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# Possidius' Augustine and Post-Augustinian Africa\*

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LOUIS I. HAMILTON

Possidius' *Vita Augustini* was written sometime between 432 and 437 C.E. As an intimate friend and fellow bishop of Augustine, Possidius has provided historians with a wealth of detailed information. The *Vita* has not been appreciated as a literary piece in its own right with its own specific authorial concerns. The *Vita* does not fit easily into the style of late antique hagiography known by Augustine and his circle. Rather, the *Vita* suggests Possidius' response to the unique circumstances of post-Augustinian Africa: the crisis of the Vandal invasions and subsequent rise of Arianism. Possidius provided a model Augustine who, through his monastic and pastoral commitment, combated heresy and helped realize the *pax et unitas* of the Church. Possidius was willing to break with Augustine's self-portrayal in *Confessions* and recast the *Vita* more akin to Augustine's response to the taking of Rome in *City of God*.

In the world of late antique hagiography the *Vita Augustini* is a peculiar and important document. Written after Augustine's death in 432 and before 437 C.E. by the African bishop and monastic Possidius of Calama, it clearly bears the marks of a contemporary and an intimate friend.<sup>1</sup> While the *Vita* has come under increased scrutiny in recent years, it has

\*My sincere thanks to Professor Robert Dodaro, O.S.A., and Professor George Lawless, O.S.A., for their careful reading of early drafts of this article and for providing me the benefit of their considerable knowledge. I would also like to thank Dr. Przemyslaw Nehring for reading an early draft of this article, which is a much revised version of my Master's thesis (1994) written under the direction of Professor Thomas F. X. Noble.

1. Possidius' easy access to the documents of Augustine's life suggests that he was in Hippo at the time of the *Vita*'s composition, thus placing the date somewhere between 432 and 435 C.E. See André Mandouze, "Possidius," in *Prosopographie chrétienne du Bas-Empire*, Vol. 1 *Prosopographie de L'Afrique Chrétienne* (303–533), 890–96, at 895.

not been fully considered from the vantage of audience and historical context. When these are taken into proper consideration the purpose of Possidius' narrative becomes plain. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the Vandal invasions of Roman Africa, Possidius addresses his fellow African clerics and instructs them on how to respond to Arian Vandals in a post-Augustinian world. In fact, Possidius will point his readers to Augustine's monastic life and episcopal style as workable models that would lead to the conversion of the heretic invaders. It is for these reasons that he chose to compose the *Vita* in the manner that he did.

The richly detailed portrait of Augustine we find in the *Vita* is primarily one of a man, albeit a great man, who is caught up in the ecclesiastical duties of his office. The Augustine we see is a defender of the faith, writing and traveling across Roman Africa; a bishop ministering to his people as priest and judge; and a leader of a monastic community disciplining and informing his brethren. As a result of the wealth of detail it contains, the text has been put to great use by historians of late antiquity and those interested in reconstructing Augustine's African world, as well as by historians interested in Augustine's personality, spirituality, and monastic practice.<sup>2</sup> A recent excellent critical edition and four English translations

2. For examples of the former, see Christian Courtois, *Les Vandales et l'Afrique* (Paris: Arts et métiers graphiques, 1955); John Joseph Gavigan, O.S.A., *De Vita Monastica in Africa Septentrionali inde a temporibus S. Augustini usque ad invasiones Arabum*, Bibliotheca Augustiniana Medii Aevi, 2nd ser. 1 (Torino: Marietti, 1962); Frederick Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop: Religion and Society at the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, tr. Brian Battershaw and G. R. Lamb (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961); A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: 284–602*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964); Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972); idem, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); E. A. Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); and Frank M. Clover, *The Late Roman West and the Vandals* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum Reprints, 1993).

For examples of the latter use of the text, see Michele Cardinal Pellegrino, "S. Agostino visto dal Suo Primo Biografo Possidio," *La Scuola Cattolica* (1954): 249–66; eadem, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Editions Alsatia, 1960); Luc M. J. Verheijen, O.S.A., "La Vie de Saint Augustin par Possidius et la Regula Sancti Augustini," in *Mélanges Offerts a Mademoiselle Christine Mohrmann* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1963), 270–79; Pierre Courcelle, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire antécédents et postérité* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1963); Adolar Zumkeller, O.S.A., *Augustine's Ideal of the Monastic Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986); George Lawless, O.S.A., *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); idem, "Augustine's First Monastery: Thagaste or Hippo?" *Aug* 25 (1985): 65–78; Mark Vessey, "Conference and Confession: Literary Pragmatics in Augustine's 'Apologia contra Hieronymum,'" *J ECS* 1 (1993): 175–213; and Siver Dagemark, *Augustinus—Munk och Biskop:*

since World War I have made the text readily available and highlight its usefulness to historians.<sup>3</sup> While historians have used the *Vita* with great effectiveness, the study of the work for its own sake has been limited: most studies of the text may be categorized as essentially descriptive or attempting to explain certain difficulties within it.<sup>4</sup> Few historians, however, have attempted to read the *Vita* as a text of its own merit or to consider the objectives and motives of Possidius himself.<sup>5</sup> The explanation for this seems fairly straightforward: Possidius seems to interject very little of himself into the *Vita*. The text, where it can be verified, is almost entirely factually accurate; its Latin, while not classical, is simple and unadorned; and the *Vita* almost entirely lacks a miraculous element.<sup>6</sup>

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*Idealbild gentemot självbild i Vita Augustini och Confessiones* (Göteborg: Historiska institutionen i Göteborg, 1995).

3. The critical edition is in *Vite dei Santi, V.III: Vita di Cipriano, Vita di Ambrogio, Vita di Agostino*, ed. A. Bastianensen (Milan: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1981). The English translations are Herbert T. Weiskotten, ed. and tr., *Sancti Augustini Vita scripta a Possidio episcopo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1919); Mary Magdeleine Muller and Roy J. Deferrari, trs., "Life of Augustine by Bishop Possidius" in *Early Christian Biographies*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, FC 15 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1952), 67–124; F. R. Hoare, ed. and tr., *The Western Fathers* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954); Michele Pellegrino, *Vita di S. Agostino* (Alba: Edizioni Paoline, 1955), translated in *The Life of Saint Augustine*, ed. J. Rotelle (Villanova: Augustinian Press, 1988); and Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head, eds., *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1995), 37–75.

4. Weiskotten, *Sancti Augustini*; D. De Bruyne, "La texte et les citations Bibliques de la Vita S. Augustini de Possidius," *Revue Bénédictine* 42 (1930): 297–300; Pellegrino, "Possidio, Santo," *Enciclopedia Cattolica* (Vatican City, 1952); Hoare, *Western Fathers*; Pellegrino, *Vita di Agostino*; A. Bastiaensen, "The Inaccuracies in the Vita Augustini of Possidius," *SP* 16.2 (1985): 480–86; and Reginald Gregoire, O.S.B., "Riflessioni sulla tipologia agiografica della Vita Augustini di Possidio," *Aug* 25 (1985): 21–26.

