

Religion in the Maghreb During Antiquity

الدين في بلاد المغرب خلال العصور القديمة

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Abstract: *In this study the researcher dealt with the notion, linguistic and terminological definition of religion in the old Maghreb, as well as the types of religions existing at that time including paganism, namely the native ones that have passed through animism or what is called natural religion. The old Maghrebian man worshipped the mountains and water therefore, their inherent spirits. He has known the zoolatry, exercised the astronomical bodies devotion represented in worshipping the sun and the moon, he was also subject to the impact of the neighbouring Egyptian religions and was influenced by colonizers' religions, that of the Phoenicians, the Greeks, and the Romans. The revealed religions namely Christianity or what is known according to Hegel as the absolute religion which content is the absolute right, have also appeared in the old Maghreb region simultaneously with Judaism.*

Keywords: *religion; mythology; Christianity; Judaism; natural religion; zoolatry; the bishop; Maghreb; the Romans; antiquity.*

الملخص: سأتناول في هذا المقال موضوع الديانة في بلاد المغرب القديم، أستعرض في البداية التعريف اللغوي والاصطلاحي للدين، وأتطرق بعد ذلك لأنواع الديانات في بلاد المغرب القديم مثل العبادات الوثنية المحلية؛ والتي مرت بالمرحلة الإحيائية (Animism) أو ما يسمى بالدين الطبيعي؛ حيث عبد الإنسان المغاربي القديم؛ وبأماكن مختلفة الجبال والمياه، وعبد الأرواح الكامنة فيها، كما عرف عبادة الحيوانات (Zoolatry). ومارس عبادة الأجرام الفلكية المتمثلة في عبادة الشمس والقمر، كما يعالج هذا البحث أيضا التأثيرات الدينية الأجنبية في المنطقة بحكم الجوار مثل الديانة المصرية، وتأثيرات أخرى بحكم الاستعمار مثل التأثير الفينيقي في المستعمرات التي أسسها الفينيقيون، وكذلك التأثير الإغريقي والروماني. وقد ظهرت ببلاد المغرب القديم الديانات السماوية كالديانة اليهودية، وعرفت المنطقة أيضا الديانة المسيحية أو ما يعرف حسب فريدريك هيغل بالديانة المطلقة، ومضمونها هو الحق المطلق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدين؛ الميثولوجيا؛ المسيحية؛ اليهودية؛ الدين الطبيعي؛ عبادة الحيوانات؛ الأسقف؛ المغرب؛ الرومان؛ العصور القديمة.

Introduction: Though studying the history of religions is considered as being exhausting, it is therefore important since it informs us about the development of the different religious beliefs. Aristote Talis said that man was a religious animal simply because religion is an engine of civilization. On the other hand, studying the history of religions helps to know more about the development of civilized thoughts because people have built civilization under the banner of religion and beliefs.

Compared to other ancient religions in general and the Mediterranean in particular, the mystery surrounding the religious beliefs that prevailed in the countries of the ancient Maghreb makes us wonder whether the ancient Maghreb had a mythology such as the Egyptians, Iraqis, Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans. Mythology, thus, requires the presence of gods, each of which has its own function, and from these functions a conflict is generated and a set of works are created to make up these myths weavings and ties. But according to some historians this did not contribute in the making up of the ancient Maghreb. Contradictorily, with this categorical denial we can refer to a prominent inscription dating back to the third century AD remains found by Tunisian archaeologists recently. Some historians believe that the religious feeling of the Berbers was strong, but their innovative endowment was limited. On the whole, they borrowed the great gods which were worshipped faithfully¹. For this, the researcher tries to answer the following research questions: Are these deities local or extraneous to the Maghrebian's belief? Did the ancient Maghreb inhabitants have a mythology compared to the other nations?

The objective of this study is thus to unveil the truth and prove that a human world without myths should not be imaginable and thereby the ancient Maghreb people were part of this worldly life.

