

*Christianity Seminar: Rethinking Martyrdom  
in Early Christian Identity*

CARLY DANIEL-HUGHES	<i>Preface</i>	5
CARLY DANIEL-HUGHES	<i>Producing and Contesting Martyrdom in Pre-Decian Roman North Africa</i>	7
SUSAN M. (ELLI) ELLIOTT	<i>Gladiators and Martyrs Icons in the Arena</i>	29
HAL TAUSSIG	<i>What Do Fiction, Mass Crucifixions and Killer Seals Add Up To? Summarizing Breakthroughs in Martyrdom Scholarship Since 1990</i>	61
MAIA KOTROSITS	<i>Sovereignty in Ruins The Death of Ignatius and Ecologies of Destruction</i>	79

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# Preface

## Rethinking Martyrdom

In the spring of 2015, the Christianity Seminar turned its attention to martyrdom. The Seminar's goal is to reimagine the history of the first two centuries of Christ groups in order to do justice to the complexity and diversity of our sources. We aim to complicate the notion of a transcendent (already present, even if faintly) Christian orthodoxy in these earliest centuries. It is critical, for instance, that the architects of orthodoxy, like Eusebius of Caesarea, had much at stake in representing the church as a community of martyrs whose suffering vindicated, even facilitated, its triumph under Constantine. Scholars have long noted that Roman persecution against Christians was sporadic and local, yet they have persisted in the notion that martyrdom, at least discursively if not referentially, was central to the composition of Christian identity. The Seminar asked whether martyrdom was in fact a pervasive concern of Christ groups in earlier centuries.

To this end, the Seminar hosted Judith Perkins, author of the critical study *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*. In her work and conversations with the Seminar, Perkins highlighted how Christians conceived of themselves as "sufferers," a social-positioning that was not uniquely Christian, but had resonance for many writers in the Roman Empire. Taking Perkins's insights as our starting point, our discussions addressed whether and to what degree martyrdom could be identified as a Christian phenomenon. Our keynote speaker, Jennifer Wright Knust, pointed us to Judean sources such as 4 Maccabees and enriched our consideration of the noble death traditions that informed, but also extended beyond, early Christian writings. Conversation circulated around whether we should engage more closely with a local-historical approach, resisting the urge to read sources from Asia Minor with those from North Africa. Would doing so attend better to the particular local and colonial histories under which our sources were produced? We pondered how best to articulate the nature of violence, particularly Roman violence, in the Empire more generally. Does a focus on martyrdom participate in an "exceptionalist" history of Christianity? Can we resist such a history, yet also take seriously the pervasiveness of Roman violence and its effects on people and communities? We parsed carefully the emergence of the confessional

statement *Christianus sum* (“I am a Christian”), which populates the martyr acts. Here we made an important insight that the term “Christian” first appears in our sources in juridical scenes. What might this indicate about the significance of the term in the Roman Empire for those who claimed it (and the moments in which they did so)?

Papers included here explore a variety of issues around these larger questions. Hal Taussig traces shifts and important theoretical insights for the Seminar found in scholarship on martyrdom and early Christianity in recent decades. Susan Elliott and I examine how Christian sources constructed martyrs as potent and powerful cultural symbols, whereas Maia Kostrosits asks whether reading for martyrdom overly determines writings like Ignatius’ letters, obscuring other concerns motivating them. Together, papers animated a lively conversation yielding new and innovative questions, which ultimately moved us beyond “martyrdom” to consider how Christ groups variously responded to Roman violence.

—Carly Daniel-Hughes

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

Carly Daniel-Hughes

## 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 Bähnk, *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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# Gladiators and Martyrs

## Icons in the Arena

Susan M. (Elli) Elliott

How did prisoners who were publicly executed in horrifying and degrading ways become icons of Christian heroism as “The Martyrs” celebrated in song and story? While Christian culture now takes the martyrs’ heroic status for granted, their transformation from objects of derision to icons of Christian heroism remains a paradox. For its spring meeting in 2015, the Christianity Seminar of the Westar Institute framed a related paradox: “Why did martyrdom stories explode in popularity even as Roman violence against early Christians subsided?”<sup>1</sup> To understand how the martyrs became a popular image for Christians in the late Roman empire, we need to understand how another despised figure in the Roman arena became an emblem of Roman heroism: the gladiator. The association of Christian martyrs with the popular image of the gladiator, both as failed heroes as proposed primarily in the work of Carlin A. Barton, is a starting point for addressing these questions.<sup>2</sup> The martyrs became icons for Christian identity in a Christian vision of the empire much as the gladiators functioned as icons for the Roman identity in the Roman empire.

