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‘And He Transformed Their Temple into a Church’: The Redefinition of Sacred Spaces in Libya in Late Antiquity[†]

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[†] Proc. *De Aed.* VI.2.10: τοῦτον δὴ τὸν νεῶν ἐς ἐκκλησίᾱς μεθερμόσατο σχῆμα.

Abstract: The aim of studying the context in which churches were built in honour of the *Theotokos* or dedicated to her in North Africa, as well as in the rest of the Empire, during the sixth century, is to gain a more thorough understanding of Justinian I’s political programme, the utility of unifying dogma and the religious conversion of dissident elements, such as pagans, Jews, Samaritans etc. These issues are addressed by analysing the spatial—principally architectural—and rhetorical superposition of Orthodox Christianity on the places of worship of other communities. It is held here that it is possible to demonstrate that this redefinition of space went a long way towards reinforcing the identity of provincial populations, especially in conflictive or border areas, which had to be secured within the territories that the Byzantine Empire had recently recovered so as to guarantee their political loyalty.

Keywords: Byzantine Africa; *Renovatio imperii*; Procopius of Caesarea; sacred space; overlapping cults; *Theotokos*; religious conversion; political identity



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1. Before Late Antiquity or Some Remarks before Late Antiquity

From a religious perspective, the centuries preceding the Muslim conquest of the Maghreb were certainly turbulent times. Pagans and, above all, Christians of different denominations became embroiled in a perpetual theological battle of a largely Christological, but also physical, nature, which posed serious problems for the inhabitants of the southern seaboard of the Mediterranean. The persecutions were soon to convulse North Africa, where early martyrdoms included the execution of the Scillitan Martyrs (second century), the mauling to death of the very popular Perpetua and Felicity (third century) by wild animals and the beheading of the eminent bishop of Carthage Cyprian (third century) (Mateo Donet 2015, p. 555; Gabrielli 2015).¹ This led to the creation of sites of memory, where martyrs had been judged, executed and buried, and, consequently, to greater unity among Christian communities, which were reinforced by the sacrality conferred on *martyria* and the relics of saints.

In this regard, during both the third and especially the fourth century, these sites of memory served to endow the new material world—to which the persecutions had given rise in Africa—with a sacred character, to the point that the churches erected in places that had witnessed torture and death, or those set aside for housing human remains, also acquired the sacrality of the saints to which they were dedicated. The development of worship gave not only many places, but also specific tangible objects, a meaning that went beyond the merely material dimension, which, in turn, was a symbol of privilege of the community in which it was practised and a factor that differentiated its members from outsiders. Although this was presumably glaringly evident as diverse religious controversies raged in Africa during the second half of the third and, above all, the fourth and fifth centuries, it should be observed that there is still no complete picture of the extent to which religious buildings, liturgical objects etc. Were redefined. Even so, it seems evident enough that the definition of group identity in contrast to the ‘Other’ (Donatists,²

Arians ([Isola 1990](#)), pagans,³ etc.) must have included the material and architectural culture involved in the different liturgies.

Despite the dearth of information, those new sacred spaces were assumedly conflictive and forbidden sites that had to be protected, so as to prevent them from being polluted by pagans or schismatics. However, it is important to note that the elements foreign to a specific religious universe were also frequently appropriated, which resulted in the usual innovation of ritual areas, which were always open to eliminating or modifying elements that were difficult to reconcile with the prevailing Christian Orthodoxy.

In this context of appropriation, special mention should go to the location of sacred sites on top of previous cultic spaces regarded as foreign, irrespective of whether they were Christian places of worship, pagan temples or Jewish synagogues. In some cases, it was physical, with those spaces being occupied and more or less readapted in order to convert them into a testimony of faith. Then again, on quite a few occasions it was rhetoric that rendered the spaces of rivals useless by including them in a series of categories in which they could never feel comfortable, or which were unacceptable to the rest of the community, thus avoiding possible conversions.⁴

This conflict reached its peak with the arrival of the Vandals in the former Roman provinces of Africa. Suffice it to read the sermons that the bishop of Carthage Quodvultdeus delivered when these Germanic people first made their presence felt so as to understand its magnitude and the millenarist vein in which the invasion and the fall of the capital were interpreted ([Isola 1990](#), p. 45).⁵

Anti-Catholic measures were swiftly implemented, evidenced by the many complaints recorded in the literature of the period ([Isola 1985](#), pp. 274 and 279; [Simonetti 1986](#), p. 38), as well as accounts of the panic that the violence of the Vandals caused throughout the land.⁶ The measures taken against the Catholic clergy had, in reality, more to do with their political resistance to the new regional power than with religious aspects per se, at least during the initial stages of the conquest ([Sánchez Medina 2018](#); [Beltrán Torreira 2010](#)). This can be inferred from the movable and immovable property that was all but immediately seized. This must have been an ideal moment for redefining that property for, from one day to the next, churches and liturgical objects passed into the hands of Arians and were incorporated into their daily worship and religious ceremonies.

In addition, the fall of Carthage and the Roman provinces of Africa to the Vandals brought about far-reaching ideological transformations in Catholic self-identity. The discourse of opposition to the Vandals rested on two fundamental pillars: on the one hand, the conviction that the new Germanic overlords formed part of an inextricable and unavoidable *Barbaricum*; on the other, the fact that they followed the Arian Heresy prevented their true integration in Romanity, for *romanus* and *catholicus* were now one and the same ([González Salinero 2001](#), p. 231).⁷ In the fifth-century Christian Empire, a Vandal political loyalty foreign to Christian Orthodoxy was inconceivable, for *fides* could only function coherently within a context of political–religious correlation.

