

# Producing and Contesting Martyrdom in Pre-Decian Roman North Africa

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## Introduction

In his defense of the Christian faith, the *Apology*, the Christian writer Tertullian of Carthage mocks that, while imperial officials slaughter Christians, when they spill their blood they merely swell the ranks of the faithful. “The blood of the martyrs is seed,” he retorts.<sup>1</sup> Yet the power that Tertullian gives the martyrs was not the obvious outcome of Roman violence against Christ-followers. Many people in the Roman world incurred corporeal violence at the hands of the Roman juridical system (imprisonment, torture, and in some cases, death), yet few subjected to these punishments were memorialized as martyrs. It was in the recording, retelling, and remembering of their deaths—in the attribution of cosmic and theological significance to them—that the martyrs were produced and given their dominant place in the Christian imagination.<sup>2</sup>

Tertullian (ca. 160–220 CE) was integral to this discursive effort. Along with others, such as Origen and Irenaeus, he constructed and theorized “martyrdom,” and then promoted it to his community.<sup>3</sup> Those who died for their religious allegiance (or who were willing to do so), these theorists held, were imitators of Christ’s passion.<sup>4</sup> They interpreted the martyrs’ deaths in sacrificial terms and drew on biblical images and language to do so.<sup>5</sup> Their visions of mar-

1. *Apol.* 50.13.

2. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 173; also Matthews, *Perfect Martyr*, 4.

3. I borrow terminology of theorizing from Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 33–68.

4. Early Christians had various understandings of what this imitation entailed, reflecting their differing christologies; see esp. Moss, *Other Christs*.

5. Notable here were influences of Jerusalem Temple imagery and representations of Jesus as the high priest in Hebrews and Revelation. See Young, “Martyrdom as Exaltation,” 71–72. For a rich discussion of sacrificial language in martyr acts, Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 50–67. Motifs of sacrifice figured heavily in some, but not all, early Christian theologies of martyrdom. Tertullian, e.g., does use sacrificial language, but it is considerably less evident in his rhetoric than that of Christians like Origen of Alexandria in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*.

tyrdom aimed to constitute a Christian culture organized “around the memory of past suffering.”<sup>6</sup> In ensuing generations their rhetoric was repeated and deployed in new contexts so that the ideals of self-sacrifice and death for one’s convictions have come in our own time to seem essential to Christian identity.<sup>7</sup> Yet it was not always the case.

In recent decades historians of antiquity have challenged romantic stories of a “persecuted church.”<sup>8</sup> They have pointed out that Roman attacks on early Christian communities were sporadic, local, and de-centralized in the second and third centuries;<sup>9</sup> even wider scale efforts, such as under Decian in 250 CE, were not targeted at Christians directly;<sup>10</sup> further, on the whole Roman persecutions, even the so-called “Great Persecution” of Diocletian and Valerian in the early fourth century, resulted in the death of a minority of Christians.<sup>11</sup> This paper complicates the history of early Christian martyrdom from a different vantage point. In it, I consider how some early Christian theorists of martyrdom in Roman North Africa participated in this ideological construction (yet disagreed about the symbolic role of the martyrs). I illustrate too that, while some Christians eagerly engaged in the cultural work of producing and remembering the martyrs, not all did. Some Christians held that suffering and death were to be avoided. They advocated compliance and compromise with Roman authorities. Others went so far as to challenge the theorists of martyrdom outright, claiming self-sacrificing death as an unintelligible response to imperial power and a theologically indefensible one. Where Tertullian argued that God commanded martyrdom to embolden the church, these Christians retorted that the God they served was no murderer.<sup>12</sup>

In Christian North Africa, the Roman province of *Africa Proconsularis* in the period before the persecution of Decian in 250 CE will serve as my test case. I limit my focus to this time frame for two reasons: First, scholars have shown that Decian’s persecution was considerably more centralized than the localized persecutions that came before it and set the stage for later ones (under Valerian

6. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 34.

7. See Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, who makes this point throughout her study (e.g., pp. 3, 173). She offers a compelling discussion of one such modern, evangelical redeployment of martyrdom in the memory of the killings at Columbine High School (pp. 172–96). More recently Moss has traced this complex history and offers a critique of a construction of Christian identity in terms of martyrdom and suffering; see Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, esp. 215–60.

8. See esp. Moss, *Myth of Persecution*.

9. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 35–39. For a highly readable historical summary, see Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 126–62. For treatment of North Africa, the focus of this paper, see Rebillard, *Christians*, 34–60; Burns and Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa*, 7–26, 38–45.

10. Rives, “The Decree of Decius,” 135–54.

11. See Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 38; also de Ste. Croix, “Aspects,” 75–115.

12. *Scorp.* 7.1.

in 257–260 and Diocletian in 303–305).<sup>13</sup> Second, and perhaps more importantly, we have a sizable and manageable number of contemporaneous early Christian writings from the second century and first half of the third century: the writings of Tertullian and two martyr acts, the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. These writings constituted and shaped martyrological discourse and imagery in North Africa<sup>14</sup> in ways that made an indelible impact on the development of Christian culture in late antiquity. They also laid the groundwork for the bitter conflicts in the lifetimes of Cyprian of Carthage (bishop 248–258) and Augustine of Hippo Rhegius (354–430)—a time when clerics vied with one another to circumscribe and harness the authority of the martyrs for their own political and theological ends.<sup>15</sup> For our interests in retelling the history of early Christianity, Tertullian and the pre-Decian martyr acts provide rich resources because they come from the same region and time period, and they tell us about Christians living under similar social and political conditions. Attending carefully to their rhetoric, we glimpse the cacophony of early Christian responses to suffering, pain, and death inflicted by the Roman state in the second and third centuries.

### Introduction to the Sources

Few historical characters in the Christian tradition evoke the romance of the ancient martyrs, popularized and made an enduring part of Christian history by the narratives recounting their deaths—the acts of the martyrs (*acta martyrum*). These stories were copied and transmitted long after they had died.<sup>16</sup> The *acta*

13. See Rives, “The Decree of Decius,” 135. For a summary of Roman persecution, see Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 127–60. Her analysis of the “Great Persecution” relies on the important work of the classicist de Ste. Croix (see e.g. n. 11).

