

Religious Violence in Late Antiquity between Facts and Ideology. The Case of Quodvultdeus of Carthage

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Abstract: Religious violence has been an essential factor in many of our societies for thousands of years. The rise of fundamentalism and coercion of others based on religious beliefs is a recurring phenomenon. The present paper analyzes key texts from Late Antiquity that relate episodes of religiously motivated violence: the story of the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria in 391 CE, as related by the Church historian Rufinus, and the destruction of the Carthaginian temple of Caelestis, as related by the bishop and Church writer Quodvultdeus. The paper argues that these religiously motivated destructions are not as straightforward as they seem at first sight. Rufinus' description interprets the events through the prism of Old Testament prophecies about the fall of pagan gods and their statues. His vision is teleological and sees the event through a series of stages derived from Scripture: the triumph of Christianity, followed by the hiding and then destruction of pagan idols. By forcing these elements into the destruction of the Serapeum, he turns a local political and religious conflict into a world-encompassing fulfillment of prophecy. The Carthaginian bishop Quodvultdeus not only believed in the fulfillment of the same prophecies but also in emulating the events of the Serapeum. The destruction of the temple of Caelestis, an imposing but abandoned structure, is turned into the second fall of the Serapeum. Through the analysis of the vocabulary employed by Rufinus and Quodvultdeus, as well as parallels with other testimonies, this paper discusses and reframes these lenses.

Keywords: Late Antiquity; religious violence; Serapeum; temple destruction; Quodvultdeus.

Introduction

In March 2001, the Taliban government decided to destroy the already famous Buddha statues in the Bamiyan valley. The statues had been created in antiquity on a commercial highway and Buddhist pilgrimage route and had survived, with difficulty, until the modern era (Baker & Allchin, 1991). They were the focus of famous intellectuals and travelers, including Goethe and Lord Byron, as well as Empress Michiko of Japan (Morgan, 2012, p. 151). It appears this irritated the Taliban, who were not keen that their country be famous for some pre-Islamic stones. The destruction was not easy. The tallest statue was over 50 meters tall, carved into the mountain some 1500 years ago. First, the statues were targeted with artillery. Antitank mines were placed at their feet. Finally, men were lowered down from the top of the mountain to place explosives in rock crevasses.

The Taliban themselves did offer two different reasons for their acts. Mullah Omar, who was overseeing the destruction, was quoted as saying, *in excidione statuarum*, "What are you complaining about? We are only waging war on stones" (Ditmars, 2021). Later, in exile, he changed his story. He claimed he had been unwilling to do it, but it was the insistence of foreigners to preserve their *idols* instead of helping the poor and hungry (Afghanistan was under international sanctions at the time) that forced him into it (Frei, 2005). This answer appears to be a post-factum justification in response to severe international criticism. The considerable effort involved in dragging heavy equipment

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and large amounts of explosives over mountain passes in late winter seems to suggest that more was at stake. It was the Buddhas' fame that moved the tanks and heavy trucks. The Bamiyan Buddhas were the last idols whose removal would proclaim a new, pure Islamic Afghanistan.

The destruction of the Buddhas horrified the world at large because the wanton destruction of works of art or vestiges of antiquity, which we see as 'cultural heritage,' is generally seen as barbarism (Nabi, 2022). The spoliation of the Bamiyan complex, which involved removing mural paintings and other fragments to be sold on the world market, in contrast, did not. Unscrupulous art looting is more acceptable to the Western mind than religious fanaticism, particularly because we had our period in history when statues and temples were destroyed in the name of religion.

Compared to any similar ancient case, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas offers many answers. We know it was a symbolic gesture that required much preparation. The decision was taken by central authorities who hoped the destruction would send a clear message to the country and the world. The message was both religious and political in nature. We also know that most of the world and perhaps the silent majority in Afghanistan were opposed to it.

The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas revived a long-standing intellectual dispute about religious violence in Late Antiquity. How widespread was the Christian-motivated destruction of pagan temples and Greco-Roman statues? Was this destruction symbolic, as was that of the Bamiyan statues, or was it part of a broader campaign of coercion designed to tear down the religious fabric of the Roman Empire?

