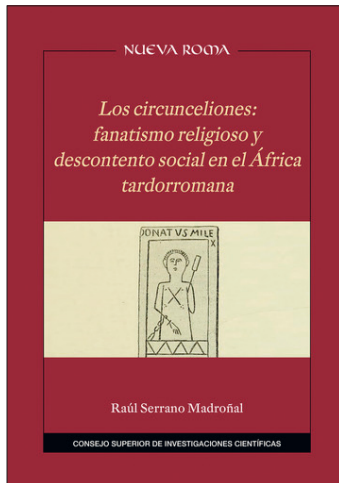


## LOS CIRCUNCELIONES




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FEW MOVEMENTS IN LATE ANTIQUITY HAVE engendered such divergent interpretations among modern historians as the enigmatic Circumcellions of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> cent. North Africa. They were infamous for their attacks against landowners, pagans, and Catholic clergy: but is this evidence of an incipient nationalism, a proto-class struggle, or religious extremism? How closely did their goals align with the schismatic Donatist church, with whom they are invariably grouped? Were they a class of itinerant farm laborers whose Donatist allegiance formed only a part of their identity, or

were they primarily religious ascetics, the radical edge of the Donatist cause? Similarly, what does their name – “wanderers around the *cellae*”, itself a pejorative term coined by their opponents – refer to? Are *cellae* rural granaries or martyrs’ shrines?

Answering these questions is tricky. In *Los circunceliones: fanatismo religioso y desconento social en el África tardorromana*, a substantial revision of Raúl Serano Madroñal’s doctoral dissertation at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, the author highlights two reasons for returning to them: first, very little historiography has been conducted on the phenomenon of Circumcellionism in Spanish, a deficiency that Madroñal hopes to rectify. Second, and perhaps more crucially, he argues that there is a substantial disconnect between what our primary sources actually say about the movement and the often strained extrapolations that historians have derived from them. In his opening chapter, Madroñal identifies two myths in particular that need to be laid to rest. First, while a social dimension does seem to have played a role in Circumcellion activities, they were not anti-Roman in orientation. Instead, they were radical Donatists whose ire was directed primarily against their Catholic opponents. Second, while they do appear to have been primarily rural, Circumcellions should not be identified as a specific class within the Roman social order. Instead, they functioned as something like – though not quite identifiable with – a primitive monastic movement. Above all, Circumcellions were religious extremists: “a local representation of that fanaticism that, for many, destroyed the Classical world” (p. 20).

A unique strength of this book is its attention to detail: the majority of the work is simply a commentary on every allusion – explicit or hypothesized – to the Circumcellion movement in late antiquity. The book is divided into five “complementary axes” (p. 21): North African religious antecedents to the Circumcellion phenomenon, a critical review of explicit references to the Circumcellions in our primary sources, a further review of possible implicit references to Circumcellion activity, an assessment of any archaeological and epigraphic sources that have been claimed at one point or another as relating to the movement, and finally an outline of the historiography of Circumcellionism among modern writers. Let us examine each in turn.

In Part I, Madroñal sets up his thesis by focusing on the religious controversies that immediately preceded the rise of the Circumcellions. After noting that by the Flavian period, North Africa appears to have been quite Romanized with few hints of local independence movements, he proceeds to consider first Tertullian, whose “rigorist” theological stance had important implications for the tenor of North African Christianity. Tertullian, Madroñal notes, argued that Christians are “immersed in a fight against Satan and his demons” at all times by the will of God, who “constantly subjects his faithful to tests of faith” (p. 35). More immediately relevant to the later

schism is Cyprian, whose views on the lapsed and veneration of martyrs directly informed later Donatist approaches to both issues. Indeed, as Madroñal notes, the Donatist schism is in many ways merely a continuation of Cyprian's battles with his opponents, a "new manifestation of an old problem" (p. 68). A short overview of the Donatist movement then follows, taking in the whole scope of its history from the first dissident bishop Majorinus in the early fourth century to the final remonstrances of Gregory the Great in the sixth. Madroñal is careful to note that the Donatists, while clearly suspicious of the empire given its hostile stance towards them, were not inherently anti-Roman: after all, as their opponents would endlessly harp, they were the first to appeal to the emperor for mediation.

