AUGUSTINE
THE
AFRICAN

ALSO BY CATHERINE CONYBEARE

The Routledge Guidebook to Augustine's Confessions

The Laughter of Sarah: Biblical Exegesis, Feminist Theory, and the Concept of Delight

The Irrational Augustine

Paulinus Noster: Self and Symbols in the Letters of Paulinus of Nola

AUGUSTINE

THE

AFRICAN

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To my sons,
Gabriel and Hilary

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PREFACE

Aurelius Augustinus, better known as Augustine of Hippo or simply St. Augustine, is one of the most influential writers and thinkers in the history of humankind. His works helped shape nothing less than Western Christianity and Western philosophy. His *Confessions* created the genre of autobiography as we know it today; his *City of God* offered a new view of human history and a new concept of happiness and justice. He came to be hailed as one of the four "fathers" of the Latin church—along with Ambrose, Jerome, and Pope Gregory the Great—and of those four he casts by far the longest shadow today.

Yet in celebrating Augustine's influence on Western thought, we miss a key point: Augustine was African. For many centuries, his North African birth and Amazigh—Berber—heritage have been simply dismissed, and we have ignored the fact that all his greatest works emerged from an African context. Appropriated for a Western version of Christianity based in Europe, they are read as if it doesn't matter *where* they were written. Augustine the African, the man in his own surroundings, is submerged. In fact, a core strand of the culture that Europe claims as its own stems from Africa.

It wasn't until I was in Augustine's homeland of Algeria a few years ago that I realized how fundamental Augustine's African context is to his works—and hence to the myriad writers and thinkers who have built upon them. Walking through the silent ruins of Augustine's city

in the late-fall sunlight, with the mountains behind me veiled in an autumnal haze and the blades of grass between the tumbled columns casting sharp little shadows, I looked out north toward the sea, in the direction of Italy, and I began to understand something of Augustine's deep ambivalence about the dominant force of Rome. Much of Augustine's mature thought depended upon his ability to look at Rome from Africa and question that dominance.

Beginning to reread Augustine's works on my return from Algeria, I discovered that everything about his life shifts once it is fully envisioned as an African life. Capturing that shift is what is new about this book. The fights Augustine got into, the alliances he made, the intellectual and philosophical positions he espoused: all are inflected by his view from Africa. The North African language of Punic helped him to think about translations of the bible. The North African schismatic church sharpened his biblical interpretation. The politics of North Africa helped him develop his theory of just war. Africa shaped Augustine's life and thought in far-reaching ways.

It was Augustine himself who first suggested to me the importance of Africa in his life. More than twenty years ago, I read his earliest surviving writings, a set of philosophical dialogues composed immediately after his conversion to Christianity. Augustine's family and some former pupils took part in the dialogues, and together they offer a sort of snapshot of that particular moment in his life. In them, he talks—out of the blue, or so it seems—about being mocked by his students in Rome *for his African way of speaking*. Augustine had risen to be an orator at the court of the emperor, and no one in the Roman Empire was a more proficient speaker than he. And yet he wrote, "It's one thing to be secure in my art, quite another to be secure in my heritage." He knew that his proficiency in Latin was unequaled, but he was insecure about his background.

This was startling, and I soon began to notice other such traces in Augustine's work. He empathized with the African queen Dido when he was at school, in a clear rejection of the Romanness he was being trained to embrace. He continued to confuse the vowel sounds of Latin spoken with an African accent, and he was aware that this was

a problem. He built a whole theological vision around his own sense of himself as displaced and wandering. The more of these traces I saw, the more profoundly human Augustine became to me—passionate and complicated, prickly and vulnerable, brilliant and striving, a loyal friend, an adoring father, and a pugnacious enemy.

All his life, Augustine was acutely aware of himself as someone from a small town in Africa, not from dominant Rome or Milan. He doesn't, however, seem to have been particularly aware of racial difference. Nowhere does he talk about his own appearance or skin color, and although his mother would hardly have fit in with the social circles in which he moved in Rome or Milan, he doesn't mention her Berber origins, and we have to infer them from her name. Nor did Augustine ever preach to his congregations in terms that suggested their race was significant. In the late Roman Empire, social advancement hung on how you spoke and which region of the empire you came from, not what you looked like. An African accent marked you out as inferior, whatever your complexion.

With the exception of five agitated years in Italy, Augustine spent his entire life in North Africa, in the coastal regions of what are now Algeria and Tunisia. He was born in 354 CE to a Berber mother and a Roman father in a little town called Thagaste, not much more than fifty miles inland, close to the modern border between the two countries. He studied and taught in Carthage, on the northern edge of modern Tunis, and then traveled to Italy and spent five years in Rome and Milan. He was baptized a Christian at Milan in 387 and soon afterward headed back across the Mediterranean to his hometown. In 391 he settled in Hippo, modern Annaba, on the north coast of Algeria. He founded a monastery there, was ordained, and then became bishop. Hippo was Augustine's home for the rest of his life. He died in 430 CE.

