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## Divine Truth, Presence, and Power: The Christian Book in Fourth-Century Roman North Africa

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## **Divine Truth, Presence, and Power: Christian Books in Roman North Africa**

*The rhetorical significance of sacred books in the North African controversy between Caecilianists and Donatists remains underexplained. In this article I situate the act of traditio in its historical context by employing insights from the study of material texts. The Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs, the arguments of Augustine and Optatus, and even apotropaic practices reveal a social logic in which the physical book does more than transmit text. I argue that this theology of the book provides a richer account of traditio than the economic and sociological explanations in current scholarship on the North African controversy. The sacred book functions as a metonym for Christian confession, an avatar of divine presence, and a powerful agent of healing. To hand over the sacred books for destruction was thus to destroy objects which embodied divine truth, presence, and power.*

### **Introduction**

Christians in North Africa agreed. It was bad to hand over (*tradere*) the sacred books for destruction as the emperors Diocletian and Maximian had commanded.<sup>1</sup> In the centuries

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1 On the Great Persecution in North Africa (303–305 CE), cf. Speyer 1981, 76–79, 127–29 (focusing on the destruction of books); Tilley 1996; Tilley 1997; Sarefield 2007, 164–69; Decret

following the Great Persecution, the act of *traditio* served as a key point of contention in the conflict between Donatists and Caecilianists that divided the North African church. Yet modern scholars are undecided about why *traditio* was so problematic, especially when not combined with idolatrous worship of the Augustus' genius. Perhaps, some suggest, it was because handing over the books prevented the Christian community from using them; after all, Christian communal worship involved reading Scripture.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, rather, it was because books represented a significant investment of church resources.<sup>3</sup> Or again, perhaps, the problem was complicity itself, cooperation with a demonically-motivated state power.<sup>4</sup> In any case, *traditio*

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2011, 96–100; Burns and Jensen 2014, 35–42; Rohmann 2016, 27–31.

2 Tilley 1997, 53–76 (although she also notes complicity). On the reading of Scripture in Roman North Africa, cf. Burns and Jensen 2014, esp. 235–36, 247, 263–65, and cited sources. Whether this was an effective preventive measure is a separate question; as Howley notes, “[l]iterary book-burning [...] was far from the most effective means of information control available [...] and seems instead to have been an occasional emphatic addition to more bloody and direct forms of persecution and suppression” (2017, 10).

3 Edwards 1997, xi; Frend 1952 (discussed in next note).

4 Frend 1952 compares *traditores* to Nazi collaborators in the Second World War (10–11). Brown 2000, 210, similarly describes *traditio* as a “craven act” of complicity. Cf. Speyer 1981, 127. On martyrdom as conflict with demonic powers, cf. Moss 2016, 60–61. In Frend’s account, the problem of complicity merges with a socio-economic reading of the Donatist movement, which sees the conflict as one between poor and disenfranchised Africans (Donatists) and Roman elites (Caecilianists). On this model, the economic loss (acutely felt by those without

seemed obviously bad to Christians at the time,<sup>5</sup> and historians have not spilled much ink on the question since.<sup>6</sup> Instead, both ancient texts and modern scholarship have focused on the thorny problems that resulted from the act of *traditio*, especially how—if at all—*traditores* should be reintegrated into the Christian community.

I argue that attention to material texts illuminates the discursive significance of Christian sacred books in fourth- and fifth-century North Africa. Books do more than contain texts.<sup>7</sup>

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significant resources) merges with resentment about close cooperation between Christian and civic elites.

5        Canons of Arles (314 CE), no. 13: *de his qui Scripturas Sanctas tradidisse dicuntur vel vasa Dominica vel nomina fratrum suorum, placuit nobis, ut quicumque eorum ex actis publicis fuerit detectus [...] ab ordine cleri amoveatur*; “Concerning those who are said to have surrendered the Holy Scriptures or dominical vessels or the names of their brethren, we decree that whoever of them has been proved from public documents to have done these things shall be removed from the clergy [...]” (Jonkers 1954, 26, no. 13; Maier 1987, 1:166, no. 14; trans. Stevenson and Frend 1987, 333). We return to this link between sacred books and sacred vessels below.

6        Brisson 1958 and Tengström 1964 devote almost no attention to the role of *traditio* in the origins of the controversy. It is likewise mentioned only in passing in de Ste Croix’s article (2006, 174–175) on voluntary martyrdom.

7        For recent introductions to the study of material texts, cf. Howsam 2014; Mole and Levy 2017 (both unfortunately focused on the print and digital book). While the contemporary discipline originated in studies of the Western print codex, scholars have applied its insights to

Indeed, one never encounters a disembodied text distinct from the material supports that enable its physical existence.<sup>8</sup> The book is implicated in economic, ritual, and readerly matrices of production and use—and, moreover, can sometimes be put to very non-textual uses.<sup>9</sup> As a result, I argue, the physical book offers fresh insight into the apparently self-evident objection to *traditio*.<sup>10</sup>

By keeping our eyes on this three-dimensional object—susceptible to being burned, damaged by a leaky roof, or placed under one’s pillow—we better understand the ritual and rhetorical landscape of ancient Christianity. Book-burning in fourth-century North Africa was implicated in existing Roman practices and discourses surrounding textual objects and their

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manuscripts from the Middle Ages and classical antiquity (Nichols 2016; Stok et al. 2017).

Studies often privilege Roman Egypt, where arid conditions favor the preservation of manuscripts (Johnson 2004; Hurtado 2006). Even for regions from which few ancient manuscripts have been preserved, however, material texts afford fresh insight (Gamble 1995; Klingshirn and Safran 2007; Johnson 2010; Houston 2014; Steinhauser 2014).

