecclesiastical leaders. Across the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa (and perhaps best known around Antioch and the Levant), Christians interacted with and contested with others who claimed to heal, provide prophecies, curse opponents, and improve one's life conditions. Such practices are especially well known through curse tablets (defixiones), magical papyri, the predictive practice of bibliomancy (foretelling the future through randomly selected biblical verses), and itinerant healers. Circumcellions, in their defiance of Catholic urban elite and disruption of their lives, were occasionally accused of attempting to materially curse and provide a magical spectacle to draw attention to themselves. See Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: the Religion of Freelance*

Experts in the Early Roman Empire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Shaily Patel, "Notes on Rehabilitating 'Magic' in the Study of Early Christian Literature," Religion Compass 15 (2021), pages n/a.

↳ Supernatural beings care about non-lethal fighting:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about shirking risk:

– Yes

Notes: In the case of Circumcellions and their penchant for seeking out martyrdom, there seems to have been a concern depicted as coming from God about those who shirk the risk of martyrdom -- and thus who do not fully enact their Christianness.

↳ Supernatural beings care about disrespecting elders:

– Yes

Notes: This is particularly the case for elders who also have ecclesiastical or monastic positions, and thus take on a different type of kinship relation with Circumcellions.

↳ Supernatural beings care about gossiping:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about property crimes:

– Yes

Notes: In the case of Circumcellions, it seems that they claimed their deity was concerned with how the wealthy had hoarded their possessions and failed to support the poor, as well as that some urban elites were illegally enslaving free people and attempting to commodify them. While committing "crime" by manumitting such people and attacking their enslavers, they claimed to have been dealing with property crimes as God intended.

↳ Supernatural beings care about proper ritual observance:

– Yes

Notes: As a branch of Donatists, Circumcellions were very concerned that God cared about proper ritual observance, particularly regarding who was performing ritual actions and whether this person was in good standing with God and the community for their ethical stance.

↳ Supernatural beings care about performance of rituals:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about conversion of non-religionists:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about economic fairness:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about personal hygiene:

– No

↳ Supernatural beings care about other:

– No

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– Yes

↳ Is the cause or agent of supernatural punishment known:

– Yes

↳ Done only by high god:

– No

↳ Done by many supernatural beings:

– Yes

↳ Done through impersonal cause-effect principle:

– No

↳ Done by other entities or through other means [specify]

– No

↳ Is the reason for supernatural punishment known:

– Yes

↳ Done to enforce religious ritual-devotional adherence:

– Yes

Notes: There is a conception that divine punishment (e.g. persecution) was one tool by which God urged Christian communities to tighten up their ritual adherence and more properly follow ethical norms set out in biblical literature.

↳ Done to enforce group norms:

– Yes

↳ Done to inhibit selfishness:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Done randomly:

– No

↳ Other [specify]

– No

↳ Supernatural punishments are meted out in the afterlife:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural punishments in the afterlife are highly emphasized by the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellions especially emphasizes the punishments for those who failed to meet their rigorist norms and martyrdom standards in the afterlife.

↳ Punishment in the afterlife consists of mild sensory displeasure:

– No

↳ Punishment in the afterlife consists of extreme sensory displeasure:

– Yes

Notes: Late ancient North African Christian literature often envisions a painful experience of hell, sometimes thought of as a heightened form of Roman imperial forms of punishment and spectacle. See, for example Tertullian of Carthage's *On the Spectacles*, which imagines God in the role of emperor in the amphitheater punishing non-Christians in the afterlife. Also see Meghan Henning, *Hell Hath No Fury: Gender, Disability, and the Invention of Damned Bodies in Early Christian Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

↳ Punishment in the afterlife consists of reincarnation as an inferior life form:

– No

↳ Punishment in the afterlife consists of reincarnation in an inferior realm:

– No

↳ Other [specify]

– No

↳ Supernatural punishments are meted out in this lifetime:

– No

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

– Yes

↳ Is the cause/purpose of supernatural rewards known:

– Yes

↳ Done only by high god:

– No

↳ Done by many supernatural beings:

– Yes

↳ Done through impersonal cause-effect principle:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Done to enforce religious ritual-devotional adherence:

– Yes

Notes: Particularly activities like baptism, eucharist, and martyrdom are conceptualized as causes of rewards in the material world and afterlife.

