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Religious Controversy and Conversion in Vandal Africa

The virulence of the religious tensions in the Vandal kingdom of Africa sets it apart from other barbarian kingdoms. The Nicene–Homoian debate was permeated with harsh language and bitterness, and enmities often burst into open conflicts and violence. In no other region of the West in which Homoian rulers held power was the Nicene church so systematically prosecuted and persecuted. Most of our information on persecutions comes from biased Nicene depictions, especially Victor of Vita's *History of the Vandal Persecution*, which aimed to give the impression that religious oppression of the Nicenes was the dominant theme of Vandal rule.[1] Although these authors exaggerated the harm done to Nicenes, downplayed the good aspects of Vandal rule, and hardly ever included the opposite view, they allow us to understand how fundamental the experience of being persecuted was for the Nicene church. But this experience has to be placed in the broader context of Nicene–Homoian contacts and conversions in Africa, which did not start with the Vandal conquest.

In this chapter, I first look at the involvement of the African church in the Trinitarian controversy of the fourth century and its intertwinement with another ecclesiastical controversy, the Donatist one. Traditionally, the religious history of late antique Africa was studied with the emphasis on the discontinuities. But as Robin Whelan argued, there is a lot to gain if we consider 'Vandal' Homoianism together with the forms of Homoian presence in pre-Vandal Africa. The latter should not be, as Whelan warns, 'reduced to a mere prologue'. With a renewed focus on continuity we can clearly see that 'Vandal' Homoianism did not introduce any

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[1] (Howe 2007, 120–55; Fournier 2020).

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new, unexpected qualities compared to the Homoianism already present in Africa.[2] The minority faith had the capacity to take root on African soil, even though the support of the Vandal regime helped to ensure the prosperity and growth of the Homoian church.

What for the Nicenes, and in particular for the Nicene polemicist, looked like fanaticism and the return of persecutors known from martyrs' stories, for the Vandals meant realising the plan to establish Christian rulership. In contrast to the Visigoths who were settled in Gaul as the federates or the Ostrogoths who took control over Italy under the imperial oversight, the Vandals were unequivocal conquerors of Africa and could organise their rule without agreeing to concessions negotiated with the imperial administration. The Homoian church was instrumental in putting this into institutional and pastoral practice, not because it was an organ of government but because, like its Nicene counterpart, it had the motivations, aspirations, and claims to universality, which were aligned with those of Christian rulers.

THE AFRICAN CHURCH AND THE TRINITARIAN CONTROVERSY

Long before the arrival of the Homoian Vandals, Africans were exposed to the consequences of confessional strife and religious violence, and many of these experiences shaped African Christian identity for centuries to come.[3] But in fourth-century Africa, in contrast to other regions of the Christian *oikoumene*, the Trinitarian controversy was not the most imperative problem. Of course, African bishops took part in theological discussions: they were interested in decisions concerning controversial condemnations and exiles, and they participated in councils about Trinitarian matters. But it was not a primary point of controversy for the episcopate in Africa, where since the beginning of the fourth century, another contentious issue had divided the church, one that arose directly from the Great Persecution under Diocletian. Though many Christians opposed the imperial orders and suffered imprisonment and martyrdom, some lapsed, agreeing to give away (*trado*, hence *traditores*) sacred books and even to offer a sacrifice to the gods.[4] In the aftermath of the

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[2] (Whelan 2014b, 242–43).

[3] See especially (Shaw 2011).

[4] See for example Augustine, *De unico baptismo* 16.27 (CSEL 53: 28); *Collatio Carthaginensis a. 411* 3.30–34 (CSEL 104: 196); *Liber genealogus* 626 (MGH AA 9, 196).

persecution, the church was divided by allegations that some members of the clergy had carried out such acts. When the archdeacon Caecilianus was made bishop of Carthage, his election met with opposition. The consecration took place in the absence of the bishops of Numidia, whose primate boasted the privilege of consecrating bishops of Carthage; moreover, among the consecrating bishops was Felix of Aptunga, allegedly a *traditor*. In consequence, the discontented chose their candidate, Majorinus, as bishop, and when he died soon afterwards, they elected Donatus in his place.[5] Two parallel, hostile ecclesiastical organizations – the Caecilianist ('Catholic') and the Donatist – emerged, and the conflict between them dominated African ecclesiastical life for the next century.

The events of the Donatist schism and the Trinitarian controversy sometimes intertwined. Only one African bishop is attested in the list of signatures of the council of Nicaea in 325: Caecilianus of Carthage. He brought the Nicene creed and conciliar minutes to Africa; one could still consult an official copy in Carthage in the early fifth century.[6] Later, the African bishops attended the council of Serdica in 343. The emperors Constans and Constantius convened this council in a city at the border of the Western and Eastern empire in the hope of resolving the Trinitarian controversy. The attempt proved unsuccessful – the Eastern bishops soon withdrew from the proceedings, unwilling to recognise bishops already condemned in the East. The Africans were among the delegates who stayed in Serdica, including Gratus, the Catholic bishop of Carthage.[7] The Caecilianist presence at gatherings outside Africa translated into recognition by the church overseas, which became an important argument in the debate with the Donatists, especially since the latter were unable to secure such approval outside Africa. Augustine also claims to have heard that in the past the Arians had tried to ally themselves with the Donatists in Africa.[8]

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[5] (Frend 1952, 1–25; Kriegbaum 1986, 59–95; Shaw 2011, 812–19; Adamiak 2019a, 31–60).

[6] *Patrum Nicaenorum nomina*, no. 206 in the Latin version, p. 56. The Nicene minutes: *Concilium Carthaginense a. 419* (CCSL 149, 94).