5. Some recent exceptions, mostly concerned with hagiographic genre, are Philip Rousseau, "The Spiritual Authority of the 'Monk-Bishop', Eastern Elements in Some Western Hagiography of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," *JTS* ns 23 (1971): 380–419; Brigitta Stoll, "Einige Beobachtungen zur Vita Augustini des Possidius," *SP* 22 (1989): 344–50; idem, "Die Vita Augustini des Possidius als hagiographischer Text," *ZKG* 1 (1991): 1–13; Dagemark, *Augustinus*; Eva Elm, "Die Vita Augustini des Possidius: *The Work of a Plain Man and an Untrained Writer?* Wandlungen in der Beurteilung eines Hagiographischen Textes," *Aug* 37 (1997): 229–40, whose piece includes a useful survey of the historiography; and Erika J. Thorgerson, "The Vita Augustini of Possidius: The Remaking of Augustine for a Post-Augustinian World" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton, 1999).

6. VA 29.5. As we will discuss below, while this is the only directly miraculous moment in the *Vita*, Possidius does note that Augustine had exorcised demons from people. Thus, it is a reference to miracles performed by Augustine.

For all of these reasons historians have paid relatively little attention to Possidius' role in constructing a deliberate and unique *Vita* for Augustine; that is, to Possidius as biographer.<sup>7</sup> Michele Pellegrino, for example, concludes that because Possidius wished to portray the life and conduct of Augustine the "plan of the work thus took shape naturally."<sup>8</sup> The scholar of late antiquity and Augustine ought to be suspicious of, not comforted by, the relative lack of the miraculous in the *Vita Augustini*. Instead of reading Possidius as, "so pedestrian and unimaginative and honest a biographer," this essay will begin by considering the unique qualities of the *Vita* and why it took the shape it did.<sup>9</sup> This approach will help us understand more clearly what his objectives were in composing his *Vita*.

The text may be divided into roughly three sections.<sup>10</sup> The first of these sections (chs. 1–18) concerns itself primarily with the attack against heresy and the promotion of Catholic Christianity. The first Manichaean to be converted is Augustine himself, and Possidius describes his early asceticism, ordination, and monastic life (chs. 1–5). Augustine begins to preach against the Manichaeans and Donatists (chs. 6–16); the especially violent and divisive nature of the latter group is noted (ch. 12) and contrasted with pacific images of the work of Augustine and his monastic brothers (chs. 11 and 13). Possidius concludes his discussion of combat against heresy with the Arian and Pelagian controversies, noting that the Pelagian heresy was a contemporary and unresolved problem: "those new heretics of our own time."<sup>11</sup>

The second section (chs. 19–27) closely details Augustine's daily activi-

7. Patricia Cox [Miller], *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xii, considers the role of the biographer of the holy as engaging "an imaginal 'place between' where the history of the man's life and his biographer's vision of human divinity meet and mingle." It is therefore our task to use what we know about Augustine's life independent of Possidius in order to inform our understanding of the ambitions of Possidius the biographer.

8. Pellegrino, *Vita di S. Agostino*, 18. He assumes that Possidius could have only portrayed the life and conduct of Augustine by enumerating his monastic and episcopal responsibilities.

9. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, xviii. Van der Meer may have thought his own description overgenerous as he felt compelled to add that Adolf von Harnack considered Possidius a man "wholly unreceptive to genius."

10. With the exception of the third section, I am in general agreement with Pellegrino as to the breakdown of the sections; however, I disagree on their overall themes. For a discussion of the proper way to divide the text, see Pellegrino, *Vita di S. Agostino*, 32–33 nn. 42–44. More recently, see Stoll, "Beobachtungen," 344–50.

11. VA 18.1 and 18.5.

ties as both a monk and a bishop. Possidius tells his readers how Augustine was concerned, in choosing his clothes and flatware for example, to be ostentatious neither in wealth nor in poverty.<sup>12</sup> The food served in those dishes would typically be vegetarian but might contain meat if there were guests or sick brothers, and wine was permitted.<sup>13</sup> Gossiping, lying, and swearing oaths were among the chief offenses of the house; however, forgiveness was to be obtained easily.<sup>14</sup>

Possidius carefully describes the way in which Augustine carried out his episcopal duties beyond the confines of the monastic community. Augustine often listened to legal disputes up until, and sometimes through, the dinner hour; he heard cases that involved non-Christians, used these cases to note how each member of the community was progressing in faith and morals, and heard them without remuneration.<sup>15</sup> We learn from the *Vita* that Augustine rarely used his position to promote the cause of either family or friends. Possidius attempts to demonstrate the effectiveness of, and to encourage, Augustine's modest approach.<sup>16</sup> Augustine, we learn, was liberal with the poor; diligent in his care for widows, orphans, and the sick; and disinterested in the administration of church property. He preferred legacies left by the dead to inheritances, and legacies were to be offered rather than requested.<sup>17</sup> Further, Augustine kept his relations with women tightly circumscribed, lest they prove a source of temptation or rumor.<sup>18</sup> Lastly, Augustine offered advice as to when one ought not to offer advice.<sup>19</sup>

The final third of the *Vita* deals with Augustine's activities during the Vandal invasion.<sup>20</sup> This section (chs. 28–31) contains the final days and

12. VA 22.1. His tableware is described in 22.5.

13. VA 22.2–4; 25.2. The amount of wine would be reduced as a form of punishment.

14. VA 22.6–7; 25.2–3, 6.

15. VA 19.2–4.

16. VA 20.1–5.

17. VA 23; 24.

18. VA 26.

19. VA 27.1–5. Augustine thought one ought not advise for or against marriage, military service, or whether to attend a banquet in one's hometown. In these matters it is too easy to attract the anger of someone who feels misguided.

