Christian Persecution in Antiquity

Christian Persecution in Antiquity

Wolfram Kinzig

Translated by Markus Bockmuehl

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY PRESS

Waco, Texas 76798

Originally published in German as Wolfram Kinzig, *Christenverfolgung in der Antike* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019). © Verlag C.H.Beck oHG, München 2019.

Cover and book design by Kasey McBeath
Cover art: *Nero's Torches*, by Henryk Siemiradzki (1843–1902), image courtesy of the National Museum in Krakow / Sukiennice / Gallery of 19th-Century Polish Art / Siemiradzki Room, public domain

Map inside front cover: The Roman Empire and its provinces at the beginning of the fourth century (west)
Map inside back cover: The Roman Empire and its provinces at the beginning of the fourth century (east)

The Library of Congress has cataloged this book under ISBN 978-1-4813-1388-9. Library of Congress Control Number: 2021939848

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper with a minimum of thirty percent recycled content.

Contents

Preface to the English Edition

At the request of many readers, the English version of this book has been supplemented by some further remarks on methodology and numbers of victims in its introduction and conclusion, and by an additional chapter on court procedures and on methods of torture in trials against Christians. In some places the narrative was slightly extended. Finally, I have added brief notes and have adapted the bibliography to cater to English-speaking readers.

I am most grateful to my longtime friend Dr. Markus Bockmuehl, Dean Ireland's Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture at the University of Oxford, who not only suggested to the publishers that this book be made available to English-speaking readers but also produced its fine translation. In the process he made some helpful suggestions, which I considered carefully, leading me to correct some errors and to alter the text here and there with a view to making it more accessible in English.

For careful copyediting of the German version, I am indebted to Dr. Julia Winnebeck (Bonn), Nathalie Thies (Eckernförde), and Dr. Stefan von der Lahr, senior editor at C. H. Beck publishers, Munich. Dr. Raphael Brendel

(Munich) pointed out a number of errors, which I gratefully acknowledge. Johanna Schwarz (Bonn) assisted with the revision of additions to the translation. Cade Jarrell at Baylor kindly saw the present version through the press.

W. K.
December 2020

Introduction

The Cruelty and Fascination of Ancient Persecutions of Christians

In his 2018 book *The 21*, the German writer Martin Mosebach recounts his visit to Egypt, to the relatives of a group of twenty-one Coptic migrant laborers who had been beheaded by Islamist terrorists on 15 February 2015 on a beach in Libya, their gruesome deaths being recorded on video and subsequently used for propaganda purposes. Mosebach's travelogue reports that they muttered the words 'Lord Jesus' at the moment of their executions, which led to their veneration as martyrs among Egypt's Christians. With sincere personal sympathy, he portrays Coptic Christianity as a 'church of the martyrs' firmly committed to the faith.[1]

Mosebach's book received mixed reviews. Some praised its memorial for the victims and stressed the author's profound empathy for the sufferings of the Copts. Others, by contrast, felt instead that the author had failed to maintain an appropriate critical distance from his subject. He was accused of simply adopting the Coptic Church's self-presentation as the keeper of authentic apostolic Christianity, confronting the West with the exemplary image of this martyrs' church without sufficiently reflecting on its deficiencies.

That book and its reception in the German media suggests something of the difficulties faced by anyone setting out to examine the history of Christian martyrs. People have always been fascinated by the steadfastness of those who suffered and even died for their faith. It offers a contrast to one's own doubts and uncertainties, offering clear orientation for religious life precisely where faith comes under duress. And yet it is precisely for this reason that reports about martyrs are almost always highly emotive. They serve to glorify, and they tend, therefore, to exaggerate the numbers of victims, idealizing the conduct of the persecuted while conversely blackening the evil minds of their persecutors.

The literary shape of these depictions reflects their authors' specific intentions. These may be to strengthen the faithful at times of persecution. At the same time, a stress on *particular* martyrdoms may be intended to reinforce the authority and influence of the bishop or other clergy in a particular locality. Then again there may be economic motives at work: pilgrimages involving potentially thousands of visitors to the shrines of martyrs leave the tills of local stores and traders flush with cash.

What is more, martyrdom reports lend themselves to the development of legends. They proliferate, engendering rampant growth of miracle stories that have nothing to do with what happened historically. Many accounts were composed long after the events and have little or no historical value.

Our information about the persecutions during the first three Christian centuries derives almost exclusively from such Christian sources. For the sake of historical honesty, modern church history must render a critical account of this tradition about the veneration of martyrs. In this account we will ask what structures, mechanisms, and decisions of the first three centuries brought about the persecutions of Christians, and how they were effected

in practice. In this connection we will also treat the legal background of the persecutions and their concrete implementation, including both the tortures and punishments used and the number of victims.

Further, we will examine the literary polemics that facilitated and accompanied the persecution of Christians. What was its concrete form? Who participated in it? What opposing strategies did Christians deploy against it in order to protect themselves?

And finally, we must give an account of the consequences for Christian daily and church life. This includes relationships with those who either denied their Christian identity under duress or else held fast to it. Were the former punished? Were the latter revered? Where special authority was attributed to a new class of charismatics—the 'confessors,' who had remained steadfast and survived persecution—what consequences did this have for power relations and governance structures in Christian churches?

The historical evidence for any account of the persecutions of Christians is found in the New Testament; in Latin, Greek, and Coptic martyrs' reports and acts preserved on papyri and in medieval manuscripts; and in the writings of the Apologists (see below p. 27). To these must be added the following primary sources:

- the correspondence and other writings of Bishop Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258), which provide firsthand information about some of the events in northern Africa during the Decian and Valerian persecutions;
- the *History of the Church* by Eusebius of Caesarea (b. before 264/265, d. 339), composed in successive editions between 313 and 325 and drawing on numerous earlier sources;
- the same author's closely related *On the Martyrs of Palestine*, written in several versions (311–316) and describing events of the Diocletian persecution;

- the tractate *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, written around 311–316 by the orator, theologian, and court tutor Lucius Caecilius Lactantius (b. c. 250, d. 325), who is also of considerable significance for our knowledge of the events under Diocletian.

Additional evidence derives from documentary sources, especially papyri, coins, archaeological discoveries, and so forth.

These texts raise some serious methodological problems: how to distinguish those stories that report historical events from those that are partly or entirely fictitious? Scholars have grappled with this problem for many decades and have suggested various typologies of this kind of literature in the process. In recent years, the ancient martyrdom literature has come under intense criticism by scholars such as Candida Moss, who has accused early Christians of inventing a story of martyrdom and thus construing a *Myth of Persecution* (as her much-acclaimed book of 2013 was entitled).

I beg to differ. It is clear that all the sources we are dealing with in this context are *literary* sources written in the style typical of their period. Like almost all of Greek and Latin literature, they follow the rules of ancient rhetoric. The purpose of historical accounts was not only to inform but also to entertain or, in some cases, to uplift or edify their readers. But this is not a problem that is peculiar to martyrs' acts. I approach these sources, therefore, as I would approach any ancient literary text. I suggest that the sources I mention in what follows basically relate events that actually happened, although they relate them in a particular rhetorical style that one needs to decipher and that may have subsequently been edited for particular (especially liturgical) purposes.

Apart from legends that are clearly fictitious, there are, broadly speaking, two types of martyr stories that may be based on historical events: the acts and the passions.

As their name indicates, acts claim to be identical to or to rest upon court records relating to the trials of the martyr or martyrs in question (the *acta* [*proconsularia*], *commentarii* / *hypomnemata* / *hypomnematismoi*, or *gesta*). They are, therefore, largely in the form of dialogue.

By contrast, the passions are narrative texts that describe the fate of a particular Christian or a group of Christians from their arrest until their execution.

In practice, however, there are many hybrid forms such as narrative texts that contain evidence that was allegedly taken from official records or other firsthand evidence.

The study of the literary forms in which reports of martyrdoms survive is closely tied to the question of authenticity. The fact that we are dealing with one or another genre tells us nothing about the historical reliability of these texts. Martyr acts may be entirely fictitious (or may contain fictitious elements), whereas passions may have been composed by authors who were eyewitnesses of the events they relate.

So how do we know that the events reported in these texts actually took place? There are a number of criteria by which we may judge the authenticity of these texts. In what follows I give a selection of the most important ones:

- Textual tradition: In what form have the texts come down to us? Are we dealing with one version of a source or several, and, if so, which version is more trustworthy? Are the texts attested and, perhaps, quoted by other ancient writers?
- Style: Is the style of the text typical of the period in which the texts were supposedly written?
- Signs of editing: Are there indications that the texts have been shortened (rarely) or extended (frequently)? What kind of additions were made (e.g., liturgical beginnings or endings)? Are there breaks in the flow of the text or of the argument, and what could they mean in terms of historicity?

- Names: Do they conform to what we know about the custom of name-giving in antiquity?
- Titles: Do titles correspond to the titulature that we find in other sources from the period in question?
- Dates: Are dates in sources consistent within the source text? Do they conform to ancient customs of dating? Do they correspond to external evidence where available?
- External evidence: Are there archaeological, epigraphical, or other findings that corroborate the account of our source text?
- Intellectual content: Can all theological or philosophical ideas and concepts expressed by the narrator or the protagonists be placed within the presumed intellectual context, or do they reflect developments of a later period?
- Verisimilitude: Is the series of events reported in a given text plausible before the backdrop of ancient society, or does it contain 'suspicious' elements (e.g., miracle stories, historically inexplicable events, legal and social institutions, or patterns of behavior)?

Over the past decades, a host of scholars from different denominational and academic backgrounds has examined our evidence using these criteria. As a result of their intensive research, a kind of canon of martyr acts that one might consider historical has been identified, and can now conveniently be found in the collections listed in the appendix to this volume. In addition, it is often overlooked that Cyprian, Eusebius, Lactantius, and others personally witnessed some of the events they are describing in their works. Cyprian witnessed, and fell victim to, the mid-third-century persecutions; Eusebius saw firsthand some of the worst atrocities of the Diocletian persecution in Palestine, whereas Lactantius—professor of rhetoric in the Eastern capital Nicomedia and at some point, perhaps, even a tutor

to the young Constantine—was in close contact with eminent members of the imperial family.

Nevertheless, some of these texts have remained disputed, with valid arguments on both sides being brought forward. It is, therefore, true what Herbert Musurillo, one of the leadings scholars of the martyr acts, noted almost fifty years ago: 'Without external confirmation of the facts . . . we are reduced to retaining merely those texts which seem least objectionable from the historical point of view.'[2] However, the history of scholarship also shows that the 'historical point of view' very much depends on the individual scholar's education, learning, and, in this context, religious background.

By contrast, much of later hagiographical literature fulfilled precisely the purpose of construing an image of early Christianity as a persecuted religion whose adherents bravely held out under torture in defending their faith until the point of death. But this 'myth' was ultimately grounded in a brutal reality that stood at its core (and that even Candida Moss does not deny). Therefore, writing about the persecution of Christians resembles the work of an archaeologist: one very carefully has to remove one layer after another of later additions and embellishments to the texts in order to get to the precious artifact. Quite often these excavations are without result: beneath the tales of cruel mass executions of Christians at the hand of Roman henchmen, there is—nothing. Yet sometimes one does find valuable nuggets of historical information. In the end, historians cannot do more than assemble the available data so as to yield a coherent and plausible account of historical events.

But there are not only problems of evidence—there is also a problem of definition. When can we speak of *persecution* (as opposed to harassment), and when is a persecution a persecution of *Christians*? When ancient Christians were marginalized or fell victim to assaults of marauding non-Christians in nightly brawls (perhaps under the effect of

alcohol), is this persecution? And when they were attacked, was this a result of their specific *religion* or perhaps of other reasons (such as their political or social position)? These questions have been widely debated. For the purpose of this book, I call a persecution of Christians the threatening or the carrying out of violence by official authorities that was directly or indirectly connected to the religion of the victims. It may have been planned long beforehand, or it may have happened 'spontaneously'; it may have been covered by law, or it may have been 'unregulated.' Persecutions differ from other violent quarrels (like street battles) in that the persecutors are themselves superior to their victims in political or military terms. (Nevertheless, I will begin my narrative with Jewish hostilities against [Jewish] Christians, although both were minority groups, because Jews appealed to the Romans for help in order to suppress the novel splinter group in their midst.)

Furthermore, persecution must be distinguished from the marginalization of Christians—that is, exclusion from social, economic, and legal opportunities and privileges—or the Christians' *own* refusal to participate in the discourses and interactions of the non-Christian majority society. In our context, this second distinction is particularly important, as the overall situation of the Christians in the first three centuries was almost throughout marked by *some* form of marginalization. By contrast, persecutions, as described in this book, were *not* a frequent occurrence and depended on a number of factors that are not always easily discernible. But when they did occur, they were marked by an incomprehensible brutality. The persecuted endured these torments with an often superhuman courage—indeed, at times they even sought them out with a longing that seems very alien to us today. The following chapters will portray both sides of this phenomenon, which is both cruel and fascinating, and which remains highly relevant to this day.

1

The Marginalization of Christianity within Judaism

Background and Setting

Christianity originated as a distinct religious grouping within Judaism. It venerated the carpenter Jesus of Nazareth, who had been condemned to death and executed in Jerusalem around the year 30 under the procurator Pontius Pilate on the factually unjustified charge of sedition. Credited with having performed many miracles, this charismatically gifted wandering preacher was eventually associated with the long-expected Messiah. Together with the events and experiences following his execution, this eventually meant that even the earliest sources spoke of the resurrection of Jesus and attributed divine qualities to him.

The Jewish followers of Jesus (whom we may now identify as Jewish Christians) unexpectedly continued even after his death to exist as a cohesive community. What is more, this community grew in attractiveness, size, and diversity. The Jews of Jerusalem soon observed that a group in their midst revered Jesus as the promised Messiah. This inevitably appeared suspect from the outset because Palestinian Jewish elites did not share this group's theological views—but above all because this new community's constitution

around an executed criminal threatened to disrupt already precarious relations between the indigenous population of the Roman province of Judaea and its occupying forces. But this indigenous population ('Judeans'—i.e., 'Jews') was neither religiously nor ethnically homogeneous. Thus the groups of Pharisees and Sadducees known to us from the New Testament held differing views of the role of the Law or of the resurrection of the dead. In addition to Aramaic-speaking Jews, there were also descendants of Greek-speaking immigrants known as 'Hellenists.' This distinction was also replicated among the Jewish Christians: among his earliest followers, shared belief in Jesus Christ encompassed diverse ethnic identities and languages as well as theological orientations.

Quite soon after Jesus' execution, these followers came to be harassed and persecuted. How to assess the extent and historicity of these developments is, however, far from straightforward: our main source, the Acts of the Apostles, dates from a significantly later period (perhaps around 90–100), and its historical reliability is contested. Acts portrays the history of the original Jerusalem church and the missionary travels of the apostles as a history of conflict, and it assigns blame for the problems above all to the 'Jews.' This can give modern readers the impression that the conflicts in question were between 'Jews' and 'Christians'—it is easy to forget that Christians were initially still a group within Second Temple Judaism, as we noted earlier. But this situation did not last long. The violent disputes following the stoning of Stephen (see below p. 12) led to Jewish Christianity's increasing expansion beyond the borders of Judaea. Its representatives were now proselytizing in the catchment areas of the Mediterranean synagogue communities, and their message encountered open doors among 'God fearers'—that is, pagans who followed certain Jewish practices without wholesale conversion to Judaism. The number of gentile Christians thus increased significantly and within a short

while constituted the majority in the churches. This triggered intensive debates around the extent to which Jewish Law still needed to be kept. Most of the Christian churches rejected a strict observance of the commandments. At most they retained (as in the so-called Apostolic Decree of Acts 15.28–29) the requirement to avoid meat slaughtered in connection with the pagan cult, blood (such as by consuming meat that had not been properly drained in a kosher manner), and certain sexual practices.

Within traditional Palestinian Judaism as perhaps also in the Jewish diaspora, by contrast, one can observe a converse trend. In the year 70, the Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem during the Jewish War of 66–74. This engendered a religious praxis that made do without the Temple cult—a development that favored Pharisaic groups, who saw the correct interpretation of the Torah (the Law) as the center of Jewish identity. By a complex process, this led to the composition of the rabbinic writings (Talmud) and the formation of rabbinic Judaism with its own institutions. As early as the first century, therefore, Christians and Jews probably went their separate ways theologically as well as institutionally, and they were eventually recognized even externally (i.e., by pagans) as two distinct groups.

The following section begins by examining the period when Christianity was meaningfully identified as a distinct Jewish group—that is, when most of its followers were Jews and acted wholly or partially within the context of Jewish cult practices.

The Fate of the Original Jerusalem Church and Its Leaders

According to Acts, Peter and John the son of Zebedee were arrested on two occasions and taken to face the Jewish High Court (Sanhedrin) for teaching that Jesus had risen from the dead. They had evidently caused offense above all among the Sadducees, an influential group who denied the resurrection of the dead. The second time, they were

scourged. By contrast, an injunction against public speaking and preaching proved impossible to implement in view of the apostles' support among the populace.[1]

Stephen, the spokesman of the Greek-speaking 'Hellenistic' Jewish Christians, took the view that God did not reside in the Temple of Jerusalem and that the Jews had not kept their God-given Law. Given the identity-forming importance of Temple and Torah for Jewish religious life, this led to Stephen being dragged to the High Court by Hellenistic Jews. His indictment for outrage against the Temple and violation of the Jewish Law culminated with his execution by stoning outside the city walls.[2]

Stephen's violent death around AD 35, later called 'proto-martyr' (i.e., the first Christian martyr), had serious consequences for the community in Jerusalem. The ensuing persecution caused most Jewish Christians to flee the city, leaving only a small remnant.[3] Saul the Pharisee took part in this persecution by jailing Jewish Christians. It is unclear in what capacity Saul did this. Since there is no tradition of Saul holding any higher office (e.g., within Jewish local administration) or membership of the Sanhedrin (the High Court), let alone commanding any kind of paramilitary unit, the effects at least of his own actions may not have been overly serious. Having finally procured the Sanhedrin's official authorization, Saul's journey from Jerusalem to Damascus turned out to be the occasion for his biographically decisive conversion experience, which from then on led to his large-scale missionary activity as Paul the apostle.[4]

The situation of Jewish Christians still in Jerusalem remained precarious, with constantly recurring arrests. In some cases we hear of the murder or execution of followers of Jesus. James (the son of Zebedee and brother of John) fell victim to a police action arranged by King Herod Agrippa I not long before his own death in the year 44, as a result of which he was beheaded. Peter, by contrast, was incarcerated in order to be executed at the feast of Passover

but was able to escape.[5] We do not know the extent of this persecution or Agrippa's motives.

Following the execution of James the son of Zebedee and Peter's escape from Jerusalem, the leadership of the community was assumed at some point around AD 45 by the brother of Jesus, whose name is also James and who was called 'the Just.' Around AD 63 the Sadducean high priest Ananus (Hanan) the Younger charged James and certain others with unknown offenses against the Jewish Law and had them stoned.[6] His tomb was subsequently pointed out in Jerusalem, and he was venerated as a martyr.

The Jerusalem community seems to have been further decimated in the context of the Jewish War. There are indications that just before war broke out in AD 66 they emigrated to Pella in Transjordan in order to escape the Roman army.[7] It is unclear whether they returned after the end of the war. In any case there continued to be Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, although they were no longer numerically significant. Although socially isolated, they were spared major persecutions. That said, the relatives of Jesus belonged to the family of David, the legendary king of the Israelites, whose widespread descendants were suspected as potential rebels; and they may have been monitored by the authorities since the Jewish War. It remains highly uncertain whether we can assign any historical value to a story in Eusebius about two great nephews of Jesus, grandsons of his brother Jude, against whom charges were filed before Emperor Domitian (81–96; see below pp. 41–44) as descendants of David. Eusebius reports that they were interrogated by the emperor but freed when Domitian found them to be simple peasants who believed in a kingdom of Christ in heaven. What is more, we are told that the emperor promptly ceased his persecution of the church.[8] It is hard to imagine Domitian transporting two lower-class residents of the provinces to Rome solely in order to conduct a trial against them in person. The persecution in question was, moreover, suspended most likely only under his successor,

Nerva (see below p. 44). At the time of Trajan (98–117), Simeon the son of Cleopas, a cousin of Jesus, was a leading figure in the church and is traditionally identified as its second bishop. He was extensively tortured as an old man and suffered martyrdom by crucifixion—perhaps also as a result of being denounced as a descendant of David and follower of Christ.[9]

During the rebellion against Rome led by Simon bar Kokhba in the year 132, some of the remaining members of the church were apparently martyred because they refused Simon's demand to deny and blaspheme Christ.[10] By the time of Jerusalem's transformation into a Roman city called Aelia Capitolina after the Bar Kokhba War (after 135), Jewish Christians and Jews had been finally expelled. A church of gentile Christian immigrants began to be constituted under a new bishop called Mark.[11]

Attacks on the Apostle Paul

Paul's popular preaching and missionary successes caused offense especially among his fellow Jews. The book of Acts is full of reports about attacks, ambushes, and denunciations against the apostle.[12] It is not possible to reconstruct each set of historical circumstances in detail or to identify the precise social position of Paul's opponents (who are mostly labeled with the blanket term 'Jews').

The motives behind this persecution were by no means merely religious; nor did they invariably originate with 'Jews.' At Philippi, Paul and his companion Silas were charged by pagans before the city magistrates, flogged, and incarcerated because they had converted a slave girl who was said to possess profitable skills of divination.[13] At Ephesus the apostle's missionary success threatened to ruin the Artemis cult's highly lucrative business in devotional trinkets and thereby occasioned a riot among the silversmiths.[14] In retrospect Paul himself sighed in his Second Letter to the

Corinthians: 'Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning.'[15]

In the year 56, finally, Paul undertook a fateful journey to Jerusalem against which he had been repeatedly warned. Jewish Temple pilgrims from Asia Minor denounced the apostle as a heretic propagating un-Jewish teachings and desecrating the sanctuary. Roman soldiers barely managed to rescue him from a lynch mob.[16] When the soldiers in turn were about to scourge him before his interrogation, Paul appealed to his Roman citizenship as prohibiting such corporal punishment.[17] The commander of the Roman cohort then introduced him to the Sanhedrin in order to discover the nature of Paul's offense. A commotion followed because Paul taught the resurrection of the dead, a doctrine affirmed by Pharisees but rejected by Sadducees, both of whom were represented in the assembly.[18] The situation in Jerusalem threatened to escalate when a Jewish assassination plot was disclosed.[19] The military tribune, therefore, decided to transfer Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea.[20] The high priest Ananias and other representatives of the Sanhedrin there charged him with agitation and religious sacrilege before the provincial governor Marcus Antonius Felix. The trial was eventually adjourned and dragged on for over two years, during which time Paul remained under arrest in the provincial capital.[21]

It was not until Felix's replacement by Porcius Festus in the year 58 that proceedings started to move again. Paul appeared before the governor to face the charges brought by the Jewish high priest and elders, although Festus consider them unfounded. Paul rejected a transfer to Jerusalem and invoked his Roman citizenship in appealing to the emperor. There may also have been a hearing before King Herod Agrippa II of Judaea and his sister Berenice. In any case Paul was eventually transferred to Rome, although the actual reason for his indictment and transfer

to Rome is not apparent. Paul arrived in Rome most likely in 59 and appears to have lived and evangelized there for at least another two years.[22] The book of Acts terminates here. Paul's martyrdom will further occupy our attention in chapter 4.

Itinerant missionaries like Paul the apostle frequently ran into trouble in the Roman Empire. The main reason for this was the fact that Jewish Christian preachers evangelized on the periphery of long-standing Jewish synagogues and thus built up groups of followers in immediate competition with the established Jewish congregations. Less commonly there were hostilities from the pagan side. Above all, the Roman authorities took action to restore public order wherever Jews accused the Jewish Christian missionaries of certain offenses—although in most cases these could not be specified in legal terms.

Scholars strongly disagree about the extent to which there were attacks by Jews against Jewish and eventually gentile Christians. The book of Acts has an interest in exonerating Roman officials from responsibility for the harassment or killing of Christians. The way it concludes with details of the proceedings against Paul is probably mostly fictitious. However, violent Jewish attacks are attested not only in Acts and are not intrinsically implausible in the context of ancient religious and social conflicts. In many places the Gospels appear to retroject these experiences to Jesus' lifetime. They relate predominantly to harassments by Jews.[23]

Violent Conflict between Jews and Christians in the Post-Apostolic Era

Disputes between Jews and Christians continued to arise from time to time. But it would be inaccurate to describe these as large-scale persecutions, since both groups continued to be minorities within a majority pagan society at least until the beginning of the fourth century. Even so, Jews

did at first occasionally succeed in coopting the support of the Roman authorities, instrumentalizing the armed force of imperial power for the purpose of repressing the new religion. Until the middle of the second century, Christian sources repeatedly speak of hostile attitudes among the Jews. Thus the churches of Smyrna (modern Izmir, Turkey) and Philadelphia (Alaşehir) in Asia Minor appear to have experienced altercations with local Jewish groups.[24] A Christian named Antipas was murdered at Pergamum (modern Bergama), possibly also by Jews.[25]

Beyond this, the Christian Apologist Justin (see below p. 27) continues to mention such scenarios of oppression. His *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 160) claims to report a conversation between the author and Trypho that took place in Ephesus in the year 132. During this exchange the author claims not only that Jews persecute Christians in the synagogues,[26] but also that at some unspecified stage in the past there was a concerted effort to send out Jewish emissaries from Jerusalem around the world who were charged systematically to denounce Christians to the authorities.[27] We hear that Jews even killed Christians where an opportunity arose,[28] or else relied on pagans to implement the executions.[29]

Composed perhaps around 100/110, the Gospel of John also indicates that some Jewish synagogues disciplined or excommunicated those 'who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah.'[30] Certain Jewish sources seem to point in the same direction. The synagogue liturgy's so-called 'Blessing of the Heretics' (Birkat ha-Minim) is often interpreted as a curse directed, above all, against (Jewish) Christians; but this is debatable. There are additionally numerous indications of very early Jewish literary polemics against Christianity. And it seems conceivable that tensions between Jews and Jewish Christians resulted in denunciations to the Roman authorities (the book of Acts [19.21–40; see above p. 14] explicitly attests this for mid-first-century Ephesus, the geographic setting of

the *Dialogue with Trypho*). But it remains anyone's guess to what extent violent Jewish actions against Christians were a mid-*second*-century reality, let alone systematically implemented.

This volatile situation came in time to be defused by Christianity's systematic gentile mission, which by the second century was increasingly distant from the ambit of the synagogue and thus no longer remained a religious competitor. At the same time, a succession of Jewish defeats by superior Roman power (most recently during the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132–135) had left Judaism at least in the Holy Land weakened to such an extent that it lacked either its own wherewithal or Roman support for any major acts of repression.

2

Christianity's Offensiveness

Ideological Parameters of the Ancient Conflicts

Pagan Prejudices against Christians

The growing mission among pagans fundamentally altered the nature of the Christian churches in the later first and second centuries. The collective term 'pagans' denotes people who were neither Jews nor Christians. They might in practice belong to very different religious orientations, but they basically maintained the worship of multiple gods with responsibilities for different aspects of human coexistence—protecting the empire or individual cities, promising good fortune in war or love, or procuring a good harvest. In Roman times this divine providence was credited with both the empire's prosperity and the welfare of its individual inhabitants. This in turn presupposed a diligent administration of the cult on the part of religious experts (i.e., priests) and to some extent the individual's participation in these rites.

Roman cults were not officially 'approved' (there was, strictly speaking, no distinct legislation covering religion) but simply existed. They were either sponsored by the authorities where they served political ends, or at least tolerated as long as they gave no occasion to suspect any

disturbance of public order or threat to public welfare (*salus publica*). Emperors might exploit new cults either to secure their own power base (as in the case of sun worship) or to strengthen the army's loyalty (as in the case of the Mithras cult; see below p. 94).

Since the welfare of society was so closely connected to cultic practice, social problems were primarily attributed not to political or economic mismanagement or other natural causes but to deficient worship of the gods. Groups that did not participate in this worship, therefore, soon found themselves in the crosshairs of the authorities. This was true for Jews as much as for Christians. Jews were admittedly somewhat protected by the ancient and venerable reputation of their religion, and by refraining from active propaganda. Christians, however, literally advertised their newfangled provincial religion with vociferous promises. They denied the existence of any other gods, which they regarded at most as demons, substituting in their place the worship of a single God whose name they were not even able to specify. (In keeping with Jewish custom, God's name in the Hebrew Bible, the so-called 'tetragrammaton' YHWH, is represented with a circumscription in the Greek and Latin translations that were consistently in use among Christians.) Worst of all, they resorted to a duly condemned and executed criminal as their leading figure, to whom they attributed divine qualities.