Augustine already cut a towering figure in the Christian world, and the pope affirmed his doctrinal authority in 431, the year after his death. His prolific writings—more than five *million* of Augustine's words survive—were copied and recopied throughout the Middle Ages. As they were copied, some of their specific references to Africa

were removed, and their original context was forgotten. Scribes collected Augustine's works, emended them, excerpted them, and made them into "greatest hits" collections. Bishops took bits of his sermons and made them the basis for their own. People attributed their own or others' works to St. Augustine: that was a good way to ensure their survival. There wasn't a deliberate campaign to erase his Africanness; it was just not interesting or relevant to the people who carried on the tradition—particularly after Islamic forces took control of North Africa in the seventh century and its Christian heritage seemed lost.

The process of the rescuing, copying, and preservation of manuscripts, the very survival of Augustine's works in ancient libraries, is a European story. It was in the Europe of the Middle Ages and early modern period that Augustine's legacy was curated and honored. All this erased the distinctive African context of Augustine's life and work. It made it easy to forget that Augustine was African.

Restoring Augustine's erased Africanness was likewise a process grounded in his writings, however precious that real-life glimpse of a view from Algeria proved to be. I'm a Latin philologist, a close reader of texts, and that type of reading was at the heart of my research for this book. Augustine's personality and his affiliations, as well as his ideas, emerge in the tiniest details of the Latin texts he wrote, in his particular choice of words or emphasis or tone, in the other authors he referenced or the ones he avoided. That's why all the translations in this book are mine, and why I occasionally flag a particular Latin word or phrase as I write, even though I assume most of my readers won't know Latin: the way Augustine would seize on a particular formulation and repeat it is very revealing.

Augustine was both an insider and an outsider. He was born into the Roman Empire as a Roman citizen, but his birthplace was a small town in Africa and his father was merely a town councillor. His rights as a citizen of the Roman Empire were the same as anyone's, but his humble origins threatened to limit his prospects. Nevertheless, he excelled at school and became in some ways the consummate Roman. He made rhetoric his profession, and no one knew the classics of Roman literature better than he. But he never forgot his Afri-

can origins. When, in *The City of God*, he set out to justify the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and to retell that empire's history, he buttressed his argument with his unparalleled knowledge of the Roman tradition. He showed a profound respect for the richness of that heritage. But again and again he questioned and subverted that tradition, needling his Roman audience by retelling their favorite stories at a slant—which was clearly inspired by his view from Africa. He often approached a question with a slightly oblique stance that helped him to see new possibilities.

The seventy-six years of Augustine's life were marked by extraordinary change in North Africa and in the Mediterranean region as a whole. After undergoing a turbulent period in the third century, the empire seemed at the time of his birth secure and prosperous. The emperor Constantine had put an end to the persecution of Christians early in the fourth century, and Christian practices were spreading vigorously. A brief pagan revival under the emperor Julian in the early 360s failed to reverse the trend. By the end of the century, when Augustine was ordained bishop, Christianity was the official state religion—though exactly what style of Christianity was vigorously contested—and the "pagan" religion of the Romans was eroding. But so were the borders of the empire. The incursion of armed groups increasingly threatened its stability, and in 410 CE a band of soldiers under the command of the Goth Alaric succeeded in sacking Rome, the historic and sentimental center of the empire. As Augustine lay dying, another band of invaders, the Vandals, had entered Africa from Spain and overrun the northwest coast. They were besieging Hippo when he died. Just a few years later, they took control of Carthage, and they ruled North Africa for the next century.

Augustine's writing demonstrated an increasing anxiety and fear for his *patria*, his home, as an entire way of life began to change. He was anxious about his intellectual inheritance, too, so toward the end of his life, he gathered together his works in chronological order and wrote short descriptions of each of them, criticizing what he thought he'd got wrong: he called the resultant list his *Reconsiderations*. He planned to do the same for his copious letters and sermons, but the

urgency of theological debate diverted him into other writing projects. Fortunately, a monk from his monastery, Possidius, appended to a reverent biography of the great saint a further checklist of his works, and the two lists provided guidance for all those who wanted to keep track. Many of Augustine's writings had, of course, already circulated beyond Africa, but it seems that his library itself survived the Vandal siege intact. After his death, his books were rescued and taken—we don't know by whom—across the Mediterranean to safer territory. That miraculous survival is what makes possible a detailed reconstruction of Augustine's life and work.

Instrumental in shaping the doctrines of the Christian church at a crucial stage of its development, Augustine's thoughts on free will, grace, and original sin were foundational. His influence has historically been felt wherever the church has spread—and, indeed, beyond: my Algerian hosts told me how they revered him as a towering pre-Islamic figure and considered him one of their own. But Augustine's expansive and tenacious intellect shaped whole spheres of thought beyond the church as well. Political theory, language studies, the history of interpretation, ideas about the self and interiority and introspection, the narration of history itself: all of these would look very different without Augustine's many writings. His thoughts on time and memory and a child's acquisition of language are starting points for countless studies. In almost any field of humanistic study, Augustine was there first. His influence continues to this day.

