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Bad Boys: Circumcellions and Fictive Violence

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Abstract: The circumcellions were roving bands of violent men and women found in late Roman Africa. The problem is that far more of them have been produced by literary fictions, ancient and modern, than once existed. The fictions have their own intriguing history, but they are otherwise useless for those who are interested in the banality of what actually happened.

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Bad Boys: Circumcellions and Fictive Violence

The roving bands of armed men, and women, who wandered through the north African countryside in the late fourth and early fifth century, known as circumcellions, engaged in violent assaults on their sectarian enemies. These circumcellion bands were a characteristic element of the sectarian violence that rent the two Christian churches, the Catholic and “the Donatist,” into which the Christian community in Africa had come to be divided in the post-Constantian age.¹ The aim of this inquiry is not to describe these violent men and their activities yet again, but rather to begin a process of questioning the standard claims made about them by modern historians.² The essence of the modern project of identifying the circumcellions and their activities has been to apply all available data in order to produce a general picture of a social movement. In the rush to sketch this picture, however, the nature of the data has never been fully and rigorously interrogated nor has the historical context of their production

¹ This paper is based on the oral presentation made at the Shifting Frontiers V Conference. The arguments and the evidence are much abbreviated ones those found in a rather lengthy paper entitled “Who Were the Circumcellions?,” [in] A.H. Merrills ed., Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique Africa (London, 2004) 00-00.

² A list of standard works would be prohibitive. For our purposes, it is sufficient to consult W.H.C. Frend, The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa (Oxford, 1952; rev. ed., 1971); J.-P. Brisson, Autonomisme et christianisme dans l’Afrique romaine de Septime Sévère à l’invasion vandale (Paris, 1958) 000-000; H.-J. Diesner, Kirche und Staat in spätromischen Reich: Aufsätze zur Spätantike und zur Geschichte der Alten Kirche (Berlin, 1963) chs. 4-5; and E. Tengström, Donatisten und Katholiken: Soziale, wirtschaftliche und politische Aspekte einer nordafrikanischen Kirchenspaltung (Göteborg 1964), 00-00: between them, these authors cite most of the earlier relevant bibliography. A number of Frend’s papers in which he continues the same line of argument that he began in the early 1950s will be cited to demonstrated the continuity of the some of the basic arguments through to the end of the twentieth century.

been carefully considered. This uncritical marshalling of all possible evidence has understandable psychological roots. In their overwhelming 'desire for evidence,' historians of the circumcellion question have grasped at whatever data are available. Because the data for this particular problem are not very numerous, historians have tended to cobble together all statements as if they are all of more or less equal value.³ What I propose here is an exploratory foray into the nature of the evidence. The results, I promise, will be entirely negative.

It is necessary to begin with a typology of the existing data. When all the surviving data on the circumcellions are collated, it can readily be seen that they fall into two broad categories. There is, indeed, an almost palpable distinction between the 'internal' and the 'external' sources that deal with the circumcellions. By 'internal' sources I mean African ones and by 'external' ones those written by men who had no direct first-hand knowledge derived from personal experience of the realities of sectarian violence in its African context. An important part of my argument will be that these two types of sources cannot be indiscriminately mixed with each other or treated as a homogeneous whole simply because all of them are 'ancient sources' concerned with the same problem. The objection is important because lack of source discrimination has characterized the practice followed by most modern historians in their analyses of the problem.

Our story properly begins with the late-fourth century resurgence of interest in heresy and heretics. The late fourth-century concern with heretics is not so much one of internal ideological defense and cleansing as it is one of the identification of a wide range of varied types of external enemies. Rather than the extensive detailed theological treatise, therefore, it is the "heresy list" that is the characteristic document of this second age of anti-heretical endeavor.⁴ It is

³ Characteristic, for example, is the use of 'Praedestinatus,' Cassiodorus, Isidore, and Tyconius by Tengström in his influential analysis of the circumcellions: Donatisten und Katholiken, e.g. pp. 38-41, 56, 58, 60.

⁴ One of these that has become attached to the writings of Tertullian, although it manifestly belongs to this later age. Usually referred to as the Adversus omnes haereses, it is a discursive discussion of thirty-two heresies. In our standard texts,

this latter tradition that produced the extensive “hit lists” of heretics that are the important context for understanding the outsiders’ knowledge and writings about circumcellions. The lists were meant to provide quick identity profiles by which believers could recognize any one of the variegated host of enemies that orthodoxy faced. It is important to understand that it is to this specific ideological and textual context to which almost all of our texts about circumcellions from sources outside Africa belong. That is to say, the statements belong by category to a type of knowledge interest that is alien to debates within African Christianity. They were connected instead to the dominant eastern and northern Mediterranean ecclesiastical and political power struggles of the time.

The earliest of these external sources is a work written in the late 390s by Filastrius, the Catholic bishop of Brixia (Brescia) in northern Italy.⁵ Brixia was part of a cluster of bishoprics in northern Italy implicated in networks of information centered on Ambrose’s imperial seat at Milan. The channels of communication by which Filastrius would have acquired knowledge of happenings in Africa would have been through the circle of informants around Ambrose. We know that Filastrius was an occasional visitor at Milan through the mid 380s when he would have had the opportunity to hear about happenings in north Africa from men such as Alypius, Evodius, and Augustine.⁶ But it is equally clear that the information given to Filastrius consisted of simple outlines of ‘the opposition’ — caricatures that we can also see in the literature of accusation and blame that was part of a hostile sectarian discourse within Africa

it is usually appended to the De praescriptione haereticorum; for the text see F. Oehler, Corpus Haeresiologicum, 1: scriptores haeresiologicos minores latinos (Berlin, 1856) 271-79.

⁵ C. Pietri & L. Pietri eds., PCBE, 2: Prosopographie de l’Italie chrétienne (313-604), vol. 1, A-K (Paris-Rome, 1999) s.v. “Filaster,” 817-19: set his death at some time after 387 but before 397; they date the Diversarum haeresion liber to “before 391.”