This strategy was surprisingly successful: before long, Christianity expanded around the entire Mediterranean, and the communities of the faithful grew to considerable size. Yet this approach also harbored substantial risks: the families that came to comprise converts to Christianity could experience serious tensions. And the participation in worship by people of all layers of society (including slaves) threatened to subvert the traditional social fabric. What is more, Christianity's expansion also entailed economic consequences, because cultic practice greatly influenced urban

trade and industry: food production and sacrificial ritual, for instance, were closely interconnected, and the high volume of pilgrims to important cult sites represented a substantial economic impact. Over the longer term, neglect of the traditional cults greatly altered cityscapes as impressive temples in public forums progressively crumbled.

Christians were thus exposed to considerable pressure to conform. Where they failed to acquiesce to it, mistrust and slander as well as verbal and indeed physical attacks might follow. Unforeseen events like a failed harvest, earthquake, epidemic, or failure to fend off military threats (particularly in border provinces) were seen as resulting from disturbance in relations with the gods for which, not infrequently, the Christians were blamed. Before long this raised the charge of religious sacrilege or treason, which in turn might incur serious legal consequence including the death penalty—a point to which we will return in some more detail. One recalls Tertullian's famous statement: 'If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if weather will not change, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a plague—straightaway the cry is heard: "Toss the Christians to the lion!"'[1]

Matters were further exacerbated by the suspicion of many pagans that Christian worship services involved forms of cannibalism and sex orgies (see below p. 59). Indeed, the very *name* 'Christians,' first introduced at Antioch,[2] was an outsider's designation by enemies of this Jewish faction, whose disparaging form served as a reminder of its criminal founder.

This disdain for the Christians is conspicuous in the famously derisive cross graffito of Alexamenos, incised into a wall at the Palatine Hill and today in the Palatine Museum. It shows a crucified man with the head of an ass, with another person apparently praying in front of him with a raised hand. Underneath, the inscription in poor Greek probably needs to be translated, 'Alexamenos worships

God.' This image presumably dates to around the year 200. Indeed, we have indications from this time that Jews as well as Christians were alleged to be worshipping a donkey.[3]

Such 'fake news' and prejudices circulated in all parts of society. They were picked up even by learned members of the Roman elites, like Marcus Cornelius Fronto (d. after 176), an orator and tutor of Marcus Aurelius,[4] while the author Lucian of Samosata (c. 120–c. 190) presented them to his readers in sharply satirical fashion.[5]

Philosophical Criticism

In addition, the second half of the second century witnessed increasing intellectual conflict with Christianity, which we can here outline only in brief. Some names of these philosophical critics are known to us. Although the Stoic Epictetus (c. 50–c. 125) already knew the fearlessness of the 'Galileans,' this struck him not as admirable but as a force of 'habit.'[6] The Cynic Crescens accused the Christians in Rome of atheism and religious sacrilege, a charge on which Justin called him out (see below p. 54). The famous physician and philosopher Galen of Pergamum (129–c. 216) saw Christianity as a philosophical school but did not think it intellectually serious: he considered its philosophy to rely on rationally unfounded laws, while faith was nourished by parables and miracles. Nevertheless, he admired the Christians' defiance of death as well as their asceticism, in which they were the equal of 'true' philosophers. We will return later to Marcus Aurelius, a Stoic (see below p. 52).

Before long, this controversy grew in hostility. Around the year 170, the otherwise unknown philosopher Celsus wrote a comprehensive work against the Christians, which he called *True Word* or *True Discourse* (*Alethes Logos*). This document survives in excerpts contained in a refutation composed around 248 by the Christian theologian Origen (c. 185–c. 253). Around the year 300, the Neoplatonist

Porphyry of Tyre (c. 234–305/310) composed an even more extensive work, *Against the Christians* (in fifteen volumes), which subjected Christianity and its teachings to an extremely critical analysis that profoundly influenced the anti-Christian literature of later generations. Porphyry himself may once have been close to Christianity, which would explain the breadth of his relevant knowledge. His work caused considerable disquiet among Christian intellectuals throughout the fourth century, generating numerous rebuttals. As late as the year 448, an edict of Emperors Theodosius II and Valentinian III ordered the destruction of *Against the Christians*.[7]

Porphyry's invective illustrates with particular clarity that these controversies did not play out in the ivory tower of some academy but had immediate political repercussions. Thus Sossianus Hierocles, the governor of Bithynia who played a crucial role at the outset of the persecution under Diocletian (see below p. 96), published two pamphlets (no longer extant) against the church, to set the ideological mood music accompanying his political measures. Here he sought to demonstrate the contradictions in holy Scripture in such detail that contemporaries wondered if he had himself once been a Christian. A more probable explanation, however, is that he made use of Porphyry.[8] In another document entitled *Lover of Truth* (*Philalethes*), Hierocles compared the life of Jesus with that of Apollonius of Tyana, the legendary first-century Pythagorean philosopher and wonder-worker, in order to demonstrate the latter's superiority. Once the persecutions in Nicomedia were underway, an unknown philosopher published three volumes against the Christians, praising the emperors for their actions, while using his socially prominent position to enrich himself with Christian property.[9]

So the intellectual polemics against Christianity were severe and for this reason politically dangerous. Christians were accused of invoking a criminal of the worst

sort, an agitator and magician who turned his followers away from the honorable laws and customs of both Jews and pagans in order to create a completely newfangled and hence suspect hybrid religion whose rejection of the traditional gods and vague idea of God led straight into atheism. Christians were in any case seen as a mob of low-life characters, uneducated and thus easily seduced. They were relying on holy books stolen from the Jews and supplemented with their own writings, whose coarse manner of presentation and primitive style was in no way in keeping with the aesthetic ideals of Greco-Roman literature. To any rationally thinking person, the Gospels in particular were unbelievable and self-contradictory. All this, it was thought, led to the refusal of sacrifices to the gods, which not only cast doubt on Christian political loyalty but directly endangered the welfare of the empire. Christians were in fact alleged to be an illegal secret society that subverted public life and that in its refusal also of the imperial sacrifice must be regarded as the Roman Empire's enemy. Thus they had provoked the anger of the gods and made themselves guilty of the world's demise.

The Christian Reaction

How did Christians respond to these attacks? It is possible to see forms of civil disobedience in the martyrdoms themselves, in their textual representation in martyr acts, and in the cultic veneration of those who were executed. Such civil disobedience was in most cases exercised passively. Once in a while the faithful overthrew sacrificial altars; there might be interferences in public trials or, rarely, physical attacks on governors. But documented cases of any active Christian resistance are very few in number. (Moreover, such resistance frequently served to *accelerate* one's own martyrdom rather than to *prevent* persecution.) The reason for this may be the incomplete survival of sources, since

writings that were destroyed were more likely to be critical of Rome than friendly to it. Quite apart from this, however, the available means meant that any violent resistance against the Roman military was doomed to failure from the start. What is more, Christian ethics with its stress on loving one's enemies hardly condoned such resistance. Instead, the faithful trusted that their suffering here on earth would be rewarded in heaven,[10] and they were confident of God's vengeance against their persecutors.

In order to escape situations of persecution, Christians attempted as far as possible to avoid any points of conflict with their environment that did not immediately concern cultic issues. However, major areas of public as well as private life were charged with pagan religiosity—from shared banquets via schools all the way to public baths with their divine statues or theaters whose performances invariably concerned myths of the gods. As a result, relations with non-Christian surroundings remained consistently difficult. For this reason Christians constantly endeavored to demonstrate their loyalty to the Roman Empire, even if this could be done only with limited success whenever the emperors attempted to stabilize their rule through *cultic* veneration. Christians did this above all by praying to their God for the preservation of the empire and the emperor's health, all the while openly publicizing this praxis of intercession for the authorities. A call to prayer for the rulers is, for example, found in 1 Timothy 2.1–4 (c. 100): 'First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (NRSV). At around the same time, we find an early example for such an intercession in the letter of Clement of Rome to the Christians in Corinth:

> You, Master, have given them the power of sovereignty through your majestic and inexpressible might, so that we acknowledging the glory and honor which you have given them, may be subject to them resisting your will in nothing. Grant to them, Lord, health, peace, harmony, and stability, that they may blamelessly administer the government which you have given them. For you, heavenly Master, King of the ages, give to the sons of men glory and honor and authority over those upon the earth. Lord, direct their plans according to what is good and pleasing in your sight, so that by devoutly administering in peace and gentleness the authority which you have given them they may experience your mercy.[11]

Cyprian (see below p. 82) and Dionysius of Alexandria (see below p. 76) referred to prayers such as these in court in order to assure the governors of their loyalty. Likewise, in their apologetic writings, Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Athenagoras, and Tertullian (see below p. 27) emphasized that the Christians asked God on behalf of the emperor for wise government, stability and increase of their dominion, and the preservation of the imperial dynasty.

In this context they presented Christianity as the empire's supporter, adopting the Roman idea that correct worship guaranteed the welfare of the body politic. This argumentation took advantage of the historical circumstance that the empire's heyday under Emperor Augustus had coincided with the birth of Jesus. In this they saw a providential connection that they deployed in many and various ways. Melito (bishop of Sardis in Lydia in the second half of the second century), for example, expressed it like this:

> Our philosophy first flourished among barbarians, but it blossomed out among your peoples during the great reign of your ancestor Augustus, and became especially for your empire an auspicious benefit. For from that time the power of Rome grew to become great and splendid. To that power you have become a successor desired in

> prayer, and will continue to be so, together with your son, if you guard the philosophy of the empire which was nursed with and began with Augustus, and which your ancestors respected alongside the other cults. This also is the surest proof that it was for good that our thinking flourished together with the empire which began so well—the fact that nothing ignoble befell it from the rule of Augustus, but on the contrary everything splendid and glorious in accordance with the prayer of all.[12]

Aside from such professions of loyalty, Christian intellectuals also attempted through their writings to rebut the attacks of pagan philosophers in detail while at the same time promoting their religion. In this context they endeavored to formulate their creedal convictions in pagan categories of thought, thereby marking the beginning of philosophical theology that made faith accountable to reason—that is, especially to Greek philosophy. The authors of these writings are collectively known as the Apologists of the second century. Among the Apologists who wrote in Greek, and whose writings survive in whole or in part, are Quadratus and Aristides (both of whom were active during the reign of Hadrian, 117–138), the Christian philosopher Justin (who taught in Rome; d. c. 165), his student Tatian (who returned to his native Syria around 172 and founded a sectarian church there), Melito, Athenagoras (a Christian philosopher from Athens, active around 177), and Theophilus (bishop of Antioch from around 180).

The most important Latin Apologists are Tertullian and Minucius Felix, both lawyers. Minucius was active in Rome in the early third century, producing an elaborate dialogue between the author and a pagan, entitled *Octavius*. Tertullian (c. 160–c. 220), however, worked in Carthage; his extensive output includes several apologetic writings in which, among other things, he decries the precarious legal situation of the Christians with at times stinging irony.

The work of the Apologists is colorfully creative and diverse. They deployed a variety of styles and genres for different purposes. The surviving *apologies* are probably based on petitions to one or more Roman emperors with the intent to alter the legal position of Christians. Works of the type *Against the Greeks* belong more to the literature of intellectual debate and controversy. There are also apologetically colored *Dialogues*.

Rhetorical strategies, too, in some cases differ substantially. Some authors like Tatian sharply attacked everything non-Christian, while others like Justin sought a rapprochement with pagan ideas and concepts.

Apologetic literature continued even in later times to be written in diverse literary genres. These include minor tractates and dialogues as well as large-scale controversial writings in multiple theologically and philosophically elaborate volumes. Prominent authors of the latter works include Origen, Cyprian (d. 258), Arnobius (fl. around 300), Lactantius, and Eusebius of Caesarea.

The earlier Apologists in particular advocated legal liability not for adherence to Christianity but only for actual crimes: thus they insisted that charges of murder, adultery, religious sacrilege, or sedition could not be substantiated. In this connection they expanded their doctrine of God and morality and explicitly emphasized the venerable age of their religion by appealing to the Old Testament. At the same time they affirmed their loyalty toward the Roman authorities and deflected the accusations against them back against the pagans, accusing them in turn of the worship of idols and licentiousness. They criticized the Greek and Roman myths as immoral and pointed out the contradictions between the different philosophers.

It is impossible to determine whether this literature had any influence on the intended addressees, let alone whether it lessened the vehemence of persecutions. Its importance regardless of that question, however, consists in the fact that

the Apologists were the first to offer a systematic treatment of theological themes including the oneness of God, the relationship between God the Father and the Son (Logos), the doctrine of demons, and the immortality of the soul.

3

Legal Procedures and Punishments

Trials against the Christians: Procedures

In this chapter I will take a closer look at the way trials against the Christians were conducted by the Roman authorities. Almost certainly there was no law or statute penalizing Christianity up until the reign of Trajan (98–117). Imperial officials, therefore, acted solely by virtue of their power of coercion (*coercitio*), allowing them to deploy any policing measures required to maintain public order, including the death penalty. (Only Roman citizens had the right to appeal to the emperor against this.) However, the officials in charge were obliged to conduct a formal investigation. This procedure, although known as an 'extraordinary' trial (*extraordinaria cognitio* or *cognitio extra ordinem*), became the norm rather than the exception in the imperial period. In the city of Rome, trials were usually presided over by the *praefectus urbi* (the highest official in the administration of the capital); in the provinces, by the respective governors.

As far as the Christians were concerned, these trials comprised seven stages:

1. Unless the public peace was seriously threatened, during the Principate the Roman authorities did not by themselves initiate the prosecution of crimes. Instead,

proceedings usually began with a *delatio nominis* (a named accusation of an offense that did not, in the first instance, have to be submitted in writing). Such denunciations could be quite lucrative for the informer (*delator*), since successful convictions resulted in a financial reward from the convicted person's assets. From the time of Trajan's rescript onward (see below ch. 6), it sufficed to be suspected of being a Christian to be arraigned before the urban prefect or the provincial governor. Unlike in the time of the Republic when, in the *quaestio*, the *delator* acted as a kind of prosecutor before the court, in the *cognitio* the accuser—at least until the time of Hadrian—usually was not present at the actual trial.

2. After the defendants had been summoned or arrested, sometimes a pretrial by some minor official was held, before the defendants were handed over to the governor. This intermediate period that the defendants had to spend in prison awaiting their trial could take some considerable time, until the governor happened to be in the town or in the vicinity of the town where the prisoners were held.

3. Ultimately, the date of the trial proper was fixed. The proceedings then usually took the following form: The defendants were first questioned with regard to their personal data (name, origin, etc.) and were then asked if they were Christians. If the defendants denied that this was the case, the governor might release them straightaway. If he was not entirely convinced, he would order the defendants to sacrifice to the gods or to the genius of the emperor in order to prove their non-Christianity. If, however, they confessed to be Christians, they were threatened with torture and/or with a death sentence in order to make them recant. Sometimes the defendants' lawyers (if they could afford any) intervened and asked for an adjournment to give the defendants time to consider their position. If, however, they persisted, they were often handed over to the *tortor* or *carnifex* (torturer) to extort a denial by force. This was an

unusual deviation from standard legal practice to which I will return below.

4. If after these torments the defendants were ready to recant, they had to prove their change of mind by sacrifice and were then released. If they persisted even further, they were sometimes repeatedly tortured until their resistance was broken.

5. Alternatively, they were immediately sentenced to death (or, in some instances, to other punishments, to which I will return below). The sentence was pronounced by the governor and made public by his herald.

6. The executions were often carried out straightaway so as to reduce the risk of public unrest to an absolute minimum. By contrast, executions in the arena appear initially to have been rare—this changed at a later stage (see below).

7. Finally, the corpses were often disposed of by burning them, exposing them to wild animals, or tossing them into the sea such that other Christians were unable to get hold of them for a decent burial, to avoid encouraging a custom of venerating the respective martyrs' relics at their tombs.

Torture and Punishments of Christians

The examination by torture (*quaestio per tormentum*) was originally only used on slaves, and in the earliest trials it was not applied to Christians. This changed, however, when the distinction between higher- and lower-ranking members of Roman society (*honestiores* and *humiliores*) became popular in Roman law in the latter half of the second century. The *humiliores* could now be tortured, as can be seen, for example, from the famous account of Christian trials at Lyon in 177 (see below pp. 57–63), when almost fifty Christians were executed or died in prison. Here torture was liberally applied.

The key instruments of torture most often applied in the case of the early Christians were the whip (*flagellum*) or

the club (*fustis*), the 'horse-rack' (*eculeus* or *equuleus*), and, above all, the iron 'claws' (*ungulae*). The *flagellum* was sometimes equipped with small leaden balls (*plumbatae*) in order to increase the pain. The *eculeus* was a wooden rack, roughly shaped like a horse, on which the defendants were stretched out. Through ropes attached to rollers on both ends, the strain on the defendant's limbs was gradually increased until the joints were ultimately dislocated, thus causing excruciating pain. *Ungulae* were used to rip open the skin of the prisoner. The *eculeus* was often used in conjunction with the claws. Sometimes also a fire was kindled beneath the rack to inflict additional pain.

Tortures were primarily used to extort confessions. Interestingly, in the case of Christians, governors tried to achieve exactly the opposite: they wanted those prisoners that had confessed to be Christians to recant so that they could be released. The church father Tertullian mockingly said about this irregular procedure: 'Then, too, when you deal with us in this matter, you do not follow the procedure prescribed for judging criminals. To others who deny their guilt you apply torture to force them to confess; to Christians alone, to force them to deny.'[1]

The death penalty included crucifixion, which in our sources is fairly rare; burning at the stake, which was mostly reserved for slaves; and beheading by sword, particularly in the case of Roman citizens or persons of higher rank. Burning at the stake was, in fact, in many cases carried out by heaping faggots around the stake in such a way that the defendant ultimately suffocated rather than was burnt alive. The frequent burning of Christians soon spawned terms of derision: they were called 'faggot fellows' (*sarmentici*) and 'half-axle men' (*semaxii*) because, as Tertullian says, 'we are bound to a half-axle post and burned in a circle of faggots.'[2]

Which kind of death would await you depended on your social status. Crucifixion and burning at the stake were

punishments meted out to slaves and (later) to the *humiliores*, whereas beheading was primarily applied to Roman citizens and (later) to *honestiores*. It seems, however, that this distinction was not always strictly applied, but that the kind of penalty meted out sometimes also depended on the whim of the individual governor.

There is also at least one example from the Diocletian persecution of the penalty of the sack, the *poena cullei*: in Tyre a young man was sewn up with a dog and a poisonous snake into a leather sack and tossed into the sea—a punishment that was originally reserved for parricide (see below p. 110). During this persecution other methods of execution were also used, such as drowning.

Whereas until the middle of the second century executions were often meted out immediately after the sentence had been pronounced, later the situation changed. The trials sometimes no longer took place in the office of the governor, or on the dais in the forum, or in the agora where trials were usually held, but in the local circus or theater. Interestingly, there is no indication that Christians were 'thrown to the lions' before the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The only exception may be Ignatius of Antioch, who mentions having to fight with beasts, but the meaning of the passage is obscure and the letter in which it is found may even be inauthentic.[3] Yet from around 167/168 onward (the martyrdom of Polycarp), we have numerous accounts that Christians were tortured and executed in the arena for the purpose of entertaining the masses. (Theodor Mommsen famously called them *Volksfesthinrichtungen*—'funfair executions.') I will discuss below the reasons for this change (see p. 56). The trials proper either preceded or formed part of these spectacles. In this context the Christians were often sentenced *ad bestias*—that is, they had to fight with lions, panthers, bears, boars, and bulls in front of thousands of spectators. If in the end the beasts

had not actually killed them, they were stabbed to death by the *confector*.

We will see that especially during the Diocletian persecution, the forms of torture and punishment multiplied beyond what has been described here (see below pp. 107–8).

However, sentences varied and did not always lead to certain death. Higher-ranking members of society were often sent into exile while their property was confiscated. Lower-ranking women could be locked up in brothels. In addition, many Christians were condemned to excavating stone or copper in quarries and mines. Yet, as we will see, some governors sought more humane solutions.

4

Persecutions in Rome under Nero and Domitian

The Fire of Rome and the Anti-Christian Pogrom

Emperor Nero (54–68) is in Christian tradition regarded as the first pagan persecutor of the new religion. However, the ancient sources are sparse and full of contradictions. Two texts are of particular importance here. The Roman historian Tacitus describes a persecution of Christians that followed the devastating fire of Rome in the year 64.[1] His account is perhaps based on a (lost) history of Nero's reign from the pen of the emperor's confidant Marcus Cluvius Rufus. On this account Nero may have started the fire himself and intended to deflect blame for it onto the Christians, who were popularly despised for unspecified crimes. The authorities arrested a great number of Christians, who were charged with 'hatred for humanity'—an accusation that Tacitus elsewhere also launches against Jews.[2] They were condemned to death and subjected to elaborate modes of execution, of which Tacitus explicitly disapproves even though he harbors no other sympathies for the Christians: they were torn to pieces by dogs, crucified, and incinerated like torches to provide illumination after dark. According to Tacitus, this appalling spectacle took place in the

gardens of Nero, which reportedly also contained a *Circus* (a hippodrome), in which the emperor paraded himself as a charioteer. This will have been a park on the right bank of the Tiber that originally belonged to Agrippina the Elder, mother of the Emperor Caligula (37–41), and in which her son and subsequently Nero later constructed a racecourse. This *Circus* was demonstrably located on the site of what is now St Peter's Basilica. In its immediate vicinity was a necropolis (a cemetery), in which the apostle Peter was probably buried (see below p. 40).

Executions of Christians because of a 'new-fangled and nefarious superstition' are also mentioned by the historian Suetonius, a younger contemporary of Tacitus, although he does not insert a link with the fire of Rome.[3]

Even if we cannot, therefore, say with certainty to what extent the anti-Christian measures in Rome related to the fire that laid waste to large parts of the capital, nevertheless there is little doubt about the pogrom that was conducted in the city under Nero's watch and resulted in fatal casualties. Despite their complete lack of sympathy for the Christians, it is noticeable that neither of these two historians appear to have any concrete allegations against them. They take for granted that the 'superstition' of the 'Christ followers' (i.e., Christians) is as such inherently punishable because the Romans had executed the founder of this sect as a criminal. In other words, those who refused to renounce Christianity under torture but instead confessed, 'I am a Christian,' made themselves culpable of a unique crime that was punishable by death. This is a point to which we will need to return.

The Deaths of the Apostles Paul and Peter

At this point it is important to deal separately with the fate of the apostles Paul and Peter: not least because of their significance for the church, the question of when and how

they met their deaths continues to be intensely discussed to the present day. The ancient sources on this subject are exceedingly scant and by no means free of miraculous elements and contradictions. For this reason recent times have seen renewed debate about the question of whether these two missionaries were ever executed in Rome at all. We cannot here rehearse the scholarly discussion in detail: it will suffice to point out that the veneration of Paul and Peter as martyrs has always attached itself to the city of Rome. There is, therefore, no reason in principle to doubt the claim that both apostles met a violent death in Rome, even if the state of the evidence is relatively thin and we do not know why they were executed.

The preceding course of events suggests that there should have been no grounds for any condemnation of Paul, let alone of the capital crime: neither Porcius Festus, the governor of Judea, nor King Agrippa II were able to confirm a punishable offense, and the Jews of the capital knew nothing of this affair (see above pp. 15–16). Given that Nero was hostile toward Christians (see above pp. 37–38), a death sentence cannot be ruled out. Paul's martyrdom is already implied by 2 Timothy (c. 100), a letter that was ostensibly authored in Rome and whose unknown author has Paul addressing his impending martyrdom.[4] Polycarp of Smyrna, who may have suffered martyrdom in the year 167/168 (see below pp. 55–57) and was said to have personally known certain apostles, also mentions Paul's suffering in his (second) Letter to the Philippians.[5] The earliest unambiguous source for a simultaneous martyrdom of Paul *and Peter* (in Rome?) is the (lost) *Letter to the Romans* by Dionysius of Corinth (c. 170).[6] Around 180, Irenaeus the bishop of Lyon knows that Peter and Paul preached in Rome and apparently also died there.[7] Not long after this we read in the legendary *Acts of Paul* that Paul was beheaded under Nero.[8] Around or a little after 200, a Christian author named Gaius writes that he saw 'victory markers' (*tropaia*) for the two apostles

at the Vatican and on the Ostian Way, by which he means their tombs.[9] In the year 203, the African church father Tertullian praises the church of Rome because it was there that Peter was 'matched to the Lord's passion' (i.e., crucifixion) and 'Paul was crowned with the death of John' (the Baptist, who had been beheaded; cf. Mark 6.21–29).[10] Not long afterward (211/12), the same author confirms that Nero was responsible for the executions: he had Peter strapped to a cross and Paul executed in an otherwise unspecified manner.[11] Appealing to unidentified sources, Eusebius indicates that Paul was decapitated under Nero while Peter was crucified.[12] A novelistic report of the passion of Peter (composed perhaps 180/190) additionally suggests that the Romans nailed Peter to the cross upside down at his own explicit request.[13] The same information also appears to have been conveyed by the Alexandrian theologian Origen in his lost commentary on Genesis (c. 240),[14] and this form of execution subsequently found its way into iconography.

Most archaeologists consider that the *tropaion* of Peter of which Gaius speaks is partially preserved to this day in an ancient necropolis immediately underneath the apse of St. Peter's Basilica, whose construction on Emperor Constantine's orders was completed around 326 and later demolished to make way for today's St. Peter's Basilica. The location on the Ostian Way mentioned by Gaius is today occupied by the Church of St. Paul Outside the Walls (San Paolo fuori le Mura), which in its earliest form was also constructed by Constantine (320–after 330). Underneath the high altar, visitors are shown the tomb of the apostle Paul, a sarcophagus that was rediscovered during excavations at the beginning of this century and that carries the inscription *Paulo Apostolo Mart*[*yri*], 'for Paul the Apostle and Martyr.' It contained fragments of bones and textiles that can be dated to the first or second century. This of course cannot establish whether these are indeed the bones

of the apostle, a question that, incidentally, remains beyond the capacity of archaeological and historical proof.

In other words, the traditions about Peter and Paul in Rome cannot be traced back beyond the middle of the second century, in Paul's case perhaps to the period around the year 100. In consideration of all the evidence, however, we may nevertheless stand by the conclusion that Peter and Paul were respectively executed under Nero by the cross and the sword. In Paul's case this can hardly have occurred prior to 61, since Paul only arrived in Rome in the year 59 and supposedly remained active in the service of the Christian cause for another two years (see above p. 16). This means that Paul's death must be dated between the years 61 and 68. In Peter's case it is not possible to specify more precisely the date of his execution during Nero's reign (54–68). His execution at the same time as that of Paul is rendered unlikely by the existence of separate traditions of martyrdom, as discussed.

Domitian's Purge among Roman Upper-Class Christians

Christian tradition even in antiquity described Emperor Domitian (81–96) as a 'little Nero' (*portio Neronis*) in view of his treatment of Christians. Tertullian, whom we have already encountered (see above p. 27), attributes this nickname to the fact that Domitian persecuted the Christians only briefly and later permitted the return of those who had been banished.[15] It is, however, quite doubtful that there were any extensive persecutions of Christians. In his *Chronicle* for the year 96, Jerome (= Eusebius) cites a certain Bruttius to the effect that 'a great many Christians suffered martyrdom under Domitian.' Among the victims was Flavia Domitilla (niece of the consul Titus Flavius Clemens), who was banished to the island of Pontia (modern Ponza) west of Naples for her witness to Christ.[16]

That information appears at first sight to contradict the pagan historian Cassius Dio, who reports in his early third-century *Roman History* that Flavia Domitilla was the *wife* of Flavius Clemens, himself a nephew of Domitian. Both of them, he claims, were accused of 'atheism': Domitian had Flavius Clemens executed, while Domitilla was banished to the island of Pandateria (modern Isola di Ventotene). In the same connection, 'many others who had drifted into the customs of the Jews' were accused of the same crime and either executed or banished.[17] There is no mention of any persecution of Christians either here or in Suetonius, who merely mentions the execution of Flavius Clemens.[18]

This makes for discrepancies between the presentations of Eusebius and Cassius Dio: Domitilla is unlikely to have been Flavius Clemens' wife as well as his niece, and the locations of exile are also not identical. Nevertheless, the general picture emerging from the sources is actually quite coherent: Domitian seems to have implemented harsh measures against the Jews. They were accused of 'atheism,' because they did not adhere to the Roman imperial cult, did not pronounce the name of the God of Israel, and did not graphically depict God. Especially the first of these offenses, the *crimen laesae religionis*, constituted a grave offense because on the Roman understanding it endangered the welfare of the empire, which depended on the orderly conduct of the relevant cult (see below pp. 70, 103).