↳ Done to enforce group norms:

– Yes

↳ Done to inhibit selfishness[]:

– No

↳ Done randomly:

– No

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in the afterlife:

– Yes

Notes: Rewards in the afterlife are the most common expectation, particularly in the case of Circumcellion martyrs who view such a reward as paramount.

↳ Supernatural rewards in the afterlife are highly emphasized by the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: As with punishments, Circumcellions envisioned high praise and reward from God once in heaven for both proper ritual action, supporting the poor, and seeking out martyrdom.

↳ Reward in the afterlife consists of mild sensory pleasure:

– No

↳ Reward in the afterlife consists of extreme sensory pleasure:

– Yes

↳ Reward in the afterlife consists of eternal happiness:

– Yes

↳ Reward in the afterlife consists of reincarnation as a superior life form:

– No

↳ Reward in the afterlife consists of reincarnation in a superior realm:

– No

↳ Other [specify]

– No

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in this lifetime:

– No

Notes: Circumcellions generally think that some aspects of the lives of poor and underprivileged Christians ought to improve after baptism in material ways. Supernatural rewards were so highly emphasized by Circumcellions that their detractors often claimed that they were coercing religious adherents to seek out death at any cost in order to be rewarded by God. Often, martyrdom itself is deemed a "reward in this life" even though one doesn't experience that reward before death.

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present:

– Yes

↳ Is the messiah's whereabouts or time of coming known?

– No

Notes: Shared with many other late ancient Christians, there is an expectation of a second coming of Jesus but no clear timeline.

↳ Is the messiah's purpose known:

– Yes

↳ Messiah is a political figure who restores political rule:

– Yes

Notes: By the time of the Circumcellions, the Messiah is understood to be a figure who will more fully establish the Roman Christian Empire's reign across the world. Texts like the fourth-century Tiburtine Sibyl, a collection of Christian prophecies attributed to one of the Sibyls associated with the Roman world, produced a vision of a final Roman Emperor who would (re)claim the world and eventually hand it over to Jesus at the end of time. The Christianization of the Roman Empire allows for further imaginaries regarding the confluence of religious and imperial power across the Mediterranean.

↳ Messiah is a priestly figure who restores religious traditions:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Other purpose:

– No

Norms and Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellions share basic late ancient Christian social norms around weekly worship and prayer. Circumcellions also are more intricately connected to their own smaller network of Donatists and encouraging caring for the poor in material ways.

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious group:

– Yes

↳ What is the nature of this distinction:

– Strongly present and highlighted

↳ Are specifically moral norms prescribed by the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: There are specific moral expectations around what freedom in Christ ought to materially look like for enslaved people and those who are being financially exploited, for example. Such freedom is thought to extend beyond the Christian Roman Empire's conception of freedom for only some.

↳ Specifically moral norms are implicitly linked to vague metaphysical concepts:

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellions particularly link ethical norms around treatment of one's body and wealth with metaphysical concepts like "salvation" or "damnation."

↳ Specifically moral norms are explicitly linked to vague metaphysical entities:

– Yes

↳ Specifically moral norms are linked to impersonal cosmic order (e.g. karma):

– No

↳ Specifically moral norms are linked in some way to an anthropomorphic being:

– Yes

↳ Specifically moral norms are linked explicitly to commands of anthropomorphic being:

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellion ethical norms are linked not only to commandments given by God through Moses, but also through Jesus and through Paul. Paul's baptismal phrase about being free from the distinctions of male/female, slave/free, and Jew/gentile seems to have impacted this group's ethical norms in particular.

↳ Specifically moral norms are have no special connection to metaphysical:

– No

↳ Moral norms apply to:

– All individuals within society

– All individuals (any time period)

Practices

Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

– No

Notes: While some Circumcellions were monks who were at least nominally celibate, this was not a requirement for the entire group.

