The Power of Saints and the Power of Nature in the North African Accounts of Martyrdoms

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ABSTRACT

The North African martyr stories, especially the earlier ones, rarely mention miraculous elements. However, when they do appear, they are often connected with elements of nature or animals. The bodies of the Donatist martyrs Isaac and Maximianus are returned by the sea; the body of another, Marculus, is preserved from the effects of a fall; the fire meant to consume Lucius and Montanus is extinguished; and beasts do not want to attack the virgin girls. This paper analyses these stories.

Peter Brown wrote his classic book on the cult of saints in 1981. In the preface to the 2014 edition, he acknowledged the points on which his opinion had changed since its initial publication. One such point was his earlier understanding that late antique Christians divided the world into celestial and earthly spheres that were distinctive and sharply separated. The exceptionality of holy men, on this account, would empower Christians to raise themselves to the celestial sphere, leaving earthly concerns behind. Brown notes that his opinion about this had changed, declaring that he came to better understand how the cult of saints 'continued to suffuse the world of nature with numinous energies.' The saints 'were deeply immanent presences. Their touch caused human bodies to regain their original, natural integrity. The heavy scent of paradise wafted from their tombs. Great trees planted beside their tombs blossomed.'

In this paper, I would like to show how the saints were understood to interact with the powers of nature in the accounts of martyrdoms coming from North Africa. The source material may not be very rich, but it still allows for interesting conclusions.² It can now be more easily consulted,

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¹ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity. Enlarged edition* (Chicago, 2015), xxviii-xxx.

² To my knowledge, the topic has not been extensively studied before. Some sketchy remarks were made by Maureen A. Tilley, 'Martyrs, Monks, Insects, and Animals', in Joyce E. Salisbury (ed.), *The Medieval World of Nature. A Book of Essays* (New York, London, 1993), 93-107. A study of literary formulae concerning nature-related miracles in the lives of the Greek Byzantine saints was made by Thomas Pratsch, *Der hagiographische Topos. Griechische Heiligenviten in mittel-byzantinischer Zeit* (Berlin, New York, 2005), 270-89.

thanks to the Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity online database,³ in the creation of which I have had the honour to participate, and also to the new edition of the acts of the African military martyrs by Juri Leoni for the *Sources Chrétiennes* series.⁴

1. Nature's mercy

1.1. Lenient animals

In *The Martyrdom of Perpetua*, a text from the beginning of the third century, we are confronted with the horror of condemning victims *ad bestias*. However, even here, there are some glimpses of the animals respecting the martyrs. For example, when one of the Christians, Saturus, was presented to a wild boar, the animal attacked a gladiator instead; then the bear did not want to leave its cave to meet Saturus, and the martyr was eventually finished by a leopard. This was in accord with the strange preference expressed earlier by Saturus himself.⁶

The best example of animals not only respecting the martyrs, but actively defending them, comes from Asia Minor, from the apocryphal *Acts of Paul*, in which a lioness defends Thecla from the other animals. A parallel case may be observed in the African text, *The Martyrdom of Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda*, which describes how the proconsul Anullinus (the favourite *bête-noire* of the majority of the African martyr stories) brought the three girls to the amphitheatre and gave them over to a ferocious bear that had not eaten for two or three days. However, the expected effect did not occur:

Before the bear had approached the holy Maxima, Donatilla began to say to it, "Do what was commanded of you, don't be afraid." And immediately the bear roared and Maxima understood its roar; and the beast licked her feet and sent the virgins of God away unharmed.