At the same time, from the Roman point of view those who had 'drifted into the customs of the Jews' would have included the Christians. Thus the measures taken against Flavius Clemens and his wife (or niece) may indeed have been justified in terms of 'atheism' but may—at least in the case of Domitilla—have targeted a Christian. In that case she would be the earliest example of Christianity's inroads into the senatorial class, the premier elite of the Roman Empire.

The context of this action may even have been the poll tax on the Jews (*fiscus Iudaicus*), the collection of which, according to Suetonius, Domitian enforced 'with extreme severity.' This had been imposed on the Jews by Vespasian after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70 (see above p. 11), for the purpose of financing the Roman cult. Suetonius mentions the fact that it also targeted those 'who lived a Jewish way of life even without professing (to be Jews)' as well as those 'who by concealing their origin had avoided paying the dues imposed on their people.'[19] In this connection there appear to have been numerous denunciations of Jews on the part of pagans.[20] In doubtful cases the authorities confirmed the Jewish affiliation of men by ordering their circumcision to be verified, as Suetonius personally witnessed in the case of a ninety-year-old man.[21] The groups liable to this tribute thus certainly included Jewish Christians, even if they might subjectively consider themselves to be exempt from the tax, because they had abandoned Judaism.

The sources are also divided about when these repressions came to an end: as we saw, Tertullian claims a brief persecution terminated by Domitian himself.[22] However, Cassius Dio and Eusebius suggest that the persecution only ended under Domitian's successor, Nerva (96–98).[23]

All in all, then, we cannot speak of a comprehensive persecution of Christians during the reign of Domitian. Christians may also have been on the radar of the Roman authorities in the course of their collecting the Jewish poll tax. Aside from this, violent measures were directed at most against certain members of the Roman aristocracy, for reasons that were probably not religious in the first instance.

For the same reasons, one should receive with a dose of skepticism Eusebius' report that 'the Apostle and Evangelist John' was under Domitian banished to the island of Patmos because of his 'testimony to the divine Word.'[24] Eusebius' formulation may be spun out of a verse in the Bible: in

Revelation of John 1.9, the author reports that he received his visions on Patmos, where he was staying 'because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.' Tertullian even knows that before his banishment to an island the 'Apostle John' was immersed in 'boiling oil' seven times without coming to any harm.[25] In a fragmentary text dating from around 130/140, Papias of Hierapolis reports that Nerva recalled John from exile; after this he lived and composed his gospel in Ephesus, where he was later killed by Jews; Papias himself claims to have seen him.[26] Papias, Tertullian, and Eusebius evidently presume that the authors of John's Gospel and the Revelation of John are identical, a point that was already questioned at the beginning of the third century and is today considered impossible. Whatever may lie behind this story, one certainly cannot derive from it any large-scale persecution.

5

Christians as Victims of Local Police Actions (111–249)

Christians in the second century remained under pressure from their pagan environment and the governing authorities. Throughout this century, however, there were no empire-wide persecutions. Only locally confined measures occurred until the middle of the third century, although they may then have targeted entire congregations; in this respect they transcended earlier reprisals with the exception of Rome under Nero. Sources for this period are more abundant and in relative agreement: Christianity as such was prohibited in principle but, rather like Judaism, tolerated in practice. The authorities only intervened where public order was at risk—although they might then unleash against Christians the full savage might of a military state. Such far-reaching powers had the potential to pose extreme danger to Christians. An official report to the authorities (*delatio nominis*; see above p. 32) could entail immediate danger to life if the Roman official in charge decided that action was required.

The Emperor Trajan's Rescript (111/112)

The essentially unregulated legal situation of the first century changed only with a correspondence between Emperor

Trajan and Pliny the Younger (61/62–113/115), the governor of the province of Bithynia and Pontus (today northern Turkey). From one of Pliny's letters (10.96) we know about a series of prosecutions of Christians that probably took place in Amastris (modern Amasra), a prosperous port city in Paphlagonia on the Black Sea, during the winter of 111/112. What had happened? The governor had received complaints against several people as Christians. He had the accused brought before him and repeatedly asked them if they were Christians. Where this was the case, he had some of them executed for their 'intransigence' (*pertinacia*) and 'inflexible obstinacy' (*inflexibilis obstinatio*). Others with Roman citizenship he transferred to Rome.

The public trial led to additional denunciations. Pliny then adopted the following approach: in order to verify their Christian affiliation, he required the accused to undergo a threefold test. They were to invoke the Roman imperial gods using a prayer he supplied to them, to offer a sacrifice of incense and wine (the so-called *supplicatio*) before the emperor's image and other statues of the gods, and finally to curse Christ. Those who complied were released.

Reactions varied: The first group of defendants disavowed being Christians and were allowed to leave. A second group initially confessed Christianity but soon recanted. Some of these claimed they had already abandoned their faith three years ago; others, even two decades ago. Since this group also passed the required test without trouble, they, too, were released. Assuming Pliny's explanations are factually accurate, this would mean that Christianity in Pontus had already suffered previous setbacks: for reasons unknown to us, its congregations apparently experienced movements of apostasy (rejections of the faith) around the year 90. The former church members reported as follows about their erstwhile religion: They gathered regularly before sunrise, sang responsive hymns to their god Christ, and took an oath to commit no offenses. Then they would depart but later reconvened

for a common meal, although this practice had been abandoned due to Pliny's implementation in his province of the imperial edict against political associations and guilds (*hetaeriae*). Pliny had this information confirmed under torture by two female slaves who had been present at the assemblies. Ultimately he discovered nothing but 'a depraved, excessive superstition' (*superstitionem pravam immodicam*).

The prohibition of *hetaeriae* (i.e., private associations) would not have been directed specifically against Christians—it also pertained for example to members of fire brigades.[1] But it would have hit the churches hard because it criminalized any form of assembly and thus also made corporate worship impossible. In other words, even before the events of the winter of 111/112, Christianity was already under considerable pressure in Pontus and elsewhere.

For Pliny, this made the problem ever more complex. He had initially convicted a small group of the faithful for their confession of the Christian name; but once their numbers increased, he investigated the matter more carefully. He thus reached the point where, leaving aside their strange but not unduly troubling religious views, he could only accuse them of infringements against the ban on private associations—but this required no draconic punishment.

Faced with mounting numbers of the accused, the governor interrupted the trial in order to ask Trajan for legal advice on how to proceed. Underlining the urgency of the matter, his letter points out how many Christians there then existed in the province: in every age group, in every social class, in cities, and in the countryside. He felt he could arrest this spreading epidemic and even saw some initial successes: all but abandoned temples were being repopulated, and long-disrupted sacrifices celebrated anew. Even the collapsed trade in sacrificial meat had resumed.

Three questions needed answering from his perspective: Should the age of the defendants affect how they were treated? (Evidently children, too, had been informed

against.) Second, should one show clemency to people who confessed (and had apparently renounced), or was Christianity a permanent cause for conviction? And finally, what was the actual charge: crimes arising from the practice of Christianity (in which case Pliny would have had to release all the accused) or the very identity of being a Christian?

Trajan's legally binding response (a so-called rescript) confirmed the correctness of Pliny's approach.[2] In the circumstances it was not possible to prescribe a uniform procedure, but (we infer) each case must have been treated individually and according to the respective governor's best judgment. Trajan nevertheless established certain principles that had to be observed: there was to be no manhunt for Christians. One should have instead responded only to formal complaints, although anonymous denunciations should not have been considered. Apostates who proved their rejection of Christianity with a sacrifice to the gods were to be released; others, to be condemned.

By failing to prescribe a detailed code of procedure against Christians and establishing only a handful of rules, Trajan left the provincial governors with substantial discretionary powers in dealing with Christians. The principles Trajan sketched were also legally questionable and for this reason came under heavy criticism from Christians. Before the century was out, the Christian orator Tertullian scoffed that on this basis whatever Christians said could never exonerate but only incriminate them. They were to be condemned not on the basis of a demonstrated crime but solely because of their allegiance to a name. While a manhunt was prescribed in the case of criminals, it was deemed impermissible for Christians—which merely showed that they were not criminals. Torture, finally, was being used against Christians to secure not a confession but a *denial* of the main charge! What a perversion of received principles of justice![3]

However juridically questionable, Trajan's principles appear to have been deployed by most governors until the middle of the third century. This meant in practice that the name of Christ as such was punishable and that the governors could prosecute Christians nearly at will, as indeed they did whenever there were tensions between the Christian and non-Christian populations. A simple named accusation with the authorities sufficed to activate the machinery of justice against the Christians. The legal situation was thus resolved de jure but remained de facto extremely uncertain. At the same time, if the extant reports about trials against Christians are to be believed, imperial officials generally had no interest in wholesale death sentences against Christians. On the contrary, we know numerous cases in which they repeatedly offered the defendants the opportunity to disavow their Christianity. However, they were motivated in many cases not by humanitarian concern but by a political calculus: mass executions were liable to entail unforeseeable political consequences and were for this reason distinctly out of favor.

Relative Calm under Hadrian and Antoninus Pius (117–161)

Justin Martyr (see above p. 27) preserves a rescript of Emperor Hadrian (117–138), whose authenticity, let alone effectiveness in bringing about change or clarification, is debated.[4] Hadrian offered a delayed response to a query from Quintus Licinius Silvanus Granianus, proconsul of the province of Asia (in today's western Turkey). Evidently a great many people had incurred unsubstantiated complaints for their Christianity, whose baselessness the governor may have verified by implementing sacrifices and thereupon releasing the accused. This caused a stir and cost both time and money.

In 124 Granianus was succeeded as governor by Minicius Fundanus, to whom the rescript was now addressed.

Hadrian was clearly concerned to formalize the procedure of indictment still further. The mere allegation of being a Christian would now no longer suffice for a denunciation (*delatio nominis*; see above p. 32). What was required instead was substantiation that could stand up to scrutiny in court. Since a *delatio* in written form was not required until the third century, those who had informed against Christians would now be summoned and questioned by the judiciary. Where the accusation of illegal conduct (by this stage including Christianity) was adequately corroborated, the corresponding judgment could be passed. If, however, an informer was found to have brought a false charge, he would be punished. Hadrian thus encumbered the process of *delatio* and made it fraught with significantly greater hazard: unless the *delator* could be sure that the accused would remain a steadfast Christian even under torture, he in turn ran the risk of being held accountable for libel. At the same time, Hadrian made the governors take to heart that an inquiry was necessary in all cases so that Christians could not just be summarily convicted.

Hadrian also extended the possibility of a final appeal to the emperor by submitting petitions. Two written defense statements for Christianity, by Quadratus and Aristides of Athens, were composed during his reign; another one by Justin followed under Antoninus Pius (138–161; see above p. 27). This apology of Justin bears the formal hallmarks of such a petition, even if it may have been revised for wider dissemination. Like the imperial rescript to Fundanus, this document shows that the situation of Christians remained precarious: informers accused Christians of various crimes like atheism and disloyalty, but these were then not properly investigated. Instead, convictions were secured simply for confessing Christ, while denial secured release. On this point Justin's depiction is at one with the rescript of Trajan. The initiative for the persecutions continued to lie with the populace rather than with the authorities. For this reason Justin

urged the emperor's critical verification of crimes supposedly connected with the Christian name. The stance toward the Christians ought to be determined not by rumors but by knowledge of their life and teaching. If accusations were unprovable, charges must be dropped. This, he claimed, was also in keeping with the legal position created by Hadrian's rescript, which is why Justin appended a copy of that document to the end of his petition. We have already seen that this was not in fact the case: Hadrian instead presupposed the rescript of Trajan, thereby retaining the possibility of a conviction solely for membership of Christianity, *without* proof of any additional crimes. We do not know if Justin misunderstood the legal position or deliberately interpreted it in a way that favored the Christians.

Such limits on denunciations appear to explain why there is no evidence of any lawsuits against Christians during the reign of Hadrian, and very little during that of Antoninus Pius. Bishop Telesphorus of Rome was executed in that city in 138.[5] Another trial probably took place in the capital during the early or mid-150s under Quintus Lollius Urbicus, the *praefectus urbi* (in office 146–160). This gives us a glimpse of the social upheavals to which Christianity sometimes gave rise as it penetrated the higher echelons of Roman society:[6] a wealthy man had denounced his wife as a Christian after she had divorced him for infidelity. When the wife succeeded in delaying the trial with a petition to the emperor, her husband angrily denounced his wife's Christian teacher Ptolemy to Urbicus, who promptly had him executed. At this point a certain Lucius accused the governor of injustice because Ptolemy had committed no crime. The resulting apparent public altercation before the judge ended with Lucius' execution for belonging to Christianity. A third Christian who also intervened was similarly executed.

But these remained the exceptions. Although the general atmosphere remained volatile,[7] the legal position and praxis implemented by Trajan and Hadrian appear to have

contributed to a certain easing of tension. In his Apology to Emperor Marcus Aurelius, Melito the bishop of Sardis (see above p. 26) mentions letters to the inhabitants of Larissa, Thessalonica, and Athens 'and to all the Greeks' in which Emperor Antoninus Pius had urged maintaining the status quo in relation to the Christians.[8] Eusebius quotes such a document,[9] which also survives in connection with the Apologies of Justin. It seems to confirm that Antoninus Pius called on the provincial assembly of the province of Asia to leave the Christians in peace, although it contains so many inconsistencies that it must be seen at least in part as a forgery. Leaving aside this letter, it follows that while attacks against Christians will have occurred at least in the cities named by Melito, the authorities nevertheless attempted further to formalize litigation against them and thereby probably to limit the number of victims.

Martyrdoms under Marcus Aurelius (161–180)

This relatively tolerable situation deteriorated under Marcus Aurelius (161–180). The emperor, himself a devotee of Stoic philosophy, viewed alien cultic practices with skepticism. In a rescript against a fortune-teller, he decreed that whoever frightens people with superstition should be banished to an island.[10] He had no sympathies for Christians either: in his *Meditations* he wrote that readiness to face death must arise out of one's own convictions rather than out of a desire to flaunt one's death as in the case of Christians.[11]

It is difficult to say to what extent this personal distaste is reflected in legislation. The aforementioned Melito (see above p. 26) complains in his Apology to the emperor that informers misappropriate Christian possessions, meaning the reward that *delatores* could claim out of the property of the condemned (see above p. 32). In this connection the bishop also mentions a new, extremely harsh edict, 'which would not be appropriate even for hostile barbarians,' and

he asks Marcus Aurelius whether it originated from him.[12] We do not know precisely what this involves. But there are indications that Christians had been condemned to forced labor in the mines. However, the reference may also be to a resolution of the senate in 177 concerning gladiators: apparently there was an acute lack of these fighters, which led Marcus Aurelius and his co-emperor Commodus (from 177) to supply individuals on death row at a favorable price to fight in the arena, thereby ensuring the continuation of the popular games.[13]

The later *Life of Abercius* contains the probably legendary statement that Marcus Aurelius and his temporary co-emperor Lucius Verus (161–169) had mandated a universal sacrifice to the gods.[14] In any case Eusebius repeatedly mentions numerous persecutions in the provinces.[15]

Not all Christians, however, took a negative view of this emperor: at the end of the century, Tertullian even calls Marcus Aurelius a 'protector' of Christians. He claims the emperor attested in a letter how on a military campaign it was Christian soldiers' prayers for rain that saved his troops from dying of thirst. This pious legend enjoyed great popularity and is for that reason also preserved in a range of other sources.[16] Tertullian claims in the same breath that Marcus Aurelius at least for a time pursued a Christian policy resembling that of Hadrian:[17] continued punishment of Christians but an 'even more severe' punishment of accusers—the latter evidently in case Christians denied their religion and had to be released, so that the denunciation was unjustified.[18]

At the level of legal norms, one can, therefore, assume a basic continuity. In practice, however, the pertinent regulations were interpreted rather more strictly than under Marcus Aurelius' predecessors. Reports of martyrdoms proliferated during this Stoic's period on the imperial throne. Theophilus of Antioch (see above p. 27) writes in general terms about persecutions and cruel torturing of Christians,

without, however, giving further details.[19] Bishop Publius of Athens was apparently executed for unknown reasons before 170.[20] Two other bishops, Thraseas of Eumeneia (southern Phrygia; today Işıklı in Turkey) and Sagaris of Laodicea on the Lycus River (near today's Denizli), suffered the same fate.[21] Thraseas was apparently executed in Smyrna (today İzmir), as he was also buried there.[22] Smyrna saw additional trials and executions of Christians: a certain Metrodoros, possibly a priest of the splinter church of the Marcionites, was burnt at the stake. The execution of Pionius may also date to this period (see below pp. 84–85).[23]

We have detailed information about other martyrdoms, which will be considered briefly in the following sections.

The Roman Trial of Justin and His Companions

The earliest surviving record of a trial of Christians probably dates to the year 165 or 166 in Rome.[24] Quintus Iunius Rusticus, the capital's most senior official (*praefectus urbi*), had arrested and summoned a group of Christians around the aforementioned Christian philosopher Justin, who maintained a small school in Rome. What gave rise to a denunciation may have been a dispute with a Cynic philosopher called Crescens, whom Justin had publicly rebuked for his harassment of Christians.[25] While quarrels between the heads of philosophical schools were not uncommon, it remains unclear why the situation escalated in this case. The urban prefect Rusticus was himself a Stoic philosopher and in this capacity had taught the emperor. Asked initially about his instruction, Justin replied with a brief summary of Christian doctrine. The next question was about the Christian meeting places; Justin initially sidestepped this probably to protect his fellow believers, but eventually he indicated his own residence.

Rusticus then asked Justin and his six companions if they were Christians, which they consistently answered

in the affirmative. Three of them, all migrants from Asia Minor, said they had been brought up as Christians. Justin, too, was not a Roman but came originally from Flavia Neapolis (today Nablus, Palestine). The prefect once again turned to Justin: were they convinced that they would be raised to heaven after their execution? Justin affirmed this. When he remained steadfast despite the judge's persistent admonition, Rusticus pronounced his judgment: the seven were to be scourged and executed for their refusal to sacrifice to the gods. The record does not indicate the mode of execution. In keeping with Trajan's rescript, Rusticus notably focused on establishing the Christian affiliation of the accused beyond reasonable doubt. His judgment was not hasty, but he first admonished the defendants and gave them the opportunity to reconsider their confession. But then he had them taken away for execution.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp of Smyrna

Not long after this, a death sentence was passed against the highly respected Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna in his diocesan city (167/168; the precise year is disputed). We know of this through a circular letter that his church composed immediately after the events and sent to other churches in the province of Asia and beyond.[26] This was the last in a series of executions, the precise number of which is unknown to us. At any rate the report shows that the character of the tortures and executions had changed in relation to the preceding period. They had previously served as either a staging post or the terminus of regularized proceedings, quite possibly drawing public attention but not laid on as a public spectacle (except during the Neronian persecution; see above pp. 37–38). Now, however, they served as public entertainment (see above p. 35). Although in themselves they were nothing new, such executions had until now been reserved for serious criminals on death row. This change

illustrates a distinct brutalization of the anti-Christian criminal proceedings under Marcus Aurelius. The reason for this could be the lack of sufficient gladiators for the highly popular bloody combat and wild animal chases in Roman arenas (see above p. 53). This generated the quest for a substitute, which was furnished by the Christians—as well as other criminals who had been condemned to death.

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* first documents otherwise unidentified Christians being condemned *ad bestias*—that is, to fight wild animals in the arena. Among others who distinguished themselves was a certain Germanicus, whose death the proconsul had tried to spare because of his youthfulness. As if this were not enough, the Christians were forced to lie down on sharp seashells and tortured in other ways. Quite why such verdicts were reached in the first place remains obscure.

The local bishop Polycarp, an old man of eighty-six years, was apparently in hiding in the vicinity of Smyrna. Eventually he, too, was tracked down, arrested, and taken into the city. The governor's measure in this respect explicitly contravened the provisions of Trajan's rescript, which had prohibited such manhunts (see above p. 48). The local police chief (the eirenarch) and his father hurried to meet the bishop outside the city in order to try and persuade him to sacrifice to the gods. The local dignitaries may have wanted in this way to prevent unrest among the population. When Polycarp refused, he was forcibly bundled off the carriage.

The trial eventually took place in the stadium of Smyrna in the presence of a gathered crowd. Anti-Christian sentiment among the urban population was evidently a significant factor in the harsh approach to the Christians. The stadium was located near the city's southern perimeter wall, on the north slope of Pagos Hill (today Kadifekale). The incumbent proconsul officiated as the presiding judge. He happened to be in town because Smyrna was hosting a

meeting of the provincial assembly chaired by the so-called Asiarch. This was a religious-political consultation about questions of interest in common between the emperor and the provincial elites, prominently including cultic veneration of the respective ruler and his family. Although the proconsul repeatedly called on Polycarp to renounce Christianity, he steadfastly refused. Quite evidently this official had no interest in escalating matters. But even threats of ever more dreadful means of execution—first wild animals, then fire—proved fruitless. At this point the judge had the guilty verdict proclaimed at the center of the stadium.

The frenzied crowd then demanded that the Asiarch should throw the elderly bishop to be eaten by a lion. The official rejected this on the grounds that the time for animal sports had finished. Polycarp was, therefore, tied to a stake in the stadium in order to be burned alive, although this was unsuccessful. Polycarp suffered grave injuries and was finally knifed by a *confector* charged with the task of administering the death blow to injured humans and animals at the conclusion of the games; his body was burned. The church later collected his ashes and buried them.

The martyrdom of Polycarp was the earliest among a series of 'martyrdoms for entertainment' (see above p. 35). This new form of Christian execution came to an initial dreadful climax in the persecution at Lyon in the year 177.

The Martyrs of Lyon in the Year 177

Our information about this pogrom also derives from a circular letter, sent by the churches of Vienne and Lyon to fellow Christians in the provinces of Asia and Phrygia, and preserved by Eusebius.[27] He prefaces this report with an introduction stating that 'city populations' initiated renewed persecutions under Marcus Aurelius, which cost the lives of 'tens of thousands' of Christians.[28] These numbers certainly appear inflated and need not denote more

than 'a great many' victims. Eusebius conspicuously singles out the urban population as instigators of the persecution. This group also promoted the executions in Smyrna, as we saw above. In Vienne and Lyon, there had been major anti-Christian riots, which meant that Christians no longer dared show themselves in the streets and avoided public places. Eventually an unknown number of them were denounced to the authorities. The local Roman site commander conducted a preliminary investigation together with municipal administrative officials. Once the Christian identity of the defendants had been confirmed through questioning, they were jailed by the otherwise unidentified governor (a *legatus Augusti pro praetore*) pending the trial. After his arrival in the city, it was resumed.

At this point Vettius Epagathus, a young nobleman and himself a Christian, spoke up and undertook the defense of the Christians against the accusations of 'atheism' and godlessness (*asebeia*). Atheism and *asebeia* (= high treason) were indeed statutory offenses that could lead to the death penalty. But the young man appears to have overlooked that these charges were not required for the death penalty, since the Christian name itself was already culpable. The governor accordingly did not respond to this objection but asked him instead whether he, too, was a Christian and then without further ado lined him up among the accused.

Some of them now held fast to their confession and were condemned to death; ten others, however, renounced Christianity. These apostasies evidently caused considerable disquiet and discussion among the churches about how one should conduct oneself in this situation of acute danger to life. Far from ebbing away, the flood of arrests extended to the jailing of all practicing Christians, most of whom evidently remained firm. This governor likewise exceeded discretionary scope conceded to him by Trajan's rescript, inasmuch as he had the Christians hunted down. In the process there were also arrests of pagan slaves who belonged

to Christian households. Under torture they accused their owners of 'Thyestean banquets' and of engaging in 'sexual intercourse after the manner of Oedipus.' In this respect the letter alludes to two myths that were very familiar to ancient readers: Atreus, the king of Mycenae, in an act of revenge killed and boiled his brother Thyestes' sons and served them up to him in a meal; Oedipus, the king of Thebes, unwittingly married his mother, Jocasta. To put it plainly: Christians killed and ate children and celebrated incestuous orgies. When these rumors began to circulate, the public unrest further intensified.

The group of the unwavering included among others Sanctus (possibly a pseudonym), a deacon from Vienne, the newly baptized Maturus, Attalus from Pergamum who played a prominent role in the Christian community, and finally the slave girl Blandina. Under torture neither Blandina nor Sanctus gave any indication of crimes the Christians had supposedly committed. Sanctus did not disclose any personal information even when the torturers placed red-hot flakes of metal on the tenderest parts of his body, but consistently answered in Latin, 'I am a Christian.' Even the resumption of torture after several days remained ineffectual. The steadfast group was finally also joined by a certain Biblis: she had first renounced, but then reconsidered under torture and denied that Christians consumed children.

This was followed by an unspecified number of Christians being subjected to still further tortures in the form of incarceration in dark dungeons, being stretched on the horse-shaped wooden rack, and other cruelties. Even this led many, particularly younger, prisoners to die of asphyxiation because the dungeons were hopelessly crowded.

Finally, Pothinus, probably the first bishop of Lyon,[29] aged over ninety and ailing with lung disease, was dragged before the court. The governor asked who was the god of the Christians, to which Pothinus replied, 'If you are

worthy, you will know him.'[30] With this answer he provoked the governor: he was beaten and so badly injured that he died after two days in jail.

The group of apostates met an unexpected fate: far from being released because of their renunciation of the Christian God, they were now accused of murder. The governor was evidently still not convinced that they were innocent of the charge of cannibalism. This in turn strengthened other defendants in their resolve not to depart from their confession of Christ.

A new phase of the proceedings began when the actual executions got underway, now carried out as public entertainment in the so-called Amphitheater of the Three Gauls, whose remains can still be visited in Lyon today. It had been expanded during the second century to a capacity of over twenty thousand seats. Combat with wild beasts was arranged specially for the executions, possibly in connection with the three-day celebrations of the emperor's birthday (24–26 April).

The Christians were subjected to extremely brutal methods of torture and execution. Maturus and Sanctus were first flogged in front of the baying crowd, then dragged through the arena by wild animals, and finally roasted on an iron chair underneath which a fire had been kindled. Sanctus nevertheless remained unwavering in his confession of Christ, while the reaction of Maturus is not mentioned. The tortures thus served not merely as entertainment but were also intended to enforce apostasy. When after all this both prisoners remained alive, they were killed by unspecified means.

Blandina the slave was hung on a cross and offered as prey to wild animals. But since the animals did not harm the young woman, she was eventually untied and taken back to jail. Instead Attalus was brought in. A Latin sign paraded before him carried the inscription 'This is Attalus the Christian.' The governor was only now made aware of the fact

that Attalus was a Roman citizen, and, therefore, took the precaution of taking him to the other incarcerated Romans.

As for the Roman citizens among the prisoners, the governor had asked the emperor about further proceedings and was now awaiting a reply. There was evidently some uncertainty in which the legate required reassurance. He probably presumed that these Christians would be transferred to the capital. After some considerable time, the imperial reply arrived and stipulated that no transfer was now envisaged. Instead, confessors should be executed and apostates released. In this Marcus Aurelius essentially operated within the framework of Trajan's rescript, except of course for the fact that the appeal of Roman citizens to the emperor followed by a transfer to Rome was no longer possible. The accusation of murder, however, was dropped as it would in any case have been impossible to corroborate.

Meanwhile the Provincial Assembly was approaching—the gathering of notables whose purpose included fostering the emperor cult and that, in Lyon as in Smyrna (see above pp. 56–57), was connected with extended games in the amphitheater.

The governor now decided to terminate the Christian trials on the first day of the games. All the 'obdurate' accused were again interrogated by him in front of the assembled crowds. He had Roman citizens who remained steadfast beheaded on the spot, while the rest were sent to fight the beasts in the arena. However, several of the jailed apostates had been encouraged by their steadfast fellow prisoners to change their minds and now also professed that they were Christians. This meant that the number of executions unexpectedly increased.

In addition, a widely known Christian physician from Phrygia named Alexander nodded to the defendants before the judgment seat and thereby encouraged them to confess. The fact that he was able to stand in the immediate vicinity of the rostrum suggests that he belonged to the local elite.

This did not, however, protect him from the reach of the Roman judiciary: once the governor noticed that Alexander signaled to the accused, he subjected him to the same interrogation. When the physician confessed his Christianity, he, too, was consigned to die in the hunting spectacle.

