



Africa's Claim on a Western Church Father

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

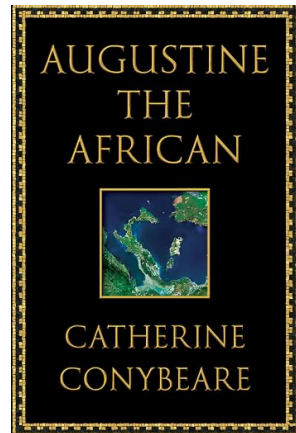
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Among the plethora of discussions on Augustine, another biography might seem like white noise, but *Augustine the African* is far from that. Catherine Conybeare (Leslie Clark Professor in the Humanities at Bryn Mawr College) has shown that there is another side to Augustine that has been unrecognized, namely, Augustine was African. Conybeare notes that Augustine's reception has mostly been controlled by European Western interpreters, which has "made it easy to forget that Augustine was African" (xviii). Much of the interpretation of Augustine assumes a Roman/Euro-centric perspective, possibly due to the primacy of his *Confessions*, which admittedly focuses on his Italian sojourn. This approach misses the fact that Augustine only spent four painful years in Italy as an outsider; Augustine noted that the Romans "sneered at his African accent" (21; cf. *De Ordine* 2.17.45). Augustine's statement in *On Order* 2.17 was Conybeare's central influence for this book: "It was one thing to be secure in his art, quite another to be secure in his heritage" (215; cf. 252n13). In other words, Augustine's life was a battle between his Roman education and his African heritage. From his early eagerness for vocational renown, through his struggles with the African Church (Conybeare's title for the Donatists), and his later confrontations with entitled Roman elites, Augustine's African heritage was a continual presence that his readers have missed. Thus, Conybeare's new biography is a welcome contribution that



Nathan Alexander Scott
Africa's Claim on a Western Church Father
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *Augustine the African*, by Catherine Conybeare

showcases how Africa has a stronger claim on this massive, supposedly Western, figure than the Western world.

The aim of this book is to help the modern reader of Augustine appreciate and recognize the African context of his writings; i.e., to read Augustine as a Westerner/European is to divorce him from his homeland and thus to misread him. Conybeare structured her biography mostly chronologically, with a focus on the African aspects of Augustine's life. In part 1 ("Insider, Outsider") she traces his early life to his traumatic return to Africa and election to the bishopric in Hippo. Part 2 ("Wolves in Sheep's Clothing") focuses on the Donatist controversy with all its messiness. Part 3 ("A Language for Africa") highlights examples of Augustine's use of Punic and his patriotic stance with regard to his African/Punic heritage. Finally, part 4 ("From Africa to Immortality") looks at the *City of God* and the Pelagian controversy highlighting Augustine's African vantage point whereby he was uniquely qualified to challenge Roman arrogance.

Conybeare notes how the young Augustine showed signs of Africanness which explain the later struggles both in Italy and then returning to Africa. From Augustine's early education, reading Virgil's *Aeneid*, "Augustine was not interested in Aeneas. Instead, he identified passionately with Queen Dido" (5). If we read Augustine through the traditional Euro-centric lens, Augustine's notes about being rebuked for his love of Carthage over Rome does not raise any significance (*Conf.* 1.13.20-14.23). Conybeare draws attention to the fact that Virgil's Dido foreshadowed Hannibal, i.e., the archetypal Roman enemy. In other words, Augustine was drawn to the African Queen Dido as if she were the protagonist rather than Aeneas. Even throughout his *Confessions*, as Conybeare highlights, Augustine portrayed his wanderings and abandonment of God (and his mother) as him acting like Aeneas, i.e., Augustine portrayed himself (and Rome) as the antagonist. Augustine tricked his mother and slipped away from the port in Carthage to sail for Rome, just like Aeneas had tricked Dido in Virgil's epic (*Conf.* 5.8.15 — note Augustine's wording: "I went to Rome . . . I was going to Hell"—5.9.16). As Conybeare puts it, "Augustine had become Aeneas. He had tricked the woman who loved him and was sailing to meet his destiny in Rome. His tears for the Carthaginian queen Dido were far away in the past" (19). Augustine's time in Italy was incredibly difficult, and Africa was inescapable. Even his closest friends in Italy were all Africans. "Augustine was recreating his circle of North African intimates in Milan: Carthage and Thagaste had arrived in Italy" (25). Conybeare also shows how Augustine's return to Africa was not the home coming he imagined. His mother died on their way home in Ostia, and his close friend Nebridius died just a year later (cf. *Ep.* 3-14). Most painful of all was the death of his beloved son, Adeodatus, just a year after Nebridius. It was this grief-stricken and broken Augustine that traveled to

Nathan Alexander Scott
Africa's Claim on a Western Church Father
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *Augustine the African*, by Catherine Conybeare

Hippo in 391 where the aged bishop Valerius manipulated events to ordain him as presbyter and later bishop. Still, he always felt unsettled in his identity as an African among Africans and he carried the grief over his lost son for the rest of his life.