20. Pellegrino chooses to begin the final third of the *Vita* with 27.6, thereby entitling the section "Last Years and Death." This novel break seems to me unnecessary and even off the point. In this final third Possidius is concerned more to discuss the Vandals than Augustine's death. Ch. 30, the letter to Bishop Honoratus that is concerned solely with the Vandal invasion, constitutes 324 of these last 440 lines of the Bastiaensen edition. In those remaining 116 lines Augustine's approach to death is set neatly into the context of the Vandal invasion.

death of Augustine. In this section, with the advent of the Vandals, Augustine is described five times as weeping. This is unlike the portraits of the deaths of the ascetics and martyrs Augustine and his brethren would have known.<sup>21</sup> It is made clear that Augustine's tears were in response to the destructive power the Vandals would unleash on the African Church and people.<sup>22</sup> They wept and groaned in sorrow recalling the words of the psalmist, "You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is upright," and they prayed the Psalms of repentance (ch. 31).<sup>23</sup> It is here at Augustine's deathbed that Possidius provided his only description of an Augustinian miracle.<sup>24</sup>

In ch. 30 Possidius inserted a long letter, otherwise unpreserved, from Augustine to Bishop Honoratus of Thiave concerning the proper response of bishops and clerics in the face of the Vandal onslaught. This "very useful and even indispensable" document, as Possidius describes it, comprises slightly more than one-fifth the content of the *Vita*.<sup>25</sup> As such, it demonstrates his clear preoccupation with the Vandal crisis. Augustine, slightly impatient in this his second letter to Honoratus on the matter, elaborated very specifically that the clergy ought to remain in order to provide the sacraments to the faithful.<sup>26</sup>

It is the combination of detail, everyday experience, emphasis on witnessed events, and the relative lack of the miraculous that allowed one recent historian to claim, "No one doubts the authenticity of the *Life of*

21. To compare this with texts Augustine would have been familiar with (either directly, as we know from his *Confessions*, or through the liturgy): Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony* (s. 58) in Carolinne White, tr., *Early Christian Lives* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 67; Jerome's *Life of St. Paul of Thebes* (s. 11) in White, *Early Christian Lives*, 81; the disposition of Perpetua at her death, *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Saints Perpetua and Felicity* (c. 6, 4) (Willits, Calif.: Eastern Orthodox Books, 1991); or Paulinus of Milan's *Life of Saint Ambrose* 42.19–21 in *Vita Sancti Ambrosii Mediolanensis Episcopi a Paulino eius notario as beatum Augustinum Conscripta: A Revised Text, and Commentary with an Introduction and Translation*, ed. M. S. Kaniecka (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1928) (hereafter *VAB*). Or to compare with other important contemporary *Lives*: the fearless death of Macrina recounted by Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of St. Macrina* (Willits, Calif.: Eastern Orthodox Books, 1975), 42–45; and Jerome's *Life of Hilarion* (s. 45) in White, *Early Christian Lives*, 115.

22. VA 29.6.

23. Ps 119.137 is quoted from VA 29.13. Pellegrino suggests that the penitential Psalms would have been Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.

24. VA 29.5.

25. VA 30.2. Ch. 30 constitutes roughly 324 of the 1498 lines to which the Latin text runs in the Bastiaensen edition.

26. VA 30.30–31.

*Augustine*.”<sup>27</sup> If it is true that historians so easily accept Possidius’ veracity, it is also odd that he would have written a biography of Augustine so satisfying to modern tastes when the predilections of Possidius’ contemporaries (most notably Augustine) were so markedly different.

Frederik Van der Meer, although incorrectly attributing only one exorcism to Augustine, rightly describes Possidius’ presentation of these miraculous events as, “in the fifth century . . . nothing very remarkable.”<sup>28</sup> The historian must be careful not to confuse the credibility of the *Vita Augustini* with its lack of miracles. If one assumes that the work lacks miracle stories because of his reliance on witnessed events, one runs the risk of overlooking the role Possidius played in constructing this *Vita* in the manner that he chose. In this regard Van der Meer’s statement that Augustine performed only one “rather ordinary case of exorcism” is a telling oversight. What Van der Meer and others have overlooked is that Possidius tells his reader that Augustine, both as a priest and as a bishop, was able to expel demons (plural) from *people*.<sup>29</sup> The significance of this remark ought not to be underestimated, as it suggests that Augustine was known to have performed more than one exorcism over the course of his ordained life.<sup>30</sup> It reflects the instincts of a modern to minimize the miraculous as problematic. It is these instincts which allow him to dismiss Possidius the author as, “so pedestrian and unimaginative and honest a biographer.”<sup>31</sup> These unrecounted exorcisms also point out that Possidius claimed to have had access to miraculous stories that he chose not to relate.<sup>32</sup>

27. Pellegrino, *Vita di S. Agostino*, 28. Mandouze, “Possidius,” 895, describes the work as displaying “une honnêteté scrupuleuse.” In fact, Dagmar Luise Ludwig, *Der Sog. Indiculus des Possidius. Studien zur Entstehungs—und Wirkungsgeschichte einer spätantiken Augustin-Bibliographie* (Ph.D. diss., Göttingen, 1984), does question the authenticity of the work. This position has not been widely accepted; see Almut Mutzenbecher, “Bemerkungen zum *Indiculum* des Possidius Eine Rezension,” *REAug* 33 (1987): 128–31. A later authorship seems improbable to me despite Possidius’ “inaccuracies.”

28. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 274.

29. VA 29.4: *Novi quoque eundem et presbyterum et episcopum pro quibusdam energuminis patientibus ut oraret rogatum, eumque in oratione lacrimas fundentem Deum rogasse, et daemones ab hominibus recessisse. 5. Itemque ad aegrotantem et lecto vacantem quemdam cum suo aegroto venisse et rogavisse, ut eidem manum imponeret, quo sanus esse posset . . .*

30. Possidius considers these unnamed exorcisms to have been of the same order as the one healing which Augustine performs in the *Vita*. He introduces that miracle, which immediately follows his reference to the exorcisms, with the comparative rather than any one of more common conjunctions (see note 28 above).

31. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, xviii.

32. Paulinus of Milan pays much closer attention to Ambrose’s exorcisms; see VAb 20.1, 21.20, 43.5–10, and 48.15–16.



Indeed, Augustine's own inclinations in hagiography appear to have been more typical of the fifth-century "uomo divino" type than those reflected in the piece that Possidius produced.<sup>33</sup> The divine-man (also "son of god") genre is characterized by the holy man's capacity to command the supernatural and the miraculous.<sup>34</sup> Almost twenty years earlier the great saint had requested that the deacon Paulinus of Milan compose a *Vita* of Ambrose. Augustine specifically requested that the piece be written in the manner of Sulpicius Severus' *Vita Sancti Martini* and the lives of the desert fathers Antony and Paul.<sup>35</sup>

Those are among the central texts in promoting the divine-man model which "swept aside" the earlier hagiographic forms in the fifth through seventh centuries.<sup>36</sup> Paulinus' Ambrose is, like the *Vitae* Augustine asked him to emulate, of the divine-man or "son of god" model, emphasizing the charisma and miraculous power of the saintly bishop. In contrast, the *classico* or "godlike" holy man is a much more knowable figure, historically and personally, who commands neither people nor nature with the authority of the "son of god."<sup>37</sup> Possidius' Augustine is usually understood to be of this latter type, "piu severi e 'classici' modelli di santità [la santità senza miracoli della biografia agostiniana di Possidio . . .]"<sup>38</sup>

Patricia Cox Miller has argued against isolating the miraculous as absolutely defining the biographer of the holy man, something neither myself nor Cracco Ruggini are suggesting.<sup>39</sup> What Cracco Ruggini suggests is that the model of the holy man as miracle worker comes to dominate beginning in the fifth century, and thus she sees Possidius' *Vita* as a classical *Vita* rather than one of the divine-man type. What I want to emphasize here is that Augustine's predilections within the genre (Sulpicius

33. This term comes from Lellia Cracco Ruggini, "Il Miracolo nella cultura del Tardo Impero: concetto e funzione," in *Hagiographie Cultures et Societes IV<sup>e</sup>-XII<sup>e</sup> Siècles*, Actes du Colloque organisé à Nanterre et à Paris, 2-6 mai 1979 (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1981), 180.