The present paper discusses some of the prominent examples of religious violence in Late Antiquity, particularly the testimonies of Rufinus, a Church historian, regarding the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria, and those of Quodvultdeus, the bishop of Carthage, concerning the destruction of the sanctuary of Caelestis in Carthage. The paper argues that Rufinus's narrative is influenced more by Old Testament passages than by Late Antique events and that the evidence for religious destruction presented by Quodvultdeus in his book, *Liber de Promissionibus*, is inspired not so much by eyewitness testimony as by literary comparanda. The Carthaginian bishop has in mind both Old Testament prophecies and Rufinus' narrative of the destruction of the Serapeum, which had become popular. The paper argues that the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria was a pivotal event that significantly influenced Quodvultdeus' discourse.

Religious violence in Late Antiquity

The question of religious violence in Late Antiquity is highly debated (Schusser, 2023). Just as in our world today, Late Antiquity saw various interpretations of what constituted religion. The question of Christian intolerance is at the core of our understanding not only of Late Antiquity but also of religion, fundamentalism, and fanaticism. We are very aware that in our society, as in Late Antiquity or as in Afghanistan, one could find people who would perpetrate violence in the name of religion. David Hume (1757/1993) argued that monotheism is, by nature, more intolerant than polytheism. Monotheism thus leads to fanaticism, while polytheism leads to tolerance.

How much of this violence was religious? Did a violent, militant Christianity destroy paganism? We possess some examples of the violent destruction of pagan statues and temples, especially in Christian sources. These have a triumphant tone and proclaim that violence is justified in the name of the true religion, i.e., Christianity. Some have argued that paganism was indeed eradicated by violence and coercion (Casseau, 2001, 2014; Nixey, 2017). Yet many refute this idea (Anghel, 2011; Drake, 2016, pp. 263-342). Some, inspired by the ideas of David Hume, took a broader view that monotheistic religions

were by definition intolerant, unlike polytheistic ones, and thus were, by nature, bound to violence (MacMullen, 1998).

Christian prophecy and paganism

All Christian writers from Late Antiquity value prophecy. They believed that the Old Testament spoke directly to them and that Scripture foretold the triumph of Christianity. When commenting on the 96th Psalm, Cassiodorus (1990, vol. 2, pp. 265–266) states that the author is speaking directly to the Christians of the 5th century. “With the advent of the Lord prophesied, he rebukes the worshippers of idols, who, after so great a manifestation was declared, are not ashamed to still worship some foolish things.”¹

In the Old Testament, statues are always seen as religious objects². Statues are powerless objects made of human hands (Psalm 115: 4-8). They are idols (Psalm 135:15-18). Statues are demons (Deuteronomy 32:16-17). Christian audiences viewed pagan statues not only as idols but also as the dwelling places of demons (Jones, 2014, pp. 3-7). The various versions of the Old Testament, such as the Septuagint (henceforth LXX) and the Vulgate (henceforth Vulg.), used the terms “statue,” “icon,” “idol,” or “demon” interchangeably in Late Antiquity. They are also referred to as sculpted or cast objects made by human hands, and so without power. In the 96th Psalm (96:5), the LXX refers to demons (*daimonia*), while the Vulgate mentions statues (*sculptilia*). In Isaiah, the LXX uses “*cheiropoieta*” (things made by human hands), whereas the Vulgate employs “*simulacra*” (Isaiah 19:1). Similarly, Isaiah (2:20-22) describes gods as gold or silver statues, referring to “abominations” (*bdelugmata*) and “idols” (*idola*) in the Vulgate. In Zechariah 13.2, both the LXX and the Vulgate use the term “idol” (*idolum*, *eidolon*). Cassiodorus (1990, vol. 2, pp. 265–266), in the passage quoted above, elegantly explains:

“For an idol (*idolum*) is called that which is itself a deceit, that is, invented by the falsehood of men. An image, composed of sacred pretense (*simulacrum*, *a simulatione sacra compositum*), because they are given honor that is not theirs”.

Yet the Scriptures explained not only the real nature of statues but also their fate. The coming of the true God means the end of the old superstitions. In Isaiah (19.1), the idols of Egypt (LXX *ta cheiropoieta*, i.e., things made by human hands; Vulg *simulacra*) are said to tremble when the Lord comes³. Again, Isaiah (2:20-21) speaks of a time when the idols (LXX *bdelugmata*, i.e., abominations; Vulg. *idoli*) would flee and hide in caves (Vulg. *fissurae petrarum*) and crevasses (Vulg. *cavernae saxorum*)⁴. Their flight would be in vain. Naum (1:14) declares that the hiding places of idols (LXX *ta glupta kai choneuta* – i.e., carved and cast statues; Vulg. *sculptile et conflatile*) would become their tombs⁵.