14. The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* was exceedingly popular in antiquity. Translated into Greek and transmitted in various versions, it has a complex textual history. The influence of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* on the North African hagiographic tradition is extensive; see Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 130–32; also Potter, “Martyrdom as Spectacle,” 57. The *Passion of Perpetua* exerted formal literary influence on two martyr acts dated to the Valerian persecution: the *Acts of Marian and James* and *Acts of Monatus and Lucius*.

15. These conflicts have been deemed the Novatian and Donatist controversies. Regarding the former, see e.g. Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, esp. 9–18. For a brief consideration of the latter, see Burns and Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa*, 47–50, 606–10. Cyprian would feature in these debates in surprising ways, as he often tried to manage the power of martyr-confessors in his lifetime. After his own death in 258 (during Valerian’s persecution), he would become a heroic figure whose memory was claimed by both Catholics and Donatists; see Grig, *Making Martyrs*, 27–33.

16. Grig, *Making Martyrs*, 23–25. Martyrdom, however, is a theme that runs through much Christian literature in the second and third centuries, not simply the martyr acts; see Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 12–16. Karen King used the term of “preparation for martyrdom” to cast a wide net in terms of examining the construction of martyrdom discourse, see King, “Martyrdom,” 25–26.

continued to be written (and eagerly collected) into the fourth and fifth century; they were read on feast days at martyrs' shrines at a time when Christianity had become the religion of the empire.<sup>17</sup> The first accounts were composed in the second and early third centuries before the Decian persecution. Two of them, the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, come down to us from North Africa.<sup>18</sup>

Written in Latin, the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* contains a sparse account of the trial of a group of twelve Christians, men and women, from Scilli (an unknown location in North Africa) by a proconsul, Saturninus (a historical detail that allows us to date the events it records to 180).<sup>19</sup> The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, also written in Latin (though translated into Greek owing to its popularity), recounts the death and trial of a Roman matron, Vibia Perpetua, her slave Felicitas, and their male companions, Revocatus, Saturninus, Satorus, and Secundulus, on the birthday of the emperor Septimus Severus (202–204). It is a considerably longer account comprised of a pastiche of sources: Perpetua's prison-diary (scholars continue to debate whether this portion of the account was composed by the martyr herself, or was a literary invention),<sup>20</sup> visionary accounts of another martyr, Satorus, and a death scene recounting Perpetua's and her companions' deaths in the Carthaginian amphitheater, stitched together by an editor's introduction and conclusion.

But it was not only the *acta* that served in the production of martyrdom. In Roman North Africa a major figure in this effort was Tertullian. Thirty-one Latin treatises survive him, ranging from polemical treatises on the incarnation and resurrection to apologies, letters, homilies, and even a Sophistic oration. Despite his prolific literary output, he tells us little about himself except that he was married, likely a member of the laity,<sup>21</sup> and convinced of the efficacy of

17. On the cult of the martyrs in North Africa in particular, see Burns and Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa*, 519–50. For a discussion of the martyr cult in the Latin West (Italy and North Africa), see Grig, *Making Martyrs*.

18. On identifying and dating the pre-Decian martyr acts, see the succinct treatment by Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 91–94. For a longer treatment, see Barnes, "Pre-Decian 'Acts Martyrum'," 503–31. The discussion of determining which acts can be dated to the period before the Decian edict has focused on the historical reliability of these accounts.

19. Birley, "Persecutors and Martyrs," 37–39; Burns and Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa*, 3–4. While Scilli has been located in North Africa, we are unsure of its precise local. We know nothing more about the group of Christians than their names (though we get two lists in the account).

20. For bibliography of some differing views, see Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 132–33 nn. 37–38; Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 86 n. 74. Judith Perkins has argued that the diary is fictive, part of the text's rhetorical use of the maternal body; see Perkins, "The Rhetoric of the Maternal Body," 313–32. There are a number of incongruities in the account that cast doubt on Perpetua's authorship; see Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 130–32.

21. Timothy Barnes argues that Jerome erroneously labeled Tertullian a "priest," since Tertullian in fact never refers to himself as such and on two occasions indicates that he is laity (*Cast. 7.3; Mon. 12.2*); see Barnes, *Tertullian*, 3–12, 13–21.

prophecy and visions. He was a supporter of the charismatic movement that began in Asia Minor, the “New Prophecy” (or “Montanism”), something he may have shared with other Christians in North Africa, perhaps even those who composed the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*.<sup>22</sup> Tertullian was dogged in his assertion that the fleshly body with the soul would be resurrected. His writings reveal a man deeply educated in Latin rhetoric and perhaps also law, with a fiery tongue and a penchant for conflict with Christians and non-Christians alike.<sup>23</sup> In his writings Tertullian regularly takes uncompromising and absolute positions. We find the same tenacity in his exhortations to his Christian audience regarding martyrdom.

Scholars once attributed Tertullian’s fervor for martyrdom to the effect of the “New Prophecy” on his thought.<sup>24</sup> This argument enabled unflattering comparisons with seemingly more moderate views on martyrdom of figures such as Clement of Alexandria, as it shielded “proto-orthodoxy” from what was seen by scholars as Tertullian’s more extreme positions. There are a number of problems with appealing to the “New Prophecy” to explain Tertullian’s construction of martyrdom, a primary one being our scant evidence for this prophetic movement, which does not support the idea that it was universally pro-martyrdom.<sup>25</sup> More centrally, Tertullian’s ascetically-oriented vision of martyrdom fits neatly within themes central to his theological perspectives throughout his corpus: it does not, in other words, seem to be simply the product of outside influence. Rather, Tertullian’s writings reveal just how diverse early Christianity was in his lifetime. Putting his construction of martyrdom alongside that of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* in particular reveals that among the theorists of martyrdom we find diverse ideologies, theologies, and practices related to it, even as these writers share discursive and persuasive strategies to promote martyrdom to their communities.<sup>26</sup>

22. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 133–34; Barnes, *Tertullian*, 17. The epithet “Montanist” did not emerge in Christian discourse in fact until the fourth century, thus Tertullian never uses it; see Nasrallah, “*An Ecstasy of Folly*,” esp. 155–62, and for a discussion of Tertullian’s conception of the prophetic, 129–54.

