

“*SI RATIONE LEX CONSTAT*”. NATURAL LAW AND CHRISTIAN VIEWS ON MILITARY  
SERVICE IN TERTULLIAN’S *DE CORONA MILITIS*

[ES] “*Si razione lex constat*”. *La ley natural y las opiniones cristianas sobre el servicio militar en la obra de Tertuliano De Corona Militis*

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**Abstract:** This article examines Tertullian’s views on military service by Christian individuals on the basis of his work *De corona militis*. Beyond his reflections on idolatry, this paper focuses on the arguments concerning Natural law and Reason as the foundation for the incompatibility between Christian faith and military service according to the author, with compelling legal remarks that are also highlighted. In his analysis of a specific case, the Carthaginian addresses the issue of why wearing laurel crowns would not be appropriate for Christians and links the Roman army to the exposure to pagan customs and religious practices by Christians. At the same time, we argue that the text should not be viewed as an (anachronistic) critique of the Roman political power from the modern perspective of a separation between political and religious spheres. Rather, it could be more likely understood as a questioning of the military institution itself. Beyond the obvious rhetorical imprint, Tertullian’s *De Corona* offers insights into the search for recognition by Christians towards the Roman Empire and highlights the complex relationships between Christian communities and Roman authorities before the turning point of the early 4<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Tertullian; Natural law; reason; Roman army; idolatry; crowns.

**Resumen:** El presente artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la opinión del autor latino-cristiano Tertuliano en torno al servicio militar por parte de cristianos a partir de su tratado *De corona militis*. Más allá de las reflexiones del teólogo cartaginés sobre la idolatría, este trabajo se fundamenta a partir de los argumentos tertulianos sobre la Ley natural y la Razón como fundamentos para defender la incompatibilidad palmaria entre la fe cristiana y el servicio militar, según el autor norteafricano, con sugestivos razonamientos jurídicos, que también son objeto de comentario. A partir de la reflexión casuística, Tertuliano aborda la cuestión de las coronas ceremoniales en relación con la doctrina cristiana y establece un vínculo entre el ejército romano y el desarrollo de prácticas religiosas y conductas sociales contrarias al cristianismo. Del mismo modo, en el presente trabajo se postula que el texto del autor objeto de estudio no debe interpretarse como una crítica (anacrónica) a la legitimidad del poder político romano desde una perspectiva moderna en la que predomina una separación entre las esferas política y religiosa. No obstante, sí podría entenderse como un cuestionamiento de la institución militar. Más allá de la obvia impronta retórica del texto, *De Corona* plantea ideas sobre la búsqueda de reconocimiento por parte de las comunidades cristianas y destaca las complejas relaciones entre el cristianismo y la autoridad romana antes del punto de inflexión acaecido durante la primera mitad del siglo IV.

**Palabras clave:** Tertuliano; Ley natural; razón; ejército romano; idolatría; corona.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The connection between early Christianity and the Roman army has been widely debated by specialists. In most instances, it is essential to rely on early Church sources with the aim of exploring a topic that has been shrouded in “*historical silence*”<sup>1</sup>. Based on the available texts, it is reasonable to assume that the issue of soldiering was not particularly prominent among Christian authors until the last decades of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century<sup>2</sup>, as the representation of Christians serving in the military prior to this period might not have been as significant. However, as Christianity gained prominence in Roman society, its influence began to extend in the army, an important institutional component.

In this context, Tertullian, often considered a controversial author, provides valuable insights in his polemical pamphlet “*On the military garland*” (*De corona militis* or *Cor.*). A prolific writer, shortly after the incident that justifies the work<sup>3</sup>, the Carthaginian theologian addresses the conflict that arises from a Roman soldier’s rejection to don the customary garland that every soldier was intended to wear during the ceremony of imperial donations<sup>4</sup> (“*donativum*”) to the troops. This incident occurred during the late reign of Emperor Septimius Severus (*reg.* 193-211), continuing Septimius’ generous treatment of the troops with the intention to secure their loyalty. The episode coincides with Caracalla and Geta’s accession to the imperial status as *augusti*. It is important to note that under Septimius’ rule, the army became a crucial element in the context of the militarization of Roman society and administration during the period<sup>5</sup>, a trend that would only intensify in subsequent centuries.

Based on this, Helgeland considers *De corona* as one of the clearest examples of the “*progressive hostility toward the Roman government*”<sup>6</sup> and situates it within the context of the early third-century persecution of Christians. As Gero notes, this shift in attitude is particularly evident in

<sup>1</sup> HARTLAND, D., «Breaching the ‘Silence’ on Early Christianity and Military Service: Paul and the Praetorian Guard», in *Phillipi and Rome* 28/1 (2010), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> BERGMAN, R., «“You say Tertullian, I say Augustine”»: An Essay on Intra-Catholic Dialogue on War, Justice, and Peace», in *Expositions* 15.1 (2021), pp. 39-40.

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian starts the text with the clarification “*Proxime factum est*” (*Cor.* I, 4). TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, ed. Currey, G., Cambridge 1854, p. 113. BARNES considers 211 as the date for *De Corona*, which is consistent with the hypothesis of the evolution of Tertullian’s thought after his conversion to Montanism. BARNES, T.D., *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, Oxford 1971, pp. 46-47.

<sup>4</sup> Although there is no specific mention in the text, it is generally accepted that Tertullian refers to the emperors Geta and Caracalla, who succeeded their father, Septimius Severus.