[7] On the council of Serdica see (Hess 2002). Also (Simonetti 1975, 161–87; Hanson 1988, 293–305; Ayres 2004, 122–25; Stephens 2015, 131–68). Gratus is named in canon 8 (7 in the Greek version).

[8] In the late 390s, the Donatists cited Serdica as historical proof that they had been previously recognised in the universal church. Augustine, who had examined the documents produced by the Donatists, alleged that it was an Arianising Serdica of the Easterners, not the council accepted in the Nicene West. Augustine, *Ep.* 44.3.6 (CSEL 34/2, 111) and *Contra Cresconium* 3.34.38; 3.71.83; 4.42.52 (CSEL 52, 445–46, 487, 550). In fact, the address of the letter of the Eastern secessionists from Serdica names a certain

Some evidence suggests that in the 340s Donatus of Carthage had taught doctrine that might have been interpreted as Arian or Arianising. In *On the Illustrious Men* (392–93), Jerome stated that Donatus' *On the Holy Spirit* was in accord with Arian teaching.[9] Similarly, Augustine in *On Heresies* (428–30) claimed of Donatus that he 'thought that, though they are of the same substance, the Son was inferior to the Father and the Holy Spirit inferior to the Son'. However, Augustine also added that 'the vast majority of the Donatists did not take note of this erroneous view that he held concerning the Trinity, nor is it easy to find anyone among them who knows that he held this position'.[10] The Catholic side might have been wary of arguments *ad Arrium* against the Donatists because they did not have a clean slate either. The doctrine of Homoioousianism promoted in the late 350s by Basil of Ancyra (and later condemned as heretical) apparently gained support in the African episcopate.[11] Later many African bishops, among them the Catholic bishop of Carthage, Restitutus, took part in the council of Rimini in 359 and subscribed to the Homoian formula of faith promoted by the emperor Constantius.[12] These events later allowed the Donatists to reciprocate Caecilianist accusations of heresy, because the conduct of the Catholic bishops at Rimini could be interpreted as a lapse into the 'Arian' heresy.[13]

There was another aspect of the Donatist controversy that reverberated in relations between Nicenes and Homoians in the Vandal era: the problem of rebaptism. The contention between Caecilianists and Donatists as to whether *traditores* and *lapsi* could be priests and ordain others as priests led to a schism, with each side identifying itself as 'the true Church' and rejecting the other as schismatic. The Donatists draw

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Donatus who may be identical with the leader of the Donatists: Hilary of Poitiers, *Fragmenta historica* 4.1 (CSEL 65, 48). For further discussion see (Achelis 1929; Zeiller 1933; 1934; Folliet 1966; Kany 2007, 433n1786).

[9] Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 93 (TU 14/1, 46). Jerome gives the date in the preface.

[10] Augustine, *De haeresibus* 69 (CCSL 46, 331–32): *sed quamuis eiusdem substantiae, minorem tamen patre filium, et minorem filio putasse spiritum sanctum. uerum in hunc quem de trinitate habuit eius errorem Donatistarum multitudo intenta non fuit, nec facile in eis quisquam, qui hoc illum sensisse nouerit, inuenitur.* Trans. Teske, 'The Heresies', 50–51. Cf. Augustine, *Sermo* 183.9 (PL 38, 992–93).

[11] Marius Victorinus, *Adversus Arium* 1.29 (CSEL 83.1, 105); Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.24, 4–6 (GCS 50, 179).

[12] Hilary of Poitiers, *Fragmenta historica* A V.1, 3 (CSEL 65, 85–86).

[13] This accusation is made in a letter ostensibly from Jerome to Pope Damasus, identified as a Donatist forgery by (De Bruyne 1931). See also (Folliet 1966, 213, 215, 220; Hoover 2018, 135–36).

from the situation the logical conclusion: schismatics and heretics are not in the church and no one outside the church can confer valid baptisms and ordinations. A convert unbaptised in the orthodox church must therefore receive baptism upon his or her conversion. This was consistent with the teachings of Cyprian of Carthage, who in the third century had defended the necessity of rebaptism for those baptised outside the church, in conflict with the church of Rome, which accepted every baptism in the name of the Trinity as valid.[14] In Africa, Cyprian was the undisputed authority for both Catholics and Donatists, but the Catholics could not stand the Cyprianic rules being applied against them. Rebaptism featured prominently in the polemics of the Donatist controversy, it appeared in the anti-Donatist imperial laws, and it prompted Augustine to formulate a new doctrine of baptism.[15] In consequence, Africans entered the Vandal era with the baptismal controversy fresh in mind. The Homoians, coincidentally, also practised the rebaptism of heretics, and when a Nicene person decided to convert, they baptised him or her.[16] We have evidence of rebaptism from other regions, but only in African sources does it have such a prominent place.

The Homoians sensed that the Donatist controversy was the Achilles heel of the African Nicene church and were eager to exploit the anti-Donatist discourse in their own favour. The Homoian church could take a stance as a neutral representative of orthodoxy, able to judge Homoousianism and Donatism equally harshly. The Homoians could also criticise Nicene expressions of partisanship and rigorism as essentially Donatist. The conference of Carthage in 484, a gathering of Nicene and Homoian bishops convened by King Huneric and described by the Nicene sources as the culmination of persecution, was designed by the Homoian side to resemble the conference of 411 that had been used to resolve the schism between the Donatists and Catholics. In 484, the role of the ecclesiastical party concerned with *unitas ecclesiae* was taken by the Homoians, while the Nicenes had recourse to an old Donatist argument: that the fact of being persecuted validated their church as orthodox.[17] For some, the accusations that the Nicene clergy and church adopted Donatist attitudes in their dealings with the Homoian church

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[14] (Kirchner 1970; Hall 1982; Dunn 2004; 2006; Ferguson 2009, 380–99; Shuve 2010; Van de Beek 2010).