⁶ Aug. Ep. 222.2 (CSEL 57: 442); an evocative and precise description of this social group can be found in Peter Brown, “Ambrose,” ch. 8 [in] Augustine of Hippo: A Biography (Berkeley-London, 2000) 79-87.

itself. When these salient characteristics, often not much above the level of crude labeling, came into the hands of Filastrius, and were further refined by him, the caricature of the circumcellions that resulted was rather odd. First, they are identified by an unusual name: Filastrius calls them “circulators” (circuitores) rather than circumcelliones. And his description succinctly identifies the circumcellions as a wandering “death sect” whose members were hell-bent on self-destruction in the name of martyrdom.⁷

There are others [sc. other heretics] in Africa who are the so-called circuitores. These men wander about the land and they compel those persons whom they encounter on the road to kill them, declaring that they desire to suffer martyrdom. Under this pretext many of them live their lives as bandits up to the time of their death. Some of them, however, die as biothanati by throwing themselves off heights; or they suffer a different type of death as the result of a deliberately sought tragedy. Those who hurry, without any rational cause, to die in this way are willing to accept the condemnation that an honest death reflects on their own. Indeed, rather than releasing themselves from the coming judgment of God, they are in fact condemning themselves to it.

To an outside reader unacquainted with the reality of the circumcellions in Africa, the general picture that they would derive from this description would be tout court that of a bizarre and somewhat irrational suicide cult. Part of this construction depends on a categorization of these people as biothanati, which was not at all an African understanding of the nature of these deaths, but which belonged to an external, ultimately Greek and eastern, typology of deaths.⁸ The

⁷ Filastrius Brixienis, Diversarum hereseon liber, 85.57 (CCL 9: 254)

⁸ On biothanati, a Latin term from the Greek biothanatos (and a collateral form biaiothanati), see S.I. Johnston, “The Unavenged: Dealing with Those who Die Violently,” ch. 4 [in] The Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece (Berkeley, 1999) 127-60.

solitary facts that Filastrius wishes to impart to his reader is that these “circulators” were madmen who wandered aimlessly around the countryside of Africa, so intent on suffering the deaths of martyrs that they were willing to compel unfortunate wayfarers whom they encounter on the roads to kill them.

The next external source on the circumcellions is another heresy list, but one that represents an elaboration of the primitive efforts of Filastrius. When precisely it was written is difficult to determine. Its anonymous author copied portions of the works of Jerome, and so has come to be known as “pseudo-Jerome.” All that we can say is that the work, conventionally known as the Indiculus de haeresibus, is definitely post-Hieronymian.⁹ Having mentioned the Donatiani as his 32nd heresy, the author proceeds to list other heresies that are closely allied to them, including the circumcellions (heresy number 33) and the ‘Mountaineers’ (heresy number 35).¹⁰

⁹ See G. Bardy, “L’Indiculus de haeresibus du pseudo-Jérôme,” RSR 19 (1929) 385-405, for some of the problems. I accept Bardy’s argument that would date the piece to the period between 393, because the author copies items from Jerome’s De viris illustribus, and 428, when Augustine refers to and quotes from the work in c. 81 of his Liber de haeresibus (CCL 46: 336). It is also important to note that the text is usually preserved with the works by Isidore for the reason (I accept) that Isidore was using it as one of his sources. De Labriolle advanced a different thesis that would interpret the relationship between the author and Isidore inversely, and which would therefore date this tract to some time after Isidore (see P. de Labriolle, Les sources de l’histoire du montanisme [Fribourg-Paris, 1913], pp. cxxxii-cxxxiv). The matter, however, is too detailed to be debated here. Although other connections are theoretically possible, I accept that Augustine’s reference to an anonymous work that contained the precise wording of the Indiculus is probably from this work and not a precursor to it.

¹⁰ Indiculus de haeresibus, 45 (Oehler, Corpus haereseologicum, 1, 295-96); on the surface of it, Francesco Arevalo’s text, copied by Migne, ought to be the better one, because it is a collation of more manuscripts; but I take Claude Ménard’s text of 1617, reprinted in Oehler, to be superior. He clearly saw the critical work ‘Gotispitas’ (which he might well have misread from ‘Cotipitas’) which makes

Thirty-third (heresy). Circumcellions, whom they call Gotispitai [Cotipitae?], share the teaching of the above-mentioned heresy. These deranged men follow the path of their own madness, which is well known to everyone. Because they love the name martyr and because they desire human praise more than divine charity, they kill themselves. After they have uttered a prayer, they commit suicide by throwing themselves off a height, or by self-immolation, or by the sword — that is, by asking other persons to kill them. They do this so that by departing from this life violently, they will acquire the name of martyrs.

Here the name of the circumcelliones is fixed accurately in an external source for the first time and it is closely linked to what has already become a typical picture of them. Fundamentally it is that of a suicide cult whose members are driven by a desire for martyrdom. It is now specified that its members commit suicide by the sword or by fire in addition to self-precipitation. Typical words indicating madness or deranged behavior that will appear consistently in the later labeling of these persons — such as insania and dementia — are added to the brief description for the first time. Perhaps more important is the fact that the definition of the circumcellions as a heresy now assumes its classic structural form. In the Indiculus, the circumcellions follow directly after the definition of the heresy of “the ‘Donatists” (still called Donatiani) who are not only given priority in the definition but who are also defined in terms that would be recognized by the disputants in Africa itself. The circumcellions are then attached as a subspecies of the heresy of the Donatiani. The Montenses, on the other hand, are now seen as peripheral to their African origins. They are listed individually and are separated from the Donatists and the circumcellions by the intervening heresy of the Novatians (number 34). They are grouped with the

sense of the Latin and which Arevalo purposefully omitted, surely on the grounds that it was apparently nonsensical.

followers of Novatian in a group of heresies with similar viewpoints, but whose geographical locus is the city of Rome.