As we read Augustine's work, however, we need to imagine that we are looking at the world from North Africa. Sicily is very close; beyond it lies the toe of Italy's boot. But Africa is Augustine's landscape, and his world extended from there. Placing Africa at the center of Augustine's work forces us to see it afresh. It upends conventional knowledge and brings core ideas of Christian thought to their very origins on the African continent.

This is the story of Augustine the African.

PART ONE

INSIDER, OUTSIDER

1

AFRICAN YOUTH

Barely anything survives of the Roman presence in Thagaste, where Augustine was born on November 13, 354 CE. It is now a large-ish modern city in Algeria, just west of the border with Tunisia, called Souk Ahras. But in the fourth century it had the dignity of a *municipium*, a self-governing town. It was not large, but it possessed all the appurtenances of a fully functioning Roman settlement: amphitheater, theater, forum, public baths. The site lies on the gentle slopes between fertile agricultural lowlands and rockier uplands. These days, the Algerian border there is semipermeable: it is closed to outsiders, but North Africans cross it with ease.

In Augustine's time, Thagaste was a border town, too. To the east lay the wealthiest and most significant province in Roman North Africa, known as Africa Proconsularis, with Carthage its principal city, and beyond it Tripolitania. To the west lay the larger, poorer province of Numidia, and beyond that Mauretania. The whole area of Roman North Africa was roughly equivalent to the modern Maghreb. Thagaste was truly on the border: in terms of civic administration, it was part of Africa Proconsularis, but for ecclesiastical purposes, it was part of the diocese of Numidia.

Augustine was the eldest child of an ill-matched couple; they later had another son, Navigius, and a daughter. His father, Patricius, was a town councillor in Thagaste. Both the name of Patricius and his

civic status mark him as Roman. We cannot tell his ethnicity, but his origins were clearly local to Thagaste. Augustine's mother, Monnica, was much younger than Patricius; she was barely past twenty when Augustine was born. The name Monnica echoes the Libyan deity Mon, who was worshiped near Thagaste, and she was almost certainly Amazigh (Berber). Augustine was devoted to his mother, and recalled with admiration her ability to deflect his father's frequent fits of rage. He had little to say about his father.

Though the family were landholders, they were not rich. Augustine recalled snippets of his childhood in the *Confessions*, a work laced with autobiography. The memories are delightfully small-scale. He was concerned with home and school and toys, and with scrounging enough time to play. The first time that Augustine the future saint said a prayer, he was praying to avoid a beating, no doubt from a tutor or even his father. He played ball instead of doing his lessons.[1] Roman villas were built on four sides around a courtyard, and we can envisage Augustine running to and fro, probably rather dusty, perhaps scuffling for the ball with his brother. He played with "nuts and marbles and sparrows": country games, outdoor games for a warm climate.[2] Perhaps they used the nuts to play a version of the ancient African game mancala. It was a modest childhood in an unremarkable African town at the southern edge of the empire.

Augustine learned his first language easily, amid the gentle conversation of his nurses and the teasing of his playmates. That language was Latin, though some of the nurses may have also spoken the North African language of Punic, which had come to the area with settlers from the region of modern Lebanon many centuries before and managed to survive the Roman invasions and settlement. When Augustine started elementary school in Thagaste, he began to learn Greek as well. He contrasted the ease of learning Latin with "the difficulty, the extreme difficulty of learning a foreign language."[3] He hated Greek. For all his prodigious intellectual powers, he was never to be at home in the language; he had some facility with it, but largely the sort that allowed intelligent comparison of words and phrases. He would always read a translation from Greek into Latin if one was available.

At the heart of Augustine's early education was the *Aeneid*, the epic poem by Virgil that was the basis of schooling for all boys in the Latin-speaking Roman Empire of the fourth century. Schoolboys (and the occasional privileged, privately tutored girl) learned to read by sounding out syllables from the *Aeneid*. The *Aeneid* taught them to scan lines of poetry, and moreover to interpret them. Children learned swaths of the poem by heart. Later on, boys would begin the rhetorical studies on which an imperial career was based by entering imaginatively into the lives of characters from the *Aeneid* and composing appropriate speeches for them to declaim at crucial moments of choice or crisis. Wherever in the empire their careers took these young men, an apposite quotation from the *Aeneid* thrown casually into their conversation or their correspondence would immediately establish them as a member of the educated ruling classes. It was a sort of Masonic handshake.

The *Aeneid* took its name from Aeneas, the legendary founder of Rome. The poem tells the story of the foundation of Rome as a brilliant mixture of visionary glory and human inadequacy. But Augustine was not interested in Aeneas. Instead, he identified passionately with Queen Dido, the mythical founder of the North African city of Carthage.

Carthage lay about two hundred miles to the east of Thagaste. Historically, it had been the great rival of Roman power. After centuries of struggle, the Romans had obliterated the city in 146 BCE, plowing salt into its fields to ensure that the area was unlivable. But around the turn of the millennium, the emperor Augustus initiated a grand project of resettlement, and long before the time of Augustine's childhood it had become once again a bustling, glamorous port city and a renowned center of culture as well as commerce. It was by far the most important city in Augustine's part of Africa. He aspired to study there.