[15] (Adamiak 2019b). On Augustine's attitude to Cyprian see (Gaumer 2016).

[16] (Szada 2019).

[17] Victor of Vita, *HP* 3.61–70, pp. 207–11. (Whelan 2014a). For the Donatist argument and its use against Catholics see (Burris 2012, 122–26).

under the Vandals may have proved convincing; certainly, the motif recurred in anti-Nicene polemics for a long time.[18] It is unsurprising that in response the Nicenes so extensively exploited the Homoian repetition of baptism. Depicting the Homoians as *rebaptizatores* was the most efficient corrective to the Homoian claims that Nicenes were resurrecting the old African schism.[19]

In sum, Africans on both sides of the Donatist schism participated in the Trinitarian controversies, and 'Arianism' appeared in their arguments, but there was no Homoian (or any other non-Nicene) party in the African church for most of the fourth century. More substantial traces of Homoian activity in Africa appear at the very end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth. Augustine had personal and intellectual encounters with Homoianism in the early fifth century – he read and responded to an anonymous *Sermo Arrianorum* that was circulating in Africa, he debated publicly with Homoians (Count Pascentius, Bishop Maximinus), and he engaged with 'Arian' theology and practice in some of his sermons and letters.[20] In contrast to the previous period when anti-Nicene theologies did not have traction in Africa, in Augustine's time Homoianism gained real adherents. As Robin Whelan has rightly noted: '"Arianism" did not arrive on a boat in 429.'[21]

Admittedly, many of the proponents of Homoianism in Africa before the invasion were immigrants from other parts of the empire and some were barbarians in Roman military service. Their Homoian doctrine shows distinct features characteristic of Wulfila, Palladius of Ratiara, Auxentius of Durostorum, and their commentator and continuator Maximinus.[22] The last of these was in all probability identical with the

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[18] The use of anti-Donatist legislation by Huneric in his edict of 484: Victor of Vita, *HP* 3.7–14, pp. 176–81. During the reign of Thrasamund, Fastidiosus, a convert from Nicenism, argued against Homoousians and Donatists in the very same sermon: Fastidiosus, *Sermo* (CCSL 91, 280–83). After the East Roman conquest, Mocianus, a former Homoian, was accusing the defenders of the Three Chapters of showing Donatist attitudes: Facundus of Hermiane, *Contra Mocianum scholasticum* 64 (CCSL 90A, 415).

[19] (Whelan 2018, 133–34). On the later tradition depicting Donatism as 'Arian' see (Hoover 2017).

[20] *Sermo Arrianorum* (CCSL 87A, 157–74). Augustine, *Contra sermonem Arrianorum* (CCSL 87A, 181–255); *Conlatio cum Maximino* (CCSL 87A, 381–470). On Pascentius: Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 17, p. 3:170–73. Augustine, *Ep.* 238, 239, 240, 241, 242 (CSEL 57, 533–67); *Sermones* 117, 135, 139, 140, 183 (PL 38, 661–71, 746–50, 769–75, 988–94), 341, 380 (PL 39, 1492–501, 1675–83); *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 18, 20, 26, 71 (CCSL 36, 179–88, 202–11, 259–69, 505–7). See a useful survey in (Simonetti 2006).

[21] (Whelan 2014b, 239).

[22] (Szada 2021).

Homoian bishop who in 427 or 428 debated with Augustine in Hippo. Several scholars who have discussed pre-Vandal Homoianism in Africa have focused on its Gothic, foreign aspect. Zeiller painted the picture of an Africa impervious to 'Arianism' in the fourth century but affected by it in the fifth, in consequence of 'the infiltration of barbarian elements into the province'.[23] Sumruld characterised the 'Arianism' that Augustine confronted, especially in his debate with Maximinus, as distinctively Wulfilan.[24] In that light, the appearance of Homoians in Africa in the 410s and 420s might seem like a prelude to the religious controversies of the Vandal period, when a foreign, intolerant form of Christianity clashed with the rooted Nicenism of the African church.

The Nicene–Homoian encounters on the eve of the Vandal kingdom were, in fact, important for further developments but not necessarily as an augury of ethnic and confessional conflict.[25] The Homoianism that we learn about from Augustine's writings is a complex phenomenon that connects barbarian military men, their officers and commanders, the political elites of the empire, and clerics and intellectuals of various sorts. As Christian doctrine, it was expressed in the Latin theological language that was common to the Homoians and Nicenes of the fifth-century West.[26] Moreover, Augustine and other Nicenes felt urged to enter into conversation with this thought and for them it was not a mere exercise in religious intolerance. We see that conversions were at stake: Homoian writings, which presented the doctrine in a short, relatively simple, and compelling form, were circulating, Nicene clerics were confronted publicly by Homoian theologians, and Homoian connections among the powerful politicians and soldiers made the teachings attractive for some people. The Homoians in Africa wanted to increase their influence and were looking for converts. The Nicenes fought not to lose anybody to the 'Arian' heresy but they also sought to turn 'Arians' into Catholics. Homoianism was not an existential threat for the African church but it was certainly a real option.

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[23] (Zeiller 1934, 538).

[24] (Sumruld 1994).

[25] On the identity of the Homoianism we see in Africa in 410s and 420s and the Homoianism of the Vandals, see (Whelan 2018, 12–14).