34. Cox [Miller], *Biography in Late Antiquity*, 21-24. While her study is concerned with earlier sources, it has proven very useful to me, especially since the *Vita Augustini* is often compared with these earlier lives.

35. For 412-13 C.E. as the date of the composition of the *VAb* see E. Lamirande, *Paulin de Milan et la Vita Ambrosii: aspects de la religion sous le Bas-Empire* (Paris: Belarmin, 1983), 7. Paulinus addressed his work to Augustine as the fulfillment of his request, *VAb*. 1.1.

36. Ruggini "Miracolo," 180.

37. Cox [Miller], *Biography in Late Antiquity*, 40-43.

38. Ruggini, "Miracolo," 180.

39. Cox [Miller], *Biography in Late Antiquity*, 49.

Severus' *Life of St. Martin*, Jerome's *Life of Paul of Thebes*, Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, Paulinus' *Life of Saint Ambrose*, and even the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*), and thus the subset of literature that we can be confident the community at Hippo was familiar with, all contain more intensive miraculous elements than Possidius' *Vita*. Thus, I will not suggest that all hagiography of the late antique Roman world was dominated by the miraculous (although much of it was); for our purposes it is important to recognize that the miraculous element was (1) increasingly normative and (2) prominent in the hagiographical material Augustine himself was interested in during the later part of his life. Therefore, Possidius' *Vita* is imaginative in ways that demand our attention because it steps out of the divine-man model. Possidius is willing to use and set aside genre to meet his own objectives. We shall see that he treats Augustine's conversion via the divine-man model but steps outside of that model when it comes to relating the miraculous because of the purpose and audience of his *Vita*.

Possidius' portrait of Augustine's ascetic life highlights the curious blend of genre and originality with which he chose to describe the saint. Others have noted that by placing Augustine's conversion to asceticism after his baptism at Cassiciacum rather than prior to it, Possidius was following the so-called divine-man type. *Vitae* such as those of Antony, Cyprian, Martin, and Ambrose all emphasize either that it is impossible to lead an ascetic life before baptism or that such efforts go against nature.<sup>40</sup> In this way, Possidius' work fits nicely within their genre. However, the modesty of Augustine's asceticism runs contrary to the divine-man type as exhibited in all but that of Paulinus' work (written at Augustine's instruction).

Through an examination of the events of Augustine's life we shall see that Possidius had both the resources and ample reason to write in the more popular divine-man genre. It was Possidius' intended audience, circumstances, and objective in writing the *Vita* that caused him to compose this unique document in the manner that he did.

The relative dearth of miracles in the *Vita Augustini* ought to surprise, rather than comfort, the historian for two reasons: we know both that other miracles not found in the *Vita* were associated with the person of Augustine and that Augustine spent the last decades of his life promoting

40. Stoll, "Beobachtungen," 347–48. For further evidence linking the VA to other *uomo divino* antecedents see Rousseau, "Spiritual Authority," 404–19.

the miraculous in Roman Africa.<sup>41</sup> Thus, it is appropriate to wonder why Possidius chose not to record Augustinian miracle stories, and an Augustinian skepticism is not a satisfying explanation. Within a year of the edict condemning the Donatists (412 C.E.), for example, Augustine asked Paulinus of Milan to compose the *Vita Ambrosii* in the divine-man genre.<sup>42</sup> A few years later, c. 416 C.E., Paulus Orosius returned from Palestine with relics of the protomartyr St. Stephen. This cult “was promoted by Augustine in every way possible.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, in the last years of his life, while composing his *Retractationes*, Augustine would recant his earlier incredulity.<sup>44</sup>

With the advent of the cult of St. Stephen, Augustine began the practice of recording into *libelli* the miraculous events that took place around the *memoria* and reading them regularly to his congregation. Possidius was among the bishops who, at Augustine’s encouragement, followed this same practice. St. Stephen’s *memoria* at Calama soon surpassed Hippo in the number of miracles.<sup>45</sup>

The aged bishop’s enthusiasm for the cult of the saints seems to have become known to Christians around the Mediterranean. He sent two complainants in a dispute (both brothers in his household) to Nola to give testimony before the shrine of St. Felix. Later, Paulinus of Milan, trusting Augustine’s enthusiasm for the African martyrologies, requested that the bishop compose a treatise on their deeds (Augustine declined but expressed his earnest desire for such a work).<sup>46</sup> Also in 418/9 a letter of appeal sought Augustine’s intervention in the Priscillian affair. Written in

41. He had not always been so enthused. Indeed, throughout the Donatist controversy Augustine had been extremely cool toward both the North African martyr cults and the miraculous generally. See W. H. C. Frend, “The North African Cult of the Martyrs: From Apocalyptic to Hero-Worship,” in *Jenseitsvorstellungen in Antike und Christentum* (Münster Westfalen: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1982), 162–63.

42. That is to say, according to the form of the *Vitae* of Antony, Martin, and Paul. *VAb* 1.1.

43. Frend, “North African Cult,” 164. The close timing between the defeat of the Donatists and the composition of the *VAb* seems to suggest that the events were coordinated in Augustine’s mind. Such a shift in “policy” toward the miraculous and saints’ cults would have allowed the Donatist congregations to find a niche more comfortably in the Catholic churches. What is more, by closely integrating the cult of the martyrs (indeed, by incorporating the protomartyr!) into the Catholic community Augustine would have undermined the Donatist claim to be the church of the martyrs.

44. *Retractationes* 1.13.7. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 541.

45. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 544.