As Virgil told her story in the *Aeneid*, Dido was an awe-inspiring figure. She had founded Carthage after her brother drove her from her home. Virgil showed her building her new city. Squares and law courts, temples and palaces: Dido oversaw them all, a powerful and benevolent queen.

However, it was not with Dido the ruler that Augustine identified. There was a second chapter to the story of Queen Dido. A band of bedraggled Trojans, sailing across the Mediterranean after the destruction of their city, was shipwrecked on the shore near Carthage and appealed to Dido for protection. With incredible magnanimity, Dido offered them a share in her newly built city. Then she fell hopelessly in love with their leader, Aeneas. She ignored her people and neglected her gleaming city. And when her lover abandoned her to found his new home in Italy, she built her own funeral pyre and stabbed herself on its summit before its flames engulfed her. In vengeance and despair, she hoped that her lover would see the smoke as he sailed away and guess that she had killed herself.

Augustine read the story addictively. He wept again and again for Dido the forsaken lover; and then he wept when the adults forbade him to read about her. You would never guess from his telling that the story of Dido comprises only about one-sixth of the *Aeneid*. Most of it is concerned with the person to whom he grudgingly referred as "some Aeneas or other" and Aeneas's destiny as the founder of Rome. Aeneas is a flawed hero, with his inner struggles and failings and his moral compromises, but there is no doubt that he is at the heart of the poem. The regal Dido died on a pyre with her leadership corroded and her dignity destroyed. But it was she, passionate, driven, all too human, who was the poem's heart for Augustine.

Nowhere in his *Confessions* did Augustine spell out that Dido was African, pitted against the Trojan-turned-Roman Aeneas. But it was crucial to his imaginative construction of his African-Roman world. Many years later, he boasted that Carthage surpassed all other places in business and in navigation, because it had been founded by Dido with merchant ships.[4] Carthage was by far the most significant city in Augustine's African world, but it was always haunted by its subordination to Rome. No wonder he backed Dido against Aeneas, and Carthage against Rome. His passionate identification with Dido was the defiant romanticism of a boy from the provinces who needed his tragic hero. He suspected that his origins and education would always be considered second-rate by those whose favor he sought. He

commemorated and mourned the subordination of his local world to the imperial power.

Augustine would have been reading the *Aeneid* and weeping for Dido in the early 360s, during the brief reign of the emperor Julian. Julian had been educated in the old philosophical schools of Athens. He was one of the first generation born in the empire for whom Christianity was a legal religion. But he was an avid pagan, and in February 362 he issued an edict that forbade Christians to teach across the empire—although, given the distances involved in relaying it to Thagaste, and the relative insignificance of the place, it was probably not punctually implemented there. Augustine did not mention the edict in the *Confessions*. Christianity was not an issue in those dark classrooms separated by curtains from the sunlit forum outside. Instead, Augustine's education was fraught with provincial anxieties about barbarism, solecism, and mispronunciation. His gift for language was already apparent, and his schoolmasters would have imposed intense pressure on their prize pupil. Augustine later observed caustically that ethics took a distant second place to the refinements of the language: "People were more displeased if one pronounced 'human' without the 'h' than if one felt hatred for a human being."[5]

Augustine's parents had also recognized his precocious abilities, and they were intensely ambitious for him. They saw the opportunities that a talent for rhetoric could afford; but they were not wealthy, and paying to send him to school was a strain. The education that Augustine later criticized could not be taken for granted; his brother (and doubtless his sister, too) received much less of it. Patricius could afford to pay for the schooling of his brilliant elder son, but only just.

The ambition of Augustine's parents sent him on, in the late 360s, to study with the grammarians in the nearby town of Madauros. Its intellectual reputation was far greater than that of humble Thagaste, and even today, Algerians refer to it proudly as "the oldest university in the world." Madauros is now M'Daourouch, about twenty-five miles from Thagaste, on south through the mountains. Unlike Thagaste, it has preserved some magnificent Roman buildings, and

in the late empire, it was much the grander city. Apuleius, the fabled second-century African writer and rhetorician, had lived in Madauros, and his presence had burnished the town's reputation for learning. Apuleius's fellow citizens had even put up a statue to him in the forum: they took care to note that it had been erected "at the public expense."[6] Augustine would have seen the statue, and realized what respect an African rhetorician could command. When he referred to Apuleius later in his life, he would recognize their shared Africanness: he said at one point in a letter to a Roman official that "as an African, Apuleius is better known to us Africans."[7]

Today, Apuleius is best known for his vivid and fanciful novel, the *Metamorphoses*, which Augustine called *The Golden Ass*. In it, a young man who happens to share a hometown (Madauros) and a first name (Lucius) with his creator finds himself on the wrong side of a magic spell and is turned into an ass: the novel is a spectacular accretion of mishaps, curiosities, and digressive tales. In real life, Apuleius was also a philosopher, a proud follower of Plato and Socrates. When he was arraigned on charges of casting magic spells—in an extraordinary concurrence of life and art—he defended himself ostentatiously as a philosopher in a speech called the *Apologia*.