I- Definition of Religion:

1- Linguistically: The linguistic dictionaries have dealt precisely with the notion of the concept of religion, and among these dictionaries we can cite:

1.1. Lisân al-'arab "لسان العرب" by Ibn Manzur Abul-Fadl Jamal ad-din Muhammad: Al-Dayyân (الديان) is one of the names of God, the master

1- Stéphane GSELL. Histoire ancienne de l'Afrique du nord , Hachette, Paris, T.VI. 1927, p.142.

judge, and one of the predecessors was asked about Alî ben Abî Tâlib (may God bless him). He said: he was Al-dayyân of this nation after its Prophet Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, meaning its judge and ruler, he is the effective one, who condemned the people, the accuser is the one who oppress people to obey him, and from it the poetry of Al-aasha Al-Khurassânî¹ when addressed the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah Bless Him and Grant Him Peace: “O Lord of the people and Al-dayyân of the Arabs”; and in the statement of Abî Tâlib: I want from Quraysh a word that condemn the Arabs, that is, obey them and submit to them².

1.2. al-Firuzabadi Muhammad ibn al-Yaqûb, owner of Al-Qâmûs al-Muhît “القاموس المحيط” dictionary: convicted, debt “dayn” and “dîn”.

And “Dana” is taking it, and a creditor and debtor and the debt is tightened by one or more debt, and he condemned, and he owes, he took a debt, and a debtor man: loan too much and borrow too much. Religion “Dîn”: the reward, and his religion “dîn” with “kasrah” a long /î:/ means habit, worship, and perseverance.

Religion: judgment, as the Almighty said: “The owner of the Day of judgment”. It was said that it means: The owner of the Day of reward. The prophet, peace be upon him, said that the religion of his people: that is, based on the legacy of Abraham and Ismail, peace be upon them both in their pilgrimage, their marriage, and their sales and methods, and as for monotheism, they had changed it. “Dâna” “دان” “yadînu” “يدين”: glorify and humiliate, obey and disobey, which is getting accustomed to good and evil. “Al dayân” “الديان” is one of the names of Allah, whose means is the ruler and the judge³. Thus, religion is obedience and submission.

2- Terminologically: Friedrich Hegel said⁴: “It is only man who can have a religion, and that animals lack religion as much as they lack law and morals.” That is because religiosity is an essential element in human formation and religious sense. It does not only lie in the depths of every

1- Subh al-aasha fi sinaat al-insha: A book consisting of 14 parts written by Abu Al-Abbas Al-Qalqashandi, who died in 821AH/1418.

2- Abul-Fadl Jamal ad-Din Muhammad IBN MANZUR ABUL FADL. Lisân al-'arab [The Arab Tongue], al dar al-misriyah liltalif wal tarjamah, Cairo, pp. 30-34.

3- Muhammad Ibn al-Yaqub FIRUZABADI. Al-Qâmûs al-Muhît [The Encompassing Dictionary], Dâr al-hadith, Cairo, 2008, pp. 581-582.

4- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was a German philosopher (1771-1831).



human heart, but rather it enters at the core of the human being just like reasoning¹.

The concept of religion among Muslim thinkers, especially Sufis, such as al-Junayd² and Ibn Ata Allah Al-Iskandarî³ who contend that faith is innate in the human soul which preceded the existence of the body, the latter that obscured faith and prevented its appearance, this idea was summed up in what is called the "Great Charter", according to the verse: «And when Your Lord summoned the descendants of Adam, and made them testify about themselves. "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we testify." Thus you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, "We were unaware of this"⁴.

The definitions and concepts about religions are endless, and the aforementioned are but a few examples.⁵

II- Pagan Religion:

1- Local Religions:

1.1. Animism: It is also called the natural religion, and under the deception of this religion, all religions that the soul cannot yet control over nature are included, accordingly, the acknowledged connotation of this belief in spirits with intelligence and ability which have the capacity to live permanently or temporarily in materialistic circumstances and cause the phenomena that humans witness. Since they are creatures that possess good and evil, human beings have to control with oppression or sympathy.⁶

The term Natural Religion appeared first in the eighteenth century. It turns around a belief in the existence of God and the immortality, and the absence of revelation. A natural religion does not believe in resurrection or judgment, however, its followers do not deny the existence of God. Instead, god is replaced by the human self as it is considered a biological

1- Emilio Brito. «La christologie de l' "Encyclopédie des sciences philosophiques" de Hegel». In: Laval théologique et philosophique, 37 (3), 1981, 353-365.

2AbûQâsim al-Junaydibn Muhammad al-Khazâz al-Baghdâdî (830-910 CE) was a Persian mystic and one of the most famous of the early Saints of Islam.

