

# Tertullian and Roman Law – What Do We (Not) Know?

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## ABSTRACT

Whether Tertullian had expertise in Roman law before his conversion to Christianity, or whether his knowledge of it was non-specialist, through studying rhetoric as part of his education, has been debated in more than two dozen scholarly works since 1735. This article doesn't comment on that but asks, for the first time as far as I know, how far these studies recognize that we have almost no legal writings in the form in which Tertullian knew them, and almost no knowledge of legal practice at Carthage while he was there. The paucity of contemporary legal writings is examined and then illustrated from what we call criminal law. The implications of this for the credibility of Tertullian's challenge to the irregularity of legal proceedings against Christians concludes the first part of the article. The situation at Carthage is examined next, and illustrated from what we call civil law. Tertullian used the noun *praescriptio* and its cognate verb *praescribo* forty times in the juridical sense of 'objection' to an opponent's claim. We know that these words were employed in four different ways in litigation at Rome, but how were they used at Carthage? The second part of the article argues that three scholarly conclusions about Tertullian's use of these words are valid only if the words were used differently at Carthage from the way they were used at Rome. The article suggests that we don't know enough about the Courts at Carthage to give a definitive answer.

## 1. Tertullian's knowledge of Roman law

Whether Tertullian had expertise in Roman law before his conversion to Christianity, either as a *iurisconsultus* or as an *advocatus*,<sup>1</sup> or whether his knowledge of it was non-specialist, through studying rhetoric as part of his education,<sup>2</sup> has been debated in more than two dozen scholarly works between

<sup>1</sup> Jurists gave opinions but didn't appear in court; advocates pled cases in court. Siegmund Schlossman described their work and applied it to Tertullian in 'Tertullian im Lichte der Jurisprudenz', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 27 (1906), 251-75, 407-30, 257-68. A personal translation of 251-75 into English is available at <[www.ianbalfour.co.uk](http://www.ianbalfour.co.uk)>. For a catalogue of Tertullian's legal terminology, arranged according to subject divisions within Roman law, Paulo Vitton, *Concetti giuridici nelle opere di Tertulliano* (Rome, 1924, reissued 1972), 17-55.

<sup>2</sup> Because of Tertullian's knowledge of the Greek language and his listing of both Roman and Greek classical authors, it is generally assumed that he received a high standard of education. For how widely he read, Timothy D. Barnes, *Tertullian: An Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford, 1971, 2nd ed., London, 1984), 194-206.

1735 and the year 2000.<sup>3</sup> This article does not comment on that but asks, for the first time as far as I know, how far these studies recognize that we have almost no legal writings in the form in which Tertullian knew them, and almost no knowledge of legal practice at Carthage while he was there. The lack of contemporary writings will be examined in sections 2 and 3, illustrated by what we call criminal law, and the situation at Carthage examined in sections 4 and 5, illustrated by what we call civil law.<sup>4</sup>

Tertullian twice commented on developments in Roman law during his years at Carthage – that laws were ‘daily being supplanted by new decrees and statutes’<sup>5</sup> and by ‘the new axes of imperial rescripts and edicts’.<sup>6</sup> The concern of

<sup>3</sup> The first editors or critics of Tertullian’s works, such as Grotius, Valesius and Pamelius, were against Tertullian being a *iurisconsultus* because Jerome did not describe him as such in *De viribus illustribus* 53.1. Debate began when the views of Johann Heinrich Blumbach, *De Senatusconsulto Quintus Septimius Florens Presbytero et Ireconculio Tertullianus Liber* (Lipsiae, 1735), 1-20, were taken up by Johannis Alexandri Guinandii Pagenstecher, *De Jurisprudentia Tertulliana oratio* (Harderoviae, 1743), 51. David Rankin, ‘Was Tertullian a Jurist?’, *SP* 31 (1997), 335-42, analysed nineteen studies between 1904 and 1997 and noted that Harnack, 1904; de Labriolle, 1906; Beck, 1930; Evans, 1959; Rambaux, 1978; Hallonsten, 1984 and Quasten, 1992, favoured jurist; that von Campenhausen, 1964 and Rankin himself, 1997, favoured advocate; that Schlossman, 1906; Colson, 1924; Daly, 1947; Hanson, 1961; Sider, 1971; Barnes, 1971; Fredouille, 1972; Bray, 1977; Aziza, 1977 and Waszink, 1979, favoured rhetorician or other non-legal influence. Rankin did not mention Joseph Kaspar Stirnimann, *Die Praescriptio Tertullians im Lichte des römischen Rechts und der Theologie* (Freiburg, Switzerland, 1949), ‘very probably a jurist’, 4, 82, and René Braun, who preferred *causidicus* (from *causas dicere*, to plead the cause of others before the courts as an advocate), *Deus Christianorum: Recherches sur le vocabulaire doctrinal de Tertullien, Études Augustiniennes* (Paris, 1962, revised ed. 1977), 18. The most determined scholarly attempt to show Tertullian as a jurist was Alexander Beck, *Römisches Recht bei Tertullian und Cyprian* (Halle, 1930, reprinted with extended preface, Aalen, 1967), but a key reviewer of that monograph argued that the texts assembled by Beck showed Tertullian as a *causidicus*, not a jurist: Artur Steinwenter, *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte: Romanistische Abteilung* 52 (1932), 412-6, 415. Since Rankin ‘some of the features traditionally ascribed to his legal background are readily understood in terms of his expertise in the ways of rhetoric’: David Wright, ‘Tertullian’, in Philip F. Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2 (London, 2000), 1032. For Roman jurists generally, see Detlef Liebs, *Hoffjuristen der römischen Kaiser bis Justinian* (München, 2010). For the ongoing debate about the distinction between jurists and advocates, see Caroline Humfress, *Orthodoxy and the Courts in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> When jurisdiction was conferred by the State on a Roman magistrate, he acquired all the powers necessary to deal with both crimes (*imperium merum*) and questions of private right (*imperium mixtum*); however, the boundary between criminal and civil procedure was hardly delineated at the turn of the second and third centuries: Lord Mackenzie, *Studies in Roman Law*, 7th ed. (Edinburgh, 1898), 350.

<sup>5</sup> *Ad nationes* 1.10.4: *novis de die consultis constitutisque obruistis*.

<sup>6</sup> *Apologeticum* 4.7: *novis principalium rescriptorum et edictorum securibus*. Decrees were judgments given by the emperor in lawsuits; statutes were legislation by the senate, although, by the end of the second century, often the emperor’s own wishes clothed with the respectability of a servile senate; rescripts were answers given by the emperor to those who consulted him; edicts were general laws laid down by the emperor. W.W. Buckland, *A Text-book of Roman Law from*

this article is that, for the most part, neither the old laws nor the new ones are available to us as Tertullian knew them.

## 2. Our knowledge of Roman law

Tertullian was a near contemporary of four lawyers described as ‘the great lights of jurisprudence for all time’, Gaius, Papinian, Ulpian and Paul.<sup>7</sup> They were prolific writers, but none of their works has come down to us in the form in which Tertullian knew them. When the only known complete copy of the *Institutes* of Gaius, published c. 161 AD, was rediscovered in 1816 AD, the chemicals used to decipher the text damaged parts of it so badly that its contents are known only ‘with the aid of many conjectures’.<sup>8</sup> For example, Gaius wrote about *praescriptiones*, the subject of the fourth and fifth sections of this article, but a substantial part of his description is illegible.<sup>9</sup>

Almost everything which the others wrote was edited, three hundred years later, when the Emperor Justinian I appointed a Commission in 530 AD to go through about two thousand works of jurists and praetors, containing three million lines, with instructions to condense and update and publish them as contemporary law.<sup>10</sup> They discarded about ninety-five percent of the material and amended and published the other five percent in 533 AD as the *Digest*.<sup>11</sup> What they did not use has almost entirely disappeared, leaving us impoverished, because what is left of the jurists’ work tells us more than any other writings

*Augustus to Justinian*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1963), 17-20; Lord Mackenzie, *Studies in Roman Law* (Edinburgh, 1898), 14-6; Frederick P. Walton, *Historical Introduction to the Roman Law*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1912), 269-81.

<sup>7</sup> Sir Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society* (London, 1861), 41; Gaius (alive in 178), Papinian (murdered in 212), Ulpian (writing from 211-21) and Paul (dates unknown, but a contemporary of Ulpian).

<sup>8</sup> F.P. Walton, *Historical Introduction* (1912), 289. Gaius’ *Institutes* disappeared after the fall of the Roman Empire, until an almost complete copy was discovered in Verona in 1816.

<sup>9</sup> Gaius, *Institutes*, 4, 130-7. ‘Gaius distinguishes between *praescr. pro actore* (130-1a, 134-7) and *pro reo* (133). The illegible page after 133 must have contained more about *praes. p. reo* before it returned, by a train of thought which is irrecoverable, to *praescr. p. actore*.’ Francis de Zulueta, *The Institutes of Gaius* (Oxford, 1953), II 285. Furthermore, the text we possess had been altered over many years after Gaius published it as copyists incorporated glosses written in the margins of manuscripts into the text: W.W. Buckland, *A Text-book of Roman Law* (1963), 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 40, 42. ‘Almost everything’: most of what else we have from the classical age is described in *ibid.* 34-39; other works of less importance were collected by Gustavus Haenel, *Corpus Juris Antejustinianum*, 5th ed. (Leipzig, 1886).

<sup>11</sup> Justinian, *C. Tanta* 1 said that the Commissioners read nearly 2,000 *libri*, containing three million *versus* (lines) and reduced them to 150,000 *versus* – five percent; H.F. Jolowicz and Barry Nicholas, *Historical Introduction to the Study of Roman Law*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1972), 482, suggest that only 1,528 *libri* were consulted, not ‘nearly 2,000’, which increases the ‘five percent’.

about the law of the classical age.<sup>12</sup> ‘There is moreover the probability that some of these texts reached Justinian’s compilers in a form which had already been altered to some extent in the immediately post-classical period.’<sup>13</sup> The Commission’s amendments are known as ‘Interpolations’ and much ingenuity has been exercised to date them.<sup>14</sup> Our knowledge of what Tertullian knew is even more restricted, because the *Institutes* of Gaius’ do not mention criminal law and Justinian’s *Corpus Iuris Civilis*<sup>15</sup> dealt, as the name says, almost entirely with civil law.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Tertullian’s ‘ignorance’ of Roman law – or is it ours?

The clincher of Timothy Barnes’ argument that Tertullian was not a *iuris-consultus* was twofold: (1) that Tertullian ‘never makes this telling point’ that ‘no specific *lex, senatus consultum* or imperial decree proscribed Christianity as illegal’,<sup>17</sup> and (2) that Tertullian did not mention a work where Ulpian listed imperial pronouncements about punishment of Christians.<sup>18</sup> Barnes pronounced Tertullian ‘ignorant’ of Roman law on both counts.<sup>19</sup> While Christianity was

<sup>12</sup> The classical age of Roman law, its golden period, was from the beginning of the second century to the middle of the third. ‘Other writings’ include imperial rescripts embodied in various collections of the later empire.

<sup>13</sup> H.F. Jolowicz and B. Nicholas, *Historical Introduction* (1972), 405.

<sup>14</sup> W.W. Buckland, *A Text-book of Roman Law* (1963), 43-4. Justinian said that the amendments were *multa et maxima* (C. *Tanta* 10), as centuries-old texts were adapted to expound existing law.

<sup>15</sup> The *Digest* and three other works commissioned by Justinian have been collectively known as the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* since Denys Godefroi used the phrase for his 1583 edition, to distinguish it from the compilation of Canon Law called *Corpus Iuris Canonici*.

<sup>16</sup> For Gaius, Lord Mackenzie, *Studies in Roman Law* (1898), 396; for Justinian, only a small section at the end of the fourth book of the *Digest*, 4.18, and the last title of his *Institutes*, touched on criminal law.

<sup>17</sup> *Tertullian* (1971), 27.

<sup>18</sup> A chapter in the seventh book of Ulpian’s *De officio proconsularis*. Unsurprisingly, there is no trace of it in Justinian’s *Digest*, because his Commissioners had no interest in now-obsolete laws about persecution of Christians; we know about it only because it was quoted by a Christian writer, Lactantius, early in the fourth century, in his *Divinae institutiones* V 11.19 – an example of how fragmented is our knowledge of criminal law in Tertullian’s time.

<sup>19</sup> *Tertullian* (1971), 28. The second point is scarcely fair because, as far as we know, Ulpian’s work was not available until 211, more than a decade after Tertullian’s main challenge to the irregularity of proceedings against Christians in *Ad nationes* and *Apologeticum* in 197. Of the many attempts to construct a chronology for Tertullian’s writings, two of the most recent – Jean-Claude Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique*, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 47 (Paris, 1972), 487 and T.D. Barnes, *Tertullian* (1971), 55 – agree on dating both *Ad nationes* and *Apologeticum* in 197. Tertullian’s only other work about the legality of persecution was an open letter in 212 to Scapula, the Proconsul of Africa from 211-213, but we don’t know if Ulpian’s *De officio proconsularis* was available to Tertullian then.

illegal – there is no doubt about that – Barnes’ first point was that no enactment before 250 AD made it so and that Trajan’s advisory rescript to Pliny, *conquiritendi non sunt*<sup>20</sup> (not to be sought out), defined the legal position of Christianity until Decius, but didn’t proscribe it. ‘There is no evidence to prove earlier legislation by the Senate or the emperor.’<sup>21</sup> There may be no extant laws, but Tertullian’s point, in his carefully reasoned appeal to the ‘leaders of Rome’ who met on the Byrsa at Carthage,<sup>22</sup> was that Trajan’s rescript ameliorated existing *leges* (Tertullian’s word).<sup>23</sup> Would he have jeopardized his credibility by saying that, if his opponents could have responded in ridicule, ‘but there were no such laws’?