This same external tradition is also very much present in a work from the pen of Augustine himself but which can only be said to be authored by him in a complex sense of authorship. This was Augustine's own "Book of Heresies" (Liber de haeresibus). The case is a caution against the easy categorization of sources as "internal" or "external" in my typology. In general, Augustine's writings on circumcellion violence constitute a most valuable body of evidence of unimpeachable primary status. This work, however, is an exception. The "Book of Heresies" was written by Augustine more in the manner of a literary pastiche than as an original composition, and late in his life. Although it appeared some four decades after the model work drafted by Filastrius, it belongs to the same heresy list tradition.¹¹ In the section concerned (the sixty-ninth chapter of the work) Augustine lists three heresies in a row: the Donatiani — to whom he gives in addition the standard African appellation of Donatistae — the Mountaineers, and the circumcellions.¹²

And those men also belong to this same heresy [i.e. of the Donatists] in Africa who are called circumcelliones, a rough and primitive type of men most notorious for their outrages — not just for the savage crimes that they perpetrate against others, but also because in their insane fury they do not spare even themselves. For they are accustomed to killing themselves by various kinds of deaths, but especially by throwing themselves off heights, by drowning, or by self-immolation. And they seduce others whom they can, of either sex, to join them in this same mad behavior. In

¹¹ L.G. Müller, transl., intro., comm., The De Haeresibus of Saint Augustine (Washington DC, 1956); for the basic background, see S. Jannacone, La dottrina eresiologia di S. Agostino (Catania, 1952).

¹² Augustine, Liber de haeresibus, 69.3 (CCL 46: 332). On some of the source problems, see G. Bardy, "Le De Haeresibus et ses sources," [in] Miscellanea Agostiniana, vol. 2 (Rome, 1931) 397-416; and Müller, De Haeresibus, 8-9.

order that they might be killed by others, sometimes they threaten these other persons with death if they do not kill them as ordered. It is true, however, that such things are very displeasing to many Donatists. But for some reason they do not believe that they are polluted by association with such men — these Donatists who crazily blame the Christian world in general for the crime of these unknown Africans.

Words and phrases such as genus hominum agreste, famosissima audacia, immania facinora and other verbal touches in this passage clearly suggest additions and elaborations drawing on the language of one of Augustine's favorite authors, the historian Sallust. The style of the whole, however, is not that of the bishop of Hippo. In representing the circumcellions as demented lunatics who wanted to vent violence on others and, irrationally, on themselves by different kinds of ritual suicide, this picture is structured according to the external caricature. How this dull list, in itself so alien to Augustine's more complex style, came to be part of his writings is well known. He was forced into writing it by the remorseless pleadings of Quodvultdeus of Carthage. Augustine grudgingly relented, primarily, one suspects, to get the Carthaginian pest off his back. It is important for our argument that the text of this work is not authored by Augustine in the precise sense that he composed the whole work afresh de novo. His "Book of Heresies" is, rather, a turgid list that lacks the verve and creativity of the author, and which betrays on every page that it is not much more than a re-canned work quickly put together from other existing sources. In fact, it is not much more than a lightly edited pastiche of two existing works: for its first 57 chapters it is a distillation of an abbreviated Greek version of Epiphanius' Panarion, the Anacephaleôsis. The source of the 23 additional heresies that constitute the core of the second half of the work is a more severely edited version of Filastrius' Liber de haeresibus. Finally, to complete the work, Augustine added eight more heresies drawn from various sources including Eusebius, the pseudo-Jerome, and from his own experience. Although he added a few supernumerary heresies to update heretical movements to that of the Pelagians, his particular bête-noire of the time, he otherwise depended on the

structure that Filastrius and the Indiculus had provided for the placing and description of the Donatists and the circumcellions.

The place that the circumcellions have in this peculiar work of Augustine's therefore more properly belongs to the image of them already configured by the external tradition. Augustine's intimate knowledge of what was happening in Africa, however, permits him to expand and to correct some of the basics of the framework provided by Filastrius and the writer of the Indiculus. First of all the entry for the Donatiani or Donatistae — the latter and more appropriate term appears here for the first time in the heresy list tradition — is a reasonably detailed account of the origins of the dissident church in Africa. Augustine then gives very short shrift to the so-called Mountaineers in Rome. As for the circumcellions, he adds some features that will be picked up in the later tradition. First of all, there is the Sallustian language: the fact that the circumcellions were a genus hominum agreste is striking and will have a real impact on the subsequent tradition. The primitive and lawless nature of the circumcellions is linked to the violence that they commit against others as well as against themselves. Augustine also adds the critical fact that there were dissidents in Africa who disassociated themselves from the violent actions of the circumcellions. This is another new item in the description that will be adopted by subsequent writers — but which will also be misunderstood by them. The phrase with which he completes the entry, that condemns “the ‘Donatists’” for blaming the rest of the Christian world outside Africa for their own faults was an old favorite of his, frequently used in sectarian polemic within Africa. Finally, and significantly, Augustine deletes all reference to martyrdom in the motivations of the circumcellions. The reasons are starkly and grossly political, but they were not understood by outsiders and would therefore largely be ignored in the later development of the external tradition. Martyrdom was already so deeply embedded in the outsiders' caricature of the circumcellions that it could not be rooted out, even by an Augustine.

The treatment of the circumcellions by Augustine is structurally complex in terms of tradition in that it is simultaneously “internal” and “external.” By accepting, however grudgingly, the crude confines of the genre of the heresy list, Augustine confirmed some parts of the existing picture while at the same time

contributing new elements. Amongst the existing elements that receive elaboration is the claim that the circumcellions deliberately provoked others to kill them.¹³ Because the Augustinian additions were made in the genre of the heresy list, they were easily adopted by outsiders who could more readily understand them precisely because of the mode in which they have made. As we shall see, however, only certain elements of these additions will be selected to contribute to the picture that was being created by the external tradition. Only as long as there were new parts of the story that were coherent with the external caricature would they be truly adaptable and useful. In this respect, Augustine will be exploited in ways that he himself probably would not have imagined to provide new materials for further elaborations of the idea of the circumcellion.