23. For a longer introduction to Tertullian’s biography, see Dunn, *Tertullian*. For an assessment of Tertullian’s familiarity with and use of technical rhetoric, see Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric*.

24. E.g. Dunn, *Tertullian*, 44.

25. See Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 150–55. Moss cites the important work of William Tabbernee on Montanism, but rightly notes that he does not question the category of “voluntary martyrdom.” As she points out, such a category relies on modern notions of “agency” and “self-determination.” They also do not attend carefully enough to the polemics of early Christian authors. The construction of “voluntary martyrdom” as over-zealous, as opposed to true martyrdom, enabled writers like Clement to fashion an exclusive (elite, male) ideal of martyrdom; see Young, “Martyrdom,” 82. It also justified fleeing or the avoidance of persecution, an opinion taken by Clement and later by Cyprian; see Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 155–58.

26. See King, “Martyrdom,” 25–26.

### Producing Martyrdom

Tertullian and the North African martyr acts are partisan and persuasive literature. They do not offer an uninterested record of Roman persecution and Christian response. Rather they use various rhetorical strategies in order to instruct Christian audiences to read arrest, trial, imprisonment, and torture in particular ways, by inflecting these events with cosmic and theological significance. Moreover, they suggest that Christian identity ought to be organized around these episodes. They train their audiences to emulate the martyrs, to remember them, just as they also cajole their audience to imitate their Stoic suffering, preparing themselves for a similar fate—in this they sound notes from other early Christian texts promoting martyrdom.<sup>27</sup>

### Constructing Roman and Christian Difference

To achieve their rhetorical goals, both Tertullian and the martyr acts invert the logic of Roman judicial power. In this system corporeal punishment of various kinds was used to signal utter degradation and the loss of status.<sup>28</sup> For the theorists of martyrdom, conversely, the endurance of physical suffering leads to exaltation in heaven. In Tertullian's apologetic works, as in the two martyr acts, the actions of the Romans in attacking Christians are routinely presented as a mockery of justice. The Romans, Tertullian grumbles, use any excuse to attack Christians: "If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the weather will not change, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a plague—straightaway the cry is heard: 'Toss the Christians to the lions!'"<sup>29</sup> By indicating that the charges against the Christians are unspecified, arbitrary, or otherwise suspect, these early Christian theorists of martyrdom use the apparent erratic behavior of the Roman officials as evidence of "the lawlessness of the hostile world. . . ." <sup>30</sup> The *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* shows Romans holding cursory and unjust investigations. Christians, alternatively, appear as a unified body confident in their religious convictions despite the consequences.<sup>31</sup> In it, the Roman official Saturinus requires nothing more than the assertion of Christian identity to demand the death sentence of those whom he cursorily interrogates:

27. Considerable work has been done on the ways in which the martyr acts form Christian subjectivity around suffering and the memory of suffering, such as Perkins, *Suffering Self*; Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*. My treatment here is especially indebted to Castelli and her use of social memory theory.

28. See Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 41.

29. *Apol.* 40.2. *Si Tiberis ascendit in moenia, si Nilus non ascendit in rura, si caelum stetit, si terra movit, si fames, si lues, statim "Christianos ad leonem!"* (CCSL 1.153). Translation from Sider, ed., *Christian and Pagan*, 63.

30. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 43.

31. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 129.

Vesta said: "I am a Christian."

Secunda said: "I wish to be, what I am."

Saturninus the proconsul said to Speratus: "Do you persist in remaining a Christian?"

Speratus said: "I am a Christian." And with him they all agreed . . .

Saturninus the proconsul read his decisions from a tablet: "Whereas Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda, and the others having confessed that they have been living in accordance with the Christian rite, and whereas though give the opportunity to return to the usage of the Romans they have persevered in their obstinacy, they are hereby condemned to the sword."<sup>32</sup>

In the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, likewise, the governor Hilarianus requires little provocation to issue a sentence, as Perpetua reports in her "diary":

[Hilarinus the governor said:] "Offer the sacrifice for the health of the emperors."

"I will not," I answered. Hilarianus then said: "Are you a Christian?"

"I am." I replied. . . . Then Hilarinus sentenced on all of us and condemned us to the beasts. . . .<sup>33</sup>

For an ancient audience, the outcome of these scenes would perhaps be of little surprise. In the martyr acts the fateful words "I am a Christian" are the climatic utterance that leads to the protagonists' deaths. Yet the sentence meted out in the *Passion of the Perpetua and Felicitas* would likely solicit their attention. For readers are told at the narrative's beginning that Perpetua was of the decurial class,<sup>34</sup> from a family that made up the local council; she was a woman who should be spared death *ad bestias*. This was punishment reserved (along with others, such as crucifixion) for the lower classes, the *humilores*. Tracking down epigraphic data for this Hilarinus, J. B. Rives has argued that the account may accurately represent what was an unconventional and somewhat extreme pun-

32. *Act. Scil.* 9–10, 14.

*Vestia dixit: Christiana sum.*

*Secunda dixit: Quod sum, ipsud volo esee.*

*Saturninus proconsul Sperato dixit: Perseveras Christianus?*

*Speratus dixit: Christianus sum: et cum eo omnes consenserunt.*

*Saturninus proconsul decretum ex tabella recitavit: Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda, et ceteros ritu Christiano se vivere confessos, quoniam oblate sibi facultate ad Romanorum morem redeundi obstinanter perseveraverunt, gladio animadverti placet.*

Translation from Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 88–89.