46. Letter 29\*, tr. Robert Bryan Eno, S.S., *Saint Augustine: Letters Volume VI* (1\*–29\*), FC 81 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 193–95.

the manner of the African martyrologies, it hoped to move the famous bishop to action.<sup>47</sup>

Several miraculous stories were associated with Augustine. The one miracle that he does perform in the *Vita* was part of the "rite of healing" that he would have performed countless times in the course of his ordained life.<sup>48</sup> A consideration of the miraculous events surrounding Augustine suggests that Possidius would have had access to even more miraculous stories had he been interested in seeking them out.<sup>49</sup> Had he wished to, therefore, he had the materials to write a *Vita* much more like Paulinus' *Vita Ambrosii* and more typical of the popular divine-man model. Why was he not so inclined? In its essence this question asks, why did Possidius write this *Vita Augustini*?

The answer may be found in his intended audience and how it lent shape to his work. From the outset of his work we can see that Possidius envisions a circumscribed audience for the *Vita*. His audience will *not* be the enthused crowds that filled the churches of late antiquity. It was to such a congregation that Augustine had preached over one hundred extant sermons concerning the saints and martyrs (at least five of which concern miracles within Hippo).<sup>50</sup> Augustine referred to these as the

47. So Madeleine Moreau argues, "Lecture de la Lettre 11\* de Consentius à Augustin: Un pastiche hagiographique?" in *Les Lettres de Saint Augustin découvertes par Johannes Divjak* (Paris: Etudes augustinienes, 1983), 215–23.

48. VA 27.2. For imposition of hands see reference in Pellegrino, *Vita di S. Agostino*, 116 n. 2. It should be noted that at least two of the miracles in the VAb are attributable to this ritual; see VAb 10 and 28.

49. See the example of the Curma's vision of Augustine described in Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 534. Another dream of Augustine with miraculous effect is in *Sermo* 323.21, the famous story of Paul and Palladia. See Robert Bryan Eno, S.S., *Saint Augustine and the Saints* (Villanova: Augustinian Press, 1985). Also, in Book 22.8 of *City of God* we learn that Augustine prayed with a man who was then cured after several unsuccessful operations. It is interesting to note that Jacobus de Voragine, in the late thirteenth century, was more than happy to attribute this and other miracles from Book 22 to Saint Augustine; see *The Golden Legend*, ed. William G. Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 2.126–27. Once again, materials were available for Possidius to construct a very different sort of life had he been so inclined. In this regard it is interesting to notice the similarity between the events of *Sermo* 323 and VAb 52, to see how a similar story can be presented with great effect.

50. *Sermo* 94 is an example of a *libellus* read instead of a sermon. Augustine would have saints' lives read "when he was too weary to preach at length (*Sermo* 94)." See Eno, *Saint Augustine and the Saints*, 82. In addition to Augustine's preaching on miracles of Hippo in *Sermones* 320–24 there is also the lengthy list of primarily regional miracles in *de Civitate dei* 22.8.2–22, commented on by Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 544–45.

“unadorned” public record that had so moved and “delighted” him.<sup>51</sup> Possidius’ audience would not be so broad. The uniqueness of the *Vita* stems from its intended clerical and African audience and from its practical (as distinct from devotional or liturgical) purpose.

Possidius may have assumed that if his readers had not already read *Confessions*, they would at least have had access to the autobiographical information it contained.<sup>52</sup> He was not addressing the casual reader or auditor. He fully expected his readers to take advantage of the *Indiculus* of Augustine’s writings that he had appended. He instructed them either to write or travel to Hippo for the best editions (an expensive and at this time somewhat dangerous prospect, only for “those who love God’s truth more than temporal riches”).<sup>53</sup> From this we can assume his audience to have been those “highly sophisticated” men of letters who formed the elite clerical and lay leaders of the Church.<sup>54</sup>

We can narrow this group even further. Possidius included a letter, otherwise unpreserved, from Augustine to Bishop Honoratus of Thiave concerning the proper behavior of bishops and clerics in the face of the Vandal onslaught. As noted earlier, this document accounts for more than twenty percent of the total text of the *Vita*. Clearly, this significant section of the text is only, as Possidius says, “very useful and even indispensable” to African ecclesiastical ministers and strongly suggests that they were the *Vita*’s primary audience. The letter does not address the laity at all, only referring to them vis-à-vis the clergy’s obligation to remain with them in times of danger. What is more, the thrust of Augustine’s argument in that letter, that the clergy ought to remain with the people so as to administer

51. Letter 29\* (FC 81:194).

52. VA Pref. 5. Possidius tells us that he will condense the discussions of Augustine’s conversion and early life, as Noble and Head, *Soldiers of Christ*, 31; and Hoare, *Western Fathers*, 191, have also noted.

53. VA 18.10: “In this way, those who love God’s truth more than temporal riches will be able to choose the ones they wish to read and become acquainted with; then they may apply to the Church of Hippo to make a copy, or they may visit the library in Hippo, where they may find more correct copies, or may make inquiry wherever they can, and, having found what they want, may make a copy and keep it, and generously allow others to copy it in turn.” Not to belabor the obvious, but clearly Possidius hoped and even anticipated his audience would pursue Augustine’s writings via the *Indiculus*.

54. Brown, *Augustine*, 158–60. I hesitate to apply the phrase *servi dei*, but Possidius’ simple reference clearly intends people of letters with the resources and willingness to seek out Augustine’s writings. Thus, he appears to have intended sophisticated and committed Christians. These would be people like Augustine or Possidius but could include lay non-monastic Christians also. On the *servi dei* see Lawless, *Augustine*, 55.

the sacraments, demonstrates that the letter was concerned only to address the clerical and not the lay leaders of Roman Africa.<sup>55</sup> So, at least this part, an entire one-fifth of the *Vita*, is directed toward an exclusively African, clerical audience.

As in the letter to Honoratus, the wealth and kind of detailed information concerning Augustine's pastoral and monastic habits which fills the second part of the *Vita* (chs. 19–27) provides a practical model of behavior helpful only to clerics. The types of issues Possidius addressed include Augustine's concern to use his judicial office to examine the spiritual progress of his flock, his approach with public officials, how and for what brothers were punished, the administration of Church property, etc. (see above). These are the daily concerns of an ecclesiastic. This kind of detailed description of Augustine's communal life, while perhaps of passing interest to a late antique congregation, would have been truly useful and important only to fellow ecclesiastics and to monks in particular.<sup>56</sup>

Possidius described certain issues on which Augustine was unwilling to advise people (see note 18 above). This is of particular interest since, although it is advice Augustine attributed to Ambrose and can be located in Ambrose's works, Paulinus of Milan, Ambrose's hagiographer, was silent on the matter. Possidius, unlike Paulinus, did not fill his work with edifying stories from the life of a holy man in order to move a congregation or to evangelize non-Christians; these minutiae were provided by Possidius to describe the proper behavior of a bishop and a monk.