The first part of this article will offer an overview of the Roman arena as both a projection of Roman imperial power and a setting for negotiation of social relations. The second section will focus on the gladiator as a central feature of the spectacle program for which the Roman arenas were constructed and as an icon of Roman identity. The final section will discuss how the presentation of Christian martyrs casts them as gladiators and some of the implications of seeing them in this role.

1. This project has taken a different direction since the topic first occurred to me while reading Perkins, *The Suffering Self*.

2. Barton, “The Scandal of the Arena”; *Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*; “Savage Miracles”; *Roman Honor*; “Honor and Sacredness”; “The Emotional Economy”; McKay with Barton, *Art of Manliness Podcast #74: Ancient Roman Honor with Dr. Carlin Barton* (28 June 2014). This project follows one thread in Barton’s work. I have laid aside discussion of sacrifice and sacredness in particular, as well as other aspects.

### The Roman Arena, Spectacles, and Roman Imperial Power<sup>3</sup>

The gladiators and Christian martyrs made their respective public stands in the Roman arena, one of the most important visible projections of Roman imperial power and Roman identity (*Romanitas*).<sup>4</sup> To understand how accounts of Christian martyrs associated them with gladiators, we need to understand the importance of the arena and its development in Roman imperial culture.

#### The Arena: Projecting Imperial Power

In Roman cities the amphitheater was “the most visible single building.”<sup>5</sup> The Flavian amphitheater (the Colosseum) at Rome was the Roman empire’s largest building, seating 50,000 to 80,000 people.<sup>6</sup> Amphitheaters for the spectacles that included gladiatorial games were part of the imperial building program over the course of the imperial era, at Rome and in the provinces.<sup>7</sup> Across the empire arenas were constructed and theaters were adapted with sophisticated infrastructure to stage a distinctly Roman form of spectacle, a spectacle of death.<sup>8</sup>

The transition from the Republic to the Empire saw an expansive imperial building program and an explosive growth of spectacles. Sponsorship and management increasingly came under the control of the emperor. The gladiatorial games, or *munera* (offerings), had been sponsored by private individuals or families in the period of the Republic and the civil wars. Originally they took place in cemeteries as funerary offerings to display the honor and importance of a deceased family member, usually a father who was a public figure.<sup>9</sup> These were privately sponsored civic events. During the era of the Republic and the civil wars, the *munera* moved to the forum and began to increase in size: from

3. For surveys of some of the recent scholarship on the Roman arena, see Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 8–10; Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 128–32. Castelli’s treatment of the arena focuses entirely on its role in projecting imperial power, reading it only “in terms of the logic of imperial interests.” The reading here will be less monolithic.

4. Gunderson (“The Ideology of the Arena,” 120) mentions that some scholars characterize the arena as a disturbing institution at the fringe of Roman culture. He does not, however, cite works that take this approach except for characterizing Carlin Barton’s approach as viewing the arena as an “exceptional institution.” Most treatments assume the centrality of the arena, including Barton’s. Many recent studies use Foucauldian language and analysis of performance and projection of power, as will I without discussing Foucault.

5. Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 3; Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 53.

6. So claims the recent PBS documentary, at least. Glassman, *Colosseum*. Futrell (*The Roman Games*, 62, 239 n. 19) clarifies that the seating capacity was the largest in the Roman world, although it was not the largest performance space.

7. On resistance to the construction of permanent buildings for the spectacles during the Republican era, see Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 56–57.

8. Coleman, “Fatal Charades,” 49, 51–54.

9. See e.g. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 13.

three pairs of gladiators in the first recorded presentation, to a presentation of 320 pairs in 85 BCE by Julius Caesar to honor his father.<sup>10</sup> They came to be used to promote the political ambitions of the *editor* sponsoring the event and were often held in temporary structures in the forum at the political heart of Rome.<sup>11</sup>

In the transition to the Principate, the emperor took over sponsorship of the gladiatorial presentations at Rome, and the size of the spectacle saw an explosive increase, with Augustus claiming in 14 CE to have sponsored eight presentations where 10,000 men fought (RG 22.1) and Trajan in 107 CE sponsoring 123 days of gladiatorial presentations, again with 10,000 gladiators.<sup>12</sup> In the provinces, a priest of the imperial cult usually sponsored the event. Not only did the size of the events increase, but the reach of the spectacles spread with the building of arenas and production of spectacles at locations across the empire as part of the Romanization of the provinces. This helped transfer the loyalty of local nobility to Rome.<sup>13</sup>

The spectacles in the arena most obviously projected Roman military power with a program that included wild beasts brought back from military conquests at the frontiers of the empire, elephants taken from opposing forces in Carthage and the east, mock sea battles (*naumachiae*), the display and execution of "barbarian" military opponents, and the skills for individual military combat displayed by gladiators. Yet there were more dimensions to the projection of power than raw military might.