<sup>5</sup> CAMPBELL, J.B., *The Emperor and the Roman Army, 31 BC-AD 235*, Oxford 1984, p. 401.

<sup>6</sup> HELGELAND, J., «Christians and the Roman Army A.D. 173-337», in *Church History* 43/2 (1974), p. 150.

passages like *Cor. XI*<sup>7</sup>. Ultimately, the brief text reflects Tertullian’s evolving views on the role of Christian individuals in the *militia*. In contrast, an earlier work, *Apol. V, 6*, discusses the episode of the *Legio XII Fulminata*, the “Thundering legion”, and the so-called “rain miracle”, which has sparked extensive debate. On this regard, scholars like Huttunen understand that this fragment does not indicate a general acceptance of military service by Tertullian<sup>8</sup>, while others like Shean argue that it indicates a “considerable body of opinion within the Christian community which regarded military service as an acceptable vocation for the faithful, even a honorable one”<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, *De corona* is a relevant work to gauge the theologian’s stance on military service and add to the scholar debate on the matter, but those positions should not be conflated with the concept of the *milites Dei* or *milites Christi* (soldiers of God) in a martial sense. In this context, the term does not refer to the profession of arms but serves as a rhetorical device opposing the *miles Caesaris*<sup>10</sup>, with the service (as suggested by the Latin verb “*militare*”) or commitment to God through ascetic or monastic life.

In *De corona*, the apologist not only describes the event, but he also firmly supports the soldier who chose not to wear the crown, describing him as a unique individual. Tertullian praises the soldier’s resolve (“*O militem in Deo gloriosum!*”<sup>11</sup>) and considers him “*the only brave*” and “*the only Christian*”<sup>12</sup> among the Christian soldiers present at the ceremony<sup>13</sup>. The Church Father uses the soldier’s gesture primarily as an example to defend him from the mockery and criticism of his peers (“*Denique singuli designare, eludere eminus, infrendere cominus*”<sup>14</sup>), which will be addressed later in this text.

However, this paper’s main focus is not to analyze the extent of involvement in the army by Christians, the Roman authorities’ attitude towards those soldiers, or the issue of idolatry in our author’s thought. Instead, our primary aim is to delve into Tertullian’s understanding of natural law and examine how it influenced his understanding of Christian participation in the army, especially considering the alleged evolution of his views on that topic throughout his life.

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<sup>7</sup> GERO, S., «“Miles Gloriosus”: The Christian Military Service According to Tertullian», in *Church History* 39/3 (1970), p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> HUTTUNEN, N., *Early Christians Adapting to the Roman Empire. Mutual Recognition*, Leiden/Boston 2020, p. 211.

<sup>9</sup> SHEAN, J.F., *Soldiering for God: Christianity and the Roman Army*, Brill 2010, p. 191.

<sup>10</sup> BRENNAN, P., «Military Images in Hagiography», in *Reading the Past in Late Antiquity*, ed. Clarke, G., Croke, B., Nobbs, A., Mortley, R., Canberra 1990, p. 328.

<sup>11</sup> *Cor. I, 2*. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 114.

<sup>12</sup> *Cor. I, 4*. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 115.

<sup>13</sup> In a common literary feature of his work, our author uses the expressions “*solus scilicet fortis inter tot fratres commilitones*” and “*solus Christianus*” to juxtapose the soldier with the rest of the Christian soldiers. (*Cor. I, 4*).

<sup>14</sup> *Cor. I, 2*. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 114.



## 2. TERTULLIAN'S VIEWS ON NATURAL LAW IN *DE CORONA*; SCRIPTURES, CUSTOM, AND TRADITION

Tertullian's interpretation of natural law during his pre-Montanist period is evident in his *Adversus Iudaeos*, where he addresses the problem. He refers to the law "before the law of Moses", which can be expounded as an unwritten law given by God, "founder of the Universe". This divine law, in the author's view, could be "understood naturally"<sup>15</sup> by every human being.

However, after his conversion to Montanism (and *De Corona* "belongs decisively"<sup>16</sup> to this phase), Tertullian's views shift towards a more severe and radical stance. This change can be perceived in *De corona*, where he confronts the assumption by some Christians that wearing a garland was permissible since no explicit prohibition could be found in the Scriptures. The polemicist vehemently rejects this permissive approach, which argues "that everything which is not forbidden is freely permitted". On the contrary, he understands that the conclusion should be exactly the opposite, as according to the Scriptures, "what has not been freely allowed is forbidden"<sup>17</sup>.

Tertullian expanded this argument in *Cor. VII*. In his *refutatio*, he asserts that if a duty was not explicitly prescribed by the Scriptures, one should refer to custom ("*consuetudo*") and, consequently, to tradition ("*traditio*"). In fact, after the *narratio*, the author starts his doctrinal comments in *De Corona* by claiming that wearing any kind of crown or garland contradicts Christian custom<sup>18</sup> and invokes the Scriptures, with an interesting figurative use of the term "patrocinium" ("*Scripturae patrocinium*")<sup>19</sup>, a concept of legal origin. The use of this terminology could add to the extensive discussion on the knowledge of the theologian from Carthage about Roman law<sup>20</sup>. Such is not the only example of legal reasoning in *De Corona*, as Tertullian further considers the relationship

<sup>15</sup> TERTULLIAN, *Adv. Iudaeos* II, 7, ed. Dunn, G., London/New York, 2004, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> SIDER, R. (ed.), *Christian and Pagan in the Roman Empire. The Witness of Tertullian*, Washington D.C. 2001, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> *Cor. II*, 4. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 118.