We do not know what *leges* Tertullian was referring to, but if many if not most of the legal writings which he knew, and his readers knew, have been lost, perhaps ‘ignorance’ of them is not Tertullian’s but ours? Barnes elsewhere accepted that ‘it is not clear whether Trajan, in his reply, made a change in the legal position of Christians or not’.<sup>24</sup> In short, we just don’t have the legal records as Tertullian knew and used them.

So much for the general position; what about the local situation at Carthage?

#### 4. Roman law at Carthage

Many efforts have been made to understand Tertullian’s use of the noun *praescriptio* and its cognate verb *praescribo*, appearing 106 times across twenty-five of his thirty-one extant works.<sup>25</sup> This article looks only at his forty

<sup>20</sup> Pliny, *Epistulae* 10.97.2.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy D. Barnes, ‘Legislation against the Christians’, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 58 (1968), 32-50, 48. He scrutinized twenty ‘scattered and often difficult to evaluate’ passages, six of them quoted by Tertullian, attributed to fourteen emperors, and argued that none of them went further than the guidance given by Trajan to Pliny (my footnote 20). In his monograph, *Tertullian* (1971), 27, Barnes added *lex* to the list: ‘No specific *lex*, *senatus consultum* or imperial decree proscribed Christianity as illegal.’ He disagreed with John A. Crook, *Life and Law of Rome* (London, 1967), 279: ‘The equation “Christian = man to be punished” can only have been established by government directive.’ After commenting that Nero may have provided a precedent, Crook added: ‘This is not enough. There must have been a legal order, a rescript to the urban prefect or something of the sort.’

<sup>22</sup> Most are now agreed that *Apologeticum* was addressed to the ‘leaders of Rome’ who met on the Byrsa at Carthage and not to the leaders in Rome itself; T.D. Barnes, *Tertullian* (1971), 109.

<sup>23</sup> *Apologeticum* 5.7: *Quales ergo leges istae ... quas Traianus ex parte frustrates est vetanda inquiri Christianos.*

<sup>24</sup> ‘Legislation against the Christians’ (1968), 37.

<sup>25</sup> J.-C. Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion* (1972), 196-218, 232-4, counted 106 usages and showed that the words have two meanings in Tertullian’s works, (1) forty-two places where the secular meaning ‘preface’ or ‘information given in advance’ had acquired the technical value in juridical language of ‘prior objection’, and (2) sixty-four places where the meaning was ‘rule’ or ‘precept’. He went on to show how Tertullian combined the two meanings into a ‘personal

or so uses of these words in the juridical sense of ‘objection’ to an opponent’s claim.<sup>26</sup> Despite the reservations in the first part of this article, we know that *praescriptio* was employed in four different ways in litigation at Rome,<sup>27</sup> but how was it used at Carthage? It is a fair question, because until the third century Rome made no attempt to impose a unified system of law on the diverse peoples of her Empire; until then, Phoenecian and Berber laws and customs inter-related with Roman law at Carthage.<sup>28</sup> Noting that Gaius’ *Institutes* do not mention acquiring title to land by *praescriptio*, one commentator surmised ‘... probably in his day there was no general system, the matter being left to the particular law of each province’,<sup>29</sup> and another said more generally, that ‘Roman law was in practice probably interpreted in the light of local traditions’.<sup>30</sup>

‘Probably’ is the key word. ‘The literature of the classical period was mostly written from the standpoint of Rome, ... Even when the great jurists of the capital have provincial cases in mind, they are representative of the official point of view, which is conservative and Roman.’<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, almost all the works quoted in Justinian’s *Digest* were by lawyers who lived in Rome;<sup>32</sup>

semantic neologism’ (*néologisme sémantique personnel*) – an example of Tertullian taking a word with a technical meaning and using it in a non-technical sense.

<sup>26</sup> The first to distinguish juridical and non-juridical uses of *praescriptio* in Tertullian’s works was Jean-Léon Allie, *L’argument de prescription dans le droit romain, en apologétique et en théologie dogmatique* (Ottawa, 1940), 48. In 1949, J. Stirmimann identified thirty-nine of Tertullian’s uses of *praescriptio* as having juridical meaning: *Die Praescriptio Tertullians* (1949), 83-5. In 1970, Dimitri Michaélidès listed everything previously written on this in *Sacramentum chez Tertullien* (Paris, 1970), 154-62, and supported the traditional view that Tertullian took the word from a judicial background.

<sup>27</sup> For the rest of this paper, the noun and the verb are both encompassed by the one word, *praescriptio*.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Michel Carrié, ‘Developments in provincial and local administration’, in A.K. Bowman, P. Garnsey and A. Cameron (eds), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed, vol. XII, *The Crisis of Empire A.D. 193-337* (Cambridge, 2005), 269-309; he dated Carthage’s transition from ‘a Latin colony to a colony under Italic law’ at c. 208 (271). Caroline Humfrees broadly concurred with his conclusions, but saw provincial cities increasingly choosing to use Roman law, rather than having it imposed on them, after Caracalla’s *Constitutio Antoniniana* granted Roman citizenship to almost all free inhabitants of the Roman Empire in 212: ‘Law’s Empire: Roman Universalism and Legal Practice’, in Paul J. du Plessis (ed.), *New Frontiers, Law and Society in the Roman World* (Edinburgh, 2013), 77-90.

<sup>29</sup> F. Zulueta, *The Institutes of Gaius* (1953), II 70-1.

<sup>30</sup> Greg Woolf, *Becoming Roman: the Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge, 1998), 67, illustrated by one of Trajan’s letters to Pliny, who had written for advice because several cities claimed they were exempt from the usual laws on bankruptcy. Trajan replied: ‘It depends on the charter of each city. If they have such a privilege, uphold it, but I am making no general rule to the detriment of private creditors.’ Pliny, *Epistulae* 10.108-9.

<sup>31</sup> H.F. Jolowicz and B. Nicholas, *Historical Introduction* (1972), 405.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l’Afrique chrétienne depuis les origines jusqu’à l’invasion arabe* (Paris, 1901), II 181.

Gaius does not mention Carthage and the *Digest* refers to it only once.<sup>33</sup> Even if Tertullian lived in Rome for a while – doubted by some<sup>34</sup> – he was brought up in Carthage,<sup>35</sup> which had its own law school,<sup>36</sup> yet we know almost nothing about regional variations of Roman law (if any) at Carthage. With two caveats, the remainder of this article examines four scholarly views about Tertullian's use of *praescriptio*, and argues that three of them can be valid only if the word was used differently at Carthage from the way it was used at Rome. The first caveat acknowledges that Tertullian transposed the judicial use of *praescriptiones* into theological ones, which 'oscillate between various shades of meaning, according to the context'.<sup>37</sup> Jean-Claude Fredouille remarked on the irony that the word chosen by Tertullian to silence heretics 'simply, quickly and effectively' has led 'the learned ... to a disconcerting variety of conclusions'.<sup>38</sup> The second caveat is that neither the number of *praescriptiones* used by Tertullian – opinion has ranged from one to ten<sup>39</sup> – nor the adjectives he added to

<sup>33</sup> *Digest* 32.11. *pr.*

<sup>34</sup> Johannes Quasten summarized the pre-Barnes majority view that Tertullian lived in Rome, although he provided no conjecture as to dates: *Patrology* (Utrecht and Brussels, 1963), II 246; following T.D. Barnes' view that *gemmarum quoque nobilitatem uidemus Romae* (*De cultu feminarum* 1.7.2) was not intended to be autobiographical (*Tertullian* [1971], 245), recent scholarship has largely ignored the question.

<sup>35</sup> It is widely accepted that Africa Proconsularis was his *patria* or homeland, although he himself never dwelt on autobiographical details and no extant contemporary writer mentions him: Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (London, 2004), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Franz Peter Bremer, *Die Rechtslehrer und Rechtsschulen im römischen Kaiserreich* (Berlin, 1868), 571; Berhhard Kübler, *Geschichte des römischen Rechts* (Leipzig, 1925), 258.

<sup>37</sup> '... oscillent, selon les contextes, entre diverses nuances', so J.-C. Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion* (1972), 218. Similarly, 'Tertullian ... keeps of the Roman procedure only the framework, and the general idea of prescription, for he transposes this juridical expedient into the theological domain, and gives it a quite different meaning' ('Tertullien ... ne garde de la procédure romaine que le cadre et l'idée générale de prescription, car il transpose cet expédient juridique dans la domaine théologique et lui donne un contenu tout différent' [own trans.]). R.F. Refoulé in *Tertullien: Traité de la prescription contre les hérétiques*, edited and translated by R.F. Refoulé and P. De Labriolle (Paris, 1957), 24. Likewise J. Stirnimann, *Die Praescriptio Tertullians* (1949), 93: 'These examples demonstrate sufficiently that Tertullian takes over the *praescriptio* of the Roman lawsuit only in its outer form. He fills the *praescriptio* with a completely new content and puts it in the service of the apologetics. He transfers the *praescriptio* of the lawsuit into the language of theology. The juridical *praescriptio* becomes a theological *praescriptio* in the hand of Tertullian' ('Diese Beispiele legen zur Genüge dar, dass Tertullian die Präskription des römischen Prozesses nur in ihrer äusseren Form übernimmt. Er erfüllt die Präskription mit ganz neuem Inhalt und stellt sie in den Dienst der Apologetik. Er transponiert die Präskription des Prozesses in die Sprache der Theologie. Die juristische Präskription wird in der Hand Tertullians eine theologische Präskription' [own trans.]).

<sup>38</sup> 'Ironie ... son avantage n'est-il pas, aux yeux de Tertullien, sa simplicité, sa brièveté, son efficacité? ... stimulé la perspicacité des érudites ... tant la diversité de leurs conclusions est déconcertante', *Tertullien et la Conversion* (1972), 195.

<sup>39</sup> R.F. Refoulé, *Tertullien: Traité de la prescription* (1957), 25-6, cited Mgr Freppel, P. Monceaux, P. de Labriolle and G. Bardy as finding one *praescriptio*; D. van den Eynde as finding two; G. Esser, K. Adam, A. d'Alès, B. Altaner and P. Battifol as finding three (the most popular view

them,<sup>40</sup> nor the *praescriptio longi temporis*, which he didn't mention by name but some scholars believe he had in mind,<sup>41</sup> affect the remainder of this article.

## 5. Four *praescriptiones* at Rome

### 5.1. A plaintiff's *praescriptio in formulary procedure*

Ordinary litigation at Rome in Tertullian's time was in two stages, known as the 'formulary procedure',<sup>42</sup> because a praetor prepared a written *formula*, outlining the issues, and forwarded it to a *iudex*, who decided the case.<sup>43</sup> A plaintiff could ask the praetor to enter a *praescriptio pro actore* because, as the name says, it was written at the beginning of the *formula*.<sup>44</sup> This kept the plaintiff's options open. For example, if a creditor was suing for money payable

until J. Stirnimann, *Die Praescriptio Tertullians* [1949], 50-4, 127-34, established two); U. Hüntemann as finding four and J.L. Aillie as finding up to ten. Refoulé came down in favour of two (30-1), but didn't acknowledge Stirnimann's analysis which established this, although he did commend Stirnimann for making 'un progrès décisif à l'interprétation de cet ouvrage' (8). Stirnimann's work was taken forward by André Sergène, 'Tertullien "de praescriptione haereticorum"', XXXVII, 4 et la "longi temporis praescriptio", in *Études offertes à Jean Macqueron* (Aix-en-Provence, 1970), 605-12. The two *praescriptiones* which they identified were that heretics have no right to use scripture (*De praescriptione haereticorum* 1-15) and that only the universal Catholic Church has communion with the Apostolic Church (*Ibid.* 21).

<sup>40</sup> He added only two adjectives to *praescriptio* in its judicial sense – *praescriptio novitatis* (*Adversus Marcionem* 1.1.6-7) and *originis praescriptionem* (*Ad nationes* 2.12.37-8). The priority of truth over error was a main part of his general argument in his antiheretical treatises, but he did not rely only on this technical point and wrote detailed refutations of the individual doctrines of Hermogenes, Marcion and Praxeas.

<sup>41</sup> Tertullian did not use the phrase *praescriptio longi temporis* but many have seen it in *De praescriptione haereticorum* 37, where he stressed the priority of the Church's possession of Scripture. In both formulary and cognition procedure (5.1 and 5.4 below), a person with uninterrupted possession of property over a defined period, who fulfilled other conditions, could ask to be given occupancy rights or even ownership; this was called *praescriptio longi temporis*, even when invoked by a defendant in a formula. Tertullian's use of it (without naming it) was first suggested in 1906 by Joseph Partsch, *Die longi temporis praescriptio im klassischen römischen Rechte* (Leipzig, 1906), 76, 109; he was followed by Umberto Moricca, *Storia della letteratura latina christiana* (Turin, 1923), I, 195-6. The idea was fully explored by J. Stirnimann, *Die Praescriptio Tertullians* (1949), 28-36, 99-126, who concluded that Tertullian 'pointed to it rather than used it' (126), because Stirnimann thought it implied the Church's title to Scripture was acquired rather than inherited, and by R.F. Refoulé, *Tertullien: Traité de la prescription* (1957), 32-6. A balanced antidote to Stirnimann's concern is Henry Chadwick's review of Stirnimann's monograph in *The JTS* n.s. 1 (1950), 210-1.

