

Jury Report

KHMW Jan Brouwer Thesis Award 2025 - History

Vicente Fischer de Miranda Rodrigues MA, Leiden University

Living Among the Graves: The Cult of the Dead from Rome to Donatist Africa

Geachte aanwezigen, dear audience,

Het is een eer en een genoegen namens de jury van de Jan Brouwer Scriptieprijs 2025 voor het vak geschiedenis de laudatio te mogen uitspreken voor de winnaar. I will do so in English, to make sure the laureate and his nearest and dearest will understand the well-deserved praise for his work. Let me first say a few words about the process.

This year, the jury consisted of professors Frans Grijzenhout, Inger Leemans, Marlou Schrover and myself (Josine Blok), with Marjan Scharloo as our chair. We received thirteen submissions, and I want to thank our colleagues around the Netherlands profoundly for their commitment and for taking the trouble to select and submit the best Master-theses they supervised. Indeed, excellent pieces of work they were, and the cliché that the jury had a hard time selecting the best among them was as true as ever. After thorough discussions we found the best thesis to be the one written by Vicente Fischer de Miranda Rodrigues on the Donatists.

Who were the Donatists? This question is at the heart of Vicente's thesis. The topic takes us back to the fourth and fifth centuries AD, and to the Christian church in Romanised North Africa. Disagreement on religious matters has been part and parcel of the Christian church right from the beginning, and time and again that part of the church that succeeded in getting the upper hand, vilifying and finally expelling the rival view, called itself the Catholic (whole and true) church. In the present case, the Donatists were called after Donatus, a leader and elected bishop of this widespread movement. Among their powerful opponents, the figure of the church father St. Augustine towers highly, and in the council of Carthage of 411 he and his like-minded consolidated their position by claiming the name of Catholic Christianity.

But what exactly was the contention, what did the Donatists do or think that brought them into collision with the self-proclaimed Catholic church? The problem here is that our written evidence is entirely one-sided: no statement of intention of the Donatists survives, only their defamation voiced by the Catholics. Scholars have tried to look through or behind these texts to understand what appeared as a Donatist 'revolution', but reconstructing their authentic agency in this way is almost impossible.

To unravel this long-standing conundrum, Vicente proposes an original, new approach. He uses, not the conventional written sources on this schism, but archaeological material and inscriptions to reconstruct various traditions in the cult of the dead in the Roman world and especially North Africa. He shows how these cults served collective memories of the communities to which they belonged and the creation of myths about significant, holy figures. The Donatists were not revolutionaries, but instead clung to their age-old practices of commemoration and veneration of local cult figures. The Catholics, however, regarded these practices as semi-pagan; instead, they propagated Biblical figures for veneration and the altar

as the focus of cult. What was at stake in this dissent on cult was that religious authority was not to rest with local communities, but centrally in the hands of the Roman, Catholic church.

In his thesis, Vicente Fischer de Miranda Rodrigues offers a persuasive, entirely new approach to a stalemate problem. He shows an excellent grasp of the scholarship and the textual, archaeological and epigraphical evidence, and his argument is laid out clearly and eloquently. This is excellent, professional work, and fully deserves the Jan Brouwer prize for the best Master thesis in history.

Prof. dr. J.H. (Josine) Blok, emeritus-hoogleraar geschiedenis van de oudheid en antieke cultuur Universiteit Utrecht

Prof. dr. F. (Frans) Grijzenhout, hoogleraar kunstgeschiedenis van de nieuwere tijd Universiteit van Amsterdam

Prof. dr. I.B. (Inger) Leemans, hoogleraar cultuurgeschiedenis Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, onderzoeksleider NL-Lab, KNAW Humanities Cluster

Prof. dr. M.L.J.C. (Marlou) Schrover, hoogleraar migratie geschiedenis met speciale aandacht voor gender klasse en etniciteit Universiteit Leiden

The meeting of the jury, chaired by KHMW social member drs. M. (Marjan) Scharloo, took place on December 9th, 2024 via Zoom. Also present at the meeting was prof. W.B. (Wim) Drees, academic secretary for the social sciences and humanities of the KHMW.