

Zeitschrift: Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft = Revue suisse pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique = Rivista svizzera di filologia classica

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Vereinigung für Altertumswissenschaft

Band: 51 (1994)

Heft: 1

Artikel: Tertullian on child sacrifice

Autor: Rives, James B.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-39781>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 20.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Tertullian on Child Sacrifice

By James B. Rives, Columbia University, New York

That the Carthaginians offered their children in ritual sacrifice was notorious in antiquity and has in more recent times been amply confirmed by archaeological evidence¹. Although much remains obscure about this practice, it was clearly an important part of the worship of the two chief Punic deities, Ba'al and Tanit. These deities continued to be widely worshipped in Roman times, under the Latin names of Saturnus and Caelestis, although child sacrifice seems to have disappeared as a central rite in their cult. This disappearance is not surprising, given the professed Roman hostility to human sacrifice. But the only specific evidence for the Roman response to Punic child sacrifice is given by Tertullian, who in a brief passage in the *Apologeticum* declares that children were openly sacrificed in Africa until a proconsul had the responsible priests crucified. Most discussions of this passage have focused on the question of the date at which these events took place, a problem which has not yet been resolved and is perhaps not susceptible of any certain resolution². In contrast,

1 See in general W. Huss, *Geschichte der Karthager* (Munich 1985) 535–540; more recently, S. Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in their Mediterranean Context*, JSOT/ASOR Monograph Series 3 (Sheffield 1991). Some scholars have argued that while the Punic peoples may have practiced child sacrifice on occasion, it was not part of their regular religious ritual: see e.g. S. Ribichini, “Beliefs and Religious Life» in S. Moscati (ed.), *The Phoenicians* (New York 1988), especially 120–123; counter arguments are presented by Brown 54–55. We might also note a recent study of the tophet at Tharros in Sardinia, which shows that in 46% of the cases animals either accompanied or were substituted for the children, and that in every way the human and animal victims were treated exactly the same. If the animals were sacrificed, then, the children probably were as well: F. Fedele/G. V. Foster, “Tharros: Ovicaprimi sacrificali e rituali del tofet”, *RStudFen* 16 (1988) 29–46; cf. the summary in Brown 68–70.

2 The problem of date centers on two phrases in the passage. The first is *ad proconsulatum Tiberii*. But Tiberius was never proconsul of Africa, and the phrase cannot be understood in any other way: T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian* (Oxford 1985) 18. Hence, either Tertullian refers to an otherwise unknown proconsul, whom he names only by his praenomen, or the name has been corrupted in the transmission of the text. The former alternative has found its supporters, but such a usage is uncharacteristic of Tertullian. In all other cases, he refers to proconsuls either by their cognomina or by both nomina and cognomina; for example, his address to P. Iulius Scapula, procos. A.D. 212/13, is the *Ad Scapulam*. Textual corruption is thus much more likely. Various emendations have been proposed: *C. Serii*, for C. Serius Augurinus, procos. A.D. 169/70 (see M. Fluss, *RE* 6A, 1936, 807f.); *Trebi*, for either C. Trebius Maximus, cos. A.D. 122, or M. Trebius Sergianus, cos. A.D. 132 and attested in Africa by *AE* 1933, 58 (P. Frassinetti, “Nuovi studi sul testo dell’*Apologeticum*”, *RIL* 91, 1957, 3–122 at 30f.); *Hiberi*, for Antonius Hiberus, cos. A.D. 133 (see B. E. Thomasson, *RE* Suppl. 13, 1973, 10); none of these has won acceptance. The phrase is thus of no use in establishing a date. The other phrase

few scholars have carefully examined the nature of these events. It is instead generally agreed that in this passage Tertullian is describing the end of public child sacrifice in North Africa. In this paper I shall argue that the real nature of the events described by Tertullian may have been rather different, and that the received interpretation of the passage results from his rhetorical manipulation of his material.