3Tâjj al-DînAbû al-FaḍlAḥmadibnMuḥammadibnAbd al-Karîmibn Ata Allah Al-Iskandarî al-Shâdhilî (1260-1310 CE) was an Egyptian Maliki jurist, muhaddith and the third spiritual guide of the Shadhilî Sufi order.

4Quran, Chapters-Sura: Al-'Araf [The Elevations] , the verse 172.

5François-Marie BERTRAND,. Dictionnaire universel historique et comparatif de toutes les religions du monde, publié par M. l'Abbé Migne, Paris, 1848, T. I, p.129.

6Gsell (S). HAA.N., Hachette, Paris,T. I. 1913. p. 243.

and cultural continuity of the human being¹. The gods Makurtam, Iunam, Macurgum, Matilam, Bonchor, Vihinam, and Varsissima as represented in figure 1.

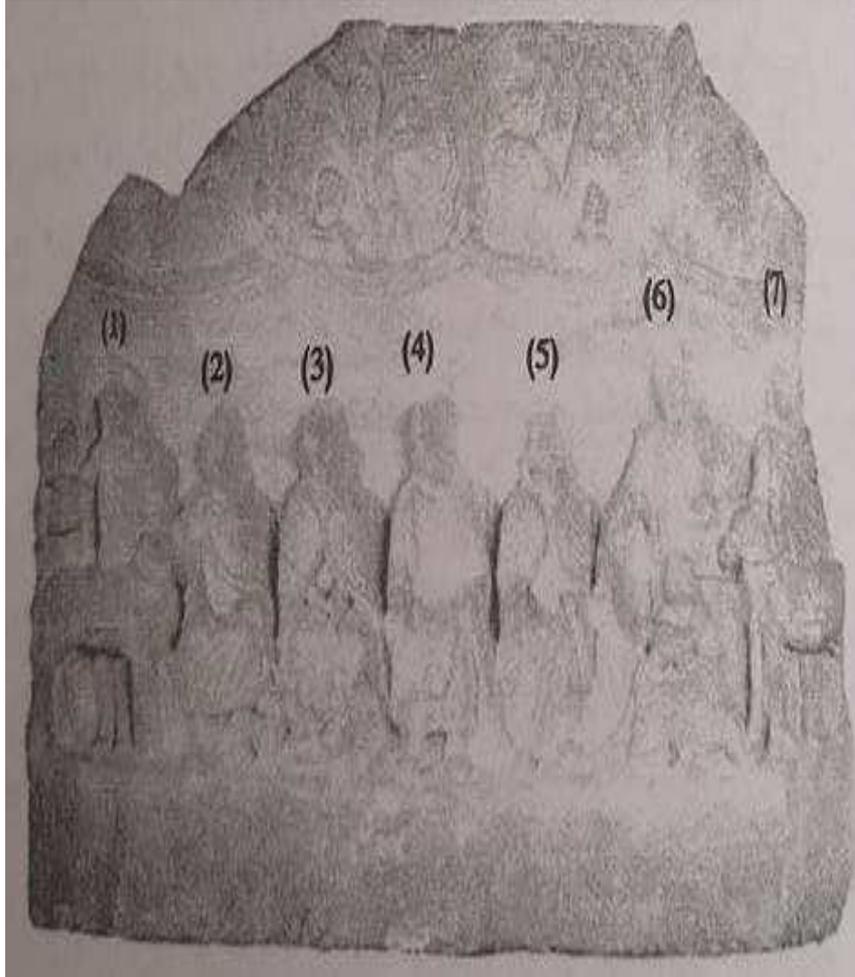


Fig. 1: Local Deities

"The picture represents an inscription that was founded in Tunisia depicting seven gods sitting on their thrones proving that the ancient Maghreb people had their own deities. It also shows a horse and a ram²".

¹Colas DUFLO. « De la religion naturelle à la religion de la nature ». In: *Dix-huitième Siècle*, n°33, 2001. L'Atlantique, sous la direction de Marcel Dorigny . pp. 517-527 ;

Jules SIMON. *La religion naturelle*, (2e édition), Domaine public, Paris, 1856, 468p.

²- Gabriel Camps. **Les Berbères: mémoire et identité**, Ed. Errance, Paris, 1987, p. 167.