- 3 http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk/
- ⁴ Actes et passions des martyrs militaires africains, ed. Juri Leoni, SCh 609 (Paris, 2020). For the most recent and extensive discussion of the North African martyrology see Sabine Fialon, Mens immobilis. Recherches sur le corpus latin des actes et des passions d'Afrique romaine (II^e-VI^e siècles) (Paris, 2018).
- ⁵ It is the most ancient of the texts consecrated to the martyrdom of Perpetua and her companions. See the discussion by Efthymios Rizos in CSLA.E01666 (the number refers to the Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity database).
- ⁶ Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis 19, ed. L. Stephanie Cobb, The 'Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas' in Late Antiquity (Oakland, 2021), 36. The animals in the martyr stories are only episodically treated in the book, which deals mainly with the later periods: Dominic Alexander, The Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages (Woodbridge, 2008).
- ⁷ Acta Pauli et Theclae 33, ed. Richard Lipsius, Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha (Leipzig, 1891), 1, 258-9.

Consequently, the proconsul had to order the girls to be beheaded.⁸

The Martyrdom of Marciana, a text probably from the fifth century, describes how the saint was exposed to the beasts. The first of them, a lion, however, did not even want to touch her:

The devout virgin of Christ was bound to the stake, and the most ferocious lion was released. He came with great impetus, with straight paws towards the breast of the girl; he smelled the holy body of the martyr, and he did not further touch her.⁹

Yet, even in this story, not all animals prove to be so benevolent. After the failure of the lion, a bull and later a leopard were dispatched against Marciana. The former injured her, and the latter killed her.

1.2. The merciful rain

The Martyrdom of Marciana, in all probability a late literary text, is an 'epic passion', according to the classification of Hippolyte Delehaye. ¹⁰ The Martyrdom of Lucius and Montanus, however, is a 'historical passion', an account probably written in the third century, not more than a few decades after the events it described. Unlike other African passions from that period, which are devoid of the miraculous, this one contains a significant episode showing the elements having mercy on the martyrs as the fire which was prepared for their death was miraculously extinguished by rain:

We were constant in our prayers, with all trust, and immediately we obtained what we were asking for. When the fire had just been lit to destroy our bodies, it went out, and the flames of the blazing ovens were put to sleep by the Lord's dew. It was not difficult for the believers to link these new miracles to old examples, as the Lord promised in His Spirit, and He who worked that glory for the Three Youths was victorious with us.¹¹

- ⁸ Passio Maximae, Donatillae et Secundae 6, ed. C. De Smedt, 'Passiones tres martyrum Africanorum: ss. Maximae, Donatillae et Secundae, s. Typasii veterani et s. Fabii vexilleferi', *AB* 9 (1890), 107-34. See CSLA.E07491.
- ⁹ Passio Marcianae (BHL 5257-9) 5,4: Ligatur ad stipitem deuota Christi uirgo, et dimissus est ferocissimus leo, qui cum magno impetu ueniens erectis manibus in pectus puellae sanctum corpus martyris odorauit et eam ultra non attigit. For more information on this text see CSLA. E08210. It exists in two versions and it has never been reedited since its publication by the Bollandists in the seventeenth century. Both versions were edited and translated by Sabine Fialon in her PhD thesis in 2012. I am particularly grateful to her for sharing it with me. The shorter version can be also found here: Sabine Fialon, 'La Passio sanctae Marcianae (BHL 5256): editio princeps', Sacris erudiri 53 (2014), 15-67.
 - ¹⁰ Hippolyte Delehaye, Les Passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires (Bruxelles, 1921).
- ¹¹ Passio Lucii et Montani 3, ed. François Dolbeau, 'La passion des saints Lucius et Montanus. Histoire et édition du texte', REAug 29 (1983), 68: Et incumbentes precibus adsiduis tota fide statim quod petebamus accepimus: accensus paene in exitium nostrae carnis ignis extinctus est et flamma caminorum ardentium dominico rore sopita est. Nec difficile credentibus fuit noua posse ad uetera exempla contingere, domino in spiritu pollicente, quia qui gloriam istam operatus est in tribus pueris, uincebat in nobis. See CSLA.E07938.