33. *Pas. Perp.* 6.3–4, 6. *Fac sacrum pro salute imperatorum. et ego respondi: Non facio. Hilarinus: Christiana es? inquit. Et ego respondi: Christiana sum . . . tunc nos universos pronuntiat et damnat ad bestias.* Translation from Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 128.

34. *Pas. Perp.* 2.2.

ishment. Motivated by religious conservatism, the governor took advantage of the latitude permitted local officials in the decades of the second and early third centuries.<sup>35</sup> For our purposes it is important to note simply that framing this trial and punishment as the result of the actions of a single Roman official served the persuasive aim of exposing the Romans' inability to facilitate law and justice.

Just as the charges made against the Christians remain unspecified in the martyr acts, so too are the details about the religious observances (imperial holidays, civic festivals, and games) that the Christians have rejected, leading to their arrest. We find blanket claims that the accused refuse to partake in sacrifice or in the Roman "rite" (*ritus*). These two *acta* imply that its protagonists abstain entirely from participation in civic religion. In this the narratives echo Tertullian, who likewise insists that Christians are distinguished from non-Christians because they do not engage in the religious life of the city in any way, and most certainly do not sacrifice to the emperors.<sup>36</sup> This is a bold and far-reaching claim: for religion (of which sacrificial offerings of various types were a primary part) was a ubiquitous feature of ancient life. In making it, Tertullian and the martyr acts present the Roman North African civic landscape as rife with opportunities to test the tenacity of one's claim to Christian identity. To assert, as Tertullian and the martyr acts do, that this identity be defined in terms of abstention from civic religion severely complicates civic engagement for Christians (not surprisingly, Tertullian also restricts Christians from enjoying civic offices, festivities, and forms of entertainment, and prohibits them for all sorts of employment as well).<sup>37</sup> More critically, it constructs stark boundaries between Christian and Roman difference (which in people's lived experience were more malleable and not necessarily exclusive),<sup>38</sup> and then casts that difference in moral and theological terms.

In the rhetoric of the early Christian theorists of martyrdom (including those from North Africa that we have been tracing), it is the martyr's body upon which competing visions of reality—Christian versus Roman—are played out.<sup>39</sup>

35. Rives, "The Piety of a Persecutor," 1–25.

36. Rebillard, *Christians*, 18–19.

37. E.g. see his *On the Spectacles*, *On the Military Crown*, and *On the Pallium*.

38. See Castelli *Martyrdom and Memory*, 35. The Roman province of *Africa Proconsularis* boasted wealthy cites like Carthage, rich countryside, and diverse populations of Africans (Libyans), Phoenicians, Greeks, Judeans, and, of course, Romans. In fact, the names of the martyrs and their persecutors in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* betray a shared Punic heritage.

39. There has been considerable attention given to the representation of martyr's bodies. Some examples informing my discussion here include Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity," 269–312; Perkins, *Suffering Self*, esp. 104–23; Cooper, "The Voice of the Victim," 147–73; Tilley, "The Ascetic Body," 467–79.

Martyrs withstand torture with stoic determination, seeming little phased by it; they orchestrate their own deaths. They command authority precisely when, exposed to the lewd gaze of hungry crowds, they should be the most vulnerable. Their tortured bodies reveal cosmic and theological truths. A second-century martyr act from Gaul, for example, the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons*, reports that the slave girl Blandina endured punishment night and day, and in the end, hung on a stake, she appears as the vision of Christ himself on a glorious cross. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, uttering his final prayer Polycarp is surrounded by fire “like the sail of a vessel,” his body giving off the fragrance of golden bread; his side, when pierced, does not bleed, but miraculously releases a dove.<sup>40</sup>

Likewise in the final scenes of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, the heroine, Perpetua, and not her persecutors, control the meaning of her torture and death.<sup>41</sup> She refuses the garb of the priestess of Ceres (and priests of Saturn for her male companions), and the religious spectacle in which her persecutors attempt to script her. Her wishes are granted, as the narrator of the scene states: “injustice recognized justice.”<sup>42</sup> Perpetua and her slave girl Felicitas (both new mothers) are thrust naked into the arena, milk seeping from their swollen breasts—a scene that should, following Roman social codes in which public nudity signaled exclusion and lack of status (even social death), become in this narrative a means for Perpetua to shame her torturers. The crowd is horrified by the spectacle; her persecutors relent and give the pair modest tunics. So too Perpetua manages the precise second of her death. She prevails as others meet their death; a mad heifer tosses her about, but she pauses to tie up her hair and cover her body. It is she who emboldens her companions as they face their torments and she who ultimately takes the unsure hand of a gladiator to her own throat.<sup>43</sup>

### Differing Views about the Symbolic Role of the Martyrs

Yet even among those who promoted martyrdom in North Africa, we can locate competing views of the phenomenon.<sup>44</sup> Where the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* presents the martyrs as “brokers of spiritual power,” Tertullian (and perhaps others who sympathized with his ascetic vision of the church) interpreted them as models for the faithful. It is primarily in the dream scenes

40. *Mart. Pol.* 15.1 (LCL 25.332–33).

41. See the longer discussion of this scene by Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 137–39; Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 104–23.

42. *Pas. Perp.* 18.7 (Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 133).

43. *Pas. Perp.* 18–21.