He entered the arena together with Attalus on the following day. It is one of the many juridical inconsistencies of the proceedings that even though as a Roman citizen he would at least have been entitled to a 'humane' execution by beheading, Attalus was after all thrown to the animals—the source claims in order to please the mob. He, too, was roasted on the iron chair. He cried out in Latin to the surrounding crowds, 'You see, what *you* do is to eat humans, but *we* do not eat humans and do nothing else that is wicked!'[31] In the end their torture evidently occasioned both of their deaths, even if the source gives no information about this.

Finally, Blandina, too, was brought into the arena, now together with Ponticus, a slave of about fifteen years who may have been her brother. They, too, were subjected to tortures: scourging, fighting wild beasts, and roasting on the iron chair. Ponticus, remaining steadfast, did not survive these agonies. Blandina also did not renounce her faith. She was finally forced into a fish trap of willow branches and thrown to a bull. The *confector* eventually finished off the woman, who was already unconscious.

Blandina's courage achieved a certain respect from the spectators. Staged as spectacles, martyrdoms were ambivalent in their public effect: they had the potential and intention of functioning as a deterrent. At the same time, the steadfastness and courage of many Christians in the face of suffering and death were also attractive, documenting the new religion's effective power in believing individuals and their hope for reward in the world to come.

The bodies of those who had previously suffocated under the inhuman conditions in prison were thrown to the dogs.

Together with the corpses from the arena, for six days their remains were then publicly displayed under military guard as a deterrent before finally being cremated. The ashes were scattered into the river Rhône to prevent the development of any cult of the martyrs around their tombs.

It is only the postscript to the letter from the church of Lyon that shows that there must also have been Christians who remained steadfast under torture and yet were released for unknown reasons. A terminological distinction was now made between the 'confessors,' who had not lapsed but survived, and the 'witnesses' (i.e., the 'martyrs'), who had died for their faith. 'Martyrdom' was more highly regarded than simple 'confession.' Nevertheless, confession under persecution did convey a special charism that found expression for instance in advocating on behalf of those who had not stood fast (*lapsi* / the fallen). This is a point to which we will return (see below p. 134).

The massacre of Christians in the year 177 left a horrifying result. From various martyrs' catalogues, we know forty-seven victims by name (twenty-five men, twenty-two women). Of these, twenty-two were beheaded. The six people discussed above perished in the arena, while nineteen others died in prison, including Bishop Pothinus.

Trials of Christians under Commodus (180–192)

Marcus Aurelius was succeeded by his son Commodus (180–192), who had already served for a time as his father's co-regent. Commodus apparently did not persist with his father's strict policy against the Christians, so that the situation of the churches improved significantly. We also have increasing indications that there were Christian members of the highest domestic administration of the imperial court, the so-called *familia Caesaris* consisting of slaves and freedmen.[32] As early as the end of the first century, Claudius Ephebus and Valerius Biton may already have belonged

to this group.[33] And even during the time of Polycarp of Smyrna (i.e., before 167), a certain Florinus held a position of rank in the imperial household.[34] Although not perhaps herself a Christian, Commodus' concubine Marcia was the hub of a Christian 'cell' at the imperial court: she had been educated by the Christian priest and eunuch Hyacinthus and maintained good contacts with the Roman bishop Victor (189–199).[35] With Hyacinthus' support she successfully intervened for the release of Christians who had been condemned in unknown circumstances to work in the mines in Sardinia. Marcia's circle probably also included Carpophorus, the owner of a small bank (see below p. 66).

By this time there were Christians in nearly all social classes of society. For this reason their persecution constituted a mounting political risk for governors as it made them unpopular among ever-increasing sections of the population. Some provincial administrators reacted with a certain helplessness. During a trial of Christians around 184/185, Gaius Arrius Antoninus, proconsul of the province of Asia, found himself confronted with a protest by all the faithful of that unidentified city. Doubtful as to whether he could risk executing such a large number of people, he got himself out of trouble by having only a few taken away but reportedly releasing the others with the words, 'Wretches, if you really want to die, you have cliffs and ropes to do it with.'[36]

We have indeed only scattered reports of proceedings under Commodus, two of which belong to the beginning of this emperor's reign. The first martyrdom in North Africa occurred on 17 July 180: six (or possibly twelve) Christians from the otherwise unknown North African town of Scil(l)i or Scillium were brought before the proconsul Publius Vigellius Saturninus in Carthage, the capital of the province of Africa Proconsularis.[37] The difference in the number of the condemned arises from the fact that only six Christians are identified at the beginning, while the judgment at the end comprises twelve names. Unlike

in Smyrna and Gaul, the trial took place in the courtroom at the proconsul's official residence. The accused brought with them Christian writings, including letters of the apostle Paul, although the reason for this is not clear. Saturninus virtually implored the Christians lined up before him to desist from their 'madness' (*dementia*), but in vain: all of them reaffirmed their Christian confession and declined any time to reconsider. At this point they were condemned to death because they had professed to 'live according to the Christian way' and refused to return to the custom of the Romans. A herald announced the judgment, and the defendants were beheaded without delay.

There is a conspicuous contrast between these executions and those of three years earlier in Gaul: the proconsul dispensed with an execution in the arena as well as with tortures. Immediately after the judgment was pronounced, all of the accused were decapitated like Roman citizens for their membership of Christianity (whether or not they necessarily possessed citizenship). The proconsul in other words followed entirely along the precedent of Pliny; indeed, he was rather more cautious in deploying no torture (see above p. 46).

Reactions were even milder among governors of the province of Africa: at Thysdrus (today El Djem, Tunisia) around 190/191, Gaius Cincius (Cingius) Severus assisted Christians in their depositions so that they could be released. Lucius Vespronius Candidus Sallustius Sabinianus treated one accused Christian's offense simply as a breach of the peace before letting him go (191/192).[38]

Another trial from the reign of Commodus is that held in Rome against Apollonius, who was held in high regard in the church of the capital for his education and philosophical learning. Apollonius had been denounced to the powerful Praetorian prefect Sextus (?) Tigidius Perennis around the years 180–185. The initial report was apparently inadequate, since the *delator* (informer) was first executed in

keeping with the legal praxis instituted by Hadrian (see above pp. 50–51): both of his legs were broken (*crurifragium*), which was a form of the death penalty. This however did not lead to Apollonius' release: at the judge's behest, he is reported to have defended himself in a brilliant speech in front of senators, before being condemned to death by decapitation.[39] Assuming the story is authentic, it is unclear why in this case the urban prefect was not the magistrate in charge of overseeing the proceedings; the defendant must have had considerable influence—though evidently not enough to release him.

A rather bizarre case is the trial against Calixtus, slave of the aforementioned banker Carpophorus (see above p. 64), which also took place in Rome around 187/189. He appears to have held a position of some responsibility in his owner's business, since he was accused of embezzling bank clients' funds. Since he was unable to provide compensation, he ran into a synagogue service where he caused a disturbance by crying out that he was a Christian—reportedly in order to provoke his own death. The Jews then dragged him before the urban prefect Publius Seius Fuscianus and denounced him for causing a public nuisance and for being a Christian. Carpophorus intervened on his slave's behalf and denied the truth of the latter allegation in front of the judge: Calixtus was no Christian but sought death to escape his creditors. He may have wanted to help him, or perhaps he was afraid that a guilty verdict would mean the embezzled funds were lost for good. The prefect did not relent but imposed a penalty of flogging and deportation to a Sardinian mine.[40] Calixtus survived the forced labor and subsequently adorned himself with the title of 'confessor'—an honor that is bound to have appreciably advanced his later career progression all the way to becoming bishop of Rome (217–222). It is rather doubtful whether in the end he did after all suffer martyrdom, as a later tradition claims. Notably, Calixtus was not condemned to death—perhaps

because Carpophorus enjoyed good connections with the imperial household.

In North Africa the proconsul Caecilius Capella condemned the Christian Mavilus of Hadrumetum (today Sousse, Tunisia) to death by wild animals. In Apamea Cibotus on the Meander river (in the province of Phrygia; today Dinar, Turkey), Christians from the splinter church of the Montanists (see below p. 70) were jailed together with the catholic believers Gaius and Alexander of Eumeneia (today Çivril, Turkey). They all suffered a martyr's death together, regardless of their respective denomination.[41]

The Ambivalent Policy of the Severans (193–235)

The Situation under Septimius Severus (193–211)

Even if it always remained precarious, relative calm essentially continued throughout the empire under the dynasty of the Severans (193–235). According to a late tradition, Emperor Septimius Severus (193–211) prohibited missionary efforts on the part of Jews as well as Christians[42]—but that probably needs to be considered fictitious. There appear to have been no empire-wide decrees concerning the Christians.[43] Indeed, there continued to be believers at the imperial court who remained entirely unmolested: among them was a well-to-do court official called Ambrosius, a benefactor of Origen.[44] He got into trouble only under Maximinus Thrax (see below pp. 74–75). We will consider Prosenes below (p. 72). Septimius Severus' son Caracalla is said to have been brought up by a Christian wet nurse. The emperor reportedly even kept a Christian physician named Proculus Torpacion at his palace and publicly shielded Christian members of the senatorial class against groundless accusations.[45] Aside from this, we know of a confessor in Rome named Natalius who was for a time the bishop of a splinter church, although we have no information about the nature of his confession.[46]

That said, in the provinces the situation was inconsistent. Thus Claudius Lucius Hieronymianus, the governor of Cappadocia between 202 and 212, cracked down harshly against the Christians—possibly for personal reasons as his wife had converted to Christianity. These measures also targeted Bishop Alexander of Caesarea in Cappadocia (today Kayseri, Turkey), although he survived. Hieronymianus himself subsequently appears to have moved toward Christianity.[47]

In one unusual case in Syria, a bishop appears to have literally led his congregation into the desert to await the return of Christ. There they were seized and taken to the governor, who very nearly condemned them as bandits but was stopped from doing so by his Christian wife.[48] At the same time, the governor's treatment of Asclepiades was evidently not altogether gentle, since this future bishop of Antioch was from now on celebrated as a 'confessor.'[49]

Punishments for the Christian name thus differed considerably and did not always entail certain death. Women might instead be assigned to brothels.[50] Christians continued to be condemned to work in quarries and mines. But in some cases it did not even come to that: in Africa, Gaius Julius Asper had a Christian tortured, but when he got ready to recant he did not compel him to sacrifice but let him go (200–201 or 204–205). Gaius Valerius Pudens realized that the only reason a Christian had been caught in a prosecution was because of a legal contrivance and, therefore, promptly discontinued the proceedings (210/211).[51]

Christians also had opportunities to take charge of their own destiny: thus the Montanist (see below p. 70) Themison bought his freedom from prison for a large sum of money, which later did not prevent him from designating himself a martyr. Another Montanist called Alexander had for unknown reasons defected from his religion, but came before the proconsul Aemilius Frontinus in Ephesus and was convicted of robbery. But when he subsequently claimed to

have been taken to court for his faith, the congregation in Ephesus bought his freedom. This indicates that local circumstances may have allowed Christian congregations considerable discretion in helping the condemned.[52] Around the time of 208/209, we also have evidence from North Africa for downright blackmail: non-Christians extorted payment from Christians to avoid being taken to court or to be granted military protection. Indeed, it seems that entire congregations paid tribute for this purpose.[53]

Governors were, therefore, able to react quite flexibly, and Christian churches, too, had at their disposal a variety of ways to de-escalate the situation. Nevertheless, there were also particular hot spots of Christian persecution: Egypt and North Africa (notwithstanding the relative easing of tensions described above).

Egypt

In the year 202/203, there were pogroms in Egypt under the prefect Quintus Maecius Laetus.[54] Jailed Christians were transferred to Alexandria to be centrally condemned. Among them was Leonides, the father of the great theologian Origen. His substantial fortune was confiscated by the public treasury, so that his wife and her seven children were left destitute. The causes for the persecution apparently had their origin in hostilities among the population of the metropolis of Alexandria, but it is unknown what triggered them.

Anti-Christian measures significantly weakened the church of Alexandria due to a major exodus of the faithful from the provincial capital. While the situation remained calm under Laetus' successor, Claudius Julianus, increasing reprisals resumed from the year 206 under the prefect Subatianus Aquila. Origen, who had in the meantime become the leader of a theological school in Alexandria, supported the imprisoned Christians. Together with the success of his theological instruction, this evidently incurred the hostility of Alexandrian pagans. His residence was surrounded by

soldiers, and he had to go underground. Some of Origen's students were less fortunate and suffered martyrdom: four of them were beheaded, in part after being tortured; two others, including a woman, were burned at the stake. A certain Potamiaina was also burned to death, together with her mother, Marcella. Aquila had initially tortured Potamiaina before threatening to have her raped by gladiators. For unknown reasons she was eventually condemned not for her Christianity but for treason (*crimen laesae maiestatis*) and killed by being doused with boiling pitch (a rare form of execution). She was guarded by a soldier called Basilides, who was himself later beheaded after being denounced for his Christian refusal to take an oath.

There are likely to have been additional fatalities. The events caused such unrest among the Christians in Egypt that an exegetical treatise by a certain Judas interpreted them apocalyptically as the work of the antichrist.[55]

North Africa

Toward the end of the second century, the situation became increasingly insecure in North Africa, too. In 197 the Christian orator and solicitor Tertullian felt impelled to draw attention to the continuing precariousness of Christianity's legal situation (see above p. 27). A very detailed martyrdom report from the metropolis of Carthage narrates the persecution of a group of Christians led by Vibia Perpetua, a member of the municipal upper class (*Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*). In revising his narrative, the unknown editor (Tertullian?) apparently drew on a kind of journal from Perpetua's own pen.

During the time of Bishop Optatus, the Christian church of Carthage experienced internal conflicts. These may have had to do with the spread of Montanism, a separate Christian denomination from Phrygia that propagated strict asceticism and expected the imminent end of the world. In this complicated situation, a group of catechumens

(Christians preparing for baptism) were arrested and charged with belonging to Christianity: Revocatus and his heavily pregnant wife, Felicitas; Saturninus and Secundulus; Vibia Perpetua, who was aged about twenty-two and had recently given birth; and the young Saturus. Perpetua previously had a heated argument with her father, who tried in vain—and even with beatings—to induce her to apostasy. While she was still under house arrest, the group underwent baptism and were eventually taken to prison. Perpetua carried her nursing child with her.

The following day the prisoners were taken to a court that was convened in the forum and chaired by the procurator Publius Aelius Hilarianus. So this trial took place in public: the prisoners were presented on a raised platform, which probably mobilized a crowd. Even before the interrogation began, Perpetua's father once more implored his daughter to offer the sacrifice for the sake of her child, but she refused. All the defendants confessed their faith under interrogation, and for this reason Hilarianus condemned them to death by wild animals (*damnatio ad bestias*). The group were taken back to prison to await their execution, scheduled for 7 March to coincide with the games to celebrate the birthday of the emperor's son Geta; Perpetua's child stayed with the grandfather.

Secundulus was beheaded by the sword while still in prison, apparently because it transpired that he had Roman citizenship. In addition, Felicitas' execution was initially to be postponed due to her pregnancy, since Roman law prohibited the execution of pregnant women. But two days before the appointed date for the games, she gave birth to a baby girl, who was immediately taken from her and given to the care of a woman from the Christian church.

The venue for the executions was the amphitheater of Carthage, which is partly preserved to the present day. It held nearly thirty thousand spectators and was thus significantly bigger than the theater of Lyon (see above p. 60).

After they were flogged, Saturninus and Revocatus were apparently tied to a pole on a stage and then attacked by leopards and bears. By contrast, Saturus had to face a wild boar and a bear, but he survived the attack and was temporarily taken back to prison.

Perpetua and Felicity were tied up naked in fishing nets and thrown before a wild cow, a scene that appalled even hardened theater audiences. They both survived the confrontation with this animal. Saturus, by contrast, suffered serious injuries when fighting a leopard. As he lay on the ground streaming with blood, the spectators shouted, 'Well-bathed!'—a slogan one encounters in Roman baths. Eventually all surviving Christians were executed by the sword on the stage. An additional four martyrs fell victim to the same persecution at an unknown date.

For all the detailed precision of these accounts of execution, we know very little about their underlying occasion. There is much to suggest the general context of a threat, though this probably cannot be more precisely identified. Nevertheless, there were tensions in Carthage between the pagan and Christian populations: we know that under the same procurator Hilarianus, there were altercations about the purchase of cemeteries by Christians.[56]

The Situation under the Emperors Caracalla, Elagabalus, and Severus Alexander (211–235)

There was no significant change under Caracalla (211–217). Christians continued to be able to attain high office in the milieu of the emperor. Thus we have the funerary inscription of a certain Marcus Aurelius Prosenes, a freedman who began his career under Commodus and rose to achieve the position of chamberlain under Caracalla.[57] Prosenes apparently converted to Christianity during his time at the imperial court. What the inscription does not tell us is how he dealt with the cultic obligations that invariably arose in that setting.

In the army, the refusal of these obligations could entail fatal consequences. Tertullian reports a particular episode that occurred at the beginning of Caracalla's rule in the Third Augustan Legion (*Legio III Augusta*), which was stationed in the province of Africa.[58] On the occasion of the accession to office of Caracalla and Geta, who at first governed jointly, the soldiers received an imperial gift of money (*donativum*). Such *donativa* might entail significant sums, a multiple of the annual salary. For this purpose the soldiers were to muster wreathed with laurel. Laurel wreaths were, among other things, a sign of homage to Apollo, the 'god of missiles' (*deus telorum*). One soldier refused this cultic act and thus identified himself as a Christian. He was expelled from the army and at the time of Tertullian's writing was awaiting his fate in jail.

In other respects, too, the situation in North Africa was insecure. Under Publius Julius Scapula Tertullus Priscus, proconsul of Africa, Christians were dragged to court time after time, charged with sacrilege (*sacrilegium*) and high treason. Others were successfully forced to recant. And there were executions by the sword in Numidia and Mauretania.[59]

Matters were quite different in the provinces of Egypt and Arabia, where just before 215 the governor (*legatus)* of Arabia invited the widely famous Origen to deliver lectures, brokered by the prefect of Egypt and Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria.[60]

Anti-Christian legislation was also first codified during the time of Caracalla: Ulpian (d. 223), the famous court jurist and high-ranking administrative official, first compiled all the imperial rescripts on this subject in book 7 of his work *On the Office of Proconsul*.[61] Here he also urged governors to hunt for 'religious offenders' (*sacrilegi*).[62] It is not known to what extent this had any practical effects, but we may suppose that there was not always a sharp distinction between denouncing someone for being a Christian (in which case manhunts were prohibited; see above p. 48) and for sacrilege.

The brief reign (218–222) of Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, later known as Elagabalus for the Syrian deity he venerated, was unique in many respects: his attempt to establish in Rome a cult that was wholly alien to the Roman pantheon was ultimately among the reasons why he was deposed and murdered. Because of or perhaps despite his sympathies for Eastern cults (his family being from Syria), there appear to have been no reprisals against Christians during his administration.

The reign of Emperor Severus Alexander (222–235), a nephew of Elagabalus who ascended to the throne at the age of just about thirteen, was strongly influenced by his mother, Julia Avita Mamaea. On his mother's side, the family of this emperor came from Emesa (today Homs) in Syria and appears to have had a similar penchant for indigenous cults as Elagabalus, although they did not flaunt this quite so openly. Openness to religious change was also manifest in relation to the Christians. The polymath and Christian chronographer Julius Africanus established a library inside the Pantheon in Rome at the emperor's behest.[63] It was probably through him that the emperor's mother made contact with Origen. This theologian apparently spent the winter of 231–232 in Antioch at the court of Julia Mamaea and delivered lectures there.[64] Hippolytus, a theologian and bishop of a Roman splinter church, dedicated to Julia a work on the resurrection (preserved only in a few fragments). Less secure, however, is the report that the emperor set up statues of Christ, Abraham, Orpheus, and others in his shrine of domestic deities, and that he also decided legal disputes in favor of the Christians.

The Situation under Maximinus Thrax (235–238)

The end of the Severan dynasty brought about more troubled times for Christians. Martyrdoms are again attested

under the first military emperor, Maximinus Thrax (235–238). Eusebius accounts for this reversal in religious policy with reference to Maximinus' concern about the large number of Christians at the court.[65] We may infer from this that his anti-Christian policy did not have religious causes as such but rather served to consolidate his own power. He may have seen the Christians as representatives of the old regime whose loyalty he doubted. At the same time, the persecution in Rome was directed only against the church's leaders since, as we saw earlier, it was they who maintained links to the palace: immediately after the emperor's inauguration, the two bishops Pontianus (230–235) and Hippolytus (see above) were exiled to Sardinia, where they also died. Pontianus' successor, Fabian (236–250), transferred their bodies to Rome for burial in the Catacomb of Calixtus and on the Via Tiburtina, respectively.[66]

A distinctive situation affected Cappadocia in Asia Minor as well as Pontus, where in 235 the land was shaken by severe earthquakes for which the population blamed the Christians. This led to an unexpected persecution under the governor Licinius Serenianus following a long period of peace; many escaped by fleeing to more peaceful provinces. Church buildings were also destroyed.[67] This news from Cappadocia may have prompted Origen in Caesarea (Palestine) to compose an *Exhortation to Martyrdom* (235) intended to encourage Christians in distress. But whether in fact there were any measures taken against Christians in that city is unclear.[68]

The First Christian Emperor? Philip the Arab (244–249)

Eusebius relates a report to the effect that Emperor Marcus Julius Philippus (called Philip the Arab, 244–249) was a Christian and intended to participate in the Easter vigil at an unknown location. The bishop, however, encountered him and challenged him first to repent of his many sins.

The emperor is reported to have obeyed 'willingly' and joined the penitents.[69] Later tradition connects this story with Bishop Babylas of Antioch. Two of Origen's letters (to Philip the Arab and his wife Severa), which Eusebius saw in person, confirm that the imperial household did indeed maintain connections with Christian theologians.[70] In the 260s Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria (247/48–264/65) noted in a letter the report, explicitly identified as a rumor, that some emperors before Valerian were Christians, though without specifying which ones.[71] It is true that as far as we know Christians enjoyed a relatively peaceful time under Philip, who may indeed have had sympathies for Christianity.[72] The anecdote of the penitent emperor, though, is more likely to have been invented in the light of the contemporary historical situation.

Toward the end of his reign in the winter of 248/249, there was again a pogrom in Alexandria. Dionysius, the eyewitness mentioned above, reports that a pagan seer and poet had through his prophecies incited the population against the Christians.[73] It is unclear whether religious hysteria caused the disturbances, as Dionysius appears to suggest, or whether Philip's tax reforms increased pressure on the population, which then discharged itself in pogroms, as recent scholarship assumes. In any case the situation got completely out of control: a pagan mob engaged in large-scale looting of Christian houses. Christians who declined to recant or sacrifice in the temple were tortured and murdered: the elderly Metras was beaten up, his eyes were gouged out, and he was stoned to death. When Quinta the Christian refused to offer a sacrifice in the temple, she was dragged through the city by her feet, scourged, and similarly stoned to death. The elderly virgin Apollonia had her teeth knocked out and was threatened with burning at the stake unless she recanted; but she instead willingly jumped into the bonfire that had already been lit. A certain Serapion was severely tortured in his house and then

thrown out of the window. The governing authorities did not manage to restore order. On the contrary, during this emperor's chaotic final months, the religious disturbances transformed into open civil war between the pagan inhabitants of the city, thereby providing a temporary reprieve for the Christians.

6

A Decade of Persecution

From Decius to Valerian (249–260)

The First Empire-Wide Persecution under Decius (249–251)

A dramatic change in the treatment of Christians began under Emperor Decius (249–251). Local measures of repression had repeatedly flared up over nearly two-and-a-half centuries. But they had only ever affected particular hot spots especially in the major cities, and even there they were always interrupted by periods of relative calm. Now, however, they were replaced by blanket persecutions affecting Christians across the *entire* territory of the Roman Empire.

An edict of December 249, which unfortunately is not preserved verbatim, compelled all inhabitants of the empire publicly to offer cultic veneration to the gods. Commissions were established in order to monitor and record this process. Specifically, the requirement was to bring a food-and-drink offering and to consume sacrificial meat. This was then confirmed with special certificates (*libelli*). If the sacrifice had not been offered voluntarily by a certain date, the authorities compelled the Christians to perform it. To this end they could be jailed and tortured by various means including scourging, beating, the horse-shaped rack, the iron claw, and red-hot irons. The authorities were

empowered to confiscate the property of those concerned, to exile them, and eventually also to execute them.[1] We still have in our possession many of these certificates on papyrus from Egypt, all of them dating to June or July 250.

This measure did not specifically single out the Christians.[2] Instead, the point was to demand the religious loyalty of the empire's *entire* population. That said, administrators inevitably had Jews (about whose treatment we have no sources) and Christians in their sights because of their categorical refusal to offer cultic veneration to the gods. The real motive for the imperial tactic remains obscure. The most plausible theory still appears to be that the empire's political instability made a return to the traditional Roman gods appear advisable. By demonstrative veneration on the part of the empire's entire population, it sought to secure public welfare and command the loyalty of all its subjects.

Many of the faithful voluntarily complied with the official demands, since they took the view that one could venerate God under any name. There were also substantial social pressures associated with this mass event: anyone who did not participate was immediately conspicuous and stigmatized, and had to expect significant reprisals. After all, the control agencies were comparatively flexible in their implementation of the edict and sometimes merely required grains of incense to be strewn on the altar. Bribes, too, were apparently not uncommon: by paying a sum of money, it was possible to obtain *libelli* without formally declaring one's loyalty to the gods. Only a minority of Christians appears to have evaded the sacrifices or actively refused them.

The events in Alexandria and Carthage are particularly well documented because we have contemporary reports. For Alexandria, Bishop Dionysius once again offers detailed information in a letter.[3] Following the proclamation of the imperial edict, the more distinguished Christians of the Egyptian metropolis turned up one by one to sacrifice, some of them being employees of the Roman administration.

Others sought safety by escaping. Then again there were those who only recanted after some time in prison, either before or after being tortured. Martyrs included the frail and elderly Julian as well as a certain Cronion: driven through the city on camels while being flogged, they in the end were publicly burned at the stake. For standing up to the mob that was mocking the Christians, the soldier Besas was arrested and beheaded. The Libyan Macarius was also burned alive. The eminent female ascetic Ammonarion was first severely tortured and then led away to execution when she continued to refuse the sacrifice. The elderly Mercuria, Dionysia (the mother of several children), as well as another woman were immediately put to death by the sword. When even the use of force did not persuade the roughly fifteen-year-old Dioscurus to sacrifice, he was released by the judge, the prefect of Egypt Aurelius Appius Sabinus. The Egyptians Heron, Ater, and Isidorus were burned at the stake without delay. A particular misfortune struck Nemesion, who was initially accused of robbery along with some others. Although he was able to prove his innocence in this matter, he was then denounced as a Christian and dragged in chains before the governor. There he was tortured with twice as many blows of the scourge as the robbers before joining them in being burned at the stake.

As also on previous occasions (see above p. 61), bystanders attempted to use secret signs to encourage steadfastness in those who stood before the court. Four soldiers and the aged Theophilus attracted the attention of the other spectators in this way. When they realized that their time, too, had come, they rushed up to the bench and confessed their Christian faith. In other cities and villages of Egypt, there were numerous additional victims. Dionysius mentions the case of the administrator Ischyrion, who refused to sacrifice and was for this reason impaled by his employer, a high-ranking official, with a stake through his bowels.

The Alexandrian underground seems to have organized a kind of spiritual aid agency for the imprisoned Christians. Despite being decimated by an epidemic of the plague, most of the remaining members of the clergy (four priests and three deacons) remained in the city for this purpose. Here they lived in a hideout, buried executed Christians at the risk of their own lives, and visited the prisoners.[4]

There were evidently also substantial numbers of victims among those who had fled for safety into the desert only to die of hunger, thirst, hypothermia, or illnesses; to fall prey to robbers or wild animals; and not uncommonly to be enslaved. Among them were the aged Bishop Chairemon of Nilopolis (in the Faiyum basin) and his wife, who fled to the mountains and never returned.

The bishop of Alexandria himself was spared the worst: while the governor Sabinus did order a manhunt for him, Dionysius himself indicates that it never occurred to the soldiers to look for him in his own house. After three days he managed to escape with his children and several fellow Christians. They were, however, arrested on the way and deported to Taposiris (today Abu Sir in the Nile Delta). Here they were freed by an agitated crowd and hidden in the Libyan desert.[5]

Dionysius' report clearly confirms that all classes of the population had to turn up for sacrifice. Despite the brutal approach of the authorities, however, the number of executions in Egypt was evidently not very large. Our source affirms fewer than twenty executions in connection with Alexandria. The number of confessors and those who offered the sacrifice must, therefore, have been many times that of the martyrs.