As Fulgentius of Ruspe recounts, the Vandal monarch took it upon himself to ensure that the main urban centres had Arian bishops and, likewise, that the new heretical churches were furnished with all that was necessary for assuming their ecclesiastic role.⁸ In this context, the difficulty in delimiting the respective communities can be appreciated, and this made it all the more pressing to elaborate a spatial rhetoric, for meeting places were thus converted into spaces of identity and distinction with respect to the rest ([Rebillard 2015](#), p. 44).⁹

Before the anti-Arian struggle, the African Catholic Church had already been superimposed on the sacred sites of other religious groups, as occurred, for example, with the basilica dedicated to the Donatist martyr Marculus in Vegesela (Ksar-el-Kelb, Tunisia) ([Maier 1987](#), pp. 275–91), whose execution might be reflected in the inscription ‘*memoria domni Marchuli*’ discovered within ([AE 1935](#), p. 121; [Duval 1982](#), pp. 158–60, no. 75).¹⁰ The Vandals’ control over Africa was therefore no more than the consolidation of a practice according to which power and places of worship were inextricably linked, for which reason

their destruction or symbolic suppression under a new building or decorative programme implied the political–religious victory of the new power, in this case Arian.

Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that floorplans, architectural/decorative designs or even liturgical furnishings must have always been necessarily different. The results of archaeological excavations, as least regarding third- and fourth-century remains, paint a picture very different from the polarised models described in the literary sources. Indeed, the reuse of spaces often merely involved a process of ritual cleaning. For example, Donatists used to reconsecrate holy places, and this included not only whitewashing and cleaning the walls of the churches and ritually sprinkling them out with salted water, but also scrapping off, smashing up or simply removing the altars, conceived as a source of pollution (Gaddis 2005, pp. 119–22).

As of this period, in contrast, and very closely related to the definition of Christian Orthodoxy established at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 and to the promulgation of the Theodosian Code on heretics, the differences were ever more visible. These groups needed to prevail in the urban environment in an increasingly more incontestable manner, even asking themselves ‘whether a separate minority group should have the right to public worship’ (Gwynn 2010).

2. The Justinian Building Programme: The Physical and Spiritual Defence of Newly Recovered Libya, According to Procopius of Caesarea

It was not until the sixth century that a comprehensive course of action for the rhetorical, and also physical, appropriation of places of worship was implemented through a systematic, large-scale imperial building programme that would accompany the *Renovatio Imperii*, namely, Justinian’s plan to reconquer the territory of the former Roman Empire.

Justinian I’s attempt to recoup the domains previously lost in the West formed part of a complex plan which included a remodelling of spaces, especially in the urban centres and the *limites* of the reconquered Western territories, and also in the Eastern provinces. The consolidation of the redefined Justinian *Romanitas* in the Mediterranean necessarily involved the creation of an imperial ideology based not only on the reoccupation of Western lands, but also on the definition of the main public spaces of cities throughout the Empire, which were endowed with strong fortifications,¹¹ aqueducts and public (baths, forums, etc.) and religious buildings.

The concepts (*renovatio*, *restitutio*, *reparatio*) associated with this grand political design could also be employed to describe the emperor Justinian’s building programme. In relation to this programme—mainly reconstructed from the legal sources (Jones 1988; Humfress 2005; especially Bueno Delgado 2015)—the concurrence of military expansion, the dogmatic standardization of Christian communities and the reluctant conversion of heretical groups of Jews and pagans can be considered as being paramount (Vallejo Girvés 1994; Tommasi Moreschini 2002, including non-literary sources). The emperor not only intended to bring the Empire back to its former glory, but also to reassert *recta fide*, thus putting the dissent marking the previous two centuries behind him (Maas 1986, p. 25). To this end, he not only built churches and monasteries, but also hospices that enhanced his presence in the social sphere and garnered him the popular support of urban communities (*Nov. Iust.* 7 *praef.*, April 535 AD).

The comprehensive knowledge that we have of this political–religious building programme is mainly due to a short work written by Procopius—probably at the end of his life, in the 550s—in which he gives a thorough account of the public works carried out, or at least planned, during the reign of Justinian I. *De Aedificiis* (*Buildings*) is a panegyric comprising six books, of which the sixth and last is specifically devoted to Libya—Roman Africa in the Latin sources. It not only describes those public works, but also includes a brief analysis of the administration and functioning of the new territories controlled by Constantinople. It is likely that the author drew from courtesan sources on ongoing building projects or those that never made it past the drawing board, for archaeology has often disproved the literary sources.¹²

There can be no doubt that the emperor desired to restore to the Nicene clergy all of which they had been dispossessed in Africa during the rule of the Vandals, as evidenced by the *Novellae*, in which the return of the property seized by Arians is decreed (*Nov. Iust.* 37, 3, 535 AD).

Through this measure, not only was property returned to the rightful owner, but the Orthodox community also recovered their public religious spaces, which had been thoroughly pillaged, diminished or suppressed during the decades of Vandal rule (Fournier 2019, pp. 147–66, with new approaches). The region's churches, the first property to be returned, not only served as meeting places for the Christian community, but were also important spaces in the retaken and refortified urban centres. The transformation of the late urban layout was not only aimed at reestablishing the public amenities of the ancient African cities (aqueducts, baths, markets, etc.) (Lepelley 1979–1981), but also at creating a unified and uniform Christian material culture. This was achieved through the consecration of churches and the construction of monasteries, all with conspicuous defensive features. The purpose of the monastic centres that Procopius (*De Aed.* VI.2.110) describes in Libya, which were located in Dinathisum and Agriolodé,¹³ was to defend the land retaken in the areas most vulnerable to invasion from the south.

For Justinian, this was no minor concern, as illustrated by a passage from the third paragraph of Book VI of *De Aedificiis*: '[...] this emperor found all Libya too lying under the power of the barbarians' (VI.1.109). The emperor's concern for reconquering African territory was a result of two main factors. Firstly, there were military reasons, for the constant threat of enemy incursions made it imperative to refortify urban centres. Secondly, there was the disquiet caused by the continuance of pagan cults, such as that of the Egyptian god Osiris in Taposiris Magna, only a day's journey away from Alexandria.¹⁴ Even though he does not elaborate on the matter in Book VI, Procopius does mention that strong measures were adopted to convert the Egyptians (*Bella*). On the island of Philae, for example, the emperor ordered the destruction of the temples dedicated to both Greek and local pagan divinities—i.e., Isis and Osiris—and their statues were despatched to Constantinople, so that the native inhabitants could no longer worship their gods in public spaces.¹⁵

The closure of their religious centres was certainly a severe blow to the Egyptians, because this was where they engaged in their cultural practices, but the seizure of the representations of their gods must have been adding insult to injury, for they had been apprehended and taken to the capital like prisoners.¹⁶ Whoever dared to oppose imperial decisions would have been accused of attacking the Empire, thus perpetrating a public crime.