8 McGann 1991; Genette 1997; Jansen 2014.

9 On non-textual uses of books: Watson 2007; Cummings 2013.

10 On the controversy: Frensdorff 1952; Tengström 1964; Tilley 1997; Lancel 1999, 388–429; Brown 2000, 207–21; Decret 2011, 101–43; Shaw 2011; Burns and Jensen 2014, 47–51; Whitehouse 2016a, and the sources collected in Maier 1987; Stevenson and Frensdorff 1987, 336–53. For a recent survey of scholarship: Whitehouse 2016b.

destruction.<sup>11</sup> In this article, I juxtapose this broader Roman context with specific discourses and practices related to Christian books in order to elucidate the rhetorical significance of *traditio*. The ancient Christian book did not simply contain text; it was an iconic object of worth, beauty, and sanctity that was *viewed* as well as *read*.<sup>12</sup> As an object, the Christian book was active, present, animate.<sup>13</sup> *Traditores* did not simply transgress by betraying prized possessions of the community or by complicity with the demonic persecutors; as we will see, in fact, surrendering various other objects to the authorities did not merit censure as *traditio*. Books were different. The Christian book functioned as a physical token of Christian faith, an incarnation of the Word, and an avatar of divine presence. This often-overlooked social logic is why it was so bad to hand over the sacred books for destruction.<sup>14</sup> *Traditores* renounced the Christian faith—and Christ himself—in their most physical and public manifestation.

A number of sources illuminate the significance of the sacred book as a physical object. North African martyrdom accounts portray exemplary Christian behavior with regard to books

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11 On the intentional burning of books in Roman antiquity: Speyer 1981, esp. 43–119; Sarefield 2006; Sarefield 2007, esp. 160–69; Winsbury 2009, 135–43; Rohmann 2013; Rohmann 2016; Howley 2017.

12 For the distinction: Elitzir 2013. On the iconicity of the late ancient Christian book: Lowden 2007; Vessey 2007, 242; Rapp 2007. On the interplay of late ancient Christian textuality and visuality: Francis 2009. Note also the Christian preference for codex over bookroll and its significance for ancient Christian identity formation (Hurtado 2006).

13 The language of the “animacy” of objects derives from Chen 2012.

14 I adapt the language of “social logic” from Spiegel 1990; cf. Clark 2004, 162–165.

alongside counter-examples of those who failed to meet the high standards demanded by their Christian communities. To preserve the physical book of Scripture was to preserve its content, and thus to defend the Christian confession itself. Explicit polemic from the Donatist-Caecilianist controversy confirms the importance of the book for (especially) Donatist self-representation and, moreover, accentuates the book's significance as an avatar of divine presence. For Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) and Optatus of Milevis (d. *post* 384 CE), we find, this divine presence was realized most fully when the text was performed liturgically. Finally, the use of the Christian book as an object of ritual power is attested by Augustine's sermons and comparative evidence from around the late ancient Mediterranean. In this context, the book's power relates only indirectly to its textual content. As an embodiment of the word, the book *itself* effects healing. The physical book in North Africa thus functions as a metonym for Christian confession, an avatar of divine presence, and an object of divine power.

In this article, I rely on a number of polemical sources from the conflict between Donatists and Caecilianists. My focus, however, is not the historical questions of when or by whom Christian books were handed over to Roman authorities for destruction, much less the theological question of who was “right” in the controversy. Rather, I excavate the social logic on which rhetorical constructions of *traditio* are based, the conceptual frameworks within which Christian books function as sacred objects and not merely as vehicles for text. As much as possible, I situate this social logic within the landscape of practices and artifacts known to us from Roman North Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries CE.<sup>15</sup>

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15 Cf. Rebillard (2017, 21 and *passim*) who focuses on the social function that martyrdom texts performed rather than on the “authenticity” of the accounts.

### Physical Metonyms

We begin with martyrdom accounts set during the Great Persecution. While the destruction of Christian books is a recurrent theme in these texts, the preserved texts often do not elucidate the significance of handing over the books.<sup>16</sup> For example, in the martyrdom of Felix, an otherwise unknown bishop from Tibiuca, Felix's insistent refusal to hand over the books is frustratingly under-explained.<sup>17</sup> He asserts that he must obey God rather than human authorities, and even that it is better to be burned than to hand over the books to a similar fate.<sup>18</sup> In no other

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16 Many of the texts are collected and translated in Musurillo 1972 and Tilley 1996. On Donatist martyrdom narratives: Tilley 1997, 41–50, 57–69; Dearn 2016; Moss 2016. On methodological problems of collecting and editing, see most recently Rebillard 2017, 1–21.

17 As noted by Dearn 2016, 77–78, the editorial reconstruction of the *passio Felicis* is fraught with methodological problems. The texts printed by Musurillo, Maier, and Tilley (Musurillo 1972, 266–71; Maier 1987, 1:46–57; Tilley 1996, 7–11) reflect an imagined *Urtext* created by Delahaye (1921). Despite these problems, the *passio Felicis* in the manuscript witnesses (printed by Delahaye) illustrate the centrality of (not) handing over the books. This Felix is not the Felix of Abthungi who participated in the consecration of Caecilian and was accused of *traditio* (Opt., *contra Don.*, apparatus 2; CSEL 26: 203–204). While Felix was a common name, it is tempting to suggest that a martyrdom of Felix circulated in Donatist circles as a rhetorical counterpoint.

18 The *topos* of obeying God rather than humans is linked to the apostles Peter and John in Acts 4:31 and appears in a number of North African martyrdom narratives (e.g. *act. Abit.* 6; cf. the emphasis on Scripture as the “Law” in *act. Abit.* 11–13 and Tilley 1997, 62, 65).



way, apparently, is Felix asked to betray Christ. Yet this brief martyrdom account, focused on (not) handing over books, does not tell us *why* it is better for Felix to be burned than to let the Scriptures be burned. Nor does the author feel compelled to explain why defending the books at any cost is obedience to God. This opacity invites further attention: What is it that motivates this Christian refusal to hand over the sacred books?

In the following paragraphs, I argue that the physical book in North Africa functions as an avatar not only for the Scriptural text but also for the Christian confession of faith.<sup>19</sup> We see this in the elaborate and stylized Donatist composition known as the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*.<sup>20</sup> The narrative purports to describe events from February 304 CE, when a number of Christians were arrested in the village of Abitina and conveyed to Carthage for trial, torture, imprisonment, and eventual death. The text reflects a polemical interpretation of the events leading up to the North African schism.<sup>21</sup>

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19 On the metonymic function of the book: Cummings 2013.

20 This text, also known as the *passio sanctorum Dativi et Saturnini presbyteri et aliorum* (BHL 7492) is not in Musurillo 1972. Critical edition: Franchi de’Cavalieri 1935, 1–71, reprinted with French translation and notes in Maier 1987, 1:57–92; English translation: Tilley (1996, 26–49). Cf. the introductions of Franchi de’Cavalieri (45–46), Maier (1:57–58), and Tilley (25–27). The text is attested only in a Donatist version (Dearn 2004, 2–4; *pace* Tilley 1997, 58–59; Moss 2010, 199–200).