Augustine would have found the rakish, polymath persona of Apuleius deeply enticing at this stage of his life. So it must have been a bitter disappointment to him when, in his sixteenth year, his parents recalled him to Thagaste. Madauros was insufficient to their ambition. His father was saving up money and importuning patrons so that Augustine could be sent on to study in Carthage.[8] The city was rich and polyglot; it was the home of the governing elite; and it offered the best education in Africa west of Alexandria—and by far the best for a native speaker of Latin.

Just as Augustine's life seemed to be expanding, it was shut down. "I began to be with my parents," he wrote grimly.[9] He was back amid the frustrations of his hometown. He was also in the throes of puberty: after seeing him naked at the public baths, Augustine's father joyfully announced to his mother that she could soon expect grandchildren. Monnica responded differently: she asked Augustine particularly not

to sleep with other men's wives. Encompassed in her request was a world of small-town boredom and social tensions. Men in their thirties conventionally married girls in their teens, and the temptation for the young wives to have an affair with an age-appropriate boy must have been strong. Years later, Augustine would write that, if sins of the body were all that one were worried about, people could be considered pure up until fourteen years of age, "when they begin to be pubescent."[10] The precision of that demarcation is striking. Augustine's own adolescent development started in Madauros and came under scrutiny when he returned home to Thagaste. Augustine's parents were eager that he shouldn't be trapped into an early marriage that would impede his professional progress—and their desire for his advancement.[11] Through education he could rise into the imperial civil service and the highest echelons of rhetorical practice: he could become truly one of the Roman elite.

At this point in Augustine's life, an event took place that is as famous—and mythical—as the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. But whereas Washington's story is about accepting responsibility, Augustine's is about the opposite: futility and waste. Augustine and a gang of friends stole some inedible pears from a neighbor's property, and then simply threw them to the pigs. That's all.

Yet Augustine agonized over the episode. It epitomized that desolate moment back in Thagaste. Augustine was an energetic adolescent, avid for scholarly stimulation, who had just begun to launch himself in the wider world, only to be called back home. He had a small pack of aimless, underemployed friends, probably dating back to his early school days, with whom he had little in common; the friends to whom he subsequently became truly close were younger than he, and passionately intellectual. The project of stealing the inedible pears summed up his sense of boredom and pointlessness. He became acutely aware of the way that peer pressure had forced him into such an action: "I absolutely couldn't have done it alone. . . . But when someone says, 'Come on, let's do it!' then it's shameful not to be shameless."[12]

Augustine felt that he had become an impoverished wasteland.

The image is Platonic.[13] But back in Thagaste, looking at the landscape, Augustine would only have had to climb a little farther into the rocky hills to see what such a wasteland looked like. Or to look out over the fields of the valleys in a dry season or a year of blight. To a child growing up in an agricultural landscape, this image would have conveyed something that presaged a long season of hunger. Platonic or not, the image sums up his intellectual frustrations.

Finally, the long year of waiting was over, and Augustine could make the journey to what must have seemed the near-mythical city of Carthage. It was late autumn in 370; he had just celebrated his sixteenth birthday. He would have traveled through the hills to the east of Souk Ahras and along the valley of the Medjerda River. He would have passed the quarries of Chemtou, with their cliffs from which much-prized butter-colored marble with pink veins was cut, and the dense and prosperous settlement of Bulla Regia, squeezed between sharp hills and the river, its villas, with their exquisite mosaics, cut deep into the ground. There was also a magnificent theater, where years later Augustine would deliver a passionate sermon attacking louche theatrical performances. He would have made his way across the rich agricultural plains that extended to the west of Carthage, from which vast amounts of grain were exported every year to Rome. But he wrote simply, "I came to Carthage."

Carthage in 370 CE would have been an impressive sight to anyone, not least to a young man who had never been more than thirty miles from his landlocked home. The whole city was shaped by the Mediterranean Sea and the prosperity that the sea brought with it. The sea curved around the hill, the Byrsa, that was at the heart of the city. Monumental public buildings composed of vast blocks of stone were set into the sides of the hill, Roman and Christian together: a magnificent theater, churches and shrines, a vast set of public baths adjacent to the coast. To the landward side, there was a circus and an amphitheater; down the coast, as it slanted to the southwest, the ancient Punic port. When the Romans devastated the city at the end of the Punic Wars in 146 BCE, more than five hundred years before, they didn't manage to destroy the massive walls that protected the

summit of the Byrsa—awe-inspiring sections of which still survive. At Augustine's arrival, almost four centuries after the city's resettlement, Carthage was a crowded metropolis, jostling with people from across North Africa and the wider empire, all making their way through the architectural palimpsest of the city's history.