The passage in question reads in full: *Infantes penes Africam Saturno immolabantur palam usque ad proconsulatum Tiberii, qui ipsos sacerdotes in eisdem arboribus templi sui obumbraticibus scelerum votivis crucibus vivos exposuit, teste militia patris nostri, quae id ipsum munus illi proconsuli functa est. Sed et nunc in occulto perseveratur hoc sacrum facinus* (Apol. 9.2–3). The syntax here, as in much of Tertullian, is somewhat laborious. I would roughly translate as follows: “Children in Africa used to be sacrificed to Saturnus openly up to the proconsulship of Tiberius, who exposed the priests themselves alive on the same trees of their temple, [the trees] that shaded their crimes, [trees like] votive crosses; a witness is the militia of my father, who discharged that very duty for that proconsul. But even now in secret this holy crime persists.”³ We must first consider the historical reliability of this account. Tertullian after all did not write this work to provide posterity with a source of facts, but to present his audience of the time with persuasive arguments. There are, however, two good reasons to believe that something like the events he describes did in fact occur. First of all, stripped of dramatic touches and rhetorical flourishes, the account does not reveal any inherently unbelievable or even unusual actions⁴. The exposure of the priests on the trees while still alive was

is *teste militia patris nostri*, which suggests an event within Tertullian’s lifetime. All the extant manuscripts, however, have the reading *teste militia patriae nostrae*; *patriis nostri* is the reading of the *Fuldensis*, a lost manuscript whose readings were preserved in the margin of a Renaissance copy and which evidently represented a radically different recension of the text: see Frassinetti and, more briefly, Barnes 239–241. This reading has usually been accepted by editors on the evidence of Jerome (*De vir. ill.* 53), who states that Tertullian’s father was a *centurio proconsularis*. Barnes (11–12 and 19–21) has tried to refute this traditional view, arguing that Jerome based his statement on this very passage of the *Apologeticum*, which had previously been corrupted; for criticisms of Barnes’ argument, see the review by R. Braun, *REL* 50 (1972) 68–76 at 71–73 and G. Schöllgen, *Ecclesia sordida? Zur Frage der sozialen Schichtung frühchristlicher Gemeinden am Beispiel Karthagos zur Zeit Tertullians* (Münster, Westfalen 1984) 178–186.

3 I use the text of E. Dekkers, in the *Corpus Christianorum* edition of Tertullian (vol. 1, 1954) and follow in most respects the interpretations of J. P. Waltzing, *Apologétique. Commentaire analytique, grammatical et historique* (Paris 1931).

4 The description of trees as ‘votive crosses’, for example, is highly unusual. Trees could apparently be pressed into service as *crucis* (e.g. *Ov. Am.* 1.12.18), but their qualification as ‘votive’ is unique. If the adjective is taken literally, it would suggest that the Roman soldiers vowed the punishment of the priests to a deity, apparently Saturnus. While such a scenario is indeed implausible, it is unnecessary to take the description literally. Waltzing (above, n. 3) 70 interprets the phrase as the rhetorical assimilation of the priests to the *ex-votos* that would normally be hung on trees in a sacred grove, as in e.g. *Apul. Met.* 6.3. Although the parallel is

clearly a type of crucifixion, which could take a number of forms. Such a punishment was entirely appropriate in this situation, since crucifixion was in fact especially associated with the punishment of rebellious foreigners⁵. Secondly, the *Apologeticum* was professedly written not simply for a pagan audience, but in particular for officials of some kind, addressed in the opening as *Romani imperii antistites* (1.1) and at the close as *boni praesides* (50.12). Since such men were among those most likely to know whether or not this incident actually occurred, Tertullian must have believed that the facts he presented were true, or at least would be accepted as such by his audience. There is thus little reason to doubt the historicity of Tertullian's story, and indeed few scholars have done so.