Closer comparison with the *Vita Ambrosii*, which was consciously imitative of the divine-man model and thus more typical of it, illuminates Possidius' objectives. Paulinus, despite his objections, is not concerned to provide his reader with an imitable model of asceticism or pastoral practice and so is content simply to allude to these ideas. He dedicates only one part of a short chapter to the Ambrose *multae abstinentiae et multarum vigiliarum vel laborum*. Paulinus, an amanuensis, includes *operam . . . scribendi propria manu libros* ("the work . . . of writing books with his

55. VA 30.10, 29–31 especially.

56. Lawless, *Augustine*, 127–35, concludes that as Possidius' *Indiculus* of Augustine's works is incomplete, the absence of a *Regula* does not necessarily exclude Augustinian authorship. The strong monastic interests of Possidius, interests which he clearly anticipated in his reader, while neither proving nor disproving the authenticity of the *Regula*, do make its omission a still greater riddle. The *Regula* may still have simply been assumed by Possidius. Lawless (128) also observes that "most significantly" Augustine himself probably did not consider the *Regula* as a document intended for a broader audience since it was a *libellus*, a category not included in Augustine's own assessment of his public corpus. Thus, Possidius' audience precluded the *Regula*.

own hand”) among his short, if superlative laden, list of Ambrose’s ascetic disciplines.<sup>57</sup> The few additional lines Paulinus adds on Ambrose’s pastoral duties offer little more in the way of detail and pale in comparison to the depth of detail Possidius is concerned to provide. Paulinus’ purpose was simply to point out that Ambrose (like prior great saints and bishops) practiced some form of asceticism, not to compose a didactic piece that could describe to the reader the proper forms of ascetic practice.<sup>58</sup>

The differences between Paulinus and Possidius are of audience and purpose. Paulinus is struggling to convey the charisma of Ambrose. His Ambrose is the *episcopus venerabilis* who evoked precisely such a response in those who came into contact with him.<sup>59</sup> Thus, we are told that angels protect and accompany Ambrose, that important people travel from as far as Persia to meet him, and that demons recognize and fear him.<sup>60</sup> Possidius is more interested in providing a practicable model of an exemplary monk and bishop; he is concerned to show *sacerdos optimus Augustinus*.<sup>61</sup> Where Ambrose’s biographer paints in bold strokes and striking colors, Augustine’s is interested in the details of a well-lived life. An Arian sees an angel whispering into Ambrose’s ear, Paulinus tells us, as the bishop preaches and so converts. In Possidius’ *Vita* a Manichaean converts after Augustine delivers a rambling and disjointed sermon.<sup>62</sup> Paulinus’ portrait of Ambrose, like the miracles he performs, is intended to cause the reader to wonder at this great man’s unique relationship with God. It is not a relationship that the reader can readily duplicate. Possidius, on the other hand, portrays a praiseworthy bishop who is, therefore, a source of peace and unity but who remains an imitable model.<sup>63</sup> Few see angels next to their bishops, but many clerics can deliver a rambling sermon.

Much changed in the twenty or so years that passed between the composition of these two works. Although Paulinus was writing after the sack of Rome by the Gothic armies of Alaric, the Western Empire had not experienced the sort of destructive force that the Vandals applied in Africa. More importantly, the Vandals were unique among the Arian

57. *VAb* 38.1–2.

58. While the *VMart* (12) and the *VAnt* (Intro., 29) both claim to be providing a model, their portraits infrequently contain the sort of useful detail that would actually enable a disciple to live according to the precise customs that these ascetics lived.

59. *VAb* 38.1.

60. *VAb* 20.1; 25.11–20; 48.15–16 respectively.

61. *VA* Pref. 1.

62. *VAb* 17; *VA* 15.

63. *VA* 3.5.



Gothic armies in actively persecuting and converting the Catholics, and they did so with serious effect, though the Catholics and their churches persisted.<sup>64</sup>

Under such circumstances, with Catholicism in Roman Africa in jeopardy, Possidius provided his fellow bishops and clergy with a clear pattern for the appropriate conduct of their offices. Providing a model of behavior was the express purpose of the letter from Augustine contained in ch. 30, and indeed for much of the work. A triumphant *Vita* centered on the wonderful stories and events that surrounded Augustine's life would have inspired religious conviction but would not have contained the practical directions needed by a clerical community in a severe crisis, and one that lacked leadership. Missing the comfort of Augustine's friendship and leadership for the first time in forty years, Possidius would have had to face the Vandal challenge alone. Africa was without the peace and unity that Possidius presented as the fruit of Augustine's life, and he hoped to edify the church with its memory.<sup>65</sup> How then did Possidius imagine these recollections to be beneficial to his clerical audience; what need did he envision this work satisfying? Reexamining one of Possidius' best-known "inaccuracies" proves telling.

Possidius, as noted above, assumed that his audience was familiar with (or could easily gain familiarity with) Augustine's autobiographical

64. Frank M. Clover, "Carthage and the Vandals," in *Excavation at Carthage 1978, Conducted by the University of Michigan VII*, ed. J. H. Humphrey (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 1–22, reproduced in idem, *Late Roman West and the Vandals*. Clover (9) makes a strong case for continuity in Vandal Carthage, characterizing Victor of Vita as "a trenchant and misleading witness." The Vandal Arians did, however, seize the basilicas of Carthage even if Catholic worship continued outside the walls, as Clover (18) notes. Claude Lepelley, *Les Cités de L'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire* (Paris: Études augustinienes, 1981), 2.49, notes that because the attacks were concentrated on the aristocracy of Carthage the psychological effect across the Mediterranean was comparable to that of 410. Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 249 and 263, states that although the persecutions under Gaiseric were probably motivated more by wealth than religious difference, they "were evidently of a sustained savagery such as the imperial government rarely attained" . . . "however much one may discount the rhetorical exaggerations of Victor Vitensis and the later chroniclers. . . ." Gavigan, *Vita Monastica*, 115–16, offers a variety of evidence for the persecution of monastic bishops, especially under the Vandals in the fifth century. The effects of the invasion appear to have been more social/political and psychological than material or economic; see the archaeological evidence from Iol Caesarea (modern Cherchel, Algeria) in T. W. Potter, *Towns in Late Antiquity: Iol Caesarea and its Context* (Oxford: Ian Sanders Memorial Committee, 1995), 32–49.