Everything at Carthage seemed to Augustine bigger, grander, more intense. Of course, his education was grander—that was the point: he had come to Carthage specifically to study at an advanced school of rhetoric. But he remembered the whole aura of Carthage as one of swirling, overwhelming, insatiable desires. Augustine's own insatiable desire to learn was only one part of his new temptations. Now that he was in Dido's own city, he no longer wept over his books and recitations for her love and tragic death: he went to the theater instead, and wept extravagantly over the plays he watched there. His youthful fumblings with women in Thagaste—which we may infer from his mother's caution against sleeping with married women—found new and tantalizing directions. The first time in the *Confessions* that Augustine mentions going to church, it is because he went there to pick up women. "During the celebration of your rituals, God, within the very walls of your church," he admitted, "I felt incredible lust."[14]

Augustine's naïve apprehension of Christianity, which "my youthful heart had dutifully drunk from the very milk of my mother," was soon supplanted by a new religious passion.[15] He developed a fierce commitment to Manichaeism, an urbane, multicultural religion that flourished in the multicultural trading city of Carthage. Manichaeism had been founded in the mid-third century and was named for its founder, Mani, who had come originally from a Judeo-Christian community in the Arsacid Empire (roughly coterminous with modern Iran) and, after a period of proselytization, established his church on the west bank of the Tigris (in modern Iraq). By Augustine's time, the missionary efforts of Manichaeism had been incredibly successful. There were Manichaeans all around the eastern part of the Mediterranean basin, and down through the Arabian Peninsula as far southeast as India; they were particularly prevalent in Egypt, but they spread all across North Africa and even up into Italy.

To Augustine in the early 370s, newly arrived in Carthage, caught up in the swirl of new stimuli and desires, Manichaeism would have looked like a more sophisticated, rigorously argued version of Christianity. Later, Augustine wrote that the Manichaeans "said with terrifying authority . . . that they would introduce to God the people who wished to hear them, and would free them from all error."[16] In the *Confessions*, he wrote with disdainful hindsight of the "sticky ensnaring mixture" of the names of God and Christ and Holy Spirit produced by Manichaeism;[17] but he remained stuck in that exotic part-Christian mixture for a full decade of his life. Despite Augustine's disdainful language and ostentatious repudiation of Manichaeism in the *Confessions*, he gives no hint that at the time the religion was actually outlawed in the Roman Empire.[18]

What most captivated Augustine about Manichaeism was its "novelty."[19] It was not just about religion: Manichaeism encapsulated the novelty of the big city and the proliferation of possibilities of every kind for the ambitious young man. It also purported to provide a solution to a difficult question that had bothered Augustine for some time: the problem of how there came to be evil in the world. Mani had taught that, instead of there being one omnipotent, beneficent God, the universe was divided into the forces of Light and Darkness. Each force was eternal; each was purely material. At some point, the forces of Darkness attacked those of Light and engulfed them. The solution of the god at the head of the forces of Light was to create the universe, which—though composed of both light and dark matter—would provide the engine for the gradual release of the forces of Light. It was the job of the followers of Mani to facilitate this release, through strict codes of dietary practice and asceticism: the lower level of followers, the Hearers—amongst whom Augustine enrolled himself—assisted the more exalted Elect in releasing the particles of Light by feeding them the appropriate foods.

Augustine's mother, Monnica, whose Christian faith was unshakable, was distraught by her son's conversion to Manichaeism. She must have moved with him to Carthage, for the *Confessions* contains a vignette—poignant or irritating, depending on where your

sympathies lie—of her desperately begging a bishop to intervene with Augustine and point out the error of his adherence to Manichaeism. Weeping, she demanded that the bishop "unteach the bad and teach the good" to her obdurate son. The bishop dismissed her: "It is impossible that the son of tears like yours should be completely lost."[20] Monnica had brought her small-town habits and simple Christianity to the big city of Carthage. Augustine may have been exuberantly exploring new possibilities, but she was always present to make sure that he was aware of the gulf between his new life and his initial upbringing. No wonder he was preoccupied with the problem of good and evil.

The self-absorbed pages of the *Confessions* give no suggestion that the 370s were a turbulent time at the edges of Roman Africa. Roman settlement in whole swaths of North Africa was dependent on the goodwill of the local population, and on complex alliances both with and amongst them. The local population could—and did—rebel when confronted by corruption and incompetence. The long-established province of Africa Proconsularis, of which Carthage was the principal city, boasted a long coastal border and extensive agricultural lowlands, and so was relatively immune to attack from the indigenous people who had been pushed back into the mountains to the south. But Lepcis Magna on the north coast, in modern Libya, was at the edge of a thin line of Roman settlement. In general, the southern border of Roman occupation in North Africa was an ill-defined one, a scattering of garrisons along the edge of the mountains whose survival depended on cooperation between the Romans and the people who were already established there. When Lepcis Magna was attacked in the early 370s, the leader of the Roman forces in Africa refused to support the Roman settlers.

The Romans needed a steady and trustworthy administrator to oversee the African provinces and maintain the delicate balance of power between the settlers and the indigenous population. The administrator was called the *comes Africae*, the "count of Africa," and answered directly to the emperor; he was in charge of the considerable military forces in North Africa. The position was one of the most powerful in the empire.