Does membership in this religious group require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence):

– No

Notes: Circumcellions certainly upheld a high standard of sexual ethics that may have involves partial abstinence, but this does not seem to be a uniform constraint across all group members.

Does membership in this religious group require castration:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require fasting:

– No

Notes: While fasting is not required, there are moments in the year where fasting may be deemed appropriate -- particularly along with prayer if the necessity to repent for an immoral action arises, and one needs to fast in order to be more fully reinstated in the community.

Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of property/valuable items:

– Yes

Notes: There is a general expectation that the super-wealthy will redistribute their wealth within Circumcellion thought (or else that wealth will be forcefully taken and distributed). However, one is not required to give up all property upon joining.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of time (e.g., attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.):

– Yes

Notes: There is a general expectation to attend weekly church services, as well as other services of prayer or holidays throughout the year.

Does membership in this religious group require physical risk taking:

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellions were well known (and sometimes polemically characterized as insane) for risking their lives in disrupting the lives of non-Donatist Christian urban elites and rich people through stealing their possessions or aggravating them to the point of martyrdom.

Does membership in this religious group require accepting ethical precepts:

– Yes

Does membership in this religious group require marginalization by out-group members:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It is unclear what type of domestic rituals would be expected, but prayer within one's own home and potentially small reading circles for scripture and its interpretation were common in late ancient North Africa.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

I.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale “ceremonies” and “festivals.”

– Yes

Notes: As noted above, by the mid-fourth century Christians across the Mediterranean began to interact more closely with the remains of martyrs, leading to large-scale festivals on the anniversary of their birth or death. Given their penchant for martyrdom, it is likely that Circumcellions were part of this burgeoning movement toward relic collection and remembrance in North Africa, and participated in celebrations of martyrs' lives that involved dining at their tomb and having a crowd listen to a recollection of their martyrdom. See Robert Wisniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Susan Stevens and Jonathan P. Conant, *North Africa Under Byzantium and Early Islam* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2016).

↳ On average, for large-scale rituals how many participants gather in one location:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Likely somewhere between a couple dozen to a few hundred would gather for a large-scale festival or ritual.

↳ What is the average interval of time between performances (in hours):

Performances here refers to large-scale rituals.

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are there orthodoxy checks:

Orthodoxy checks are mechanisms used to ensure that rituals are interpreted in a standardized way, e.g. through the supervisory prominence of a professionalized priesthood or other system of governance, appeal to texts detailing the proper interpretation, etc.

– Yes

Notes: Appeal to particular Christian creeds, particularly about Jesus's humanity and divinity, would be used to check on one's stance.

↳ Are there orthopraxy checks:

Orthopraxy checks are mechanisms used to ensure that rituals are performed in a standardized way, e.g. through the supervisory prominence of a professionalized priesthood or other system of governance, appeal to texts detailing the proper procedure, etc.

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellions were infamous for their concern over orthopraxy and its relation to orthodoxy, particularly in the aftermath of Christian persecution. They believed with other Donatists that clergy who failed to live up to a particular ethical standard and uphold a shared set of theological commitments should not perform particular rituals.

↳ Does participation entail synchronic practices:

– Yes

Notes: Church services, prayer, and public Christian holidays (e.g. Easter) were done synchronously.

↳ Is there use of intoxicants:

– No

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present:

E.g. special changes to appearance such as circumcision, tattoos, scarification, etc.

– No

Does the group employ fictive kinship terminology:

– Yes

↳ Fictive kinship terminology universal:

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellions understood themselves to be siblings in Christ, but also produced particular layers of such kin membership that allowed for closer connections with each other than with other Christians -- particularly those that they deemed beyond correct ritual and ethical practice.