<sup>18</sup> *Cor. II*, 1. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 117.

<sup>19</sup> *Cor. II*, 4. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 119. While it is true that "patrocinium" is a term with a long tradition of use by the Romans in a broader social context, a strictly legal definition can also be considered. In this regard, the term can be defined as "Patronage, protection, a relationship between two persons in which one, the patronus, grants protection to the other. Patrocinium is also used of the legal assistance given to a party in a trial by an advocate", see BERGER, A., «Patrocinium», in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law* (reprinted), Philadelphia 1991, p. 622.

<sup>20</sup> On that question, Tertullian was initially believed to be a jurist by scholars like Adolph von Harnack. In response to that opinion, the classical thesis by Barnes, who considers that Tertullian's "legalistic approach to Christianity does not issue from academic expertise in jurisprudence", had great impact on scholarship, see BARNES, T.D., *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, cit., pp. 22-29. Another significant contribution is RANKIN, D., «Was Tertullian a Jurist?», in *Studia Patristica* 31 (1997), pp. 335-342. More recently, BALFOUR, I., «Tertullian and Roman Law – What Do We (Not) Know?», in *Studia Patristica* 94 (2017), pp. 11-22.

between custom (*consuetudo*) and Tradition (*traditio*), emphasizing the need for a “*traditio*”<sup>21</sup> to establish and preserve a custom. This terminological equivalence in Latin between the legal concept of “*traditio*” in the transfer of property<sup>22</sup>, the “*traditio*” (“tradition”, in English) in its usual sense in the transmission of cultural attitudes and beliefs but also as the theological concept used by the author in the text highlights his legal reasoning in *De Corona*.

The Latin Father even considers the value of custom in civil law matters (“*in civilibus rebus*”<sup>23</sup>), underscoring the legal foundation of his arguments. He believes that ancient practices of refusing to wear crowns are supported by past examples (tradition), which have led to established and accepted customs. That point leads Tertullian to analyze if custom needs to be supported expressly by Scriptures: “*Ergo quaeramus an et traditio nisi scripta non debeat recipi*”<sup>24</sup>). On this regard, he concludes his refutation by declaring that there will be no explicit recognition for every single custom in the Scriptures (“*Harum et aliarum ejusmodi disciplinarum si legem expostules Scripturarum, nullam leges*”<sup>25</sup>).

Therefore, under the lack of an explicit recognition for the prohibition to wear crowns (as a custom) in the written law, an answer to that dichotomy needs to be found. It is immediately after that Tertullian vindicates the causal link between custom, tradition, and faith as a closely related triad (*Cor. IV, 1*). The reason serves as the basis for ancient traditions, custom, and faith, in accordance with nature. Scripture documented Tradition, but even an unwritten tradition could be defended because it would be confirmed by custom (“*His igitur exemplis renuntiatum erit, posse etiam non scriptam traditionem in observatione defendi, confirmatam consuetudine, idonea teste probatae tunc traditionis ex perseverantia obseruationis*”<sup>26</sup>). As a result, we can assume that there is no clear difference between written or customary basis for law in his view, as both are substantiated by reason.

Tertullian’s argument progresses with a discussion on the observance of law based on reason (“*si ratione lex constat*”<sup>27</sup>). Divine reason serves as the support (again, “*patrocinium*”) for custom,

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<sup>21</sup> *Cor. III, 1*: “*Quomodo enim usurpari quid potest, si traditum prius non est?*”. In this regard, a connection could be made with the legal requirement for a material delivery so the *traditio* happens effectively; TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 120. The jurist Ulpian synthesizes that principle in his notorious sentence: “*Nemo plus iuris ad alium transferre potest, quam ipse haberet*” (D. 50.17.54).

<sup>22</sup> The necessity of an actual transfer of a good as a fundamental material element of *traditio* has been underscored by several prominent Roman law scholars, such as SCHULZ, F., *Prinzipien des Römischen Rechts*, Munich 1934, §57 or D’ORS, Á., *Derecho Privado Romano*, Pamplona 1986, p. 176.

<sup>23</sup> *Cor. IV, 5*. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 124.

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, p. 119.

<sup>25</sup> *Ivi*, p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> *Ivi*, p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> *Cor. IV, 5*. *Ibid.*



but for the Patristic writer the main point lies upon questioning not only if a custom should be followed but why it should be followed<sup>28</sup>. From there, the author takes a considerable leap in his discourse. Every practice should, therefore, be judged upon nature, which is none but the first of all laws<sup>29</sup>.

Ultimately, Tertullian forwards to the matter of the divine law and the «authority of Nature» (*Cor.* VII, 1). For him, that authority is based “*on the ground of a common sense as human beings*”. Our author emphasizes that natural law is accessible to all humans, not just Christians (*Cor.* VII, 2). The importance of *Discipline* (“*disciplina*” in this case can be interpreted as a mention to Scriptures) is highlighted a few times in the text and will be the focal point of the author in *Cor.* VII-X. This marks a significant change from the previous arguments on natural law by the Carthaginian, which until that moment were based mainly on Scripture. Nature was led now by Spirit. The author’s evolving views on natural law, discipline, and the role of tradition are central to his thesis in *De Corona*.