But the arguments which support the veracity of the story do not necessarily support the validity of its interpretation. Although Tertullian was probably unwilling actually to invent a story that could be spotted as a falsehood by his audience, it was quite a different thing to use a true story in order to create a misleading impression. This was a standard tactic in ancient rhetoric, as a cursory survey of Cicero's speeches will reveal. Accordingly any unusual features in Tertullian's presentation of this story call for close investigation. There is in fact a very interesting discrepancy, obvious enough when one notices it, but which has received little comment. This is a fairly sharp discontinuity between the story of the priests' punishment and the framework into which Tertullian puts it. He begins with the general observation that *infantes penes Africam Saturno immolabantur palam*, and concludes with the avowal that the practice still continues in secret. In both cases he clearly intends the reader to think of a phenomenon fairly common in Africa. But when he comes to describe the repression of the practice, he moves from the general to the particular. He is clearly no longer speaking about a general occurrence taking place throughout Africa, but about the fate of particular priests in a specific although unnamed location⁶. There are in this passage, then, two different events: on the

not exact, this is very likely the sort of imagery that Tertullian had in mind. *Votivus* would of course have more point if it modified *sacerdotes* rather than *arboribus*: it is possible that in the transmission of this difficult passage the original accusative was altered to an ablative under the influence of *crucibus*.

5 For the variety of crucifixion, see Sen. *Dial.* 6.20.3: *Video istic cruces ne unius quidem generis sed aliter ab aliis fabricatas: capite quidem conversos in terram suspendere, alii per obscena stipitem egerunt, alii brachia patibulo explicuerunt*; for a full discussion of the nature of crucifixion, see M. Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia 1977) 22–32; for its application to foreigners, see 46–50.

6 It is worth noting that the location of this shrine is unknown. Most scholars have simply assumed that Tertullian meant Carthage: see, e.g., M. LeGlay, *Saturne africain. Histoire* (Paris 1966) 322 and Barnes (above, n. 2) 14–21. This assumption seems to me unwarranted, since priests of Saturn could be found throughout Africa. Nor does the archaeological evidence from Carthage suggest that it was an important center of the cult: cf. M. LeGlay, *Saturne africain. Monuments. I: Afrique proconsulaire* (Paris 1961) 14–24. Most major sanctuaries were in fact rural; it is more likely that one of these, away from the Romanizing influence of

one hand, the end of child sacrifice in North Africa as an open and accepted practice, and, on the other, the Roman crucifixion of certain priests of Saturnus at one particular shrine. Tertullian implies that these two events are closely related, that the crucifixion of this group of priests led more or less directly to the disappearance of child sacrifice. To what extent can we believe this interpretation?

We may first note that it is almost impossible for the end of public child sacrifice to have been the direct result of the action taken against these priests. If in fact child sacrifice were as widely practiced at the time of this incident as Tertullian implies, the Romans would quite obviously not have been able to wipe it out by the punishment of one group of priests. It is conceivable, of course, that the Romans intended this action to serve as an indication of their attitudes and as an example of what lay in store for those who refused to follow it, and that in fact most Africans did take the hint. But it is easier to see a direct link between this event and the end of child sacrifice if we assume that the crucifixion of the priests took place in the context of some larger program. We would at least expect the proconsul to have issued some general ban of child sacrifice before inflicting this punishment of the priests. The Romans may have found human sacrifice repugnant, but they also recognized the importance of ancestral custom. Since it was well known that child sacrifice had long been practised in Africa, it would have been unusually harsh to take such drastic measures against its practitioners without first giving them the chance to cease of their own accord. The contrast with an incident recounted by Plutarch is instructive. When the Romans learned that a tribe called the Bletonesii had sacrificed a man to the gods, they sent for their leaders in order to punish them; but when they learned that this was done in accordance with custom, they merely sent them away with a warning to abandon the practice⁷.