But the principal foyer of the crafting of the external image of the circumcellions was Italy, and there are good reasons to target centers not only in the north around Milan, but also in the south in Campania. The next external source noting the circumcellions is one such compilation, and one that also has strong links with the genre of the heresy list. Ascribed by Jacques Sirmond to a “Praedestinatus,” the work seems to have been composed in the decade after Augustine completed his *Liber de haeresibus*, in the mid to late 430s. The treatise was redacted in three books, the first of which adheres to the heresy list tradition. In order to demonstrate the orthodoxy of his own beliefs, the author defines 90 different heresies. The sixty-ninth heresy is that of the Donatists, and it is in this same section the author lists the *circumcelliones* as a subspecies of the “Donatist” heresy.¹⁴

¹³ Aug., *Ep.*, 185.12 (CSEL 57: 10-12) gives one of the most elaborate of descriptions of this sort of behavior more than a decade before the redaction of his *De haeresibus*, although, notably, he does not identify such ‘young men’ as *circumcelliones* and clearly give a quite different context for their violence (in the context of anti-pagan actions).

¹⁴ *Liber de haeresibus*, 69 (Oehler, *Corpus haereseologicum*, 1 [Berlin, 1856] 255-56).

These heretics (i.e. “Donatists”) who live in Italy are called the Mountaineers. In the interior of Africa they are called Parmenians and at Carthage, Donatists. In the two Numidias there are men who live like monks whom we call circumcellions, rough and most audacious slaves of demons who not only vent terrible savageries on others, but also do not spare themselves any suffering. For they are accustomed to commit suicide by different ways of dying, but especially by throwing themselves off heights, as well as by water and by fire. And they seduce as many persons of either sex as they are able to this same kind of death. Sometimes they ask persons whom they encounter to kill them, threatening them with death if they do not do this.

A number of conclusions can be made about this writer and his account of the circumcellions. First, he draws on earlier pre-Augustinian sources for the idea of the “Parmenians” as a principal division of the dissident church in Africa.¹⁵ But he also uses some of Augustine’s description, because he at least has the more appropriate internal label of Donatistae for the Donatists. Second, in a passage that is included in his sixty-first heresy, that of the Patriciani, he extracts ideas on the suicidal martyrdoms of the circumcellions and earlier notices on them as biothanati and attributes these characteristics to a heresy whose origins he locates in Numidia Superior and Mauretania.¹⁶

The sixty-first heresy is that of the Patriciani, who take their origin from Patricius . . . Some of them even ask persons whom they encounter (and who are otherwise completely unknown to them) to kill them. This madness began some time ago in the region of Upper Numidia and Mauretania. Then, following their example, some wretched Donatists, in order that they might be considered to

¹⁵ Parmenian was the dissident bishop of Carthage from the 360s to his death about 393.

¹⁶ Liber de haeresibus, 61 (Oehler, Corpus Haereseologicum, 1, 255-56).

be martyrs, began to throw themselves off mountain tops. But by abandoning eternal life within the Catholic faith, as biothanati they have found only eternal death. Optatus was chosen to do battle against them.

The reason for this odd split is that the author is using different sources, and with little discrimination. Outside of Augustine's "Book of Heresies" he found items that indicated the circumcellions' deranged desire for martyrdom and the fact that they were biothanati. As we have seen, Augustine had removed these items from his account of the circumcellions. Because this author wished to exploit as much of the existing circumcellion material as possible, he transferred these characteristics to his description of the Patriciani. His entry on the Donatists and circumcellions therefore is taken almost wholly from Augustine. He rephrases some of the Augustinian additions to the tradition, but they are still clearly identifiable. For example, the Sallustian phrase that Augustine added to his description of the circumcellions: genus hominum agreste et famosissimae audaciae is rephrased by our author as agrestes et audacissimos daemonum famulos. The reason for the alteration is not just one of stylistic variation. The change in phrase provides us with a small clue to a critical additional step in the formation of the external tradition. First, it is important to note the consensus that the author came from a southern Italian background, an observation that will have later resonances. The alteration is connected to another slight but significant addition that this author made to the tradition. He is the first to insert into his description of the circumcellions his understanding that these men were ones who lived velut monachos: their mode of life is "like that of monks." Although this innovation begins life rather innocently as no more than a descriptive simile, it was to have a long and influential history.

The context in which he made the suggestion, however, explains his alteration of Augustine's evocative Sallustian description of circumcellions that was intended to raise the specter of savage and primaeval men of the countryside as imagined in Sallust's account of the Catilinarian conspiracy. Augustine's use of Sallustian imagery makes good sense in Africa, given the background of the circumcellions that was so well known to Augustine and his

peers. But this was incomprehensible to those outside Africa who were working on the basis of a highly schematic caricature of a suicide cult. The author therefore rewords the appropriate Augustinian description to make these men “rough and wild servants of demons.” Working with the caricature and the basic categorization of the circumcellions as an heresy, the author thinks of them as a species of wild and out-of-control, and heretical, monastic.

Given local realities outside Africa where these views of circumcellions were being produced, these few words were something to which non-African writers were readily and easily attracted, and onto which they could graft materials about bad monks that were ready to hand. In the next sentence in our author we see much the same sort of misreading of Augustine’s original. Augustine speaks of the circumcellions who, by the use of force, ‘seduced’ other people of both sexes to their side — that is, to join the ranks of the dissident church. The author of this piece, however, understands the statement in more vivid hues that are colored by the existing caricature. For him, the circumcellions seduce others to the same death-cult and suicidal ends as themselves. What we see in this southern Italian source of the mid-fifth century, therefore, is a further elaboration of the caricature with the critical invention of the idea — no doubt based on local realities, as well as the debates and the discourses in which the writer himself was involved — that the circumcellions were a species of wild and dangerous monk.