[26] There are some traces of the use of the Vandal language in Africa, but there was no literary or theological culture connected with the idiom. It is possible that the Scriptures in Gothic were known (as the languages were very similar) but we have no direct attestation. The Vandals and the Homoian church in Africa seem thoroughly Latinised: (Tiefenbach 1991; Reichert 2008; Brennecke 2008b, 133–44; Francovich Onesti 2013a, 2013b; Wolfe 2014). This can be matched with their adoption of Roman and African material culture: (Rummel 2018, 39–40).

THE VANDALS AND THEIR CHRISTIANITY

Victor of Vita, writing in the late 480s, opened his *History of the Vandal Persecution* with the invasion in 429. Without much ado, Victor moved on to the calamities of war, cruel killings, famine, destruction of the countryside and cities, and inhuman treatment of civilians. The reader understands that all this happened because the Vandals were savage and barbaric. Their advance is illustrated by apocalyptic quotations from Scripture: they were God's scourge and the portent of the end of the world.[27] That they were Christians, we learn only in chapter 9 of Book 1, where Victor first mentions the confiscation of churches in Carthage: 'they delivered over to their religion the basilica of the Ancestors where the bodies of SS Perpetua and Felicitas are buried, the basilica of Celerina and the Scillitani, and others which they had not destroyed'.[28] Various Vandal transgressions continue but Homoianism returns only in chapters 19 to 21 with a story about the *comes* Sebastianus who declined to abandon the Nicene faith.[29] The very name of 'Arianism' comes up only in chapter 27.[30] Victor was interested neither in recalling the origins of Vandal Christianity nor in explaining why they came to be of another confession. He assumed that his readers would know about Vandal 'Arianism' and would understand that, together with barbarity itself, it was the main reason for the atrocities that befell Africa.[31]

For a modern historian, the question of the beginnings of Vandal Christianity is much more baffling. When exactly did the Vandal elites become Christian and start to think about themselves as responsible for the well-being of the church and the unity of its doctrine? Why did they proselytise Homoianism so vigorously, and why did their relations with the Nicene church in Africa become so inflamed, especially in comparison to the other kingdoms?

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[27] Victor of Vita, *HP* 1.1–8, pp. 97–100. On the dating and authorship see (Howe 2007, 28–60) with further references.

[28] Victor of Vita, *HP* 1.9, pp. 100–1: *Et, ut de necesariis loquar, basilicam Maiorum, ubi corpora sanctarum martyrum Perpetuae atque Felicitatis sepulta sunt, Celerinae uel Scilitanorum et alias quas non destruxerunt suae religioni licentia tyrannica mancipauerunt*. Trans. Moorhead (TTH 10, 6). On the fall of Carthage see (Modéran 2002a). On the basilicas mentioned by Victor: (Courtois 1955, 42–43; Ennabli 1997, 19–20, 32–33).

[29] Victor of Vita, *HP* 1.19–21, pp. 105–6. *PLRE* 2, s.v. 'Sebastianus 3', pp. 983–84.

[30] Victor of Vita, *HP* 1.27, p. 109.

[31] In his description of the conquest Victor relied on Augustine, Possidius, and Quodvultdeus. Lancel, introduction to Victor de Vita, *Histoire de la persécution vandale en Afrique*, 19–21; (Fournier 2017, 2020, 142–43).

When the Vandals crossed the strait between the Iberian peninsula and Africa in 429, they had already spent more than two decades within the boundaries of the Roman Empire. At the end of the fourth century, groups of Vandals moved north and west from their settlements in the Upper Tisza Valley and became prominent on the Rhine frontier; joined by some Alans and Suevi, they crossed into Gaul in 406. In mid-409, amid the civil war waged by the usurper Constantine III against Honorius and later against the general Gerontius and another usurper, Maximus, they moved south into Aquitaine and later crossed the Pyrenees.[32] Hydatius, a native of Gallaecia in the north-west of the Iberian peninsula and the author of the chronicle (finished in 469) that is our most important source for fifth-century Hispania, records in the deepest shades the horror of the first waves of the invasion but also records a peace treaty, probably somehow arranged with Maximus who retained some control over the Spanish provinces.[33]

In the meantime, Gothic power rose in southern Gaul. In 417–18, the Gothic King Vallia led a campaign in Hispania at the behest of the empire.[34] It had a devastating effect on the Alans, who lost their dominant position in the peninsula, and on part of the Vandals, but those Vandals and Suevi who resided in Gallaecia remained relatively unaffected. However, later conflicts between them, and meddling by the imperial pretenders, provoked in 420 the military expedition of the *comes Hispaniarum* Asterius. In consequence, the Vandals were pushed south, to Baetica, but their appearance in the richest part of Hispania did not solve any problems for the empire.[35] In 422, the *comes domesticorum* Castinus was sent to fight the Vandals, but his campaign, despite some initial successes, ended in a defeat. The Vandal position in southern Hispania strengthened; military victory and access to rich resources

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[32] For the origin and the early history of the Vandals see (Courtois 1955, 11–58; Merrills and Miles 2010, 1–55; Modéran and Perrin 2014, 15–92; Berndt and Steinacher 2008; Steinacher 2016, 31–96). On Constantine III, his revolt against Honorius, and the rise of the general Fl. Constantius see (Matthews 1975, 307–28; Ehling 1996; McEvoy 2013, 195–204).