21 It is difficult to determine when the account was written or revised. Tilley (1996, 26 n.4) suggests that it was written before Caecilian became bishop in 311 CE (cf. Moss 2010, 200). Dearn (2004) argues instead that the text was composed more than a century later, after the

Sacred books play a central role in how the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* construe Christian identity. Handing over the books emerges as a key issue from the beginning of the narrative: “Some fell from faith at the critical moment by handing over to unbelievers the Scriptures of the Lord and the divine testaments so that they could be burned in unholy fires” (2.3).<sup>22</sup> The crime goes beyond the financial or practical ramifications of losing a church library. The *traditores* (including the bishop Mensurius, 20) fall from faith by destroying that which is holy.<sup>23</sup> This destruction of the sacred entails pollution (*pollutus*, 20.3; *pollutorum omnium*,

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Council of Carthage in 411 CE, although most of his arguments support a date at any point in the later fourth century. The debate about date intersects with one about historical reliability. Since the present article examines the symbolic significance of the Christian book in North Africa, and not the historical events *in se*, however, historical reliability does not directly affect our discussion. In any case, the text “illuminat[es] the manner in which the outbreak of the schism was polemically reconstructed at a later date” rather than providing an “objective” account of the origins of the schism (Dearn 2004, 2; cf. Dearn 2016).

22 *Et quamvis tradendo gentilibus scripturas dominicas atque testamenta divina profanis ignibus comburenda a fidei cardine cecidere non nulli* (Franchi de’Cavalieri 1935, 50; trans. Tilley 1996, 28; cf. Gaumer 2016, 215). The other main issue is the celebration of the Eucharist (*act. Abit.* 7, 9–13). Section 13 sets Eucharist and Scripture in parallel, a point to which we return below. On the use of Eucharistic imagery, cf. Moss 2016, 63–64.

23 Mensurius claimed to have handed over only heretical books (Aug., *brev. coll.* 3.13.25; CSEL 53: 73–75).

23.1).<sup>24</sup> The martyrs, however, “resisted by freely shedding their blood for [the Scriptures]” (2.3).<sup>25</sup> Burning the Scriptures is part of a diabolical imperial plot: the devil “sought to burn the most holy testaments of the Lord, the divine Scriptures” (2.1).<sup>26</sup> The Scriptures are the center of conflict between the devil and the church.

Yet the physical books themselves are significantly *absent*, even while the reader is continually referred to their existence. When the proconsul Anulinus asks the lector Emeritus whether he has Scriptures at home, Emeritus answers that they are in his heart (*in corde meo*, 12.9). The author of the narrative emphasizes the significance of this claim by apostrophe: “O martyr, most suitable and diligent custodian of the sacred Law! Trembling at the crime of the *traditores*, he placed the Scriptures of the Lord within the recesses of his own heart lest he lose them” (12.10).<sup>27</sup> The same motif recurs with the martyrs Felix (14) and Saturninus the Younger (15). We repeatedly find that those with the Law written on their hearts cannot betray the

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24 On “pollution” in martyrdom narratives: Moss 2016, 63–64.

25 *Conservando tamen ea et pro ipsis libenter suum sanguinem effundendo, fortiter fecere quam plurimi* (Franchi de’Cavalieri 1935, 50; trans. Tilley 1996, 28).

26 *Temporibus namque Diocletiani et Maximiani bellum diabolus christianis indixit isto modo, ut sacrosancta Domini testamenta scripturasque divinas ad exurdendum peteret* (Franchi de’Cavalieri 1935, 50; trans. Tilley 1996, 28).

27 *O martyrem legis sacrae idoneum diligentissimumque custodem! qui traditorum facinus perhorrescens, scripturas dominicas ne perderet, intra secreta sui pectoris collocavit* (Franchi de’Cavalieri 1935, 59; trans. Tilley 1996, 37).

physical books. The opposite of *traditio* is internalizing Scripture.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, then, the Scriptures are not absent; rather, the martyr-book has become the material support for the Scriptural text.<sup>29</sup>

In the conclusion of the narrative (19–23), we read a further argument about the importance of the Scriptures. Alluding to the Maccabean martyrs (2 Maccabees 6–7; cf. 4 Maccabees), the author writes that “All upheld the Law of the Lord (*legem Domini*) and steadfastly and bravely celebrated the assembly of the Lord.<sup>30</sup> They saved the Scriptures of the

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28 As Tilley summarizes, the Abitinians “embodied the words of the Bible in their lives” (1997, 10).

29 The logic of the text may correspond to the view of the Roman authorities, for whom it seems that burning the martyr and burning the book are interchangeable. Compare the martyrdom of R. Ḥanina b. Teradyon, who is said to have been wrapped in a Torah scroll and burned alive (b. ‘Abod. Zar. 17b; cf. Boyarin 1999, esp. 56–58). Late ancient rabbinic martyrdom accounts resemble Christian ones in numerous ways, but the problem of *traditio* seems to be particularly Christian one. While the two texts imply a similar identification between book and martyr, R. Ḥanina is burned for publicly teaching Torah rather than for refusing to hand over a sacred book. Boyarin suggests that the distinction between Jewish and Christian martyrdom is “the forms of textuality and authority that they generate and venerate” (1999, 66).

30 The Maccabean martyrs became central to Donatist constructions of identity and appeals to their example became central to the North African controversy (Joslyn-Siemiatkoski 2009, 56–63). According to the documents collected by Augustine, Secundus of Tigisis—the Numidian primate and supporter of Donatus—described his own actions during the persecution as

Lord and the divine testaments from flames and burning. For the sake of the divine Law, they offered their very selves to menacing fires and diverse tortures in the manner of the Maccabees” (19.5).<sup>31</sup> We discover an artful and intentional slippage between renouncing the *content* of Scripture (“the Law”) and allowing the destruction of *physical books*. The Maccabean martyrs suffered torturous deaths in order to *keep* (that is, not transgress) the Law (that is, the Law of Moses). The Abitinian martyrs undergo torture and death so that they might *keep* (that is, physically preserve) the Law (understood as Christian Scripture).<sup>32</sup> This homology suggests that, for the author of the *Acts*, to preserve the physical books of the Law is to observe the Law itself.