According to the literary sources, however, buildings were erected more often than they were demolished, with most of those built in Libya as part of the Justinian programme being of a military nature: two strongholds with garrisons in Paratonium¹⁷ and Antipyr-gum; the strong fortifications of Teuchira;¹⁸ the walled enclosure of Berenicè;¹⁹ the aqueduct of Ptolemaïs;²⁰ the very strong defences of Boreium in the Pentapolis;²¹ the walls of Leptis Magna, rebuilt on a smaller scale, and the restoration of the former Severan palace;²² the walls of Sabrathan (Ibid); the rebuilt circuit-wall and new moat of Justinianê, in addition to the aforementioned fortified monastery;²³ the solid defences of Vaga-Theodorias; the fortress of Tucca; the circuit-wall of Hadrumetum;²⁴ the construction of a walled city in Caputvada;²⁵ the strong walls of Mammes, Telepté²⁶ and Cululis;²⁷ the fort of Aumetra; the enwalling of a number of cities and forts in Numidia;²⁸ and, finally, the retaking of the fortress of Septum in the far West.²⁹

3. Conversion to Christianity and New Religious Spaces: The Invocations of the *Theotokos* in Libya

The physical protection of the Africans was certainly one of the emperor's concerns, but their Orthodoxy was no less so, even though this might have had more to do with

military defence it would initially appear. For this reason it was imperative to distance the Libyan population from the Arian Heresy, Jewish atavism and the simplicity of traditional paganism. Accordingly, it was not only necessary to create new Orthodox places of worship, such as the churches built in Boreium, Leptis Magna (5), Sabrathan and Carthage (2), but also to convert the communities living in error and to suppress or substitute their most significant places of worship.

One of the first episodes of conversion involved the Mauritanians of Cidamê,³⁰ who, having surrendered to Roman *fides* many years before, now embraced its creed, as set out in the political programme of the Justinian *Renovatio imperii*, for such a political alliance required a common faith. There is a similar account of the—more than willing, according to the sources—religious conversion of the pagan tribe of the Gadabitani. Likewise, a Jewish community in the vicinity of Boreium converted to Christianity and their temple, traditionally attributed to Solomon, was replaced by a church. Particularly noteworthy was the situation of Augila,³¹ an oasis where the ancestral customs of its inhabitants still survived, including the practice of polytheism, with temples dedicated to Amon and Alexander of Macedon, where, according to Procopius, they continued to offer sacrifices and where many *hierodules* served.

When, as in the aforementioned examples, faith and, consequently, worship, plus in many cases liturgical spaces, were forcibly transformed, this was sometimes reinforced by the construction of very special churches, for they were dedicated to none other than the *Theotokos*, namely, the Mother of God.³² The purpose of giving this title to Mary was to resolve the theological disputes that had plagued the Church since the fourth century, to bolster the decisions made at the First Council of Nicaea (325), and subsequently those at the Third Ecumenical Council convened in Ephesus (431), and to enhance the image of the Virgin as the Mother of God, which, with the passing of time gave her the role of Mediatrix.

In Procopius' account of Libya, the churches of Mary, the Mother of God, are from west to east as follows: Septum in Mauretania Tingitana, Carthage in Proconsular, Leptis Magna in Tripolitania and Augila in Cyrenaica, cities hundreds of miles apart, but whose public works corresponded to the same building and ideological programme. In all cases, the desire to impose the new model on dissident communities seems clear enough. Although there is no explicit reference to conversions, Septum, located in the Strait of Gibraltar—the ancient Pillars of Hercules—presumably had an Arian government, be it Vandal or Visigoth.³³ The case of Carthage is also somewhat ambiguous, for, although there is no direct mention of any conversions, there is a reference to Gelimer and his Vandals, which undeniably points to the Arianism prevailing in the capital when it was retaken. In Leptis, the barbarian Levathae (Laguatan) (Mattingly 2008) had sought the help of soothsayers to explain the strange events befalling the city, which is clear evidence of their paganism. Lastly, as already noted, in Augila the pagans continued with their traditional worship of Amon and deified Alexander the Great.

Septum is the first of the African cases that should be addressed. Archaeology has only just begun to provide conclusive evidence of the building of its circuit-wall in the Byzantine period (Bernal Casasola and Paredes 2020, p. 434; Villada Paredes and Bernal Casasola 2019), but not of the church of the Mother of God. Even though it is true that a large late basilica discovered some decades ago was put forward as a candidate, since then this hypothesis seems to have been debunked, with some authors contending that it is buried under the sanctuary of St Mary of Africa, where archaeological excavations have yet to be performed.³⁴ Although Procopius mentions a dedication and not a construction, which would be compatible with its identification with the fifth-century church, neither does this building have anything to do with the known walled enclosure, which presumably would have been necessary for its defence, nor is there any evidence that it was used in the sixth century (Vallejo Girvés 2012; Bernal Casasola and Paredes 2020).

In any event, the dedication of the Ceuta church was clearly related to the safekeeping of the Empire. Protection, good governance and even intercession in any territorial disputes

that might arise in the future were placed under the aegis of the *Theotokos* (CI I.27.1.9 2.9.), who would ultimately become the patroness of the Byzantine Empire.