¹ Cassiodorus Expo. Ps. For Ps. 96.5: *Aduentu Domini prophetato, idolorum cultores increpat, qui tanta manifestatione declarata, non erubescunt adhuc colere nescio quas ineptias. Idolum quippe dictum est, quod ipsum sit dolum, id est, hominum falsitate repertum. Simulacrum, a simulatione sacra compositum, quod illis detur honor alienus. Sic utraque fugienda ipsorum nominum interpretatione declarantur. Et quoniam spiritus immundi se cupiunt adorari, dum falsos sibi honores uindicant, quos eorum iniquitas non meretur accipere, uide quid sequitur adorate eum, omnes angeli eius.*

[With the advent of the Lord prophesied, he rebukes the worshippers of idols, who, after so great a manifestation was declared, are not ashamed to still worship some foolish things. For an idol is called that which is itself a deceit, that is, invented by the falsehood of men. An image, composed of sacred pretense, because they are given honor that is not theirs.

Thus both are declared to be avoided by the interpretation of their names. And since unclean spirits desire to be adored, while they claim false honors for themselves, which their iniquity does not deserve to receive, see what follows: adore him, all his angels.]

² All English bible verses used in this articles are from the New Revised Standard Version.

³ Isaiah 19.1: See, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.

⁴ Isaiah 2.20-21: ²⁰On that day people will throw away to the moles and to the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, ²¹to enter the caverns of the rocks and the clefts in the crags, from the terror of the LORD and from the glory of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth.

⁵ Naum 1.14: The LORD has commanded concerning you: Your name shall be perpetuated no longer; from the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image and the cast image. I will prepare your grave, for you are worthless.

Finally, in Zachariah (13:2), these idols (LXX *eidolon*, Vulg *idolum*) are said to disappear eventually.

The eschatology of statues was, therefore, flight, destruction, burial, and disappearance.

The destruction of the Serapeum

The fame of the Serapeum in Late Antiquity is not to be underestimated. The Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus (*Res gestae*, Book 22, chapter 16, section 12), who was generally uninterested in religious matters, claims that the splendor of the Serapeum in Alexandria was unmatched by any other, except the sanctuary of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. An anonymous traveler to Alexandria praises the temple in even more exuberant terms (Rougé, 1966, p. 34). As with the Bamiyan Buddhas, its fame would have nefarious consequences.

Of all episodes of temple destruction of Late Antiquity, that of the Serapeum in 391 CE (or perhaps 392 CE, see Hahn, 2008) is by far the best known. The numerous sources which describe it attest to its profound impact (Russel, 2007, pp. 7-10). A Late Antique Alexandrian World Chronicle, preserved in papyrus form, depicts the triumphant Christian bishop standing on top of the temple and the statue of Serapis (Figure 1). The destruction of the Serapeum symbolized, to Late Antique audiences, the triumph of true faith over idols. The 2009 movie "Agora" (Amenábar, 2009) took this event out of the pages of history books and into wider attention. The movie lends the event a symbolic meaning, as the destruction symbolizes the entire transition from paganism to Christianity. For modern audiences, it represents the victory of fundamentalism over tolerance and ignorance over knowledge. The destruction of the Serapeum has been regarded as a highly symbolic, overarching event, in short, as the Roman equivalent of the Bamiyan.



Figure 1. Theophilus triumphant over the Serapeum
Source: Bauer & Strzygowski, 1905, fig. VI verso

The most detailed and widely known source for the event is the *Ecclesiastical History* of Rufinus, written as a continuation of Eusebius' homonymous history. It is dated to the first years of the 5th century CE⁶, certainly after the invasion of Northern Italy by the Goths in 402 CE (Thelamon, 1981, 22-23). The event is also described in the *Ecclesiastical Histories* of Socrates Scholasticus, as well as those of Theodoret of Cyr and Sozomenus, all written around the middle of the 5th century CE. It also occupies an important place in the pagan *Lives of Philosophers and Sophists* of Eunapius of Sardis. This is probably written around the year 400 CE, being the earliest of our sources.