44. This is a centerpiece of Moss’s argument in *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*; see also Grig, *Making Martyrs*.

recorded in the *Passion* that the martyrs' role as spiritual intermediaries is highlighted most clearly. A notable example comes from Perpetua's diary. She sees her deceased brother, Dinocrates, in torment. His face marked by the cancer that killed him, he struggles unsuccessfully to drink from a pool of water. Praying for his comfort, Perpetua receives a second vision of the boy healed of his wounds, with his thirst quenched he runs off to play happily.<sup>45</sup> The recurrence of water in these visions points not only to debates about the status of the martyrs, but also to concerns about the salvific status of the unbaptized dead and to a context in which women were practicing baptism (despite Tertullian's complaints) in early Christian communities.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* the intercessory power of the martyrs is given a positive valence. In another dream scene, for instance, Perpetua and her companion Saturus are carried to heaven, where they reconcile a bishop and priest, who then bow down before them.<sup>47</sup> Here it is the martyrs who are leaders of the community capable of mediating grace and salvation to it.<sup>48</sup> This image of the martyrs was not produced simply in the composition and retelling of their stories. It was actualized in other ritual practices in which early Christians engaged, especially visiting them in prison and providing food and sustenance.<sup>49</sup> In the patron-client system of the Roman world, as Andrew McGowan explains, the giving of food and hospitality were critical to the establishment of social networks and hierarchies. Feeding a martyr, combined with practices such as kissing the chains that bound him or her, were means of constituting and harnessing the martyr's privileged social position "as a figure straddling the threshold between the human and divine realms."<sup>50</sup> The image of the martyrs as spiritual intermediaries would prove central to the development of the cult of the martyrs in the fourth century and be the regnant view in the Latin West.<sup>51</sup>

When we look carefully at Tertullian's writings, though, we are reminded that in early Christian North Africa this was only one understanding of the martyr's symbolic power. Tertullian, of course, promoted the martyrs as exceptional.<sup>52</sup> He shared the perspective of the *Passion* that the martyrs, upon dying,

45. *Pas. Perp.* 7.1–8.4.

46. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 142. Moss considers the possible influence of Thecla traditions on this account, owing to her popularity in late antique North Africa.

47. *Pas. Perp.* 13.1–8.

48. *Pas. Perp.* 1.1.

49. See Rebillard, *Christians*, 16; McGowan, "Discipline and Diet," 455–76; cf. *Pas. Perp.* 3.7–9; 9.1–3; 16.4; 17.1–3; Tertullian, *Ux.* 2.4.2; *Mart.* 1.1; *Pud.* 22.1; *Ieiun.* 12.

50. McGowan, "Discipline and Diet," 466.

51. Grig, *Making Martyrs*, 26. This view also had important implications for shaping the penitential system.

52. For a thorough discussion of Tertullian's theology of martyrdom, see Bähnck, *Von der Notwendigkeit*.

would be carried immediately aloft by the company of the angels to the kingdom of heaven.<sup>53</sup> All other Christians, according to Tertullian, would await the reunion of soul and body in the final judgment.<sup>54</sup> Yet in his view, while on earth the martyrs had not accrued any spiritual benefit; this came only at the moment of their dying and extended to them alone. Their death exemplified Christ's suffering and provided an admirable model for the faithful to emulate, but it did not obtain salvific power that could be mediated to others.<sup>55</sup> The notion that a martyr might intercede in another's salvation challenged dramatically his vision of divine justice (one predicated on philosophical, particularly Stoic principles) in which God would judge each person individually for his or her deeds.<sup>56</sup> In *On Modesty*, Tertullian thus lambasts "fornicators" and "adulterers" who visit the prison only to plead their case before the imprisoned martyrs in the hope of obtaining pardon for their indiscretions. In Tertullian's vision of the church no such reconciliation was possible. The Christian body was called to be a pure, spotless bride.<sup>57</sup> In it there was no room for compromise or what appeared to him as moral flexibility. Fasting, sexual asceticism, and the avoidance of worldly luxuries were part of Christian discipline aimed at orienting each Christian toward the will of God. Martyrdom, on this account, was the outcome of authentic Christian living.

### Contesting Martyrdom

If we train our focus solely on authorial voices of the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, and Tertullian of Carthage, we might surmise that Christians in North Africa were universally engaged in the cultural production of martyrdom.<sup>58</sup> However, rather than reflecting communal consensus, their rhetoric aimed to shape it. Such persuasion was necessary, I argue here, because the meaning of a Christian's physical suffering and death at the hands of Roman authorities was under dispute among North African Christians in the second and third centuries (and it would continue to be in the following centuries as well). Tertullian's writings, in particular *On the Military Crown*, *On Flight in Persecution*, and *Against the Scorpion's Sting (Scorpiace)*, provide

53. *Res.* 43.4, 52.11; *An.* 55.4; cf. Bähnke, *Von der Notwendigkeit*, 198–200.

54. *An.* 45.1–46.13.

55. See esp. *Pud.* 22.3–4; cf. McGowan, "Discipline and Diet," 470.

56. Otherwise he sees a kind of injustice if "this very flesh should be torn by martyrdom, and another be crowned; or that this very flesh should wallow in uncleanness, and another receive damnation!" *Res. Mort.* 14.8 (Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise on the Resurrection*, 36). *Idque iudicium resurrectio expunget, haec erit tota causa, immo necessitas resurrectionis, congruentissima scilicet deo: destinatio iudicii.* On the influence of Stoicism on his thought, see Osborn, *Tertullian*, 66–75.

57. See *Fug.* 14.2; see Eric Osborn, *Tertullian*, 173–75.

58. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 143.

some of our best evidence for the contested nature of martyrdom in Christian North Africa. Reading against Tertullian's rhetoric, we can discern the voices of those Christians who drew different conclusions about how Christians should comport themselves in light of Roman judicial procedures and the threat of corporeal punishment—conclusions that they too defended with theological and scriptural rationales.