The metonymic relationship between the *content* of the sacred books and their physical instantiations expresses Christian identity.<sup>33</sup> Sentenced to death by starvation after their tortures,

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comparable to those of Eleazar in 2 Maccabees 6 (Aug., *brev. coll.* 3.13.25; CSEL 53: 73–75; cf. Frend 1952, 12–14).

31 *Qui legem Domini asserentes, collectam dominicumque constanter et fortiter celebrabant, quique scripturas dominicas divinaque testamenta de flamma atque de incendio conservantes, se ipsos diris ignibus cruciatibusque diversis machabeico more pro divinis legibus obtulerunt* (Franchi de’Cavalieri 1935, 65–66; trans. Tilley 1996, 44).

32 Cf. Brown 2000, 213, although he does not consider the physical book as such.

33 Just across the Mediterranean in Sicily, and at much the same time (304 CE), the martyr Euplus would maintain, “It is forbidden to give [the Scriptures] up [...] whoever gives them up loses eternal life” (*tradere non licebat [...] qui tradit, vitam aeternam perdit*); significantly, this line is preserved only in the Latin version of the *acta Eupli*, which may have circulated in North Africa (*act. Eup.* 2, lines 6–8 [Latin]; Musurillo 1972, 316–17). The Gospels are hung around

the Abitinians institute regulations for their unpolluted church (21). Based on Revelation 22:18–19, they decree that those who hand over (*si quis traditoribus communicaverit*, 21.1) the books fall under the curse on those who add *or take away* even a single letter or stroke of a letter—and will thus be blotted out of the Book of Life.<sup>34</sup> By handing over the books, the *traditores* have not just removed a single letter, but *erased* the Scriptures entirely, thus subjecting themselves to the curse of the Seer. Betraying the books is not merely denying Christ by complicity with imperial authorities. Rather, it is renunciation of the divine Law which is—or should be—inscribed on the heart. The books become a physical metonym for both the *contents* of the text and, by extension, the *content* of Christian confession.<sup>35</sup> Sacred text and sacred object converge.<sup>36</sup>

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Euplus' neck as he is led away to his death, marking his identity as a Christian (*act. Eup.* 3; Musurillo 1972, 318–19). On this account, cf. Sarefield 2007, 168–69; de Ste Croix 2006, 175; Moss 2010, 185–86.

34 Franchi de' Cavalieri 1935, 67–68; trans. Tilley 1996, 46. Miles 2016, 260, instead reads this use of Revelation 22:18–19 as an attempt to safeguard the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* against tampering.

35 On book-burning (of pagan books) from the fourth century onward as a sign of conversion *to* Christianity, cf. Sarefield 2007, 169–73; note also Acts 19:19.

36 Tilley approaches this claim when she asserts that for Donatists “Scripture as a *book* was the tradition, and it was to tradition generally, not to specific rules or texts within that Bible, that a faithful Christian had to adhere” (1997, 62, italics original). Yet Tilley goes on to apply this insight not to the physical book, but to the role of the Bible in Donatist hermeneutics and exegesis.

### Traditio(n) and Presence

Less than a decade after vigorous persecution in North Africa had ended, the Roman magistrate Anulinus received a letter from the Emperor Constantine. Reporting back in the stereotyped language of imperial correspondence, Anulinus states that he “received and venerated” the “heavenly letter” of the Emperor (*scripta caelestia maiestatis uestrae accepta atque adorata*).<sup>37</sup> This incidental phrase, preserved in a dossier of official documents from the Caecilianist-Donatist controversy, draws our attention to another way in which inscribed objects function in Roman North Africa. Anulinus venerates the letter because it is an avatar of Constantine’s presence, through which the Augustus speaks and receives honor *in quasi-absentia*.<sup>38</sup>

The absent presence of writing—so playfully explored by Derrida and other post-structural literary critics—motivates Anulinus’ veneration; it also plays a role in the North African controversy between Caecilianists and Donatists. In ancient epistolary theory, the letter as an image of the author’s soul and an avatar for the presence of its author is a commonplace.<sup>39</sup>

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37 *Letter of Anulinus to Constantine* (15 April 313 CE), cited in Aug., *ep.* 88.2 (CSEL 34.2: 408; Maier 1987, 1:144–146; trans. Stevenson and Frend 1987, 341). This mode of interaction is hardly unique for late ancient letters, but it is easy to overlook. Anulinus figures as the judge in *act. Abit.*

38 On the book as avatar, see O’Donnell 1998.

39 In *ep.* 8, Jerome employs this motif, quoting the comic playwright Turpilius’s statement that “the exchange of letters is the only thing that makes present those who are absent” (*sola,*

Yet while the letter was the most theorized textual artifact in late antiquity, this mediatory role is not limited to letters alone. Not only are a surprisingly wide range of texts framed or conceived as “letters” in some way, but *all* ancient texts were understood to simulate the presence of their absent authors, human or divine.<sup>40</sup> Classical Latin literature offers a number of examples in which the book functions as a substitute for its author.<sup>41</sup> In light of this understanding of texts as

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*inquit, ‘res est, quae homines absentes praesentes faciat’* (Cain 2009, 28; cf. 82). On the *sermo abstentium* and the presence of the author in ancient epistolary theory, see *inter alia*: Cic., *ad fam.* 2.4.1, 3.11.2, 12.30.1; *ad Att.* 8.14.1, 9.10.1, 12.53; Sen., *ep.* 75.1; Ps.-Lib., 2, 58; Ambr., *ep.* 66.1. Discussion: Thraede 1970, 27–47, 162–164; Malherbe 1988; Ebbeler 2009, esp. 273, 283; Ebbeler 2010, 465–68; Howley 2017, 4.

40 This idea is not restricted to antiquity. Milton famously compared destroying a book to an act of homicide (Cummings 2013, 93).