<sup>42</sup> Summarized and applied to Tertullian by J. Stirnimann, *Die Praescriptio Tertullians* (1949), 11-27, and by R.F. Refoulé, *Tertullien: Traité de la prescription* (1957), 20-4, both citing authorities on Roman law and both identifying Tertullian's *praescriptio* as taken from the cognition procedure (5.4 below).

<sup>43</sup> For the role of the praetor and the *iudex*, J.A. Crook, *Law and Life of Rome* (1967), 73-83.

<sup>44</sup> Gaius, *Institutes* 4.132.



by instalments, he might enter a *praescriptio* that this case was about only the overdue instalment, and not the whole debt.<sup>45</sup>

Herbert Bindley in 1893<sup>46</sup> and James Morgan in 1928<sup>47</sup> believed that Tertullian based his *praescriptio* on this.<sup>48</sup> However, at Rome it was available only to plaintiffs who, by definition, wanted their case to proceed, safeguarded by their *praescriptio*. Tertullian's *praescriptio*, by contrast, was intended to paralyse the heretics' claim without their being heard. Unless the Courts at Carthage used *praescriptio pro actore* differently from the Courts at Rome – and that we don't know – it could not have been Tertullian's source.

## 5.2. A defendant's *praescriptio* in formulary procedure

A defendant could ask the praetor to incorporate a preliminary plea; to continue the example of a suit for money, a debtor might admit the loan but plead a subsequent agreement to extend the repayment date. This was originally called *praescriptio pro reo* but by Tertullian's time it had been renamed at Rome as *exceptio*.<sup>49</sup> Dimitri Michaélidès in 1969<sup>50</sup> and Peter Jones in 1973 believed that Tertullian used *praescriptio* 'in the older sense of the term'.<sup>51</sup> That

<sup>45</sup> An example given by Gaius, *Institutes* 4.131.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Herbert Bindley, *Tertulliani, De Praescriptione Haeticorum: Ad Martyras: Ad Scapulam* (Oxford, 1893), 4.

<sup>47</sup> James Morgan, *The Importance of Tertullian in the Development of Christian Dogma* (London, 1928), 28.

<sup>48</sup> They said that Tertullian saw the Church as plaintiff and the heretics as defendants; most scholars see it the other way round. J.-C. Fredouille said that he found it *difficile* to see Tertullian's *praescriptio* as the *praescriptio pro reo* of the formulary procedure, but 'if one insists absolutely on again finding in this treatise the circumstances of a law-suit, it would be necessary to concede that Tertullian is taking part ... not as the defence counsel, but rather as the prosecutor' ('si l'on tient absolument à retrouver dans ce traité les conditions d'une action en justice, il faudrait admettre que Tertullien fait figure ... non pas de défendeur, mais bien de demandeur' [own trans.]), *Tertullien et la Conversion* (1972), 224-5.

<sup>49</sup> Gaius, *Institutes* 4.133: 'In our days, as already stated, all the *praescriptiones* are introduced by the plaintiff; formerly, some were introduced by the defendant' (*His temporibus, omnes praescriptiones ab actore profisciscuntur. Olim autem quaedam et pro reo opponerantur* [own trans.]) Lord Mackenzie, *Studies in Roman Law* (1898), 365. It was entered at the end of the *formula*; the *iudex* had to look at the merits of the plaintiff's case before deciding whether the defendant's *objectio* answered it. Tertullian used *exceptio* only once, to make a different point, saying that 'there is no *exceptio* which protects those people who don't know the Lord' (*Cum etiam ignorantes dominum nulla exceptio tueatur ad poenam: De paenitentia* 5). It was therefore not a synonym for *praescriptio* for Tertullian.

<sup>50</sup> Foi, *Écritures et Tradition, Les 'praescriptiones' chez Tertullien* (Paris, 1969).

<sup>51</sup> Peter W. Jones, *The Concept of Community in Tertullian's Writings, in the Light of Contemporary, Legal, Philosophical and Literary Influences*, Ph.D. thesis presented to McGill University (Montreal, 1973); the quotation is from Part 1, end of Chapter 4. The problem with this understanding of *praescriptio* is that a defendant's *praescriptio* in this sense did not deny the accuracy of the plaintiff's claim but introduced a new factor, such as the example given about the

can be correct only if the Courts at Carthage were more conservative and traditional than those at Rome, still using *praescriptio* although Rome had renamed it *exceptio*. Was that so? We don't know.

### 5.3. *A defendant's praescriptio dealt with by a praetor*

If a defendant's objection was fundamental to the case, for example that the Court had no jurisdiction, the praetor didn't append it to a *formula* and send it to a *iudex*, but ruled on the objection himself. This was known at Rome as *praescriptio fori*.<sup>52</sup> Philip Schaff in 1884 identified this as Tertullian's source;<sup>53</sup> Joseph Stirnimann in 1949 said that 'perhaps' Tertullian employed it in this sense.<sup>54</sup> Was it used in this way at Carthage while Tertullian was there? We don't know.

### 5.4. *Praescriptio in cognition procedure*

By Tertullian's time,<sup>55</sup> the rigidity of the formulary procedure had made it increasingly unfit for purpose, so in a typically Roman way of reforming the law, a new and more flexible procedure, *cognitio extraordinaria*, was introduced alongside the old, letting the old die gradually away. It 'assumed different forms at different periods and in different parts of the empire'.<sup>56</sup> In it, a single judicial officer, not a praetor, dealt with the whole case and *praescriptio* (not *exceptio*) was used for every kind of defence.<sup>57</sup>

suit for money, which set aside the usual outcome of the claim. As mentioned at 5.1, Tertullian's *praescriptio* admitted nothing and denied heretics the right even to be heard.

<sup>52</sup> 'A formal objection to a claim against a person based on the tribunal's lack of jurisdiction over the person objecting.' Aaron X. Fellmeth and Maurice Horwitz, *Guide to Latin in International Law* (Oxford, 2009), taken from *praescriptio fori* in the 2011 on-line version.

<sup>53</sup> '... before the merits of the case are discussed, showing *in limine* that the plaintiff ought not to be heard', *History of the Church* (Edinburgh, 1884), II 830.

<sup>54</sup> *Die Praescriptio Tertullians* (1949), 19, 26. He accepted that Roman lawyers used the phrase but contended at 19 that they did so in the cognition procedure (5.4 below). However at 26 he said that 'perhaps' Tertullian used it as a praetor would in making a judgement, although he believed that the praetor's role had disappeared in the provinces by Tertullian's time.

<sup>55</sup> William Turpin, *Formula, cognitio, and proceedings extra ordinem*. <<http://local.droit.ulg.ac.be/sa/rida/file/1999/TURPIN.pdf>> (accessed on August 31, 2015).

<sup>56</sup> H.F. Jolowicz and B. Nicholas, *Historical Introduction* (1972), 406-8. The two processes existed side by side for a long time. The cognition procedure made quicker progress in the provinces than in conservative Rome. Jolowicz and Nicholas suggested two reasons for this: (1) provincial governors were permitted more initiative than the praetors at Rome, and (2) they couldn't find enough suitable *iudices* – it was an unpaid appointment (408). The formulary procedure remained available until Diocletian enacted in 294 that all cases should be heard from beginning to end by one judicial officer, but it remained in use by habit until expressly abolished by the sons of Constantine in 342.

<sup>57</sup> *Digest* 44.1. C.7.40. 8.35.

In 1906, J. Partsch identified this as Tertullian's source;<sup>58</sup> Joseph Stirnimann in 1949 and R.F. Refoulé in 1957 agreed with him.<sup>59</sup> If they are correct, the Courts at Carthage were more progressive than those at Rome, using the cognition procedure while Rome kept the formulary procedure as the norm until the middle of the third century; were they? We don't know.

## 6. Conclusion

This article suggests that the contemporary significance at Carthage of some of the legal words used by Tertullian is not available to us, and that we should allow for this in our understanding of his works.

<sup>58</sup> *Die longi temporis praescriptio im klassischen römischen Rechte* (1906), 71.

<sup>59</sup> J. Stirnimann, *Die Praescriptio Tertullians* (1949), 1, 20-7, 86-7, 96; R.F. Refoulé, *Tertullien: Traité de la prescription* (1957), 23-4, although Refoulé disagreed with Partsch on which *praescriptio* Tertullian used.

**Volume 1**  
**STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXV**

STUDIA PATRISTICA

Markus VINZENT	
Editing <i>Studia Patristica</i> .....	3
Frances YOUNG	
<i>Studia Patristica</i> .....	11
Mark EDWARDS	
The Use and Abuse of Patristics .....	15

PLATONISM AND THE FATHERS

Christian H. BULL	
An Origenistic Reading of Plato in Nag Hammadi Codex VI.....	31
Mark HUGGINS	
Comparing the Ethical Concerns of Plato and John Chrysostom .....	41
Alexey FOKIN	
Act of Vision as an Analogy of the Proceeding of the Intellect from the One in Plotinus and of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Father in Marius Victorinus and St. Augustine .....	55
Laela ZWOLLO	
Aflame in Love: St. Augustine's Doctrine of <i>amor</i> and Plotinus' Notion of <i>eros</i> .....	69
Lenka KARFÍKOVÁ	
Augustine on Recollection between Plato and Plotinus .....	81
Matthias SMALBRUGGE	
Augustine and Deification. A Neoplatonic Way of Thinking.....	103
Douglas A. SHEPARDSON	
The Analogical Methodology of Plato's <i>Republic</i> and Augustine's <i>De trinitate</i> .....	109

## MAXIMUS CONFESSOR

Paul A. BRAZINSKI	
Maximus the Confessor and Constans II: A Punishment Fit for an Unruly Monk .....	119
Ian M. GERDON	
The Evagrian Roots of Maximus the Confessor's <i>Liber asceticus</i> ....	129
Jonathan GREIG	
Proclus' Doctrine of Participation in Maximus the Confessor's <i>Centuries of Theology</i> 1.48-50 .....	137
Emma BROWN DEWHURST	
The 'Divisions of Nature' in Maximus' <i>Ambiguum</i> 41? .....	149
Michael BAKKER	
Gethsemane Revisited: Maximus' <i>Aporia</i> of Christ's γνώμη and a 'Monarchic Psychology' of Deciding.....	155
Christopher A. BEELEY	
Natural and Gnostic Willing in Maximus Confessor's <i>Disputation with Pyrrhus</i> .....	167
Jonathan TAYLOR	
A Three-Nativities Christology? Maximus on the <i>Logos</i> .....	181
Eric LOPEZ	
Plagued by a Thousand Passions – Maximus the Confessor's Vision of Love in Light of Nationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Religious Persecution.....	189
Manuel MIRA	
The Priesthood in Maximus the Confessor.....	201
Adam G. COOPER	
When Action Gives Way to Passion: The Paradoxical Structure of the Human Person according to Maximus the Confessor .....	213
Jonathan BIELER	
Body and Soul Immovably Related: Considering an Aspect of Maximus the Confessor's Concept of Analogy .....	223

Luke STEVEN	
Deification and the Workings of the Body: The Logic of ‘Proportion’ in Maximus the Confessor .....	237
Paul M. BLOWERS	
Recontextualizations of Maximus the Confessor in Modern Christian Theology.....	251

## Volume 2

### STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVI

#### EL PLATONISMO EN LOS PADRES DE LA IGLESIA

(ed. Rubén Pereto Rivas)

Rubén PERETÓ RIVAS	
Introducción.....	1
Viviana Laura FÉLIX	
Platonismo y reflexión trinitaria en Justino.....	3
Juan Carlos ALBY	
El trasfondo platónico del concepto de <i>Lex divina</i> en Ireneo de Lyon.....	23
Patricia CINER	
La Herencia Espiritual: la doctrina de la preexistencia en Platón y Orígenes.....	37
Pedro Daniel FERNÁNDEZ	
Raíces platónicas del modelo pedagógico de Orígenes.....	49
Rubén PERETÓ RIVAS	
La <i>eutonía</i> en la dinámica psicológica de Evagrio Póntico .....	59
Santiago Hernán VAZQUEZ	
El ensalmo curativo de Platón y la potencialidad terapéutica de la palabra en Evagrio Póntico .....	67
Oscar VELÁSQUEZ	
Las <i>Confesiones</i> en la perspectiva de la Caverna de Platón .....	79

Gerald CRESTA	
Acerca de la belleza metafísica en Pseudo-Dionisio y Buenaventura.....	91
Graciela L. RITACCO	
La perennidad del legado patrístico: Tiempo y eternidad.....	103

### Volume 3

## STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXVII

### BECOMING CHRISTIAN IN THE LATE ANTIQUE WEST (3rd-6th CENTURIES)

(ed. Ariane Bodin, Camille Gerzaguët and Matthieu Pignot)