the colony and the regular surveillance of the governor, was the scene for the events that Tertullian describes. On the other hand, the *militia* that Tertullian cites as the source of his information was probably not the Roman legion in Africa, the III Augusta, but the urban cohort of Carthage. The legion was at this time stationed some 450 km away at Lambaesis, and its command belonged not to the proconsul, but to the imperial legate of Numidia. The urban cohort, however, was under the direct control of the proconsul: see H. Freis, *Die Cohortes Urbanae* (= *EpigStud* 2, 1967) 31–36. Soldiers from the urban cohort were active throughout Proconsularis, but rarely at great distances from Carthage: they served as *stationarii* in Thuburbo Maius (*AE* 1954, 53) and in Sullethum (*ILS* 2123), while another settled a boundary dispute between the inhabitants of Thabora and Thimisua in the Siliana valley (*CIL* 8.23910). It is likely, then, that the crucifixion of the priests took place at a rural sanctuary not too far from Carthage. An obvious possibility is the sanctuary on the Djebel bou Kournein, the distinctive twin-peaked mountain across the bay from Carthage (cf. LeGlay, *Monuments* 1.32–73), although other sites are equally possible.

⁷ Plut. *Quaest. rom.* 83; C. Cichorius, "Staatliche Menschenopfer", in: *Römische Studien* (Leipzig 1922) 7–21 at 9f. plausibly associates this tribe with the city of Bletisa in Lusitania. He goes on to suggest that this incident took place after 97 B.C., when P. Licinius Crassus was proconsul of Hispania Ulterior, in which Bletisa was located.

Since the same course of action was possible in dealing with the priests of Saturnus, it is difficult to believe that the proconsul chose instead to resort immediately to violent punishment.

At the least, then, we should assume that public child sacrifice in Africa came to an end as the result of a Roman ban, the serious nature of which was made clear by the exemplary punishment of one group of priests who refused to comply. Thereafter, the practice may have continued, but only in secret, as Tertullian asserts, since the practitioners were now fully aware of the possible penalties. But even this scenario is not entirely plausible. In an area as vast as Roman Africa, with the lack of efficient mass communication, it is unlikely that one action, no matter how drastic, would have served as an effective warning for the entire population. This is all the more true because the worship of Saturnus was most firmly rooted not in the relatively Romanized towns, but in the countryside. In particular, the most important sanctuaries of the god were almost always rural. Accordingly, the enforcement of such a ban would necessarily have been an ongoing task, in which the scene described by Tertullian would no doubt have been played out on several occasions. In short, if child sacrifice did come to an end as the result of Roman intervention, that intervention must almost certainly have taken the form of a general campaign, of which the story told by Tertullian constituted only one episode.

For Tertullian's interpretation to be entirely convincing, then, it seems necessary to postulate some general campaign, an ongoing enforcement of a ban, even though Tertullian himself says nothing about any such campaign. Is there any other evidence to suggest that there was in fact some general action along these lines? There is certainly no other direct textual evidence. As I noted at the beginning, this passage is the only extant literary text that deals with the Roman response to the practice of child sacrifice within the province of Africa. There are, however, two other types of evidence. One consists of parallel situations, other religious practices or groups forbidden and suppressed by the Romans. The other is the archaeological evidence for child sacrifice in Africa, which allows us to chart its disappearance with some degree of specificity. I shall look first at the former of these.

Human sacrifice in general was a crime in the Roman world, and we know of several specific prohibitions. The earliest of these dates to 97 B.C., when according to Pliny a *senatus consultum* was passed forbidding the practice. Although the circumstances surrounding this decree are obscure, it is quite likely that its general context was that of an attack on magic, superstition and foreign religious practices, categories among which the Romans perceived considerable overlap. Human sacrifice was in fact considered a defining feature of magic in particular, and it is as a species of magic in general that it is criminalized in the *Sententiae* of Paulus⁸. But while the legal status of human sacrifice

8 Plin. *Nat.* 30.12: *Cn. Cornelio Lentulo P. Licinio Crasso consulibus senatusconsultum factum est, ne homo immolaretur*; for the context of this decree, cf. J. A. North, "Religious Toleration

within the Roman empire indicates that the Romans would have repressed the practice in Africa if that had been necessary, it does not actually prove that they did so. More important in this respect are those cases in which the Romans are known to have taken action against a particular group. The persecution of Christians is an obvious parallel, especially since Christian ritual was thought to involve the ritual murder of an infant. But this parallel introduces more complexities than it resolves, and so I shall leave it to one side.

