Saint Cyprian referred to henna as "Devil's Grease" in "De Habitu Virginum" (On the Dress of Virgins)."

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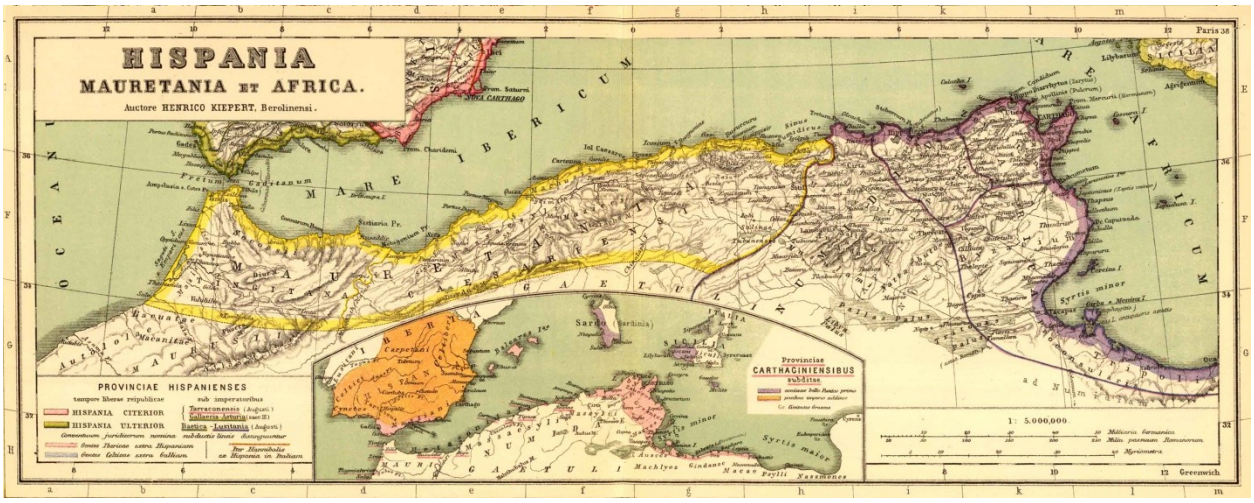
The "virgins"[1] who used "devil's grease,"[2] henna, in Saint Cyprian's "De Habitu Virginum" were the women of Mauretania, which was the Roman colony on northwestern coast of North Africa, part of the Roman Empire. 'Mauretania' was the northern coast of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.[3]



Map of Northwestern Africa, area known as Mauretania during the Roman period.
For more information on this area, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mauretania

Rome colonized North Africa, importing olives, wheat, raw materials, and slaves. In the third century, the leaders of the early Christian communities emerging in North Africa urged their followers to differentiate themselves from Jewish communities, the indigenous culture, and from the Roman culture. In the late the third century, when Cyprian[4] was the Bishop of Carthage (in present day Tunisia), the Roman Empire was in crisis. Christians were targets of attack for undermining Roman authority by resisting the imperial religion. Romans generally allowed people in their colonies to keep their religions, or hybridize their religions with the Roman imperial religion, as long as they dutifully sacrificed to Roman gods. Sacrifices to Roman gods implied the legitimacy of Roman rule, and were a crucial part of the Empire's social discipline and economy. Christian refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods implied that they did not honor the legitimacy of the state, and were therefore a political threat to be publicly punished as an

1 'Virgins' was the term for "honorable women", not necessarily women who had never had sexual intercourse.
2 : The translation 'Devil's grease' comes from Emily Anne Beaufort: Egyptian sepulchers and Syrian shrines: including some stay in the Lebanon, at Palmyra and in Western Turkey; in 2 vol. (Band 1), London, 1862, page 389.
3 The western Mediterranean was culturally connected to the Carthaginian Empire, and not part of the current African country Mauritania.
4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyprian

object lesson to the population. Rome did not vigorously persecute of Christian in Mauretania as they did in the empire capital.

Emboldened by this leniency of the Roman authority in western north Africa, Saint Cyprian, in "De Habitu Virginum," urged women to convert to Christianity, and to style themselves in a visibly different way from the Romanized community. The things the bishop urged women to abandon in "On the Dress of Virgins" and "Of the Discipline and Advantage of Chastity", reflect the appearance and behavior of western North African women under Roman rule at that time. Women hennaed their hair, both for and during marriage. They used rouge and henna to mask the appearance of aging to look young and attractive. There is evidence that Roman women also hennaed their hair, but perhaps not to the extent of the women in the southern Mediterranean where henna was available as an indigenous plant. Henna was probably used by indigenous people in northeast Africa long before the Carthaginian expansion. The western North African indigenous polytheistic religion included henna as part of life's celebrations, particularly marriage, happiness and luck.

Cyprian, himself being born into the indigenous Amazigh culture, refers to the fire-like color of henna as ‘predicting the fires of hell,’ calling henna “the Devil’s Grease” because the women wore henna for beauty and fashion (the sin of vanity) and because they were celebrating their pre-Christian polytheistic religion. Not only was he scolding women with graying hair who used henna, he had seen the phenomenon of henna-stained hair reflecting red in the sunshine. Though henna had been used by Roman women, Jewish women, and indigenous women, Cyprian felt henna a polytheistic practice and therefore unsuitable for Christian women.

Mauretanian women liked colorful garments, and sought red and purple robes when they could afford such. The women had pierced ears and wore earrings, and their ears were pierced early in childhood. Cyprian deplored "little moon" earrings that the women wore, crescent shaped earrings popular at that time. They wore gold necklaces, bracelets, and ankle bracelets. They liked to wear and show off the most expensive jewelry they could acquire.

Saint Cyprian specifically urges women to abjure kohl, henna, rouge, and jewelry. Mauretanian women unabashedly enjoyed wealth and worldly possessions as did Roman women. They did not feel that the pleasures of wealth and life were anything to be ashamed of; health, wealth, and sexuality were things to be enjoyed, because the pleasures in life were gifts from the gods, not to be spurned. In gratitude for the joys of life, their gods were honored with burnt offerings, incense and wine.

The women rimmed their eyes with kohl and would gaze at people directly, they held their heads up straight, not casting their eyes down; they did not they refuse to meet the gaze of another person. Their adornments were part a social permission to display the enjoyment of life, wealth, and sexuality. They enjoyed their own bodies and didn't mind being in the company of other nude men and women for the purpose of bathing. They would point and comment on each other's bodies, occasionally joking, grabbing, and gesturing. They sang love songs, some of which were explicit. They enjoyed feasts and wedding banquets and the bawdy jokes, drunkenness and the rude hilarity that were standard at the wedding parties.

Roman rule in cities of Mauretania collapsed in the decades after “De Habitu Virgines.” Saint Cyprian does not seem to have persuaded women to abandon their henna, kohl, beautiful clothing, and jewelry. When the Muslims conquered the Maghreb invaded centuries after Saint Cyprian, they found a mixed population of Christians, Jews, and indigenous polytheists. In the following centuries, Coptic Christian women had a night of the henna, including patterned henna on their hands and feet as well as dying the bride’s hair with henna. In the twentieth century, some Coptic Christian bridegrooms also had henna patterns on their bodies for their wedding nights. Wedding feasts continued to be raucous and bawdy, and women continued to sing and enjoy love songs and the occasional lewd joke. Jewish women in that region continued henna use, as did the Imazighen and Muslim populations.

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