Part II, by far the longest section in the book, covers all major explicit allusions to the Circumcellions in our primary sources. It is divided into twelve sub-chapters, each of which represents a different witness to the movement – though it is worth noting that the chapter devoted to Augustine is further subdivided into thirty-three subsections. Most of these entries are quite short, reflecting the rather fleeting nature of their sources. Predictably, the writings of Optatus (pp. 71-79), Augustine (pp. 81-128) and the decrees preserved in the *Theodosian Code* (pp. 133-137) dominate the discussion. Madroñal is rightly suspicious of the utility of later sources, such as the edict of the Vandal king Huneric in 486 CE, to shed light on Circumcellion activity. Such later sources are too far removed from the original events to transmit a faithful picture. Isidore's characterization of Circumcellions with rogue "gyrovague" monks, for instance, is simply a mistaken amalgam of two separate Augustinian texts, while Beatus of Liébana's pericope on the same topic, sometimes identified as a lost snippet of Tyconius,<sup>1</sup> is simply a rehash of Isidore's error.

These entries provide convincing background for the lengthy conclusion to this section (pp. 157-172), in which Madroñal marshals the evidence amassed so far to offer some valuable perspectives on a number of contested facets of Circumcellion identity. Were the Circumcellions Donatist partisans from the beginning, or was their relationship more tenuous? Madroñal reminds us that our earliest mention of the Circumcellions depicts their leaders as *duces sanctorum*, thus implying a specifically religious dimension to their activities from the start (p. 158). What were the enigmatic *cellae* that they haunted? Probably rural granaries, not martyrs' shrines (p. 171). Did they really jump off of cliffs? Yes: they had, after all, a venerated example in Bishop Marculus, who had been thrown off a cliff by the Roman authorities during the Macarian repression (p. 164).

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1. Frend, 1969.

In Parts III and IV, Madroñal turns to a more difficult quarry: an evaluation of literary allusions (Part III) and potential archaeological/epigraphical evidence of Circumcellions (Part IV). Confusingly, the first entry in Part III concerns the famous “Harvester of Mactar”, a Latin epigraphical text now found in the Louvre and identified as a Circumcellion self-description by Emin Tengström (p. 223).<sup>2</sup> Tengström’s argument is reliant on the assumption that the Circumcellions constituted a distinct agricultural class within Roman society, a claim Madroñal disputes (he also notes that the inscription dates from the 260s, nearly a century before the first named appearance of the Circumcellions). Other potential references to Circumcellion activity include Optatus’s account of attacks against Catholic basilicas during the reign of the emperor Julian and Augustine’s *violentissimae turbae* who engaged in similar tactics in the 390s. Both, Madroñal concludes, probably do reflect Circumcellion involvement, despite the lack of explicit confirmation. The records of writers outside of North Africa such as Philastrius of Brescia and Theodoret of Cyrillus, on the other hand, preserve only garbled rumors of Circumcellion activity.

Part IV surveys five potential Donatist sites in North Africa that are sometimes linked to the Circumcellions, such as the basilica dedicated to Marculus in modern Ksar-el-Kelb, the basilica allegedly dedicated by Optatus in Timgad, or the headstone of the martyr Robba. With the exception of the Timgad basilica, Madroñal affirms their Donatist provenance. He is more skeptical of the sixty-five epitaphs found in Djebel Nif-en-Nser and Djebel Anouda which William Hugh Clifford Frend had claimed as evidence of Circumcellion cliff-jumping,<sup>3</sup> noting that the evidence is entirely circumstantial. A slightly more positive assessment is given of the Henchir Bou-Said stele, located within a basilica whose arch is inscribed with the words “deo laudes”. According to Madroñal, it is “not absurd” that this artifact, which portrays a chained man holding a club, may represent a Circumcellion, though it is ultimately unprovable. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that a representation of the Henchir Bou-Said stele forms the cover of the book under review.

After a brief historiographical overview in Part V, Madroñal proceeds to his general conclusions. Throughout the survey, two areas in particular have remained contested: whether the Circumcellion movement involved a social dimension and whether “Circumcellions” ought to be identified as primarily as a class of itinerant agricultural workers, and only secondarily as a religious group. Madroñal acknowledges that there was a social element in Circumcellion activity, although he cautions that it is mentioned

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2. Tengström, 1964.