According to documents dating back to the Roman era, it was founded that the ancient Maghrebeans worshipped in various places the mountains and waters, especially, the souls lurking in them. He also knew animal worship (Zoolatry). At the beginning of the fifth century AD, Saint Augustine attributed to the Egyptians alone the worship of animals, while his homeland was known for this belief in animals. One of the tribes of Tripoli used to worship Gurzil, who is a descendent of Lord Amun, and one of the cows. He used to recite a bull sent to the enemies at the beginning of the battle.¹ According to Gsell, the poetic verses of Flavius Corippus Africanus support several ancient archaeological documents attesting to the existence of sacred animals in Africa.

There is a text by the historian Diodorus Siculus², narrates the campaign of Agathocles that took place at the end of the fourth century B.C. He spoke about a land inhabited by many monkeys and in which there are three cities named after these animals known as Pithèkous which means monkey in the Greek language, and the monkeys lived inside the homes of people and were considered gods, as they were enjoying, according to their will, the people's food, and the parents preferred to give their children names derived from the names of the monkeys, and the ultimate disbelief in this country is killing the monkey and whoever did so was beheaded.

The monkeys constitute the large animal wealth in the countries of the coastal regions, especially in the Atlas Mountains. The Libyans had also worshipped the sun and the moon, according to Herodotus who contends that the Libyans were affording offerings to the sun and the moon. Macro says that the Libyans represented Ammon with horns of ram. They see it as the sunset. Stephane Gsell confirms Macro's speech for he used to find sun worshipped everywhere, and this statement is reinforced by many other testimonies³.

1.2. Spiritual, Individual Religion: At this stage God becomes not a substance but a subject or a soul. Here the personal God appears as an essential belief, God is precisely the spirit. For this, the Maghrebians worshipped kings like Yuba the First and his ancestors were kings, but it cannot be confirmed if they were worshipped in their lives. Yuba II built

1- Marguerite-Marie THIOLLIER. Dictionnaire des religions. Le Sycomore - L'Asiathèque, Paris, 1980, p. 309 ; Gsell (s), op.cit. T.I. pp. 243-244.

2- Diodorus Siculus was an ancient Greek historian (90-30 B.C.).

3- Quintus Naevius Cordus Sutorius Macro (21BC- 38AD) was a prefect of the Praetorian Guard, from 31 to 38 during the period of the Roman Emperors Tiberius and Caligula.

a temple for the God of Augustus the responsible for his grace, just like the Romans who worshipped their emperors starting with Augustus who transmitted this religion from the Egyptians to the Pharaohs.

2. Foreign Influences:

2.1. The Egyptian Influence: There is no justification that the Libyans before being influenced by the Egyptians had worshipped a god ram, and they had called it Amun. Hence, the paintings of the southern Wahrani represent Amun Raa of Taibeh and that it has reached the region after moving among the tribes existing there for there is no clear evidence that the ancient Maghrebians had a direct relation with Egypt. As for worshipping Isis (fig. 2), it appears that it did not enter Mauritania until the reign of Yuba II due to his wife Cleopatra Cellini.¹