In this framework, we must highlight Tertullian’s familiarity with the works of Seneca when he discusses natural law, as he openly acknowledges his frequent agreement (“*saepe noster*”) with the Stoic philosopher in *De anima*:

*“Et hic itaque concludimus omnia naturalia animae ut substantiua eius ipsi inesse et cum ipsa procedere atque proficere, ex quo ipsa censetur. Sicut et Seneca saepe noster: insita sunt nobis omnium artium et aetatum semina, magisterque ex occulto deus producit ingenia, ex seminibus scilicet insitis et occultis per infantiam, quae sunt et intellectus. Ex his enim producuntur ingenia”*<sup>30</sup>.

In our opinion, it is striking how the North African theologian does not wholly reject philosophical principles and opinions, as sometimes has been argued, but incorporates certain arguments and terminology into his theological stance, even when at times he tried to refute those, as in his *Treatise against Hermogenes (Adversus Hermogenem)*. While Tertullian cannot be labelled a philosopher, this passage shows his engagement with Stoic and Platonic traditions and reflects an ongoing (although sometimes indirect) dialogue between pagan philosophers and Christian theologians on common problems and concepts. Here we agree with Leal, when he affirms the acceptance (and not just a mere recognition) of some elements from these traditions and the rejection

<sup>28</sup> *Cor.* IV, 7. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 125.

<sup>29</sup> *Cor.* V, 1. Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> TERTULLIAN, *De anima*, 20, 1. Emphasis mine.

of those that conflicted with was what then considered as Christian doctrine<sup>31</sup>, which highlights this type of interaction. Even from perspectives that could be theoretically irreconcilable, it seems unlikely that Christian authors like Tertullian, who was well-versed in rhetoric, could be unaware of the concepts and principles that the philosophical tradition had been developing for centuries by that time.

On the conflict presented, the conclusion is clear for the apologist. Sacred Scriptures serve as a written basis for custom, but since an express prohibition of every practice that could potentially conflict with Christian principles was not found in the Scripture, natural understanding, common to every human being, is the only basis to ponder whether a certain behavior or action is in accordance with Christian teachings.

### 3. MILITARY SERVICE AND THE ARMY IN TERTULLIAN’S THOUGHT

After outlining Tertullian’s theoretical foundation on the limits among custom, tradition, and law, it is essential to analyze the core issue that motivated this study: Tertullian’s concept of natural law and its connection to his views on military service in the Roman army. In our opinion, this is the most relevant point to substantiate our main argument.

Regarding the substance of *De corona*, scholars like Dunn suggest that military service was not the primary focus for the Carthaginian. Instead, the main issue appears to be the conflict with idolatry (not only in relation to crowns) and to how it could be avoided by Christian soldiers<sup>32</sup>. However, Tertullian’s critical position to military service by Christians, which leads him to question the military institution, is of particular interest from a legal perspective, as it stems from a natural law approach. From the incident that originated the text, the Church Father had clearly focused on the dissension arising from the mandatory wearing of ceremonial garlands during certain public solemnities performed by Roman society and their significance for the early Christian doctrine. Although the apologist dedicates most of the chapters (II to X and also XII and XIII) to this question, there are key points worth considering (mainly in chapters XI and XII), to understand his reasoning on natural law and the *militia* from his unique perspective.

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<sup>31</sup> LEAL, J., «Las dos almas de la Teología del siglo III: Tertuliano, *De anima* – Orígenes, *De principiis*», in *Teología y vida* 55/1 (2014), p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> DUNN, G., «Tertullian and Military Service: The Scriptural Arguments in *De corona*», ed. MECONI, D.V., *Sacred Scripture and Secular Struggles*, Leiden/Boston 2015, p. 102.



Interestingly, at the beginning of *De corona*, Tertullian seems to contrast antithetically (or at least consider separately) the service in the army of an esteemed emperor (an obvious apologetic remark about Septimius Severus amidst a more polemic tone) with the duty of being a soldier of God (“*Dei miles*”<sup>33</sup>). The contrast and the distance between the Roman administration and the Christian individuals are then exposed through a brief dialogue in which the military tribune inquires the disobedient soldier about his conduct<sup>34</sup>. Under the confession of being a Christian as the justification for the soldier’s offense, the tribune decides to send him to the presence of the prefects. The author begins to anticipate the need to assume the consequences derived from rejecting those social practices that were contrary to the Christian faith.

Therefore, it is pertinent to connect the critique to the military as an institution and the role of Christian soldiers in the military context. Tertullian continues the text with the alleged reaction by some Christians who question the attitude of the confessed follower of Christ (“*Mussitant denique tam bonam et longam pacem periclitari*”<sup>35</sup>). This excerpt is evidence of the service of Christian individuals in the Roman army at that time, and, consequently, of the acceptance of that possibility as not contrary to their beliefs by some of the *milites* alluded by our author. On the specific issue of the garland, it is significant that the rhetorical approach starts with the intention to answer the question “*But where are we forbidden to be crowned?*”<sup>36</sup>, posed, according to Tertullian’s argument, by some Christians who argued that wearing such a crown would not be against Christian principles. As noted with the rhetorical question presenting the conflict between custom and Scriptures earlier, Tertullian proposes again an inquiry that hypothetically could have been argued against him as the foundation for his reflections to counter that thesis.

Beyond its value as the starting point for the refutation presented by the author, this questioning also represents how different sensibilities were present among Christians regarding various social attitudes and phenomena that could be conflicting with their doctrinal conceptions. Some Christians may have sought a more peaceful integration into Roman social structures, including the army, and may not have been willing to protest or show any kind of public disagreement against certain manifestations of Roman political power, which could have been discordant with their religion and could have led to possible punishment and, ultimately, martyrdom<sup>37</sup>. For that reason, the

<sup>33</sup> *Cor. I, 1*. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 113.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 114.