The arena also projected the stratification of social relationships within the empire. Seating arrangements and the dress code enforced in the amphitheaters beginning with the reforms of Augustus also projected power relationships within the arena.<sup>14</sup> The crowd was not seated as an amorphous mob but in

10. Edmondson, "Dynamic Arenas," 69–70; Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 48. See Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 53–57, on the forum as the venue.

11. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 48.

12. Edmondson, "Dynamic Arenas," 70–71.

13. Gunderson, "The Ideology," 146–48; Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 8–11. The spectacles and gladiatorial games (*munera*) were not the only entertainments that gathered large crowds. The theater and sporting events (*ludi*) were also part of the entertainment and religious calendar. Here I will focus on the arena and the spectacles that included the gladiatorial games, however, because the arena with its spectacles played a central role in defining the Roman empire and because accounts of the martyrs strongly associate them with this venue.

14. See e.g. the *Lex Julia theatralis* described in Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, Augustus, 44. For discussions of the seating arrangements, see Gunderson, 123–24, citing Rawson, "Discrimina Ordinum." The *Lex Julia theatralis* specified seating in the theaters, and there is some ambiguity about its precise application for the temporary wooden seating at the gladiatorial presentations in the Augustan era, although Augustus did institute segregation of the audience by gender at this time. The Flavian amphitheater (the Colosseum) inaugurated by Titus in 80 CE instituted social segregation in stone. See Edmondson, "Public Spectacles," 11–18. Costume details are also included in Edmondson, "Dynamic Arenas," 84–95. See also Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 80–83.

orderly rows according to status. When the population assembled in the amphitheater, the entire ranking system was physically visible.

The spectacles established that those who took their seats anywhere in the stands, however, even in the worst seats, were part of the Roman community, and the spectacles were part of integrating that community into the imperial program. The audience itself was thus part of the spectacle in which spectators (with clear over-representation of the nobility) were able to see themselves and each other arrayed in their respective places and the clothing of their rank, producing what Erik Gunderson terms the "spectacle of the audience" that becomes "an ideological map of the social structure of the Roman state."<sup>15</sup>

The emperor himself took a central position in the audience, and his presence and actions in the arena were part of the entire performance of imperial social relations. Suetonius, for example, characterizes each of the emperors by citing his performance of his role in the arena, and the various descriptions highlight the importance of the arena and the spectacles in the negotiation of power relations at the heart of the empire.<sup>16</sup> The codification of seating arrangements and dress in the transition from the Republic to the Principate simultaneously gave visual prominence to the nobility and undermined their power as the emperor's presence in the arena gave him more direct access to the common citizenry (*plebs*).<sup>17</sup> As the *editor* (sponsor) of the gladiatorial competitions, the emperor also gave the signal of his decision to spare or to kill the defeated gladiator, often in response to the crowd. In this action, the emperor also displayed his role as *pater patriae* and his power of life and death (*vitae necisque potestas*) as the *paterfamilias* of the family empire,<sup>18</sup> with a microcosm of the entire empire displayed in rank as a Roman family, from *paterfamilias* to the slaves.

The amphitheaters projected Roman imperial power not only by their imposing architecture, both external and internal, but also in the program of spectacles for which they were built. Thomas Wiedemann points out how the usual pattern displayed essential elements of Roman power and defined the Roman identity in which the crowd participated. The morning slaughter of beasts, especially animals brought back from Rome's military conquests at the frontiers, displayed Roman civilization's power over wild nature and dangerous animals. The midday executions of criminals and captives assured the crowd of the security of a just order by visibly removing threats to Roman order: the criminals

15. Gunderson, "The Ideology," 119, 125. On the over-representation of the nobility, see 123. Also Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 53–54.

16. See Gunderson, "The Ideology," 126–33.

17. Gunderson, "The Ideology," 132.

18. See Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 53.



and barbarians who defied Rome's laws and rule. Roman laws and Roman rule were by definition "just" in Roman eyes because they were Roman. The afternoon gladiatorial games displayed a means of redemption from the massive exhibition of death in the two earlier spectacles.<sup>19</sup> The program of the arena was to "educate Romans about the contents of their empire," in Erik Gunderson's words, and drew a boundary between what was Roman and therefore civilized and what was un-Roman and un-civilized.<sup>20</sup> The spectacle program provided a repeated re-enactment of Roman victory in arenas across the empire.