For Carthage, its Bishop Cyprian (d. 258) is our most important witness: a corpus of his letters and several treatises survive, which document the persecution and its aftermath. The commission charged with the implementation of the edict in this North African metropolis consisted of

five officials. Sacrifices had to be offered on the city's capitol in front of the temple of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva.[6] In other words, everyone could see who had sacrificed. Those who refused had occasion to consider their decision at leisure in the local prison.[7] Even children faced compulsion to sacrifice. A little girl whose parents had fled was taken to the officials by her nurse; since she was not yet able to eat meat, they gave her bread dipped in wine in front of an image of the gods.[8]

There were diverse penalties for persistent refusal, probably considering the status of the prisoner as well as the payment of bribes. The mildest cases involved the confiscation of property. Additionally one might be sent into exile. A Christian woman called Bona was exiled despite having technically performed the sacrifice—against her will. After her relatives had compelled her to do so by force, she cried out, 'Not I but you have done this!'[9] Extended confinement in prison was also possible,[10] although in the absence of a Roman legal provision for prison sentences it is not always clear to what extent this should be regarded as a punishment rather than as detention awaiting trial, coercive detention for contempt, or the consequence of delayed execution.

Large numbers of Christians sacrificed willingly, certainly including high-ranking dignitaries.[11] Among them was Bishop Fortunatianus of Assuras (near today's Sers, Tunisia).[12] Cyprian additionally heard from Spain about his episcopal colleagues Basilides and Martialis, who had offered sacrifice and were subsequently deposed.[13] But there were also many who refused: the Carthaginian confessor Lucian reports in a letter from prison about thirteen men and four women who had at the time of writing died under torture or in the mines, or else of hunger or thirst in prison.[14] Like others, Cyprian himself sought safety by escaping, suffering substantial loss when his property was confiscated.[15] From his hideout he kept in touch with his church by correspondence for a period of about fourteen months.

Our sources for Rome are somewhat less effusive. In any case we know that the capital's Bishop Fabian was executed in January 250. The priests Moses and Maximus as well as the deacon Nicostratus were consigned to the dungeons, where Moses died just under a year later.[16] The names of three additional confessors (Urbanus, Sidonius, and Celerinus) are preserved.[17] The church of Rome experienced heated internal conflicts about the question of how to treat apostates—a point to which we will return (see below pp. 135–36).

In Palestine the elderly Bishop Alexander of Jerusalem was jailed in Caesarea and died there.[18] Babylas of Antioch suffered a similar fate.[19] Origen, too, was locked up, tortured on the horse-shaped rack, and threatened with death.[20]

At Smyrna in Asia Minor, Polemon the temple administrator (*neokoros*) in charge of the imperial cult arrested the priests Pionius and Limnus, the slave Sabina, as well as Asclepiades and Macedonia and dragged them to the city's agora. Here the arrested individuals refused to offer the sacrifice demanded of them. Since Polemon was not authorized to carry out the death penalty, he initially had the Christians taken to jail. When Pionius was visited in prison by remorseful apostates, he preached a lengthy sermon of repentance and encouragement to them. Such contact with church members was nothing unusual. Believers imprisoned for their faith were credited with a special spiritual empowerment, and many hoped to receive from them intercession and forgiveness of their own sins (see below p. 134).

After the city's Bishop Euctemon had offered the sacrifice, Polemon, accompanied by a cavalry officer, turned up among the prisoners and once again implored them to sacrifice as the bishop had done. Finally, the trial took place in the presence of the proconsul, who repeatedly had Pionius tortured. When he remained steadfast despite everything, he was nailed to a cross with Limnus to his right and Asclepiades to his left, before being asphyxiated in a ring of burning fire—all in the same venue where Polycarp had previously

suffered a martyr's death (see above p. 57). The fate of the other prisoners is unknown.[21] At Pergamum a similar fate overtook Bishop Carpus of Julia Gordus (province of Asia; today Gördes in western Turkey), the deacon Papylus (or Pamphilus) of Thyatira (modern Akhisar), as well as Agathonice, under the otherwise unknown proconsul Optimus.[22]

Since the ultimate punishment was imposed quite rarely, we may surmise that Decius was interested less in the physical destruction of Christians than in their (enforced) integration. The persecution appears to have subsided around the end of the year 250, and it terminated with the emperor's death in battle against the Goths in June 251.

This, however, does not mean that there were no further reprisals under Decius' successor, Trebonianus Gallus (251–253). Clergymen were frequently exiled.[23] Thus we know that Bishop Cornelius (251–253) was probably banished from the capital to the neighboring Centumcellae (Civitavecchia), where he also died.[24] He was later celebrated as a martyr, as is shown by the inscription on his extant coffin in the Crypt of Lucina in the Catacomb of Calixtus. His successor, Lucius (253–254), initially fared no better, although he was able to return to Rome when the emperor was murdered already in August of the same year.[25]

A sacrificial edict was published in Carthage before the summer of 252, although its reach may have been locally limited. In this connection the pagan population engaged in anti-Christian disturbances, though we have no specific information about these.[26] Here the background may also be the empire's long-rampant epidemic of the plague that had in the meantime reached North Africa and for which Christians were blamed.

The Second Empire-Wide Persecution under Valerian (253–260)

Trebonianus Gallus was followed by Valerian (253–260), another military officer. The first years of his reign were a

favorable time for the church. Once again there were said to be numerous Christians at the imperial court. But then the tide turned very suddenly. Dionysius of Alexandria attributes the change of heart to the influence of Fulvius Macrianus, the teacher and 'assembly president' (*archisynagôgos*) of the Egyptian magicians. This man had reportedly persuaded Valerian to undertake magical rituals that also involved the sacrifice of infants, which the Christians at court had tried to prevent. He, therefore, commanded the emperor 'to kill the pure and holy men and to persecute them.'[27] The murder of children for mantic purposes was commonly imputed to unpopular rulers in antiquity and is probably a fabrication. By contrast, the alleged tensions between magicians and Christians at the imperial court may well have been factual. Macrianus had risen under Valerian to the rank of chief chamberlain to the emperor, and after the latter's death he tried repeatedly to promote his two sons to the imperial throne.

August 257 saw the publication of a first edict of unknown wording in the name of the emperor and his son, the second Augustus Gallienus. Whoever did not willingly accept the Roman religion was to be forced to do so. Apparently no formal recantation of Christian faith was expected. But the emperor imposed a ban on assemblies and prohibited (only?) Christians from visiting cemeteries.[28] Unlike the religious policy of Decius, this edict exclusively targeted those who did not practice the Roman religion, and thus above all Jews and Christians—although we do not know of any practical implications for the former. As far as Christians were concerned, we will see that the primary target concerned the clergy. Exile was envisaged as punishment for higher-ranking clerics; but we also hear of forced labor in mines and of imprisonment. An additional objective was to make it impossible for Christian convocations to conduct services, to provide a Christian burial for their dead, or to commemorate their martyrs in the cemeteries.

When this relatively mild sanction failed to produce the desired results or to be implemented comprehensively, an additional and significantly tougher edict was issued at the beginning of August 258. Bishops, priests, and deacons who held fast to their faith were to be immediately executed. The property of high-ranking Christian members of society like senators or equestrian knights was to be confiscated; if they were obstinate in their adherence to Christianity, they, too, were faced with the death penalty. Eminent women were banished to exile, and their property also fell to the treasury. Christian members of the emperor's court (*caesariani*) were deported to the imperial estates as slaves. As before, the test remained sacrifice to the gods. In principle, therefore, this edict also targeted the clergy and beyond them the prosperous and influential members of the Christian churches whose elimination was intended to ensure the church's definitive destruction as an organization.[29]

Our sources once again provide the fullest information about this persecution for Egypt and North Africa. Bishop Dionysius was himself a victim, as he reports in a letter.[30] Together with a priest, three deacons, and a Roman cleric who happened to be staying in the Egyptian metropolis, he was brought before Lucius Mussius Aemilianus, the prefect of Egypt, and eventually exiled to the village of Cephro a long way west of Alexandria. He was forbidden to participate in divine worship or to visit cemeteries (and thus to take part in events at those locations). The church of Alexandria then held services without its bishop, who in exile gathered a new congregation at Cephro and engaged in a mission to the still wholly pagan population. When the prefect was apparently informed about this, he reassigned the clerics in Cephro to individual places of exile in the region of Mareotis west of Alexandria. Dionysius ended up in a hamlet relatively close to Alexandria. The second edict does not appear to have directly affected the bishop, who was able to return to Alexandria after the persecution.[31]

In North Africa Cyprian the bishop of Carthage was arrested on 30 August 257 and brought before the court of the proconsul Aspasius Paternus. After a short hearing, in which he refused to offer sacrifice to the gods or to denounce his priests, he was exiled to Curubis north of Carthage (today Korba, Tunisia). From this picturesque port and beach town, the bishop was able to maintain relatively effortless contact with his home church.[32] Thus he sent letters to African clergy, including at least nine bishops who had been condemned to work in the mines in Numidia and elsewhere, in order to comfort them and support them through financial donations. This correspondence also shows that women and children likewise fell victim to the persecution.[33]

Cyprian later returned briefly to Carthage. He refused an opportunity to escape and was then arrested once more on 13 September 258. Sympathetically supported by his church and the population of the African capital, he was taken on the following day to the gravely ill proconsul Galerius Maximus' country residence and brought before him there. The judge asked the bishop just once more if he was prepared to offer the sacrifice—and, when he declined, immediately pronounced the death sentence. Cyprian was promptly executed by the sword, after rewarding the executioner (*speculator*) with twenty-five gold coins (*aurei*). His church buried his body during the following night in a solemn torch procession.[34] The relevant reports suggest that the African primate's steadfastness before his execution became a great encouragement for subsequent martyrs. Time and again his name is mentioned in the martyr acts of the year 259.

In the spring of that year, there were renewed fatalities in Carthage, as the *Passion of Montanus and Lucius* suggests (admittedly a text of contested authenticity). The document consists of two parts: a letter from a group of clergy in prison and a report about the subsequent fate of these prisoners. After one of them had already died in prison,

the others were to be burned at the stake, but the fire went out. So they were taken back to the dungeon, where they remained for several months and would have died of hunger and thirst, had it not been for fellow believers coming to their aid. Finally, they were executed by the sword.

The *Passion of Marian and James* is likewise of North African origin. It mentions in passing the execution of Bishops Agapius and Secundinus along with numerous other Christians in Numidia, and it proceeds to report more fully on the fate of the two protagonists, a lay reader and a deacon, in Cirta (today Constantine, Algeria) under the governor (*legatus Augusti*) Gaius Macrinius Decianus. They were beheaded in a mass execution on the bank of the river Rhumel, while the author of the *Passion of Marian and James* was arrested but escaped with his life.

As far as other regions are concerned, the second phase of this persecution appears also to have been especially severe in Rome, where the city's new bishop Xystus (Sixtus) II was executed in a cemetery on 8 August 258 together with four deacons. The urban prefects subsequently continued to execute Christians who had been reported to them and to confiscate their property.[35]

Aside from this we know of three martyrdoms in Caesarea in Palestine. Having voluntarily presented themselves to the judge, Priscus, Malchus, and Alexander were reportedly thrown to be eaten by wild animals—one of the few examples of condemnation *ad bestias* during the persecutions of the mid-third century. In addition a woman who belonged to the Christian sect of the Marcionites was likewise executed.[36]

The *Passion of Fructuosus, Augurius, and Eulogius* from Spain mentions the execution of Bishop Fructuosus along with two deacons on 21 January 259 in Tarragona, the capital of the province of Hispania Citerior (Tarraconensis). After six days' confinement in the dungeon and a brief interrogation before the *legatus Augusti* Aemilianus, they

were burned at the stake in Tarragona's amphitheater, still extant to this day. In this connection the *Passion of Fructuosus, Augurius, and Eulogius* also reports that at night Christians attempted to snatch up as much as possible of the martyrs' ashes but were admonished by Fructuosus in a dream to give them back—a clear indication of the emerging cult of relics.

This second empire-wide persecution ended in 260, when Valerian was captured by the Sassanian ruler Shapur I near Edessa and apparently died or was killed in captivity.

The Period of the Church's Flourishing (260–303)

Valerian's son Gallienus (260–268) had governed jointly with his father since 253 and thus held shared responsibility for the persecution. After his father's death, however, he radically changed the direction of his religious policy. In a general edict, probably as early as 260, he decreed the cessation of anti-Christian measures and the return of confiscated ecclesial property. In a rescript to the Egyptian bishops, he additionally promised the restitution of places of cult and the free conduct of divine worship. A further missive addressed to other bishops restored permission for Christians to visit their cemeteries.[37] The consequences were of the greatest significance for the church: Gallienus had not merely reinstated the situation prior to the persecution of Valerian but de facto recognized the Christian church by guaranteeing its free exercise of religion and explicitly conceding its right to own property.

Christianity in the Roman Empire thus entered a period of prosperity that lasted more than four decades: there are only very few extant martyr acts from the time between 260 and 303. One of them is the story of Marinus, a soldier executed in Caesarea in Palestine after being denounced by a begrudging rival because of his promotion to centurion.

The judge Achaeus allowed him a short time for consideration while the bishop Theotecnus encouraged his resolve to hold fast his confession, whereupon Marinus was condemned to death. His body was then solemnly buried by Asturius, a well-to-do Roman senator.[38] The martyrdom of Marinus is in many respects peculiar, since it really does not fit the general picture of the reign of Gallienus and his successors. It may possibly belong to the beginning of this period, when after Valerian's capture the two aforementioned sons of Macrianus (see above p. 86) briefly controlled the Eastern provinces.

Emperor Aurelian (270–275) reportedly abandoned his initially tolerant attitude[39] in order to plan a persecution of Christians at the insinuation of certain counsellors; but he was either unable to sign the relevant edicts[40] or was murdered before they reached the more distant provinces.[41] These measures may have been linked to Aurelian's promotion around 274 of the cult of the 'Invincible Sun' (*Sol Invictus*) as the central imperial deity, which led to frictions with the Christians because of their refusal to sacrifice to the sun god. (However, while such refusals may be attested for the time of Diocletian, the martyrdom reports from the reign of Aurelian are historically unreliable.)

We have no concrete documentation of measures either for or against the Christians on the part of the other emperors during this time. Eusebius generally describes the period from Gallienus to Carinus as a time of the church's flourishing. He reports that Christians were appointed as provincial governors and for this purpose exempted from cultic obligations relating to their office. He singles out the influential *caesariani* Dorotheus and Gorgonius among Christians who were able to confess their faith publicly at the imperial court.[42] Church attendance increased to such an extent that new and bigger churches had to be constructed.[43] But this situation was not to last.

7

The Fiercest Attack on Ancient Christianity

The 'Great Persecution' under Diocletian and Its Aftermath

The Background

The last and probably most severe persecution struck the Christians of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the fourth century. It is, therefore, also called the 'Great Persecution' in English-speaking scholarship. In this case we do have a great many sources, but it is almost impossible to arrange them in any accurate chronology that is not internally contradictory. In what follows, therefore, the description of some developments is hypothetical, as is the assignment of events to specific dates. (For a better orientation, readers may wish to consult the chronological table at the end of this volume.)

Two years after coming to power in 284, Diocletian (284–305) appointed his childhood friend Maximian as his co-emperor: Diocletian would from now on govern the Eastern Empire, while Maximian would look after the West. But Diocletian went further still. In order to protect the vast empire effectively against powerful external enemies, in 293 he introduced a tetrarchy, or government by foursome: Constantius (I) Chlorus was named as Caesar (i.e., sub-emperor) for Gaul and Britain; Galerius, as

Caesar for parts of the East. Among the measures adopted to stabilize this division of power, the two *Augusti* stressed the importance of the traditional Roman cults and placed themselves under the protection of specific gods. Diocletian saw himself as shielded by Jupiter the 'preserver,' 'protector,' 'extender,' and 'avenger' (of the empire), as his coinage puts it, and for this reason he carried the epithet *Iovius*. Maximian, however, entrusted himself to Hercules, who bore similar epithets and was additionally revered as 'virtue' or 'strength' (*virtus*); for this reason the second emperor also called himself *Herculius*.

But Diocletian was concerned not only about a return to the worship of the ancient Roman gods. He also promoted other popular cults that were easily integrated into the traditional religious life. This is true above all for the cult of Mithras, a mystery religion that had originated in Persia and was extraordinarily popular among soldiers. Thus, surviving inscriptions from military camps attest the two *Augusti* erecting shrines there on behalf of this deity, who had long been equated with the 'Invincible Sun god' (*deus Sol Invictus*), whose worship had already been promoted by earlier emperors, as we saw earlier (see above p. 91). Its very indeterminacy in fact made the cult of *Sol Invictus* an ideal religious umbrella underneath which to gather and combine diverse forms of worship, rendering them useful for overriding political purposes.

Two cults, however, could not be integrated into the Roman pantheon without further ado because their adherents explicitly rejected polytheism—and, unlike Judaism, pursued an assertive mission instead of contenting themselves with the unobtrusive pursuit of their own religious practices. An even more recent phenomenon than Christianity was Manichaeism, a hybrid religious mix of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Buddhism that originated in the hostile Sasanian Empire (see below p. 128). It derived from Mani (216–277) and as a result of intensive missionizing activity had by the

late third century established itself in large parts of the Mediterranean. A harsh rescript against this new cult was issued probably on 31 March 302.[1] Its introduction affirms that an 'ancient religion' like that of the Romans must not be questioned by 'new-fangled and hitherto unknown sects'—a principle that also governed the later anti-Christian policies of the tetrarchs. There followed the instruction to burn the Manichaean clergy and Scriptures as well as to behead ordinary followers persisting in their faith and to confiscate their property. The treatment of Manichaean believers among the Roman elite was somewhat milder: their possessions were confiscated, and they were consigned to forced labor in the mines. The proposed measures read like a blueprint for the later anti-Christian edicts.

Even prior to this point, occasional action had been taken against Christians in the army: in the North African city of Theveste (today Tébessa, eastern Algeria), the proconsul Cassius Dio had the twenty-one-year-old Christian recruit Maximilian executed by the sword on 12 March 295 for his refusal to serve in the Roman army, which he regarded as a sin.[2] The proconsul's harsh response was entirely conventional in cases of insubordination. A similar episode occurred in the city of Tingis (Tangier) in the summer and autumn apparently of the year 298. The centurion Marcellus caused a scandal during a banquet in honor of the emperors, when he threw down his army badge in front of the imperial standards and declared that as a soldier of Jesus Christ he could no longer serve the emperors. He was arrested and executed by the sword on 30 October after several months' imprisonment.[3]

Unlike these isolated occurrences, a more serious event took place at the imperial court some years later when Diocletian was spending time in the Eastern Empire, probably at Antioch (299/300 or 302 according to alternative dating). Christian slaves of the emperor had made the sign of the cross during pagan ceremonies. Since the official auguries

subsequently turned out negative, Diocletian demanded a sacrifice to the gods from all inhabitants of the palace and all soldiers in the Roman army.[4] In this connection the otherwise unknown General Veturius apparently oversaw several dishonorable discharges and even some martyrdoms.[5]

The First Anti-Christian Edict

The situation fundamentally worsened in February 303. At this point Diocletian and his Caesar Galerius were staying at the imperial residence in Nicomedia (Bithynia, today İzmit). The sub-emperor was in part influenced by his mother, Romula, who hated the Christians. Galerius himself evidently saw in them a danger to public welfare and a destabilizing factor for the empire. He, therefore, attempted to persuade the Augustus to take comprehensive action against the Christians. But Diocletian hesitated: he believed it would suffice to keep Christians out of the court and the army, and he wanted to avoid major bloodshed. But the Caesar's view was supported by leading judges and military officers in his entourage, known as the *amici* ('friends'). Among them was the governor (*praeses*) of the province of Bithynia, Sossianus Hierocles, who also made no secret of his distaste for Christianity (see above p. 23). Diocletian, however, continued to waver. It was only when the highly regarded Oracle of Apollo at Didyma (today Didim, western Turkey) gave a favorable response that Diocletian finally consented to the measures against the Christians, while insisting that bloodshed be kept to a minimum. And thus at daybreak on 23 February 303, during empire-wide celebrations honoring Terminus, the god of boundary markers, the church of Nicomedia was plundered and then destroyed.[6]

An edict published on the following day decreed that all churches should be torn down and the books of the Christians burned. This was probably accompanied by a ban on assemblies—or the wording of the edict was at any rate

interpreted in that fashion by several provincial governors. In addition, confessing Christians of the Roman upper class were to lose their office and public honors, be subjected to torture, and forfeit their legal status. Employees of the imperial household (*caesariani*), mostly freedmen, were to be reduced to the status of slaves unless they recanted.[7] Although we do not have the precise text of this or the following edicts, their rationale may be taken as analogous to that of the earlier policy against the Manicheans: Christians constituted an alien element in the Roman population, corrupting time-honored morality and cultic order, and thus endangered the welfare of the empire. Their religion, therefore, had to be rendered harmless. To this end draconian measures were decreed, even if Diocletian did apparently at first attempt to avoid the imposition of the death penalty.

The edict was publicly posted in Nicomedia and dispatched to the provinces, where over subsequent weeks it was likewise advertised by public notice. In the imperial residence, this led to a remarkable expression of civil disobedience: a high-ranking Christian dignitary removed the decree and tore it to pieces, which promptly led to his execution.[8]

The imperial officials Dorotheus and Gorgonius, mentioned earlier (p. 91), were condemned to death by hanging together with their respective imperial slaves. One of the slaves was first hoisted up naked and scourged in front of the emperor; then a mixture of salt and vinegar was drizzled into his wounds, and in the end he was slowly roasted on a fire grate; but still he was not prepared to deny his faith. He perished in the process.[9]

In order to impel Diocletian to adopt even tougher measures, Galerius had his slaves set fire to parts of the palace and then spread the rumor that Christians had banded together with the court eunuchs in order to assassinate the emperors. Diocletian then ordered all of his household's *caesariani* to be tortured in order to discover the truth—but to no avail. Nevertheless, the emperor himself does not

appear to have taken any further action. There may have been a second fire two weeks later due to unknown causes. Galerius then claimed that his security was no longer guaranteed and left the city abruptly.[10]

Unsettled by events he evidently failed to understand, Diocletian took drastic action. His wife Prisca and daughter Valeria had to offer a sacrifice; the powerful court eunuchs were executed. In addition, Anthimus, the bishop of Nicomedia, was beheaded. An indeterminate number of priests and deacons were also killed together with their families and servants. They were burned at the stake in groups, while the imperial household's slaves were drowned in the sea with stones around their necks. *Caesariani* who had already been executed and buried were exhumed and likewise submerged in the sea to preclude a martyrs' cult at their tombs.[11]

These measures were at first local and limited to Nicomedia. The edict of 24 February, however, was in force across the empire and led to the widespread destruction of churches and public burning of Christian books.[12] The Western emperors, Maximian and Constantius, were also instructed to implement this edict. Maximian enacted it as thoroughly as possible in his sphere of control in Italy, North Africa, and Spain, while Constantius confined his efforts to the demolition of church buildings in Gaul and Britain (where presumably they were not very numerous).[13]

At the same time, there were attempts to exclude Christians from legal protection by setting up altars in law courts and in front of the public tribunals, restricting access to those who first offered sacrifice.[14] A papyrus letter from Egypt shows that in a legal dispute about a plot of land a Christian called Copres dispatched a pagan friend to offer on his behalf the sacrifice to the gods that was required in advance of his lawsuit in Alexandria.[15] In a canon (church law) of the year 306, Bishop Peter of Alexandria (see below pp. 113, 119) punished such conduct with six months' church penitence.

It took some time for the edicts to be fully propagated throughout the empire and implemented by respective provincial administrations. In North Africa the earliest confirmation of their enforcement dates from June 303. In Timidia Regia (province of Africa Proconsularis, south of the modern city of Tunis), the first day of that month saw twenty-seven Christians accused before the proconsul Gaius Annius Anullinus (303–305) for offending against the ban on assemblies in the February edict. Under interrogation, their leader Gallonius refused to surrender their Christian books and was for this reason stretched on the horse-shaped rack and mauled with iron claws. When a further challenge to reveal the location of the forbidden Scriptures remained without success, two fellow Christians were condemned to be burned at the stake for violating the ban on assemblies and for a 'sacrilegious racket,' while the rest were convicted solely on the former charge to die by the sword. Only Gallonius himself was subjected to fresh tortures and deported to Uthina (today Oudhna, Tunisia), the next stop on Anullinus' circuit. There, accompanied by ten other Christians, he had to appear once more before the judge. He continued to refuse to disclose any information despite renewed torture on the rack and was probably burnt at the stake on 11 June 303, while the other Christians were executed by the sword.[16]

The first edict of Diocletian is also referenced in the *Passion of Bishop Felix*. It was proclaimed in the city of Tibiuca, also in the province of Africa Proconsularis (today Henchir-Zouitina, Tunisia), as late as 5 June 303. With Bishop Felix absent on travels, a priest and two lectors were brought before Magnilianus, the city's highest government official (*curator civitatis*), and challenged to surrender the 'divinely made books.' The clergy claimed that the bishop had taken them with him. After this they were arrested in order to be transferred to the proconsul Anullinus. Upon his return, Bishop Felix admitted ownership of the holy books but

refused to surrender them. Magnilianus then placed him in coercive detention for three days and threatened him, too, with deportation to the proconsul. Since he stuck to his refusal, he was transported to Carthage on 14 June and initially locked up there until he could be brought before Anullinus. Since he showed himself unrelenting before the proconsul too, he was beheaded on 15 July and buried near the martyrs of Scili (see above pp. 64–65).

From around the same time, we have the martyrdom account of around fifty Christians from Abitinae (near Medjez al-Bab in northern Tunisia) led by the priest Saturninus, who were interrogated by the same governor in Carthage. There had previously been a failed attempt in Abitinae to burn the books surrendered by the local bishop Fundanus in the city's forum: a rain shower and hailstorm had extinguished the flames. During the legal proceedings, the defendants admitted having celebrated divine worship but refused to surrender their holy Scriptures. They died either under torture or subsequently in jail, where there was already a large number of clergy. Bishop Mensurius of Carthage (see below p. 136) and his deacon Caecilian reportedly prevented the prisoners from being cared for by fellow Christians, possibly because they did not wish to strain relations with the governor still further and took a skeptical view of the Abitinaean Christians' craving for martyrdom. The prisoners then held a kind of council in the dungeon, which resolved that those who had surrendered biblical Scriptures (the so-called *traditores*) should be excluded from the fellowship of the church, since they were guilty of eternal torment in hell. The Donatists later appealed to this resolution (see below p. 137). The highly stylized account of these martyrs, though apparently based on original trial proceedings, drastically describes the torments on the horse-shaped rack and the deployment of iron claws (*Confessions and Acts of the Martyrs of Abitinae*).

We have in addition the *Acts of Munatius Felix*, the pagan chief priest and *curator* of the city of Cirta in Numidia (today Constantine, Algeria). They indicate that on 19 May 303, Felix came to the Christian assembly hall accompanied by other officials, demanding the surrender of the 'writings of the law' and all of the church's property. He was received by a group of local clergy led by their bishop Paul. The bishop initially succeeded in delaying the surrender of the biblical books. The church-owned library had apparently been cleared and its holdings distributed among the lectors. They had then been instructed to keep them away from the church. Paul, therefore, handed over only the church's remaining property, which was listed in detail (including liturgical implements and vestments). Two subdeacons eventually also produced a codex. But they refused to name the lectors and were, therefore, arrested. The subsequent inspection of the seven lectors' houses yielded the surrender of a total of thirty-six large and smaller codices. All the lectors were thus technically guilty of *traditio*—except for Euticius, who successfully persisted with his claim to not own any codices.

Another prominent example of the surrender of books is known to us in Carthage, where the aforementioned Bishop Mensurius claims to have taken the holy Scriptures to safety and left the officials only with certain 'heretical' books. At a later date, he and other bishops were nevertheless accused of *traditio*.[17] Long after the persecution, the Donatist bishop Silvanus of Cirta was likewise brought to trial on this and other charges and sent into exile.

The acts of a synod of Numidian bishops, reportedly held in Cirta under the presidency of Bishop Secundus of Tigisis, date perhaps from March 305. In connection with the imminent consecration of a bishop, the president here interrogated his fellow bishops in order to discover which of them had not been compromised and was thus still able to perform the consecration. One bishop claimed to have fled the

praeses Florus (see above p. 103). Another had surrendered only insignificant papers, while a third handed over medical works. The fourth admitted having thrown gospel codices into the flames under considerable pressure but claimed they were already damaged. Leaving aside the authenticity of these acts (which was already contested soon afterward), they nevertheless offer a useful picture of the range of possible reactions during this phase of repression.[18]

In Egypt, extant papyri from Oxyrhynchus attest confiscations of church property under the local prefect Clodius Culcianus (in office 301–307).[19] Dated to 5 and 9 February 304, these documents also confirm that even small Egyptian villages already had church buildings and that the congregations concerned had to certify officially that their property had been surrendered. All valuables were then taken to Alexandria. The relevant official files were copied for different levels of the administration.