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, p. 115.

<sup>36</sup> *Ivi*, p. 116.

<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that the acceptance of martyrdom is one of the distinctive features of Montanism, as explicitly stated in *Apol. 50, 13*: «*semen est sanguis Christianorum*». The prolific theologian indicates his intention to address the issue



provocative conduct of the soldier was perceived by some of those Christians as imprudent and detrimental to their position in Roman social structures. That rationale is especially noticeable in *Cor. I, 4*:

“*Exinde sententiae super illo, nescio an Christianorum (non enim aliae ethnicorum), ut de abrupto et praecipiti et mori cupido, qui de habitu interrogatus nomini [of Christ] negotium fecerit, solus scilicet fortis, inter tot fratres commilitones solus christianus. Plane superses, ut etiam martyria recusare meditentur, qui prophetias ejusdem Spiritus Sancti respuerunt*”<sup>38</sup>.

Tertullian anticipates his position before proceeding with his complete argument against the crowns, by saying that those who argue against the sinful nature of that practice are acting out of “*ignorance*”<sup>39</sup>. In this case, the question is not open to debate for him, as “*it is neither sinless nor doubtful*” (*Cor. I, 6*). On a more political view, this passage also shows that despite the conventional portrayal of Septimius as a persecutor of the Christians (although not a «bad» emperor<sup>40</sup>) in certain Christian sources, the times of Septimius and Caracalla seem to have been relatively peaceful for Christian communities<sup>41</sup>.

The *narratio* then continues with a vivid and literary description of the events following the imprisonment of the dissident (“*in carcere expectat*”<sup>42</sup>). Here Tertullian splendidly opposes the heavy burden of the soldier’s moral duty and the physical load of his equipment as explorer<sup>43</sup>

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of public displays of faith in *Cor. I, 5* (TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 115), which was indeed addressed in *De Scorpiace* and *De Fuga*, if we consider them as subsequent to *De Corona*. Barnes agrees at least with *De Fuga*, cf. BARNES, T.D., *Op. cit.*, p. 132, esp. n. 7. Some considerations on the dating of Tertullian’s works can be found in RANKIN, D., *Tertullian and the Church*, Cambridge 1995, pp. xv-xvi; DUNN, G., *Op. cit.*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>38</sup> *Cor. I, 4*. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 115. Emphasis and context mine. The prophetic reference supports the thesis of *De corona* belonging to Tertullian’s Montanist period.

<sup>39</sup> Ivi, p. 116.

<sup>40</sup> On the differentiation between “bad” emperors and those who carried out anti-Christian persecutions in historiography, see CUESTA FERNÁNDEZ, J., «La imagen del emperador malo y del perseguidor anticristiano en las *Historiae adversus paganos* de Paulo Orosio. Un estudio comparativo», in *Antesteria* 4 (2015), pp. 279-296; DMITRIEV, S., «‘Good Emperors’ and Emperors of the Third Century», in *Hermes* 132/2 (2004), pp. 211-224.

<sup>41</sup> Christian persecutions in this context possibly had a local or regional scope, but the governments of Septimius Severus and Caracalla were apparently lenient in terms of religious tolerance towards Christianity. On this issue, see KERESZTES, P., «The Constitutio Antoniniana and the Persecutions under Caracalla», in *The American Journal of Philology* 91/4 (1970), pp. 446-459; AGUADO GARCÍA, P., «Cristianismo bajo Septimio Severo y Caracalla», *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma, Serie II, Historia Antigua* 13 (2000), pp. 255-260. SIDER also concurs with the untroubled situation in North Africa until the appointment of Scapula as proconsul of Africa in 212. SIDER, R., *Op. Cit.*, p. 119, n. 10.

<sup>42</sup> *Cor. I, 3*. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 115.

<sup>43</sup> The use of the term “*speculatoriam*” concerning the soldier’s footwear suggests that the individual was assigned to a reconnaissance unit (*exploratores* or *speculatores*). For further insights, see RUSSELL, F. «Finding the Enemy: Military Intelligence», in *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World*, ed. Campbell, B., Tritle, L.A., New York 2013, pp. 474-492.



(“*speculatoriam*”) to the more favorable situation (“*auspicatus*”) experienced instead by serving God with his word, a sharper weapon<sup>44</sup>:

“*Ibidem gravissimas penulas posuit, relevari auspicatus, speculatoriam morosissimam de pedibus absolvit, terrae sanctae insistere incipiens, gladium nec dominicae defensionis necessarium reddidit, laurea et de manu claruit. Et nunc rufatus sanguinis sui spe, calceatus de Evangelii paratura, succinctus acutiore verbo Dei, totus de Apostolo armatus, et de martyrii candida melius coronatus, donativum Christi in carcere expectat*”<sup>45</sup>.

The mention to the use of the sword in the fragment is not casual, if we consider passages like Jn 18, 11<sup>46</sup>, where Jesus calls Peter to sheathe his sword in an adverse situation and to accept the will of the Father. Tertullian contraposes the submission of the weapon, unnecessary to serve God, by the soldier, with the dignity of accepting the only possible service for a Christian, and, ultimately, martyrdom as the final display of the “donativum Christi”. Nevertheless, the Carthaginian then interprets that wearing crowns contravenes natural law and proceeds to elaborate a justification that aspires to go beyond the Christian argumentation, explicitly considering the necessity to address Pagan literary sources (“*Litterae ad hoc saeculares necessariae*”<sup>47</sup>).