The count of Africa of the 370s, Romanus, turned out to be neither steady nor trustworthy. It was he who refused support to Lepcis Magna. No sooner had that crisis abated than in Mauretania, the westernmost province of Africa, a powerful group of the indigenous Mauri erupted into internecine warfare. It was essentially a battle about leadership: Firmus, the legitimate son of the group's leader, Nubel, murdered his illegitimate brother, Zammac, presumably to secure his own succession.[21] Nubel himself was well connected within the Roman imperial administration; he was one of the local power brokers on whom the stability of North African rule depended. Romanus quickly became involved in the struggle, because he had strong personal connections to the murdered Zammac. He mobilized the imperial forces in Africa against Firmus. But some refused to comply, and supported Firmus against Romanus. The Mauri divided as well, and different factions fought on either side, some for Romanus, some for Firmus. Chaotic fighting extended all across Mauretania, even up into the major city of Caesarea on the coast.

Alarmed, the emperor Valentinian I called in the *magister militum*, Theodosius, the highest-ranking military officer in the empire. Theodosius brushed aside Romanus and took over the Roman campaign. The Roman historian who recorded these events described the outlandish barbarians "squawking on their trumpets, jangling their little shields against their knees,"[22] suggesting it was absurd that they should challenge the astute Romans. It is clear, however, that the power dynamics were far more balanced.[23] The conflict only ended in 375, when Firmus was taken captive by a local chieftain who had switched his allegiance to the Roman side. Firmus chose to commit suicide rather than be handed over to Theodosius alive. His body was ignominiously delivered to Theodosius's camp on a pack animal.

By this time, Augustine had returned to his hometown, Thagaste, where he was teaching rhetoric. His father had died in 372; Augustine registered little grief at his death. Now, back in his childhood home with Monnica, Augustine was living with a young woman, presumably a local girl with whom he had become involved during the year at home before he went off to study in Carthage.[24] They had a son

together, born when Augustine was only about seventeen, whom he adored. The boy was called Adeodatus, "given by God." About the woman, Augustine said very little, and he nowhere mentioned her name, but the two of them were together for about fourteen years. He made clear that they had not planned to have a child together—but "once he's born, the child compels you to love him."[25]

Augustine had returned to Thagaste with some reluctance. He distracted himself with a passionate new friendship that developed between him and a young man around his own age. They had grown up together and gone to school together, but only at this point did their friendship blossom.[26] The two became inseparable. All through his life, Augustine was a man of intense passions, and he was always eager to draw his friends with him into his current enthusiasms. In this case, Augustine involved the friend—who, like the mother of his son, he never named—in his Manichaeism. The shared worship and discussion of an outlaw religion was a deep bond.

Then the friend fell badly ill. Despite the presence of his own companion and son at home, Augustine rarely left his friend's bedside. But one day, while Augustine for once was absent, the friend fell suddenly into unconsciousness. His family, fearing death, baptized him into Christianity while he was still in a coma. When the friend came round, Augustine tried to make him laugh about the baptism—but the friend was appalled, and made it clear that he had now repudiated Manichaeism. Augustine felt bitterly betrayed.

The illness was serious indeed, and not long afterward, Augustine's friend died. He died, as his family had wished, a Christian, and Augustine was completely bereft. The friend seemed to have been the only thing attaching him to Thagaste; now that link was severed. He couldn't bear to see all the places that reminded him of his friend. Being in his hometown, his *patria*, became a torment rather than a comfort; being in his father's house made him wretched. He was losing his confident sense of self and of direction in life: "I had become a huge problem to myself," he confessed.[27] Augustine couldn't wait to leave Thagaste again.

For the first time in his life, Augustine had come hard up against

the fact that home was not in the place where he assumed it would be. After his turbulent time in Carthage, he would have thought that he was returning to the familiar: the family estate, his mother, and his companion. The passionate friendship, so quickly formed, had granted an illusory sense of belonging, but first religious divergence and then death had corroded it. Augustine was adrift: what he had thought would locate him and settle him could not do so.

So, at the age of twenty-two or so, Augustine traveled all the way back to Carthage to teach rhetoric there instead, with his companion and son and his mother in tow. It was no longer an excitement, but a bleak duty: he needed to support his wider family. It was also not what his local friends and sponsors in Thagaste would have wished. He may even have been contractually bound to return to his hometown and teach there in exchange for the financial support he had been given; but his patrons allowed him to ignore this mandate. The move from small and familiar Thagaste, from the structure and support afforded by his patrons, back into what he called the "frying pan" of bustling, diverse, competitive Carthage was a significant reversal.[28]

In Carthage, Augustine quickly found another friend to love and lead. Nebridius had grown up on an estate near Carthage; he was both slightly younger and of higher class than Augustine.[29] In the *Confessions*, Augustine always mentions him with the deepest affection; he admired Nebridius, he said, for his virtue. But Nebridius could challenge Augustine on an intellectual plane as well: he began to detach Augustine from Manichaeism by observing cogently how absurd it was that an incorruptible god should be drawn into battle against the forces of Darkness.[30] Nebridius became part of Augustine's informal entourage and followed him for some time; later, he returned home to his mother and his "superb ancestral property," and he and Augustine exchanged affectionate, self-consciously intellectual letters.