65. VA Pref. 1–3.



*Confessions*. He informed his reader that he would not bother retelling those events in their entirety.<sup>66</sup> However, Possidius himself appears to have confused that narrative. Pierre Courcelle points out that Possidius inverted the order of Augustine's conversion to the life of asceticism and to Christianity. Possidius, it would seem, has completely overlooked Augustine's time at Milan. In so doing, he eliminated perhaps the most famous scene in *Confessions*: Augustine's final movement towards conversion after hearing the playing child call, *tolle lege!*<sup>67</sup> Possidius replaced that scene with Augustine, having been baptized by Ambrose, being moved to follow the gospel imperative to "sell all that he has and give to the poor."<sup>68</sup> Courcelle apologizes for this as a minor oversight by pointing out that in both versions Augustine is listening to the internal voice of conscience and converting.<sup>69</sup>

Given the improbability that Possidius, a friend of Augustine's for some forty years, committed such an oversight, some historians have begun to rethink Possidius' "oversight." Possidius, within the confines of hagiographic genre, could not depict Augustine the Manichaean heretic living an acceptable ascetic life. Before his baptism by Ambrose, Augustine is a figure of the heretic; he is the first in a series of conquered heretics in the course of the *Vita*.<sup>70</sup> What is more, he is a type of the divine-man; therefore, his conversion to Christianity must, in some way at least, precede (if not actually be) a conversion to an ascetic way of life.<sup>71</sup> Certainly, anyone who was familiar with Augustine's *Confessions* would have recognized this "error" on Possidius' part.

Rather than a simple oversight, it seems more plausible that Possidius was consciously placing Augustine within a strong monastic and ascetic tradition. Thus, Possidius was aware that he was writing within a hagio-

66. VA Pref. 5.

67. Courcelle, *Confessions de saint Augustin*, 612.

68. VA 2.2; Possidius quotes both Matt 19.21 and Luke 12.32–33.

69. Courcelle, *Confessions de saint Augustin*, 613, 616. Bastiaensen, "Inaccuracies," 481, dismisses this as a "rather unfortunate" example of Possidius' "streamlining" the narrative of Augustine's early life.

70. Stoll, "Vita Augustini," 6–7.

71. Stoll, "Beobachtungen," 347. She gives the examples of Cyprian and Martin. Cyprian did live as an ascetic before baptism, but this was viewed as "unnatural." Martin, despite his good intentions, is prevented only by his youth. Likewise, youth and a sense of obedience to his parents prevented Antony from pursuing an ascetic life (VAnt. sec. 1, p. 30). Ambrose, according to Paulinus, was likewise not allowed to become an ascetic before his baptism (VAb 7).

graphic tradition, that of Ambrose, Antony, and Martin.<sup>72</sup> By taking Augustine's asceticism out of the philosophical setting of Cassiciacum, placing it after his baptism, and conforming it to the monastic *exempla* of other *Vitae* (via the above noted connection through Luke 12.32–33 and Matt 19.21) Possidius placed Augustine's moderate ascetic life on a level with Antony, Martin, Cyprian, and Ambrose. This would have lent much credibility to the monastic life Possidius was attempting to promote among his fellow clerics.<sup>73</sup> Paulinus is likewise careful to construct for Ambrose a struggle for conversion, even though he is already a catechumen and about to become a bishop. Thus, he says that Ambrose, "wished to declare himself a philosopher, but was to become a true philosopher in Christ."<sup>74</sup>

Possidius lent further credence to the Augustinian way of life by connecting Augustine's triumphs over the various heresies to his ascetic way of living. Possidius continually connected Augustine and his monastic brethren to the growth in "peace and unity" of the Catholic Church.

Thus, the truth of the preaching of the Catholic Church became daily better known and more evident, and so did the way of life of these holy servants of God with their continence and austere poverty. Other churches began eagerly to ask and obtain bishops and clerics from the monastery that owed its origin and growth to this memorable man, with the result that the Church was established and consolidated in peace and unity.<sup>75</sup>

Clerics went out of Augustine's monastery like so many ripples building into a great wave rolling across Africa. "These men, inspired by the ideals of that holy community and being now scattered among the Churches of the Lord, founded monasteries in their turn; as zeal for the spread of God's word increased, they prepared brothers [*fratres*] for the priesthood and then advanced them to other Churches."<sup>76</sup>

Likewise, Augustine's writings flooded the Mediterranean.<sup>77</sup> Augustine

72. VA Pref. 2–3: "We know from our reading that other devout men belonging to our holy Mother, the Catholic Church, have set themselves a similar task in the past. . . . Therefore, I too, . . . have undertaken to tell, as well as the Lord allows me, of the origin, progress, and due end of that esteemed man."

73. It is important to remember that Augustine had been a monastic innovator; Lawless, *Augustine*, 52–58, esp. at 52 and 57.

74. VAb 7.25–26.

75. VA 11.2.

76. VA 11.3. Possidius is overlooking several notorious scandals among Augustine's brothers (see Augustine, *Sermo* 355/356 and *Letters* 13\* 77.78, 209; and 20\*).

77. VA 11.4.

and his fellow monks were building a specifically monastic unity. "More and more, with the aid of Christ, the peace, unity and fraternity of the Church of God grew and multiplied daily [*ac magis magisque, iuvante Christo, de die in augebatur et multiplicabatur pacis unitas et ecclesiae Dei fraternitas*]." <sup>78</sup> Possidius will return to this theme at least another nine times in the course of the text. <sup>79</sup> The hope of *pax et unitas* would have had great emotional appeal to the African church under the Vandals.

There is yet another echo of the Vandal invasion in the structure of the *Vita*. As we have seen, Possidius intended to discuss "the origin, course, and destined end" of the saint.

Therefore . . . I have undertaken to explain the origin, the development, and appointed end of the aforesaid venerable man, of which I have heard from him or am expert through many years of his loving fellowship, as God will grant me [*Idcirco . . . de praedicti venerabilis viri (Augustine) et exortu et procursu et debito fine, quae per eum didici et expertus sum, quamplurimis annis eius inhaerens caritati, ut Dominus donaverit, explicandum suscepi*]. <sup>80</sup>

Herbert T. Weiskotten observed that this is an echo of Augustine's *De civitate dei*. Weiskotten pointed his readers to *De civitate dei* 11.1 where Augustine states that he is going to discuss the origin, course, and end of the Heavenly and the Earthly Cities: *exortu et excursu et debitis finis*. <sup>81</sup> It is, perhaps, the imprecision of this allusion that has caused later scholars to overlook it.

There is no reason for us to assume that this was such a vague reference. There are five places in the entirety of Augustine's writings where he used the precise sequence of *exortus, procursus, debitis fines*; three times in the *De civitate dei*. <sup>82</sup> Upon close examination, the first of the latter proves the most likely candidate. As he closes Book 1, Augustine says that there are two cities, ". . . de quarum exortu et procursu et debitis finibus quod dicendum arbitror, quantum divinitus adiuvabor, expediam propter gloriam civitatis Dei, quae alienis a contrario comparatis clarius emi-

78. VA 13.12–14 (Weiskotten, *Sancti Augustini Vita*, 68). Stoll, "Beobachtungen," 350, argues that Possidius sees the African church being rebuilt along the model of the Apostolic church. However, as the model for Augustine's monastery is itself based on the Acts of the Apostles, it seems difficult to pull these two themes apart.