41 A particularly famous example is Ovid’s *Tristia*, in which the poet imagines wandering Rome even while he remains exiled in Tomis. The opening lines of the collection express this clearly: “Little book, you will go without me—and I grudge it not—to the city, whither alas your master is not allowed to go! (*Parve—nec invideo—sine me, liber, ibis in urbem, / ei mihi, quo domino non licet ire tuo!*, *trist.* 1.1.1–2 [LCL 151: 2–3]). The theme permeates the collection; see especially 1.1.57–62, 3.7.48–52; discussion: Edwards 1996, 116–125. In *amor.* 2.15.9 and 3.8.6, Ovid similarly imagines his book entering the house of his lover even while Ovid himself cannot. Compare also Sen. Maj., *suas.* 7, titled “Anthony promises to spare Cicero’s life if he burns his writings: Cicero deliberates whether to do so” (*Deliberat Cicero an scripta suo conburat, promittente Antonio incolumitatem si fecisset*) [LCL 464: 594–595]. Cicero chooses death over



avatars of their authors, it makes perfect sense to conceive Scripture as an embodiment of divine presence. And so we find that, for Christians in Roman North Africa, the physical book does not *merely* represent the textual content of Scripture and its theological significance, as we saw in our reading of the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*. Rather, if Christ speaks through Scripture then the Christian book, like Constantine's letter, assumes even greater significance as an avatar for the presence of its divine author.

In Roman legal practice, moreover, a book might be burnt in place of its author as the rhetorical equivalent of execution.<sup>42</sup> Such symbolic executions may have been rhetorically powerful, but were seldom intended to prevent circulation of a text and even less likely to succeed.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, if the public burning of a text functioned rhetorically as an execution of

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the destruction of his works. Discussion: Gunderson 2003, 81–89. Ovid (*trist.* 1.7.35–40; cf. Krevans 2010, 206–208) figures the burning of his works before his exile as the funeral of their author or perhaps even as a suicide.

42     The *locus classicus* is Lucian of Samosata's *Alexander* 47. See Sarefield 2006; Sarefield 2007, 163–64; Rohmann 2016, 90–91; Howley 2017, esp. 19 n.100.

43     Despite a basis in earlier legal practice, book-burning is employed in an new way during the Great Persecution; there is no antecedent for the widespread attempt to burn those who would not surrender copies of Christian Scripture. The closest parallel is the burning of prohibited magical books and their owners. By the fourth century, there was also a long Roman history of burning cult texts, especially oracles and works related to divination and astrology. For such burnings, see Livy 25.1, 39.16, 40.29; Pliny, *hist. nat.* 13.84; Suet., *Aug.* 31; cf. Sarefield 2006;

the author, then handing over the Christian Scriptures corresponds to betraying the divine author. Precisely this identification between divine author and sacred text motivates the Donatist bishop Petilian to assert that *traditores* commit the crime of Judas.<sup>44</sup> Petilian elaborates a Johannine *logos*-theology with attention to the verb *tradere*, used to describe both the betrayal of Judas and the action of the *traditores*. Just as Judas betrayed (*tradere*) the incarnate divine Word, so also faithless disciples betrayed (*tradere*) the inscribed divine word under persecution. In this light, it is unsurprising that polemic centers on the Gospels, where the iconic relationship between sacred text and divine Word is most evident.<sup>45</sup> Anulinus venerates Constantine in the letter; *traditores* betray Christ in the Scriptures.<sup>46</sup>

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288–89 for further references. This practice is based on the idea that these objects were powerful—and maleficent—objects; below I discuss similar understandings of Christian books.

44 Petilian’s comments are reported by Aug., *contra Pet.* 3.32.72; cf. 2.11.25 on the “Church of Judas.”

45 As Lowden states, “as the cross is an image of Christ, so is the gospel book” (2007, 28).

46 For Christian authors, *traditio* was not only about books. As noted above, *act. Abit.* repeatedly juxtaposes preserving Scripture with celebrating Eucharist (*act. Abit.* 7, 9–13). In *gest. ap. Zen.* 3–4, Silvanus is charged with *traditio* because he handed over the property of the church, in particular the sacred vessels which were (presumably) used for the Eucharist (SC 413: 306–7; trans. Edwards 1997, 171–75; cf. the Canons of Arles, cited above in note 5##). The concern with the textual divine body corresponds to a concern with the sacramental divine body. Because both the sacred books and the sacred vessels mediate divine presence, to betray either constitutes *traditio*, the crime of Judas. Contrast the unproblematic handing over of other, non-

This iconic understanding of the Christian book influences material culture.

Unfortunately, the covers of the only known North African Gospel book, the fifth-century *Codex Bobiensis*, have not been preserved.<sup>47</sup> Other deluxe late ancient Gospel books from around the Mediterranean, however, resemble reliquaries or pyxides, reflecting the concept of sacred presence which we find in Petilian's argument.<sup>48</sup> Given slightly later complaints by Jerome of Stridon and Caesarius of Arles about ornate but unread Gospel books, it is reasonable to surmise that by the later fourth century, the external visual characteristics of some North African Gospel books—and perhaps other volumes of Scripture as well—reflected their theological significance.<sup>49</sup>

Several Caecilianist authors revise Petilian's understanding of how sacred texts mediate divine presence. In his *Treatise against the Donatists*, Optatus of Milevis challenges what he sees as the Donatist identification of the sacred book with God himself.<sup>50</sup> He relativizes the crime

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sacred objects like clothes and shoes (*gest. ap. Zen.* 2); the fact that this did not lead to charges of *traditio* confirms that economic loss and complicity were not the primary factors in the charge.

47 Houghton 2016, 210 (Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria, 1163 [G.VII.15]).

48 Lowden 2007; Rapp 2007; Elitzir 2013.

49 Caes. Arl., *serm.* 2; Jer., *ep.* 22.32, 107.12; cf. Lowden 2007, 32.

50 The following discussion offers a close reading of Opt., *contra Don.* 7.1. The seventh book of Optatus' tractate significantly post-dates the other six books; while the main body of the composition likely dates from the mid-360s, the seventh book is more likely to date from ca. 384 CE. Because of significant variations in the manuscript tradition of book 7, a number of scholars have suggested that the book has been interpolated, but I follow Edwards in seeing it as a unified

of *traditio*, arguing that *any* destruction of Scripture is equally bad. If allowing the sacred book to be destroyed by a magistrate's fire is apostasy, then (by *reductio ad absurdum*) it is *also* apostasy if one allows the Gospel to be damaged by a leaky roof, gnawing rodents, or a negligently-set house fire.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Optatus maintains, negligence in caring for the sacred is worse than handing over the *sacra* under pressure. The *traditor* hands over the book whole; it is the magistrate who casts the book to the flames.<sup>52</sup>

Optatus' relativization of *traditio* is a new development. Not only does he challenge the Donatist construction of the book that we saw in the *Acts of Abitinian Martyrs*, but he also contradicts the thirteenth canon of the Council of Arles (314 CE), which had unequivocally condemned those who handed over the sacred books.<sup>53</sup> Optatus does not challenge the underlying premise. The Christian book remains sacred, worthy of protection not only from

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whole (1997, xvi–xviii). A number of shared motifs, including adding to and taking away from Scripture (cf. Revelation 22:18–19), the example of the Maccabean martyrs, and Scripture engraved on the heart, suggest that Optatus is responding to arguments similar to those found in the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*.