The best known example of a general campaign such as that postulated against child sacrifice in Africa is the suppression of the Druids in Gaul. There is much about this episode as well that is obscure and controversial, especially concerning the specific stages of the suppression and the motivations behind it. Nevertheless, it is generally conceded that the Druids were the object of specific and apparently repeated prohibitions made at the highest levels, and that these prohibitions were carried out by force when necessary, with the final result that by the latter part of the first century A.D. Druids had all but disappeared from the Celtic world⁹. Their suppression certainly proves that the Romans could have carried out a similar campaign in Africa. There is, however, a significant difference between the Roman actions in Gaul and in Africa. It is quite clear that the former were directed against the Druids as a class; some scholars have even suggested that the charges of human sacrifice were a side issue, made to justify what was essentially an act of political and social repression¹⁰. But there is no evidence that the Romans were interested in wiping out the priests of Saturnus. On the contrary, they continued to thrive throughout the period of the Empire, as the hundreds of extant inscriptions attest¹¹. Thus the Roman action in Africa was directed against a practice, while that in Gaul was directed against a group. We may nevertheless conclude that the Romans were certainly capable of carrying out a campaign in Africa such

in Republican Rome", *PCPS* n.s. 25 (1979) 99 n. 5. The whole passage of Pliny is a good example of the connections that a Roman could make between magic and foreign religion. Paul. *Sent.* 23.16 (under the heading of the *Lex Cornelia de sicariis at veneficis*): *Qui hominem immolaverint exve eius sanguine litaverint ..., bestiis obiciuntur, vel si honestiores sint, capite puniuntur*. On magic as a crime, see A. F. Segal, "Hellenistic Magic. Some Questions of Definition", in: R. van den Broek/M. J. Vermaseren (eds.), *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religion presented to G. Quispel* (Leiden 1981) 349–375, esp. 356–362; C. R. Phillips, "Nullum Crimen sine Lege. Socioreligious Sanctions on Magic", in: C. A. Faraone/D. Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera* (New York 1991) 260–276.

⁹ According to Suetonius (*Claud.* 25.5), Augustus forbade Druidism to Roman citizens, while Claudius abolished it entirely; according to Pliny (*Nat.* 30.13), however, Tiberius was responsible for the ban on Druidism. For the problem of dating, see e.g. Barnes (above, n. 2) 17.

¹⁰ H. Last, "Rome and the Druids. A Note", *JRS* 39 (1949) 1–5, accepts human sacrifice as the main reason for Roman repression, but others have argued that it was largely a side issue: most recently D. Nash, "Reconstructing Poseidonius' Celtic Ethnography. Some Considerations", *Britannia* 7 (1976) 11–26 at 23–26 and M. Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea* (New York 1987) 239–244.

¹¹ For the priests of Saturnus, see LeGlay, *Histoire* (above, n. 6) 359–400.

as that implied by Tertullian's interpretation of his story. Whether or not they in fact did so, however, cannot be proved by citing analogous campaigns in other parts of the empire. More help on this point may be obtained by a consideration of the archaeological evidence.