The African Church (i.e., the Donatists) was such a central element of the North African context, that by the time Augustine was ordained, “the schism between the two churches had already endured for more than a hundred years” (71), and the African Church held the majority population in North Africa (76). The primary issue was over purity, i.e., the Church in Africa (Conybeare’s term for Augustine’s Catholic Church) had tainted itself through accepting *traditores* (“traitors” and those who “handed over” Christian writings). Apart from the hyper-exclusionist nature of the African Church, “there was no significant difference between the two sides” (70). A central difficulty for Augustine was that the Donatists seemed to have the stronger claim to what it meant to be an African Christian. He “was now obliged to construct arguments against people who wanted to place Africa at the center of their faith” (87). “The problem for Augustine was . . . how it impinged on his own African identity” (88). In other words, there are elements of identity crisis in Augustine’s writings against the Donatists. The controversy came to a climax, through a state-mandated summons to the Council of Carthage “beginning on June 1, 411” (101). Conybeare dedicates chapters 7 and 8 to discussing this council and its aftermath. Conybeare shows how these events shook Augustine to his core as an African seeking to find settlement in his African identity, whilst condemning a deeply rooted part of the African ecclesial culture. With this focus on Augustine’s Africanness, one can understand (though not condone) his reasoning for accepting the aid of judicial power to force the Donatists to dissolve into the Church in Africa.

Next Conybeare discusses Augustine’s relationship with Punic, the pre-Roman vernacular of North Africa, which came to the Carthaginian region with the Phoenician settlers around the eighth century BC. Augustine regularly defended Punic and sought ways for its native speakers to participate in services and events (cf. *Ep.* 66.2). Conybeare suggests that Augustine’s beloved companion (mother of his son) was a native Punic speaker, and that his son, Adeodatus, was named according to the Punic *Mutanba’al*, which means “gift of God” (122). One of the best places to find Augustine’s engagement with Punic is in his sermons. He frequently paralleled Punic alongside Latin and Greek (e.g., *Serm.* 288.3), to highlight the notion that each language has equal participation in communicating divine truth. Unfortunately, his desire to support Punic led to some problems. Conybeare recounts when Augustine sought a bishop for a Punic community south of Hippo in 423. Due to the paucity of Punic proficient clergy, Augustine chose Antoninus, a young monk

Nathan Alexander Scott
Africa's Claim on a Western Church Father
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *Augustine the African*, by Catherine Conybeare

(twenty years old) from his monastery in Hippo. The immature bishop exploited his congregation to finance the construction of his episcopal palace. The whole situation was ugly (cf. *Ep.* 20*, wherein Augustine recounts the events to a wealthy patroness). These examples, among others that Conybeare discusses, showcase Augustine's affection for his African heritage, particularly that this Latinist loved Punic.

In the final section Conybeare elaborates on her earlier statement: "much of Augustine's mature thought depended upon his ability to look at Rome from Africa and question that dominance" (xvi). In the wake of Aleric's sacking of Rome in 410, Augustine had to deal with an influx of wealthy and entitled Roman refugees in North Africa, many of whom (e.g., Volusianus) were "blaming Christianity for the vulnerability of Rome" (157; cf. *Ep.* 135, 137). Volusianus' challenges as well as Augustine's correspondence with the Tribune Marcellinus (*Ep.* 136, 138, 139) — who oversaw the Council of Carthage in 411 — prompted Augustine to write his *City of God*. Augustine requested that Marcellinus inquire after all the possible objections to Christianity, "so that I can respond with care to *everything*" (160; *Ep.* 138.20). Throughout Conybeare's discussion on Augustine's process of writing his tome, she highlighted the elements of how Augustine's African perspective enabled him to respond to the fear over Rome's fragility. It was not just his extensive familiarity with classical literature; it was the fact that Augustine was African that enabled him to reinterpret the heroic history of Rome to expose its futility. For example, Regulus, the man who kept his word and returned to Carthage to be tortured and executed comes out looking bad (169-70; *Civ.* 1.15, 24). Even Augustine's depiction of Hannibal, Rome's archetypal enemy, appears more virtuous than Rome's heroes (170-2). This latter feat is something that only an African could do. It is possible that, had Augustine been writing in Italy or any other part of the Roman world, his critique of Roman grandeur would not have survived as it has.

Despite this biography's greatness, there are some critical points to note. The first is the limited scope. Conybeare has brilliantly presented Augustine as African, but there is a lot to his life and writings that were hardly mentioned, if at all. For example, Conybeare discussed copious examples from his preaching, but she hardly mentioned his exegetical writings. Consider that Augustine had to request time to study Scripture after he was ordained presbyter in 391 (*Ep.* 21, 22), a sabbatical that led to the writing of his early commentaries and set the foundation for his later exegetical works. She does discuss his *On Christian Teaching* and its relation to the Donatist controversy, but only briefly. Another point is that Conybeare's discussion on the Pelagian controversy was insightful but seems to have less focus on the African elements in Augustine's rhetoric than her other topics. Rather, she focuses on how Augustine's residual grief over

Nathan Alexander Scott
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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *Augustine the African*, by Catherine Conybeare

his lost son, Adeodatus, shaped his harsh correspondences with Julian of Eclanum. As much as Conybeare's connections between Julian and Adeodatus are insightful and excellently argued, they are less directly part of Augustine's Africanness than other potential topics. Despite these critical points, the biography is an amazing work that does showcase how Augustine has been misread through the ages. Even the critical points expose gaps in scholarship for further exploration. For example, how did Augustine's African heritage shape his *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, or his *Questions on the Heptateuch*? These, and other research questions, are areas that will now require scholarly analysis thanks to Conybeare's work.

This new biography is a much-needed corrective to our understanding of this figure who looms so large in the history of Western Christianity. To read Augustine properly, we must read him as an African among Africans.