According to Rufinus, the conflict began (11.22) when Bishop Theophilus sought to enlarge a basilica donated by the state to the bishop. On the grounds "hidden grottoes (*antra latentia*) and underground grottoes (*terrae defossa*) were discovered, used by pagans, "which smacked more of lawlessness and crimes than of religious services" (*latrociniis et sceleribus apta*).

Rufinus states that the *basilica* was decrepit and unattended (*vetusta et admodum neglecta fuit*) and had been so since the emperor Constantius (reigned 337-361) donated it to the church. Temples were seen as valuable property throughout the empire (Cameron 2015, pp. 43-49). The state would often allow empty and decaying buildings (including abandoned temples) to be reused for various functions, including churches. In Constantinople, the 6th-century historian Malalas, who knows the city well, states that Theodosius turned the temple of Helios into a church, the temple of Artemis into a gaming hall, and the temple of Aphrodite into a carriage house for the praetorian prefect (Malalas, *Chronographia*, p. 267.81 Thurn / p. 345 Bonn edition). Removing cult statues and altars was often enough to eliminate their pagan character, and they could be used for other purposes. Sometimes, sacred statues dedicated to divinity and considered untouchable were stored in underground vaults or otherwise concealed. Such is the case at St. Martino ai Monti in Rome (Anghel 2015a). Rufinus describes the statues as hidden. This implies malicious intent and the continuation of prohibited pagan rituals. It also reveals a long-standing obsession with hiding things, which spans from antiquity to the present day (Anghel 2011, 2015b). Hiding is perceived as more credible than abandonment.

Describing the death of George, the Arian Patriarch of Alexandria (356-361), Socrates Scolasticus (*Hist. Ecc.* 3.2), paralleled by Sozomen (*Hist. Ecc.* 5.6-7), states that the emperor Constantius donated an ancient plot of land to the bishop. The plot of land was full of impurities (*suffetou te gemon pollou*) because pagans had previously sacrificed humans there to Mithra. The bishop discovered some grizzly cultic relics in a cellar (*adyton*) while the place was being purified.

Theophilus decided to parade his discoveries "through the midst of the Agora." This enraged the pagans who, "as though they had drunk the serpents' cup (*calix draconum*)," violently attacked Christians. In the Scriptures, the enemies of God drink the poison of serpents or from the cups of demons⁷. By weight of numbers, the Christians drove the Pagans into the Serapeum as if into a fortress (*quasi in arce*). There, the pagans forced Christians to sacrifice to idols, and when some refused, they were themselves sacrificed. They were pitched "into the caverns which a careworn antiquity had built to receive the blood of sacrifices and the other impurities of the temple" (*in speluncas praecipitantes, quas ob sacrificiorum sanguinem ceterasque impuritates delubri recipiendas vetustas curiosa construxerat*).

⁶ The Latin text of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Rufinus can be found in Mommsen's edition (Mommsen, 1908) while a good English translation with a commentary in Rufinus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 11.22, trans. Amidon, 1997. All English quotes of Rufinus in this article use Amidon's translation.

⁷ Deut. 32: 33 their wine is the poison of serpents, the cruel venom of asps. (Vulg. *fel draconum vinum eorum et venenum aspidum insanabile*) 1 Corinthians 10:21: ²¹You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. (Vulg. *Non potestis calicem Domini bibere et calicem daemoniorum*).

Rufinus thus connects these underground chambers with those discovered by Theophilus. By the 4th century, blood sacrifice had become very rare in the Roman empire (Rives, 2024, pp. 291-332), but it was a recurring image in Christian writings who were particularly abhorred by it, as in Rufinus' description who speaks of the blood of citizens wickedly spilled before the altars (*tanto scelere ante aras sanquis civium funderetur*). The impurities flowing down in the underground chambers parallel those mentioned by Socrates in the story of George and the Mithraeum.

The mention in both stories of Constantius' donation of the underground chambers in which impurities flowed indicates that both Rufinus' and Socrates' Ecclesiastical Histories drew from the same source but conflated it with different events. Both Rufinus and Socrates used Greek sources for their Histories, Which may have been the same one, but these are now lost (Rufinus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 11.22, trans. Amidon, 1997, pp. xiv-xix; Thelamon 1981, pp. 13-21). In our view, it is more likely that Rufinus is the one who wrongly conflated the discovery of the Mithraeum with events of 391, not only because he was notoriously careless with matters of chronology (Rufinus, trans. Amidon, 1997 passim and p. 103, n. 38 for the destruction of the Serapeum), but also because this addition serves his arguments. The same human sacrifices which had some time ago been perpetrated in the underground Mithraeum were also performed on Christians in the Serapeum. They also vividly fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah (2:21), which states that the idols would "enter the caverns of the rocks and the clefts in the crags."