Ariane BODIN, Camille GERZAGUËT & Matthieu PIGNOT	
Introduction .....	1
Matthieu PIGNOT	
The Catechumenate in Anonymous Sermons from the Late Antique West.....	11
Camille GERZAGUËT	
Preaching to the <i>ecclesia</i> in Northern Italy: The Eastertide Sermons of Zeno of Verona and Gaudentius of Brescia.....	33
Adrian BRÄNDLI	
Imagined Kinship: Perpetua and the Paternity of God .....	45
Jarred MERCER	
<i>Vox infantis, vox Dei</i> : The Spirituality of Children and Becoming Christian in Late Antiquity .....	59
Rafał TOCZKO	
The Shipwrecks and Philosophers: The Rhetoric of Aristocratic Conversion in the Late 4 <sup>th</sup> and Early 5 <sup>th</sup> Centuries .....	75
Ariane BODIN	
Identifying the Signs of Christianness in Late Antique Italy and Africa.....	91

Hervé HUNTZINGER

- Becoming Christian, Becoming Roman: Conversion to Christianity  
and Ethnic Identification Process in Late Antiquity ..... 103

**Volume 4****STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXVIII**

## LITERATURE, RHETORIC, AND EXEGESE IN SYRIAC VERSE

(ed. Jeffrey Wickes and Kristian S. Heal)

Jeffrey WICKES

- Introduction ..... 1

Sidney H. GRIFFITH

- The Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning: Syriac *Mêmrê* at Work..... 5

Kristian S. HEAL

- Construal and Construction of *Genesis* in Early Syriac Sermons..... 25

Carl GRIFFIN

- Vessel of Wrath: Judas Iscariot in Cyrillona and Early Syriac Tradition ..... 33

Susan ASHBROOK HARVEY

- The Poet's Prayer: Invocational Prayers in the *Mêmrê* of Jacob of Sarug ..... 51

Andrew J. HAYES

- The Manuscripts and Themes of Jacob of Serugh's *Mêmrâ* 'On the Adultery of the Congregation' ..... 61

Robert A. KITCHEN

- Three Young Men Redux: The Fiery Furnace in Jacob of Sarug and Narsai ..... 73

Erin Galgay WALSH

- Holy Boldness: Narsai and Jacob of Serugh Preaching the Canaanite Woman ..... 85

Scott Fitzgerald JOHNSON

- Biblical Historiography in Verse Exegesis: Jacob of Sarug on Elijah and Elisha ..... 99



## Volume 5

## STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXIX

## CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

(ed. Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski)

Piotr ASHWIN-SIEJKOWSKI	
Introduction .....	1
Judith L. KOVACS	
‘In order that we might follow him in all things’: Interpretation of Gospel Texts in <i>Excerpts from Theodotus</i> 66-86 .....	7
Veronika ČERNUŠKOVÁ	
The <i>Eclogae Propheticae</i> on the Value of Suffering: A Copyist’s Excerpts or Clement’s Preparatory Notes? .....	29
Piotr ASHWIN-SIEJKOWSKI	
<i>Excerpta ex Theodoto</i> – A Search for the Theological Matrix. An Examination of the Document in the Light of Some Coptic Treatises from the Nag Hammadi Library .....	55
Jana PLÁTOVÁ	
How Many Fragments of the <i>Hypotyposes</i> by Clement of Alexandria Do We Actually Have? .....	71
Davide DAINESI	
Cassiodorus’ <i>Adumbrationes</i> : Do They Belong to Clement’s <i>Hypotyposes</i> ? .....	87
Joshua A. NOBLE	
Almsgiving or Training? Clement of Alexandria’s Answer to <i>Quis dives salvetur</i> ? .....	101
Peter WIDDICOMBE	
Slave, Son, Friend, and Father in the Writings of Clement of Alexandria .....	109
H. CLIFTON WARD	
We Hold These ἀρχαί To Be Self-Evident: Clement, ἐνάργεια, and the Search for Truth .....	123
Annette BOURLAND HUIZENGA	
Clement’s Use of Female Role Models as a Pedagogical Strategy ...	133

Brice ROGERS	
‘Trampling on the Garment of Shame’: Clement of Alexandria’s Use of the <i>Gospel of the Egyptians</i> in Anti-Gnostic Polemic.....	145
Manabu AKIYAMA	
L’Unigenito Dio come «esegeta» ( <i>Gv.</i> 1:18) secondo Clemente Alessandrino .....	153
Lisa RADA KOVICH HOLSBERG	
Of Gods and Men (and Music) in Clement of Alexandria’s <i>Protrep-     ticus</i> .....	161
Joona SALMINEN	
Clement of Alexandria on Laughter .....	171
Antoine PARIS	
La composition des <i>Stromates</i> comme subversion de la logique aris- totélicienne.....	181

### Volume 6

### STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXX

#### THE CLASSICAL OR CHRISTIAN LACTANTIUS

(ed. Oliver Nicholson)

Oliver NICHOLSON	
Introduction .....	1
John MCGUCKIN	
The Problem of Lactantius the Theologian .....	17
Mattias GASSMAN	
<i>Et Deus et Homo</i> : The Soteriology of Lactantius.....	35
Gábor KENDEFFY	
More than a <i>Cicero Christianus</i> . Remarks on Lactantius’ Dualistic System .....	43
Stefan FREUND	
When Romans Become Christians... The ‘Romanisation’ of Christian Doctrine in Lactantius’ <i>Divine Institutes</i> .....	63

Blandine COLOT	
Lactantius and the Philosophy of Cicero: ‘Romideologie’ and Legit- imization of Christianity .....	79
Jackson BRYCE	
Lactantius’ Poetry and Poetics .....	97
Oliver NICHOLSON	
The Christian Sallust: Lactantius on God, Man and History .....	119
Elizabeth DEPALMA DIGESER	
Persecution and the Art of Reading: Lactantius, Porphyry and the Rules for Reading Sacred Texts .....	139
David RUTHERFORD	
The Manuscripts of Lactantius and His Early Renaissance Readers ..	155
Carmen M. PALOMO PINEL	
The Survival of the Classical Idea of Justice in Lactantius’ Work ...	173
Ralph KEEN	
Gilbert Burnet and Lactantius’ <i>De mortibus persecutorum</i> .....	183

### Volume 7

#### STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXI

##### HEALTH, MEDICINE, AND CHRISTIANITY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

(ed. Jared Secord, Heidi Marx-Wolf and Christoph Markschies)

Jared SECORD	
Introduction: Medicine beyond Galen in the Roman Empire and Late Antiquity .....	1

##### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Christoph MARKSCHIES	
Demons and Disease .....	11
Ellen MUEHLBERGER	
Theological Anthropology and Medicine: Questions and Directions for Research .....	37

## CHRISTIANS, DOCTORS, AND MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE

Jared SECORD	
Galen and the Theodotians: Embryology and Adoptionism in the Christian Schools of Rome .....	51
Róbert SOMOS	
Origen on the Kidneys .....	65
Heidi MARX-WOLF	
The Good Physician: Imperial Doctors and Medical Professionaliza- tion in Late Antiquity .....	79
Stefan HODGES-KLUCK	
Religious Education and the Health of the Soul according to Basil of Caesarea and the Emperor Julian .....	91
Jessica WRIGHT	
John Chrysostom and the Rhetoric of Cerebral Vulnerability .....	109

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH,  
DISABILITY, AND ILLNESS

Helen RHEE	
Portrayal of Patients in Early Christian Writings .....	127
Meghan HENNING	
Metaphorical, Punitive, and Pedagogical Blindness in Hell .....	139
Maria E. DOERFLER	
The Sense of an Ending: Childhood Death and Parental Benefit in Late Ancient Rhetoric .....	153
Brenda Llewellyn IHSEN	
‘Waiting to see and know’: Disgust, Fear and Indifference in <i>The     Miracles of St. Artemios</i> .....	161

## CONCEPTIONS OF VIRGINITY

Michael ROSENBERG	
Physical Virginity in the <i>Protevangelium of James</i> , the Mishnah, and Late Antique Syriac Poetry .....	177

Julia Kelto LILLIS Who Opens the Womb? Fertility and Virginitly in Patristic Texts ....	187
Caroline MUSGROVE Debating Virginitly in the Late Alexandrian School of Medicine .....	203

### Volume 8

#### STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXII

##### DEMONS

(ed. Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe)

Sophie LUNN-ROCKLIFFE Introduction .....	1
Gregory SMITH Augustine on Demons' Bodies .....	7
Sophie LUNN-ROCKLIFFE Chaotic Mob or Disciplined Army? Collective Bodies of Demons in Ascetic Literature .....	33
Travis W. PROCTOR Dining with 'Inhuman' Demons: Greco-Roman Sacrifice, Demonic Ritual, and the Christian Body in Clement of Alexandria .....	51
Gregory WIEBE Augustine on Diabolical Sacraments and the Devil's Body .....	73
Katie HAGER CONROY 'A Kind of Lofty Tribunal': The Gathering of Demons for Judgment in Cassian's <i>Conference Eight</i> .....	91

### Volume 9

#### STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIII

##### EMOTIONS

(ed. Yannis Papadogiannakis)

Yannis PAPADOGIANNAKIS Introduction .....	1
--	---

J. David WOODINGTON	
Fear and Love: The Emotions of the Household in Chrysostom .....	19
Jonathan P. WILCOXSON	
The Machinery of Consolation in John Chrysostom’s Letters to Olympias.....	37
Mark THERRIEN	
Just an Old-Fashioned Love Song: John Chrysostom’s Exegesis of <i>Ps.</i> 41:1-2 .....	73
Christos SIMELIDIS	
Emotions in the Poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus .....	91
Yuliia ROZUMNA	
‘Be Angry and Do Not Sin’. Human Anger in Evagrius of Pontus and Gregory of Nyssa .....	103
Mark ROOSIEN	
‘Emulate Their Mystical Order’: Awe and Liturgy in John Chryso- stom’s Angelic πολιτεία .....	115
Peter MOORE	
Deploying Emotional Intelligence: John Chrysostom’s Relational Emotional Vocabulary in his Beatitude Homilies .....	131
Clair E. MESICK	
The Perils and Virtues of Laughter in the Works of John Chryso- stom.....	139
Andrew MELLAS	
Tears of Compunction in John Chrysostom’s <i>On Eutropius</i> .....	159
Maria VERHOEFF	
Seeking Friendship with Saul: John Chrysostom’s Portrayal of David .....	173
Blake LEYERLE	
Animal Passions. Chrysostom’s Use of Animal Imagery .....	185
Justus T. GHORMLEY	
Gratitude: A Panacea for the Passions in John Chrysostom’s Com- mentary on the <i>Psalms</i> .....	203

Brian DUNKLE	
John Chrysostom's Community of Anger Management .....	217
Andrew CRISLIP	
<i>The Shepherd of Hermas</i> and Early Christian Emotional Formation	231
Niki Kasumi CLEMENTS	
Emotions and Ascetic Formation in John Cassian's <i>Collationes</i> .....	241
Margaret BLUME FREDDOSO	
The Value of Job's Grief in John Chrysostom's <i>Commentary on Job</i> : How John Blesses with Job's Tears .....	271
Jesse SIRAGAN ARLEN	
'Let Us Mourn Continuously': John Chrysostom and the Early Christian Transformation of Mourning.....	289
Martin HINTERBERGER	
Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus Speaking about Anger and Envy: Some Remarks on the Fathers' Methodology of Treating Emotions and Modern Emotion Studies .....	313

## Volume 10

### STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIV

#### EVAGRIUS BETWEEN ORIGEN, THE CAPPADOCIANS, AND NEOPLATONISM

(ed. Ilaria Ramelli, with the collaboration of Kevin Corrigan,  
Giulio Maspero and Monica Tobon)

Ilaria RAMELLI	
Introduction .....	1
Samuel FERNÁNDEZ	
The Pedagogical Structure of Origen's <i>De principiis</i> and its Christology .....	15
Martin C. WENZEL	
The Omnipotence of God as a Challenge for Theology in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa .....	23

Miguel BRUGAROLAS  
 Theological Remarks on Gregory of Nyssa’s Christological Language  
 of ‘Mixture’ ..... 39

Ilaria VIGORELLI  
 Soul’s Dance in Clement, Plotinus and Gregory of Nyssa ..... 59

Giulio MASPERO  
*Isoangelia* in Gregory of Nyssa and Origen on the Background of  
 Plotinus ..... 77

Ilaria RAMELLI  
 Response to the Workshop, “Theology and Philosophy between  
 Origen and Gregory of Nyssa” ..... 101

Mark J. EDWARDS  
 Dunamis and the Christian Trinity in the Fourth Century ..... 105

Kevin CORRIGAN  
 Trauma before Trauma: Recognizing, Healing and Transforming the  
 Wounds of Soul-Mind in the Works of Evagrius of Pontus ..... 123

Monica TOBON  
 The Place of God: Stability and Apophasis in Evagrius ..... 137

Theo KOBUSCH  
 Practical Knowledge in ‘Christian Philosophy’: A New Way to  
 God ..... 157

Ilaria RAMELLI  
 Gregory Nyssen’s and Evagrius’ Biographical and Theological Rela-  
 tions: Origen’s Heritage and Neoplatonism ..... 165

**Volume 11**

**STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXV**

AMBROSE OF MILAN

Isabella D’AURIA  
 Polemiche antipagane: Ambrogio (*epist.* 10, 73, 8) e Prudenzio  
 (*c. Symm.* 2, 773-909) contro Simmaco (*rel.* 3, 10) ..... 1