79. See VA 10.4, 11.5, 12.4, 12.5, 13.4, 14.7, 16.3, and 18.7.

80. VA Pref. 18–25 (Weiskotten, *Sancti Augustini Vita*, 38).

81. *Civ. dei* 11.1.31 (Weiskotten, *Sancti Augustini Vita*, 147 n. 1). Pellegrino, *Vita di S. Agostino*, 19, mentions only that this formula comes from *City of God*.

82. *Civ. dei* 1.35.15; 10.32.184; 18.1.1. See also *Retract.* 2.43.27 and *ep.* 8.8.

*nebit*.<sup>83</sup> It seems clear that in his Preface to the *Vita Augustini* Possidius was not simply referring vaguely to the *De civitate dei* but, in fact, either had this passage open before him or in mind. It is a poignant passage.

In Book 1 Augustine had been discussing the destruction of Rome by the Goths. Possidius would have been writing sometime after the sack of Hippo. The Vandals loomed large in Possidius' mind, and he committed almost a full third of the *Vita* to the invasion of North Africa and the siege of Hippo, and its significance, even though those events represent only the last two years of Augustine's long life. Possidius may have found the words of Book 1.35 comforting. There Augustine had spoken of the Heavenly City under siege. "She must bear in mind that among these enemies are hidden her future citizens; and when confronted with them she must not think it a fruitless task to bear with their hostility until she finds them confessing the faith."<sup>84</sup>

Possidius forms this into a central theme of his work. From Ambrose's baptism of Augustine the Manichaean heretic through the course of Augustine's confrontations with the various Christian heresies, Possidius' resounding refrain had been that Augustine's way of life and preaching, with the aid of divine grace, had triumphed over heresy and brought *pax et unitas* to North Africa.<sup>85</sup> Even in the end God spared the great saint and Hippo, for a little while at least, because of his earnest prayer. Augustine had told his brethren, "You know that during our present disaster I pray God to deliver this city from the enemies that surround it or, if he decide differently, to make his servants strong in accepting his will or at least to take me from the present world to himself."<sup>86</sup>

Possidius tells us that God has granted to Augustine two of his prayers. It is this theme of the deliberate triumph of Catholic Christianity and the Augustinian way of life which Possidius hoped would make his fellow clerics strong in the face of the Vandal threat, strong enough to meet the demands of Augustine's last letter and minister to the people. Like the *De*

83. *Civ. dei* 1.35.16–20: "My task, as far as I shall receive divine assistance, will be to say what I think necessary in explanation of the origin, development, and appointed end of those two cities. And this I shall do to enhance the glory of the City of God, which will shine more brightly when set in contrast with cities of other allegiance." The English translation is from *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984), 46.

84. *Civ. dei* 1.35.3–5.

85. On the theme of peace and unity see also Stoll, "Beobachtungen," 350; and eadem, "*Vita Augustini*," 6–7.

86. VA 29.1.

*civitate dei* this work emphasizes the inscrutable and providential character of human history, that the history of the Church is not tied to the specific history of any one particular place or political entity.

In the *Vita* the Vandals are presented as simply one more group of heretics, the latest in a series of enemies of the Church who are to be endured and converted. They did not represent the defeat of the Catholic Church. To the extent that they were God's "just judgment" they fit into a larger, if inscrutable, divine plan for salvation. The God who converted the Manichaeans, the God who "brings about the salvation of souls when and as he wills and by whatever instruments he wills, whether or not these realize what they are doing," would likewise convert the Vandals.<sup>87</sup>

It seems likely that Possidius' comparison of the circumstances of the *De civitate dei* to the Vandal crisis may even have emerged from his last conversations with Augustine. Possidius, Augustine, and their fellow bishops and clergy prayed and wept over the Vandal siege, reciting Psalm 118.137 ("You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is equitable"). They discussed all of these events "very frequently" (*saepissime*), and Augustine would steel their strength by reminding them of Plotinus' words, "No one is great who is amazed that wood and stone collapse and mortals die."<sup>88</sup> Augustine had quoted this often in the past, then in reference to the sack of Rome in 410 C.E.<sup>89</sup> Now it took on a new immediacy. In the light of the Vandal siege of Hippo their thoughts returned to that fateful day. Augustine may have reminded his brothers in those last days of that earlier calamity and of his response to it in *De civitate dei*. In view of the disaster that surrounded them a hope for the *pax et unitas* that Augustine had won for North Africa would likely have had a strong appeal for Possidius, and this is what the *Vita* offered his fellow clerics.

A triumphalistic *Vita* filled with the miraculous events surrounding Augustine's person and the force of his personality would have only emphasized the loss of their formidable leader and rung hollow before the reality of Vandal persecution. Indeed, Augustine's own advice to Honoratus had implied the contrary: "We ask, nonetheless, what we ought to do so as not to seem to tempt the Lord by always looking for miracles from on high."<sup>90</sup>

87. VA 15.6.

88. VA 28 11–13 (quoting Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.4.7).

89. Cited by Augustine, *Sermo* 81.9; 279.2; *de Civitate dei* 2.2. See Bastiaensen, "Inaccuracies," 486; P. Courcelle, *Histoire littéraire des grandes invasions germaniques* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1964), 77.

90. VA 30.39.

Possidius' exclusion of the miraculous should therefore be seen as one aspect of a deliberate decision to set aside the contemporary norms of a hagiographical form he otherwise embraced. This decision should alert the reader to the unique set of circumstances surrounding the creation of the *Vita* and its unique purpose. The most appropriate comparison is provided by Paulinus' *Life of Ambrose* since it was written at Augustine's behest and according to the model he suggested. That work, however, is concerned to show that Ambrose was a great servant of God and not to offer an imitable model for Christians to follow. Possidius is concerned, by contrast, to show Augustine as having converted to monasticism and to offer the reader the details of a lived monastic life. This monastic life is linked by Possidius to the conversion of heretics and to the creation of peace and unity within the Church. To that end, the *Vita* served in part as a context for, an introduction to, and a device to circulate the letter to Bishop Honoratus (which comprises more than twenty percent of the *Life*). This letter clearly links the writing of the *Vita* with the pressing concern of the invading Vandal Arians. Possidius' *Vita* was, thus, intended to encourage and promote the pursuit of an Augustinian-style episcopal monasticism as the means to overcome the Vandal enemy and to win them as future citizens of the heavenly city.

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