The author is drawing an analogy with the story of the Three Youths in the Book of Daniel. However, it should be noted that the biblical text does not mention rain or even extinguishing the fire; instead, it stresses the miraculous delivery from the existing fire. The context in which the rain appears in *The Martyrdom of Lucius and Montanus* is different from that in standard 'rain miracles' stories from the Christian East, where the saints, following the example of the Prophet Elijah, caused rain to fall and end the droughts that threatened famine. Dionysios Stathakopoulos enumerated seven such stories, about Spyrydion of Trimithus in Cyprus, Epiphanios of Salamina, Porphyrios of Gaza, Anatolios of Constantinople, Andrew of Crete and Euthymios and Sabas, both of Palestine.¹²

1.3. The stones, wind and sea

Marculus was a Donatist bishop killed during the Catholic repression of 347. The soldiers threw his body over a precipice with the intention of destroying it completely, so that it could never be venerated. However,

The hard stones and rough rocks spared his consecrated limbs. The mountains feared to harm the man whom the traitors did not fear to slay. Except for those people, every creature adores its creator and in this respect the mountains could not lack the capacity to deserve God's favour.¹³

The fate of Marculus, or rather that of his body, was the beginning of other stories about the Donatists throwing themselves from rocks to find their deaths. ¹⁴ In the *Martyrdom of the Martyrs of Abitina* (also known as *Passio Dativi, Saturnini et aliis*), a text considered to be written, or at least edited, by Donatists early in the fifth century, a virgin called Victoria appears. ¹⁵ She was so keen on her chastity that she preferred suicide to marriage. However, the wind was there to save her:

When the young woman unwillingly and reluctantly was forced into a marriage and her parents gave her a bridegroom against her will, the young woman secretly threw herself off a cliff so that she might flee the man who would carry her off like booty. Supported by compliant breezes, she was received unharmed on the lap of the earth.¹⁶

¹² Dionysios Stathakopoulos, 'Rain Miracles in Late Antiquity: An Essay in Typology', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 52 (2002), 73-87. See also Juan J. Pomer Monferrer, 'Focs que no cremen en l'hagiografia tardoantiga i bizantina', *Studia Philologica Valentina* 20 (2018), 141-74.

¹³ *Passio Marculi* 13, ed. Paolo Mastandrea, 'Passioni di martiri donatisti', *AB* 113 (1995), 65-75; trans. M. Tilley. See CSLA.E06329.

¹⁴ See Alden Bass, 'Marculus', in *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*, ed. David G. Hunter, Paul J.J. van Geest, Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte, consulted on 10 October 2022; Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge, 2011), 752-8.

¹⁵ See Alan Dearn, 'The Abitinian Martyrs and the Outbreak of the Donatist Schism', *JEH* 55 (2004), 1-18.

¹⁶ Passio Dativi, Saturnini et aliis 17, ed. P. Franchi de' Cavalieri, Note agiografiche, fasc. 8 (Città del Vaticano, 1935), 47-71; trans. M.A. Tilley. See CSLA.E07672.

In a similar fashion, the bodies of the other Donatist martyrs of the same year, Isaac and Maximian, were thrown into the sea. The author of the account of their martyrdom was clearly fascinated by the watery element, as he consecrated a long passage to poetic descriptions of the power of the waves and storm. However, the result was miraculous: after a long turmoil, the sea returned the bodies to the shore.

The Martyrdom of Fabius was probably written in the middle of the fifth century. It recounts the history of a soldier who refused to sacrifice during the Diocletianic persecution. His body and head were thrown separately into the sea, with stones attached to them. What happened later? 'The elements themselves did the pious duty that the humans failed to do and the abyss showed the martyr what human cruelty had denied.' That is, the sea transported the reunited body of the martyr from the region of Caesarea in Mauretania to Cartenna, more than a hundred kilometres away, so that it was safe and held in veneration by new people, who had never heard of the martyr before. The author of the text expressed his gratitude to the sea, which came to be an instrument of God's mercy: 'Thanks to you, the sea, for your efforts. Thanks to you, Almighty God. You command the elements, you direct the foreign merchandise towards us by sea, and now you changed it so that the martyr could be delivered to us.' 18