In our opinion, this proposal demonstrates the Christians’ search for recognition, as they were still a minority in a Pagan context, rather than an indication of awareness by the Roman authorities toward Christian communities. By operating within a theoretical framework familiar to much of the Roman society, Tertullian evidenced that his work was not only addressed to Christians, but, as usual with much of his production, he also intended to engage those outside the Christian faith.

In particular, the Roman army of the period seems to still have been heavily attached to mystery cults and, specifically, to Mithraism, whose worshippers were, to a considerable degree, soldiers<sup>48</sup>. This circumstance is referred by Tertullian in *Cor. XV*, 3, to reverse the criticism directed at the dissenting soldier (using *retorsio*) and portray those who venerate Mithras as being close to the

<sup>44</sup> It is notable that the sword is the only offensive weapon invoked by Paul in Eph. 6, 10-17, when referring to the “Armor of God”. The comparison between the sword and the word of God can also be found in Heb. 4, 12 (“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart”). The same idea seems to be latent in Mt. 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Cor. I*, 3. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., pp. 114-115.

<sup>46</sup> Jn 18, 11. “Jesus commanded Peter, ‘Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?’”.

<sup>47</sup> *Cor. VII*, 3. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 130.

<sup>48</sup> MASTROCINQUE, A., *The Mysteries of Mithras: A Different Account*, Tübingen 2017, p. 41. About the Mithras Cult, see CLAUSS, M., *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien*, Munich 1990; BECK, R., *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, Oxford 2006; GORDON, R., «The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras: a Critical View», in *L’armée romaine et la religion sous le Haut-Empire romain. Actes du congrès de Lyon (26–28 octobre 2006)*, ed. WOLFF, C., LE BOHEC, Y., Paris 2009, pp. 379-450.

devil<sup>49</sup>. As such, it is highly debatable that even about a century later, military garrisons “were becoming openly Christian”, contrary to what authors like Odahl have expressed<sup>50</sup>.

As mentioned, some scholars argue that the focus of *De corona* lies on the problem of idolatry and the use of crowns, a topic tackled by Tertullian around the same time in *De Idololatria*. This assumption could mean that even if soldiering was allowed (or not) among Christians, the main issue would still reside in the fact that garlands were forbidden as they were contrary to Christian doctrine. However, it is also true that the Christian arguments regarding military service are very present in the text. At the beginning of *De Corona*, the patristic author touches on certain soldiers “who had imagined that they could serve two masters”<sup>51</sup>, an allusion to those Christian servicemen who had accepted wearing the garlands but who, at the same time, had not abandoned their Christian beliefs. In *Cor. XI, 1*, he revisits the Christian *topos* of “the two masters”, which can be found in the Gospels<sup>52</sup> and could point to a connection in terms of political theory about the way the Roman army was perceived by Christians as a key cog in the imperial structures and political power in that context<sup>53</sup>: “*Etenim ut ipsam causam coronae militaris aggrediar, puto prius conquirendum, an in totum Christianis militia conveniat. Quale est alioquin de accidentibus retractare, cum a praecedentibus culpa sit?*”<sup>54</sup>.

The discursive construction, therefore, transcends the critique of idolatry based on natural law. It questions the coherence between *militia*, intertwined with the earthly of the emperor, and the Christian condition. However, Tertullian’s objection about the impossibility to serve both divine and earthly powers within a Christian worldview cannot be understood as the basis for an alleged (and anachronistic) critique of the legitimacy of Roman political power from an anti-State perspective. It is another example of the “*tensione sempre esistente*”<sup>55</sup> between the earthly realm and the kingdom of God, which is apparent in early Christian sources concerning Roman authority. Although the author does not delve into this point in *De corona*, his eloquent exposition in *Ad Scapulam* stands out as he recognizes the authority of the emperor as established by God, and the duty to honor and worship

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<sup>49</sup> This idea was also developed by our author in his work *De Prescriptione Haereticorum*.

<sup>50</sup> ODAHL, C., *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, New York 2004, p. 153.

<sup>51</sup> *Cor. I, 1*. “[...] qui se duobus dominis servire posse praesumpserant». TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 113.

<sup>52</sup> Mt. 6, 24: “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money”.

<sup>53</sup> *Cor. XII, 5*. “*Est et alia militia regiarum familiarum. Nam et castrenses apellantur, munificae et ipsae sollemnium Caesareanorum. Sed et tu proinde miles ac seruus alterius es, et si duorum, Dei et Caesaris, certe tunc non Caesaris, cum te Deo debes, etiam in communibus, credo, potiori*”. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 150.

<sup>54</sup> *Cor. XI, 1*. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 143.

