

30 minutes on Augustine ¹

THE GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT HIM

Augustine was born on 13 November of 354AD in a town called Thagaste (The modern day Souk-Ahras, in Algeria). His parents named him Aurelius Augustinus but he became known to the world as Augustine. He died on 28th August of 430 in Hippo. He died at the age of 76 in Hippo.

His parents were the local people of Thagaste- Berbers.

His Father was Patricius. He was a local councilor. This meant that he had to use his resources and money to fund the Local events like sports and development projects and this sapped all his wealth. He died a poor man. The father was for a long time not a Christian. He lived a permissive lifestyle, engaging in sexual affairs when already married to Monica, Augustine's Mother. He also did lots of alcohol. He died a Christian though.

His mother's name was Monica. She was raised up as a Christian and so she desired to raise her children as Christian.

In fact she prayed so much to have Augustine converted to Christianity. She had him learning about the Christian faith, doing the catechism classes in preparation for baptism. Although the baptism was not to happen until way much later to reduce the length of a life lived in sin after baptism. In fact many people preferred being baptized at their death point for them to go to heaven. (Obviously grace was not yet understood well in this time)

He had one brother and one or two sisters who not much is known about.

THE ENVIRONMENT HE WAS BORN IN

Augustine's African homeland had been part of Rome's empire since the destruction of Carthage five hundred years before his birth. Carthage had been rebuilt by Rome as the metropolis of Roman Africa, wealthy once again but posing no threat. The language of business and culture throughout Roman Africa was Latin.

The dominant religion of Africa became Christianity--a religion that violently opposed the traditions of old Rome but that could not have spread as it did without the prosperity and unity that Rome had brought to the ancient world.

SCHOOL LIFE

Augustine was taken to school in Thagaste where he learned the languages. Here he learned and enjoyed the Latin language but hated Greek. Consequently he did not do well in Greek and this really

¹ This article is an edited version of the essay by James J. O'Donnell, [Augustine the African](#).

affected his studying Philosophy written by other scholars because he had to read their work second hand (translations)

His parents were did not have enough money to pay for his education. Finally, with the help of an affluent family friend (uncle), they managed to scrape together enough to send him to the nearest university town a dozen miles away Madaura then to Carthage at around the age of 17.

Augustine read lots of Philosophers works especially Cicero he had to read a work of Cicero's called the *Hortensius* (the book has since been lost) which taught philosophy as some way of life and the discipline that is required for this. Until the time of Augustine's conversion to Christianity Cicero would remain the one master from whom the young African learned the most; Augustine is in many ways the greatest of Cicero's imitators in point of Latin style.

YOUTH LIFE

Of Augustine's childhood we know only what he chooses to tell us in the highly selective memoirs that form part of the Confessions. He depicts himself as a rather ordinary sort of child, good at his lessons but not fond of school, eager to win the approval of his elders but prone to trivial acts of rebellion, quick to form close friendships but not always able to foresee their consequences.

At the age of 17 he left home for Carthage for University studies. Not long after, his father died and his mother was left with modest resources and nothing to tie her to Thagaste. Augustine himself quickly set up housekeeping with a young woman he met in Carthage, by whom a son was born not long after. This woman would stay with Augustine for over a decade and, though we do not know her name, he would say that when he had to give her up to make a society marriage in Milan "his heart ran blood" with grief as she went off to Africa--perhaps to enter a convent. The son, Adeodatus, stayed with Augustine until premature death took him in late adolescence.

Augustine taught in Carthage close to 7 years. Seven years in Carthage matured the young teacher into a formidable scholar and orator. But he became unhappy with the students here who were undisciplined and cheated him of school fees. So he moved on to try building a career in rhetoric.

There was a job offer in Milan. Augustine entered the contest and won so he became a professor of rhetoric here (an orator).

THE ROAD TO CONVERSION

Augustine was brought up in Christianity but he was not a Christian himself.

As he grew up he started engaging in sinful acts as a young boy. At some point in his life he felt his life was not going well. He craved for a more disciplined life. He was then led to reading and studying philosophy to see whether it will give him a better way of life. In those days wanted to get the wisdom of life. This is when he read a book by a philosopher called Cicero- Hortinsius which seemed to have provided a better way of life.

The zeal for philosophy led first in what may seem a strange direction. Fired with the love of wisdom from his reading of the quintessential Roman politician, Augustine immediately joined a religious cult from Persia that had planted itself in the Roman world as a rival of Christianity: Manichaeism.

The world the Manichees imagined was torn between two contrary powers: the perfectly good creator and the perfectly evil destroyer. This is dualism. The world seen by human eyes was the battleground for their cosmic conflict. The Manichees and their followers were the few who were on the side of the good spirit and who would be rewarded for their allegiance with eternal bliss. In the meantime all sorts of misfortune might befall the individual, but none of the wicked things he found himself doing were his fault. If the devil does compel sin, then guilt does not ensue.

But while Augustine soon dissented privately from the Manichees, he did not break with them publicly. Even when he had decided the slogans were nonsense, they still provided the assurance that all the evil in Augustine's life was not his own fault and could not be let go of easily. Augustine associated with Manichees who thought he was one of them as late as 384, more than a decade after his first involvement with the sect.