With regard to Carthage, it can be observed that a church dedicated to the Mother of God, together with another to St Prima,³⁵ was erected in the proconsular capital. Although Procopius provides very little information in this respect, it is known that the city's walled citadel was rebuilt and furnished with a moat. These new fortifications, which were also reinforced by a monastery with solid defences, were down to the city's greater need for protection. The church of the *Theotokos* depended, in turn, on the nearby palace, the authentic operational headquarters of the reconquest of Africa.³⁶

With regard to Leptis Magna, although information is scarce, the fact that it is mentioned by Procopius should be framed in the conversion of the Mauritanian barbarians, of Phoenician origin, from the city of Cidamê, as well as that of their Gadabitani counterparts, which certainly does not seem to have been a coincidence. The city is described as abandoned and covered with sand, having been literally swallowed up by the desert,³⁷ which would have stressed the loss of its character as an urban centre and the need for imperial intervention. The city was rebuilt on a much smaller scale than before, in order to make it more easily defensible. A new church of the Mother of God—*worth seeing*—was added to the rebuilt city, and another four unspecified churches, which were perhaps dedicated to some or other local saint. This information is followed by a reference to the restoration of the Severan palace, a centre of power that was doubtless reused in some way for controlling the city in the late period, as occurred with the arch dedicated to Vespasian and his son—of which the inscription has come down to us³⁸—converted into the Byzantine Gate, as named by the Italian archaeologists who excavated it in the 1920s.

In relation to the churches, the archaeological remains of Leptis Magna bear witness to the existence of a church built on top of a Roman temple, probably dating from the reign of Trajan. Known as Leptis Magna 2, it is an unidentified temple, located in the city's ancient forum, whose *cella* was reoccupied by a late Christian temple. By contrast, it is impossible to say for sure whether it is the church of the Mother of God or one of the other four erected in that period (Brouquier-Reddé 1992, pp. 79–80, Fig. 34). Nonetheless, it conveyed a clear message to the Levathae (Desanges 1962, pp. 190–91),³⁹ about whom Procopius claims that it would have somehow drawn a veil over recent developments—he is most likely referring to the revolt of this *gens*:⁴⁰ the passage itself from *De Aedificiis* mentions that the city had been abandoned by the Vandals and that part of its territory had been occupied by the barbarian Moorish tribes, called Leuathae.

Despite the fact that Byzantine policy anticipated, during the initial years of the conquest, the signing of pacts with local tribes so as to guarantee peace,⁴¹ it was not long before a major revolt broke out as a result of the *dux militis* of Tripolitania's actions.⁴² According to both Procopius in his *Bella* and Corippus in his *Iohannis* (*Iohannidos*), it commenced in 543, before spreading under a tribal confederation until it was finally quashed in 548.⁴³ In light of this, it is apparent that the Berber threat was greatest in Tripolitania, specifically in Leptis Magna, the city in which the unfortunate episode involving the *dux* and his Leuathae guests took place—all (except one of their number who managed to escape to tell the tale) were murdered at a banquet that he threw for them, after offering them assurances.

Perhaps this was behind the great lengths to which the emperor went to redefine Leptis Magna, the only African city with five churches, a much higher number than in the pacified and flourishing Carthage. The rebuilding of the circuit-wall and the palace, plus the construction of the churches, however, does not appear to have been sufficient to place Tripolitania on a firmer footing, at least in the long run, for according to Ibn 'Abd-al-Hakam, when the Arab Muslims arrived in 642, nothing remained of the Byzantine presence in the city.⁴⁴

In Augila,⁴⁵ the last African enclave in which a church of the Mother of God was built, Procopius asserts that Justinian's intention was not only to ensure its inhabitants' physical protection, but also their spiritual salvation by teaching them the true religion.

After convincing them to renounce their polytheism (their aforementioned worship of Amon and deified Alexander the Great), they converted en masse to Christianity, a process culminating in the construction of the church of the Mother of God ‘to be a guardian of the safety of the cities and of the true faith’ (*De Aed.* VI.2.111). It would seem, therefore, that the *Theotokos* was not only expected to tend to the souls of the Empire’s subjects, but also to their physical security. Procopius’ insistence on this point highlights the importance of the city requiring such protection.

Indeed, the oasis of Augila was located on an important route between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, two provinces where the Vandals did not even rule in name, which provided the North African tribes with the land bases necessary for launching raids of which the Leuathae incursion was just another example, in the context of an evident power vacuum (Oric 1914, pp. 8–14; Rebuffat 1970, pp. 1–10). The Leuathae not only managed to disrupt the Roman provinces recently recouped by Byzantium but also to rally the support of the Libyan population—through the creation of a great confederation—which posed a grave threat to the future of the Justinian project. The Byzantine administration’s greatest fear was the possibility that the African Roman population might be absorbed by the loose confederation of *gentes* under the orders of the Leuathae.

At this point, it seems appropriate to consider other Justinian churches of the Mother of God in the rest of the Empire, in an attempt to shed some light on the goals established by the emperor for their African counterparts and his intention to convey a political–religious message to the communities that should be converted or brought back to Orthodoxy in the reconquered territories.

4. Other Justinian Churches Dedicated to the *Theotokos*: Mount Gerizim and the Samaritan Revolts

The information contained in *De Aedificiis* allows to identify a total of 11 non-African churches of the Mother of God in Constantinople (2), Hieron,⁴⁶ Anaplis,⁴⁷ Antioch,⁴⁸ Theodosiopolis,⁴⁹ Jerusalem,⁵⁰ Mount Gerizim,⁵¹ Mount Sinai,⁵² Jericho⁵³ and Porphyreon.⁵⁴ With regard to all of these cities, the accent should be placed on their defensive character, especially visible in the capital itself, Constantinople, where Procopius underscores the importance of locating the two churches of the Mother of God—those of Blachernae and Pege (the modern-day church of St Mary of the Spring)—as bastions at either end of the land walls, in the vicinity of the Golden Horn and Balikli, respectively.⁵⁵

Concerning the Antiochian church, it should be stressed that it was built during the Persian War and that, adjacent to it, there was another church dedicated to St Michael the Archangel, protector of the faithful against physical danger. Procopius notes that, following the implementation of the Justinian policies in the region, these cities ‘no longer need either be fearful of the inroads of the villainous barbarians’.⁵⁶ Another important church was located on Mount Sinai, on whose slopes Justinian also erected a solid fortress with a large garrison ‘in order that the barbarian Saracens might not be able from that region, which, I have said, is uninhabited, to make inroads with complete secrecy into the lands of Palestine proper’.⁵⁷

