

## *Flamen Perpetuus Christianus: The Unique Case of an African Magistracy*

This paper presents the burial inscriptions of three members of the Astii family within Vandal Ammaedara (modern day Haïdra, Tunisia), arguing that the appellations of this family reveal the tenacious survival of a locally significant *flaminium* and *sacerdotium provinciae* where Roman power had long receded. As a continuous site of Christian cult from the 4th through the 7th centuries, the epigraphy of Ammaedara provides compelling evidence for the development of North African Christianity through late antiquity. One of the richest periods for this epigraphic record was the late 5th and early 6th century Vandal reign, as especially evident in the burial inscriptions of Basilica I, once the seat of a Vandal bishop, and Basilica IV, the (somewhat problematically) so-called “Vandal Chapel.” In the latter can be found the curious inscriptions of three members of the Astii family, two of them designated a *flamen perpetuus* and one a *sacerdotalis provinciae*. The most striking of these is that of Astius Mustellus, dated to the fourth regnal year of the Vandal King Hilderic in 526 and designating the deceased a *flamen perpetuus Christianus*.

The meaning of this inscription has aroused great interest in scholars ever since an initial report asked the question of how this title of a pagan priesthood could belong to an epitaph situated within a Christian church and inscribed with a cross (De Rossi 1877). Chastagnol (1972) revised De Rossi’s proposal that *flamen* and *sacerdotalis provinciae* became noble titles divested of cultic significance, arguing for a widespread continuity of the ritual offices across the Roman Empire instead. Duval and Prévot adopted this position in their magisterial report on the Christian inscriptions of Ammaedara (1975) and arguments have continued as to whether the cultic role of a *flamen* and *sacerdotalis* was rendered to the Vandal king or the emperor (Duval

1984 and Clover 2011). The basis of these arguments, however, neglect the specifically local character of the flamine and provincial priesthood in proconsular Africa.

This paper argues that there is no sufficient evidence that the *flamines* and *sacerdotes provinciae* persisted outside of Africa after Honorius' legislation against civic priesthoods in 415. To the contrary, the legal, literary, and epigraphic evidence suggests that these offices remained in Africa under a particularly local significance. Unlike in Rome, where the *flamines* were not even responsible for the festivals they supervised, African provincial and municipal priests could have the duties of organizing and fundraising for spectacles. These responsibilities remained after the secularization of the offices. Even as the importance of civic festivals waned the *flaminium* and *sacerdotium provinciae* were sustained by their long history in the public life of Africa Proconsularis.

As early as the bilingual Punic/Latin Gaetulus inscription (*CIL* 8, 5209) the *flamen perpetuus* could serve as a Latin translation of a local African identity (cf. Shaw 2014). The local implications of this title were evidently powerful enough to proceed forward where Roman power withdrew. In fact, it was precisely the absence of Roman power in Vandal Africa that allowed the *flamen perpetuus* and *sacerdotalis provinciae* to survive there, as it had vanished elsewhere. Once Justinian had conquered the Vandal kingdom, the very mention of any *flaminium* disappears from the record and *sacerdotium* was used only to refer to the Syriarch and Phoeniarch. Against this background, the Astii of Ammaedara tell the story not of the Vandal assimilation of a Roman civic hierarchy, but the conservation of local power structures absent the imperial oversight.

## Bibliography

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