[33] On Hydatius see Tranoy, introduction to Hydatius, *Chronica* (SC 218, 9–62), (Muhlberger 1990, 193–266; Burgess 1993, 3–10; Kulikowski 2010, 151–56). The barbarians then divided the land among themselves: Hydatius, *Chronica* 41 (49), p. 82. On this settlement see (Courtois 1955, 51–58; Arce 2002; Kulikowski 2010, 161–67).

[34] Orosius, *Historia adversus paganos* 7.43.7–15 (CSEL 6, 560–62). Hydatius, *Chronica* 52 (60), 55 (63), p. 84.

[35] Hydatius, *Chronica* 66 (74), p. 86. (Courtois 1955, 55; Merrills and Miles 2010, 45–46; Modéran and Perrin 2014, 86–87).

prompted political consolidation. It also seems that in this period the Vandals became acquainted with the sea, reaching the Balearic Islands and the shores of Africa.[36] Eventually, in 429, the Vandals led by Geiseric decided to cross to Africa. They ravaged Mauretania and Numidia, and reached Africa Proconsularis where they besieged Hippo. They were opposed by the imperial forces of Aspar and Bonifatius and a short-lived peace was reached in 435; the Vandals got northern Numidia and probably parts of Mauretania Sitifensis or Africa Proconsularis.[37] The reach of the Vandals was limited but they were quickly able to extend their African holdings: in 439 they conquered Carthage and after a new treaty with the empire in 442, besides Numidia, they possessed Africa Proconsularis, Byzacena, and the coasts of Tripolitania. The emperor Valentinian III retained control only over the Mauretanias and some parts of Numidia, and after his death in 455 the Vandals occupied these too. The Vandal kingdom in Africa was born.[38]

Over several decades, the Vandals transformed from a loosely associated force within a larger barbarian confederation into a consolidated polity, centred around the kings of the Hasding dynasty, with a well-organised army and fleet. In the 410s, they were treated as a hostile horde but also a repository of barbarian military power to be exploited by Roman generals and imperial pretenders. In the 430s, they had a kingdom to which the empire had to cede its territories. It seems probable that in the latter phase, religious factors started to play a more prominent role. To a degree, this is a trick of the light: none of our sources for earlier Vandal history is so preoccupied with their religious policies as Victor of Vita. But the political consolidation coincides with a newly and strongly articulated Christian self-understanding that led to a violent clash with the Nicene church in Africa.

The beginnings of Christianity among the Vandals are opaque. Orosius in his *History against the Pagans* (around 416 or 417) names

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[36] Hydatius, *Chronica* 77 (86), p. 88: pillaging of the Balearic Islands, sacking of Carthago Spartaria and Seville, and invasion of Mauretania. On Castinus' campaign: (Stickler 2002, 27–28; Wijnendaele 2015, 43–48).

[37] Prosper, *Chronica* 1295, 1304, 1321 (MGH AA 9, 472–74). Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 28, p. 3:204–9. On the narrative harmonization of Augustine's death with the Vandal invasion see (Vössing 2012).

[38] Main sources: Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 28.12, p. 3:208–9; Victor of Vita, *HP* 1.13, pp. 102–3; Procopius, *Bell.* 3.3.13–36, p. 1:320–21; Prosper, *Chronica* 1347 (MGH AA 9, 479); *Novella Valentiniani* 34, pp. 140–41. Secondary literature: (Courtois 1955, 155–73; Modéran 2002b; Schwarcz 2004; Modéran and Perrin 2014, 143–44; Steinacher 2016, 98–102).

the Vandals among barbarian peoples who in consequence of their arrival to the Roman Empire would eventually fill the churches of Christ but says nothing more specific about their religion.[39] Salvian of Marseille in *On the Governance of God*, written in the 440s, consistently treats the Vandals as heretical Christians.[40] We cannot be sure, however, whether Salvian had information about the religious history of the Vandals in Hispania or merely knew that they were Homoian Christians in his times and inferred that it was the same before. The scholars who have examined the problem of Vandal conversion usually assumed that it must have happened while they were in contact with the Goths, considered to be the primary carriers of 'Wulfilan Arianism'.[41] On this basis, Peter Heather surmised that the Vandal conversion took place between 406 and 421, though he conceded that 'this window of opportunity is obviously very narrow'.[42] But we probably should not limit the Gothic presence in the Iberian peninsula to the Visigothic armies led by Athaulf and Vallia. Possidius, for example, says that some Goths associated themselves with the confederation of the Vandals and Alans who crossed the strait of Gibraltar.[43] It is also noteworthy that the Suevi in Hispania, with whom the Vandals were associated for many years, also became Homoian; indirectly, it indicates that the barbarians in the Iberian peninsula (and maybe even earlier) were exposed to similar religious influences. On the other hand, we have no precise knowledge about the technicalities of how Homoianism spread among the barbarians: we cannot take for granted that the presence of Goths was necessary for fuelling and sustaining the process. More probably, the Vandals were exposed to various forms of Christianity along the way, and possibly also in their seats on the Danube and Tisza.[44]

When relating the fate of the Vandals in Hispania, Hydatius usually says nothing about their religion. Only in the entry referring to the year 428 does he record that the Vandal King Gunderic tried to lay hands on a church in Seville but was seized by a demon and died.[45] He was followed by Geiseric, and Hydatius wrote down a curious rumour

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[39] Orosius, *Historia adversus paganos* 7.41.8 (CSEL 6, 554).
[40] Salvian, *De gubernatione Dei* 7.38.45–48 (SC 220, 456, 462, 464). See also 5.2.5–11 (SC 220, 310–20).
[41] (Schäferdiek 1970, 1978, 506–8; Brennecke 2008b, 140).
[42] (Heather 2007, 143).
[43] Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 28.4, p. 3:204.
[44] (Strzelczyk 1993, 242).
[45] Hydatius, *Chronica* 79 (89), p. 90.