In similar circumstances, a similar miracle happened to the bodies of the seven monastic brothers killed by Vandals in 484. The account of their martyrdom has for some time been considered to have been written by Victor of Vita, but scholars now agree that it was written by an anonymous author in the sixth century who elaborated on Victor's brief account of the death of these seven monks. ¹⁹ The anonymous account also tells us what happened after the death of the martyrs and seems to be largely influenced by the accounts cited earlier:

When the venerable bodies were thrown into the sea, it returned them intact to the shore immediately, although it is against the nature of the water. The sea did not dare to keep the bodies in its depth for three days, as usually happens, because it feared to disobey the commandment of the Lord even in a minimal way. It is said that even the tyrant himself, although impenitent, became frightened. The crowd which gathered buried the bodies with joy, directed by the venerable clergy of the Carthaginian Church.²⁰

¹⁷ Passio Fabii 10, 1: Officium suum elementa praebuerunt et succedit in locum hominum obsequium competens abyssorum et, quod negauerat humana crudelitas, fluctuum deuotio et martyris experta fides exhibuit (SCh 609, 344). See CSLA.E08211.

¹⁸ Passio Fabii 10, 6: Gratias tibi, mare, gratias laboribus tuis. Gratias tibi, omnipotens Deus, qui imperas elementis, qui nobis per maria peregrinas merces aduehere iubes, nunc et martyrem mutatis officiis ad nos fecisti pergere (SCh 609, 348).

¹⁹ Victor Vitensis, *Historia persecutionis* 3, 41, ed. S. Lancel, *Histoire de la persécution vandale en Afrique suivie de la passion des sept martyrs et du Registre des provinces et des cités d'Afrique* (Paris, 2002). See CSLA.E08290.

²⁰ Passio septem monachorum 15, ed. S. Lancel, Histoire de la persécution vandale en Afrique suivie de la passion des sept martyrs et du Registre des provinces et des cités d'Afrique (Paris, 2002), 219: Sed cum in mari uenerabilia corpora iactarentur, illico, quod contra naturam est aequoris, eadem hora inlaesa corpora pelagus litori reddere maturauit nec ausus fuit, ut moris

2. Other aspects and punishing miracles

For the sake of brevity, I will not expand on another aspect of nature's 'mercy' on martyrs – not the mercy of the elements, but of their own bodies, which were insensible to the pain of martyrdom. The subject has recently been analysed by Stephanie Cobb.²¹ Continuing to consider miraculous intervention, another text I would like to present here is the Latin Martyrdom of Typasius. The text has been preserved in a single manuscript from the thirteenth century, which also contains the Martyrdom of Cassianus.²² Modern scholars consider the account to have been written at the end of the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth. Typasius was a soldier in the Roman army in Africa in the time of Diocletian. He abandoned the army to consecrate himself totally to the Christian life. However, he was forced into active service again, whereupon he declined the donative from the emperor, but promised him that if he was allowed to serve Christ, the imperial armies would overwhelm their enemies on all fronts in forty days. This transpired as he promised, and Typasius was able to return home. However, the persecutions started some years later. Claudius, the dux of Mauretania Caesariensis, ordered Typasius to take back his arms and sacrifice to the gods. Typasius refused to do either. Claudius made the soldiers put the military belt on Typasius and place a spear in his hands, but both were immediately torn into pieces in a miraculous way.23

While considering the merciful power of the natural elements in assisting the martyrs, we cannot omit the opposite situations when nature took vengeance for the sake of the martyrs. These events belong to a large group of miracles that can be considered "punishing". We find many more witnesses of them in the Eastern than in the Western accounts of martyrdom, but the martyrdom of Typasius contains the following example:

And above his burial mound they placed his shield. According to their religiosity, all the Christians used to break off and take small fragments from this shield, and when these were applied to the weak, the paralytic, the possessed, and all who were suffering, they were cured. Then the *praepositus* Doncius and the *decurio* Lucius, who had been the causes of the disturbance which had resulted in the death of the martyr Typasius, while they were standing before the dux Claudius, suddenly burned with fever and pain.

est, triduana dilatione in profundo retinere, ne praecepto dominico minime paruisset. Ad quod miraculi genus et ipse tyrannus, licet inpaenitens, ut fertur, expauit. Gaudens autem quae aderat multitudo corpora sanctorum martyrum diligenti tradidit sepulturae, praeeunte clero uenerabili Carthaginiensis ecclesiae. See CSLA.E08279.

