

## THE DECLINE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE— MIRRORED IN THE LIFE OF ST AUGUSTINE

The *Confessions of St Augustine* may not reveal specific issues within the Roman judicial system or the finer points of Roman engineering but they give us enormous insight into the declining life of the Empire.

It is evident from the *Confessions* that Augustine's life was subject to many changes that were a reflection of the changes that occurred in the Roman Empire when the Vandals were knocking at the gates of Rome presaging the end of the Classical Age.

In the mid 4th Century CE, the frontiers of the Roman Empire were shaking with turmoil from Hadrian's Wall to the Euphrates. However, at this time, the birthplace of Augustine in Thagaste, Northern Africa, was still a peaceful colonial province at the Empire's heart. Such colonies were populated by highly educated people but were burdened through a central bureaucracy and tax system that reflected the continuity and order of Augustine's early years.

Indeed, Augustine's descriptions of his childhood in Thagaste clearly show that the society in which he grew up was one that offered a high standard of education in reading, writing and arithmetic. He writes of the trials and agonies of school life, how he disliked Greek but loved Latin and thought the pursuit of literary studies to be useless. Indeed, although he weeps for the death of Dido, he finds Homer in particular corrupt. At the age of eleven and thanks to his father Patricius's diligent saving, Augustine was sent to a school of grammar and rhetoric near his home in Madaura and from thence to university in Carthage.

Carthage was a flourishing commercial seaport, a centre for oratory and legal studies. Augustine writes very little of his daily life there except that he was obsessed with the pursuit of sexual pleasures and the theatre. Nevertheless, it was here that he discovered the liberal arts and Cicero's treatise *Hortensius* that was to influence his development in philosophy towards his search for the 'truth'. Whilst at Carthage, Augustine was introduced to the Manichaeans, an heretical sect he was to be associated with for nine years. The following decade was to see him as teacher of rhetoric in Thagaste and Carthage. He described these years as wasted ones but years in which he was nevertheless living in a rich, fertile academic atmosphere and where he encountered astrologers and also Aristotle.

The lack of discipline in his Carthaginian students drove Augustine to seek advancement in Rome which he perceived as the epitome of an orderly and disciplined society. In fact, the Empire was already in decline and as a teacher of rhetoric, this decline was mirrored in the 'wicked' behaviour of his students. Thorough disillusionment was followed by a job offer via the prefect of Rome, as professor of rhetoric in Milan. The offer included travel expenses, suggesting that travel was still organised and safe at this time.

Alypius, former student of Augustine in Carthage, held him in such esteem that he followed him to Milan. Such was the mentor's capacity for friendship that he had healed Alypius's addiction to gladiatorial sport and chariot racing. The *Confessions* give lively accounts of his adventures in the circus and his mistaken arrest in the silversmith's market. An interesting insight into the accepted corrupt practice of the times is described when Alypius, as assessor to the Commissioner of the Treasury in Rome is offered a bribe by a senator. However, most significantly, Milan brought two major influences in the person of a leading orator and churchman Ambrose and in the writings of the Neoplatonists. The works of the Roman, Victorinus, translated from the Greek of Plotinus, were particularly instrumental in clearing Augustine's mind with respect to a transcendental God. He writes of research into astrology and experiments with a scientific friend to find the 'truth' about stars and constellations. Augustine's conversion experience in 386 CE led him to abandon

his profession in rhetoric, to be baptised by Ambrose and ordained priest. He now focused his energies on Holy Scripture, particularly the theology of St Paul, with neoplatonic philosophical influence.

Thus far, Augustine had followed the path many of the educated and powerful in the Roman Empire, who were trained in rhetoric and oratory, had taken and who had adhered to an imperial polytheism as well as the moral principles of ancient Greece. Emperor Constantine's conversion and declaration of Christianity as the State religion at the end of the fourth century CE had brought a successful establishment of the Pax Romana and the universal acceptance by Rome of the Gospel. The *Confessions* give early evidence of declaratory creeds in reference to the conversion of Marius Victorinus. A significant change occurred with Augustine's public declaration of faith under the fostering care of Ambrose and the influence of St Anthony through Pontitianus. This change in direction was towards the monastic life which was to have enormous influence on western spirituality.

The *Confessions* give further insight into the Christian Church in the last half century of the Roman Empire through the story of the life and death of Augustine's mother, Monica. A charming glimpse into the carry-over of pagan ritual is given when Monica is admonished by her son for veneration of the saints at a shrine, a forbidden practice at that time. Certainly, Augustine paints a predominantly middle class picture of the Church amongst the intelligentsia of Milan, giving little mention of the proletariat.

The changes in attitude towards conventional careers and traditional Roman ties of class and education may be seen as detrimental to the sociological order and thus to mirror the decline of the Roman Empire. Augustine's theological and philosophical studies finally led him to believe that our relationship with God is best understood through meditation. Essentially, this flooding of the inner life into social forms is what distinguishes the Late Antique period of the third century CE from the Classical World. The late Roman Empire world had now become a society steeped in religious belief. The heretic, Jew and pagan, had become second class citizens, whereas the bishop, holy man and monastic community had risen to increasing prominence, leaving a legacy of institutions in the codes of Roman Law. Thus was formed the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the ideas of the Christian Empire and the infancy of monasticism.

In Augustine's words, "Do not go outside yourself, but turn back within; truth dwells in the inner person, and if you find your nature given to frequent change, go beyond yourself. Move on, then, to that source where the light of reason receives its light".

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*St Augustine, by Antonello da Messina*