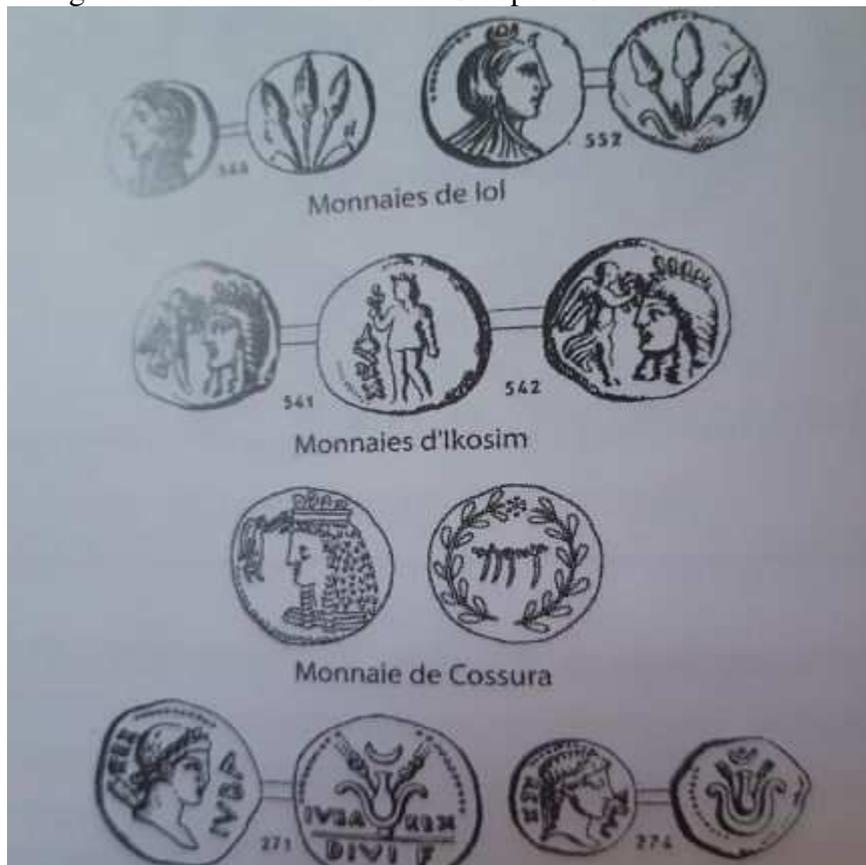


Fig. 2: Isis Egyptian Goddess

1- Gsell (s), op.cit, T.I, pp. 250-253.

"The image shows the goddess Isis appeared in the Numidian coin represented by a snake symbol upon the crown¹".

2.2. The Phoenician Influence: The great Phoenician deity was not only goddess of Carthage, but the control of its protection spread to all the regions that Carthage reigned to become a Roman state. Money has been found there minted by Mitlos Scipion, who was the general leader of the Pompey Party, in the middle of the first century. It carries an epigraphic deity with a lion's head, which is Ishtar or Tannetbniebal (fig. 3); and beside this ichnography is written on it three letters: GTA which has been read in the sense of G (enius) T (errae) A (frcae), meaning the African Earth Prisoner.²



Fig. 3: Goddess Tanit

1-Jean MAZARD, *Corpus Nummorum Numidiae Mauretaniaque*, Paris, 1955, 326.

2- Gsell (s), op.cit, T.I, p.250/Paul-Albert FEVRIER, «Aux origines du christianisme en Maurétanie césarienne ». In: *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité*, T. 98, n°2, 1986, p. 797.



"This inscription represents the Phoenician Goddess Tanit responsible of growth and fertility¹".

2.3. The Greek Influence: the Libyans who lived around Lake Tritinus had worshipped Greek gods and carries for them sacrifices such as Athens, Triton and Poseidon in the fourth century B.C. It was stated in Scylax's journey that there was a structure of Athena Tretinus.²

2.4. The Roman Influence: The Roman authorities did not impose its official religion in all its states, and the Roman beliefs did not spread throughout the empire except for the general acceptance of many religions by pagans. So the cult of Rome spread (Dea Roma) and the official Divine Trinity (Jupiter), the Great Lord and his wife, Juno, the goddess of childbirth and fertility, and Minerva (fig. 4), the goddess of wisdom and reason, who was worshipped in Capitolium . Most of the rich and powerful had worshipped the Roman gods in many states for they were keen on imitating and belonging to the Romans. They offered sacrifices to deities such as Nèptunus-Poseidon, the Lord of the Sea ... as well as the cult of abstract symbolic deities such as the goddess of harmony (Concorda), peace (Pax), and fortune (Fortuna), which are symbols of the desire for power, affection, harmony, and peace.³



Fig. 4⁴: Goddess Minerva

"The picture shows Minerva the Goddess of reason, wisdom, and art just like the Phoenician goddess Athena."

1- Jean-Marie BLAS DE ROBLES. *Libye : grecque, romaine et byzantine*, Edisud, Aix en Provence, 1999, p. 59.

2 Scylax of Caryanda was a Greek explorer and writer of the late 6th and early 5th centuries BCE; Ibid, pp. 254-256

3- Elisabeth Smadja. «L'empereur et les dieux en Afrique romaine ». In: Dialogues d'histoire ancienne, 1985, vol. 11, p. 550.

4- Sophie Saint-Amans et Meriem Sebai. «Genius en Afrique romaine : dossier iconographiques et épigraphiques. Nouvelles observations sur la représentation et la définition d'une divinité romaine.». In : Iconographie et religions dans le Maghreb antique et médiéval, Institut supérieur des métiers du patrimoine, Tunis, 2010, p. 179.