Closer to the end of the external western Latin tradition on the circumcellions in Late Antiquity are some brief remarks in Cassiodorus. These are contained, significantly, in a consideration of Psalm 132, whose words frequently prompted discussions of the virtues of monastic life. As Cassiodorus himself suggests in the introduction to his comments, this particular Psalm had already become part of debates on the virtues and vices of monasticism: “Although some have thought that this message is addressed to monks, my view is that it pertains to the unity of Christians in general, since it is proclaimed not only to monastic communities but to the whole church . . . [therefore] although I do not dispute that it is addressed to holy monasteries, its message should not be isolated from the general body [i.e., of Christianity].” In commenting on Psalms 132.1, and specifically on the verse ‘Consider how good and pleasant it is to live

as brothers in common,' Cassiodorus is drawn to the parallels between the ideals of confraternal property and sharing, and the ideals propagated by monastic communities.¹⁷

“To inhabit,” which is to say, to continue with the same good intent or purpose. The “habitation” that God seeks is not a construction with walls that contains bodies, but a place that joins human spirits by means of a holy association. By this sort of definition, he [sc. the Psalmist] excludes circumcellions who wander about here and there with a purpose that is vacillating and quite different from that found in a monastic community.

Cassiodorus' entire discussion in this section of his commentary is devoted to the common life that characterized monastic communities. The only conception that he has of circumcellions is that they are like monks. But he is not willing to include them as true monastics because the spirit and intent of their wanderings is quite at odds with the higher values of a genuine monastic community. We see here the continuation of the same Italian tradition that had by the mid-fifth century produced the idea that the circumcellions were a kind of wandering and uncontrolled, if not violent, monk.

The final heir to the external picture of the circumcellion is Isidore of Seville, who, at the end of Antiquity, constructed his own outsider's perspective that became the last word in the external tradition in Late Antiquity. This is the definition and concept of the circumcellion that will be bestowed on mediaeval European tradition. From this point onward, circumcellio will be used as a term, now detached from any referent in Africa, to describe undesirable vagrant clerics. It is part of the combined external picture of them as violent monks and a suicidal martyr cult. Isidore's earliest notice on circumcellions is manifestly drawn from a tradition that combined lists of heresies on the one side with lists of monastics and ecclesiastical orders on the other. Composed in the first decade of the seventh century, his treatise “On Church Offices” (De ecclesiasticis officiis)

¹⁷ Cassiodorus, Expositio in Psalmos, 132.1 (CCL 98: 1206).

merges the two listing traditions to produce a strange pastiche-like picture of holy vagrant hucksters. It is important to note that the circumcellions are included as the fifth type in a list of six categories of monks — three of which are good and three of which are bad.¹⁸

The fifth type [sc. of monk] are the circellions who in the cover of monks wander everywhere, carrying off their pretence for personal profit, wandering around the provinces, not having been sent by anyone, and not having any fixed place of abode, never staying anywhere nor having settled homes. Some invent fictions about things they have not seen, presenting their own views as if they were those of God; others sell the body parts of martyrs (if indeed they are those of martyrs); others exalt their fringes and phylacteries, seeking a sense of glory from their listeners; still others walk around long-haired (so that the sacred cut will be held to be cheaper than their long hair) so that anyone who sees them will think them one of those ancients whom we read about — as a Samuel or an Elijah or one of the others. Still others proclaim that they have offices, which they in fact have not received. Others say to those who are listening to them that they have parents and relatives in this or that place, and they lie that they are just travelling to see them. And all of them beg, and they extort from everyone either the expenses of their costly poverty or the costs of their pretended holiness. In the meantime, wherever these men have been apprehended when they are caught involved in their evil deeds and words, or whenever they have been charged as infamous persons, the movement that goes under the general name of monks is cursed.

Here we have entered into a realm of pure fiction, all of it, it might be noted with some irony, propagated by Isidore rather than the “lying false monks” whom he

¹⁸ Isid. De eccl. Off. 2.16.7-8 (CCL 113: 76).

himself seems to have invented. The various sources in this literary collage are discernible. Some go back to circelliones, while other strands are derived from the idea, gradually developed and elaborated, that the circumcellions were vagrant monks, and false ones at that.

The source of the rest can easily be identified. Once the idea that the circumcellions were a species of monk had been made outside Africa, the works of Augustine could then be carefully sifted through to find references to wandering false monks. The fact that Augustine himself never once thought that the circumcellions were malicious monks — or indeed, any type of monk — was beside the point. Indeed, on those occasions when Augustine was specifically faced with talk about the evil institution of Catholic monastics for which he was blamed and on which he could easily have pointed to “Donatist” circumcellions as their evil counterpart, he signally failed to do so.¹⁹ If one was convinced a priori that circumcellions were a species of monastic, then it could be assumed that Augustine must have been speaking about the same men when he wrote about monks. The only problem that then faced the diligent researcher was to find some explicit Augustinian text on monks, preferably bad ones. The necessary additional evidence was provided by Augustine’s De opere monachorum. In the passages concerned, it must be stated as firmly as possible that Augustine is saying nothing whatsoever about circumcellions or men like them. They are never once averred to by name or even by allusion in the whole of his treatise. Rather, the work is a discussion of legitimate and illegitimate types of monastic life. Augustine warns that monks must live a life that would be approved of by Christ, a life which will not excite the disapproval of non-Christians and give them grounds for criticism of the faith:²⁰

¹⁹ Aug. Contra litt. Petil., 3.40.48 (CSEL, 52: 201): Where Petilian launches a vituperative attack on monks and monastics: ‘Deinceps perrexit ore maledico in vituperationem monasteriorum et monachorum’; he attacks Augustine for inventing this form of life. It is significant that in his refutation Augustine never points to the circumcellions. The connection never occurs to him, but he surely would not have missed this point, if he could have made it.