²¹ L. Stephanie Cobb, *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (Oakland, 2017).

²² Passio Cassiani (SCh 609, 216-22). See CSLA.E08055.

²³ Passio Typasii 1-2 (SCh 609, 254-68). For the dating of this text, see my discussion in CSLA.E01583.

They lost control of their limbs, their bowels burst, their eyes fell out, and they died. This happened so that all peoples might curse their death and cry out that the holy martyr Typasius had been defended by divine retribution.²⁴

The execution of Emperor Maximian by Constantine is described in the same text as the vindication of Typasius.²⁵ In the *Martyrdom of Marciana*, already mentioned, when Marciana was expiring, the house of the Jew Budarius, responsible for her suffering, was struck by 'the divine fire', and subsequent attempts to reconstruct it always failed.²⁶

The saints themselves could also intervene, perhaps slightly less dramatically but still spectacularly. One of the miracles described by Gregory of Tours can be described as "punishing". It involved the relics of an African saint, Eugenius, the fifth-century bishop of Carthage exiled by the Vandals:

A girl, one of the inhabitants of the region, went to a stall as if intending to buy something. When she saw an ornament she liked, she took it from the merchant. Immediately, more swiftly than words [can say], she gave the ornament to someone else and then claimed that she had not received it. But the merchant insisted: 'I offered it to you with my hand, and you took it for a closer inspection.' When the girl denied [the accusation], the merchant said: 'If, under the influence of greed, you so persist in denying, the blessed martyr Eugenius will judge. If you take an oath before his tomb and say that you did not receive the ornament, then I will think that what I misplaced was not a loss.' Promising that she could be cleared by this oath, she quickly went to the tomb. When she raised her hands to swear her oath, immediately she lost control of her limbs and became stiff. Her feet were glued to the pavement, her voice stuck in her throat, and her mouth hung open without any words. The merchant and the other people saw this, and he said: 'Young girl, let the ornament that you took from me be of use to you. The punishment given by the martyr is sufficient.' After saying this, he left the place. For a long time, the girl was held in this pain. Finally, at the martyr's command, she spoke and openly confessed what she had wished to conceal in secret.27

²⁴ Passio Typasii 3, 5-6: Et super ipsum tumulum posuerunt eius scutum; de quo scuto uniuersi christiani minuta fragmina abscindentes pro sua fide rapiebant et languentibus et parliticis et demoniacis et omnibus male habentibus superponentes curati sunt. Tunc Doncius praepositus et Lucius decurio, qui fuerunt in morte Typasii seditionis auctores, dum starent ante Claudium ducem, subito solutis omnium membrorum neruis ruptisque uisceribus atque oculis amissis, incensi febribus et tormentis exspirauuerunt ita ut omnes populi eorum exsecrarentur interitum etuniuersi declamarent sanctum martyrem Typasium diuino arbitro fuisse defensum. (SCh 609, 272).

²⁵ Passio Typasii 4, 2 (SCh 609, 274).

²⁶ Passio Marcianae (BHL 5257-9) 6, 1: At ubi deuotae uirginis spiritus exiuit de corpore, eodem temporis puncto Budarii blasphema domus, cum omnibus qui ibidem fuerant, diuino arsit incendio. S. Fialon finds analogies to Ovid and Virgil here; Mens immobilis (2018), 422.

²⁷ Gregorius Turonensis, *Gloria martyrum* 57 (MGH SRM 1/2, 2nd ed., 77-78), trans. Raymond Van Dam. See CSLA.E00583.