51 Opt., *contra Don.* 7.1.37–41. Optatus tendentiously recasts the Donatists as spiritual heirs of the *traditores* at the Numidian council of Cirta.

52 Optatus conveniently ignores cases like that of Victor of Rustica, who is accused of throwing an erased four-Gospel codex into the flames with his own hands (see note 76### below). In light of the decision of the Abitinian martyrs, we might note the lack of concern with the act of erasing sacred books.

53 See note 5### above.

persecutors' fires, but also from natural elements and human misuse. Nonetheless, Optatus does not identify the book *qua* object with Christ. Instead, he reimagines how the physical book mediates divine presence.

To counter Donatist claims, Optatus articulates a new theology of the book. “The Law and God are not one and the same” (*non est unum lex et Deus*), he asserts.<sup>54</sup> While God “is able both to raise the dead and give reward, a book not handed over cannot do either one.”<sup>55</sup> The Christian book is not an independent talisman. Rather, it is referential to its source.<sup>56</sup> Sacred text—whether the stone tablets of the Decalogue (smashed by Moses), Jeremiah’s scroll of prophecy (burned by Jehoiakim), or the incinerated Christian codex—is sacred because it comes from God.<sup>57</sup> While the object can be destroyed, the divine speech which it contains and the divine presence which it mediates remain unimpaired. The ultimate insignificance of *traditio* is demonstrated by the inability of either persecutors or *traditores* to eradicate Scripture. Because of its divine source, Scripture persists: “There is no less of the Law for those who desire to teach and be taught.”<sup>58</sup> The Donatist theologian Parmenian asserted that the *traditores* had entirely

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54 Opt., *contra Don.* 7.1.37–41 (SC 413: 210–11; trans. Edwards 1997, 135, modified).

55 *Non est unum lex et Deus! Si pro Deo moriendum fuerat, qui et resuscitare mortuos et reddere praemium potest, liber non traditus de duobus his nec alterum potest!* (Opt., *contra Don.* 7.1.36; SC 413: 210–11; trans. Edwards 1997, 135).

56 Cf. Cummings 2013, 93.

57 Opt., *contra Don.* 7.1.11–23.

58 *Nihil minus est de lege et docere et doceri cupientibus* (Opt., *contra Don.* 7.1.35; SC 413: 210–11; trans. Edwards 1997, 135).

burnt the Law—but in fact, Optatus tells us, “all the members of the Law are sound, they are preserved, they are read aloud.”<sup>59</sup> Scripture is safe with God, regardless of how the books might be mishandled by their human custodians: “That which is destroyed does not perish.”<sup>60</sup> The central issue for Optatus is the performance of Scripture in preaching and teaching. “The libraries are filled with books,” Optatus asserts, “in different places the divine praises are everywhere proclaimed. The mouths of the lectors keep not silence. The hands of all are full of volumes. Nothing is lacking to people who wish to be taught.”<sup>61</sup> Christ continues to speak.

Augustine of Hippo similarly articulates a liturgical understanding of how sacred texts mediate divine presence. After all, a text—whether Constantine’s letter or a Gospel codex—does not speak by itself. Rather, it is activated by human readers who perform it into presence.<sup>62</sup>

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59 *Omnia membra legis sana sunt, salua sunt, recitantur* (Opt., *contra Don.* 7.1.35; SC 413: 210–11; trans. Edwards 1997, 135).

60 *Non perit quod erogatum est si in sua origine sua saluum est* (Opt., *contra Don.* 7.1.11; SC 413: 198–99; trans. Edwards 1997, 129). Discussing earlier Roman authors, Joseph Howley similarly observes that “[l]iterary texts are conceived of as immune to material destruction: elite book-users argue forcefully that their own culture of book-use and circulation makes books impervious to destruction” (2017, 21).

61 *Bibliothecae refertae sunt libris; nihil deest ecclesiae, per loca singula diuinum sonat ubique praeconium. Non silent ora lectorum, manus omnium codicibus plenae sunt; nihil deest populis doceri cupientibus [...]* (Opt., *contra Don.* 7.1.30–31; SC 413: 208–09; trans. Edwards 1997, 134).

62 While the performative and productive aspects of reading practices are relevant for

Returning to ancient epistolography, we recall that a physical artifact is not the only way in which an author might be made present. As Jennifer Ebbeler observes, “messengers were not always mere bearers of a written message; they could, and in Late Antiquity, often did become [...] participants in the performance of letter exchange [...] the messenger served as a stand-in for the letter’s absent author.”<sup>63</sup> Augustine’s liturgical understanding of divine presence in Scripture reflects this model for the mediation of authorial presence. Augustine repeatedly identifies liturgical reading of Scripture with divine speech and divine presence. When the reader approaches the lectern or the bishop preaches, it is Christ who speaks.<sup>64</sup> Divine speech through the Gospels read aloud in liturgy manifests divine presence *even more* than if Christ stood among the congregation.<sup>65</sup> For Petilian, divine presence is manifested by the sacred physical book as an object in itself. For Augustine, by contrast, one encounters the divine presence through the book as a text activated in the reading and preaching of the Church. Liturgical performance resembles reading a letter. While Scripture manifests God’s presence, Augustine asserts that this requires a reader and a performance. (As we will see shortly, other forms of ritual practice envisioned additional ways in which the divine power of a sacred book might be activated.) By emphasizing

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modern books and readers as well, William Johnson’s work on ancient sociologies of reading is particularly *apropos* (e.g., 2000; 2010).

63 Ebbeler 2009, 271.

64 Aug., *serm.* 17.1, 17.3, 162c\*.15. Compare Augustine’s sermons on Perpetua and Felicitas, especially *serm.* 180, which he explicitly discusses the act of reading the text aloud in order to make the martyrs present.