III- Monotheistic Religion:

1- Judaism: The existence of Judaism in the ancient Maghreb is a hot debatable topic. Some researchers spoke about the evident impact of Judaism on the African Christian beliefs for the Arab Muslims found the Jews in the region when they came. Their existence, according to these studies, dates back to the first century AD, after the war against the Roman Empire between 66-70 AD, as the Zélotés Jews “Qaná'im” who first migrated to the city of Cyrène, adjacent to the Shehat region in the northeast of Libya.¹

After that, they spread on the western side and in the desert. Half a century later, during the reign of Emperor Trajan (98-117 AD), a bloody conflict arose between the newcomers and the city's residents. However, during the reign of Emperors Hadrian (117-138 AD), Septimius Severus (193-211AD), Lucius Septimius Bassianus Caracalla (198-217AD), Antoninus Elagabalus (218-222AD) and Severus Alexander (222-235AD), the status of the Jews greatly improved and the tolerance spread.²

Whether the history of the arrival of the Jews in North Africa dates back to the first century AD or it was with the advent of the Phoenicians in the middle of the eighth century BC, their number in the region was small, and the effect of their movement on the ground apparently was weak or non-existent, as it appears from some archaeological studies when compared to the Phoenicians and the Romans³.

2- Christianity (Christos): What is known according to the Hegel of absolute religion and its content is absolute truth. The Christian call reached the state of Africa before other western Roman states, and its emergence is attributed to Carthage, since the middle of the second century due to its strong relation with Rome, the center of the preaching in the West and the intense connection with the East -the cradle of Christianity.

African Christianity was distinguished from that in Western Rome by its Latin language. Thus, A Christian literature emerged in the Latin language, and it has afforded to the western world the most wonderful pieces of what its thinkers such as Tertullianus and Cyprianus has

1- Marcel Simon. «Le Judaïsme berbère dans l'Afrique ancienne» (fin). In: Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses, 26e année, n°2, 1946. pp. 121-123

2- Ibid, pp. 124-127.

3- Meriem Sebai. «La construction d'un mythe contemporain: les temples «sémitiques» d'Afrique romaine ». In : Anabases, N°. 11 (2010), pp. 165-179

produced¹. Later on, in the fourth century AD, Augustinus, whose brilliance enlighten the darkness of the Christian West, throughout the Middle Ages².

Tertrillianus is proud of asserting that the number of Christians became steadily increasing, and in many cities they elected a bishop (episcopus) who looked after their affairs. The number of concilium bishops that was in Carthage had reached seventy in 216 AD, and in 256 AD the bishops of Carthage was not less ninety, on behalf of the churches of their cities, to attend the council founded by the famous Bishop Cyprianus of Carthage.³

Conclusion: The ancient Maghrebian people were open not only to their local religion, but they experienced also the religions of other nations. This is primarily due to the fact that the pagan belief system mixed with the foreign religions that were introduced into the countries of the Maghreb because of its privileged geographical location. The eastern influence came from Egypt and Phoenicia, while the Western influence reached the region from the Greeks and the Romans. The ancient Maghreb was also a place for the Jewish religion whose followers spread in the region mainly during the Roman era. This was also the case for Christianity which witnessed a distinctive development to the extent that the region had its own doctrine- the Donatism- which fought against the Roman presence in the region; therefore, rejecting the religious dependency on Rome so as to prove their Christian privacy.⁴

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1- Tertullian (Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus; c. 155 – c. 240? AD) was a apologist and theologian Christian author from Carthage in the Roman province of Africa, he became a priest. René Braun. «Aux origines de la Chrétienté d'Afrique : un homme de combat, Tertullien ». In: Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé, n°2, Juin 1965. pp. 189-208.

2- Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis; 354 – 430 AD), known as Saint Augustine, was a theologian, philosopher, and the bishop of Hippo Regius in Numidia, Roman North Africa.

Pierre Sarr. «Administration et discipline ecclésiales dans l'Afrique chrétienne d'après quelques lettres de saint Augustin ». In: Dialogues d'histoire ancienne, vol. 32, n°1, 2006. pp. 83-100.

3- Cyprian (Thaschus Cæcilius Cyprianus; c. 200 – September 14, 258 AD) was bishop of Carthage and a notable Early Christian author of Maghreb descent. He was recognised as a saint in the Christian churches.

4- Marcel Simon. «Un document du syncrétisme religieux dans l'Afrique romaine ». In: Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 122^e année, N. 2, 197, p. 507.

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