The Second and Third Anti-Christian Edicts

According to Eusebius, riots in the region of Melitene in eastern Cappadocia and in Syria triggered a further escalation.[20] The Syrian rebellion, centered in and around Seleucia and Antioch, is also known from other sources and apparently had no religious causes. Quite why the emperor intervened so harshly, therefore, remains in the end unclear; but it may have to do with the fear of alliances between usurpers and the Christian clergy. In any case Diocletian issued a second anti-Christian edict ordering all clergy to be jailed.

This measure led to the complete overcrowding of prisons. Apparently faced with numerous complaints from the provinces, the Augustus, therefore, decreed later in 303 in a third edict that all prisoners who offered sacrifice should be freed; the others were to be threatened with tortures that, if effective, would (one assumes) have also resulted in their release.[21] Diocletian evidently continued to try to avoid

unnecessary martyrdoms. Executions were not explicitly envisaged: steadfast clergy who survived their tortures were to be retained in the prisons.

However, the reality was rather different. Eusebius speaks of numerous martyrdoms especially in Africa, Mauritania, Egypt, and the Thebaid (i.e., in Maximian's sphere of power)—though it is unclear if this may instead relate to the situation after the fourth edict (see below pp. 105–8).[22] We know of executions in Milevis, Numidia (today Mila, Algeria) under the *praeses* Valerius Florus in June 303.[23]

In the province of Armenia Minor, a trial before the governor Agricolaus took place at Sebaste (today Sivas, central Anatolia) on 12 July 303. There had already been several martyrdoms in the area. Those on trial were the lector Ariston and the cantor Severianus, who had allegedly composed and sent to Agricolaus a pamphlet disparaging the two *Augusti* because of the persecution of Christians, and in which the authors declared their intention to set fire to temples. They would thus have been guilty of the most serious offenses known to Roman law: high treason (*crimen laesae maiestatis*) and religious sacrilege (*sacrilegium*).

Ariston remained steadfast under interrogation by the governor, refused a sacrifice to the gods, and was, therefore, sentenced to death by burning at the stake. In the case of Severianus, however, deployment of the horse-shaped rack and iron claws facilitated the governor's discovery that no temples had in fact been set on fire, and that the pamphlet was authored not by the two accused but by the chorbishop[24] Athenogenes of Pedachthoe (Heracleopolis, about thirty miles north-northwest of Sebaste). He had presented it to them to assist them in 'giving testimony.' Severianus eventually performed the sacrifice.

At a later point, Athenogenes, who had initially hidden from his persecutors, was arrested and put on trial. The governor confronted the bishop with Severianus' accusation, but he denied it. Severianus was then brought in to be

confronted with them. Faced with the bishop, he initially recanted his earlier statement but then repeated it after renewed torture. Athenogenes, however, continued to insist that he had nothing to do with the document. Even continued interrogation did not enable the governor to achieve clarity on this point. He, therefore, changed his tactic and instead accused Athenogenes of failing to perform the sacrifice according to the imperial edict. Eventually both were sentenced to death by burning at the stake.[25]

Eusebius provides particularly full information about the aftermath of the edicts in Palestine.[26] All atrocities notwithstanding, once again it is clear that the point was not to conduct a massacre among the clergy, especially since numerous clerics readily offered sacrifice. Pragmatic solutions were often adopted: clergy were led by force to the sacrificial altars, compelled to touch the sacrifice, and then released. Other clergy had friends falsely testify that they had sacrificed. They, too, were let go. Still other Christians were dragged some distance along the ground and then let go, even if they loudly protested that they had not sacrificed because they wanted to suffer martyrdom. One person survived when after his tortures he was mistaken for dead and thrown into a mass grave.

Due to this relatively mild implementation of the edicts, there were few martyrdoms in Palestine under the *praeses* Flavianus, notably only among members of the lower clergy. The first to die by the sword in Caesarea on 7 June 303 was the ascetic and scholar Procopius, lector and exorcist of the church of Scythopolis (today Beit She'an, Israel). Then the lector and exorcist Alpheus of Caesarea and the deacon Zacchaeus of Gadara (today Umm Qais, Jordan) were beheaded after severe tortures on 17 November 303.[27] Around the same time, Romanus, deacon and exorcist of the church of Caesarea, had witnessed the destruction of churches and mass participation in sacrifices at Antioch. His public sermon calling for repentance caused a riot,

whereupon he was arrested and initially sentenced to death by fire. When he was already standing at the stake with wood piled around him, he was taken down again and brought before the emperor Diocletian, who was then staying at Antioch. Here his tongue was cut out. Romanus subsequently went back to prison, where he remained locked up until 304. When the other prison inmates were freed on the occasion of Diocletian's twentieth anniversary in power, Romanus was stretched on the horse-shaped rack and finally strangled.

The Fourth Anti-Christian Edict and Its Aftermath (304–308)

When even these draconian measures failed to suppress Christianity permanently, a fourth edict in early 304 mandated a general sacrifice consisting of food-and-drink offerings before the images of the gods.[28] While the edict itself is not preserved, it probably included the additional requirement that the sacrifice needed to be offered 'for the health of the emperors.'[29] The point was, therefore, in the first instance to exact from Christians a demonstration of loyalty toward the imperial power, to be performed before the images of the gods. Jews were explicitly exempted from this sacrifice.[30]

The four edicts were not carried out everywhere. To some extent their implementation was limited to the first decree. This is true particularly for the West: here the emperor in charge was Maximian Herculius (along with his Caesar Constantius Chlorus) and, following his abdication in 305, the new Augustus Constantius and his Caesar Severus (305–306).

In Maximian's territory, the small number of martyrdoms following the fourth edict includes the execution of Euplus, the deacon at Catania, Sicily, who had apparently caused a commotion outside the courtroom while carrying the (forbidden) Gospels.[31] There was also the affliction

of Crispina of Thacora (province of Africa Proconsularis; today Taoura, Algeria), who was beheaded on 5 December 304 for refusing the sacrifice.[32] Aside from this, the influential bishop Ossius (Hosius) of Cordoba (b. c. 256, d. 359) later identified as a 'confessor' under Maximian.[33] Other reports are mostly legendary.

Leaving aside the destruction of church buildings (see above p. 98), the territories of Constantius (Britain and Gaul) appear to have witnessed no persecutions at all.[34] To the contrary, Eusebius reports that Christians at the imperial court who did not perform the required sacrifice were in fact *supported* by Constantius and included in his bodyguard[35]—an anecdote, however, that lacks plausibility.

Following the early death of Constantius (July 306), Severus was initially promoted to Augustus (murdered in September 307). Ultimately the son of Constantius established himself as his Caesar—Flavius Valerius Constantinus, who would go down in history as Emperor Constantine 'the Great.' By this time all attempts to oppress the Christians had long been suspended in the West, to the extent that there had been any here.[36] After Diocletian's abdication (305, at the same time as Maximian Herculius), Galerius set the tone as Augustus in the East with Maximinus Daia acting as his Caesar.

Galerius and Maximinus Daia continued the persecution without interruption. In his territory of Egypt and Syria, Maximinus tried to compel all Christians to sacrifice. Initial letters to this effect were dispatched in the year 306, ordering a general sacrifice to the gods to be offered by all subjects without exception. City authorities were responsible for implementation. At Caesarea in Syria, this meant that heralds summoned all inhabitants of the city to go to the temples. There military tribunes called on individuals by name, using specially compiled lists.[37]

Even Christians seem normally to have performed the sacrifice. This is known to be the case for Bishop Apollonius

of Lycopolis in central Egypt (Thebaid; today Asyut), who voluntarily went to the temple and offered a libation in plain view, and similarly for Bishop Plutarch of Sbeht (Apollinopolis in the Thebaid; today probably Kom Isfaht), who offered the sacrifice together with the majority of his congregation.[38] Even the highly learned Bishop Stephanus of Laodicea (today Latakia, Syria) opted to sacrifice, which led his contemporaries to accuse him of cowardice.[39]

One always needs to bear in mind the brutal approach adopted by local governors. Lactantius and Eusebius report cruel tortures deployed in the territory of the two Eastern emperors. According to Lactantius, steadfast Christians under Galerius were tied to stakes. Fire was kindled under their feet to peel the skin from their soles. The torturers then held burning torches to their extremities in regular intervals, all the while dousing their heads with water to prevent the relief of death arriving too soon. After their agonizing deaths, their bodies were burnt on a pyre before the remains were thrown into a river or into the sea.[40]

Eusebius provides a list of modes of torture and execution arranged by regions. On this account, the preferred mode of execution in Arabia was by hatchet and in Cappadocia by breaking the legs. In Mesopotamia the condemned were suspended upside down over a smoldering fire and died of smoke inhalation. In Alexandria their noses, ears, hands, and other body parts were cut off. At Antioch they were roasted, forced to hold an arm into the fire, or drowned in the sea. Not infrequently they avoided these agonies by resorting to suicide, like the aristocratic lady and her two daughters who eluded their pursuers in Antioch by plunging into the river Orontes. In Pontus, sharp reeds were driven into fingers under the tips of the nails, molten lead was poured onto the bodies of the victims, or their bowels or other organs were slowly excised. Later, such brutal measures apparently had to be reduced in response to pressure from above, so that efforts against the Christians were

eventually confined to gouging out an eye or paralyzing a leg. If they continued to resist, they were condemned to forced labor in the province's copper mines.[41]

Thus there continued to be numerous martyrdoms in the years 304–308, too. For ease of reference, they are in the following pages (selectively) arranged by province and in presumed chronological sequence.

Martyrdoms in the Territory of Diocletian or Galerius

The *Passion of Irenaeus*, the bishop of Sirmium (today Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia), describes events in the province of Pannonia Secunda in the year 304. This young clergyman was interrogated and tortured by Probus, the province's *praeses*. Then the bishop's relatives, slaves, and neighbors were brought in to persuade him to offer sacrifice to the gods. When this proved pointless, he was taken back to prison and further abused. A fresh interrogation accompanied by beatings also remained unsuccessful, so eventually it was resolved to drown Irenaeus in the river Sava. The condemned, however, succeeded in his demand to be executed by the sword. This was eventually done on a bridge over the river, from which his body was then thrown (6 April 304).

From Thessalonica in the province of Macedonia, we have the *Martyrdom of Agape, Irene, and Chione*. Evidently living a celibate life, these women had escaped into the mountains outside the city as early as the year 303. They were arrested there in March 304 and initially brought before a police officer to perform the sacrifice. When they refused, they were transferred to Dulcitius, the *praeses* of Macedonia, in the company of four other women. They repeated their refusal of the sacrifice under interrogation and denied that they possessed Christian writings. The heavily pregnant Eutychia was taken back to jail along with the other young women (Agatho, Irene, Cassia, and

Philippa); but Agape and Chione were burned at the stake without further ado. When the governor then discovered during a house search that Irene did after all own pertinent books, he subjected her to a further interrogation. Afterward she was taken naked to the city's brothel while the confiscated writings were incinerated. When that establishment's patrons reportedly left her untouched, Dulcitius interrogated her yet again before finally condemning her to die at the stake for her continued refusal to sacrifice. She was executed on 1 April 304. The fate of the other four women is unknown.

It was probably in 304 that the *praeses* Maximus sat in judgment over the veteran Julius at Durostorum (province of Moesia Inferior; today Silistra, Bulgaria), where the Eleventh Claudian Legion was garrisoned. Julius claimed to have been a Christian for the entire twenty-seven years of his military service. The governor failed in all his efforts to persuade him to sacrifice by offering financial incentives. He was condemned to death, and two further executions took place in the same connection (*Passion of Julius the Veteran*). Around the same time, the soldier Dasius was apparently also beheaded at Durostorum (*Martyrdom of Dasius*).

With regard to Bithynia, the case of Anthimus was mentioned previously (see above p. 98). Lactantius dedicated his work *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* to the confessor Donatus, who survived ninefold (!) torture as well as six years of imprisonment (305–311) under the Pretorian prefect Flaccinus; Sossianus Hierocles, the *praeses* of Bithynia (see above p. 23); as well as his successor, Priscillian. Another governor delighted in tormenting a prisoner over the course of two years until he finally sacrificed.[42]

In the province of Phrygia I or II, soldiers set fire to an entire Christian village that had refused the sacrifice, resulting in the death of all its inhabitants. Adauctus, a high-ranking imperial official, was probably also executed in the same province.[43]

Martyrdoms in the Territory of Galerius or Maximinus Daia

We know of numerous executions in the province of Syria-Palestine. A certain Timotheus was burnt at the stake in Gaza. At Caesarea, six Christians who had reported themselves to the *praeses* Urbanus (in office 304–307/308) were beheaded along with two others (24 March 305). The execution of eight Egyptians at Tyre must also be dated to the beginning of the persecution: they were scourged and then forced to fight with panthers, bears, wild boars, and bulls. But since the condemned were not attacked by the animals, they were ultimately executed by the sword and their bodies thrown into the sea.[44]

Apphian, a nineteen-year-old ascetic of aristocratic descent, was a student of the learned Pamphilus (see below pp. 111, 116) and highly educated in philosophy and theology. He caused a scandal in Caesarea when he grabbed the governor Urbanus by the hand to prevent him from sacrificing to the gods. He was promptly seized by the bodyguard, thrown into prison, and there confined in the stocks. Then he was brought before Urbanus and, when he refused to sacrifice, tormented with incomprehensible cruelty: several times he was scourged until his skin drooped from his body in shreds. When even this was to no avail, the torturers wrapped his feet in oil-soaked linen and set fire to them. Three days later, on 2 April 306, the half-dead young man was dragged once more before the judge. When he refused the sacrifice yet again, he was drowned in the sea. A tidal wave following an earthquake washed his body ashore again.[45]

Apphian's half-brother Aedesius, a Christian philosopher, was condemned to forced labor in the copper mines of Palestine following a period of imprisonment. He was eventually released and went to Alexandria (see below p. 117). Around the same time, a young man in Tyre was mistreated, sewn into a cowhide together with a dog and a poisonous snake, and thrown into the sea.[46]

During the games organized by Maximinus Daia in celebration of his birthday on 20 November 306, a further execution took place in the emperor's presence at Caesarea: a certain Agapius was thrown to the wild animals and seriously wounded by a bear. Having survived these torments, he was drowned in the sea the following day.[47] Also in Caesarea, the seventeen-year-old ascetic Theodosia was imprisoned in April 307. The *praeses* Urbanus had her tortured to the bone and finally drowned, while he condemned other confessors to forced labor in the copper mine of Phaino (today Feynan, east of the Wadi Arabah, Jordan).[48]

On 5 November 307, Bishop Silvanus of Gaza and his companions suffered the same fate. The same court proceedings condemned a confessor called Domninus to die at the stake. Three men were consigned to a fistfight in the arena; when they resisted this activity, they were deported to the mines. Auxentius the priest was thrown to the wild beasts. Others were castrated and then transported to the mines. Three young women were consigned to the brothel, while others were jailed. Eusebius' teacher Pamphilus was made to answer the governor's questions regarding his philosophical knowledge and was then expected to sacrifice, which he refused. He was abused with iron claws and taken back to prison together with others (see above p. 116).[49]

In the following year, the authorities transferred a group of ninety-seven Egyptian confessors, including women and young children, from the apparently overcrowded quarry of Mons Porphyrites in the Thebaid (about thirty-five miles west of today's Red Sea beach resort of Hurghada) to Diocaesarea (Sepphoris, north of Nazareth). When they (again?) refused the sacrifice, the governor Firmilianus (308–310) had the tendons of their left feet cut and their right eyes gouged out before being cauterized with a red-hot iron. Finally, they were deported to the mines in the province of Syria-Palestine.

One group who had been caught studying the Bible in Gaza were partly mutilated in a similar fashion at Caesarea but partly tortured even more severely. One female ascetic among them had been threatened with consignment to the brothel; on reviling the emperor, she was scourged and suspended from a stake or a cross, where she continued being tormented. In view of this bloody spectacle, Valentina of Caesarea, another well-known ascetic, heckled the judge as to how long he intended to abuse the woman; she, too, was arrested, tortured, and finally dragged by force to the altar. Here she managed to knock over the table along with the sacrifice. For this she was first lacerated with iron claws before being bound together with the other woman and burnt at the stake. A certain Paul, who had also been condemned, asked the executioner for a brief delay and prayed with a loud voice not only for his fellow captives but also for emperor, judge, and executioner (25 July 308). Finally, 130 prisoners, who had been mutilated like the previous group, were transferred from Egyptian mines to others in Palestine and Cilicia.[50] Bishop Tyrannion of Tyre and the priest and physician Zenobius of Sidon were executed in Antioch; their martyrdoms are of uncertain date.[51]

Under the prefect Clodius Culcianus (in office 301–307), the province of Egypt witnessed extensive abuses of Christians. The general population apparently participated in these, as we learn from a letter written in prison by Bishop Phileas of Thmuis (in the Nile Delta) immediately before his own execution (see below). People were beaten with rods, whips, straps, and ropes. They were hung on stakes by their hands, which had been tied behind their backs, all their limbs being stretched on racks and then treated with instruments of torture. Others were suspended by an arm from the ceiling of the courtroom. Still others were strapped to pillars above the floor, so that the force of gravity would cause the straps to cut deep into their skin. Survivors might

additionally be stretched on the rack. Many did not outlast these tortures; others were taken back to prison half dead and there succumbed to their injuries. A few recovered and were again presented to the governor in order to force them to sacrifice, which many evidently continued to refuse.[52] Yet others, like Bishop Peter of Alexandria (see above p. 98, and below p. 119), opted to flee during this phase of the persecution.[53]

The pogroms did not even spare dignitaries like Philoromus, a high-ranking official of the imperial administration, who was beheaded together with Bishop Phileas.[54] The *Acts of Bishop Phileas* report that he was arrested at Thmuis, interrogated by the prefect Culcianus, tortured, and taken to Alexandria in chains. There he had to appear four more times before the prefect, who was evidently most concerned to save the life of his defendant. In this connection he was repeatedly beaten. At the fifth hearing, he stood before the court together with twenty priests. The governor now offered him the opportunity to sacrifice not even to the gods but in an unspecific manner 'to the Lord alone.' Phileas declined: Christians were categorically not permitted to offer blood sacrifice. Culcianus callously made the fate of the co-accused priests dependent on the conduct of their bishop: if he sacrificed, the lives of his clergy would be spared. In an earlier hearing, the governor had already pointed out the actions of a priest who had done exactly that. A little later Culcianus challenged Phileas to follow his conscience and thus to spare the lives of his sons and his wife; but he refused again, stressing his exclusive commitment to God. The bishop's legal advisers attempted to free him by means of a ruse, claiming—perhaps in consultation with the prefect—that the bishop had already sacrificed in the *secretum* (the court chamber not open to the public); but he vehemently denied this. Eventually their only remaining option was to request a further delay of the judgment. Phileas, however, desired no further respite and thus appears to

have been beheaded together with Philomorus immediately after the final hearing on 4 February 306. The fate of the other defendants is unknown. Bishops Hesychius, Pachymius, and Theodore were also put to death.[55]

In the province of the Thebaid, at Antinoupolis on the eastern bank of the Nile (six miles from today's Beni Hasan), on 19 May 304, there occurred the martyrdom of Coluthus, a highly respected physician who was brought to the tribunal before Satrius Arrianus (Adrianus; 305/306–307), the provincial *praeses* in charge of the Thebaid. Coluthus apparently refused to surrender Christian writings in connection with the first edict and had already stood trial on that count. The rostrum was now surrounded by numerous Christians who had sacrificed and implored Coluthus to do the same. Evidently reluctant in his duty to implement the imperial edict, Arrianus attempted at length to impel the physician to sacrifice in view of his family and his position, and finally threatened him with death by fire. Then he mentioned bishops in the Thebaid who had already sacrificed, as well as the bystanders. But all these persuasive efforts were in vain: Coluthus was mostly silent or expressed his refusal in a few words. In this case, too, the lawyers repeatedly requested a pause for consideration; the governor was quite willing to grant this, but the physician declined. Arrianus then had him stretched on the horse-shaped rack and a large stone suspended from his neck. When even this made no difference, he yelled at the taciturn defendant that no debating contest was expected from him but that he should just get on and sacrifice. In the end he gave up in consternation and read out the sentence: death by burning at the stake. This was immediately carried out.[56]

While the authorities also had the ordinary clergy in their sights, much less time was taken with them. A priest called Stephanus from the village of Lenaius in the district of Antinoupolis, central Egypt, was put on trial in late 305

at Cleopatris, a port city on the left bank of the Nile. It must have been completed at great speed. But even here the *praeses* Arrianus tried in vain to persuade the defendant to offer a sacrifice to the gods. When this failed, the priest was burned at the stake.[57]

Arrianus the governor has left a deep imprint on the tradition of the martyrs as the brutal persecutor-in-chief of Christians, although this is not easily squared with his relatively moderate demeanor toward Coluthus. Speaking from personal observation, Eusebius describes his cruelty in the darkest terms: Christians had their skin cut open with shards. Women were suspended naked upside down by one leg and pulled up into the air. The condemned were torn apart when they were tied to constrained branches or trees that were suddenly left to snap back. These persecutions extended over several years, and executions could reach up to one hundred in a single day. Even children were not spared. At times the executioners could only manage their task in several shifts and with a constantly replenished supply of fresh swords. Christian self-indictments were also not uncommon.[58]

Renewed Persecution under Maximinus Daia (309–311)

In Maximinus Daia's territory, the oppression of Christians occurred in waves. Pressures appear to have subsided from the summer of 308. The captives in the mines of the Thebaid were released. For unknown reasons, however, the persecution once again intensified in another edict of Maximinus (around summer/autumn 309). The Roman deities' dilapidated temples were to be rebuilt. The entire population including babies (!) then had to present a food-and-drink offering there and to eat of the sacrificial meat. But the chicaneries went further still: all groceries for sale on the market had to be drizzled with sacrificial wine. Doormen posted at the exits of the public baths similarly sprinkled the

bathers with wine. This made it practically impossible for Christians to go about a normal way of life without coming into physical contact with the traditional cults. These measures were unpopular even among pagans. Among the Christians they impelled three men to attack Firmilianus (see above p. 111), the governor of Palestine, at Caesarea on 13 November 309; they confessed their allegiance to the one God and creator of the worlds and were promptly beheaded. A female Christian ascetic's torso was stripped before she was driven with floggings through Caesarea to the tribunal, where Firmilian eventually condemned her to die at the stake. The bodies of the deceased were thrown to be consumed by animals in the wilderness.[59]

On 14 December 309, a group of Egyptian Christians traveled en route to Cilicia to support the confessors in the mines (see above p. 112 and below) but were arrested at a checkpoint at the gate of Ascalon (today Ashkelon, Israel). As previously with their Cilician fellow Christians, Firmilian had them mutilated in eye and foot, one of the group burned at the stake, and two others beheaded. On 11 January 310, death by fire was also the fate of the young ascetic Peter Apselamus as well as of Asclepius, a bishop of the Christian sect of the Marcionites.[60]

Martyrdom finally also overtook the priest Pamphilus, the teacher of Eusebius (see above pp. 110, 111). He had already spent over two years in prison at Caesarea together with the elderly Deacon Valens of Jerusalem and a certain Paul of Jamnia (today Yavne, Israel). Among them were five Egyptians who had been arrested on their return from Cilicia, where they had accompanied fellow Christians condemned to forced labor in the mines. On 16 February 310, these Egyptians were brought before Firmilianus and beheaded after lengthy interrogation and tortures. The same sentence was pronounced on Pamphilus and his companions. Porphyry, a young domestic slave and student of Pamphilus, who had cried out from among the crowd for permission

to give the bodies of the martyrs a decent burial, was also arrested, tortured, and burned at the stake. The confessor Seleucus, a Roman army veteran, brought Pamphilus the news of his student's death. When Seleucus was observed greeting one of the prisoners with a fraternal kiss, he was taken to the governor, who had him instantly beheaded. He was followed by the elderly Theodulus, a high-ranking member of Firmilianus' own household, who had also greeted a prisoner with a kiss and was for this reason crucified. The final victim was Julian, who had embraced and kissed the executed Christians and was, therefore, burned at the stake. Their bodies were again initially thrown out to be consumed by wild animals; but when this failed to produce the desired result after four days, they were buried after all. The last martyrs in Caesarea were Hadrian and Eubulus, who in March 310 were first sentenced to fight the wild animals and subsequently beheaded.[61]

Conditions of forced labor in the copper mine of Phaino were generally so lax that Christians there were permitted to conduct worship services. Firmilianus discovered this on an inspection trip and reported this state of affairs to the emperor. As a result, some of the confessors were deported to Cyprus, the Lebanon, and other places. Four men in positions of leadership suffered death by fire, including two Egyptian bishops called Peleus and Nilus.[62] Frail and elderly Christians, like Bishop Silvanus of Gaza (see above p. 111) or John the blind, of whom it was said that he knew the entire Bible by heart, were initially exempted from forced labor. Later, however, these two were included among thirty-nine of the forced laborers to be beheaded.[63]

Aedesius, the half-brother of Apphian (see above p. 110), watched in Alexandria as the prefect Sossianus Hierocles (in office 310/311; see above p. 23) sentenced Christians, including women consigned to prostitution. In response he attacked the governor and beat him up. He was tortured and drowned.[64]

Galerius' Edict of Toleration and the Situation in the Eastern Empire

Despite this, all attempts to extinguish Christianity failed. At long last, therefore, the terminally ill Galerius altered his strategic policy on religion. On 30 April 311, he published an edict indicating that he was now prepared to tolerate the church. Christians were once again permitted to practice their religion and to restore their meeting places. In return he demanded the church's intercession for the empire and its rulers, thereby contributing to 'public welfare' in keeping with ancestral custom.[65] However, the edict was issued only in the names of Galerius, Licinius, and Constantine and seems not to have been comprehensively implemented in the East. After Severus' death Licinius had been appointed by Galerius in November 308 as co-Augustus for the West. When Galerius, too, died only a few days after the Edict of Toleration was published, Licinius took over the Balkans while Maximinus Daia was able to extend his previous domain (Egypt, Syria) to include Asia Minor.

In the territory of Maximinus Daia, who had not signed the Edict of Toleration, the situation continued to be precarious. Here, too, the persecution was at first suspended. Thus, in a letter to the governors in May 311, Pretorian prefect Sabinus (commander of the imperial guard) justified yet another U-turn in imperial policy by explaining that there was no point in trying to dissuade the Christians by force from their obstinate refusal to sacrifice to the gods; for this reason they should from then on have been tolerated and protected by the state. There was, however, no mention of allowing the reconstruction of churches.[66] But the prisoners were at any rate released, and congregational life once again flourished.

Nevertheless, after a pause of half a year, the chicaneries resumed once more. Eusebius and Lactantius attributed blame for this to the emperor's bad character, whose

violence and sexual addiction they illustrate in dark colors. At the same time, they stress his assiduous sacrificial activity and strict devotion to oracles, along with his efforts to promote the traditional practice of religion through the construction of new temples.[67]

To begin with, Christian meetings in cemeteries were prohibited. Then a centrally instigated campaign led several cities to send the emperor petitions asking him to deny Christians the right of residence or at least to refuse permission for the construction of churches inside the cities.[68] The petitions along with the imperial rescript were posted in the cities and favored an atmosphere of anti-Christian pogroms. In his rescript the emperor asserted a direct connection between veneration of the Roman gods and the respective cities' welfare and protection from war and natural disasters. Although no comprehensive sacrifice to the gods was mandated, Christians who held onto their faith were to be expelled from their cities. Adherents of the old religion were additionally promised further benefits.[69] Furthermore, the emperor arranged for the appointment of chief priests from the local elites of all provinces and cities; their duties included sacrifices and checking that Christians neither constructed church buildings nor even met for worship.