In Punic practice, the remains of sacrificed children were placed in urns and buried in sacred precincts, which in the modern literature are usually called tophets. A number of tophets from the pre-Roman period have been excavated in Africa, Sicily and Sardinia, but the only excavated tophet whose use extended into the Roman period is that of Hadrumetum. The archaeological evidence is thus not extensive, but it is nevertheless suggestive. The original excavator, P. Cintas, identified six different levels of urn burials. Those of the first level, starting in the early sixth century B.C., yield only the bones of children, while in those of the second level, dating from the early fourth to the early third centuries B.C., bones of lambs begin to appear as well. The urns of the third level, beginning in the late third century B.C., yield the remains of animals just as often as those of children. In the fourth level, from the mid second to the mid first century B.C., the urns are smaller and cruder, but still contain the bones of infants as well as those of animals. It is only in the fifth level, dating from the end of the first century B.C. to the end of the first century A.D., that the remains of children are displaced entirely by those of small animals¹². In Hadrumetum, at any rate, it is clear that although the rites that took place on the tophet changed over time, they did so slowly: there is little indication of any rapid alteration. In particular, child sacrifice was apparently practiced for roughly a century after the Romans gained control of the area. In Hadrumetum, then, it appears that child sacrifice was initially maintained under Roman rule and only gradually abandoned, perhaps from pressure on the part of the Roman residents to end the barbarous practice, perhaps from a desire on the part of the Punic citizens to become more Roman¹³.

The archaeological evidence from Hadrumetum creates serious problems for the interpretation which Tertullian gives to his story. If the practice of child sacrifice in Africa were so popular that the Romans had to resort to violent punishment in order to effect their ban on it, we should not expect it to have either tapered off gradually in the pre-Roman period or lingered on under

12 I have used L. Foucher, *Hadrumetum* (Tunis 1964) 36–39, who follows the original report of P. Cintas, “Le sanctuaire punique de Sousse”, *Revue Africaine* 92 (1947) 1–82; see also Brown (above, n. 1) 58–61. Hadrumetum, as a *civitas libera*, retained in theory control over its internal affairs, but the Romans no doubt had the authority to influence their decisions, especially as by the time of Caesar a *conventus civium Romanorum* is attested there: J. Gascou, “La politique municipale de Rome en Afrique du Nord I. De la mort d’Auguste au début du III^e siècle”, *ANRW* II.10.2 (1982) 136–229 at 169.

13 In most of the shrines of the Roman period in which the sacrificial remains have been examined, they are of birds or small animals: see for example the shrine north of Thuburnica (LeGlaz, *Monuments*, above, n. 6, 276f.) and those at Thugga and Thinissut (LeGlaz, *Histoire*, above, n. 6, 333).

Roman rule. We would expect rather to see the evidence continue at a more or less steady rate, and then disappear at a more or less defined point: quite the opposite of what is found in Hadrumetum. Consequently, I would argue that the interpretation of this episode to which Tertullian leads his audience is simply wrong. The practice of child sacrifice in Africa was not wiped out by the Romans, but outside of Carthage at least was already in decline by the second century B.C.¹⁴ The annexation of Africa as a Roman province probably hastened its disappearance, but probably as the result more of indirect social and political pressures than of a general ban and a military campaign.

If the incident described by Tertullian was not part of a general campaign against child sacrifice, and did not play a key role in its disappearance, under what circumstances might it have taken place? The gradual disappearance of child sacrifice in the first century B.C. does not preclude the possibility that it was maintained or sporadically revived by individuals or small groups. There is in fact some slight archaeological evidence for this. At Lambafundi in Numidia, fifteen steles dating to the second/third century A.D. have been found, each with two to four sacrificial urns buried beneath it. In most of these the bones contained therein are animals and birds, but in two cases they are of young children. Although the evidence is uncertain, it is at least possible that these children were sacrificed¹⁵. Tertullian's story would make perfect sense in the context of such an isolated occurrence of child sacrifice. Indeed, if we suppose that the practice was no longer common at the time of the incident, the drastic and apparently summary punishment becomes easier to explain. In such a situation the proconsul would not need to explain that such practices were unacceptable under the new dispensation, but could simply assume that the priests were aware of their crime and punish them accordingly.

