

Marco Cristini: *The Years of the Infidels. African Latin Christianity from the Vandals to the Almohads*. London/New York: Routledge 2025. 270 pp., 12 ill. € 152.00. ISBN 978-1-032-54063-4.

As its title suggests, Marco Cristini's "The Years of the Infidels. African Latin Christianity from the Vandals to the Almohads" is a long-durée study of North African Christianity, from the arrival of the Vandals in 429 to the final documented phases of African Latin Christianity in the late twelfth century. Cristini, who is a lecturer in medieval history at the University of Florence, has drawn on Latin epistles, chronicles and commentaries as well as translations of Arabic historiographical, hagiographical and legal texts to explore the fluctuating fortunes of local Christian communities of North Africa and their changing relations with their own sovereigns, the Latin popes and European rulers such as Charlemagne.

An extended analysis of North African Christianity is a rare treat, as many studies of this subject focus on the community before or after the Islamic conquest of the region. North African Christianity prior to the Islamic conquest has received significant attention in recent decades; alongside the studies of Robin Whelan and Jonathan Conant relating to heresy and martyrdom under Vandal or East Roman rule,¹ translations and studies of source texts from North Africa such as the recently published *Chronicle of Victor of Tunnuna* are continuing to augment an already rich field.² More moderate attention has been paid to North African Christianity after the Islamic conquest, with articles by Mark Handley, Jonathan Conant, Virginie Prevost and Dominique Valérian offering shorter investigations of the topic.³ However,

- 1 R. Whelan: *Being Christian in Vandal Africa. The Politics of Orthodoxy in the Post-Imperial West*. Oakland, CA 2018 (*Transformation of the Classical Heritage* 59). J. Conant: *Staying Roman. Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439–700*. Cambridge 2012 (*Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought*. Ser. 4, 82).
- 2 A. Klein: *Die Chronik des Victor von Tunnuna (ca. 565). Eine Chronik und ihre Geschichte(n)*. Stuttgart 2023 (*Roma aeterna* 12), reviewed by Roger Collins in *Plekos* 26, 2024, pp. 65–70, URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2024/r-klein.pdf>.
- 3 M. A. Handley: *Disputing the End of African Christianity*. In: A. H. Merrills (ed.): *Vandals, Romans and Berbers. New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*. Aldershot 2004, pp. 291–310. V. Prevost: *Les dernières communautés chrétiennes autochtones d'Afrique du Nord*. In: *RHR* 4, 2007, pp. 461–483, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rhr.5401>. D. Valérian: *La Permanence du christianisme au*

all of these studies of North African Christianity adhere to one or the other side of the Roman-Islamic chronological divide. This deepens the sense of split that is often assumed in older historiographical discourse and which Cristini addresses in the book under review. The broader perspective that he adopts allows him to undertake comparisons and to map developments extending beyond the scope of narrower studies. It also necessitates a less detailed coverage of the subject material and less technical discussion, making “The Years of the Infidels” suitable for a non-specialist audience as well as readers more familiar with the field.

The eight chapters of the book are divided equally between the pre-Islamic and the post-Islamic period. The introduction refers to some of the characteristic features of North African Latin Christianity and gives an overview of the modern historiography on the topic. As Cristini notes, until comparatively recently studies of North African Christianity have adhered to what he calls “the Decline and Fall narrative”, according to which the arrival of the Arabs signaled the end of Latin Christianity in North Africa. He borrows the term from the British historian Edward Gibbon’s reference to the “Decline and Fall of Christianity in Africa”,⁴ but observes in the introduction that the paradigm aligned well with French colonial ambitions in the region, which were in turn connected with the missionary activities of the French Catholic Church. Indeed, many of the formative studies of the history of North African Christianity which were written in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were the work of French historians who were also members of the clergy (p. 8). Cristini’s observations on the modern historiography, and his concern to avoid what he calls a teleological perspective in his study (p. 225), show an important awareness of the wider significance of researching Latin Christianity in Africa. But the question remains, and will underlie many readers’ experience of the book as a whole: how did Latin Christianity lose its footing in the North African landscape? Cristini addresses this question explicitly in his conclusion; the preceding eight chapters provide a chronological overview of the Christian community’s fortunes without awarding these a causal significance.

Maghreb. L’apport problématique des sources latines. In: D. Valérian (ed.): *Islamisation et arabisation de l’Occident musulman médiéval (VIIe-XIIe siècle)*. Paris 2011 (Bibliothèque historique des pays d’Islam 2), pp. 131–149.