Victoria ZIMMERL-PANAGL <i>Videtur nobis in sermone revivescere... Preparing a New Critical Edition of Ambrose's Orationes funebres</i> .....	15
Andrew M. SELBY Ambrose's 'Inspired' Moderation of Tertullian's Christian Discipline	23
Sarah EMANUEL Virgin Heroes and Cross-Dressing Kings: Reading Ambrose's <i>On Virgins 2.4</i> as Carnavalesque.....	41
Francesco LUBIAN Ambrose's <i>Disticha</i> and John 'Reclining on Christ's Breast' (Ambr., <i>Tituli</i> II [21], 1).....	51
D.H. WILLIAMS Ambrose as an Apologist.....	65
Brendan A. HARRIS 'Where the Sanctification is One, the Nature is One': Pro-Nicene Pneumatology in Ambrose of Milan's Baptismal Theology.....	77
David VOPŘADA <i>Bonum mihi quod humiliasti me</i> . Ambrose's Theology of Humility and Humiliation.....	87
Paola Francesca MORETTI 'Competing' <i>exempla</i> in Ambrose's <i>De officiis</i> .....	95
Metha HOKKE Scent as Metaphor for the Bonding of Christ and the Virgin in Ambrose's <i>De virginitate</i> 11.60-12.68.....	107
J. WARREN SMITH Transcending Resentment: Ambrose, David, and <i>Magnanimitas</i> .....	121
Andrew M. HARMON Aspects of Moral Perfection in Ambrose's <i>De officiis</i> .....	133
Han-luen KANTZER KOMLINE From Building Blocks to Blueprints: Augustine's Reception of Ambrose's <i>Commentary on Luke</i> .....	153

Hedwig SCHMALZGRUBER  
 Biblical Epic as Scriptural Exegesis – Reception of Ambrose in the  
 So-called *Heptateuch* Poet ..... 167

Carmen Angela CVETKOVIĆ  
 Episcopal Literary Networks in the Late Antique West: Niceta of  
 Remesiana and Ambrose of Milan..... 177

Stephen COOPER  
 Ambrose in Reformation Zürich: Heinrich Bullinger’s Use of  
 Ambrosiaster’s Commentaries on Paul..... 185

**Volume 12**

**STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVI**

AUGUSTINE ON *CONSCIENTIA*

(ed. Diana Stanciu)

Diana STANCIU  
 Introduction ..... 1

Allan FITZGERALD  
 Augustine, Conscience and the Inner Teacher ..... 3

Enrique A. EGUIARTE  
*Conscientia* (...) *itineribus* (...) in *sapientiam* ..... 13

Matthew W. KNOTTS  
 With Apologies to Jiminy Cricket. The Early Augustine’s ‘Sapiential’  
 Account of *conscientia*..... 21

Anne-Isabelle BOUTON-TOUBOLIC  
*Conscientiae requies* (*Conf. X*, 30, 41): Sleep, Consciousness and  
 Conscience in Augustine..... 37

Andrea BIZZOZERO  
*Beati mundi cordes* (*Mt* 5:8). *Coscienza*, *Conoscenza* e *Uisio Dei* in  
 Agostino prima del 411..... 55

Josef LÖSSL  
 How ‘Bad’ is Augustine’s ‘Bad Conscience’ (*mala conscientia*)? ... 89

Marianne DJUTH	
The Polemics of Moral Conscience in Augustine .....	97
Diana STANCIU	
<i>Conscientia, capax Dei</i> and Salvation in Augustine: What Would Augustine Say on the ‘Explanatory Gap’? .....	111
Jeremy W. BERGSTROM	
Augustine on the Judgment of Conscience and the Glory of Man....	119
Mark CLAVIER	
A Persuasive God: Conscience and the Rhetoric of Delight in Augustine’s Interpretation of <i>Romans</i> 7 .....	135
John COMSTOCK	
The Augustinian <i>Conscientia</i> : A New Approach.....	141
Jérôme LAGOUANÈRE	
Augustin, lecteur de Sénèque: le cas de la <i>bona uoluntas</i> .....	153
Gábor KENDEFFY	
Will and Moral Responsibility in Augustine’s Works on Lying .....	163

### Volume 13

#### STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVII

#### AUGUSTINE IN LATE MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

(ed. John T. Slotemaker and Jeffrey C. Witt)

David C. FINK & John T. SLOTEMAKER	
<i>In Memoriam</i> David C. Steinmetz .....	1
John T. SLOTEMAKER & Jeffrey C. WITT	
Introduction .....	3
John T. SLOTEMAKER	
The Reception of Augustine’s Thought in the Later Middle Ages: A Historiographical Introduction .....	5
Peter EARDLEY	
Augustinian Science or Aristotelian Rhetoric? The Nature of Theol- ogy According to Giles of Rome .....	23

Bernd GOEHRING	
Giles of Rome on Human Cognition: Aristotelian and Augustinian Principles .....	35
Christopher M. WOJTULEWICZ	
The Reception of Augustine in the Theology of Alexander de Sancto Elpidio .....	47
Graham MCALEER	
1277 and the Sensations of the Damned: Peter John Olivi and the Augustinian Origins of Early Modern Angelism .....	59
Florian WÖLLER	
The Bible as Argument: Augustine in the Literal Exegesis of Peter Auriol (c. 1280-1322) and Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1349).....	67
Severin V. KITANOV	
Richard FitzRalph on Whether Cognition and Volition are Really the Same: Solving an Augustinian Puzzle.....	81
Simon NOLAN	
Augustine in Richard FitzRalph (c. 1300-1360) .....	95
Jack HARDING BELL	
Loving Justice: Cicero, Augustine, and the Nature of Politics in Robert Holcot's <i>Wisdom of Solomon</i> Commentary.....	109
John T. SLOTEMAKER	
Peter Lombard's Inheritance: The Use of Augustine's <i>De Trinitate</i> in Gregory of Rimini's Discussion of the Divine Processions .....	123
John W. PECK	
Gregory of Rimini's Augustinian Defense of a World <i>ab aeterno</i> ....	135
Jeffrey C. WITT	
Tradition, Authority, and the Grounds for Belief in Late Fourteenth-Century Theology .....	147
Pekka KÄRKKÄINEN	
Augustinian, Humanist or What? Martin Luther's Marginal Notes on Augustine.....	161
David C. FINK	
Bullshitting Augustine: Patristic Rhetoric and Theological Dialectic in Philipp Melanchthon's <i>Apologia</i> for the Augsburg Confession ....	167

Ueli ZAHND	
The Early John Calvin and Augustine: Some Reconsiderations .....	181

### Volume 14

## STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVIII

### LATREIA AND IDOLATRY: AUGUSTINE AND THE QUEST FOR RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

(ed. Paul Camacho and Veronica Roberts)

Veronica ROBERTS & Paul CAMACHO	
Introduction .....	1
Michael T. CAMACHO	
‘Having nothing yet possessing all things’: Worship as the Sacrifice of Being not our Own .....	3
Erik J. VAN VERSEDAAL	
The Symbolism of Love: Use as Praise in St. Augustine’s Doctrine of Creation .....	21
Paul CAMACHO	
Ours and Not Ours: Private and Common Goods in Augustine’s Anthropology of Desire.....	35
Christopher M. SEILER	
<i>Non sibi arroget minister plus quam quod ut minister</i> (S. 266.3): St. Augustine’s Imperative for Ministerial Humility.....	49
Robert McFADDEN	
Becoming Friends with Oneself: Cicero in the Cassiciacum Dia- logues.....	57
Veronica ROBERTS	
Idolatry as the Source of Injustice in Augustine’s <i>De ciuitate Dei</i> ...	69
Peter BUSCH	
Augustine’s Limited Dialogue with the Philosophers in <i>De ciuitate     Dei</i> 19 .....	79
Joshua NUNZIATO	
Negotiating a Good Return? St. Augustine on the Economics of Secular Sacrifice.....	87

## Volume 15

## STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIX

THE FOUNTAIN AND THE FLOOD:  
 MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR AND PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY  
 (ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis)

Sotiris MITRALEXIS	
Introduction .....	1
Dionysios SKLIRIS	
The Ontological Implications of Maximus the Confessor's Eschatology .....	3
Nicholas LOUDOVIKOS	
Consubstantiality beyond Perichoresis: Personal Threeness, Intra-divine Relations, and Personal Consubstantiality in Augustine's, Thomas Aquinas' and Maximus the Confessor's Trinitarian Theologies.....	33
Torstein Theodor TOLLEFSEN	
Whole and Part in the Philosophy of St Maximus the Confessor .....	47
Sebastian MATEIESCU	
Counting Natures and Hypostases: St Maximus the Confessor on the Role of Number in Christology .....	63
David BRADSHAW	
St. Maximus on Time, Eternity, and Divine Knowledge .....	79
Sotiris MITRALEXIS	
A Coherent Maximian Spatiotemporality: Attempting a Close Reading of Sections Thirty-six to Thirty-nine from the Tenth <i>Ambiguum</i> .....	95
Vladimir CVETKOVIĆ	
The Concept of Delimitation of Creatures in Maximus the Confessor .....	117
Demetrios HARPER	
The Ontological Ethics of St. Maximus the Confessor and the Concept of Shame.....	129
Smilen MARKOV	
Maximus' Concept of Human Will through the Interpretation of Johannes Damascenus and Photius of Constantinople .....	143

John PANTELEIMON MANOUSSAKIS St. Augustine and St. Maximus the Confessor between the Beginning and the End.....	155
---	-----

### Volume 16

#### STUDIA PATRISTICA XC

##### CHRIST AS ONTOLOGICAL PARADIGM IN EARLY BYZANTINE THOUGHT

(ed. Marcin Podbielski)

Anna ZHYRKOVA Introduction .....	1
Sergey TROSTYANSKIY The Compresence of Opposites in Christ in St. Cyril of Alexandria's <i>Oikonomia</i> .....	3
Anna ZHYRKOVA From Christ to Human Individual: Christ as Ontological Paradigm in Early Byzantine Thought .....	25
Grzegorz KOTŁOWSKI A Philological Contribution to the Question of Dating Leontius of Jerusalem .....	49
Marcin PODBIELSKI A Picture in Need of a Theory: Hypostasis in Maximus the Confes- sor's <i>Ambigua ad Thomam</i> .....	57

### Volume 17

#### STUDIA PATRISTICA XCI

##### BIBLICA

Camille LEPEIGNEUX L'éphod de David dansant devant l'arche (2S. 6:14): problèmes tex- tuels et exégèse patristique.....	3
Stephen WAERS <i>Isaiah</i> 44-5 and Competing Conceptions of Monotheism in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries .....	11

Simon C. MIMOUNI  
 Jésus de Nazareth et sa famille ont-ils appartenus à la tribu des prêtres ?  
 Quelques remarques et réflexions pour une recherche nouvelle..... 19

Joseph VERHEYDEN  
 The So-Called *Catena in Marcum* of Victor of Antioch: Throwing  
 Light on *Mark* with a Not-So-Little Help from *Matthew* and *Luke* .. 47

Miriam DECOCK  
 The Good Shepherd of *John* 10: A Case Study of New Testament  
 Exegesis in the Schools of Alexandria and Antioch ..... 63

H.A.G. HOUGHTON  
 The Layout of Early Latin Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles and  
 their Oldest Manuscripts ..... 71

David M. REIS  
 Mapping Exilic Imaginaries: Greco-Roman Discourses of Displace-  
 ment and the Book of *Revelation* ..... 113

Stephan WITETSCHEK  
 Polycrates of Ephesus and the ‘Canonical John’ ..... 127

Gregory Allen ROBBINS  
 ‘Many a Gaud and a Glittering Toy’ (Sayers): Fourth-Century Gospel  
 Books ..... 135

PHILOSOPHICA, THEOLOGICA, ETHICA

Frances YOUNG  
 Riddles and Puzzles: God’s Indirect Word in Patristic Hermeneutics. 149

Methody ZINKOVSKIY  
 Hypostatic Characteristics of Notions of Thought, Knowledge and  
 Cognition in the Greek Patristic Thought..... 157

Elena Ene D-VASILESCU  
 Early Christianity about the Notions of Time and the Redemption of  
 the Soul..... 167

Jack BATES  
 Theosis *Kata To Ephikton*: The History of a Pious Hedge-Phrase ... 183



James K. LEE	
The Church and the Holy Spirit: Ecclesiology and Pneumatology in Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine.....	189
Maria LISSEK	
In Search of the Roots. Reference to Patristic Christology in Gilbert Crispin's Disputation with a Jew .....	207
Pak-Wah LAI	
Comparing Patristic and Chinese Medical Anthropologies: Insights for Chinese Contextual Theology .....	213

### HAGIOGRAPHICA

Katherine MILCO	
<i>Ad Proendam Virtutis Memoriam</i> : Encomiastic Prefaces in Tacitus' <i>Agricola</i> and Latin Christian Hagiography.....	227
Megan DEVORE	
<i>Catechumeni</i> , Not 'New Converts': Revisiting the <i>Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis</i> .....	237
Christoph BIRKNER	
Hagiography and Autobiography in Cyril of Scythopolis.....	249
Flavia RUANI	
Preliminary Notes on Edifying Stories in Syriac Hagiographical Collections.....	257
Nathan D. HOWARD	
Sacred Spectacle in the Biographies of Gorgonia and Macrina.....	267
Marta SZADA	
The Life of Balthild and the Rise of Aristocratic Sanctity .....	275
Robert WIŚNIEWSKI	
Eastern, Western and Local Habits in the Early Cult of Relics.....	283

### ASCETICA

Maria Giulia GENGHINI	
'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything' ( <i>AP</i> Moses 6): How the Physical Environment Shaped the Spirituality of Early Egyptian Monasticism .....	299

Rodrigo ÁLVAREZ GUTIÉRREZ  
 El concepto de *xénitéia* en la hagiografía Monástica primitiva..... 313