<sup>55</sup> JOSSA, G., *La teologia della storia nel pensiero cristiano del secondo secolo*, Naples 1965, p.223.



the emperor but again highlights the tension that stems from the practice of sacrificing for the emperor's welfare:

*“Christianus nullius est hostis, nedum imperatoris, quem sciens a Deo suo constitui, necesse est ut et ipsum diligat et reuereatur et honoret et saluum uelit, cum toto Romano imperio, quousque saeculum stabit: tamdiu enim stabit. Colimus ergo et imperatorem sic quomodo et nobis licet et ipsi expedit, ut hominem a Deo secundum; et quicquid est a Deo consecutum est, solo tamen Deo minorem. Hoc et ipse uolet. Sic enim omnibus maior est, dum solo Deo minor est. Sic et ipsis diis maior est, dum et ipsi in potestate eius sunt. Itaque et sacrificamus pro salute imperatoris, sed Deo nostro et ipsius, sed quomodo praecepit Deus, pura prece. Non enim eget Deus, conditor uniuersitatis, odoris aut sanguinis alicuius. Haec enim daemoniorum pabula sunt”<sup>56</sup>.*

After narrowing the scope of Tertullian’s critique as presented in *De corona* to the rejection of the crown as a symbolic element opposing Christianity in every possible manifestation and to the rejection of the army as an institution, we shall proceed with a brief treatment of the conflict arising from the coronation in the context of Christian thought. In Tertullian’s view, not just the donative received by the soldiers during the ceremony presents a clear contradiction with the Christian dogma<sup>57</sup>. The symbolism entailed by the acceptance of the military garland during a ceremony prompts a series of inevitable reflections on the nature of conflicts and the attitude towards war from a Christian’s perspective: *“Triumphus laurea foliis struitur, an cadaueribus? Lemniscis ornatur, an bustis? Unguentis delibuitur, an lacrimis coniugum et matrum?”<sup>58</sup>.*

According to our author, the problem of idolatry could be presented as a logical consequence of military service: “to begin with the real ground of the military crown, I think we must first inquire whether warfare is proper at all for Christians” (*Cor.* XI, 1). Therefore, as noted, the author does not intend his work to revolve around the critique of military service, but he provides some reflections on the issue. Touching on this primary aspect of the question, Tertullian then proceeds with an extensive display of biblical references to the conflict presented, using arguments from authority to strengthen his rhetorical position, with implicit mentions of passages from *Luke*, *Matthew*, or *Leviticus* in *Cor.* XI, 1-2. A particular excerpt summarizes the causal relationship between military service and idolatry, with the former being the origin of the latter: *“De prima specie quaestionis, etiam militiae ipsius illicitae, plura non faciunt, ut secunda reddatur, ne, si omni ope expulero*

<sup>56</sup> Scap., II, 6-8. Vicastillo aptly points out that behind the concerns expressed by our polemicist and, in general, by the Christian communities regarding the future of the emperor and the empire lies the providential function they assign to the Empire. On this matter, see TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, ed. VICASTILLO, S., Madrid, 2018, p. 121, esp. n. 15. In a different tone, we can highlight the emphatic assertion that *“The Christian is an enemy of none”* (*“Christianus nullius est hostis”*), which opens the passage.

<sup>57</sup> *Cor.* XII, 4. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 149.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibíd.*

*militiam, frustra iam de corona militari prouocarim. Puta denique licere militiam usque ad causam coronae*”<sup>59</sup>.

Over the potential justification of Christians engaging in military service, beyond the conflict posed by garlands and idolatry, Tertullian counters with a justification that challenges the assumption that any crown, regardless of their use and context, could be legitimately accepted. More interesting for our analysis is his subsequent argument. After refuting any possible reconciliation of crowns with Christian doctrine, our author provides numerous examples of situations where Christian soldiers could face a conflict between their faith and army duties, ranging from performative aspects to those with more symbolic meaning. Once again, Tertullian concludes that both positions are inevitably incompatible:

*“Iam et stationes aut alii magis faciet quam Christo, aut et dominico die, quando nec Christo? Et excubabit pro templis, quibus renuntiavit? Et cenabit illic, ubi apostolo non placet? Et quos interdum exorcismis fugavit, noctibus defensabit, incumbens super pilum, quo perfossum latus est Christi? Vexillum quoque portabit aemulum Christi? Et signum postulabit a principe, qui iam a Deo accepit? Mortuus etiam tuba inquietabitur aeneatoris, qui excitari a tuba angeli expectat? Et cremabitur ex disciplina castrensi Christianus, cui cremari non licuit, cui Christus merita ignis indulsit”*<sup>60</sup>.

In his discourse, Tertullian does not limit himself to rhetorical questioning; he also provides a categorical answer that serves as a corollary to reaffirm that the figurative connection between Christians and the military camps is a transgression in itself: “*Quanta alia inde delicta circumspici possunt castrensiun munium transgressioni interpretanda! Ipsum de castris lucis in castra tenebrarum nomen deferre transgressionis est*”<sup>61</sup>.

At this point, it seems reasonable to wonder about the situation of those individuals who converted to Christianity after assuming military duties. Tertullian ponders this exceptional circumstance (“*alia conditio est*”<sup>62</sup>) in his detailed invective. The result is the inevitable consequence of the previous assertions. Ideally, the newfound incompatibility for those “new” Christian soldiers should lead to desertion (“*dum tamen suscepta fide atque signata aut deserendum statim sit*”<sup>63</sup>). However, the author made a concession in his rigorist views to the *realpolitik* and the pragmatics of Christianity during that time. In this regard, the North African theologian acknowledged that in those

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<sup>59</sup> *Cor. XI, 7*. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 147.

<sup>60</sup> *Cor. XI, 3*. Emphasis mine. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 143-144.

<sup>61</sup> *Cor. XI, 4*. TERTULLIAN, *De corona militis*, cit., p. 144.

<sup>62</sup> *Ivi*, p. 145.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*



cases where it was not possible for Christians to renounce military service (given the lack of sources, Tertullian's assumption that such "*has been the course with many*" could very well be an overstatement), they should at least "*aut omnibus modis cavillandum, ne quid aduersus Deum committatur, quae nec ex militia permittuntur, aut nouissime perpetiendum pro Deo, quod aequae fides pagana condixit*"<sup>64</sup>.