Socrates, who states that he confronted two eyewitnesses (*Hist. Ecc.* 5.16), believes that the seizure of the Serapeum by Theophilus triggered the riot and that there was no siege. This version, less favorable to Theophilus, who is called an "instigator," makes many of Rufinus' hagiographical elements superfluous.

According to Rufinus, the siege lasted for some time while the matter was referred to the emperor. Local authorities corresponded with the Pagan leader and philosopher Olympius (Damascius, *Vitae Isidori Reliquiae*, ed. Zintzen, 1967, fr. 91, 93-94, 97), who, according to Rufinus, defended human sacrifices and further antagonized the Christians. A very different Olympius is presented in Damascius' Life of Isidore (Damascius, *Vitae Isidori Reliquiae*, ed. Zintzen, 1967). There, the philosopher is not a warmonger but a careful and successful orator and a frugal, modest man.

When the emperor's answer arrived in Alexandria and was read out loud, Rufinus states that the fear in the hearts of the pagans was so great that without waiting for the text to be read out, they "sought to hide somewhere, to find alleys through which to flee"⁸. The text of Socrates, for a change, presents a similar image of fear, running away, and hiding. Both passages echo the words of Isaiah: they "enter the caverns of the rocks and the clefts in the crags, from the terror of the Lord and from the glory of his majesty" (Socrates Scholasticus, *Hist. Ecc.*, 3:20-21).

Abandoned by pagans, the Serapeum was systematically destroyed. Eunapius (*Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*, 6.11, frg. 472-473, trans. Wright, 1921) states that only the foundations were left in place as they couldn't be moved. This is confirmed by the archaeological remains (see McKenzie, Gibson, & Reyes, 2004). The destruction began with a large statue, possibly the cult statue of the god, which was depicted on coins or in the 6th-century chronicle mentioned elsewhere (above, Figure 1). The Ecclesiastical histories introduce yet another anecdote. Pagan curses or premonitions had propagated the idea that cosmic cataclysms would occur if the statue were destroyed. It took a brave Christian to strike the first blow. According to Socrates' account (Ecclesiastical Histories, 5.17), a mischief of mice that inhabited the statue ran in all directions, providing another direct reference to the bats mentioned in Isaiah 2:21.

⁸ Rufinus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 11.22, trans. Amidon, 1997: "...stupor ac pavor gentilium populos invadit, latebras unusquisque quaerere, angustos fugae calles rimari aut nostris se latenter immergere..."

In Socrates' account, as we have said, the riot began when Theophilus paraded the relics of the Mithraeum (the one, in his account, discovered by bishop George) and the seizure (*kataluein*) of the Serapeum. Pagan sources, i.e., Zosimus (*New Hist.*, 2.23.3) and, above all, Eunapius, also claim that Theophilus was the instigator. Eunapius (*Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*, 6.11.3, frg. 472, trans. Wright, 1921) emphasizes not the role of the emperor but that of the local authorities, Romanus and Evagrius, and that the whole episode started from nothing.

These sources are perhaps just as biased (on the Pagan side) as Rufinus and Socrates; yet we have strong evidence that Alexandrian bishops had long desired to destroy the Serapeum. First, there was bishop George, the one who discovered the Mithraeum, who also seized the Serapeum in 360, thus starting a riot and getting killed by it (*Hist. Ecc.* 3.20). The reign of Julian the Apostate postponed the destruction of the Serapeum by three decades. Two other sources, written before the destruction, attest to the bishops' desire to destroy the temple. Both Libanius (*Oratio*, 30.8–10; Libanios, ed. And trans. Nesselrath 2011, pp. 46–49) and Ammianus Marcellinus (22.11.6) were moderates, generally desirous of tolerance and harmony and uninterested in religious matters.

For the bishops, the destruction of the Serapeum was both symbolic and a political gesture, just as the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was for the Taliban. According to this line of interpretation, all sources share similar elements: a parade of pagan artifacts intended to ridicule them; collusion between the bishop and local authorities; and the destruction of the temple. According to Rufinus, these, however, take a secondary stage to sacrilegious pagan sacrifices and, above all, to the fulfillment of prophecy.