Sean MOBERG  
 Examination of Conscience in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* ..... 325

Daniel LEMENI  
 The Fascination of the Desert: Aspects of Spiritual Guidance in the  
*Apophthegmata Patrum*..... 333

Janet TIMBIE  
 ‘Pay for Our Sins’: A Shared Theme in the Pachomian Koinonia and  
 the White Monastery Federation..... 347

Paula TUTTY  
 The Political and Philanthropic Role of Monastic Figures and Mon-  
 asteries as Revealed in Fourth-Century Coptic and Greek Corres-  
 pondence..... 353

Marianne SÁGHY  
 Monica, the Ascetic..... 363

Gáspár PARLAGI  
 The Letter *Ad filios Dei* of Saint Macarius the Egyptian – Questions  
 and Hypotheses..... 377

Becky LITTLECHILDS  
 Notes on Ascetic ‘Regression’ in Asterius’ *Liber ad Renatum Mona-*  
*chum*..... 385

Laura SOURELI  
 The ‘Prayer of the Heart’ in the *Philokalia*: Questions and Caveats 391

Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY  
 Monastic Hybridity and Anti-Exegetical Discourse: From Philoxenus  
 of Mabbug to Dadišo Qatraya ..... 417

**Volume 18**

**STUDIA PATRISTICA XCII**

LITURGICA AND TRACTATUS SYMBOLI

Liuwe H. WESTRA  
 Creating a Theological Difference: The Myth of Two Grammatical  
 Constructions with Latin *Credo*..... 3

Tarmo TOOM	
<i>Tractatus symboli: A Brief Pre-Baptismal Explanation of the Creed..</i>	15
Joseph G. MUELLER	
The Trinitarian Doctrine of the <i>Apostolic Constitutions</i> .....	25
Gregory TUCKER	
‘O Day of Resurrection!’: The Paschal Mystery in Hymns.....	41
Maria MUNKHOLT CHRISTENSEN	
Witnessed by Angels: The Role of Angels in Relation to Prayer in Four Ante-Nicene Euchological Treatises .....	49
Barry M. CRAIG	
He Lifted to You? Lost and Gained in Translation .....	57
Anna Adams PETRIN	
Reconsidering the ‘Egyptian Connection’ in the Anaphora of Fourth- Century Jerusalem .....	65
Anthony GELSTON	
The Post-Sanctus in the East Syrian Anaphoras .....	77
Graham FIELD	
Breaking Boundaries: The Cosmic Dimension of Worship .....	83
George A. BEVAN	
The Sequence of the First Four Sessions of the Council of Chalcedon	91

#### ORIENTALIA

Todd E. FRENCH	
Just Deserts: Origen’s Lingerin Influence on Divine Justice in the Hagiographies of John of Ephesus.....	105
Benedict M. GUEVIN	
Dialogue between Death and the Devil in Saint Ephrem the Syrian and Saint Romanos the Melodist .....	113
Paul M. PASQUESI	
<i>Qnoma</i> in Narsai: Anticipating <i>Energeia</i> .....	119

David G.K. TAYLOR Rufinus the Silver Merchant's Miaphysite Refutation of Leontius of Byzantium's <i>Epaporemata</i> (CPG 6814): A Rediscovered Syriac Text.....	127
Valentina DUCA Pride in the Thought of Isaac of Nineveh .....	137
Valentin VESA The Divine Vision in Isaac of Niniveh and the East Syriac Christology	149
Theresia HAINTHALER <i>Colossians</i> 1:15 in the Christological Reflection of East Syrian Authors .....	165
Michael PENN, Nicholas R. HOWE & Kaylynn CRAWFORD Automated Syriac Script Charts.....	175
Stephen J. DAVIS Cataloguing the Coptic and Arabic Manuscripts in the Monastery of the Syrians: A Preliminary Report .....	179
Damien LABADIE A Newly Attributed Coptic <i>Encomium</i> on Saint Stephen (BHO 1093)	187
Anahit AVAGYAN Die armenische Übersetzung der pseudo-athanasianischen Homilie <i>De passione et cruce domini</i> (CPG 2247).....	195

## CRITICA ET PHILOLOGICA

B.N. WOLFE The Gothic Palimpsest of Bologna .....	205
Meredith DANEZAN Proverbe ( <i>paroimia</i> ) et <i>cursus</i> spirituel : l'apport de l'Épitomé de la Chaîne de Procope.....	209
Aaron PELTTARI <i>Lector inueniet</i> : A Commonplace of Late Antiquity .....	215
Peter VAN NUFFELEN The Poetics of Christian History in Late Antiquity .....	227

Yuliya MINETS	
Languages of Christianity in Late Antiquity: Between Universalism and Cultural Superiority .....	247
Peter F. SCHADLER	
Reading the Self by Reading the Other: A Hermeneutical Key to the Reading of Sacred Texts in Late Antiquity and Byzantium .....	261

## HISTORICA

Peter GEMEINHARDT	
Teaching Religion in Late Antiquity: Divine and Human Agency ...	271
David WOODS	
Constantine, Aurelian, and Aphaca.....	279
Luise Marion FRENKEL	
Procedural Similarities between Fourth- and Fifth-Century Christian Synods and the Roman Senates: Myth, Politics or Cultural Identity?	293
Maria KONSTANTINIDOU	
Travelling and Trading in the Greek Fathers: Faraway Lands, Peoples and Products .....	303
Theodore DE BRUYN	
Historians, Bishops, Amulets, Scribes, and Rites: Interpreting a Chris- tian Practice .....	317
Catherine C. TAYLOR	
Educated Susanna: Female <i>Orans</i> , Sarcophagi, and the Typology of Woman Wisdom in Late Antique Art and Iconography .....	339
David L. RIGGS	
Contesting the Legacy and Patronage of Saint Cyprian in Vandal Carthage.....	357
Jordina SALES-CARBONELL	
The Fathers of the Church and their Role in Promoting Christian Constructions in <i>Hispania</i> .....	371
Bethany V. WILLIAMS	
The Significance of the Senses: An Exploration into the Multi- Sensory Experience of Faith for the Lay Population of Christianity during the Fourth and Fifth Centuries C.E.....	381

Jacob A. LATHAM  
*Adventus, Occursus*, and the Christianization of Rome ..... 397

Teodor TĀBUŞ  
 The Orthodoxy of Emperor Justinian’s Christian Faith as a Matter  
 of Roman Law (*CJ I,1,5-8*)..... 411

Nicholas MATAYA  
 Charity Before Division: The Strange Case of Severinus of Noricum  
 and the Pseudo-Evangelisation of the Rugians..... 423

Christian HORNING  
 Die Konstruktion christlicher Identität. Funktion und Bedeutung der  
 Apostasie im antiken Christentum (4.-6. Jahrhundert n. Chr.) ..... 431

Ronald A.N. KYDD  
 Growing Evidence of Christianity’s Establishment in China in the  
 Late-Patristic Era..... 441

Luis SALÉS  
 ‘Aristotelian’ as a *Lingua Franca*: Rationality in Christian Self-  
 Representation under the ‘Abbasids’ ..... 453

**Volume 19**

**STUDIA PATRISTICA XCIII**

**THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES**

Joshua KINLAW  
 Exegesis and *Homonoia* in *First Clement* ..... 3

Janelle PETERS  
 The Phoenix in *1Clement*..... 17

Jonathan E. SOYARS  
 Clement of Rome’s Reconstruction of Job’s Character for Corinth:  
 A Contextual Reading of the Composite Quotation of LXX *Job* 1-2  
 in *1Clem.* 17.3 ..... 27

Ingo SCHAAF  
 The Earliest Sibylline Attestations in the Patristic Reception: Eru-  
 dition and Religion in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD ..... 35

J. Christopher EDWARDS	
Identifying the Lord in the <i>Epistle of Barnabas</i> .....	51
Donna RIZK	
The Apology of Aristides: the Armenian Version.....	61
Paul R. GILLIAM III	
Ignatius of Antioch: The Road to Chalcedon? .....	69
Alexander B. MILLER	
Polemic and Credal Refinement in Ignatius of Antioch .....	81
Shaily SHASHIKANT PATEL	
The ‘Starhymn’ of Ignatius’ <i>Epistle to the Ephesians</i> : Re-Appropriation as Polemic .....	93
Paul HARTOG	
The Good News in Old Texts? The ‘Gospel’ and the ‘Archives’ in <i>Ign.Phld.</i> 8.2 .....	105
Stuart R. THOMSON	
The Philosopher’s Journey: Philosophical and Christian Conversions in the Second Century .....	123
Andrew HAYES	
The Significance of Samaritanism for Justin Martyr .....	141
Micah M. MILLER	
What’s in a Name?: Titles of Christ in Justin Martyr.....	155
M ADRYAEL TONG	
Reading Gender in Justin Martyr: New Insights from Old Apologies	165
Pavel DUDZIK	
Tatian the Assyrian and Greek Rhetoric: Homer’s Heroes Agamemnon, Nestor and Thersites in Tatian’s <i>Oratio ad Graecos</i> .....	179
Stuart E. PARSONS	
Trading Places: Faithful Job and Doubtful Autolycus in Theophilus’ Apology .....	191
László PERENDY	
Theophilus’ Silence about Aristotle. A Clandestine Approval of his View on the Mortality of the Soul?.....	199

Roland M. SOKOLOWSKI 'Zealous for the Covenant of Christ': An Inquiry into the Lost Career of Irenaeus of Lyons .....	213
Eric COVINGTON Irenaeus, <i>Ephesians</i> , and Union with the Spirit: Examining the Scriptural Basis of Unity with the Spirit in <i>AH</i> V 20.2 .....	219
Sverre Elgvin LIED Irenaeus of Lyons and the Eucharistic Altar in Heaven.....	229
John KAUFMAN The Kingdom of the Son in the Theology of Irenaeus .....	237
Thomas D. MCGLOTHLIN Why Are All These Damned People Rising? Paul and the Generality of the Resurrection in Irenaeus and Tertullian .....	243
Scott D. MORINGIELLO Allegory and Typology in Irenaeus of Lyon.....	255
Francesca MINONNE Aulus Gellius and Irenaeus of Lyons in the Cultural Context of the Second Century AD .....	265
Eugen MAFTEI Irénée de Lyon et Athanase d'Alexandrie: ressemblances et diffé- rences entre leurs sotériologies .....	275
István M. BUGÁR Melito and the Body.....	303

#### APOCRYPHA AND GNOSTICA

Pamela MULLINS REAVES <i>Gnosis</i> in Alexandria: A Study in Ancient Christian Interpretation and Intra-Group Dynamics.....	315
Csaba ÖTVÖS Creation and Epiphany? Theological Symbolism in the Creation Narrative of <i>On the Origin of the World</i> (NHC II 5).....	325



Hugo LUNDHAUG	
<i>The Dialogue of the Savior</i> (NHC III,5) as a Monastic Text .....	335
Kristine Toft ROSLAND	
Fatherhood and the Lack thereof in the <i>Apocryphon of John</i> .....	347
Jeremy W. BARRIER	
Abraham's Seed: Tracing <i>Pneuma</i> as a Material Substance from Paul's Writings to the <i>Apocryphon of John</i> .....	357

## Volume 20

### STUDIA PATRISTICA XCIV

#### FROM TERTULLIAN TO TYCONIUS

Anni Maria LAATO	
Tertullian, <i>Adversus Iudaeos</i> Literature, and the 'Killing of the Prophets'-Argument .....	1
Ian L.S. BALFOUR	
Tertullian and Roman Law – What Do We (Not) Know? .....	11
Benjamin D. HAUPT	
Tertullian's Text of <i>Galatians</i> .....	23
Stéphanie E. BINDER	
Tertullien face à la romanisation de l'Afrique du Nord : une discus- sion de quelques aspects .....	29
Christopher T. BOUNDS	
The Doctrine of Christian Perfection in Tertullian .....	45
Kathryn THOSTENSON	
Serving Two Masters: Tertullian on Marital and Christian Duties ...	55
Edwina MURPHY	
Widows, Welfare and the Wayward: <i>1Timothy 5</i> in Cyprian's <i>Ad     Quirinum</i> .....	67
Charles BOBERTZ	
Almsgiving as Patronage: The Role of the Patroness in Third Cen- tury North African Christianity.....	75

Daniel BECERRA	
Origen, the Stoics, and the Rhetoric of Recitation: Spiritual Exercise and the <i>Exhortation to Martyrdom</i> .....	85
Antti LAATO	
A Cold Case Reopened: A Jewish Source on Christianity Used by Celsus and the <i>Toledot Yeshu</i> Literature – From Counter-Exegetical Arguments to Full-Blown Counter-Story .....	99
Eric SCHERBENSKE	
Origen, Manuscript Variation, and a Lacking Gospel Harmony .....	111
Jennifer OTTO	
Origen’s Criticism of Philo of Alexandria .....	121
Riemer ROUKEMA	
The Retrieval of Origen’s <i>Commentary on Micah</i> .....	131
Giovanni HERMANIN DE REICHENFELD	
Resurrection and Prophecy: The Spirit in Origen’s Exegesis of Lazarus and Caiaphas in <i>John 11</i> .....	143
Elizabeth Ann DIVELY LAURO	
The Meaning and Significance of Scripture’s Sacramental Nature within Origen’s Thought .....	153
David Neal GREENWOOD	
Celsus, Origen, and the Eucharist .....	187
Vito LIMONE	
Origen on the <i>Song of Songs</i> . A Reassessment and Proposal of Dating of his Writings on the <i>Song</i> .....	195
Allan E. JOHNSON	
The Causes of Things: Origen’s Treatises <i>On Prayer</i> and <i>On First     Principles</i> and His Exegetical Method .....	205
Brian BARRETT	
‘Of His Fullness We Have All Received’: Origen on Scripture’s Unity .....	211
Mark Randall JAMES	
Anatomist of the Prophetic Words: Origen on Scientific and Herme- neutic Method .....	219