To return finally to Tertullian, I would argue that he came upon the story of the priests' crucifixion and deliberately used it in his work to create a misleading impression of the end of child sacrifice in Africa. His motivations for doing so become apparent if we examine his rhetorical tactics. Tertullian was at this point in his argument defending Christians against the accusations of child sacrifice and ritual cannibalism which were commonly made in the

14 In Carthage itself the practice seems to have continued relatively unabated until the destruction of the city in 146 B.C.: L. E. Stager: "The Rite of Child Sacrifice at Carthage", in: J. G. Pedley (ed.), *New Light on Ancient Carthage* (Ann Arbor 1980) 1–11. The sites in Sicily and Sardinia were abandoned earlier.

15 Lambafundi: M. LeGlay, *Saturne africain, Monuments. II: Numidie-Mauretanie* (Paris 1966) 114–124. LeGlay argues that some of the steles are funeral steles of children dedicated after death to Saturnus, and so placed among the votive steles. Thus, the presence of human bones amidst animal bones does not prove that the children were actually sacrificed, as the animals presumably were. But if the children and animals are found in the same place, treated in the same way, why should we suppose that the one group was sacrificed and the other not? Cf. n. 1 above.

second century¹⁶. In the terminology of Latin rhetoric, this was a conjectural issue: did the Christians engage in such practices, or did they not? In the absence of non-artificial proofs (e.g. witnesses and documents), Tertullian relied in chapter eight on artificial proofs, arguments from the nature of the people or the actions. In chapter nine he supplemented these with the retorsion argument, the demonstration that the charges were more true of the accusers than of the defendants¹⁷. In this context he had recourse to various well known instances of human sacrifice, of which the Carthaginian practice of child sacrifice was one of the most familiar. His list, which also includes the Gauls, the Taurians, and the games of Jupiter Latiaris, in fact comprises a stock set of exempla. It appears in almost the same form in the *Scorpiace* (7.6) and also in Minucius Felix, who cites in addition to Tertullian's examples the mythical Egyptian king Busiris and the Roman inhumation of two Greeks and two Gauls (*Octavius* 30.3–4). But although this list of exempla was ready at hand, it did not exactly serve his needs. Its origins lay in Academic arguments concerning the relativity of law and morality, and in that context ancient and even mythical examples served as well as contemporary ones¹⁸. But Tertullian's purpose was to demonstrate that these practices were a part of contemporary paganism, and to this end he selected, contracted, and modified the traditional material.

To begin with, he eliminated entirely two of the examples, those of Busiris and the Roman inhumation of Greeks and Gauls, because they so obviously took place in the distant past. He did mention the Taurians, but only to dismiss them as a mere tale from the theater. On the other hand, he elaborated on and saved for last the games of Jupiter Latiaris. Here was the perfect material for his argument: "But look, in that most religious of cities, the city of the pious descendents of Aeneas, there is a certain Jupiter whom they drench with human blood at his own games."¹⁹ In order to complement this suggestion of

16 The charges are presented in *Apol.* 7.1: *Dicimur sceleratissimi de sacramento infanticidii et pabulo inde et post convivium incesto*, see also Justin. *I Apol.* 26.7; Tatian. *Or.* 25.3; Athenag. *Leg.* 3 and 31–35; Min. Fel. 9.5–7. For detailed discussions of these stories and their origins, see above all F. Dölger, "Sacramentum infanticidii: Die Schlachtung eines Kindes und der Genuss seines Fleisches und Blutes als vermeintlicher Einweihungsakt im ältesten Christentum", *Ant. & Chr.* 4 (1934) 188–228; A. Henrichs, *Die Phoinikika des Lollianos* (Bonn 1972) 12–16, see id., "Human Sacrifice in Greek Religion", in: O. Reverdin/B. Grange (eds.), *Le sacrifice dans l'antiquité*, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 27, Vandœuvres-Genève 1981, 224–232; more recently S. Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (London 1985) 54–78.