4 E. Gibbon: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Ed. D. Womersley, 3 vols. London 1994. Vol. 3, p. 318.

Chapter 1 (“The Vandal Kingdom: Confrontation and Coexistence”, pp. 15–60) summarizes the fifth and early sixth centuries of Vandal rule over North Africa, mainly from the perspective of the Arian-Catholic conflict that characterized this period. Cristini’s description of the conflict is refreshingly clear and non-specialist readers will appreciate his detailed but lucid presentation of events and their significance. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are dedicated to the period of east Roman rule. Chapter 2 (“Conquering Africa: Justinian’s Wars and the Three Chapters Controversy”, pp. 61–82) covers the Three Chapters Controversy, which was an attempt by Justinian to impose condemnation of the writings of three theologians who had supported the Council of Chalcedon in 451. This measure had been intended to reconcile the Chalcedonians with the non-Chalcedonians but it backfired; the Chalcedonians regarded it as undermining the authority of the council, while the Monophysites insisted on the condemnation of the entire Council and were dissatisfied with Justinian’s compromise. Cristini’s analysis of the Controversy in North Africa highlights the independence of the African Church with regard to both the east Roman ruler and the Pope, who accepted the condemnation in 533. Whether the churchmen of North Africa supported or rejected Justinian’s condemnation appears to have been a personal decision, and not due to dictates from either side.

Chapter 3 (“Gregory the Great and the African Church”, pp. 83–107) focuses on the correspondence between Gregory the Great (Pope Gregory I) and the African bishops and clergy. This chapter builds on the analysis of relations with Rome in the previous chapter, and shows how the independent and often deeply divided African clergy used papal communication to obtain advice, consolation and often support for their struggles at home. The chapter ends with a discussion about the alleged resurgence of African Donatism in the sixth century, the significance of which is disputed by Cristini. Cristini’s demonstration of this point draws on detailed examination of both primary sources and the historiography of the Donatist controversy and is likely to be challenging for the non-specialist reader. One wonders slightly why his overview of North African Christianity does not begin earlier in its history, so that the Diocletian Persecutions and their significance for subsequent conflicts could be fully explained. Nonetheless, Cristini’s introduction to Donatism in chapter 3, and his analysis of its relevance for the sixth century is admirably clear and concise, even for a non-specialist reader.

The theme of disunity is continued in chapter 4 (“Monothelism and the African Church”, pp. 108–123), in which Cristini examines the controversy around the doctrine of Monothelism in the seventh century. This doctrine, according to which Christ was endowed with two natures but a single will, was imposed by Heraclius in an attempt to reconcile divided Christian factions after the Council of Chalcedon. The doctrine found little support and in 680–681 the Third Council of Constantinople endorsed the dyothelite position instead, which recognized a human and a divine will in Christ. Cristini addresses the long-rehearsed argument that the divisive effect of the Monothelite Controversy weakened North Africans’ interest in opposing the Arab invaders. Although he avoids drawing conclusions, noting that the lack of evidence makes this impossible, his discussion of the controversy’s relevance in North Africa is helpful for understanding the currents of conflict and alliances that characterized the region shortly before the Arab conquest.

The following four chapters focus on the Christian community after the Islamic conquest of North Africa in the seventh century. Chapter 5 (“The Islamic Conquest and its Impact upon African Latin Christianity”, pp. 124–137) addresses the period of the conquest and its immediate aftermath, covering both the Christian reactions to the Arabs and the way that the conquerors perceived their own religion during this time. Cristini draws on Stephen Shoemaker’s and Robert Hoyland’s arguments that seventh-century Islam was not yet a homogenous and clearly distinguished religious tradition and suggests that this may have eased the interaction between the two groups in these first decades. He also argues against the widespread view that the Islamic conquest caused an exodus of African Christians from the region, attributing this to Arabic historiography compiled centuries after the conquest, and to Latin passages that are better understood as references to normal episodes of inter-regional mobility. The broader argument of this chapter, that early post-conquest interaction in North Africa was characterized less by rupture or hostility than previously thought, corresponds to archaeological findings suggesting significant continuity after the conquest. It also lays the basis for Cristini’s argument in the following chapters, that the Christian community continued to exist (if not flourish) in North Africa far longer than hitherto portrayed by the Decline and Fall narrative.

Chapter 6 (“Three Centuries of Silence? African Christians under Islamic Rule during the Early Middle Ages”, pp. 138–187) assumes the presence of a fragile, but still functioning Christian community for at least four centuries