In addition to the aforementioned churches, the most illustrative church described by Procopius for gaining a deeper understanding of Justinian’s policy on the superposition and suppression of cults is that of the Mother of God in Nablus. This church gave rise to a serious conflict with the Samaritan community living in the city, the ancient Neapolis of Palestine—next to the biblical Shechem—more specifically, a fierce struggle for the control of the cultic space created by the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim many centuries before, in the first millennium BC (Pummer 1987; Crown 1988 and especially (Crown 1986)).⁵⁸

From a religious point of view, it was, and still is, a highly significant place, for it is the mount on which the Israelites performed their first religious ceremonies after the Exodus, following Moises’ instructions on the convenience of celebrating their arrival in the Promised Land and on building an altar as an act of thanksgiving.⁵⁹ Furthermore, it should be noted that the church was located in the vicinity of two other religious sites of prime im-

portance whose control would also lead to interreligious strife (Sivan 2008, p. 107 and ff.).⁶⁰ Jacob's Well and the Joseph's Tomb (Pummer 1993, p. 139), the bones of the patriarch having already been an apple of discord between the Samaritan community and Byzantium, for both Theodosius I and Theodosius II had dispatched emissaries with orders to unearth them in a place close to Gerizim (Sivan 2008; Crown 1988, p. 69 and ff.). Once Christianity had become the official religion of the Empire and firmly established in the region, the conflict escalated (Crown, *ibid*).

In the fifth century, the emperor Zeno built a Christian church on the summit of Mount Gerizim in response to the significant disruptions caused by the Samaritans, in an unequivocal show of superiority.⁶¹ The construction of the new Christian church was also accompanied by important restrictions, including the prohibition to ascend the mount to visit the ancient temple, now surrounded by a wall,⁶² and to perform religious ceremonies (Droeber 2020, p. 71). This led to new rebellions during the reign of Anastasius I, who ordered the governor of Edessa⁶³ to retake the mount.

As Procopius himself observes in his *De Aedificiis*, the emperor Justinian also fortified the church of the Mother of God. Zeno had already built a circuit-wall around it, but this was 'only a light wall of stone', protected in turn by no more than 10 men, for the rest had been stationed in the city (*De Aed.* V.VII.8). Whereas, despite the unrest, Anastasius did not strengthen the fortifications, Justinian erected another circuit-wall around the existing wall or barrier, thus making the church impregnable. The latter also restored five churches that the Samaritans had put to the torch during the revolt of 529. These were very challenging times, for several laws were enacted against non-Christians, which were particularly merciless with the Samaritans (Pummer 2016, p. 137). Notwithstanding the fact that the religious factor had played a vitally important role in triggering the conflict, it was not the only one, for the laws enacted by the emperor not only condemned the religion of the Samaritans—their synagogues were to be destroyed and no new ones could be erected in their stead—but also deprived them of the possibility of conveying their property to other members of their community, which, in the short term, spelled doom for their economy, as well as their progressive decline.⁶⁴

The constant pressure brought to bear in the region sparked another Samaritan uprising, leading to the death of Jews and Christians from very different walks of life, including several leaders of the Church, some of whose property—including different places of worship—were consumed by fire, along with certain relics (Pummer 2016, p. 139 and ff.). The evolution of the revolt, led by the Samaritan Iulianus Sabarides,⁶⁵ seemed to bode well, for he managed to gain control of most of the cities of Samaria, where many vulnerable Christian churches were raised to the ground (Crown 1988, p. 74). However, the rebellion was crushed in 531, partly thanks to the support that the Ghassanids (Shahid 2010, p. 8) lent Justinian, who dealt harshly with the Samaritans, many of whom were executed or sold as slaves to the Sassanid Persians.

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The emperor Justinian, with his religious building or restoration programme, was bent on reestablishing Christian Orthodoxy—clearly evinced by the choice of the *Theotokos*—as well as on suppressing any other form of worship, regardless of whether it was pagan (as in Augila), Jewish (as in Boreium) or Samaritan (as in Gerizim), by superimposing Christian churches on other places of worship. However, the aim of these religious measures was much more complex and had political–military connotations that historiography has not always adequately addressed. It is obvious that the new churches or consecrations of Donatists and Arians, among others, involved the creation of a new or redeemed *locus sanctus*, as well as the desecration of the ancient sacred spaces of other religious communities, which were forced to witness their usurpation and the violation of their religious and, therefore, political identity. The purpose of this invasion of ancient cultic sites was not only to stamp out religious dissent, but also to impose the aforementioned rhetoric, through which those very sites and the communities that were defined by them were undermined and discriminated.

The fate of the synagogue in Boreium—supposedly erected by Solomon—whose description in Procopius gives this work its title (*De Aed.* VI.2.10), underscores Justinian's ability to set himself up as the architect of the new established order (Ousterhout 2010), yet one that was not, or not exclusively, of a religious nature, for the emperor placed the accent on the physical protection of the inhabitants of the newly recovered Empire. This is what occurred in Septum, Carthage and the troubled Leptis Magna, against which the Leuathae battled unremittingly as of the third century (Mattingly 2008). The author of *De Aedificiis* shows little interest in the *pacati* of Cidamê or in the conversion of the Gadabitani, yet he does indeed digress on the Leuathae, for it was the enemy incursions that really concerned the emperor, and against which all possible measures of both a purely defensive (fortresses, moats, walls, gates, etc.) and religious nature were taken, which ultimately reinforced group identity in an attempt to avoid desertions from the imperial ranks. There are constant allusions to the incursions of neighbouring tribes and, consequently, to the need to construct bastions and fortified churches and monasteries, among other defences, in order to protect the cities against the barbarians, for Book VI commences by stating that all Libya was under their power.

The churches built and dedicated to the *Theotokos* were not, therefore, mere religious buildings, and not only because they were enwalled or located in already fortified enclosures, but also because they performed the role of symbolic barriers against the inroads of the enemy. The churches of Leptis Magna and Nablus served not only as pivotal points around which the Christian community revolved, but also as rhetorical spaces of opposition to the political dissent clearly represented by the Leuathae and Samaritans, alike.