Augustine began to sit through a few of the bishop's sermons. Here Christianity began to appear to him in a new, intellectually respectable light. As before, his most pressing personal problem was his sense of evil and his responsibility for the wickedness of his life; with the help of technical vocabulary borrowed from Platonic philosophy Ambrose proposed a convincing solution for Augustine's oldest dilemma. Augustine had besides a specific objection to Christianity that only a professor of belles-lettres could have: he could not love the scriptures because their style was inelegant and barbaric. Here again Ambrose, elegant and far from barbaric, showed Augustine how Christian exegesis could give life and meaning to the sacred texts.

Two years later, while on a visit to the coastal city of Hippo Regius, he found himself virtually conscripted into the priesthood by the local congregation. He broke into tears as they laid hands on him in the church and his fate became clear. Cynics in the audience thought these were tears of ambition and disappointment at not being made bishop straight off, but they were only tears of deeply felt inadequacy. Augustine had for some time been avoiding cities that needed bishops in fear of just such a fate.

His abilities were quickly recognized, and by 393 he was being asked to preach sermons in place of his bishop, who was a Greek speaker by birth. The old man passed on in 395 and Augustine assumed responsibility for the church at Hippo. He would remain at this post until his death thirty-four years later.

LIFE AS BISHOP

Conventional accounts sketch Augustine's Episcopal career in terms of the controversies in which he took part. This brief sketch will do likewise; but I must first point out the main inadequacy of this approach. Augustine's first order of business through the decades of his episcopate was the care of the souls entrusted to him. Most of his life was an endless round of audiences with his clergy and his people. He was constantly called upon to adjudicate all kinds of disputes that had arisen in a world where the man of God was more to be trusted as judge than the greedy magistrate sent from abroad to represent Roman justice. The real focus of his activity lay elsewhere still: the liturgy.

The early church was an institution centered upon the worship of the community. Of a Sunday, every orthodox Christian in Hippo could be found jammed into Augustine's basilica, standing through a service that must have lasted at least two hours. We know from the hundreds of sermons that survive how much care and imagination Augustine put into preaching, tailoring his remarks to suit the needs and capacity of his audience. The man who had been orator enough to declaim for emperors must have been a spellbinding preacher.

But even the homiletics of Augustine did not efface the dignity of the central act of worship. God was present on the altar for these people and this event was the center of Christian community life. Lukewarm believers in the throng attended out of respect for social pressure and a fear of divine wrath and were not much moved, but for Augustine, this was his central task. The controversies were only sideshow, important only when they threatened to disrupt the unity of the community's worship.

There were heresies that Augustine engaged in doing away with;

1. The Manichean cult and their belief for a start.
2. The Donatist cult - they believed they were the better Christians because they did not renounce their faith during the persecutions that happened under Diocletian (303-305) so they did not want those they called the compromisers to admitted easily back in the church after the persecution subsided. The principle for which Augustine fought deserves emphasis. Christianity was not, he claimed, something external and visible; it was not to be found in obedience to certain clearly-defined laws. Christianity was a matter of spirit rather than law, something inside people rather than outside. Most important, the church had room within itself for sinners as well as saints, for the imperfections of those in whom God's grace was still working as well as for the holiness of the blessed. Augustine drew the boundary of the church not between one group of people and another but rather straight through the middle of the hearts of all those who belonged to it. The visible church contained the visible Christians, sins and all; the invisible church, whose true home lay in heaven, held only those who were redeemed. Charity dictated that the visible church be open to all, not lorded over by a few self-appointed paragons choosing to admit only their own kind.
3. When the Roman Empire fell sometime later, the more intellectual among them began to wonder aloud whether their new religion might not be to blame for the disaster they had suffered. After all, the argument ran, Rome had been immune from capture for fully eight hundred years; but now, just two decades after the formal end of public worship of the pagan gods (commanded by the emperor Theodosius in 391), the city fell to the barbarians. Perhaps it was true what pagans had said, that the new Christian god with ideas about turning the other cheek and holding worldly empires in low esteem was not an efficient guardian of the best interests of the ruling class. Most of the people who indulged in these idle speculations were themselves Christian. The "paganism" of these people was no revival of ancient religion, but only the persistence of the ancient notion of religion as a bargain you struck with the gods in order to preserve your health, wealth, and complacency. Augustine sort to reassure them that Rome was not the promised city of God. Therefore their hopes should not be dashed by the fall of the empire. They should look on to the future hope through Christ. He wrote a book in response to explain why the Roman Empire fell. The book was the City of God.
4. Pelagianism was theologically rather similar to Donatism, in that it assumed that people could, by their own virtue, set themselves apart as the ones on whom God particularly smiled. This thought advocated for an ascetic in order to purify yourself.

LEGACY

It is as a thinker, a teacher, writer, debater and preacher that Augustine's influence has proved strategic.

Augustine wrote very many books; - the *Confessions*, the *City of God*, the *Soliloquies*, the *Trinity*. He wrote against the cult he was in Manichaeism, on the catholic and Manichee way of life. He wrote another book - against the skeptics - true happiness is not to be found in virtue alone but in loving God.

Further reading:

- Michael Reeves, *The Breeze of the Centuries*, IVP, chapter 4.
- [*Confessions*](#)
- [*City of God and Christian Doctrine*](#)