about the king: 'There is a story which some relate that Geiseric had converted from the orthodox faith to the Arian heresy, thereby becoming an apostate.'[46] Tantalisingly, Hydatius tells us nothing more – neither about the source(s) of this information nor about the time and circumstances of the conversion. Maybe the chronicler wanted to taint the character of Geiseric with a note of opportunism, especially as the rumour is related in conjunction with the account of his succession: was the choice of Homoianism dictated by a wish to gain the loyalty of the Vandal warriors among whom this faith was more popular?[47] The lack of detail should warn us, however, against reading too much from this brief report. At best, it is another hint that in the motley group of peoples fighting together in Hispania various forms of Christianity took hold and the Vandal confederation was never as uniformly 'Arian' as our Nicene sources usually want us to think.

The other sources portray Geiseric more consistently as an Arian zealot. Prosper in his first reference to Geiseric's policies in Africa after the peace of 435 states that '[i]n Africa Geiseric, king of the Vandals, want[ed] to subvert the Catholic faith by the Arian impiety within the frontiers of his settlement', and in order to do that he exiled the Nicene bishops and confiscated their churches.[48] Shortly after, he tells a story of the martyrdom of four worthy Hispano-Romans, Arcadius, Paschasius, Probus, and Eutycianus, who served at Geiseric's side. At some point, the king wanted them to convert to 'the Arian perfidy' in an attempt to make them even dearer to himself. Because they refused, the king sent them into exile, tortured, and eventually killed them. The young brother of Paschasius and Eutycianus, Paulillus, was beaten and degraded to slavery but spared from death because of his tender age.[49] The account was probably designed to evoke the episode of the three young men in the furnace from the book of Daniel, and Geiseric was thus shaped in the likeness of the cruel Nebuchadnezzar.[50] This all remains in line with Victor of Vita's depiction of Geiseric as a ferocious and cruel heretic devoted to promoting Homoianism and destroying the Nicene faith.

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[46] Hydatius, *Chronica* 79 (89), p. 90: *qui, ut aliquorum relatio habuit, effectus apostata de fide catholica in Arrianam dictus est transisse perfidiam.*

[47] (Merrills 2004, 181).

[48] Prosper, *Chronica* 1327 (MGH AA 9, 475): *In Africa Gisiricus rex Wandalorum, intra habitationis suae limites volens catholicam fidem Arriana impietate subvertere.*

[49] Prosper, *Chronica* 1329 (MGH AA 9, 475–76).

[50] (Steinacher 2016, 114–15).

Another aspect often discernible in the Nicene sources is the view that the Vandal move to Africa was somehow divinely inspired and could be interpreted in apocalyptic terms. Possidius of Calama, Augustine's hagiographer, wrote that the Vandals invaded his homeland 'by the divine will and power'.[51] Salvian added that the Vandals themselves promoted their image as God's scourge: 'They themselves confessed that they were not doing their own will, for they say they were activated and driven by a divine command.'[52] Procopius, in the mid–sixth century, had also heard of this tradition. In relating the later attacks of Geiseric on Sicily, Italy, Illyria, and Greece, he brought up an anecdote about the captain of a ship in Carthage, who before embarking asked the king against whom they were sailing, and Geiseric replied: 'Clearly, against those with whom God is angry.'[53] This portrayal was fuelled by prejudice but we have no reason to doubt that the king presented himself as a devout Christian invested in promoting the interest of the church to which he belonged.

The Homoian church as an institution – run by clerics who organise teaching and worship, administer sacraments, and manage places of cult – is almost absent from the evidence on the Vandals in Hispania but gradually gains substance in the African evidence. This does not mean that the Homoian priesthood and organised cult materialised only after the crossing. The whole process of subscribing to Christianity among the Vandals and their allies, elusive as it is, must have been driven primarily by Homoian clerics. They carried the books, vestments, and vessels necessary for liturgy and they had the knowledge to celebrate ritual, teach doctrine, and imbue in Homoian believers a sense of the nefariousness of the Homoousian heresy (i.e. Nicene Christianity). When the Vandals settled firmly in Africa, they also obtained buildings, endowments, and control over important holy sites (especially in Carthage), and this substantial rise in wealth boosted the importance and power of the Homoian church as an institution.

The Nicene authors, especially Victor of Vita, consistently diminish the authority and independent standing of the Homoian church in the

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[51] Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 28.4, p. 3:204: *divina voluntate et potestate.*

[52] Salvian, *De gubernatione Dei* 7.54 (SC 220, 468): *Ipsi denique fatebantur non suum esse quod facerent: agi enim se diuino iussu ac perurgeri.* Trans. O'Sullivan (FC 3, 203).

[53] Procopius, *Bell.* 3.5.24–25, p. 1:335: ἐφ᾽ οὕς ὁ θεὸς ὤργισται. Trans. Dewing and Kaldellis, *Prokopios*, 156. Procopius, however, believed that the Vandals arrived in Africa invited by the *comes* Bonifatius fighting against his enemies: *Bell.* 3.3.14–36, p. 1:313–17. This seems to have been a later conspiracy theory, see (Courtois 1955, 155–57; Schwarcz 2004, 51–52; Wijnendaele 2015, 90–92).