Quodvultdeus and the imitation of Theophilus

The preceding discussion of the destruction of the Serapeum has not been intended to be comprehensive. For instance, Hahn (2008) discusses certain legislative aspects of the affair. The German scholar discusses the importance of attributing the destruction of the Serapeum to Imperial legislation. A critical view of the same legislation about temples is presented in Cameron (2015, pp. 62–63). It is intended solely to highlight theological points and rhetorical emphases in Rufinus' text, as fuller discussions can be found elsewhere. My main argument concerns the impact of Rufinus' text in the Latin West of the Empire, in particular in the work of Quodvultdeus.



Figure 2. Quodvultdeus
Source: Photo by the
author from the
catacombs of San Gennaro
in Naples

Quodvultdeus was born somewhere in North Africa around the turn of the 5th century CE and probably lived until his fifties. A bishop of extraordinary erudition, he was a disciple

and close collaborator of Augustine of Hippo. Far from the image of a Late Antique monk-bishop, he is depicted (Figure 2) as beardless yet confident, wearing gold earrings and holding the Scriptures.

Quodvultdeus' *Book of Promises and Predictions of God* (*Liber de promissionibus et praedictionibus Dei, from here on LdPP*) is a systematic treatise of all the prophecies fulfilled through the coming of Christ and the triumph of the church (Quodvultdeus, ed. Braun, 1964). It consists of prophecies, quoted and explained, and historical testimonia of their fulfillment. Since the book was written in the middle of the 5th century CE (perhaps between 450 and 456 – Quodvultdeus, ed. Braun 1964, pp. 15-18), paganism was no longer a key topic, but it was nevertheless present. The Carthaginian bishop presents the prophecies (Deut. 7:15, 12:3; Isaiah 19:1; Jeremiah 10:11; Zechariah 13:2; Ps. 95:5). To these, he adds a passage from the Gospel of Luke. 11: 17-20: "for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul" and from the Sybilline oracles, the pseudo-pagan texts written in a Jewish milieu.

Quodvultdeus then passes on to the fulfillment of these prophecies. The Christian emperor Theodosius, in his view, closed the temples in Africa through the efforts of the missionaries Comites Iovius and Gaudentius. He immediately continues by speaking of Symmachus' debate over the altar of Victory in the Roman Senate. As Symmachus is the one who mentions the mission of Iovius and Gaudentius (cf. P.W. IX.2. p. 2016), he probably constitutes Quodvultdeus' source on the episode.

He then quotes a law of Honorius stating that all temples and their dependencies should pass to the church (*ecclesiis contulit*) so that their idols would be broken up. The laws of Honorius, especially those concerning Africa (*Codex Theodosianus*, 16.10.20 – ed. Pharr, 1952, pp. 474-475) state that pagan places of worship should become public property (*ad usum publicum*) and that altars and cult images should be destroyed. Perhaps the most striking change of the law is that the temples, in the bishop's words, should become not public but church property.

After this theological and legal discussion, Quodvultdeus proceeds to examples of fulfillment. He first speaks of the temple of Serapis in Alexandria, where a metal quadriga (*quadriga ferrea*) was suspended in the air, held in place by a magnet. In detail, Rufinus describes a statue of Sol (*simulacrum Solis*) suspended by a magnet inside the Serapeum⁹. Sol, in classical mythology, did travel in a quadriga, so Quodvultdeus is relating the history of Rufinus. But the Old Testament also connects statues of pagan gods with quadrigas (and destruction) in Micah 5:10-13:

- 10** "On that day, says the Lord,
I will cut off your horses from among you
and will destroy your chariots; (Vulg *quadriga*)
¹¹ and I will cut off the cities of your land
and destroy all your strongholds;
¹² and I will cut off sorceries from your hand, (Vulg *maleficia*)
and you shall have no more soothsayers; (Vulg *divinationes*)
¹³ and I will cut off your images (Vulg *sculptilia*)
and your pillars from among you, (Vulg *statuae*)"

Of the entire story of the destruction of the Serapeum Quodvultdeus quotes only the destruction of the metal quadriga, but it is an episode revealing of his sources: the Old Testament and Rufinus' destruction of the Serapeum.