A last example should help to support even more this interpretation. In his *Bella* (*Bell.* VIII, 3, 21), Procopius refers to another church of the Mother of God, which was erected in the land of the Abasgi (*Abasgoi*), in the region of Colchis. These people are described as being distinctly pagan, insofar as they worshipped trees, and openly barbarian, for, driven by greed, they sacrificed their comeliest boys, mutilating their genitals in order to sell them as eunuchs in the imperial markets.⁶⁶ This should be framed in the context of the Lazic War in which the Abasgi participated.

After rebelling against the emperor in 550, the Abasgi sought the assistance of the Sassanids (Odisheli 2018, pp. 1–2), the worst of all betrayals. According to the Perpetual Peace of 532, the regions of Lazica and Abasgia had entered into the orbit of Byzantium. The intention of converting the inhabitants of both regions to Christianity was to reinforce their *fides* to the emperor in face of the threat posed by the Persians. We know of the conversion of King Tzath I of Lazica, who was baptised and received the royal insignia from Constantinople during the reign of Justinian I. Meanwhile, the Abasgi

adopted a more civilised standard of life. For not only have they espoused the Christian doctrine [. . .] but the emperor Justinian also built a sanctuary of the Virgin in their land, and appointed priests for them, and thus brought it about that they learned thoroughly all the observances of the Christians; and the Abasgi immediately dethroned both their kings and seemed to be living in a state of freedom (*Bell.* VIII, 3, 21).

Their conversion to Christianity and the construction of the church are plainly linked to the political rift with their rulers and to the growing imperial presence in the region, for other sizeable buildings were erected for garrisoning Byzantine troops, principally in the coastal cities and in the mountain passes leading to the Caucasus.

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With the passing of time, Roman Africa, Procopius' Libya, would become the Ifriqiya mentioned in the Arabic sources. Nonetheless, specific practices associated with the perpetuation of places of worship would be maintained, always using the discourse of spatial superposition and rhetoric described above of which there are a number of interesting examples: the trinomial of Ceuta (Byzantine church/Aljama mosque/cathedral),⁶⁷ the extraordinary superposition that can be observed in the Esplanade of the Mosques in

Jerusalem;⁶⁸ and the oasis of Augila, which was stormed by Arab Muslim troops in the seventh century.

In this last city located in the African desert, the new Islamic power would create a new religious site of memory, namely, the tomb of Sidi Abdullah ben Sara, one of the companions of the Prophet (Mason 1974). As before, it was connoted from a religious perspective, for Christianity and Islam, the two great religions of Africa during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, helped to consolidate the position of the political powers that prospered under their aegis, and which could not afford to tolerate any ambiguity as regards the *fides* of the people to their rulers. Therefore, those sacred spaces assumed the role of representing political power, while reinforcing the identity of the community, recreated whenever those spaces that gave it meaning were defined.

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Notes

- ¹ Later on, there were many other martyrs: Montanus and Lucius and companions (c. 260); Agapius and Secundinus (both bishops) in Lambesa; Maximilian in Tebessa (295); and the centurion Marcellus in Tangiers (298), to whom should be added those martyred during the persecution of 303 (Bishop Felix in Thibiuca; the Abitinian Martyrs; Galonius and companions in Thimida Regia; Maxima, Secunda and Donatilla in Thibiuca; and Crispina in Theveste). Likewise, there are martyrs whose historicity is a moot point, including the *massa candida* of Carthage and, later on, the 20 martyrs of Hippo, to whom Augustine refers in his sermons.
- ² On the worship of the Donatist martyrs, *vid.* (Frend 1951); Maier 1987; for a more general overview of religious conflicts in Africa: Gaddis 2005, chs. III–IV; (Shaw 2011).
- ³ Regarding the suppression of pagan spaces, the eminently archaeological vision of (Leone 2013) is interesting in that the author contends that this was not owing so much to religious strife as to economic reasons. On Leone, *vid.* the very critical review of (Fournier 2016).
- ⁴ For instance, *superstitio, praecipitates, haeresis, haeretico* etc. For interreligious dialogue in Late Antiquity and the controversial lexicon: (Torres Prieto 2021, pp. 87–118).
- ⁵ With respect to the account of Vandal excesses, González Salinero 2001 is essential. Regrettably, the archaeological excavations performed at the beginning of the twentieth century did not pay particular attention to possible destruction layers dating from this period: (Lancel 1989, p. 654).
- ⁶ Capreolus of Carthage, *Epist.* 1; Possidius of Calama, *Vit. Aug.* 28.5 and 8–10; Quodvultdeus, *De temp. barb.* II.1.2; Victor Vitensis, *Hist. pers.*, I.1–12.
- ⁷ Cultural and especially religious ties must have been strengthened as a result of the disintegration of the Empire during the fifth century. With respect to this comparison: (Siniscalco 1986, pp. 203–4).
- ⁸ *Vita Fulgentii*, 1. The reuse of the basilica of St Monica is a case in point (Ennabli 1975, p. 49). The overlapping of Vandal elements not only occurred in religious buildings, but also in those devoted to public entertainment and spectacles (Gil Egea 1998, pp. 67–68).
- ⁹ The most obvious way of promulgating the chosen religious formula was to convene the rest of the community in the space devoted to public meetings (Rebillard 2012).
- ¹⁰ (Cecchelli 1993, pp. 129–30; Cecconi 1990, p. 56); for the Donatist martyr, *vid.* PCBE I Marculus; there are plenty of literary accounts: Optatus, Augustine and the Conference of Carthage in 411 all mention him, plus, of course, the *Passio Marculi* (Monceaux 1920, 60 and ff.); on the basilica of Vegesela: (Cayrel 1934, pp. 133–38).
- ¹¹ In this respect, albeit exclusively restricted to Africa, *vid.* Pringle 1981—a critical review of the *limes* as conceived by (Diehl 1896) in the nineteenth century; (Durlat 1981; Duval 1983, pp. 149–204).
- ¹² Specific studies of the information that *De Aed.* provides on Libya include the old, but very interesting, work by (Desanges 1963) on the building of walls in the area of the Aures and in the rest of Numidia; the long paper by Duval 1983, in which the author argues that many of the buildings were renamed after the Justinian refurbishment, appearing in Procopius' work as new: (Traina 1990; Roques 1993; Reynolds 2000). It is notable that the opposite also occurred, with the building of cities supervised by the emperor, which are only known in light of the epigraphic evidence, but which are not mentioned in the *De Aed.* (Durlat *passim.*).