3. Frend, 1971.

in only 6% of entries (p. 240). According to both Optatus and Augustine, Circumcellions threatened creditors and freed slaves, providing “a space of refuge for offenders from the social sphere” (p. 167). In keeping with his argument that Circumcellions ought to be seen as religious extremists, Madroñal argues that the impulse for such phenomena was rooted in the Old and New Testaments. Deuteronomy, for example, condemns slavery within the Israelite community, while the Pauline epistles preach spiritual equality between masters and slaves. “It is plausible”, he concludes, “that the biblical rigor of these agonistic Circumcellions before 347 moved them to radically position themselves against usury and to promote equality between masters and slaves, following these controversial scriptural precepts” (p. 161).

Such an argument, of course, would be strengthened if it could be proved that the Circumcellions were primarily a religious phenomenon rather than a class of migratory farm workers. Without getting into the weeds of Madroñal’s argument, which seems to be directed primarily against Brent Shaw’s detailed defense of the latter claim in chapter 14 of *Sacred Violence*,<sup>4</sup> his basic point is that the primary sources which could be used to support it are vanishingly small: “Only the questionable interpretation of one of these explicit references, linked in a forced way with another of the non-explicit references, can support this explanation, which means neglecting 96% of the total volume of the preserved record” (pp. 237-238). The case for the Circumcellions as agricultural laborers relies almost exclusively on an entry in the *Theodosian Code* in which in which *circumcelliones* are listed alongside other Roman classes like *spectabiles*, *senatores*, *negotiatores* and *plebei* as liable for a fine if they continue to embrace the Donatist cause. That statement, plus the next clause which *might*, depending on how it is translated, render agricultural administrators responsible for Circumcellions (rather than, according to Madroñal’s translation, “Donatists” in general) working on their farms, is all the explicit evidence that can be marshaled in support of the theory. For Madroñal, this is far from convincing, and he argues that Circumcellions were instead “bands of Donatist Christian extremists” who represented the radical edge of the movement. Freeing slaves and threatening creditors was a genuine, if minor part of their legacy, but it was rooted in a fanatical devotion to the Christian scriptures rather than any sort of antipathy towards Rome.

One of the two reasons why Madroñal wrote the present book was because of the scarcity of academic literature on the Circumcellions in Spanish. In *Los Circumcelliones*, however, he has succeeded in producing a sourcebook that is essential for scholars of the movement in any language. While Madroñal cannot claim to have

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4. Shaw, 2011.

collated all known allusions to the Circumcellions in Augustine's massive corpus,<sup>5</sup> he has created an indispensable guide to the main primary sources crucial for our understanding of the movement. There are times that I wish the author might have been more skeptical: while acknowledging that we do not have any testimony from the Donatist (let alone Circumcellion) side of the story, he sometimes seems to assume that if a motif is sufficiently represented in the primary sources, it must be broadly accurate (p. 241). This comes out especially clearly in portrayals of the alleged Circumcellion penchant for suicide by cliff-jumping, which Madroñal defends on the basis of many allusions to the practice in Augustine's writings and the fact that they might have had an exemplar in the martyrdom of Marculus (pp. 163-164). But Augustine, as Madroñal reminds us on p. 162, is often "repetitive", and significantly never offers us a specific example of this suicidal tendency. We are left to wonder whether "cliff-jumping" was really so significant a component of Circumcellion self-identity as it appears in Catholic writings, or whether an isolated incident has been transformed into a caricature.

Nevertheless, Madroñal's desire to base his portrait of the Circumcellions directly on the combined witness of the available sources is commendable. In so doing, he is able to bring a statistical component to the debate. While we should not overstate the value of statistics here (after all: should we count all of Augustine's writings separately for the purpose of statistical analysis, or should we group them together as offering us the perspective of one author?), his deployment of quantitative analysis can help us visualize how important a particular facet of the movement was to the controversy. There is a certain romanticism which surrounds the Circumcellion movement which all too often renders it susceptible to wildly diverging interpretations: they have, after all, been successively portrayed as religious ascetics, suffering proletariat, or violent nationalists, their association with Donatism either tenuous or extreme. By both carefully collating our limited corpus of sources and critically examining what we can and cannot know from them, Madroñal has created a compelling re-evaluation of the enigmatic Circumcellions.

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5. I noticed, for example, that references to "cliff-jumpers" in Augustine's Sermon 162A.1 or *Homily on John* 11.15 are missing.

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