Next, Quodvultdeus presents a similar, albeit more spectacular case. Near Rome, a dragon (*draco*) in a cave, to which one had to descend a certain number of steps,

⁹ *LdPP* 3.43: Magnets, it is said, have the power to pull and draw iron to themselves. The image of the sun had been made by its artisan of the finest sort of iron with this in view.

demanded consecrated virgins but was destroyed by a monk who was a client of Stilicho around the year 400 CE. The *Liber pontificalis* speaks of *draco immanissimus* to which one also had to descend a certain number of steps. For Quodvultdeus, the *draco mirae magnitudinis* was a mechanical wonder (*mechanica arte formatus*) holding a sword with which he spilled the blood of the victims¹⁰. This particular legendary anecdote is also attested in the Life of St. Silvester, which Duchesne dates to the middle of the 5th century CE, making it a contemporary of Quodvultdeus.

The story of the slaying of the dragon, known today mostly as St. George, had various versions in Late Antiquity and was connected to many saints in Rome or elsewhere (Graf, 1923, pp. 441-444). The story contains all the elements we have encountered so far in the Old Testament or the Serapeum, including demons living in statues, idols, hidden human sacrifice, and their blood of victims collected in underground caves.

The third example concerns the temple of Caelestis in Carthage, so topographically very close to the bishop:

“[The temple] had been closed for a very long time, and when the Christians wanted to turn it to the service of the true religion [they found it] invaded because of the abandonment by a thorny hedgerow; but the Pagans cried out that inside there were dragons and serpents (*dracones aspidesque*) meant to protect the temple” (LdPP III, 44).

Quodvultdeus presents veridical details about the temple, including the dedicatory inscription, *AURELIUS PONTIFEX DEDICAVIT*, which agrees with the archaeological and numismatic data for the temple (Duval, 1966, 1967; Hurst, 1979). In the end, the dragons and serpents were unable to protect the temple, which was subsequently demolished and converted into a cemetery.

This is Quodvultdeus' central piece, as he claims to have witnessed it himself. The Carthaginian bishop presents the destruction of the temple of Caelestis as a counterpoint to Rufinus' Serapeum story. In both stories, the bishop leads a struggle to convert the main temple into a church. The Christian community rallies behind the bishop while the pagans oppose him. Both include a description of the marvelous structures of the Caelestis sanctuary (LdPP 3.44.1-9; Ruf. XI.23). In both stories, the pagans spread rumors that the destruction of the structures would lead to cataclysms, and in both stories this is proven false (LdPP 3.44.10-15; Ruf. XI.22). In both stories the destruction leads to the discovery of hidden signs that predicted the destruction. In Carthage, it was in inscription *AURELIUS PONTIFEX DEDICAVIT*, which, according to Quodvultdeus, predicted the dedication of the church by bishop Aurelius, while in Alexandria, it was the hieroglyph of ankh, interpreted as a sign of the cross *ante litteram*.

Perhaps the most crucial element in both stories is the motif of the tomb. Rufinus states that “For on the site of Serapis's tomb the unholy sanctuaries were leveled, and on the one side there rose a martyr's shrine, on the other a church.” He doesn't mean a literal tomb but a symbolic one. Quodvultdeus also states that the destruction of the sanctuary transformed it “as it was” into a tomb (*in sepulturam scilicet mortuorum*). The term “scilicet” indicates that he is referring to a symbolic tomb, not a real one, as the sanctuary of Caelestis was located in the center of the city. Most commentators, except for René Braun, have argued that Quodvultdeus is referring to a real cemetery (LdPP vol. II, 576, n. 2). They both mean that the temples have become tombs for the idols, just as the Old Testament had predicted. A few paragraphs later, Quodvultdeus quotes a prophecy from the Latin version of the *Perfect Discourse* of Hermes Trismegistes: “Then this land so sacred, home to sanctuaries and temples, will be covered by dead bodies and cadavers” (LdPP 3.45.6-7). This passage was a Christian interpolation in a treaty that

¹⁰ Quodvultdeus III, 43: *sanguinem fungeret innocentem*, a reference to Psalm 105, 38: *effunderunt sanguinem innocentem*.

predated the 4th century. Augustine also quoted it¹¹, and it seems to have been based on an identical prophecy of Nahum 1:14: “The LORD has commanded concerning you: Your name shall be perpetuated no longer; from the house of your gods, I will cut off the carved image and the cast image. I will prepare your grave, for you are worthless” (Vulg. *de domo Dei tui interficiam sculptile et conflatile ponam sepulcrum tuum*).