²⁰ Aug. De op. mon. 28.36 (CSEL 41: 585-86).

O slaves of God, soldiers of Christ, it is in this way that you will foil the ambushes of that most cunning enemy (i.e. the Devil), who fears your good reputation, that good odor of Christ, so that people of good spirit will not say “we will run after the fragrance of your perfumes.” [Cant. 1.3]. In this way you will avoid the snares of that enemy of ours with all of his stench — he who has dispersed through the world so many hypocrites who live in the dress of monks, who wander around the provinces, never sent by anyone, never settled, never stopping, never having fixed abodes. Some sell the bodily parts of martyrs (if indeed they are martyrs); others exalt their fringes and phylacteries. Some of them say to those who listen to them that they have parents or relatives in this or that region — and they lie that they are travelling just to see them. They all beg, and they all extort, either the costs of their profitable poverty or the price of their pretended holiness; in the meantime they have been caught here and there doing their evil deeds; or they are declared infamous in some way, then your good purpose is cursed under the general name of “monks” — something which is so good and so holy, that we desire it in the name of Christ — that, just as through other foreign lands, they should now spread and flourish throughout all of Africa.

Augustine’s warnings about false monks were copied almost word for word by Isidore, or his source, omitting some phrases which only makes the actual meaning of the original more difficult to discern. Isidore, or his source, then leapt forward several chapters in Augustine’s work on monks to find another disreputable species of type — long-haired monks who deliberately cultivated a hirsute appearance — and, for good measure, threw these men in too as “circumcellions.” The original text in Augustine reads:²¹

²¹ Aug. *De op. mon.* 31.39 (CSEL 41: 590-91).

These men who hawk around their venal hypocrisy and who are afraid lest the holy tonsure not be held to be inferior to their long locks, obviously wear their hair long so that anyone who happens to see them, might think them one of those ancients about whom we read: a Samuel or one of the others whose long hair was not cut.

In his usual manner, Isidore took this basic material and then elaborated and extended it somewhat by adducing other examples — Elijah the prophet is added to his list of the ‘ancients’ — to flesh out the general picture.

The picture of the circumcellions that has now emerged is one that lives on in an odd world of its own, with no reference to any reality that had ever existed in the African countryside — a reality that is clear enough from the picture that can be drawn from the detailed descriptions of circumcellions and circumcellion behavior in Optatus and Augustine. Any specific connection of circumcellions with African society is now fading permanently from view. The circumcellions were always understood by Augustine himself to be a peculiarly African phenomenon. By borrowing from Augustine’s writings on monks, Isidore has mutated them into a species of men who wander around “the provinces” of the empire in general. Thus, by Isidore’s time, the critical factor of local context was gradually being lost in the external tradition and, by default of specificity, the circumcellions were becoming instead a general western European phenomenon. Step by step, a completely fictitious being was being created — the violent wandering monk, the vagrant religious huckster.

Isidore also included a definition of the word circumcelliones in his “Etymologies” (Etymologiarum sive Originum). This definition might have contained information useful for our purposes, were it not for the fact that it is included in the eighth book of his work that is entitled “De ecclesia et sectis” which immediately indicates the field or genre within which it falls. It is the same tradition that we have just examined that considered the circumcellions under the rubric of a strange religious sect or heretical movement, a tradition that was fictively created outside Africa. After offering general definitions of “heresy” and “schism,” and having advanced to defining the “heresies of the Jews,” Isidore finally arrives at “the heresies of the Christians.” In this section, he

basically re-runs the same canonical lists of heresies that began with Epiphanius in the east and Filastrius in the west, and that were combined by the editorial skills of Augustine and his secretarial assistants at Hippo. Isidore finally arrives at the “Donatistae” (8.5.51), and it is as a subspecies of them that the circumcellions are defined.²²

Circumcelliones are called by this name on the ground that they are rough countrymen whom they call cotopitai, and who share the teaching of the above mentioned heresy (i.e. of the Donatistae). Because of their love of martyrdom, these men commit suicide, so that, by departing from this life violently, they might acquire the name of martyrs.

As a dictionary definition this simply emphasizes some odd aspects of circumcellions which would lead one to believe that they were unusual rustic types who were also a suicide cult. From what source did he draw his definition of circumcellions? With the discovery of a manuscript of a work by Isidore found in the Escorial Library and published in 1940 by Angel Vega, we can see some of the connections. The definition was drawn from Isidore’s very own “Book of Heresies” (Liber de haeresibus).²³ In it he gives definitions of Donatists (heresy number 42), the Mountaineers (heresy number 43), and the

²² Isid. Etymol. 8.5.53. There is a small problem with the sourcing of the passage as Isidorus has constructed it. Although he is fairly scrupulous in following the order of the existing ‘heresy lists’, he does depart from them occasionally, and without clear explanation. So it is in this case. Following the order in the standard heresy lists, the series in 8.5.51-53 ought to run sequentially: Donatistae – Montenses – Circumcellionae, but Isidore has the sequence: Donatistae – Bonosiaci – Circumcelliones.

²³ A.C. Vega ed., S. Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi De Haeresibus liber (Madrid, 1940) 35; the text can also be found in PLS 4: 1818-19.

circumcellions (separated from these by a few intervening heresies as heresy number 47).²⁴

Circumcellions are those who, because of their mad desire for martyrdom, in the midst of offering up prayers, kill themselves by means of the sword or by fire, so that, by dying violent deaths, they might acquire the name of martyrs.

Here suicidal martyrdom is highlighted, although the characteristic death by precipitation, so important to African realities, has now been discarded. A clue to the origin of the lemma comes from the phrase *interdum orantes*, which appears only in the text of the south-Italian *Indiculus de haeresibus*. It can be seen that Isidore has drawn part of his later dictionary definition from an earlier heresy list which he had reworked into his own “Book of Heresies.” What has been prefixed to it is the remark about the *cotopitai*. Where did Isidore find this odd word? The word has occasioned all sorts of extravagant etymological guesswork from unusual Greek dialects to Coptic, but the source is none other than the same south-Italian *Indiculus*.