3. The power of the relics

So far, we have concentrated on the miracles appearing in the African accounts of martyrdom, although the last example has already shown us the belief in the miracles engendered by the relics of the saints long after their deaths. Accordingly, in the last part of this paper, we should turn to another African text, *The Book of the Miracles of St Stephen*, which relates specifically to the cult of saints rather than to their lives or deaths. This is the earliest extant text of this kind, and the next is the collection detailing the miracles that took place in the sanctuary of Thecla at Seleucia in Isauria (southern Asia Minor). Stephen's grave was discovered in Caphargamala (Palestine) in 415, and his relics arrived in Africa (most probably via Minorca) around 418. The shrine containing them was established in Uzalis, about fifty kilometres north of Carthage.

A series of miracles followed, some witnessed by Augustine of Hippo and described by him in *The City of God.*²⁹ However, we find more of them in the anonymous *Book of the Miracles of St Stephen*, although most of the miracles recorded there are healings. The book is based on a collection of *libelli* or *testimonia* of those who were healed by the power of Stephen's relics.³⁰ The miracles of restored health are of course themselves examples of the power of the saint and his earthly remains over the normal course of nature. However, at the end of the second book of the 'Miracles' we find two stories about extraordinary, supernatural events that prove the same power, although they are not connected to issues of health, at least not human health.

The first concerns the 'health' of wine. In Uzalis, about two hundred amphoras of wine became corrupt, worse than vinegar. A flask of it was taken to the shrine of Saint Stephen and blessed there. Then, after some drops of the blessed wine were poured into each of the amphorae of the corrupted wine, all their contents regained their excellence.³¹

The second proof of the power of Stephen's relics was also witnessed in Uzalis. A violent noonday tornado put the whole city into darkness. There was probably nothing immediately inexplicable about that, but what followed did defy explanation. A 'dragon of fire' (*igneus draco*) appeared in the sky. People gathered at the shrine of Stephen to pray and the dragon disappeared behind the clouds. The author of the account was aware that all this could be taken as an accident and therefore overrode such objections, denigrating those who claimed

²⁸ Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle, ed. Gilbert Dagron (Brussels, 1978). See CSLA.E05879.

²⁹ Augustinus, *De civitate Dei* 22, 8 (CCL 48, 821-823). See CSLA.E01109, CSLA.E01111, CSLA.E01116, CSLA.E01117, CSLA.E01118, CSLA.E01119, CSLA.E01120, CSLA.E01121, CSLA.E01125, CSLA.E01135.

 $^{^{30}}$ Les miracles de saint Étienne: Recherches sur le recueil pseudo-augustinien (BHL 7860-7861), ed. Jean Meyers (Turnhout, 2006).

³¹ Miracula Sancti Stephani 2, 3, ed. J. Meyers, Les miracles (2006), 334-338.

this as 'the unwisely wise men' (*insipienter sapientes*) and explaining that in this way the words of *Ps* 148:7-8 were fulfilled: 'Praise the Lord from the earth, ye dragons, and all deeps: fire, and hail; snow, and vapours; stormy wind fulfilling his word' (KJV). After the miraculous delivery from danger, the people could give thanks to 'God and his friend' (*Deo et amico eius*), the 'friend' being Stephen.³²

4. Conclusion

Even today, the 'standard miracles' considered by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in the Vatican as proofs of sainthood are healings.³³ Ancient Christian literature abounds in examples of such miracles, and the African sources are no exception. However, the African accounts of martyrdom present us with several examples of supernatural events that are distinct in kind from miraculous healings. The sanctity of the martyrs was proven by their readiness to give up their lives for Christ. The beneficent reactions of the elements, fire and water, and of the animals were additional proofs of this sanctity. They also corroborate the updated thesis of Peter Brown: the saints were intrinsically related to both Heaven and Earth, most notably at the moments of their deaths.

³² Miracula Sancti Stephani 2,3, ed. J. Meyers, Les miracles (2006), 340-2.

³³ Henryk Misztal, *Le cause di canonizzazione. Storia e procedura* (Città del Vaticano, 2005), 72-6.