- 13 Proc. *De Aed.* VI.2.7. The now classic work by (Seston 1934) is indispensable. The monastery in Mandracium, near Carthage, could also be regarded as falling into this category (Proc. *De Aed.* VI.5.113). Although Procopius does not refer to it, there was also another fortified monastery in Proconsular Africa, viz. that of Tebessa, also from the sixth century (Diehl 1896, p. 430 and ff.).
- 14 As there is known to have been a Christian bishop (Marcus) in 362, it can be assumed that, at least from that moment on, Philae had a church. Despite this, and the fact that Theodosius I decreed the closure of pagan temples in 391, this centre of worship does not seem to have undergone any changes. The island continued to be a sacred place where ancient Egyptian cults existed until the sixth century. This might have been down to the fact that the sanctuary was transregional, and served to strengthen ties with the Blemmyes, who were frequent visitors to the temple complex, with all that this implied at an economic and commercial level (Hahn et al. 2008). The closure of pagan temples between 535 and 537 was not only promoted by Justinian, but also by the patriarch of Alexandria, who lost no time in transforming the temple of Isis into a church dedicated to St Stephen (Merkelbach 2001, p. 330). This church was consecrated during the tenure of Theodorus of Philae who was bishop until 577. In addition to that of St Stephen, built in the pronaos of the temple of Isis, the archaeological record points to the existence of another five or six churches built between the sixth and eighth centuries (Richter 2002, pp. 123–26).
- 15 Proc. *Bell. Pers.* I.19.35–37. It is surprising that this episode is not included in the *De Aed.*, which would stress the idea that conversion was not the driving force behind the Justinian programme.
- 16 Something similar occurred after the anti-pagan unrest in Ephesus (Foss 1979, pp. 86–87).
- 17 Ammonia.
- 18 Tocræ.
- 19 Benghazi. Additionally, the construction of baths.
- 20 Tolmeita.
- 21 VI.2.111, possibly present-day Tabilbé.
- 22 VI.4.112, present-day Libda, close to Al-Khums.
- 23 VI.5.113 very close to the palace; also porticoed streets and baths.
- 24 VI.6.114, present-day Susa.
- 25 Present-day Ras Kabudia.
- 26 Present-day Medinet el-Kedima.
- 27 Present-day Ain Jelloula.
- 28 ‘[...] Pentebagae and Florentianae and Badê and Meleum and Tamugadê, as well as two forts, Dabusi and Gaeana [...] he walled two cities, Fricê and Sitifis [Setif]. At the cities situated in the rest of Numidia [...] he set up impregnable defences: Laribuzuduôn, Paraturôn, Cilana, Siccaveneria [Keff], Tigisis [Ain el-Bordj], Lamfouaomba, Calamaa [Guelma], Medara [Haidra], Medela; besides these, two forts, Scilê and Foscala’ (*De Aed.* VI, 7, 115). The identification of some of these places is problematic to say the least.
- 29 Present-day Ceuta.
- 30 Present-day Ghadames.
- 31 Present-day Aujilah.
- 32 She was solemnly given the title of *Theotokos* at the Council of Ephesus in 431, in relation to the Christological dogma according to which Jesus was fully God and, in turn, fully human, as had been established at the Council of Nicaea in 325, and that his two natures were united and inseparable in a sole person born of Mary.
- 33 On the situation of Ceuta when the Byzantines arrived, *vid.* (Montenegro and del Castillo 1997, pp. 70–88), who consider that the Vandals had lost control of the city to the *Mauri*; (Vallejo Girvés 2012, pp. 99–123).
- 34 In this respect, there is great deal of inconclusive literature, although it seems that the interesting cultural trinomial ‘Byzantine church/Aljama mosque/cathedral’ presented by (Bernal Casasola and Paredes 2020, p. 422), following the proposal of E. Gozalbes Cravioto, should be accepted as the most probable of all: ‘that the Byzantine basilica is located below the cathedral of Ceuta, in Africa Square, which was built on top of the Islamic Aljama mosque; which, in turn, according to Al-Bakri, was erected on top of “ancient” buildings’. The late Roman basilica must have already been abandoned by that time.
- 35 It is impossible to identify the saint to whom Procopius is referring, but it is interesting that he specifies that she was a local one and that, unlike the *Theotokos*, her church was located outside the palace complex, which, it is understood, was walled. He seems to be contrasting a central official cult with a local one that served to unite the population of the capital. Following the suggestion of P. Silvio Moreno, IVE—personal communication—St Prima might have belonged to the group of Saturninus and companions, the 49 Abitinian Martyrs of 304 (*Acta SS. Saturnini, Dativi et aliorum plurimorum martyrum in Africa*, PL 8, 688 and ff.). Prima is also mentioned in the two lists of Mauritanian martyrs appearing in the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*: 17 October and 2 November, but this is improbable given how distant Carthage was.
- 36 In all likelihood, the Byzantines simply reused the existing Vandal church on the hill of Byrsa, inside the Germanic palace complex.