### **The Virtues of Compliance and Compromise**

Certainly in the period before the edict of Decius, Christians faced isolated and short-lived persecutions resulting in the arrest and deaths of a small number of people.<sup>59</sup> Yet in emphasizing the limited frequency and duration of Roman persecution we might overlook the fact that state-sponsored violence was an ever-present reality for all imperial subjects. Roman violence was on display in public executions; it was evident in the presence of Roman soldiers who policed the colonies and amassed for imperial celebrations;<sup>60</sup> it was broadcast through images of triumphant emperors and defeated subjects that appeared on coins and monuments that dotted civic landscapes of the empire. Thus, while a few Christians in North Africa may have been directly impacted by the violence of the Roman state, all lived under its constant threat. Our sources reveal that Christians had varying responses to these social and political circumstances and negotiated Roman authority differently as a result.<sup>61</sup>

Tertullian seized upon and collected evidence of Roman violence against Christians and attempted to organize his community around it. These incidents were opportunities to propagate his vision of a marginalized, besieged, and suffering earthly church poised for heavenly victory.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, his writings furnish important evidence that other Christians came to alternative conclusions about these violent episodes. Uninterested in emulating those who incurred torture and death, they wondered whether such outcomes could be avoided. In *On the Military Crown*, for example, Tertullian opens with the case of an accused Christian soldier who on the eve of an imperial birthday refused to wear a laurel crown gifted to him. Apparently the young man claimed in the words of the apostle Paul that Christ and not the emperor was his "head" and was thrown into prison to be executed as a result. Tertullian justifies the soldier's actions as a pious demonstration of faith, where other Christians saw his behavior as brash and foolish. The youth gave all who claimed the

59. Rebillard, *Christians*, 34–42.

60. A legion was stationed in Lambese (Algeria), and soldiers may have been present on festive occasions, such as imperial holidays, or used to keep public order; see Sider, *Christian and Pagan*, 40.

61. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 38.

62. Rebillard, *Christians*, 43.

self-designation “Christian,” they averred, a dangerous reputation; he simply should have accepted the crown. Some Christians asserting this position likely also defended the right of Christians to remain in the military—a position that Tertullian rejects near the end of this treatise.<sup>63</sup>

The complaint of Tertullian’s opponents interestingly recalls encounters between Perpetua and her father recorded in the diary sections of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. Perpetua recalls how on several occasions he pleaded with her to recant her confession of Christian identity so that she might live and care for her newborn son. Perpetua is unmoved by his displays of grief and ultimately shames him publically. Scholars have read Perpetua’s arguments with her beleaguered father as a conflict between Christian identity and Roman social values.<sup>64</sup> Yet the animosity exchanged between them sounds echoes of the conflicts between Tertullian and his Christian opponents in *On the Military Crown*, as well as *On Flight in Persecution* and *Scorpiace* (considered below) regarding the most appropriate way to negotiate Roman hostility. Might Perpetua’s exchange with her father function in the story as a refutation of Christians who wish to avoid conflict with Roman imperial power?<sup>65</sup> Who interpreted the actions of Christians like the soldier, refusing the crown, or Perpetua and her party, refusing to recant their confession of Christian identity and sacrifice, as obstinate and even dangerous to the community?

### Many Identities and Many Responses to Roman Power

Éric Rebillard has recently argued in his succinct and thought-provoking monograph *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 C.E.*, that for many individual North African Christians their religious allegiance “was only one of the multiple identities that mattered in their everyday life, and we should not assume that the degree of groupness associated with the Christian category was as high, stable, and consistent as Tertullian claims it should be.”<sup>66</sup> As a matter of course, Christians held multiple identities related to status, ethnicity, profession, familial, and social relationships, as well as religious affiliation. These informed the many ways that they participated in civic life: attending sacrifices, hanging laurel wreaths on their doors and lighting lamps, enjoying political offices, engaging in various kinds of professions, sponsoring or attending games, exchanging gifts and blessings with neighbors, attending naming ceremonies, and perhaps marking imperial cult holidays with

63. Whether this soldier was killed in Rome or North Africa is debated among scholars. See Dick, ed., *Christian and Pagan*, 117 n. 2.

64. See Perkins, *Suffering Self*.

65. Moss entertains this possibility, which I build on here; see Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 143–44.

66. Rebillard, *Christians*, 9.

sacrificial offerings of some kind.<sup>67</sup> They may have understood these as communal exercises holding little relevance for their affiliation with the Christian community. Rebillard's study alerts us to the fact that likely many Christians conceived of their Christian identity in less absolute and oppositional terms than the rhetoric of Tertullian (and the martyr acts) implies.

That ancient North African Christians routinely bracketed their Christian identity (or "de-activated" it to use the sociological language Rebillard employs) enabled a variety of responses to the threat of Roman attacks on their communities as well. In *On Flight in Persecution*, Tertullian (unhappily) reports that in the face of Roman violence Christians leave, looking for safer locations where threats are less ominous;<sup>68</sup> they bribe Roman officials in the hopes of avoiding arrest or disruptions to their meetings; they avoid going to meetings altogether, thinking that such collective gatherings might draw unneeded suspicion. They may have even recanted their Christian identity and offered a sacrifice if required to do so to avoid punishment. Tertullian considers such behavior to fall outside the acceptable boundaries of Christian identity. To sacrifice—no matter what the rationale—is an egregious display of idolatry.<sup>69</sup> One cannot deny Christian allegiance without also denying Christ himself, he rails in *Scorpiace*.<sup>70</sup>

Despite Tertullian's pleas for Christians to face threats directly, we know that in the decades of the Decian persecution most Christians complied with the edict to sacrifice to the gods (some complied fully by offering animal sacrifice and eating a portion, while others offered only an incense libation before an imperial portrait).<sup>71</sup> Evidence for Christian observance of the edict comes down to us in two sources: the copious letters and treatises of the bishop Cyprian

67. It is critical to bring us back to the ways that both Tertullian and the martyr acts attempt to flatten out such multiplicity, so that Christian identity becomes primary and exclusive and set in opposition to its Roman equivalent. Yet their rhetorical efforts to foreclose this multiplicity are not entirely successful: Tertullian's polemics recite alternative points of view in an attempt to discredit them. In the martyr acts, while Christian allegiance is stressed, the multiple identities that would have been relevant in the daily lives of its protagonists appear, even if they go unmarked or are put in service of other rhetorical interests. E.g., apart from being a Christian, Perpetua is also a well-born matron from a Roman decurial family, where Felicitas is a slave. In both the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* and the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, some of the martyrs and their torturers bare Latinized Punic names—a reminder that they share a common heritage as Roman colonial subjects. To name one example, some of the names of both the martyrs and their persecutors in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* bear the traces of a shared Latinized Punic heritage. See above.