17 *Apol.* 9.1: *Haec, quo magis refutaverim, a vobis fieri ostendam partim in aperto, partim in occulto, per quod forsitan et de nobis credidistis*. For a close rhetorical analysis of these chapters, see R. D. Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian* (Oxford 1971) 45–48.

18 Cf. Cic. *Rep.* 3.15, from Carneades, and Orig. *Cels.* 5.27, again probably from Carneades: H. Chadwick, "Origen, Celsus and the Stoa", *Journ. Theol. Stud.* 48 (1948) 34–49. Note also the first specific reference to the Carthaginian practice: [Plat.] *Minos* 315B–C.

19 *Apol.* 9.5. The games of Jupiter Latiaris are cited by a number of apologists: Justin *II Apol.* 12,

human sacrifice in Rome, he needed some way to take the traditional example of Carthaginian child sacrifice out of the realm of history and give it more relevance and immediacy. The story of the crucifixion, which he hoped would be familiar to at least some of his audience, provided just the sort of detail that he required. By giving it full rhetorical weight but at the same time leaving its context vague and general, he could imply that public child sacrifice in Africa was not a thing of the distant past, but had continued into relatively recent times. It is for the same reason that he ended his account by asserting that it still continued, as a hidden and secret rite, into his own times²⁰.

In conclusion, I am convinced that the accepted interpretation of this passage is mistaken. Given the paucity of evidence, we of course cannot be certain that there was no Roman campaign against child sacrifice in Africa. Similar actions in other parts of the empire certainly lend support to that possibility. This passage of the *Apologeticum*, however, can only with a number of provisos be used as evidence for it. It is clear enough that in it Tertullian has associated two distinct events. As I have argued, the true nature of these events may have been quite unlike Tertullian's presentation of them. It is not difficult to believe that he would have misled his audience in order to strengthen his argument, or to find motivation for such a tactic in this particular case. Indeed, in this case Tertullian's rhetorical success may have been such that he was able to mislead not only the audience of his own time, but also readers of his work for centuries to come²¹.

Theophil. *Ad Autol.* 3.8, Tatian. *Or.* 29, Lact. *Div. inst.* 1.21.3, and Athanas. *Contra gent.* 25; it also turns up in Porph. *De abst.* 2.56.9. H. J. Rose; "De Iove Latiari", *Mnemosyne* n.s. 55 (1927) 273–279, argues that it is a later misunderstanding of references to games, which certainly fits the description given by Tertullian.

20 It seems to me that Tertullian's interest in providing his audience with contemporary material also supports a date for the crucifixion of the priests within his own lifetime. The text itself may favor this date as well. The phrase *teste militia patris nostri / patriae nostrae*, quite apart from the textual problem, strongly implies an oral account from a witness. The word *testis* can also be used of a written source, but it is not clear what sort of written source *militia* could be. Barnes (above, n. 2) 324 suggests that it is an appeal "to the corporate memory of the urban cohort stationed in Carthage as the repository of a tradition about an event which occurred long ago." But in the early second century A.D. the urban cohort of Lugdunum was exchanged with that of Carthage, nor does the original cohort seem to have been established before the early 90s A.D.; if this is correct, the corporate memory of the cohort would not extend as far back as the early empire, when Barnes would date this episode: see Y. Le Bohec, "Les troupes en garnison dans la province d'Afrique sous le Haut-Empire", *Bull. Arch. Com. Trav. Hist.* 15/16 B (1979/80 [1984]) 47–49 and F. Bérard, "Aux origines de la cohorte urbaine de Carthage", *Ant. Afr.* 27 (1991) 39–51.

21 For their helpful advice and suggestions, I owe thanks to Darice Birge, Maura Lafferty, Mark Petrini, James Zetzel, and to Fritz Graf and the readers of this journal.