65 Aug., *serm.* 263.3, 301a.1.

ecclesial performance, Augustine locates the divine presence in the *text* as well as the *object* of the Christian book.

For both Augustine and Optatus, the physical book of Scripture mediates divine speech and presence not primarily as an object, but in the liturgy of the Church. Here we see an evolution of the meaning of *traditio* from the Abitinian martyrs to Augustine. If *traditio* is the crime of betraying Christ as manifested in the Scriptures, then the Donatists who abandon Christ present and speaking in the liturgy of the true Church are, in a way, *traditores* even while still in possession of the physical books—for it is in the Church that Scripture is read and God speaks.<sup>66</sup>

### Powerful Symbols

As we have seen, texts from the Donatist controversy reveal the metonymic role of the sacred book; it represents Christian confession and even functions as an avatar for divine presence. We observed the former in the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* and the latter in polemical texts from both Caecilianist and Donatist authors. Given the role of the Christian book as an iconic object in the North African evidence, we might expect to find this embodied in ritual practices involving the book.<sup>67</sup> Yet there is a surprising lack of North African literary evidence

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66 Here note Augustine's repeated contrast between Donatist concern over *traditio* and *traditores* and the Donatist's decision to cut themselves off from the apostolic *traditio* shared throughout the world in *ep.* 44.5, 185.46; *de bapt.* 4.24, 6.3.

67 Comparative evidence from other parts of the Mediterranean: Rapp 2007; Eastman 2018. Eastman argues that “[Syriac] Gospel codices were not mere textual containers, but were themselves powerful ritualizing objects that manifested the physical presence and agency of



for such practices. There are no descriptions of processing the book in liturgy and even evidence for public reading is largely indirect.<sup>68</sup> Although sources from fourth-century Syria and from the later Latin West mention the imposition of the Gospel book during episcopal ordination, no North African evidence attests it. Formal liturgy, however, is not the only site of ritual practice.

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Christ, again both inside and outside of liturgical contexts.”

68 The paucity of literary attestation may reflect assumed knowledge and is not evidence for the absence of such practices. Unless the book or books remained permanently on the lectern, processing would seem to be a necessary step even if we do not know how it might have been ritually elaborated. We likewise have no evidence for where the book was stored in church buildings (church libraries are mentioned for Hippo and Carthage by Possidius in his *Vita* of Augustine, but these do not seem to function primarily for the storage of liturgical codices). The book is a unique sacred object because the reader must take it home to practice. On the sacred books in the homes of lectors, cf. *gest. ap. Zen.* 3–5; SC 413: 306–307; trans.: Edwards 1997, 171–75. The destruction of church buildings containing sacred books gives limited further evidence. The paucity of description is not unique to practices involving Scripture; we are also ignorant about many aspects of North African Eucharistic practice, for example. Note, however, that the moral qualifications for lectors in North Africa resembled those for Eucharistic ministers (bishops, presbyters, and deacons). To perform the sacred books required a similar sacramental status of purity as to handle the Eucharistic sacraments at the altar. Although celibacy was not required, after puberty lectors were required to be married or in a state of committed celibacy. Rules for lectors are published in Munier’s edition of the African councils (CCL 149, indexed at 389). I am grateful to J. Patout Burns for his insight on this point.

Ritual practices from a different context—apotropaic use—illustrate the function of the book as an object of power.<sup>69</sup> Here I focus on a specific set of practices involving inscribed objects. Because these “magical” practices operate within a larger ritual and symbolic landscape, rather than as an isolated discourse, apotropaic use of a Gospel codex offers insights into the social logic of the Christian book *qua* object. In North Africa, these practices are documented primarily by episcopal disapproval.<sup>70</sup> Augustine famously objects to using the Gospel of John as a cure for fever. In one of his sermons, he states: “What then? When you have a headache, we commend you if you put the Gospel by your head and do not hurry to an amulet. [...] We rejoice when we see that a man, confined to his bed, is tossed by fever and pain and yet has placed no hope anywhere else except that he put the Gospel by his head, not because the Gospel was made for this, but because it has been preferred to amulets.”<sup>71</sup> While acknowledging that reliance on a

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69 As David Frankfurter (1998; 2002) and Jonathan Z. Smith (1995) have argued, “magic” functions as a heresiological term of art to describe “bad” ritual practices. Although the category as we know it does not map onto ancient taxonomies, it has heuristic value when used to denote those practices which received ecclesiastical censure.

70 On ancient Christians and the “magical” use of texts, cf. Gamble 1995, 237–41. On the textuality of ancient “magic,” cf. Frankfurter 1994. Many late ancient amulets employed the vocabulary or text of Scripture (de Bruyn and Dijkstra 2011; Jones 2016; de Bruyn 2017). As representations of the full text, the *incipits* of the Gospels also appear frequently (Sanzo 2014).

71 *Quod ergo? Cum caput tibi dolet, laudamus si euangelium ad caput tibi posueris, et non ad ligaturam cucurreris. [...] ut gaudeamus quando uidemus hominem in lecto suo constitutum, iactari febribus et doloribus, nec alicubi spem posuisse, nisi ut sibi euangelium ad caput poneret*

Gospel book is better than using an amulet, Augustine goes on to argue that it would be better to “put the Gospel on the heart” (*ponatur ad cor*) to cure sinful inclinations.<sup>72</sup> Rather than trying to force God’s hand by using a sacred object, one should pray. Yet although Augustine does not endorse this procedure, he does not deny its efficacy either. The physical book of Scripture functions as an object of healing power.<sup>73</sup>

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; *non quia ad hoc factum est, sed quia praelatum est euangelium ligaturis*. Aug., *tract. Io.* 7.12.1 (CCSL 36: 73); trans. mod. Rettig 1988, 165; cf. Aug., *tract. Io.* 7.7.

72 Aug., *tract. Io.* 7.12.2 (CCSL 36: 73); here, just as in *act. Abit.*, we again find the theme of writing on the heart (cf. 7.7.1). On Augustine’s disapproval of amulets, cf. Aug., *de rud.* 25.48, although he has no objection to the healing power of relics. Similar “magical” practices are attested in late ancient Christianity all around the Mediterranean (see note 70## above). Sacred books could be used for other ends as well, such as predicting the future and offering guidance. Augustine objects to sortilege (e.g. *ep.* 55.20; *ennarr. in Ps.* 91.10, 140.18), but bibliomancy has a strong resemblance to his own conversion experience as recounted in the famous *tolle lege* passage of *conf.* 8.12.29, which echoes Athan., *vit. Ant.* 2.2–3 (cf. Luijendijk 2014; Wísniowski 2016).