- 37 Proc. *De Aed.* VI.4.112. The city's decline coincided with the onslaught of the Austoriani in 364, according to Amm. Marc. 26.4.5; cf. 27.9.1; (Desanges 1990).
- 38 CIL VIII, 8 = CIL VIII, 9 = IRT 342 = LBIRNA 49 = LBIRNA 50 = IRT-S, 24 = AE 1926, 155 = AE 1949, 84 = AE 1951, 206 = AE 1952, +104 = AE 2018, +1864.
- 39 Coripp., *Ioh.*, II.43.184; III.79.187; VII.384; VIII. 648. Regarding the Laguatans following the Islamic Conquest of the Maghreb: (de Felipe Rodríguez 2019).
- 40 Proc. *Bell. Vand.* II.21.1 and ff.
- 41 Proc. *Bell. Vand.* I.25.7, the awarding of insignias was regarded as a form of political recognition of territorial control; (Pringle 1981, pp. 9–16 and 23–50).
- 42 PLRE IIIb, *Sergius* 4, 1124–1128, the office of *dux militis* was reestablished after the reconquest in 534, according to CJ I.27.2, the incumbent having his seat in Leptis Magna, which must have led to friction with the local population, given the power vacuum of the Vandal period.
- 43 Coripp. *Ioh.* I.144,467; IV.48,85,629; V.171; VI.278; VII.535 (cult of Amon); VIII.434,474,501; (Modéran 1986, pp. 95–212).
- 44 Trad. A. Gateau, pp. 35–37. = Ibn 'Abd-al-Hakam, *Conquête de l'Afrique du Nord et de l'Espagne*, A. Gateau (trad.), (Argel 1947).
- 45 For a necessary study of the dilemmas posed by the sources on this enclave, *vid.* (Modéran 2003, pp. 243–44).
- 46 *De Aed.* I.III.36 contains a description of the churches of Blaquernas, Pege ('Both these churches were erected outside the city-wall, the one where it starts beside the shore of the sea, the other close to the Golden Gate, as it is called, which chances to be near the end of the line of fortifications, in order that both of them may serve as invincible defences to the circuit-wall of the city') and Hieron.
- 47 I.VIII.43—restoration—together with two churches of St Michael the Archangel in Arnavutkoy, in the Bosphorus Strait.
- 48 II.X.65.
- 49 III.IV.72, together with the reconstruction of monasteries in the present-day Turkish city of Erzurum, 40 miles from Dara.
- 50 V.VI.103. By building it at the highest point of the city, on top of a Jewish sacred space, Justinian apparently wanted to give it spatial pre-eminence (Murphy-O'Connor 2008, pp. 19–20, 83–84). This choice would not have been devoid of political motivations, although, for the Christian community of the period, it symbolised the supremacy of their creed and the victory of the Mother of God over Judaism, whose sacred mount had been abandoned (Tsafirir 2000). As to the subsequent superposition of buildings during the Islamic period, *vid.* Procopius, *Buildings of Justinian*, Trad. Aubrey Stewart, M.A., anot. C. W. Wilson, T. Hayter Lewis, London 1888, appendix II.
- 51 V.VII.105 in Nablus.
- 52 V.VIII.106 Jebel-el-Tur.
- 53 V.IX.106 reconstruction of the temple.
- 54 *Id.*, it was not a church but a house of the Mother of God, perhaps a hospice.
- 55 The church of Balikli is especially interesting for, even though it must have been built outside the city walls, it controlled access to the city through the Golden Gate: (Janin 1964; more specifically, Mango 2000, pp. 173–88).
- 56 See Note 48.
- 57 VIII.106.
- 58 The first temple to be archaeologically confirmed on Mount Gerizim dates from the fifth century BC (Magen 2007, pp. 157 and ff., 183; on the most recent discoveries of Samaritan material culture: Dar 2010), at the same time when the Second Temple of Jerusalem was built (Gudme 2020, p. 73). Whereas the Jewish cult prevailed in this city, the Samaritan cult held sway on Mount Gerizim. Both religious communities had a common origin, although the rivalry between them led to the destruction of the Samaritan temple by the Jews during the second century (Flav. Jos. Ant. 13.3.4; Bourgel 2016, pp. 505–23, 2019, p. 628). By then, a thriving city had been established on the slopes of the mount, which would subsequently be raised to the ground by the Hasmoneans. Thanks to the testimony of Flavius Josephus, it is known that the walls surrounding the temple remained standing (*Ibid.* 14.6.2; 18.4.1; B.J. 3.7.32; as regards the colony in the Roman period: (Magen 2009). The emperor Hadrian built in the mount a temple of Zeus Hypsistos). There is also reference to this circuit-wall in the account of Eusebius of Caesarea (Eus. Ces. *Onom.* 214. 135; on the value of Eusebius' work for gaining further insights into Christian Palestine: Groh 1985; Walker 1990; Freeman-Grenville and Taylor 2003).
- 59 *Deut.* 11.29–30. Other biblical references to the mount: *Deut.* 27.12; *Jos.* 8.33; *Jue.* 9.7; it is considered to be the place where Abraham raised the altar on which to sacrifice his son Isaac on God's behest.
- 60 The uncompromising Christian Orthodoxy of Palestine, underpinned by Constantinople's political discourse fraught with restrictions and prohibitions, as well as the constant opposition of the Jewish community, exacerbated the violent reaction of the Samaritans, whose main revolt broke out in 529.
- 61 Juan Malalas is not referring to a new building but to the reuse of the Samaritan synagogue (1831, pp. 382–83). The Samaritan sources also mention this, emphasising the importance of access to water (Alsaoud 2018, p. 194).
- 62 On the church dedicated to the *Theotokos*, *vid.* (Schneider 1951, pp. 228–31; Bull 1968, pp. 58–72; Di Segni 1990, pp. 343–50; Hjelm 2010, p. 25; Zangenberg 2012, pp. 399–418).

- ⁶³ PLRE II, Procopius 7.
- ⁶⁴ The Samaritans were, in turn, under pressure from the Christians in the area, according to the account of the Palestinian monk Cyril of Scythopolis (Gray 1993; Adshead 1996; Rabello 1997).
- ⁶⁵ S.v. 'Julianus ben Sabar', *A Companion to Samaritan Studies* . . . , 140. (Crown et al. 1993).
- ⁶⁶ A practice already mentioned by Herodotus III, 97; Arrian. *Peripl. Pont. Eux.* 12; and also described in a later period by Steph. B. s. v. Σάννιται.
- ⁶⁷ *Vid.* n. 40.
- ⁶⁸ *Vid.* n. 56.

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