↳ Fictive kinship terminology widespread:

– Yes

↳ Fictive kinship terminology employed but uncommon:

– No

Society and Institutions

Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

– A tribe

Notes: While polemically characterized as almost anarchically egalitarian, Circumcellions still had clergy and hierarchical leadership positions that determined what ethical, ritual, and martyrdom practices ought to be encouraged. Augustine and Optatus regard Circumcellions as discombobulated, dispersed, and hidden from plain sight in rural communities -- leading to the presumption that they have no "true" leadership like urban Catholics did. However, rural North African congregations could be led by Donatist and Circumcellion priests, and Circumcellions' concern for the correct form of baptismal and eucharistic practice by community leaders also attest to their concern for a hierarchical structure. While a relatively small group compared to Carthaginian Catholics, their rural, dispersed geographical situation and smaller-scale leadership are perhaps best described as a series of associated tribes.

Welfare

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized famine relief:

– No

Notes: While their approach to famine relief is not institutional, they are critical of the failure of other Christian groups to fully care for the poor and institutionalize such relief.

Is famine relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: There are some avenues in late ancient North Africa for famine relief through Catholic churches, particularly in Carthage.

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized poverty relief:

– No

Notes: Like with famine relief, poverty relief is provided on an ad hoc basis depending on what could be commandeered, distributed, or donated from the wealthy in Circumcellion circles.

Is poverty relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm:

– No

Is institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Notes: Some local monasteries likely cared for the sick, and some may have had a substantial amount of Circumcellions, but this is not highly institutionalized.

Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:

– No

Is formal education available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: Particularly schools in urban areas (and some local monasteries) were capable of providing formalized education. Often such an education was built upon Roman imperial standards, and was

most accessible to the urban elite. Others would receive basic education at home from their own parents.

Bureaucracy

Do the group's adherents interact with a formal bureaucracy within their group:

– No

Do the group's adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellions interact not only with other Catholic clergy in the region, but also with legal courts and bureaucratic officials -- particularly in moments where provoked martyrdom is at stake for one of their members.

Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– No

Is public food storage provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: In rural areas around the Circumcellions, most people would be subsistence farmers. However, rural and quasi-urban monasteries would have a supply of food stored for moments of crisis.

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):

– No

Is water management provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

– No

Is transportation infrastructure provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Roman imperial and Christian Roman imperial officials had produced roads between cities that were utilized by Circumcellions, and are often characterized as the places where they would attack

Catholic elites and enslavers.

Taxation

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

– No

Are taxes levied on the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Like other inhabitants of the Christian Roman Empire, Circumcellions were taxed by imperial officials. However, such taxation was often seen as excessive and not providing enough in return for Circumcellions.

Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

– No

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized police force provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

– No

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Particularly in moments of seeking out martyrdom, Circumcellions interact with local (often urban) judges and magistrates. These figures are often Catholic.

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– No

Are the group's adherents subject to institutionalized punishment enforced by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Institutionalized punishment from an imperial urban center often involved incarceration,

corporal punishment, and potentially death.

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include execution:

– Yes

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include exile:

– Yes

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include corporal punishments:

– Yes

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include ostracism:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Do the institutionalized punishments include seizure of property:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– No

Are the group's adherents subject to a formal legal code provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Like other inhabitants of the Roman Empire, Circumcellions were subject to Roman imperial law -- which often led to the type of conflict they experienced, based on the overwhelming Catholic presence in imperial legal structures.

Warfare

Does religious group in question possess an institutionalized military:

– No

Do the group's adherents participate in an institutionalized military provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It is likely that some Circumcellions participated in the Roman imperial military, but the extent to which is unknown.

Are the group's adherents protected by or subject to an institutionalized military provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellions were subject to local North African soldiers within the Roman imperial structure, particularly if facing capital punishment.

Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– No

Is a non-religion-specific written language available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Like many late ancient North Africans, Latin was the primary language of communication and writing. However, it is possible that some also used Greek, particularly if interacting with Egyptian neighbors through trade networks.

Is a non-religion-specific written language used by the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Calendar

Does the religious group in question possess a formal calendar:

– Yes

Notes: Circumcellions shared a religious/liturgical calendar with other late ancient Christians that noted particular holidays (e.g. Easter), feast days, and perhaps some celebrations of martyrs.

Is a formal calendar provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It is likely that most Circumcellions were subsistence-based consumers, particularly in rural areas. However, there may be some sharing of resources within the community, or purchasing food from local markets.

Is food provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know