Joseph LENOW	
Patience and Judgment in the Christology of Cyprian of Carthage...	233
Mattias GASSMAN	
The Conversion of Cyprian's Rhetoric? Towards a New Reading of <i>Ad Donatum</i> .....	247
Laetitia CICCOLINI	
Le texte de 1 <i>Cor.</i> 7:34 chez Cyprien de Carthage.....	259
Dawn LAVALLE	
Feasting at the End: The Eschatological <i>Symposia</i> of Methodius of Olympus and Julian the Apostate .....	269
Marie-Noëlle VIGNAL	
Méthode d'Olympe, lecteur et exégète de Saint Paul .....	285
Johannes BREUER	
The Rhetoric of Persuasion as Hermeneutical Key to Arnobius' <i>Adversus nationes</i> .....	295

### Volume 21

### STUDIA PATRISTICA XCV

#### THE FOURTH CENTURY

Elizabeth DEPALMA DIGESER	
Pseudo-Justin's <i>Cohortatio ad Graecos</i> and the Great Persecution ..	3
Atsuko GOTOH	
The 'Conversion' of Constantine the Great: His Religious Legislation in the Theodosian Code.....	13
Vladimir LATINOVIC	
Arius Conservativus? The Question of Arius' Theological Belonging	27
Sébastien MORLET	
Eusèbe le grammairien. Note sur les <i>Questions évangéliques</i> (À Mari- nos, 2) et une scholie sur Pindare .....	43
Thomas O'LOUGHLIN	
Some Hermeneutical Assumptions Latent within the Gospel Appa- ratus of Eusebius of Caesarea .....	51

Michael Bland SIMMONS	
Exegesis and Hermeneutics in Eusebius of Caesarea's <i>Theophany</i> (Book IV): The Contemporary Fulfillment of Jesus' Prophecies.....	65
Sophie CARTWRIGHT	
Should we Grieve and Be Afraid? Christ's Passions versus the Pas- sions of the Soul in Athanasius of Alexandria .....	77
William G. RUSCH	
Athanasius of Alexandria and ' <i>Sola Scriptura</i> ' .....	87
Lois M. FARAG	
<i>Organon</i> in Athanasius' <i>De incarnatione</i> : A Case of Textual Inter- polation .....	93
Donna R. HAWK-REINHARD	
The Role of the Holy Spirit in Cyril of Jerusalem's Sacramental Theology.....	107
Olga LORGEUX	
Choice and Will in the Catecheses of Cyril of Jerusalem.....	119
Florian ZACHER	
Marius Victorinus, <i>Opus ad Candidum</i> . An Analysis of its Rhetorical Structure.....	127

#### CAPPADOCIAN WRITERS

Claudio MORESCHINI	
Is it Possible to Speak of 'Cappadocian Theology' as a System?.....	139
Nienke M. VOS	
'Teach us to pray': Self-Understanding in Macrina's Final Prayer...	165
Adam RASMUSSEN	
Defending Moses. Understanding Basil's Apparent Rejection of Allegory in the <i>Hexaemeron</i> .....	175
Marco QUIRCIO	
A Philological Note to Basil of Caesarea's Second Homily on the <i>Hexaemeron</i> .....	183

Mattia C. CHIRIATTI ἀγών/θέα-θέαμα and στάδιον/θέατρον: A Reviewed ἔκφρασις of the Spectacle in Basil's <i>In Gordium martyrem</i> .....	189
Arnaud PERROT Une source littéraire de l'Ep. 46 de Basile de Césarée : le traité <i>De la véritable intégrité dans la virginité</i> .....	201
Aude BUSINE Basil of Caesarea and the <i>Praise of the City</i> .....	209
Benoît GAIN Le voyage de Basile de Césarée en Orient : hypothèses sur le silence des sources externes .....	217
Seumas MACDONALD Contested Ground: Basil's Use of Scripture in <i>Against Eunomius 2</i>	225
Nikolai LIPATOV-CHICHERIN An Unpublished Funerary Speech (CPG 2936) and the Question of Succession to St. Basil the Great .....	237
Kimberly F. BAKER Basil and Augustine: Preaching on Care for the Poor .....	251
Oliver LANGWORTHY Sojourning and the Sojourner in Gregory of Nazianzus .....	261
Alexander D. PERKINS The Grave Politics of Gregory Nazianzen's Eulogy for Gorgonia....	269
Gabrielle THOMAS Divine, Yet Vulnerable: The Paradoxical Existence of Gregory Nazianzen's <i>Imago Dei</i> .....	281
Bradley K. STORIN Reconsidering Gregory of Nazianzus' Letter Collection .....	291
Andrew RADDE-GALLWITZ Gregory on Gregory: <i>Catechetical Oration 38</i> .....	303
Andrew J. SUMMERSON Gregory Nazianzus' Mixture Language in Maximus the Confessor's <i>Ambigua</i> : What the Confessor Learned from the Theologian .....	315

Ryan CLEVENGER	
Ἐκφρασις and Epistemology in Gregory of Nazianzus.....	321
Karen CARDUCCI	
Implicit Stipulations in the <i>Testamentum</i> of Gregory of Nazianzos <i>vis-à-vis</i> the <i>Testamenta</i> of Remigius of Rheims, Caesarius of Arles, and Aurelianus of Ravenna.....	331
Michael J. PETRIN	
Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa on τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον..	343
Andra JUGĂNARU	
The Function of Miracles in Gregory of Nyssa's Hagiographical Works.....	355
Makrina FINLAY	
Gregory of Nyssa's Framework for the Resurrected Life in <i>The Life     of St. Macrina</i> .....	367
Marta PRZYSZYCHOWSKA	
Three States after Death according to Gregory of Nyssa.....	377
Ann CONWAY-JONES	
An Ambiguous Type: The Figure of Aaron Interpreted by Gregory of Nyssa and Ephrem the Syrian .....	389
Robin ORTON	
The Place of the Eucharist in Gregory of Nyssa's Soteriology .....	399
Anne KARAHAN	
Cyclic Shapes and Divine Activity. A Cappadocian Inquiry into Byzantine Aesthetics .....	405
Hilary Anne-Marie MOONEY	
Eschatological Themes in the Writings of Gregory of Nyssa and John Scottus Eriugena .....	421
Benjamin EKMAN	
'Natural Contemplation' in Evagrius Ponticus' <i>Scholia on Proverbs</i>	431
Margaret GUISE	
The Golden and Saving Chain and its (De)construction: Soterio- logical Conversations between Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and the Cappadocian Fathers .....	441

## Volume 22

## STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVI

## THE SECOND HALF OF THE FOURTH CENTURY

Kelley SPOERL Epiphanius on Jesus' Digestion .....	3
Young Richard KIM Nicaea is Not Enough: The Second Creed of Epiphanius' <i>Ancoratus</i>	11
John VOELKER Marius Victorinus' Use of a Gnostic Commentary .....	21
Tomasz STEPIEŃ Action of Will and Generation of the Son in Extant Works of Euno- mius .....	29
Alberto J. QUIROGA PUERTAS 'In the Gardens of Adonis'. Religious Disputations in Julian's <i>Caesars</i>	37
Ariane MAGNY Porphyry and Julian on Christians .....	47
Jeannette KREIJKES The Impact of Theological Concepts on Calvin's Reception of Chrysostom's Exegesis of <i>Galatians</i> 4:21-6 .....	57
Hellen DAYTON John Chrysostom on <i>katanuxis</i> as the Source of Spiritual Healing ...	65
Michaela DURST The <i>Epistle to the Hebrews</i> in the 7 <sup>th</sup> <i>Oration</i> of John Chrysostom's <i>Orationes Adversus Judaeos</i> .....	71
Paschalis GKORTSILAS The Lives of Others: Pagan and Christian Role Models in John Chry- sostom's Thought .....	83
Malouine DE DIEULEVEULT L'exégèse de la faute de David (2 <i>Règnes</i> 11-12) : Jean Chrysostome et Théodoret de Cyr.....	95

Matteo CARUSO	
Hagiographic Style of the <i>Vita Spyridonis</i> between Rhetoric and Exegetical Tradition: Analogies between John Chrysostom's Homilies and the Work of Theodore of Paphos.....	103
Paul C. BOLES	
Method and Meaning in Chrysostom's <i>Homily 7</i> and Origen's <i>Homily 1 on Genesis</i> .....	111
Susan B. GRIFFITH	
Apostolic Authority and the 'Incident at Antioch': Chrysostom on <i>Gal. 2:11-4</i> .....	117
James D. COOK	
Therapeutic Preaching: The Use of Medical Imagery in the Sermons of John Chrysostom.....	127
Demetrios BATHRELLOS	
<i>Sola gratia? Sola fide?</i> Law, Grace, Faith, and Works in John Chrysostom's <i>Commentary on Romans</i> .....	133
Marie-Eve GEIGER	
Les homélies de Jean Chrysostome <i>In principium Actorum</i> : le titre pris comme principe exégétique .....	147
Pierre AUGUSTIN	
Quelques sources Parisiennes du <i>Chrysostome</i> de Sir Henry Savile ..	157
Thomas BRAUCH	
The Emperor Theodosius I and the Nicene Faith: A Brief History ..	175
Sergey KIM	
Severian of Gabala as a Witness to Life at the Imperial Court in Fifth-Century Constantinople.....	189

FROM THE FIFTH CENTURY ONWARDS  
(GREEK WRITERS)

Austin Dominic LITKE	
The ' <i>Organon</i> Concept' in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria ..	207
Barbara VILLANI	
Some Remarks on the Textual Tradition and the Literary Genre of Cyril of Alexandria's <i>De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate</i> ...	215



Sandra LEUENBERGER-WENGER	
All Cyrillians? Cyril of Alexandria as Norm of Orthodoxy at the Council of Chalcedon.....	225
Hans VAN LOON	
Virtue in Cyril of Alexandria's <i>Festal Letters</i> .....	237
George KALANTZIS	
Passibility, Tentability, and the Divine Οὐσία in the Debate between Cyril and Nestorius .....	249
James E. GOEHRING	
'Talking Back' in Pachomian Hagiography: Theodore's Catechesis and the <i>Letter of Ammon</i> .....	257
James F. WELLINGTON	
Let God Arise: The Divine Warrior <i>Motif</i> in Theodoret of Cyrrhus' Commentary on <i>Psalm 67</i> .....	265
Agnès LORRAIN	
Exégèse et argumentation scripturaire chez Théodoret de Cyr: l' <i>In Romanos</i> , écho des controverses trinitaires et christologiques des IV <sup>e</sup> et V <sup>e</sup> siècles.....	273
Kathryn KLEINKOPF	
A Landscape of Bodies: Exploring the Role of Ascetics in Theodoret's <i>Historia Religiosa</i> .....	283
Maya GOLDBERG	
New Syriac Edition and Translation of Theodore of Mopsuestia's Reconstructed <i>Commentary on Paul's Minor Epistles</i> : Fragments Collected from MS ( <i>olim</i> ) <i>Diyarbakir 22</i> .....	293
Georgiana HUIAN	
The Spiritual Experience in Diadochus of Photike .....	301
Eirini A. ARTEMI	
The Comparison of the Triadological Teaching of Isidore of Pelusium with Cyril of Alexandria's Teaching .....	309
Madalina TOCA	
Isidore of Pelusium's Letters to Didymus the Blind.....	325

Michael MUTHREICH	
Ein äthiopisches Fragment der dem Dionysius Areopagita zuge-	
schriebenen <i>Narratio de vita sua</i> .....	333
István PERCZEL	
Theodoret of Cyrrhus: The Main Source of Pseudo-Dionysius’	
Christology? .....	351
Panagiotis G. PAVLOS	
Aptitude (Ἐπιτηδειότης) and the Foundations of Participation in the	
Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite .....	377
Joost VAN ROSSUM	
The Relationship between Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus	
the Confessor: Revisiting the Problem.....	397
Dimitrios A. VASILAKIS	
Dionysius <i>versus</i> Proclus on Undeified Providence and its Byzantine	
Echoes in Nicholas of Methone .....	407
José María NIEVA	
The Mystical Sense of the Aesthetic Experience in Dionysius the	
Areopagite .....	419
Ernesto Sergio MAINOLDI	
Why Dionysius the Areopagite? The Invention of the First Father ..	425
Alexandru PRELIPCEAN	
The Influence of Romanos the Melodist on the <i>Great Canon</i> of Saint	
Andrew of Crete: Some Remarks about Christological Typologies..	441
Alexis TORRANCE	
‘Assuming our nature corrupted by sin’: Revisiting Theodore the	
Studite on the Humanity of Christ.....	451
Scott ABLES	
The Rhetoric of Persuasion in the Polemic of John of Damascus.....	457
James A. FRANCIS	
Ancient Seeing/Christian Seeing: The Old and the New in John of	
Damascus.....	469
Zachary KEITH	
The Problem of ἐνυπόστατον in John Damascene: Why Is Jesus Not	
a Human Person? .....	477