In addition, a propaganda campaign against the Christians commenced: when women in Damascus confessed under torture that orgies were being held in the churches, this was publicized everywhere by the emperor. While executions were by now prohibited, the eyes, hands, feet, noses, or ears of confessors were mutilated. Some cities nevertheless witnessed martyrdoms among church leaders: among the victims were the elderly Bishop Silvanus of Emesa (today Homs, Syria) along with two other Christians, who were thrown to the beasts. Bishop Peter of Alexandria (see above pp. 98, 113) was locked up for some time together with Melitius of Lycopolis (Thebaid; today Asyut). There the two of them witnessed others being led away to execution or agreeing to

sacrifice. This appears to have led to a disagreement among the prisoners about whether clergy who had agreed to sacrifice could be pardoned or continue to hold office: Melitius took the stricter view; Peter, the more lenient. Peter suffered martyrdom on 26 November 311 along with three of his priests, while Melitius and others were banished to the copper mines of Phaino and survived. The learned presbyter Lucian was taken from Antioch to Nicomedia and condemned in the presence of Maximinus, thrown into prison, and eventually also executed on 7 January 312. Eminent women, too, fell victim to the persecution.[70]

In an extant sarcophagus inscription from the city of Laodicea Catacecaumene (Laodicea Combusta in Pisidia; today Lâdik, Turkey), the later bishop Marcus Julius Eugenius reports how Maximinus' order to sacrifice reached him as a member of staff of Valerius Diogenes, the *praeses* of Pisidia. He suffered many and severe torments and finally resigned his post in defiance of the imperial prohibition, without compromising his faith.

Despite this, the effects of the new wave of persecutions appear to have been relatively minor. In any case, yet another reversal came about in December 312: in a missive to Sabinus, Maximinus decreed relative freedom of religion and the protection of Christians against ill-treatment. This meant that here, too, the worst was over. But since their confiscated property had not been reinstated and they had received no explicit permission to conduct services, Christians were guarded in their response.[71]

The Battle of the Milvian Bridge, the Declaration of Milan, and the End of the Persecutions

In the West the persecution to a large extent never happened or ended early (see above pp. 98, 106). But this was not fully the case in all areas. For some considerable time, Maxentius, the son of Emperor Maximian, had also asserted a

claim for sovereignty over the West. He had been in control of Italy and Africa since 307. Here the persecutions initially subsided for a time, since Maxentius apparently attempted to win the Christian population's support for his cause.[72] But the situation later once again deteriorated: Sophronia, for instance, the wife of a Roman city prefect (Junius Flavianus?), chose to commit suicide in 311 or 312 for fear of being turned in by her own husband.[73]

The uncertain political situation eventually led to a military confrontation between Maxentius and Constantine, who had controlled the other parts of the Western Empire since 306. This was decided on 28 October 312 in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge at the gates of Rome, which resulted in Constantine's victory and the death of his opponent.[74] Constantine thereby gained control over the entire Western Empire, which for Christians in those regions brought about a further consolidation of the situation. The emperor sent a letter to the governors in which he granted amnesty to imprisoned and exiled Christians and ordered the restitution of Christian property.[75] A further letter to Anullinus, the proconsul of Africa (see above p. 99; second period of office 312–313), instructed him to reinstate ecclesial property even in cases where it had already been transferred to third parties.[76]

The breakthrough for the entire empire followed in 313. In February of that year, having already struck an alliance with Licinius in 311, the Western emperor met the Augustus of the East at Milan to coordinate their shared interests. The agreed package included new arrangements for dealing with Christians: toleration of the Christian religion was now extended to the entire Roman territory (the so-called 'Edict' of Milan, which was in fact more likely a formal agreement between the emperors).[77]

Licinius needed to enroll Constantine's support in a confrontation with Maximinus Daia, who remained in control of Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor—a confrontation

he wanted to resolve militarily. This plan succeeded, and Maximinus Daia was apparently defeated on 30 April 313 at Adrianopolis (Edirne, Turkey). He initially fled to Nicomedia. There he appears to have taken against the pagan priests whose oracular pronouncements had misled him about the outcome of the war. He further issued an edict confirming the letter of toleration sent to Sabinus in December of the previous year (see above p. 120), criticizing its inadequate implementation. In addition, he now expressly permitted the conduct of worship services and the construction of churches, and he restored confiscated land and real estate to Christians (in around May 313).[78] Faced with a hopeless military situation, two months later he took his own life at Tarsus.

Licinius had pursued the fugitive ruler. After his entry into Nicomedia, on 13 June 313 he published a letter to the governors in the name of both *Augusti*. In this document he cited the meeting with Constantine in February and thereby proclaimed the end of the persecution of Christians along with a general freedom of religion for his part of the empire. He first confirmed the toleration previously proclaimed by Maximinus Daia and further directed that churches and other real estate were to be returned to the Christians. He went even beyond this in practical terms: claims for damages from third parties who had acquired Christian property in good faith were to be addressed to the governor. Additionally, he ordered the destroyed churches to be rebuilt.[79]

However, in the context of increasing tensions between the Eastern and Western Empires after 319, the regions controlled by Licinius witnessed another campaign against Christians at the court, who had their property confiscated and were either exiled or enslaved. Bishops, too, were no longer allowed to maintain contact with each other. This made it impossible to hold synods or to consecrate new bishops, which required the cooperation of at least three colleagues.

Christian women were no longer permitted to participate in divine worship and were only allowed to be instructed in Christian teaching by other women, not by men. Following a further escalation, worship services could be held only outside cities in the open country. Officers of troops charged with police duties (the so-called *stationarii*) were expected to sacrifice to the gods or else were demoted. It is possible that the same context accounts for a mysterious letter written by forty soldiers on death row from the prison of Sebaste in the province of Armenia Minor, in which they gave instruction to be buried together despite their diverse origins and directed that their mortal remains should not be scattered. The authenticity of this so-called *Testament of the 40 Martyrs of Sebaste* is, however, contested.

Finally, Licinius also secured the assistance of provincial governors in getting rid of bishops. They were arrested, exiled, and in some cases murdered, cut in pieces, and thrown into the sea. Especially in Pontus, fresh closures and destructions of churches are said to have occurred, apparently because the emperor doubted the loyalty of the local parishes.[80]

Definitive legal security extended to Christians in the Eastern Empire only after Constantine's defeat of Licinius on 18 September 324 in the Battle of Chrysopolis (today Üsküdar, a district of Istanbul), which gave the Western emperor sole sovereignty over the entire empire. Constantine issued legal decrees that extended the Western restitutions to the Christians of the Eastern Empire: exiles were recalled; believers placed under special community service obligations were relieved of them; freedom was granted to those who had been subjected to forced labor in the mines or in spinning or weaving mills, enslaved, or imprisoned; whoever lost legal status had this restored; demoted officers were able to reclaim their original rank or were honorably discharged. The property of martyrs was restored to its rightful heirs or, if there were none, handed over to the church. Christians

had their confiscated property returned to them, even if it had in the meantime passed into the possession of others. Buildings and land (including cemeteries) were in all cases to be restored to the churches by their new owners, whom the state would compensate as appropriate.[81]

8

Later Repressions of Christians in the Roman Empire

The persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire came to an end no later than the beginning of Constantine's sole rule. It is true that there were later repressions against certain groups of Christians who had been identified as schismatics (dividers of the church) or heretics. One example may be the separate North African denomination of the Donatists, which was repeatedly targeted by the authorities until the fifth century (see below pp. 136–37). In 316 or 317, for example, the religious buildings of the Donatists were confiscated on the basis of a new edict. Since Donatist believers resisted being driven from their churches, the authorities resorted to violence in dealing with them: soldiers forced their way into a church and massacred the faithful inside. Donatist bishops were sent into exile. In the summer of 347, similar measures were adopted under Emperor Constans, which again led to violent altercations between government troops and Donatists. The latter, for this reason, continued the literature of martyr acts unchanged in the fourth century.[1] On 12 February 405, Emperor Honorius published an Edict of Union, in which Donatists were designated as heretics and forcibly united with the Catholic Church. Since this measure still did not achieve success, the prohibition of Donatists was

repeated after a religious conference in Carthage on 26 June 411, and a further Edict of Union was published on 30 January 412. As a result, Donatism subsequently existed only in scattered congregations.

A second example concerns a Spanish group of Christians under Bishop Priscillian of Ávila, whose teachings it is no longer possible to reconstruct in detail. They were condemned to death and executed at Trier in 385 or 386 by the usurper Maximus.

One observes in these conflicts the emperors' unchanged efforts to ensure the uniform practice of religion for the welfare of the empire, now transferred to the inner-ecclesial space. This also explains why the emperors intervened in the theological controversies around the Trinity and Christology, which convulsed the church and the empire during the fourth and fifth centuries, and beyond. This went hand-in-hand with a growing displacement and sometimes violent suppression of Christian dissidents ('heretics'), pagan cults, and also Judaism, since Christians found it increasingly difficult to permit theological and religious pluralism either in their own ranks or vis-à-vis outsiders. Such tensions, which may have turned into outright persecution, also persisted in the successor states to the Roman Empire, such as the Vandal Kingdom in northern Africa or the Kingdom of the Visigoths in southwest Europe, into the early Middle Ages.

9

Late Antique Persecutions outside the Roman Empire

Persecutions among the Goths

Christianity's rise within the Roman Empire coincided with its expansion beyond the empire's borders, especially through trade relations. Around the time of the Constantinian turn, Christian churches arose among the Thervingi (a Gothic people) in the region between the rivers Danube, Olt, and Dniester, organized around their own bishop of Gothia (initially Theophilus, fl. 325; later Ulfilas [Wulfila], d. 383) in conjunction with the church of the empire. Close affiliation with the Roman Empire probably explains why in the 340s these Gothic Christians came under pressure when the Thervingi attempted to break away from Roman control. Ulfilas appears to have suffered significant personal reprisals, since from then on he was identified as a confessor. The Gothic Christians had no other choice but to place themselves under direct Roman protection in the province of Moesia Inferior in the region of Nicopolis (today Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria).

This did not stop the expansion of Christianity among the Thervingi, given that the emperors evidently pursued a religious policy intended to bind the Goths more closely to

Rome by Christianizing them. Emperor Valens conducted a war (367–369) that remained without success and ended with a truce. In 369–372, this triggered a second wave of persecution led by Athanaric, chief of the Gothic alliance, since the Christian Goths were considered friends of the Romans and opposed Athanaric under Fritigern. At Athanaric's command, divine images mounted on carts were reportedly rolled into Christian villages in order to compel Christians to worship them. In addition, the consumption of sacrificial meat was required. At least in one case this led to a massacre when Christian families fled into an assembly hall that was set on fire—reportedly killing twenty-six clerics, monks, and laypeople. The most famous martyr of this second phase is the missionary Sabas, who was initially twice exiled from his home village because of his confession of Christ. During Holy Week of 372, he was arrested and tortured by soldiers under the leadership of Atharid, the son of a chieftain. Since Sabas refused to eat sacrificial meat, he was finally drowned on 12 April 372 in the river Buzău, a tributary of the lower Danube in Romania. His memory was promoted not least by Christians of the imperial church who transferred his relics to Caesarea in Cappadocia, where they were venerated.[1]

Persecutions among the Sasanians (Persians)

In the Persian Sasanian Empire, too, the religion of the Christians was regarded as potentially subversive; and during the fourth century, they came under pressure to the same degree that the Roman archenemy promoted this religion. As was the case for the Goths, the anti-Christian measures of the Sasanians were in part influenced by the recurring political and military confrontations with their Western neighbors. During the third century, Zoroastrianism had become the imperial religion. Its priesthood turned its attention first against Manichaeism (see above pp. 94–95)

and then, under the king of kings (Shahanshah) Bahram II (276–293), against other religions, without always distinguishing between Manichaeans and Christians. The first victim was the young Christian Candida, a prisoner of war in Bahram's harem.

For the hagiographic and historical tradition of eastern Syria, however, the so-called 'great persecution' under Shapur II (309–379) was the most important, beginning reportedly in 340 and continuing until his death. More than forty documents describe these events. Shapur specially favored Zoroastrianism. For this reason even Constantine appealed in a letter to the Shahanshah for respect toward the Christians of Iran.[2]

The violent measures were triggered by the refusal of Simon bar Sabbae, bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon on the Tigris (today in Iraq), to levy on behalf of the imperial court a special tax imposed on Christians. This was probably intended in the first place to finance a military campaign to reconquer Nisibis (today Nusaybin, southern Turkey), which had been lost to the Romans in the year 299. Simon avowed his loyalty but insisted that the collection of taxes was not in his purview as a bishop. This led to his execution in 344 along with a pogrom against allied church leaders that killed four bishops, ninety-seven priests and deacons, two secular dignitaries, and a woman ascetic in the region of Karka d-Ledan. The following three decades evidently witnessed further executions of bishops, priests, and male and female ascetics at Seleucia-Ctesiphon and Kashkar in southern Mesopotamia; at Erbil, Kirkuk, and surroundings in northern Mesopotamia; and also in Khuzestan. Here, too, the violence mostly singled out clergy (including ascetics). The persecution targeted not Christians in general but their leaders. They were executed because they refused to act as mediators between the imperial court and the Christian provincial population, rather than—as was often assumed in the past—because of the Zoroastrian priesthood's hostility.

The church historian Sozomen claims sixteen thousand Christian victims, which is probably a fictitious number but nevertheless illustrates the brutality of the proceedings against the Christians.[3] Yazdegerd I (399–420/421) finally recognized the church of the East in an Edict of Toleration in the year 410.

Nevertheless, further martyrdoms occurred even under Yazdegerd and throughout the fifth century and beyond. The establishment of an ecclesial structure after 410 and the construction of church buildings created direct competition for Zoroastrianism, which also led to Christian attacks on traditional temples. The Shahanshahs were, therefore, obliged to accommodate the Zoroastrian religious authorities with appropriate measures. For various reasons they also conducted purges at the imperial court and had to react to external threats from Rome. Yazdegerd II (439–457) especially persecuted Christian aristocrats in Kirkuk after 446 in order to stabilize his government. A general persecution of Christians apparently only began after 455, again primarily in Kirkuk. Even when the persecutions ceased under Peroz (459–484), conversion from Zoroastrianism to Christianity remained a crime punishable by death.

Armenia and Georgia

Christianity had reached Armenia from the South (eastern Syria/Mesopotamia) and the West (Cappadocia) as early as the second and third centuries. Here, Trdat (Tiridates) IV (III on alternative numbering, 298–330?) persecuted the Christians. This was possibly triggered by the refusal of Gregory (later called the 'Illuminator'), who had been educated as a Christian in Cappadocia, to sacrifice to the goddess Anahit. Two anti-Christian decrees followed: in the first, Tiridates commissioned the nobility of his empire to ensure the smooth operation of the cult of the indigenous

gods and to bring all worshippers of other gods to trial; in the second, the populace was asked to inform against Christians. This procedure shows certain similarities to the persecution under Diocletian. Hence, the deeper reasons for the anti-Christian measures may have to do with Tiridates' dependence on Galerius. This pogrom lasted about ten years and ended with the conversion to Christianity of Tiridates and the imperial elite by Gregory, who had meanwhile been consecrated as a bishop around the year 316/317 (the date is uncertain).

From 363 Armenia fell under the influence of the Sasanian Empire. Around the year 449, Yazdegerd II (see above p. 130) attempted to force the Armenian nobility to adopt Zoroastrianism. Churches were rededicated or destroyed by Zoroastrian priests, and coercive measures were implemented against Christian clerics. In addition, Zoroastrian customs were promoted. Violent resistance was mounted in response (Battle of Avarayr, May 451), which only subsided after toleration was granted. Despite this, Armenian priests continued to be murdered. There were further uprisings from 482. It was not until three years later that the Shahanshah Balash (484–488) guaranteed the Armenians the freedom to practice their religion.

As part of their control over the kingdom of the Iberians (Georgians), during the second half of the fifth century the Sasanians attempted to Iranicize this territory as well. In this connection, martyrdoms occurred there, too, which have remained significant for Georgian piety ever since.[4] Repressions continued in the sixth century.

10

The Dispute about Repentance after Apostasy

The apostasy of many Christians under persecution constituted a massive problem for the churches. On the one hand, it was important to clarify how such apostasy should be assessed morally and perhaps also in disciplinary terms. There was general agreement that it constituted a grave sin. But what did this mean concretely? Should it entail legal (canonical) consequences like excommunication from the church—and if so, should these be temporary or permanent? If excommunication could be lifted, what should be the required penance for this?

However, there was the rather more practical challenge of how those who had remained faithful and suffered for their faith (the so-called 'confessors' as distinct from 'martyrs,' who had died for their faith) could now live together side-by-side in the churches with those who had chosen the easy path and recanted. This led to tensions between these groups; furthermore, confessors also intervened on behalf of apostates in order to shield them against ecclesial punishments.

Roman and North African sources from the middle of the third century give the clearest account of this complex situation. They illustrate that even the term 'apostate' was not unambiguous. In North Africa several types of reaction

to the edict of Emperor Decius (see above pp. 79–80) were distinguished. There were Christians who fully complied with the imperial demand and sacrificed ('sacrificers,' *sacrificati*, *lapsi*). Others had not performed all the sacrifices but merely scattered incense pellets (*tus*: 'incensers,' *turificati*). A third group had acquired the requisite certificate of sacrifice (*libellus*) through bribes, without otherwise participating in pagan cultic actions ('certifiers,' *libellatici*). An entirely distinct group, finally, was made up of Christians who had fled persecution.

Differentiations are also necessary in regard to those who remained steadfast. We already noted earlier the distinction between confessors and martyrs. But there was also another group who had remained unfaltering under persecution but had not been punished as a result (an indication that the imperial edicts were not systematically implemented everywhere). These were called the 'steadfast' (*stantes*).

In Carthage some confessors distributed certificates intended to guarantee, or at least to promise, reconciliation with the church. Even during their imprisonment, they had found people seeking them out to obtain from these Christian athletes of the faith the forgiveness of their sins.[1] This, too, was disputed: Were confessors able to forgive sins? Was not the authority to do so reserved for the bishop? Some confessors, indeed, seem to have deployed their newly acquired power indiscriminately to grant reconciliation with the church. Several priests supported the confessors in this endeavor and readmitted the apostates to communion.

Cyprian's esteem for martyrdom did not initially extend as far as Tertullian's, who in later years had declined to avoid persecution: the bishop of Carthage went underground during the Decian persecution (see above p. 83). But he was at one with Tertullian regarding martyrs as moral exemplars: to imitate the example of Christ led to total forgiveness of sins and was the ultimate goal that a person could reach on earth. Apostasy from Christianity,

by contrast, was the greatest possible sin. In addition, he regarded the actions of the confessors and priests as an immediate threat to his episcopal power, since decisions about the readmission of sinners into the church had until now been exclusively in the bishop's remit.

The problem first surfaced during the Decian persecution. Cyprian initially prohibited the admission of the lapsed (*lapsi*) and tried to defer a solution of this problem to more peaceful times, when a council might decide the question. In the end, however, he yielded and granted those who had certificates from the confessors the possibility of readmission in the event of illness. Confession to a priest would suffice, followed by the laying on of hands. At a synod in Carthage in late summer of 251, the North African clergy finally agreed that penitent *libellatici* should generally be received back into the fellowship of the church but that those who had sacrificed should be given communion only if they were in danger of death. A similar policy was followed in Alexandria.[2]

At this point Rome, too, intervened. This was partly prompted by the regular contact between the two cities. Many Roman Christians, moreover, had sought in North Africa refuge from the persecution that had raged in Rome with particular intensity (martyrdom of Bishop Fabian; see above p. 84). The presbyter Novatian acted as the spokesman of the Roman congregation, no doubt partly in hope of succeeding the recently deceased bishop. A fierce conflict soon arose with Cornelius, his main competitor (see above p. 85). Both candidates had themselves been elected bishop and consecrated, and so the church was divided. In factual terms, the difference was that Cornelius held the more lenient and Novatian the stricter position on the lapsed. While Cornelius favored readmission after appropriate penance, Novatian advocated the permanent exclusion of apostates, leaving any forgiveness entirely to the judgment of God. After some hesitation, Cyprian like most

other bishops sided with Cornelius, presumably also realizing that while Novatian's strict line might be consistent, it could hardly be maintained in practice.

In view of renewed threats, in May 252 a North African council finally decided to extend an unrestricted welcome to penitent *sacrificati*, too, who according to the previous year's ruling should have been readmitted to communion only if they were at risk of death. The threat of persecution was regarded as so severe that all Christians were in mortal danger.

Nevertheless, this question remained extremely controversial. A synod in the Spanish city of Elvira (near modern Granada) apparently resolved at the beginning of the fourth century that an adult who had sacrificed to images of the gods could under no circumstances be reinstated in the fellowship of the church.[3] Peter of Alexandria (see above pp. 119–20), however, introduced a very precise distinction between the different cases in a letter: from those who had suffered severely and only then had sacrificed, via those who had deployed various deceptions and tricks, to those who had blithely followed the imperial order and saw nothing wrong with it. He also articulated corresponding terms of penance, ranging from forty days to an indefinite period.

Half a century later, the North African church was again disunited on these questions. Here the conflict appears to have reignited because numerous priests had surrendered the holy Scriptures to the authorities (*traditores*). Bishop Mensurius of Carthage was particularly accused of *traditio* (see above p. 101). When he died in 309, Archdeacon Caecilian was consecrated as his successor by three bishops who were also equally suspected of *traditio*. For this and other reasons, there was strong resistance to the appointment of Caecilian, organized by a certain Donatus (270–355). The objection was that there were irregularities in the election of Caecilian and additionally that he had prevented the martyrs from being cared for in prison (see above p. 100). Around 310, Caecilian was deposed at a council of seventy

Numidian bishops. A lector called Maiorinus was elected instead, although he died soon afterward and was himself replaced by Donatus prior to October 313. The schism was thus manifested institutionally, too.

Donatus remained as bishop until 347. Under his leadership Donatism became the majority church of North Africa (see above pp. 125–26). The Donatists believed the only valid sacraments were those administered by a priest who had remained steadfast in the persecution. By contrast, bishops who had compromised needed to be deposed because a bishop's guilt automatically made his prayers at baptism and ordination ineffectual. This guilt, they believed, threatened the identity of the true church and created a kind of anti-church. Catholic theologians like Augustine, by contrast, insisted that the effectiveness of sacraments did not depend on the worthiness of the priest or of the institution he represented, since only Christ guaranteed salvation in the sacrament.

Yet another group wrestled with these problems: a strict view of the penitence question was also adopted by a party in central Egypt around Bishop Melitius of Lycopolis (d. 327), who was for a time imprisoned during the persecution under Diocletian and eventually condemned to forced labor in the mines (see above p. 120). This was further complicated by political and legal factors in the church, such as the contested question of whether the bishop of Alexandria had jurisdiction over all of Egypt. The incarceration of several Egyptian bishops and the flight of Bishop Peter of Alexandria had left a power vacuum in this church (see above p. 113). In this situation Melitius had undertaken to consecrate priests and deacons in the diocese of the bishop of Alexandria against the vehement protest of his imprisoned colleagues. Following his return to Alexandria (306), Peter published a series of penitential canons that, as we saw (see above p. 136), articulated periods of penitence in proportion to the severity of the respective offenses, and that were by and large an expression of episcopal gentleness. This led to

an intensification of the conflict, to the deposition of Melitius, and finally to another genuine split in the church. The church of the Melitians was at times the majority church in upper and central Egypt and survived for several centuries.

Concluding Observations

It is difficult to say how many Christians lost their lives as a result of state measures that were directed against them over the first three centuries of our era. Serious estimates for the Diocletian persecution alone amount to 3,000–3,500 victims for the whole empire.[1] A recently published source, the *History of the Episcopate of Alexandria*, mentions for this city alone a number of 643 Christians who were executed under the tetrarchy.[2] To my mind these figures are not negligible. In addition, one should note that although the actual body count was lower than some early Christian sources would make us believe, this does not mean that the way the Roman authorities treated the Christians (and other prisoners) was not utterly horrendous. Those who survived Roman tortures and prisons were usually maimed in body and soul.

As a consequence, the persecutions of Christians had major repercussions for the self-understanding of the new religion. Veneration of those who had suffered for their faith began from the very first martyrdoms, generating a cult of tombs and relics that persists to the present day.

In retrospect, the first three centuries of the oppressed church were from then on understood in marked contrast to the situation of Christendom's respective national churches of later ages. This historical perspective derives in significant respects from the contemporary witnesses and chroniclers Eusebius and Lactantius. Under Constantine, Christianity in the Roman Empire had emerged out of the position of a marginalized and oppressed minority to attain a previously unknown freedom of development that, in the long term, led to its recognition as the only legitimate public cult ('state religion') in the famous edict *Cunctos populos* (380) by Emperor Theodosius I.[3] The psychological effect of this unexpected development is quite tangible in our sources. Christians had the clear sense of living through a fundamental transition between two eras, somewhat comparable in our own times to the end of the Second World War or of the Cold War. The outward pressure, which had subdued not only each individual believer but also the congregations as a whole, had disappeared. There was, again, freedom of movement. Nobody had to be afraid any longer of being denounced to the authorities at every opportunity. Christians no longer faced the moral conflict between confessing their faith (at the risk of their own lives as well as of the health and safety of their next of kin) and apostasy (which implied exclusion from the congregation and eternal consequences at the end of days). It was, then, no longer *risky* to convert to Christianity and to lead a Christian life. At the same time, being a Christian became *easier* and even proved to be useful: from then on, Christians sided with the winners of history. Christianity became attractive and developed into a mass religion.

This psychological moment surely also accounts for the adulatory exuberance with which Lactantius and Eusebius celebrated Emperor Constantine's government while graciously overlooking numerous problematic features of his rule. To give one illustration of the upbeat atmosphere

among Christians during Constantine's reign, I quote a passage from Eusebius' *Church History* that describes the new situation in hymnic and almost eschatological terms:

> The next stage was the spectacle prayed and longed for by us all—dedication festivals in the cities and consecrations of the newly built places of worship, convocations of bishops, gatherings of representatives from far distant lands, friendly intercourse between congregation and congregation, unification of the members of Christ's body conjoint in one harmony. In accordance with a prophet's prediction, which mystically signified beforehand what was to be, there came together bone to bone and joint to joint [Ezekiel 37:7], and all that in riddling oracles the scripture infallibly foretold. There was one power of the divine Spirit coursing through all the members, one soul in them all [Acts 4:32], the same enthusiasm for the faith, one hymn of praise on all their lips. Yes, and our leaders performed ceremonies with full pomp, and ordained priests the sacraments and majestic rites of the Church, here with the singing of psalms and intoning of the prayers given us from God, there with the carrying out of divine and mystical ministrations; while over all were the ineffable symbols of the Saviour's Passion. And together, the people of every age, male and female alike, with all their powers of mind, rejoicing in heart and soul, gave glory through prayers and thanksgiving to the Author of their happiness, God Himself.[4]

Their pagan contemporaries took a rather more skeptical view. Indeed, in the course of the fourth century, it became clear that the tide had turned by 180 degrees: the traditional cults faced hard times that eventually led to their prohibition. Later church historians, especially in German-speaking countries, spoke of the 'Constantinian Turn' or 'Revolution' that inaugurated the 'Constantinian Age.' Often this entailed a negative evaluation: Protestants in particular tended (and still tend) to see the new era as beginning the decline of a church that was corrupted by too

close a relationship with the power of the state. However, one should beware of simplistic assessments: the culture of Jesus' love of neighbor—caring for the weak regardless of their nationality, skin color, or religion—was not extinguished even in the church 'victorious' or 'triumphant.' At the same time, it is true that the persecuted religion had become a religion that, until modern times, had difficulty tolerating people of other faiths. This shows the ambiguity of all human history, which likewise characterizes the history of the church.

Notes

Introduction

1 Martin Mosebach, *Die 21: Eine Reise ins Land der koptischen Martyrer* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2018); ET: *The 21: A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs*, trans. Alta L. Price (Walden, N.Y.: Plough, 2019).
2 Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), liv.

1 The Marginalization of Christianity within Judaism

1 Acts 4.1–22; 5.17–42.
2 Acts 6–7.
3 Acts 8.1; 11.19; cf. also 1 Corinthians 2.14–16.
4 Acts 9.1–9; cf. also 1 Corinthians 9.1; 15.8; Galatians 1.16.
5 Acts 12.1–17 (containing strong miraculous traits).
6 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200. Cf. also Hegesippus as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 2.23.4–18; Clement of Alexandria, in Eusebius, *Church History* 2.1.5. The veracity of Hegesippus' account (on which Clement's information may be based) is unclear.
7 Eusebius, *Church History* 3.5.3; in addition, Epiphanius of Salamis, *Anacephalaiosis* 29.7.7; 30.2.7; Epiphanius of Salamis, *On Weights and Measures* 15.397–399 (ed. Moutsoulas).
8 Eusebius, *Church History* 3.20.1–6; cf. also Jerome/Eusebius, *Chronicle*, for the year 96.
9 Hegesippus as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 3.32.1–6.
10 Justin, *First Apology* 31.6.