68. They apparently cited scriptural rationale for this practice (Matt 10:23). See *Fug.* 6.1.

69. Tertullian is keen to make this point; see *Fug.* 4.1–2.

70. *Scorp.* 9.10 (translation Dunn, *Tertullian*, 124).

71. On the Decian persecution generally, Rives, "The Decree of Decius," 135–54. For discussion of Christian responses, see Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 213–19; Rebillard, *Christians*, 47–55.

and forty-four certificates of sacrifice (*libelli*) preserved in Roman Egypt, some of which belonged to Christians.<sup>72</sup> From Cyprian we learn that Christians employed other strategies to avoid punishment as well—buying forged *libelli*, and as some did in Tertullian’s day, bribing officials, or fleeing.<sup>73</sup> (This last option Cyprian availed himself of in fact).<sup>74</sup> These varied reactions to Decian’s edict caution us against being taken in by the rhetoric of Tertullian and the martyr acts. We should not assume that Christians in the second and third centuries necessarily interpreted strategies of compliance or compromise with Roman authority as apostasy that called into doubt their identities as Christians. They may not have necessarily understood the avoidance of sacrificial offerings as essential to their Christian affiliation either.<sup>75</sup>

### Challenges to Martyrdom

At issue for early Christians in debates about how to comport themselves in light of Roman violence and persecution was whether the physical suffering and pain they endured ultimately had theological and cosmic value. Tertullian’s *Scorpiace* is directed precisely at Christians who raised questions about this issue and were openly critical of those like Tertullian who insisted upon the salvific power of Christian suffering.<sup>76</sup> These Christians are menacing scorpions, he complains: they prick the conscience of the devout with their doubts. Their questions act like venom that infects “simple and unpolished” Christians.<sup>77</sup> In defense of his position, Tertullian insists that God is the author of punishment, that martyrdom is God’s will. He draws a clear link between martyrdom and idolatry.<sup>78</sup> Martyrdom only exists so that Christians might avoid this gravest of sins. Christian suffering participates in a battle between good and evil, and it assures salvation and reward in heaven. “God has proposed martyrdoms for us,” he elaborates, “through which we might be pitted against the adversary. . . . For [God] wished to produce a human person, plucked from the devil’s throat through faith, who now tramples on [the devil] through virtue, in order

72. On the *libelli*, see the discussion by Rives, “The Decree of Decius,” 135–36 n. 4; Rebillard, *Christians*, 50–51.

73. Other evidence from writings contemporary with Tertullian point to this fact as well, notably that of Clement of Alexandria and a treatise from Nag Hammadi, *Testimony of Truth*. On the former, see Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 155–57; on the latter, King, “Martyrdom,” 40.

74. And his action was no small controversy as he attempted in the aftermath of the edict to shore up his position as bishop. In an interesting turn of events, Cyprian would eventually be martyred in the Valerian persecution; see Grig, *Making Martyrs*, 27–33.

75. Rebillard, *Christians*, 60.

76. On the necessity of suffering, see *Scorp.* 15.4.

77. *Scorp.* 1.1–5.

78. *Scorp.* 5.3.

that [the person] might not only have escaped the enemy but completely vanquished it as well."<sup>79</sup>

To his critics, however, such logic promoted the image of a cruel God.<sup>80</sup> If we read against Tertullian's rhetoric, we soon see how fundamental his opponent's criticisms were and how potentially damaging to the edifice of martyrdom that Tertullian was building. Why, they queried, would a good God use physical punishment and death to test the faithful? Is this assertion not the same as saying that God is a murderer? How can the martyrs' deaths be efficacious sacrifices? Did not Christ's death accomplish salvation for his faithful? What more could be added to it? Regarding this part of their argument, they amassed scriptural proofs, such as this line from Hebrews: "Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; *this he did once and for all* when he offered himself" (Heb 7:27).<sup>81</sup> Further, they inquired, would God hand power to earthly authorities (who are by the nature partial and unjust) to inflict punishment on the faithful?<sup>82</sup>

Tertullian identifies these insidious opponents as heretics, going so far as to claim that these venomous arguments are spewed from the mouths of Valentinians and Marcionites. It may be easy to get swept along by his caricature of his opponents. In fact, it plays nicely into the polemics of other theorists of martyrdom, like Irenaeus of Lyons and Clement of Alexandria, who insisted likewise that "heretics" like the Valentinians eagerly denounced martyrdom because they held spurious theologies. Often modern histories of early Christianity have recited their rhetoric, positing that "gnostics," who rejected the resurrection of the flesh, necessarily opposed martyrdom.<sup>83</sup> Recent work by scholars, notably Karen King, has helpfully revealed that early Christian martyrdom cannot be readily organized around "orthodox" and "heretical" camps. Analyzing three treatises preserved in the Coptic Tchacos Codex (*Gospel of Judas*, *First Apocalypse of James*, and the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, the latter two also appear in the Nag Hammadi corpus), King shows varying perspectives on martyrdom in them. While *Gospel of Judas* polemicizes against Christians who interpret martyrdom positively in terms of sacrifice,<sup>84</sup> the other treatises par-

79. *Scorp.* 6.1 (Dunn, *Tertullian*, 116–17) . . . *deus nobis martyria proposuisset, per quae cum adversario experiremur, ut, a quo libenter homo elisus est, eum iam constanter elidat, hic quoque liberalitas magis quam acerbitas, dei praeest. Evulsum enim hominem de diabolica gula per fidem iam et per virtutem inculcatorem eius voluit efficere, ne solummodo evasisset, verum etiam evicisset inimicum* (CCSL 2.1079).

80. *Scorp.* 7.5.

81. See Dunn, *Tertullian*, 108 n. 14. The opponents used the slogan "he died once for us" found throughout Hebrews and Romans.

82. *Scorp.* 15.6.