Vandal kingdom. In their account, the Homoian clerics usually spent time at the court, depended on the will, ideas, and provisions of the king, and had no popular following.[54] As noted by Robin Whelan, these tendentious depictions are the source of the modern interpretation of the Homoian churchmen as basically royal agents, court chaplains presiding over a 'national' or 'state' church (in contrast to the Nicene one that was universal).[55] In order to understand the dynamic of conversion between Homoian and Nicene Christianity in Africa, it is necessary to abandon this firmly rooted concept. The Homoian church was in many respects dependent on the government, but this does not mean that political interests and motivations were equal to religious ones. The church was not a wing of the Vandal administration, created to enforce a new order on the former Roman provinces. The Homoians perceived their Christianity as orthodox, universal, and dedicated to the eradication of heresies, and their church had agency to promote faith and defend itself against enemies.

In this context, Yves Modéran's re-evaluation of the 'Vandal persecution' as a 'religious war' (*guerre de religion*), that is, a confessionally driven conflict between two churches, unequal in resources but alike in their claim to universality, proves useful.[56] The Nicene–Homoian confrontations, though obviously not divorced from other aspects of social life, were not just a façade for more factual conflicts, whether political, ethnic, or economic. Matters of doctrine and the mystical body of the church were truly at the heart of the problem. But, in contrast to Modéran and more in concord with Whelan, I prefer to remove strife and violence from the centre of my discussion.[57] What follows in Chapter 2 is not just a study of persecution, coerced conversions, and resistance to oppressive anti-Nicene policies. This does not mean that I want to join the revisionist historiography, epitomised by Christian

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[54] Victor of Vita, *HP* 1.19, p. 105 (in the Sebastianus episode, Geiseric is just looking for a pretext to get rid of a powerful advisor and he finds it in a spurious claim that his priests wanted Sebastianus to convert); 1.43 (the Homoian priests at court persuade Geiseric to impose Homoianism on all the servants of the palace, as not even those in service to the Vandal king are uniformly Homoian), pp. 116–17. *Vita Fulgentii* 20–21 (CCSL 91F, 202–6): King Thrasamund gets involved in a doctrinal dispute with Fulgentius; he is amazed by Fulgentius' wisdom and sends a Homoian bishop, Pinta, to the debate.

[55] (Whelan 2018, 41–44). (Steinacher 2016, 113) sees in the priests of the Vandals basically military chaplains. For the 'national' church, see (Courtois 1955, 225; Strzelczyk 1993, 243; Castritius 2007, 102).

[56] (Modéran 2004).

[57] See (Whelan 2018, 10–14) on 'two orthodoxies'.

Courtois' masterful *Les Vandales et l'Afrique*, in denying that violence had a significant role in shaping the social history of fifth-century Africa.[58] Violence happened, the Nicene church was stripped of some of its possessions and privileges, and unfavourable laws were issued. But these phenomena do not sufficiently elucidate the issue of interconfessional conversions.

Throughout the Vandal period religious tensions varied in intensity. During the invasion, the Nicene churches were subjected to ruthless looting, and priests, as well as the rest of the civilian population, suffered badly. The settlement that followed involved the seizure and redistribution of land and wealth, and again it impacted the Nicene church. The Vandals were 'heretics' and a lot of confiscated goods were allotted to the Homoian church: thus the feeling of oppression was exacerbated among the Nicene ecclesiastics. Many were exiled from their churches, some even overseas, most famously Quodvultdeus, bishop of Carthage, who was among the people put on leaky ships by Geiseric after the fall of Carthage in 439.[59] Victor of Vita also claims that Geiseric introduced a ban on celebrating any Nicene rites in the lands held directly by the Vandals; the prohibition is said by Huneric, in his edict convoking the Nicene bishops for the conference in Carthage in 484, to have been frequently repeated.[60] An important anti-Nicene measure, apparently calculated to weaken the Homoousian heretics in the long run, was a prohibition of new ordinations and of filling the posts of exiled or dead bishops.[61] Nicene clerics still suffered during the reign of Huneric's successors; for example, under Thrasamund (496–523), around sixty bishops were exiled to Sardinia, among them Fulgentius of Ruspe.[62] Recent scholarship has newly appreciated the losses of the Nicene church in its struggle with the Homoian regime. Yves Modéran argued that the lists

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[58] Also crucial was the impact of the German historiography of the nineteenth and twentieth century focused on *Germanenforschung*, see especially the synthesis of (Schmidt 1942), which informed a lot of later French historiography, for example (Saumagne 1913, 1930; Gautier 1951).

[59] Victor of Vita, *HP* 1.15, pp. 103–4. On the increasing number of Africans in Rome and Italy in the Vandal period see (Llewellyn 1976; Conant 2012, 114–29).

[60] Victor of Vita, *HP* 1.18; 2.39, pp. 104–5, 139–40.

[61] Victor of Vita, *HP* 1.23, p. 107; *Vita Fulgentii* 13 (CCSL 91F, 188–89).

[62] *Vita Fulgentii* 13 (CCSL 91F, 188–89). On the expansion of the Vandal dominion on Sardinia, Corsica, and the Balearic Islands see (Courtois 1955, 185–92, 212–13). The Vandals also claimed Sicily but the sources show that administrative power lay with the rulers of Italy, for example Cassiodorus, *Variae* 1.3–4 (CCSL 96, 12–16). See (Clover 1999; Modéran and Perrin 2014, 152–54).

of participants of the conference of Carthage in 484 inflated the numbers of the Nicenes and he showed compellingly that they also contain evidence of numerous conversions to Homoianism.[63] Robin Whelan, revising what we know about the size of the two churches, suggested that 'there is no good reason to suppose a significant disparity' between the two.[64] Importantly, none of these scholars thought that this diminishment should be attributed solely to violence and oppression. Vandal rule created unprecedented conditions for the rise of the Homoian church and these should not be underplayed.