There is, finally, one other source on the circumcellions that is normally considered to be internal and which therefore in theory should be accorded the status of the best quality of primary evidence. The author ascribed to this account — the African theologian and ecclesiastical writer, Tyconius — would indeed accord this source a very high order of credibility. After all, Tyconius was a fellow African and contemporary of Augustine’s, writing out of the heart of the

²⁴²⁴ It is not clear why this separation has taken place (the intervening heresies are the Eluidiani, the Iovinianistae, and the Luciferiani, and the heresy immediately preceding are the Tertullianistae). In this work, Isidore defines ‘Donatistae’ as ‘quamvis eiusdem substantiae, tamen minorem filium patre, filioque spiritum sanctum praedicant. Catholicos etiam rebaptizant’ — therefore as persons who are primarily defined by their Arian propensities and only secondarily as rebaptizers. He defines ‘Montenses’ as ‘cum Donatistis et Novatianis pari errore discurrunt.’

dissident Christianity community, probably through the decades of the 370s to the mid 380s. Our argument here, however, will be that Tyconius is not the author of the critical passage that has been attributed to him.²⁵ My negative argument is important, because this evidence has usually been taken to be authentically Tyconian, derived from a good internal (i.e. African) source and that it therefore gives us credible independent information on the circumcellions.²⁶ The passage is said to derive from Tyconius' commentary on the book of Revelation.²⁷ In reality, the source from which it is taken is from the work on the Apocalypse written by the eighth-century Spanish priest Beatus of Liébana.

Whatever the source of this particular passage might be, from the contents alone it is not possible to accept that Tyconius was its author. First of all, Tyconius was a man of some considerable intellectual power and acumen, a writer who, although he was closely identified for a long time with the dissident church in Africa, was respected by Augustine as a mind of the first order — a critical and perceptive thinker.²⁸ As an African, he must have known his own country well, especially the nature of sectarian debates that focussed on problems such as the circumcellions. We know that Tyconius wrote on the

²⁵ P. Monceaux, "Tyconius," ch. 5 [in] Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne depuis les origines jusqu'à l'invasion arabe, vol. 5 (Paris, 1920/Brussels, 1966), 165-219, remains one of the best general introductions.

²⁶ Amongst the many, see H.-J. Diesner "Methodisches und Sachliches zum Circumcellionentum," Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Martin-Luther-Universität, Geschichts.- Sprachwissenschaft. 8 (1959) 1009-1016 = ch. 4 [in] Kirche und Staat, 53-66, at pp. 1011-12/58-59; Frend, The Donatist Church, 172-73.

²⁷ See K.B. Steinhauser, The Apocalypse Commentary of Tyconius: A History of its Reception and Influence (Frankfurt-New York, 1987), on the basic structure of the text.

²⁸ Aug. Contra ep. Parm. 1.1 (CSEL 51: 19), in a work of Augustine's, it might be noted, that is the source for many of our standard items of information on circumcellions.

nature of the internal wars that afflicted the church in Africa, and that one of the critical points of difference that he had with the hierarchy of his own church was precisely over the problem of violence and violent men. Yet the picture of the circumcellions in the passage ascribed to him is grossly ignorant and shares in many of the same images that are typical of the external caricature.²⁹

And another [sc. type of pseudoprophet] is the superstitious man. "Superstition" is so-called on the grounds that it is an observance which is excessive or goes beyond the established practices of proper religion. Such men as these do not live equally like their other brothers [i.e. monks], but destroy themselves on the pretended grounds of their love of martyrs, so that by departing from this life violently they might acquire the name of martyrs. These men, whom we call circumcellions in Latin, because they are rough countrymen, are called cotopitai in Greek. They travel around the provinces, since they do not allow themselves to live in one place with their brothers [i.e. monks] with a single purpose in order to share a life in common — as with single heart and spirit they might live in the apostolic manner. Rather, as we have said, they wander around diverse lands and gaze on the tombs of holy men, as if for the well-being of their souls. But this is of no use to

²⁹ Beatus of Liébana, In Apocalypsin B. Ioannis Apostoli Commentaria, Explanatio, 5. The text as edited by H.A. Sanders, Beati in Apocalypsin libri duodecim, (Rome, 1930): Praefatio, 5.53-55, is a text that is not free of its own problems; it is to be supplemented by the standard text of H. Flóres as revised by E. Romero-Pose, Sancti Beati a Liebana Commentarius in Apocalypsin, 2 vols. (Rome, 1985), and printed by J. Gonzalez Echegaray, A. del Campo, L.G. Freeman eds., Obras completas de Beato de Liebana (Madrid, 1995) 60; see T. Hahn, Tyconius-Studien. Ein Beitrag zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte des 4. Jahrhunderts, Leipzig, 1900 [reprint: Aalen, 1971] = Studien zur Geschichte der Theologie und der Kirche, no. 6.2, 68-69n1.

them because they do this without the common purpose of brothers [i.e. monks].

The picture of the circumcellions offered here is part of the external tradition that misunderstands and misreads them completely. It shares some of the same precise phraseology (for example, the words circumeunt provincias) common to the tradition of them as wandering monastics. It presents the circumcellions as suicidal martyrs who are simultaneously false monks. A strange term is offered as a designation and is claimed to be a vocabulum Graecum. All of this unmasks a fundamental ignorance about who these men were and what they were doing, something that seems almost impossible to ascribe to a learned African who must have been knowledgeable about the basic facts of life in his own homeland. If the whole passage is placed back in context, it is seen to belong to another list, almost precisely like the one redacted by Isidore when he lists six different kinds (genera) of monks, amongst them the “false” types of which the circelliones were one. In this section “Tyconius” is speaking of ‘false brothers’ (falsi fratres) or monastics and in the specific subsection that is in question he has a subcategory of these false brothers, namely “false prophets.”³⁰ That is to say, the circelliones are labelled as the third type of “false prophet.” This is a fundamental error of identification that would not have been made by an educated African churchman who lived at the very height of the so-called circumcellion activities. It is just not possible that he would have thought of them fundamentally as a species “pseudoprophet,” for which there is utterly no inkling in any local African sources.