83. See Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 157.

84. King, "Martyrdom," 34.

ticipate in the discourse of martyrdom, sharing discursive strategies we traced in Tertullian and the martyr acts (though deployed in different ways), even as they hold theological perspectives that Tertullian would identify as heretical.<sup>85</sup>

King's insights are important in that they complicate a simple binary of orthodoxy and heresy and allow us to see just how diverse early Christian martyrological discourse could be. Important for my purposes, they raise rather serious doubts about Tertullian's claim that those who challenge his view of martyrdom must belong to the ranks of Valentinians and Marcionites. I suggest instead that in *Scorpiace* he links the alternative views of his fellow Christians in Carthage to parodies of theological positions that they would associate with the figures of Valentinus and Marcion—the goal being, of course, to make these counter-arguments sound illogical and heterodox.<sup>86</sup> Only those who hold fast to the notion that there exists a lower god, a malicious demiurge, could truly conclude that martyrdom is vicious and not the will of God, Tertullian surmises.<sup>87</sup> And to insist that earthly tortures are human and not suitable mechanisms for divine judgment must be the product of a strange Valentinian cosmology. Transferring trials and judgments to the heavens, Valentinians claim that the soul undergoes combat as it ascends through the cosmic realms. What a mockery these “heretics” make of the example of the apostles like Paul. Indeed, Tertullian jests, were they to meet him on the way to Rome they would have called him back from martyrdom only for fear that his death would give Christians a bad reputation.<sup>88</sup>

Behind Tertullian's dismissive tone, however, lay the very real concerns of ancient Christians in North Africa. They did care how others in their community saw them. They participated in Roman provincial life, and many of them did not see their Christian affiliation to be incommensurate with their civic and familial duties. They drew various conclusions about how best to engage with Roman officials based on their experiences and allowed for contingencies and circumstances to determine their interactions with them. They also espoused varying theological positions regarding the character of divine will and justice and salvation, as well as Jesus' death and what it meant for their fate. Some

85. King, “Martyrdom,” 40.

86. Rebillard entertains this possibility as well; see Rebillard, *Christians*, 45. Recently David Wilhite has argued that there were no Marcionites in North Africa in Tertullian's lifetime and that in fact Tertullian may not have been familiar with Marcion's writings. To my knowledge he has not yet published these findings. Whether there is compelling evidence for followers of Valentinian philosophy in North Africa continues to be debated, however. Yet it is perhaps worth noting that Tertullian's treatise *Against the Valentinians* shows considerable borrowing from Irenaeus' *Against the Heresies*. In other words, Tertullian's polemics against Marcionites and Valentinians are constructions, perhaps used to shame his audience into compliance with his theological positions.

87. *Scorp.* 4.2.

88. *Scorp.* 15.7.

Christians did not share with Tertullian and the martyr acts the idea that suffering and self-sacrifice were necessary to their religious identity. Faced with the possibility of arrest and torture, they felt justified to flee and not stand their ground as Tertullian insisted they should. If in Tertullian's estimation the "true church" was a marginalized and pure one, comprised of a select few ("It is not asked who is ready to follow the wide road, but the narrow path," he states in *On Flight in Persecution*<sup>89</sup>), then it appears his vision of martyrdom provided him a most useful tool for winnowing out a great many Christians in Roman North Africa.

### Concluding Thoughts

The power of martyrdom to define Christian life and practice was not ultimately solidified in Tertullian's lifetime, or even in the decades of persecution that followed, but rather in the fourth and fifth centuries. This was the period of the "Peace of the Church," the age of the emperor Constantine. It might surprise us to learn that martyrs' stories of salvific suffering resonated so profoundly with Christians like Eusebius of Caesarea (fl. 314–340), who saw the end of persecution and the establishment of imperial Christianity.<sup>90</sup> The martyrs' trials and gruesome deaths were a critical part of his triumphalist narrative: a church, once afflicted and besieged, is now by the will of God regnant. Martyrs soon became central figures in the making of imperial Christian culture. Memories of their suffering and resultant exaltation were inscribed in the shrines and artistic monuments that began to dominate the Roman world. Their feast days filled the liturgical calendar. Their tales of torture and death were collected and embellished, and new stories were composed (often pious fictions). These acts and passions were read aloud with performances that would rival the bloody contests of amphitheater.

And their stories seemed to demand and indeed to sanction revenge. The North African apologist Lactantius in his *On the Death of the Persecutors* giddily details the horrors and physical cruelties God visited on Roman authorities and emperors who saw to the slaughter of Christians—a scene Tertullian decades earlier tells his audience they will view only in the final conflagration that awaits their enemies on judgment day.<sup>91</sup> In late antiquity Christians appropriated the discourse of martyrdom and redeployed it to foreground tales of past pain and suffering. Some Christians used it to justify as divinely willed their own malicious attacks against putative enemies such as "apostates," "heretics,"

89. *Fug.* 13.2.

90. Grig, *Making Martyrs*, 25; Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 215–46.

91. *Spec.* 30.1–7. Tertullian targets those who are guilty of idolatry, including leaders, actors, poets, athletes, and the like.

“pagans,” and “Jews.” Forced conversion and exile, destruction of property, and physical violence were the results of their efforts. Tales recounting the brutality that Romans visited on the bodies of Christian martyrs, it has been argued, incited their fervor with its imaginative, sadistic details.<sup>92</sup>

By late antiquity there seems to have been little room left for dissenting Christian voices to question the vision of a persecuted, now triumphant, church of the martyrs. This brief discussion of late antiquity raises, at least for me, ethical questions about what Christians do and have done with these narratives of persecution and suffering—narratives that over the centuries have been inscribed deeply into the Christian story. For even as they have pointed a way forward in situations of terrible physical pain and suffering, violence and opposition remain deeply embedded in them.<sup>93</sup>

92. Drake, “Lambs into Lions,” 3–36; see also Frankfurter, “Martyrology,” 215–45; Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 240–46.

93. Other historians of early Christianity have made this point as well. My comments are especially indebted to Castelli’s thoughtful epilogue in her *Martyrdom and Memory*, 197–203.

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