after the establishment of Islamic rule in the region. Cristini analyses the fate of the community and the clergy after the dust had settled on the conquest and Christians had accepted their position as *dhimmīs*, the Arabic term for protected non-Muslims living permanently under Islamic rule. He approaches the topic through the lens of the Pact of ‘Umar, a set of rules for *dhimmīs* living in towns dominated by Muslims and attributed to ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634–644) or Caliph ‘Umar II (r. 717–720). However, the Pact is probably an inapposite reference point for understanding the situation of North African Christians in the eighth–eleventh century, as it does not seem to have functioned as a reference for non-Muslim regulation during this period. Although it is attributed to one of the ‘Umars there is no evidence for it having been enforced anywhere for at least two centuries after its purported origin.⁵ And although rulings similar to the Pact’s clauses can be attributed to the late eighth century, these were composed in the eastern Islamic Empire. Legal compendia from early Islamic North Africa such as the *Mudanwana* of Saḥnūn b. Sa‘īd (d. 854) do reflect the view that Christians should demonstrate a lower social status than Muslims but their rulings are not notably similar to those of the Pact of ‘Umar, making its use in this context questionable. More successful are the examples that Cristini provides from North African written and archaeological sources that show Christian presence becoming smaller and more fragile over the centuries of Islamic rule, even while the community and its individuals continued to impact on the social and economic life of the region. He corroborates this with accounts from Latin Europe, which indicate an ongoing interest in the region, but which also suggest that conversion and intermarriage caused the community to diminish from the ninth century onwards.

Chapter 7 (“Leo IX, Gregory VII, and the Church of Africa”, pp. 188–206) uses papal communication to analyse the state of the community in the eleventh century. Cristini’s analysis of the letters drafted by both Pope Leo IX and Pope Gregory VII demonstrates the African Church’s relevance for ecclesiastical conflicts in Europe and also makes good use of the information about the North African Christian community that the letters contain. Continuing his conclusions from the previous chapter, Cristini argues that the

5 L. Yarbrough: The Early Circulation and Late Adoption of the ‘Pact of ‘Umar’ (shurūṭ ‘Umar). In: *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 53, 2022, pp. 237–304.

letters suggest a small and somewhat beleaguered Christian community in the eleventh century, but not an absent or insignificant one.

Chapter 8, poignantly titled „The Almohads and the End of Latin Christianity” (pp. 207–224), analyses how the Norman occupation of parts of Ifrīqiya, and their expulsion by the Almohads, impacted on the African Latin Church. The Almohads are well known for their intransigence towards non-Muslims and one of this chapter’s highlights is Cristini’s contextualization and source analysis of the alleged order by the Almohad caliph al-Mu’min (r. 1133–1163) that the *dhimmīs* should convert or die. As well as qualifying the significance of al-Mu’min’s decree Cristini also emphasizes the hostility towards local Christians that the Norman occupation unleashed; whereas in the Levant Islamic authors reflect an understanding of the distinction between local Christians and the Frankish Crusaders, in North Africa the African Christians were perceived as cooperating in a broader attack against Islam and punished accordingly. This interesting and well-argued section will be relevant for wider studies of Christian-Muslim conflict in the medieval period, where North Africa rarely receives the attention that it deserves.

This last chapter of “The Years of the Infidels” ends with the demise of African Latin Christianity and Christianity’s transformation into the religion of missionaries and travellers. Although he avoids tying the analysis of the book itself to this moment, in his conclusion Cristini does indeed address the question of why Christianity was not able to survive in North Africa. He summarizes a variety of explanations but draws on the discussion of the previous chapters to show their limitations, if not their weaknesses. Rather than identifying a single cause for the decline, Cristini prefers to opt for “a confluence of factors spanning several centuries” (p. 228) and describes the community’s existence as “a continuous process of change, coexistence and transformation” (p. 231). His argument that the Christian community continued to function for several centuries after the Islamic conquest builds on earlier research mentioned in this review, but by situating it in a longer chronological overview, Cristini develops the significance of this finding.

“The Years of the Infidels” is a simultaneously ambitious and cautious book. Not only the historical range of the work, but also the questions that underlie its main topics are intimidating prospects and Cristini approaches them with respect. He draws on an impressive range of primary and secondary sources, making good use of translations of primary sources from Arabic legal and historiographical texts wherever relevant. His expertise in the field of late

antique and early medieval studies is reflected in his approach to Latin texts, which generally receive deeper analysis and contextualization than the Arabic sources do. Occasionally, as with the example of the Pact of ‘Umar, his unfamiliarity with the complexities of certain Islamic literary genres is evident in his writing, but this imbalance is understandable in a book that draws on such a wide assortment of primary and secondary sources. As well as the challenges, Cristini’s work reflects the potential of a long-durée, cross-Mediterranean approach for understanding the trajectory of Latin Christianity in Africa. His portrayal of a community that weakened gradually, and which was both strengthened and threatened by its relations with Christians from across the Mediterranean, puts “The Years of the Infidels” well outside the “Decline and Fall” school mentioned in the introduction and promises new possibilities for understanding Christianity in Islamic North Africa.

Antonia Bosanquet, Utrecht University
Department of History and Art History
Ancient History and Classical Civilisation
Assistant Professor
a.s.bosanquet@uu.nl

www.plekos.de

Empfohlene Zitierweise

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