73 Understanding Christian books as objects of ritual power may even aid us in understanding the decree that Christian books should be burned in the first place. We recall that oracles and books of divination were among the cult texts that were burned under Roman law (see note 43## above). Christian sacred books were also used for divination (Klingshirn 2002; Luijendijk 2014; Wísniowski 2016). Wísniowski argues that the way in which Christians used divinatory books reveals a unique interest in the sacredness of the Christian book *qua* object:

Despite Augustine's emphasis on divine presence in liturgical performance, moreover, the book functions as a powerful and sacred object without any assumption that it is or might be read—even if Augustine would like to correct such misuse.<sup>74</sup> Apotropaic practice is based on the healing efficacy of the Gospels as an embodiment of the divine word.<sup>75</sup> The physical application of the book, not a human act of reading, effects the cure. The book represents not its text *per se* but rather its divine source.

Returning to the events of the Great Persecution which prompted the Donatist-Caecilianist controversy, we recall one of the charges of *traditio* in the documents from Cirta.

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“For it was only in the fourth century that we can witness the belief originating with Christians that the sacred text sanctifies the book, the material object which contains divine words” (565). A parallel use, which also relies on the book as an object of power, is the act of swearing oaths with books; see Bildstein 2018. Pagans likewise viewed the Christian book as a powerful, “magical” object. As Wolfgang Speyer observes, “[d]ie Heiden hielten die christlichen Schriften für Gegenstände, die mit Fluchstoff und dämonischer Schadensmacht erfüllt waren” (1981, 77).

74 Compare Wisniewski (2016, 566) on this passage: “the codex itself [...] was considered to be a vector of the divine power and able to heal the sick.” The textual content of the book, however, may still play a role. The book may exercise power purely as a symbolic object, but in light of the significance of textuality for ancient “magic” (cf. Frankfurter 1994), one should consider whether the book is read by a supernatural being, or perhaps that the book exercises animacy such that it “reads itself.”

75 Cf. Caes. Arl., *serm.* 8.3 (discussed by Vessey 2007, 242–43).

Even handing over an erased, unusable Gospel book was potential grounds for being a *traditor*.<sup>76</sup> Like the apotropaic use of John, this accusation suggests that the metonymic relationship between book and text persists even when the physical object is more or less evacuated of its textual content. Ultimately, the metonymic status of the Christian book does not require reading or even the presence of a text. The book as object mediates divine power even when the text itself is unused, inaccessible, even altogether absent.<sup>77</sup>

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76 Aug., *contra Cresc.* 3.27.30 (CSEL 52: 435–37). The culprit was Victor of Rustica, who admits the act. Other bishops claim that they handed over medical treatises (Donatus of Calama) or miscellaneous texts (Marinus of the Waters of Tibilis, unbound leaves as opposed to codices). Compare the charges against Mensurius of Carthage, who claims to have handed over only heretical books (see note 24## above). Discussion: Speyer 1981, 128; Tilley 1996, 25–27. Each of these defenses against the charge of *traditio* is based on the idea that the object handed over was *not* Scripture; the arguments would not make sense if economic loss or mere complicity were the central problem. Rigorists responded that one should not even pretend to participate in a religiously problematic act, an idea that goes back at least as far as the Maccabean martyrs. These examples illustrate the late ancient tension between “tricksterism” and “martyrdom” that Boyarin (1999, esp. 66) identifies.

77 Cf. Lowden 2007, esp. 22–23 on the fifth-century Freer Gospels. This iconicity may also explain why even handing over non-scriptural texts (see previous note) was problematic. If the physical objects *stood in* for the sacred book, did they absorb its metonymic function at second hand?

## Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the Christian book in Roman North Africa was understood to embody divine truth, presence, and power. Attention to the sacred book as a three-dimensional object thus offers new insight into the act of *traditio* and enables us to understand its rhetorical function in the Donatist-Caecilianist controversy. A diverse range of sources illuminate the significance of the Christian book. In the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*, the sacred book functions as a metonym for the divine truth of the Christian confession. The authors Petilian, Optatus, and Augustine articulate divergent theologies of the book, but each asserts that the sacred book mediates the presence of its divine author. A variety of ritual practices demonstrate that the Christian book was a powerful object even apart from specific recourse to its textual content. In each case, the book's metonymic possibilities generate an iconic power that exceeds its role as a bearer of text.

The conclusions of this article advance scholarship on the North African controversy by situating *traditio* in its historical and literary context. Previous accounts of the controversy have not engaged the rhetorical and ritual significance of early Christian books for the problem of *traditio*; instead, the limited scholarly attention to *traditio* has focused on its economic and sociological implications. I argue, however, that the significance of *traditio* in the North African sources becomes clear only if we consider the role of the Christian book as a physical token of Christian faith, an avatar of divine presence, and an incarnation of the Word. Other considerations, like the loss of valuable manuscripts and problem of complicity with a demonically-motivated persecutor, should not be discounted. Nonetheless, both the early Christian evidence and the broader Roman context fit best with an account of *traditio* that centers on the Christian book as a powerful embodiment of its divine author. This is why it was

so bad to hand over the sacred books for destruction: to commit *traditio* was to betray Christ himself to the pyre.

Insights from the North African controversy between Caecilianist and Donatist Christians contribute to a broader conversation about material texts in Late Antiquity. Martyr-books, wandering volumes of poetry, and healing palimpsests remind us that the late ancient texts functioned differently than today.<sup>78</sup> In material terms, modern books are quite unlike the parchment codices of late ancient North Africa. In readerly terms, too, contemporary users of books understand the world in ways dramatically different from late antique readers. Textual objects must be enacted into meaning, but we should not assume that others perform them in the same ways that we do. As I have argued in this article, for at least some late ancient users of Christian books these performances did far more than verbalize the text inscribed in the codex. They gestured toward a theological framework in which the codex embodied divine truth, presence, and power.

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78 As C. M. Chin states, “[a]ntiquity, for its inhabitants, worked by a very different set of spiritual, scientific, economic, and material rules than our lives do now” (2017, 483).

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