In our opinion, this argument proves that despite the severe objections presented by the Latin Father, he was aware of the diverse circumstances of Christian individuals and realized that most Christian soldiers could not publicly display disaffection towards the army. Therefore, the Carthaginian encouraged them to perform their duties in the most coherent way with their faith, avoiding the temptation to compromise their faith for material well-being or political safety.

Tertullian's ultimate purpose in *De corona* exceeds the formulation of a moral condemnation of military service in the Roman army. Despite his vehement arguments, his discourse intends to present a constructive vision of Christian life that could serve as a genuine alternative to the predominant pagan forms in Roman society. In this regard, his position in the text goes beyond the rejection of the crown as a warning about idolatry, proceeding, by the use of *retorsio* and questioning the customs of the *gentiles*, with a radical affirmation of divine authority over the Roman authorities and every sphere of human life, even in situations of conflict.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

While our analysis shows a clear antimilitaristic emphasis in Tertullian's doctrine, it is also true that early Christianity cannot be subsumed within a monolithic discourse on topics where a conflict between social and religious spheres could arise. As in many other cases, there was significant pluralism in the early Church regarding Christian participation in the army and, Tertullian's view, as original and exceptional as it was, cannot be regarded as representative of a *general* ecclesiastical stance on military service during the period.

Our author, capable of being caustic, idealistic and impetuous, constructs his argument with a distinctive, practical, and compelling style. As is the case in many of Tertullian's works, *De Corona* exemplifies his profound mastery of the Latin language, as well as the strong rhetorical imprint and originality present in his writing. Although in many cases there was an antithetical confrontation

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

between pagan philosophy and Christian doctrine during this period, *De corona* and other textual references allow us to reflect on the theoretical and conceptual connections between philosophy and Christian theology, suggesting a complex intellectual interaction at the time.

Tertullian's reflections highlight his extensive intellectual background, intersecting theological, rhetorical, philosophical, and legal domains to create a solid theoretical framework characterized by its originality. *De corona*, in our opinion, serves a dual purpose. Based on some of the cited excerpts, it is evident that the Carthaginian aimed to defend the cause of the dissident soldier, but also to persuade those in the Christian community who had reservations or critical perspectives towards the conduct of the *miles Christi* whom Tertullian praised. The author displayed a severe paternalism that denotes his pronounced doctrinal and pedagogical concerns. Lastly, the apologetic nature of *De corona* should not be understated, as Tertullian defends the Christian viewpoint regarding Roman political power and justifies the need to accept it.

*De corona* exemplifies the complex relationship between Christianity and Roman political power before the early 4<sup>th</sup> century turning point, offering valuable insights into the author's approach to natural law. His premises were now not only based on the primacy of the divine law and demonstrate an evolution in his reasoning about natural law. Therefore, several main lines that characterize Tertullian's thought during his Montanist period can be found in *De corona*. The integrative approach, which recognizes both the importance of natural reason and Tradition as well as the necessity of divine revelation, is an innovative perspective in his thought. Coincidentally, Tertullian's legal rationale around the concept of “*traditio*” in *Cor.* III and IV, which has not been adequately addressed in any of the critical editions or analyses of the text, merit additional attention from specialists. He adopted, in consequence, specific terminology from Roman legal science and a genuinely legal reasoning, as shown by his inference on the (lack of) need to provide an express prohibition of a specific custom in the Scriptures.

The position of the author on military service is fundamentally based on idolatry and the use of violence, a consistent theme throughout the text. We have emphasized how, in Tertullian's thought, the use of ceremonial garlands in the Roman army (or in any civil context) opposes Christian principles and is therefore incompatible with faith. This is a call to the Christian community members in the military to conduct their lives according to Gospel values and principles, even when such attitudes might lead to opposition and persecution by Roman authority. Our *retor* transcends a simple objection to war and militaristic stances, showing a strong opposition to the army as a social institution. The army represents the “*fides pagana*” and thus, there are several reasons why military



service conflicts with Christian *discipline*, a fundamental concept in our author's rigorist approach. This point is elaborated at the beginning of *Cor. XI*, where he addresses the contradiction between the commitment (or oath; "sacramentum"; *Cor. XI*, 3) to God and to civil authority, which are irreconcilable.

Our main thesis is that in Tertullian's thought (particularly in *De Corona*), there is a critique of the institution of the military that does not equate to a direct critique of the legitimacy of Roman political power or the emperor. The Carthaginian emphasizes his desire for the empire and emperor's prosperity, even amidst episodes of anti-Christian persecution (as seen in *Ad Scapulam*, II, 6-8, among others). Despite the army being a Roman institution under imperial authority, the author reflects a commitment to the primacy of divine power over earthly authority (*Cor. XII*, 5) and a vision of Christian identity as fundamentally incompatible with certain Roman cultural and social practices.

Ultimately, Tertullian offers one of the key testimonies for understanding the evolution of diverse Christian perspectives on military service in the early third century. The silence of the Church on the matter does not necessarily equal unconditional acceptance of military participation. Accordingly, *De Corona* provides an interesting framework for the evolution of relations between Christian communities and Roman authorities, illustrating the pursuit of recognition or at least tolerance, evident in Patristic sources of this period, about a century before the so-called "Constantinian shift", thoroughly discussed in historical scholarship, occurred.