Nicholas BAMFORD	
Being, Christian Gnosis, and Deified Becoming in the ‘Theoretikon’ .	485
Alexandros CHOULIARAS	
The <i>Imago Trinitatis</i> in St Symeon the New Theologian and Niketas Stethatos: Is this the Basic Source of St Gregory Palamas’ own Approach? .....	493
 GREGORY PALAMAS’ <i>EPISTULA</i> III (ed. Katharina Heyden) 	
Katharina HEYDEN	
Introduction: The Two Versions of Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III to Akindynos	507
Katharina HEYDEN	
The Two <i>Epistulae</i> III of Palamas to Akindynos: The Small but Important Difference between Authenticity and Originality.....	511
Theodoros ALEXOPOULOS	
The Problem of the Distinction between Essence and Energies in the Hesychast Controversy. Saint Gregory Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III: The Version Published by P. Chrestou in Light of Palamas’ Other Works on the Divine Energies.....	521
Renate BURRI	
The Textual Transmission of Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III to Akindynos: The Case of Monac. gr. 223 .....	535
Dimitrios MOSCHOS	
Reasons of Being versus Uncreated Energies – Neoplatonism and Mathematics as Means of Participating in God according to Nicephorus Gregoras .....	547

### Volume 23

### STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVII

#### FROM THE FOURTH CENTURY ONWARDS (LATIN WRITERS)

Anthony P. COLEMAN	
Comparing Institutes: Lactantius’ <i>Divinae Institutiones</i> in Calvin’s <i>Institutio christianae religionis</i> 1.1-5.....	3

Jessica VAN 'T WESTEINDE	
Jerome and the <i>Christianus Perfectus</i> , a Transformed Roman Noble Man? .....	17
Silvia GEORGIEVA	
Domina, Filia, Conserva, Germana: The Identity of the Correspondent in Saint Jerome's Letters.....	37
Roberta FRANCHI	
<i>Muliercularum socii</i> (Hier., <i>Ep.</i> 133,4): donne ed eresia nell' <i>Epistolario</i> di Gerolamo .....	51
Richard SEAGRAVES	
Prudentius: <i>Contra orationem Symmachi</i> , Bk. I .....	63
Klazina STAAT	
'Let him thus be a Hippolytus' ( <i>Perist.</i> 11.87): Horror and Rhetoric in Prudentius' <i>Peristephanon</i> 11.....	79
Diane Shane FRUCHTMAN	
Witness and Imitation in the Writings of Paulinus of Nola.....	87
Lorenzo SCIAJNO	
Salvation behind the Web (Paul. Nol., <i>Carm.</i> XVI 93-148): Connections and Echoes of a Fairy-tale Theme in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages between West and East .....	97
Ewa DUSIK-KRUPA	
Politician, Theologian, Tutor. Luciferi Calaritanis' Use of Holy Scripture.....	103
Vincenzo MESSANA	
Massimino ariano e la Sicilia: il dibattito storiografico negli ultimi decenni su una <i>vexata quaestio</i> .....	115
Salvatore COSTANZA	
Il variegato panorama di accezioni dei termini <i>Romanus</i> e <i>barbarus</i> , <i>Christianus</i> e <i>paganus</i> negli scritti di Salviano.....	129
Matthew J. PEREIRA	
The Intertextual Tradition of Prosper's <i>De vocatione omnium gentium</i> .....	143

Raúl VILLEGAS MARÍN	
Abjuring Manichaeism in Ostrogothic Rome and Provence: The <i>Commonitorium quomodo sit agendum cum Manichaeis</i> and the <i>Prosperi anathematismi</i> .....	159
Mantè LENKAITYTĖ OSTERMANN	
John Cassian Read by Eucherius of Lyon: Affinities and Diver- gences .....	169
Daniel G. OPPERWALL	
Obedience and Communal Authority in John Cassian.....	183
Gerben F. WARTENA	
Epic Emotions: Narratorial Involvement in Sedulius' <i>Carmen</i> <i>Paschale</i> .....	193
Tim DENECKER	
Evaluations of Multilingual Competence in Cassiodorus' <i>Variae</i> and <i>Institutiones</i> .....	203
Hector SCERRI	
On Menstruation, Marital Intercourse and 'Wet Dreams' in a Letter by Gregory the Great.....	211
Jerzy SZAFRANOWSKI	
To See with Body and to See with Mind: Corporeal and Spiritual Cognition in the 'Dialogues' of Gregory the Great.....	219
Pere MAYMÓ I CAPDEVILA	
Chants, Icons, and Relics in the Evangelization Doctrine of Gregory the Great: The Case of Kent.....	225
Stephen BLACKWOOD	
Scriptural Allusions and the Wholeness of Wisdom in Boethius' <i>Consolation of Philosophy</i> .....	237
Juan Antonio JIMÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ	
A Brief Catalogue of Superstitions in Chapter 16 of Martin of Bra- ga's <i>De correctione rusticorum</i> .....	245
Alberto FERREIRO	
' <i>Sufficit septem diebus</i> ': Seven Days Mourning the Dead in the <i>Let-</i> <i>ters</i> of St. Braulio of Zaragoza .....	255

Susan CREMIN	
Bede's Interpretative Practice in his Homilies on the Gospels.....	265

### NACHLEBEN

Bronwen NEIL	
Reception of Late-Antique Popes in the Medieval Byzantine Tradition.....	283
Ken PARRY	
Providence, Resurrection, and Restoration in Byzantine Thought, Eighth to Ninth Centuries .....	295
Eiji HISAMATSU	
Spätbyzantinische Übernahme der Vorstellung von der Lichtvision des Euagrius Pontikos, erörtert am Beispiel des Gregorios Sinaites .	305
Catherine KAVANAGH	
Eriugena's Trinity: A Framework for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue.....	311
Tobias GEORGES	
The <i>Apophthegmata Patrum</i> in the Context of the Occidental Reformation of Monastic Life during the 11 <sup>th</sup> and 12 <sup>th</sup> Centuries. The Case of Peter Abelard .....	323
Christopher M. WOJTULEWICZ	
Augustine and the Dissolution of Polarity. Some Thoughts on Augustine Reception in the Late 13 <sup>th</sup> and Early 14 <sup>th</sup> Centuries According to Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart .....	329
Marie-Anne VANNIER	
Origen, a Source of Meister Eckhart's Thinking .....	345
Lavinia CERIONI	
The Patristic Sources of Eriugena's Exegesis of the Parable of the Bridesmaids .....	355
Thomas F. HEYNE	
A Polemicist rather than a Patrologist: Calvin's Attitude to and Use of the Early Church Fathers .....	367

## Volume 24

## STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVIII

## ST AUGUSTINE AND HIS OPPONENTS

Susanna ELM	
Sold to Sin Through <i>Origo</i> : Augustine of Hippo and the Late Roman Slave Trade.....	1
Michael J. THATE	
Augustine and the Economics of Libido .....	23
Willemien OTTEN	
The Fate of Augustine's <i>Genesis</i> Exegesis in Medieval Hexaemeral Commentaries: The Cases of John Scottus Eriugena and Robert Grosseteste.....	51
Midori E. HARTMAN	
Beginning Again, Becoming Animal: Augustine's Theology, Animality, and Physical Pain in <i>Genesis</i> .....	71
Sarah STEWART-KROEKER	
Groaning with the Psalms: The Cultivation of World-Weariness in Augustine's <i>Enarrationes in Psalmos</i> .....	81
Marie PAULIAT	
<i>Non inueni tantam fidem in Israel</i> : la péricope de l'acte de foi du centurion ( <i>Matt. 8:5-13</i> ) interprétée dans les <i>Sermones in Matthaëum</i> d'Augustin d'Hippone .....	91
Joseph L. GRABAU	
Christology and Exegesis in Augustine of Hippo's XV <sup>th</sup> Tractate <i>In Iohannis Euangelium</i> .....	103
Teppeï KATO	
Greek or Hebrew? Augustine and Jerome on Biblical Translation...	109
Rebekka SCHIRNER	
Augustine's Theory of Signs – A Hermeneutical Key to his Practice of Dealing with Different Biblical Versions? .....	121
Erika KIDD	
The Drama of <i>De magistro</i> .....	133

Douglas FINN	
The Holy Spirit and the Church in the Earliest Augustine: An Analysis of the Character of Monnica in the Cassiciacum Dialogues.....	141
John Peter KENNEY	
<i>Nondum me esse</i> : Augustine's Early Ontology.....	167
Maureen A. TILLEY	
Pseudo-Cyprian and the Rebaptism Controversy in Africa .....	173
Heather BARKMAN	
'Stubborn and Insolent' or 'Enfeebled by Riches'? The Construction of Crispina's Identity.....	181
David E. WILHITE	
Were the 'Donatists' a National or Social Movement in Disguise? Reframing the Question .....	191
Naoki KAMIMURA	
The Relation of the Identity of North African Christians to the Spir- itual Training in the Letters of Augustine .....	221
Edward Arthur NAUMANN	
The Damnation of Baptized Infants according to Augustine.....	239
Jane MERDINGER	
Defying Donatism Subtly: Augustine's and Aurelius' Liturgical Canons at the Council of Hippo .....	273
Marius Anton VAN WILLIGEN	
Did Augustine Change or Broaden his Perspective on Baptism? .....	287
Jesse A. HOOVER	
'They Agreed with the Followers of Arius': The 'Arianization' of the Donatist Church in Late Antique Heresiology .....	295
Joshua M. BRUCE	
The Necessities of Judgment: Augustine's Juridical Response to the Donatists .....	307
Carles BUENACASA PÉREZ	
Why Suicides Instead of Martyrs? Augustine and the Persecution of Donatists .....	315



Colten Cheuk-Yin YAM	
Augustine's Intention in Proceeding from ' <i>mens, notitia, amor</i> ' to ' <i>memoria, intelligentia, voluntas</i> ' .....	327
Robert PARKS	
Augustine and Proba on the Renewed Union of Man and Woman in Christ's Humanity and the Church .....	341
Victor YUDIN	
Augustine on Omnipotence versus Porphyry Based on Appropriation of Plato's <i>Timaeus</i> 41ab .....	353
Johanna RÁKOS-ZICHY	
The Resurrection Body in Augustine.....	373
Pierre DESCOTES	
Une demande d'intercession bien maladroite : la correspondance entre Augustin d'Hippone et Nectarius .....	385
Giulio MALAVASI	
John of Jerusalem's Profession of Faith (CPG 3621) and the Pelagian Controversy .....	399
Katherine CHAMBERS	
The Meaning of 'Good Works' in Augustine's Anti-Pelagian Writings	409
Kenneth M. WILSON	
Re-dating Augustine's <i>Ad Simplicianum</i> 1.2 to the Pelagian Controversy.....	431
Nozomu YAMADA	
Pelagius' Narrative Techniques, their Rhetorical Influences and Negative Responses from Opponents Concerning the Acts of the Synod of Diospolis .....	451
Piotr M. PACIOREK	
The Controversy between Augustine and Julian of Eclanum: On Law and Grace .....	463
Timo NISULA	
'This Three-Headed Hellhound' – Evil Desire as the Root ( <i>radix</i> ) of All Sins in Augustine's Sermons .....	483

Jonathan Martin CIRAULO Sacramental Hermeneutics: Augustine's <i>De doctrina Christiana</i> in the Berengarian Controversy.....	495
Elizabeth KLEIN The Silent Word: Speech in the <i>Confessions</i> .....	509
Christian COPPA The Creatureliness of Time and the Goodness of Narrative in Augus- tine's <i>Confessions</i> .....	517
D.L. DUSENBURY New Light on Time in Augustine's <i>Confessions</i> .....	529
Math OSSEFORTH Augustine's <i>Confessions</i> : A Discourse Analysis.....	545
Sean HANNAN Demonic Historiography and the Historical Sublime in Augustine's <i>City of God</i> .....	553
Jimmy CHAN The Restoration Word Group in <i>De civitate Dei</i> , Books XI-XXII: A Study of an Important Backbone of Augustine's Theology of His- tory.....	561
Michael L. CARREKER <i>Sapientia</i> as Dialectic in Book XV of Augustine's <i>De Trinitate</i> .....	569
Augustine M. REISENAUER Wonder and Significance in Augustine's Theology of Miracles.....	577
Makiko SATO Confession of a Human Being as Darkness in Augustine.....	589
Rowena PAILING Does Death Sting? Some Thoughts from the Mature Augustine.....	599
Kitty BOUWMAN Wisdom Christology in the Works of St. Augustine.....	607
Mark G. VAILLANCOURT The Predestinarian Gottschalk of Orbais: Faithful Augustinian or Heretic?: The Ninth Century Carolingian Debate Revisited.....	621

Matthew DREVER	
Speaking from the Depths: Augustine and Luther's Christological Reading of <i>Substantia</i> in <i>Psalm 69</i> .....	629
Cassandra M.M. CASIAS	
The Vulnerable Slave-Owner in Augustine's Sermons.....	641
Kyle HURLEY	
Kenoticism in <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> and <i>Confessions</i> : Descending to Ascend.....	653
Elizabeth A. CLARK	
Augustine and American Professors in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: From Adulation to Critique.....	667
Shane M. OWENS	
Christoecclesial Participation: Augustine, Zizioulas, and Contemporary Ecumenism .....	675
Dongsun CHO	
The Eternal Relational Submission of the Son to the Father: A Critical Reading of a Contemporary Evangelical Trinitarian Controversy on Augustine.....	683