Quodvultdeus sees the story of the fight between Caelestis and Christ through the paradigm of the fight between Serapis and Christ. The bishop of Carthage described the transformation through the lens of Rufinus’ destruction of the Serapeum. Yet, volens, nolens, he allows us to see that the story is quite different. Late Antique realities of Carthage can be seen through the cracks of theological interpretation, thanks no doubt to the scruples of the bishop and his erudition (unparalleled in other authors). The sanctuary had been abandoned and overrun with rebellious shrubbery. The former bishop, Aurelius, now defunct, had already established his bishop seat (*cathedra*) there and had conducted Easter services. For some time before the destruction of the former temple, now a ruin, it had been used as a church. This episode took place many years before the destruction of the temple, an act led by the tribune Ursus under the auspices of the Augusti Constantius and Placidia.

The last example Quodvultdeus offers is that of ancient caverns and grottos (*spelae et cavernae*) full of idols in the province of Abaritana. The episode, which appears to have occurred some time ago, may be related to his childhood. These idols, which had been hidden, were taken out from time to time, so the entire city was committed to sacrilegious perjury (*in sacrilegio periurii ciuitas tenetur*). These words are reminiscent of Jeremiah 7:9-10:

“⁹ Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely (Vulg. *adulterare iurare*), make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known
¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are safe!”— only to go on doing all these abominations?.”

The hidden statues of Aribatana serve to complete the parallel between Quodvultdeus and Rufinus. Yet, in Rufinus’ account, the hidden statues are the origin of the destruction of the Serapeum, whereas for Quodvultdeus, this episode is no more than an afterthought, presented without connections and, above all, without details. These statues were “hidden,” but it was a secret known by the entire city.

The fulfillment of prophecy through the violent overthrow of pagan idols, their exodus into caves, and eventual destruction —the key theme of Quodvultdeus’ account—is not supported by evidence. The stories he presents are quite unconvincing. The underground dragon in Rome was a story that circulated widely, but, like many such stories, it was vague by nature. The episode in Carthage did not involve statues but ruins, and the one in Aribatana did not involve any destruction at all. Yet, for Quodvultdeus, the interpretation is not in doubt.

Conclusions

Quodvultdeus’ account is important for two reasons. First, for the Carthaginian bishop, the importance of Old Testament prophecies cannot be overstated. Theological interpretations play a more critical role than Late Antique events. It is only thanks to the literary scruples of Quodvultdeus that we have the details that allow us to see Late Antique events through the cracks of scriptural interpretations. Rufinus, as we have seen in the episode of the hidden Mithraeum, did not have such scruples. Second, the

¹¹ Augustin, CD, xviii, 31, where after quoting the passage from Naum, Augustine comments: “*per euangelium exterminate sculptilia et conflatilia, id est idola deorum falsorum et obliuioni tanquam sepulturae tradita iam videmus*”. Note that while the Asclepius speaks of the land being filled with tombs and dead bodies (*sepulcrorum erit mortuorumque plenissima*, Ascl. 24), Quodvultdeus quotes dead bodies and cadavers (*mortuorum cadauerumque plenissima* (III.45)).

destruction of pagan idols, their burial, and oblivion were to Late Antique Christian audiences teleological historical events. The fight between Serapis and Christ symbolized the triumph of Christianity over Paganism. Quodvultdeus and, no doubt, countless others desired to imitate the fight between Christ and Serapis.

The Destruction of the Serapeum served as a symbolic template for Later Christian temple destruction narratives. Quodvultdeus' accounts are heavily influenced by scriptural sources as well as the example of the Serapeum, not by eyewitness testimony. His account reveals that the fulfillment of prophetic or apocalyptic creeds and the presence of demonic presences in ancient pagan temples were present in Christian minds, regardless of the realities of Late Antiquity. These prophecies legitimize Christian violence but obscure the image of Late Antique paganism. We would be wrong to believe the image of a conflict à *outrage* between Christianity and paganism, as church writers would have us believe. Quodvultdeus' detailed and erudite account betrays a more nuanced reality. The temples were often long abandoned, repurposed peacefully, or gradually incorporated into Christian use before being destroyed. These layers of history show that religious transformation in Late Antiquity was not solely driven by violence but also involved legal, cultural, and pragmatic shifts.

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