Who was the author? The confident assertion that cotopita was a vocabulum Graecum reveals appalling ignorance, especially for a writer like Tyconius who knew his Greek very well. Tyconius had used the original Greek version of the book of Revelation for his new commentary. He had also used the original Greek text for his new translation in which he corrected and updated the

³⁰ Beatus, Comm. in Apocal. 5: . . . in hoc pseudoprophetae quattuor membra sunt, id est Haereticus . . . alius est Schismaticus . . . Alius est superstitiosus . . . Quartus est hypocrita.

old Latin versions that still had authority in Africa in his own day. Therefore, we are not dealing with a source from the eastern Mediterranean or a Greek one from the west. And not one from Africa either. The idea that the circumcellions were categorized as an agreste genus hominum is an Augustinian Sallustianism which had already been taken up and elaborated by the external tradition. But the odd idea that the circumcellions were “false brothers” and a species of “false prophet” is one that was developed at length by Isidore with some fabrication, either by himself or by another. Our suspicion therefore falls on a Spanish source, and the fact that the manuscript is that of Beatus of Liébana would add support to a guess that we are dealing with a Spanish rather than an African tradition.³¹

It is fairly certain that Beatus, a Spanish priest who published his commentary on the Apocalypse in 776, drew heavily on earlier works for his own book. As one modern scholar has observed, “the work is not the product of a subtle or deep thinker, but rather that of a tireless compiler and polemicist.”³² To understand better the context in which the reference to circumcellions is found, it might be useful to review briefly the structure of the work itself. It is introduced with a dedicatory letter to Etherius, the bishop of Osma and collaborator of Beatus on his other polemical work, the Adversus Elipandum. This introduction, however, has been shown to be a pastiche of quotations taken from Isidore.³³ The bulk of Beatus’ introduction to his commentary is a lengthy summary of the main body of the text that follows. Although Hahn leapt to the conclusion that the reference to circelliones showed that the passage in which it appeared, and therefore this entire part of the introduction, was of African origin and therefore Tyconian, this conclusion was rightly rejected by Ramsay who demonstrated that a large part of this section is copied, often word-for-word,

³¹ Steinhauser, “Beatus of Liébana: the Life and Writings of Beatus,” ch. “I” [in] The Apocalypse Commentary, 142-48.

³² Steinhauser, The Apocalypse Commentary, 143.

³³ H.L. Ramsay, “Le commentaire de l’Apocalypse par Beatus de Liébana,” RHR 7 (1902) 419-45, at pp. 424-25.

from Isidore.³⁴ The specific content of the prologue, therefore, is overwhelmingly drawn from Spanish sources and it has no connection at all with the African Tyconius. Beatus of Liébana's work is not an original Tyconian text and it sheds no independent light on circumcellions. Rather, it simply reiterates the canonical external mirage of these men as uncontrolled itinerant monks, who also happen to be a suicidal death cult, and it also perpetuates an odd piece of linguistic lore about so-called cotopitai.

To this standard picture, Beatus, or his source, provided an additional statement which, given that is a novel accretion, is one of some importance. In the last sentence of the entry, Beatus claims that the circumcellions, as roving monastics, make it their custom to wander around visiting the shrines of holy men or saints (martyrs) "as if for the salvation of their souls."³⁵ This additional piece of information, found only in Beatus, has been quoted time and again in support of the thesis that the circumcellions were a species of wandering ascetic who lived their lives traipsing around a circuit of martyr shrines. The evidence has always had a sort of conclusive aura of authority about it, because it is cited with Tyconius as its author. The author, however, is not Tyconius, but rather Beatus or an immediate predecessor in Spain, and the information is just as much a fiction as the rest of the monastic picture of the circumcellions constructed by this external tradition, and it must therefore be discarded from serious historical inquiry on the African reality.

Is there anything useful that the external tradition can tell us? Most significantly, I think, it offers interesting clues to the interpretation of episodes of circumcellion violence. It is important to note that the external tradition begins its long life as part of the production of heresy lists. These lists specifically as lists are themselves not an innocent phenomenon. They are linked to the specific power aims of the central church and its involvement of the secular state during

³⁴ Hahn, Tyconius-Studien, 13-24 as against Ramsay (1902) 440-44; cf. Steinhauser, The Apocalypse Commentary, 168-69.

³⁵ Beatus, Comment. in Apocal. 5: . . . sed, ut diximus, diversas terras circuire et sanctorum sepulchra pervidere, quasi pro salute animae suae; sed nihil eis proderit, quia hoc sine consilio communi fratrum faciunt.

the late-fourth century.³⁶ Appearing in great detail first in the East in the mid 370s, the literary presentation of stripped-down lists of precise names of 'proscribed' persons appears in the West beginning in the 380s, where they cannot be disconnected from the Theodosian politics of the period. Within this more general context, it is therefore important that the external interest in circumcellions is only seen as part of the process of the labeling of "the Donatists," now officially named as such for the first time as a heresy. The role that the circumcellions play in this external context is to add a specific element to the labeling process: the real threat of civil violence and disorder. Through the 390s and the first decades of the fifth-century this is a vital signal about the significance that circumcellions had for the power politics of church and state outside Africa. And this is where the important questions have to be asked about "who" they were, and that question has to begin with a clear idea of who they were not.

³⁶ They deserve more study as such; a recent treatment notes the convergence of this type of document but, oddly enough, retreats from offering any explanation: J. McClure, "Handbooks Against Heresy in the West, from the Late Fourth to the Late Sixth Centuries," *JThS* 30 (1979) 186-97.