The bombardment of diversions in Carthage this time included a swirl of astrologers and other interpreters of the future. Augustine, impressionable and questing, was duly seduced. Nebridius tried to laugh him out of his adherence to divination.[31] Overall, though, Carthage had lost its luster for Augustine: it was not the magnificent,

stimulating place it had been during his first stay. His ambitions were directing him northward, across the Mediterranean. He longed for the sophisticated world of the Italian peninsula and, especially, for Rome. He was a provincial young man on the make, pursuing potential contacts and eager to make an impression on a wider audience.

In this period, Augustine wrote his first book and dedicated it to someone he hoped would be a useful contact: an orator at Rome called Hierius.[32] He didn't know Hierius, but he had heard him speak; perhaps Hierius had visited Carthage. Augustine yearned to impress him. Hierius came from Syria, a Greek-speaking area of the empire. He first made his career as an orator in Greek, but then made the move to Rome and excelled in Latin oratory, too. Although Hierius was not actually from one of the North African provinces, there was a sense of connection, then as now, between the south and southeast littoral of the Mediterranean that held those regions together, in tacit opposition to the more dominant powers to the north. As a Syrian, Hierius was someone with whom Augustine could identify—an outsider who had yet managed to make a successful career at Rome. Augustine was quite specific: "That orator was someone of exactly the type that I loved because I wanted to be like him."[33]

Augustine's first book was a philosophical dialogue entitled *On the Beautiful and the Fitting*, and it was probably rather derivative; Augustine expressed relief, on looking back through his works, that it hadn't survived. In any case, Hierius ignored the dedication. He did not promote Augustine's career, and Augustine never mentioned his name again. He was filled with self-reproach for the idiocy of his attempt to get Hierius's attention.

Augustine rationalized his desire to leave Africa for Rome. He claimed that he wanted to get away from the rowdy students in Carthage: he had heard that Roman students were better behaved.[34] Disingenuously, he said it had nothing to do with better pay. In fact, he had not yet fulfilled his ambitions. His entire education and his provincial background had taught him to look down on Africa and to think of Rome as the center of everything, the goal of all achievement. He wanted to move on.

It was Augustine's Manichaean contacts who helped him to finally make the leap across the Mediterranean from Carthage to Rome, and promised him somewhere to stay when he got there. This was ironic, because he was increasingly disillusioned with Manichaeism, and he acknowledged their assistance grudgingly.[35] Augustine had had a disappointing encounter with Faustus, a Manichaean bishop. His coreligionists had said that Faustus would be able to answer all his questions and alleviate his doubts, particularly about the problem of evil; unsurprisingly, Faustus proved unable to do so. Augustine was still technically a Manichaean, but he had long been looking elsewhere for spiritual satisfaction.

The journey north across the Mediterranean Sea to Rome meant a leap away from home and toward more prestigious opportunities—notwithstanding Augustine's protestations to the contrary. But it also represented an escape from home in the very specific form of his mother. Monnica had continued to live with Augustine and his little family in Carthage. She lamented his attachment to Manichaeism, and she vehemently opposed the prospect of a move. In the end, Augustine tricked her into staying the night near the harbor at the oratory of St. Cyprian while he ostensibly said goodbye to a friend who was about to sail. He assured her that Cyprian—the original and most important saint at Carthage, who had been martyred there in 258—would watch over her. "She stayed there, praying and weeping."[36] In the morning, he was gone.

It must have been a clear night, because the helmsman would have needed the stars to navigate. Had Monnica looked out of the oratory, she could have seen the ship slipping past her out of the harbor to the south, up through the Bay of Carthage.

Standing on deck, Augustine would have been able to see on his left the familiar rounded hill up which the city of Carthage climbed, shadowy and densely built; he would have seen the dark bluff on which the oratory of St. Cyprian stood. On the right, more distant, he would have seen the outline of the mountains on the opposing promontory. Once he was past the enclosing arms of land, he was for the first time out on the open sea. The customary and familiar was behind him.

Augustine had become Aeneas. He had tricked the woman who loved him, and was sailing to meet his destiny in Rome. His tears for the Carthaginian queen Dido were far away in the past. He was twenty-eight years old, and he thought he was leaving Africa for good.

2

AUGUSTINE THE ITALIAN

Augustine sailed north out of Carthage in the spring of 383, headed for a place that could not possibly have met his vaulting ambition.[1] Rome was a city past its prime. It was still the symbolic center of empire, and still held a powerful place in the imagination of the citizens in its provinces. But in terms of the governance of empire, Rome by the late fourth century had become more or less irrelevant. The empire was functionally divided into east and west. The balance of power in the east had shifted dramatically to the city founded by Constantine, the eponymous Constantinople (modern Istanbul, in Turkey). The western empire was at that moment governed from Milan, but no one city—and certainly not Rome—held a settled position of dominance.

The senate was based at Rome, as it had been for centuries, but its executive power was nugatory; it had become a symbolic body. The position of prefect of Rome, *praefectus urbi*, remained a prestigious one, but more for the purpose of advertising and consolidating power and connections amid the old aristocracy than for government or defense. The emperor Constantine had initiated a dynamic new Christian building program at Rome in the early fourth century, which generated churches and oratories outside the city walls but did not renew the heart of the city. The early imperial buildings still dominated the forum; the imperial center of gravity had moved