11 Eusebius, *Church History* 4.6.4; cf. also 5.11.12.
12 Acts 9.23–25, 29–30; 13.50; 14.1–6 (cf. 2 Timothy 3.11); 17.5–9 (cf. 1 Corinthians 2.14–16); 17.13–14; 18.6; 20.3.
13 Acts 16.11–40; cf. also 1 Thessalonians 2.2.
14 Acts 19.21–40. A possible allusion is found in 2 Corinthians 1.8–9.
15 2 Corinthians 11.24–25 (NRSV).
16 Acts 21.27–36.
17 Acts 22.22–29.
18 Acts 22.30–23.11.
19 Acts 23.12–22.
20 Acts 23.23–35.
21 Acts 24.
22 Acts 28.16–31.
23 Scribes and Pharisees: Matthew 23.34–35 par. Luke 11.49–50; John 7.13; 9.22; 12.42; 16.2; 19.38; Jews and pagans: Matthew 10.16–33; Mark 13.9–13 par. Matthew 24.9–14 (yet without reference to synagogues) and Luke 21.12–19; pagans: Matthew 24.9; unspecific instigators: Matthew 5.10–12; cf. Luke 6.22; furthermore Hebrews 10.32–34; 13.3.
24 Revelation 2.9–10; 3.9.
25 Revelation 2.13.
26 Justin, *Dialogue* 16.4; 47.5; 93.4; 95.4; 96.2; 108.3; 123.6; 133.6; 137.2.
27 Justin, *Dialogue* 17.1; 108.2.
28 Justin, *Dialogue* 95.4; 133.6; cf. 110.5.
29 Justin, *Dialogue* 96.2.
30 John 9.22; cf. also 12.42; 16.2.

2 Christianity's Offensiveness

1 Tertullian, *Apology* 40.2 (from *Tertullian: Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix, Octavius*, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, Sister Emily Joseph Daily, and Edwin A. Quain, Fathers of the Church 10 [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1950], 102).
2 Acts 11.26.
3 Cf. Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.80; Tacitus, *Histories* 5.3–5.4.1 (Jews); Tertullian, *To the Nations* 1.14; Tertullian, *Apology* 16; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9.3.
4 Cf. Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9.6.
5 Cf. Lucian's tract *The Passing of Peregrinus* (11–14, 16), where Lucian ridicules the credulity of Christians and describes inter alia the alleged imprisonment of the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus, who had converted to Christianity, and his subsequent release (without

torture!) by the governor of Syria, who knew that his prisoner would gladly accept death in order to enhance his reputation. This is clearly a parody of a martyrdom story that should not be taken literally.

6 Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.7.6.
7 *Code of Justinian* 1.1.3.
8 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.2.12.
9 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.2.3–8.
10 This is ridiculed by Lucian of Samosata in *The Passing of Peregrinus* 13.
11 1 Clement 61.1–2 (from *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 127).
12 As quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 4.26.7–8 (from *Melito of Sardis:* On Pascha *and Fragments: Texts and Translations*, ed. Stuart George Hall, Oxford Early Christian Texts [Oxford: Clarendon, 1979], 63–65). Similarly, Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.30.

3 Legal Procedures and Punishments

1 Tertullian, *Apology* 2.10 (trans. Arbesmann, Daily, and Quain).
2 Tertullian, *Apology* 50.3 (trans. Arbesmann, Daily, and Quain).
3 Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans* 5 (middle recension).

4 Persecutions in Rome under Nero and Domitian

1 Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.2–5; composed c. 114–120.
2 Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5.1.
3 Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2.
4 2 Timothy 4.6–8.
5 Polycarp, *(2) Philippians* 9.1–2.
6 Fragment in Eusebius, *Church History* 2.25.8.
7 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.
8 Acts of Paul 11.5.
9 Gaius as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 2.25.7.
10 Tertullian, *On Prescription of Heretics* 36.
11 Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 15.3.
12 Eusebius, *Church History* 2.25.5.
13 *Passio Petri* 37(8).
14 Cf. Eusebius, *Church History* 3.1.2–3.
15 Tertullian, *Apology* 5.4.
16 Cf. also Eusebius, *Church History* 3.18.4.
17 Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.14.1–2.
18 Suetonius, *Domitian* 15.1.

19 Suetonius, *Domitian* 12.2.
20 Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 68.1.2.
21 Suetonius, *Domitian* 12.2.
22 Tertullian, *Apology* 5.4. This (probably erroneous) information may be based on Hegesippus as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 3.20.5.
23 Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 68.1.2; Eusebius, *Church History* 3.20.8.
24 Eusebius, *Church History* 3.18.1.
25 Tertullina, *Prescription against Heretics* 36.3.
26 Frag. 13 (17); cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Can the Rich Man Be Saved?* 42.

5 Christians as Victims of Local Police Actions (111–249)

1 Cf. Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.33–34.
2 Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.97.
3 Tertullian, *Apology* 2; see also Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 28; Cyprian, *To Demetrianus* 13; and above p. 34.
4 Justin, *First Apology* 68; cf. Eusebius, *Church History* 4.9.
5 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.3; Eusebius, *Church History* 4.10.
6 Justin, *Second Apology* 2.
7 Justin, *Second Apology* 1.1–2.
8 Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 4.26.10.
9 Eusebius, *Church History* 4.13.
10 *Digest* 48.19.30 (Modestinus); cf. also *Sentences of Paulus* 5.21.2.
11 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 11.3.
12 Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 4.26.5–6; cf. also Athenagoras, *Supplication* 7.1.
13 *Aes Sardicense*, frag. 1; *Aes Italicense* 2.56–68.
14 *Life of Abercius* 1.
15 Eusebius, *Church History* 5, pref. 1; 5.2.1.
16 Jerome/Eusebius, *Chronicle* for the years 173–176; Eusebius, *Church History* 5.5.1–6. A pagan version is found in Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 71.8.
17 Cf. also Eusebius, *Church History* 5.1.47.
18 Tertullian, *Apology* 5.6; cf. idem, *To Scapula* 4.6.
19 Theophilus, *To Autolycus* 3.30.
20 Eusebius, *Church History* 4.32.2.
21 Melito and Victor of Rome as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 4.26.3 and 5.24.5, respectively.
22 Cf. also *Life of Polycarp* 20.4.
23 Eusebius, *Church History* 4.15.46–47.
24 *Acts of Justin and Companions*, version A.

25 Justin, *Second Apology* 8; cf. Eusebius, *Church History* 4.16.1.
26 *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. I base my account on the recent reconstruction by Otto Zwierlein, *Die Urfassungen der Martyria Polycarpi et Pionii und das Corpus Polycarpianum*, 2 vols., Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte 116 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 1:6–11.
27 Eusebius, *Church History* 5.1.
28 Eusebius, *Church History* 5, pref. 1.
29 Cf. Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks* 1.29.
30 Author's translation.
31 Author's translation.
32 Eusebius, *Church History* 5.21.1; possibly based on Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.30.1.
33 1 Clem. 63.3; 65.1.
34 Irenaeus as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 5.19.5.
35 Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.12.
36 Tertullian, *To Scapula* 5.
37 *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* (the authenticity of this document is debated). Cf. Tertullian, *To Scapula* 3.4.
38 Tertullian, *To Scapula* 4.
39 Eusebius, *Church History* 5.21.2–5.
40 Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.12.5–9.
41 Anonymous, quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 5.16.22.
42 *Historia Augusta, Severus* 17.1.
43 Cf., however, Eusebius, *Church History* 6.1, who mentions a general persecution. There is no external evidence corroborating this claim.
44 Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 64.3.1.
45 Tertullian, *To Scapula* 4.
46 Eusebius, *Church History* 5.28.8.
47 Tertullian, *To Scapula* 3.4; Eusebius, *Church History* 6.8.7.
48 Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel* 4.18.
49 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.11.4.
50 Tertullian, *Apology* 50.12.
51 Tertullian, *To Scapula* 4.
52 Anonymous quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 5.18.5–10.
53 Tertullian, *Flight in Persecution* 12–14.
54 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.1–5.
55 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.7.
56 Tertullian, *To Scapula* 3.
57 *CIL* VI, 8498.
58 Tertullian, *On the Soldier's Garland* 1.
59 Tertullian, *To Scapula*.
60 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.19.15.

61 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.11.19.
62 *Digest* 1.8.13; cf. also 48.13.4.2 (Marcianus under Caracalla).
63 Julius Africanus, *Cesti* 5.53–54 = F10.52–53 (from *Iulius Africanus, Cesti: The Extant Fragments*, ed. Martin Wallraff et al., trans. William Adler, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller, Neue Folge 18 [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012], 30).
64 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.21.3–4.
65 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.28.
66 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.28; *Das Kalenderhandbuch von 354 / Der Chronograph des Filocalus* [*Chronographer of 354*], 2 vols., ed. Johannes Divjak and Wolfgang Wischmeyer (Vienna: Holzhausen, 2014), 2:55, 527; *Book of Pontiffs* 19, etc.
67 Cyprian, *Letter* 75.10 (Firmilian of Caesarea); Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* (Latin) 39.
68 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.28.
69 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.34.
70 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.36.3.
71 Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 7.10.3.
72 Cf. also Cyprian, *On the Lapsed* 5.
73 Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 6.41.1–9.

6 A Decade of Persecution

1 Cyprian, *On the Lapsed* 2; 13. Furthermore, cf. Pseudo-Cyprian, *In Praise of Martyrdom* 8.1.
2 Pace Eusebius, *Church History* 6.39.1.
3 Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 6.41.9–42.4.
4 Dionysius of Alexandria as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 7.11.24–25 (in wrong chronological sequence).
5 Dionysius of Alexandria as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 6.40; cf. also 7.11.20–23 (erroneously dated by Eusebius to the Valerian persecution).
6 Cyprian, *On the Lapsed* 8; 24.
7 Cf., e.g., Cyprian's letters to prisoners (*Letters* 6; 10; 37).
8 Cyprian, *On the Lapsed* 25. The sacrifice by small children is also mentioned in *On the Lapsed* 9. Furthermore, cf. Cyprian, *Letters* 55.13.
9 Cyprian, *Letters* 24.1.
10 Cf., e.g., Cyprian, *Letters* 13 and 28 to confessors who had been released from prison.
11 Cyprian, *On the Lapsed* 7–12.
12 Cyprian, *Letters* 65.
13 Cyprian, *Letters* 67.
14 Cyprian, *Letters* 22.2.2.

15 Cyprian, *Letters* 66.4; as regards flight from persecution entailing confiscation of property, cf. also Cyprian, *On the Lapsed* 10.
16 Divjak and Wischmeyer, *Chronographer of 354*, 2:527; Cyprian, *Letters* 9.1; Eusebius, *Church History* 6.39.1; 6.43.20.
17 Cornelius as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 6.43.9.
18 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.39.2–3; 6.46.4.
19 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.39.4.
20 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.39.5.
21 *Martyrdom of Pionius*, of uncertain date (see above p. 54).
22 *Martyrdom of Carpus, Papylus, and Agathonice*, but this may already date from the time of Marcus Aurelius (cf. Eusebius, *Church History* 4.15.48).
23 Cf. Dionysius of Alexandria as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 7.1.
24 Divjak and Wischmeyer, *Chronographer of 354*, 2:528; Cyprian, *Letters* 60.1.
25 Cyprian, *Letters* 60.1, 3; cf. also Eusebius, *Church History* 7.2.
26 Cyprian, *Letters* 59.6.
27 Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 7.10.4.
28 *Acts of Cyprian* 1.1, 7.
29 Cyprian, *Letters* 80.1.
30 Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 7.11.2–11.
31 Eusebius, *Church History* 7.21.1.
32 *Acts of Cyprian* 1; Pontius the Deacon, *Life of Cyprian* 11–14.
33 Cyprian, *Letters* 76.6.
34 *Acts of Cyprian* 2; Pontius the Deacon, *Life of Cyprian* 15–19; furthermore, cf. Cyprian, *Letters* 81.
35 Cyprian, *Letters* 80.1; Pontius the Deacon, *Life of Cyprian* 14.
36 Eusebius, *Church History* 7.12.
37 Eusebius, *Church History* 7.13.
38 Eusebius, *Church History* 7.15–16.
39 Eusebius, *Church History* 7.30.19–20.
40 Eusebius, *Church History* 7.30.20–21; Jerome/Eusebius, *Chronicle* for the year 275.
41 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 6.2.
42 The Byzantine historian John Zonaras even claims that Dometius, the bishop of Byzantion (272–284), was the brother of Emperor Probus (276–282); cf. *Epitome of Histories* 13.3.30.
43 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.1.1–6.

7 The Fiercest Attack on Ancient Christianity

1 *Lex dei sive Mosaicarum et Romanarum legum collatio* 15.3.
2 *Acts of Maximilian*.

3 *Acts of Marcellus*.
4 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 10.1–5; Eusebius, *Church History* 8.1.1.
5 Jerome/Eusebius, *Chronicle* for the year 301; Eusebius, *Church History* 8.4.
6 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 10–12; 16.4; Eusebius, *Church History* 8 app. 1; Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 2.50–51.
7 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.2.4; Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine*, prol. 1; Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 13.1.
8 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.5; Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 13.1.
9 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.6.1–5.
10 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 14.
11 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 15.1–3; Eusebius, *Church History* 8.6.6–7.
12 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.2.1.
13 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 8.7; a slightly different account in Eusebius, *Church History* 8 app. 4.
14 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 15.4–5.
15 P.Oxy. 31.2601.
16 *Acts of Gallonius*.
17 Augustine, *Against the Donatists* 18; *Breviculus collationis cum Donatistis* 3.25–26.
18 Augustine, *Against Cresconius* 3.27.30.
19 P.Oxy. 33.2673; P.Harr. 2.208.
20 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.6.8.
21 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.2.5; 8.6.8–10; idem, *On the Martyrs of Palestine*, prol. 2.
22 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.6.10.
23 *CIL* 6700 and 19353; furthermore, Optatus of Mileve, *Against Parmenianus* 3.8.
24 Lit. 'rural bishop'—i.e., a kind of auxiliary bishop with limited jurisdiction over rural communities who was subject to a metropolitan bishop.
25 *Martyrdom of Athenogenes of Pedachthoe*.
26 Cf. Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 1–2.
27 Cf. also Eusebius, *Church History* 8.3.1–4.
28 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 3.1.
29 *Passion of Crispina* 1.3.
30 Cf. *Jerusalem Talmud, Avodah Zarah* 5.4.
31 *Martyrdom of Euplus*.
32 *Passion of Crispina*.
33 Athanasius, *History of the Arians* 43.

34 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.13.13; Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.13; Optatus of Mileve, *Against Parmenianus* 1.23.
35 Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.16.
36 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 13.12; Eusebius, *Church History* 8 app. 2, 4.
37 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 4.8.
38 *Passion of Coluthus*, in *Four Martyrdoms from the Pierpoint Morgan Coptic Codices*, ed. Eve A. E. Reymond and John W. B. Barns (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 147.
39 Eusebius, *Church History* 7.32.22.
40 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 21.
41 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.12.
42 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.11.15.
43 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.11; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 9.11.10.
44 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 3; idem, *Church History* 8.7.
45 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 4.
46 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 5.
47 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 3, 6.
48 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 7.
49 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 7.
50 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 8.
51 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.13.3–4.
52 Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 8.10.2–10.
53 Sozomen, *Church History* 1.24.3.
54 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.9.7–8.
55 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.13.7.
56 *Passion of Coluthus*.
57 P.Duk.inv. 438.
58 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.9.1–5.
59 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 9.
60 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 10.
61 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 7, 11; idem, *Church History* 7.32.25; 8.13.6.
62 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.13.5.
63 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 13.
64 Eusebius, *On the Martyrs of Palestine* 4.
65 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 34; Eusebius, *Church History* 8.17.3–10; Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.57.
66 Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 9.1.3–6; cf. 9.9a.2–3; Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 37.1.
67 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.7–14; Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 37–41.

68 Eusebius, *Church History* 9.2–9.4.1; 9.9a.4–6; Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 36.3.
69 Quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 9.7.3–14.
70 Eusebius, *Church History* 9.5f.; 7.32.31; 8.13.1–7; 8.14.13–16; Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.58.2; Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 36.7; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 68.1–3.
71 Eusebius, *Church History* 9.9a; Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.59.1.
72 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.14.1.
73 Eusebius, *Church History* 8.14.16–17; Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.34. Eusebius does not mention her name; it is found in Rufinus' translation of the *Church History*.
74 The famous dream of Constantine preceding battle is found in Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 44.5; Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.28–31.
75 Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.41.1 (the letter's authenticity is, however, controversial).
76 Eusebius, *Church History* 10.5.15–17.
77 The 'Edict' must be reconstructed from Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 48.2–12; Eusebius, *Church History* 10.5.2–14 (the versions are not identical).
78 Eusebius, *Church History* 9.10.7–11.
79 Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 48; Eusebius, *Church History* 10.5.2–14.
80 Eusebius, *Church History* 10.8.7–10; Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.51–54; 2.1–2; *Anonymus Valesianus* 5.20.
81 Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 2.20.2–2.21; 2.24–41.

8 Later Repressions of Christians in the Roman Empire

1 *Martyrdoms of Maximian and Isaac* as well as *Of Bishop Marculus* (347).

9 Late Antique Persecutions outside the Roman Empire

1 *Passion of Sabas the Goth*.
2 Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4.9–13.
3 Sozomen, *Church History* 2.14.5.
4 *Martyrdom of Shushanik*, c. 466–474.

10 The Dispute about Repentance after Apostasy

1 Cf. already Tertullian, *To the Martyrs* 1.6; idem, *On Modesty* 22; idem, *To His Wife* 2.4.2.

2 Dionysius of Alexandria as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 6.44.4.
3 Canon 1 (the attribution of the list of canons to this council is, however, spurious).

Concluding Observations

1 William H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 537.
2 Cf. Jan N. Bremmer, 'Priestesses, Pogroms and Persecutions: Religious Violence in Antiquity in a Diachronic Perspective,' in *Religious Violence in the Ancient World: From Classical Athens to Late Antiquity*, ed. Jitse H. F. Dijkstra and Christian R. Raschle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 46–68, 61; referring to Alessandro Bausi and Alberto Camplani, 'The *History of the Episcopate of Alexandria (HEpA)*: *Editio minor* of the Fragments Preserved in the *Aksumite Collection* and in the *Codex Veronensis* LX (58),' *Adamantius* 22 (2016): 249–302, 275 (§ 23).
3 *Codex Theodosianus* 16.1.2.
4 Eusebius, *Church History* 10.3 (from *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, trans. G. A. Williamson; rev. and ed. Andrew Louth [London: Penguin, 1989]).

Further Reading

The most important sources for the persecution of Christians (see above pp. 3–4) are easily accessible in English translation in editions such as The Fathers of the Church (Catholic University of America Press) and Ancient Christian Writers (Newman Press); the nineteenth-century *Ante-Nicene Fathers* translation is also freely available online (ccel.org), but it is not very reliable. Translations of some martyrdom literature and writings of the early Apologists are also available in these series. For a list of editions of the original texts, see the *Clavis Clavium*, which can be accessed at https://clavis.brepols.net/clacla/Default.aspx.

In addition, the most important martyr acts, and other texts regarding martyrdom and persecutions, mostly containing the original texts accompanied by translations and sometimes extensive commentary, are found in the following recent editions (in English only):

Chenu, Bruno, Claude Prud'homme, France Qúeré, and Jean-Claude Thomas. *The Book of Christian Martyrs*. London: SCM Press, 1990.

Lapidge, Michael. *The Roman Martyrs: Introduction, Translations, and Commentary*. Oxford Early Christian Texts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Musurillo, Herbert. *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1972.

Rebillard, Éric. *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs*. Oxford Early Christian Texts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017 (PB 2019).

Literature on martyrdom and on the persecutions of Christians is vast. A selection of titles in English is included below. However, it should be noted that there is important literature also in other languages.

Barnes, Timothy D. *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*. 2nd ed. Tria Corda 5. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016.

Benko, Stephen. 'Pagan Criticism of Christianity during the First Two Centuries A.D.' In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 2nd series, vol. 23/2, ed. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase, 1055–118. 1980.

———. *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 (repr. 1986).

Bisbee, Gary A. *Pre-Decian Acts of Martyrs and Commentarii*. Harvard Dissertations in Religion 22. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988.

Bowersock, Glen W. *Martyrdom and Rome*. The Wiles Lectures Given at the Queen's University of Belfast. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Boyarin, Daniel. *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Castelli, Elizabeth A. *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*. Gender, Theory, and Religion 2004. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

Cobb, L. Stephanie. *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts*. A Joan Palevsky Book in Classical Literature. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.

Contreras, Carlos A. 'Christian Views of Paganism.' In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 2nd series, vol. 23/1, ed. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase, 974–1022. 1980.

de Ste. Croix, G. E. M. *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*. Edited by Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

DePalma Digeser, Elizabeth. *A Threat to Public Piety: Christians, Platonists, and the Great Persecution*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012.

Dijkstra, Jitse H. F., and Christian R. Raschle, eds. *Religious Violence in the Ancient World: From Classical Athens to Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Droge, Arthur J., and James D. Tabor. *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992.

Eastman, David L. *The Ancient Martyrdom Accounts of Peter and Paul: Translated with an Introduction and Notes*. Society of Biblical Literature/Writings from the Greco-Roman World 39. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015.

———. 'Martyrs, Cult of.' In *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*. Accessed 9 October 2020. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2589-7993_EECO_SIM_036429.

Fournier, Éric, and Wendy Mayer, eds. *Heirs of Roman Persecution: Studies on a Christian and Para-Christian Discourse in Late Antiquity*. London: Routledge, 2020.

Frend, William H. C. *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965. Numerous reprints.

Gaddis, Michael. *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*. The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 39. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Gemeinhardt, Peter, and Johan Leemans, eds. *Christian Martyrdom in Late Antiquity (300–450 AD): History and Discourse, Tradition and Religious Identity*. Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 116. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012.

Hartog, Paul. *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*. Oxford Apostolic Fathers. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Hidding, Aaltje. *The Era of the Martyrs: Remembering the Great Persecution in Late Antique Egypt*. Millennium Studies 87. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.

Jones, Christopher P. 'The Historicity of the Neronian Persecution: A Response to Brent Shaw.' *New Testament Studies* 63 (2017): 146–52.

Jones, Donald L. 'Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult.' In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 2nd series, vol. 23/2, ed. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase, 1023–54. 1980.

Kelhoffer, James A. *Persecution, Persuasion and Power: Readiness to Withstand Hardship as a Corroboration of Legitimacy in the New Testament*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 270. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010.

Keresztes, Paul. 'The Imperial Roman Government and the Christian Church.' In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 2nd series, vol. 23/1, ed. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase, 247–315, 375–86. 1979.

Lamberigts, Mathijs, and Peter Van Deun, eds. *Martyrium in Multidisciplinary Perspective: Memorial Louis Reekmans*. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 117. Leuven: Peeters, 1995.

Leemans, Johan. *Martyrdom and Persecution in Late Antique Christianity: Festschrift Boudewijn Dehandschutter*. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 241. Leuven: Peeters, 2010.

MacMullen, Ramsay. *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

Meredith, Anthony. 'Porphyry and Julian against the Christians.' In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 2nd series, vol. 23/2, ed. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase, 1119–49. 1980.

Middleton, Paul. *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*. London: T & T Clark, 2006.

Moss, Candida R. *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

———. 'Martyrs, Acts of the.' In *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*. Accessed 9 October 2020. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2589-7993_EECO_SIM_00002126.

———. *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*. New York: HarperOne, 2013.

———. *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Perkins, Judith. *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in Early Christianity*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Rizzi, Marco, ed. *Hadrian and the Christians*. Millennium-Studien 30. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010.

Salisbury, Joyce E. *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence*. London: Routledge, 2012.

Saxer, Victor, and Stefan Heid. 'Martyr—Martyrdom, III. Acts, Passions, Legends.' In *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino et al., 2:704–8. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2014.

Selinger, Reinhard. *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions of Decius and Valerian*. 2nd ed. Frankfurt: Lang, 2004.

Shaw, Brent D. 'The Myth of the Neronian Persecution.' *Journal of Roman Studies* 105 (2015): 73–100.

———. 'Response to Christopher Jones: The Historicity of the Neronian Persecution.' *New Testament Studies* 64 (2018): 231–42.

Shin, Min Seok. *The Great Persecution: A Historical Reexamination*. Studia Antiqua Australiensia 8. Turnhout: Brepols, 2017.

Simmons, Michael Bland. 'Persecution of Christians.' In *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*. Accessed 9 October 2020. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2589-7993_EECO_SIM_036460.

Twomey, Vincent, and Mark Humphries, eds. *The Great Persecution: The Proceedings of the Fifth Patristic Conference, Maynooth, 2003*. Irish Theological Quarterly Monograph 4. Dublin: Four Courts, 2009.

Van der Lans, Birgit, and Jan N. Bremmer. 'Tacitus and the Persecution of the Christians: An Invention of Tradition?' *Eirene* 53 (2017): 299–331.

Wilken, Robert Louis. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

Williams, Travis B. *Persecution in 1 Peter: Differentiating and Contextualizing Early Christian Suffering*. Supplements to Novum Testamentum 145. Leiden: Brill, 2012.

Key open-access websites on the archaeological evidence and the general historical background include the following (all databases accessed 10 October 2020):

https://www.theatrum.de/ and https://www.amphi-theatrum.de/ (fundamental for research on theaters and amphitheaters; in German only)

https://www.worldhistory.org/ (World History Encyclopedia)

http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk/ (Cults of Saints in Late Antiquity [CSLA] project, which includes a valuable database)

https://www.roman-emperors.org/ (*De Imperatoribus Romanis*: An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Rulers and Their Families)

https://www.rome101.com/ (collection of photos and articles on ancient Rome)

Timeline of the Persecution under Diocletian

Imperial reign (simplified)		Measures concerning the Christians (selection)	
284–305	Diocletian		
285	Maximian (Herculius) Caesar (= sub-emperor)		
286–305	Diocletian (Augustus, East), Maximian Herculius (Augustus, West)		
293	Introduction of tetrarchy ('reign of four'): Constantius (I) Chlorus Caesar for Gaul and Britain; Galerius Caesar for the East	31 March 302	Rescript against Manichaeans
		23 Feb 303	Destruction of the church of Nicomedia
		24 Feb 303	First anti-Christian edict: destruction of churches, burnings of Christian writings, prohibition of assemblies, reprisals against upper-class Christians and members of imperial household
		After Feb 303	Second edict: imprisonment of all clergy
			Third edict: release of all clergymen who had sacrificed
		Beginning of 304	Fourth edict: general obligation to sacrifice to the gods

Imperial reign (simplified)		Measures concerning the Christians (selection)	
305–306	Constantius I (Augustus, West) Severus Caesar for Italy and Africa		End of all reprisals in the West
305–311	Galerius (Augustus, East) Maximinus Daia Caesar for Egypt and Syria	Beginning of 306	Maximinus Daia reiterates the general order to sacrifice
25 July 306	Death of Constantius; his son Constantine Caesar for Britain, Gaul, and Spain (effectively usurper, 306–312)		
306–307	Severus (Augustus, West)		
Oct 306	Coup of Maxentius (control over Italy and Africa, spring 307–312)		Remission of persecutions under Maxentius
Sep 307	Assassination of Severus		
308–313	Licinius (Augustus, Territory unclear)	Summer 308	Remission of persecution in the East
		Summer/ autumn 309	Renewed intensification of pogroms under Maximinus
		30 April 311	Edict of Toleration by Galerius, Constantine, and Licinius
May 311	After Galerius' death, Licinius takes over the Balkans, and Maximinus adds Asia Minor	May 311	Proclamation of the Edict of Toleration in the territory of Maximinus

Imperial reign (simplified)		Measures concerning the Christians (selection)	
		Autumn 311	Resumption of persecutions by Maximinus
28 Oct 312	Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine's defeat of Maxentius		
312–324	Constantine (Augustus over the entire West)		West: amnesty for Christians and restitution of Christian property
		Dec 312	Maximinus decrees freedom of religion and protection of Christians against abuse
		Feb 313	Milan Agreement ('Edict of Milan') between Constantine and Licinius: toleration extended to the entire empire
30 Apr 313	Licinius defeats Maximinus Daia at Adrianopolis		
313–324	Licinius (Augustus over the entire East)	May 313	Full toleration in the territory of Maximinus (d. July 313)
		13 June 313	Licinius confirms toleration for the subjects of Maximinus
		After 319	Renewed anti-Christian measures under Licinius
18 Sep 324	Constantine's victory over Licinius at Chrysopolis		
324–337	Constantine sole ruler		Toleration and increasingly preferential treatment of Christianity

Index of Names