Even the most credulous reader of the *History of the Vandal Persecution* would notice periods of moderation: in 454, Geiseric, at the request of Valentinian III, allowed Deogratias to be ordained as the bishop of Carthage after fifteen years of vacancy.[65] Victor also admits that at the beginning of Huneric's rule, there was a thaw in Nicene–Homoian strife.[66] Exiled bishops were at times recalled to their posts: the clerics persecuted by Huneric were allowed to return at the beginning of the reign of his successor, Gunthamund; similarly, Hilderic, succeeding Thrasamund in 523, revoked his exile orders, allowing, among others, Fulgentius of Ruspe to come back to Africa.[67]

Moreover, Vandal control over Africa had its limitations. Until the death of Valentinian III, the Mauretanias seem to have remained under imperial control, and anti-Nicene actions did not apply to them.[68] Carthage and other important sees were much more affected than less important places, especially if the Homoian presence was low. The extraordinary density of the episcopal network in the African church also made it more difficult to dismantle. It is estimated that over 500 episcopal sees could be traced in Numidia, Proconsularis, Byzacena, and Tripolitania.[69] Five hundred and sixty-five Catholic and Donatist

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[63] (Modéran 2006).

[64] (Whelan 2018, 38).

[65] Victor of Vita, *HP* 1.24, pp. 107–8.

[66] Victor of Vita, *HP* 2.1, p. 122.

[67] Victor of Tununna, *Continuatio Prosperi* s.a. 523, 2 (MGH AA 11, 197). For some evidence of persecution during Gunthamund's reign see *Vita Fulgentii* 5 (CCSL 91F, 169), Gelasius I to the bishops of Dardania in *Collectio Avellana* 95.63 (CSEL 35/1, 391) and Procopius, *Bell.* 3.8.7, p. 1:346. (Courtois 1955, 300) doubts that the persecution took place. See also (Modéran 1993, 147–48). On Fulgentius' exiles: *Vita Fulgentii* 17–19, 23 (CCSL 91F, 197–202, 209).

[68] *Novella Valentiniani* 34, pp. 140–41.

[69] (Jones 1964, 715; Eck 1983, 284–87; Dossey 2010, 125, 261–62n1; Leone 2011;) with further references.

bishops attended the conference in Carthage in 411; at its Nicene–Homoian recreation in 484 around 450.[70] It exceeded many times the number of bishops in any other region.[71] The concrete actions against the episcopate (executions and exiles, confiscations) as well as the 'war of attrition' (the ban on ordinations and worship) probably caused less damage than it could have if the Nicene church had been smaller and more loosely organised. Leslie Dossey has shown that many local communities were able to use their status as episcopal sees to affirm forms of self-government that could not easily be suppressed by outside authorities. In the pre-Vandal era, the bishops of the more important cities or the representatives of the imperial administration had difficulty intervening at the local level when local leaders had strong popular support.[72] There is no reason to believe that this was any different under the Vandal rule. The dense ecclesiastical network thus had a remarkable resilience and the pressure on it was fluctuating.

Some restoration of the Nicene church had already begun before the Byzantine conquest. King Hilderic (523–30) stopped enforcing the anti-Nicene measures and allowed exiled bishops to return to their sees. In 525, for the first time since the invasion, a Nicene council gathered in Carthage to discuss the current business of the church and it was presided over by the recently consecrated Bishop Bonifatius.[73] Hilderic was overthrown by a revolt and replaced by his cousin Gelimer; the rebellion was the main justification for the war waged against the Vandals by Justinian. But from the account of Procopius, we also know that Justinian's propaganda put a religious spin on events.[74] Novel 37, issued after the conquest, presents the recently concluded war as a campaign to free Nicenes from tyrannical oppression.[75] Public opinion in Africa was exposed to

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[70] The *Notitia provinciarum et civitatum Africae*, pp. 252–72 lists exactly 459 but some of those certainly did not attend (an annotation *non occurrit*). (Courtois 1954, 93–95) proposed that it did not represent those who arrived in Carthage but that it was a file ('un fichier') compiled by the bishop of Carthage gathering all the dependent bishoprics and only secondarily did it come to be associated with the conference. (Modéran 2006, 169–71) argued against Courtois' interpretation and proposed that the list was made in conjunction with the conference to serve as an argument that the Nicenes were more numerous than the Homoians. See also (Whelan 2018, 35–38).

[71] See the comparison in (Wood 2018, 58–59). Also (Courtois 1955, 109–11; Leone 2011, 5, 12–13). For the most complete list of known African bishops from late antiquity see (Fedalto 2008).

[72] (Dossey 2010, 125–94).

[73] *Concilium Carthaginense a. 525* (CCSL 149, 254–82). See (Adamiak 2016, 24–25).

[74] Procopius, *Bell.* 3.10.18–24, p. 1:358–59.

[75] *Novella Iustiniani* 37, pp. 244–45.

these narratives, and ecclesiastical loyalties and disloyalties remained in a dynamic relationship with political expectations and fears.

In Africa, just as in Ostrogothic Italy several years later, the East Roman military victory was only the first step in the reintegration of the conquered provinces into the political and bureaucratic body of the empire. The Nicene restoration went together with this process and was not done instantly. A specific act, like issuing a comprehensive law against heresy, was crucial to stimulate the renewal of the Nicene church, especially if, as recent interpretations suggest, it had really been badly weakened. From the ecclesiastical side, disciplinary measures concerning former Homoian clergy and converts (sometimes multiple) had to be decided on and enforced. I discuss these matters in detail in Chapter 3.