The spectacles were not the simple competitive sporting events of either the Greco-Roman or modern eras. We may be able to visualize the social stratification in the seating arrangements based on our contemporary experience of football stadiums, baseball fields, or rodeo arenas with the elite in their sky boxes, the respectable middle income families in the covered sections, and the "bums" in the cheap seats exposed to the elements in the baseball bleachers or the "Oh, Shit!" section at a local rodeo.<sup>21</sup> While the social stratification in the stands has some similarities, the relationship between the audience and the participants in the spectacles on the sands of the Roman arena was quite different. While the spectacles revealed the social stratification of the empire, they also produced a common familial bond among the strata in the audience through the degradation of those dying on the sand, outside of the community. The whole stratified crowd internalized Roman victory by watching the defeat of threats to Roman order.

The arena was also a location for the projection of sacral power as well. The modern division of "religious" and "political," the separation of church and state we assume in the United States, did not apply in the Greco-Roman era. In the Roman empire especially, all forms of performance of state power were "religious." Whether the human deaths in the events were explicitly understood as "sacrifice" is a matter of debate,<sup>22</sup> but all of games and theatrical events were part of a religious calendar honoring the deities. The association of the games and the imperial cult was also strong, and the priest of the imperial cult was often the *editor* (sponsor) for the spectacle program and would thus be positioned as the local expression of the imperial *paterfamilias* at the games.<sup>23</sup>

19. Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 46–47; Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 8–10.

20. Gunderson, "The Ideology," 133. See also Edmondson, "Dynamic Arenas," 82–83.

21. This section is unique to the rodeo arena at Red Lodge, Montana, but other arenas are similarly stratified.

22. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, chap. 3. Coleman ("Fatal Charades," 69–70) also discusses how dressing individuals to be executed in luxurious clothing in "fatal charades" corresponds to elements of sacrificial scapegoat rituals.

23. See e.g. Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 44–45.

### The Audience in the Arena: Negotiating and Constructing Imperial Power<sup>24</sup>

We tend to equate “Roman imperial power” with the power of the emperor, but imperial power also included the crowd in the arena. At Rome, where the emperor was expected to be present for spectacles in the arena, and in the provinces, where Roman officials and Romanized provincial leaders acted on his behalf, the arena was a location for a sometimes tricky negotiation between the power of the crowd and the power of the emperor. The power on display was not only the power of the emperor but also the power of the Roman (and Romanized) people, and these powers were not always in concord. Yet the arena projected the imperial power that included both, and it created social cohesion in a location where Romans participated in imperial power.

We need to picture the arena as a location where the push and pull of political interests were part of the spectacle. The crowd was not present as a body of passive observers sitting back to be entertained.<sup>25</sup> As the influence of the political institutions of the Republic waned, the arena events and other spectacles like theatrical events and chariot races became political arenas where the crowd was physically and vocally present as part of the power dynamics. The spectacle became the arena for politics<sup>26</sup> and “the shaping of Roman social relations.”<sup>27</sup> Competition was taking place in the stands as well as on the sand, sometimes including riots.<sup>28</sup> The arena was not a static projection of Roman imperial power but a dynamic location for the performance and continual negotiation of power relations, a place where the emperor also promoted his agenda.<sup>29</sup>

One of the ways that the crowd projected its power was in unified chanting or acclamation. Formulaic acclamations had long been used in cults and formed part of the script in ritual settings across the Greco-Roman era. Wherever crowds gathered, however, non-formulaic acclamations, could be spread to manifest public opinion or manipulate it for political purposes.<sup>30</sup> Chants could be started to promote a pro-imperial message or celebrate a victory, but they could also be used on occasion to oppose imperial policy. For example, when

24. For a general description of the activities taking place in the audience, see Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 104–13.

25. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 8–9.

26. Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 119, citing Dupont, *L’acteur-roi*, 30: “la mutation est accomplie, Rome est passé d’une poitique spectacle au spectacle comme lieu de la politique.” Dupont follows Nicolet, *Le métier de citoyen romain*.

27. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 72, 111. See also Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 24–29, 36–42.

28. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 63.

29. Edmondson (“Dynamic Arenas”) discusses this process at Rome from the Augustan era to Trajan.

30. Potter, “Performance,” 132–41.

Germanicus recovered from an illness in 19 CE, the crowd took up a chant, “*salva Roma, salva patria, salvus est Germanicus*” (“Rome is safe! The fatherland is safe! Germanicus is safe!”)<sup>31</sup> The crowd’s acclamations could also express protest, as the Roman *plebs* did to express weariness with long wars waged during the reign of Severus.<sup>32</sup> At trials, the crowd’s acclamations could advocate a sentence (“X to the lions!”) or sometimes mercy (*eleison/miserere*).<sup>33</sup> Some of the unified chanting was spread by claques, “rent-a-voice” groups hired to applaud and chant favorable slogans for a fee, and private associations (*collegia*) would provide such vocal support for their patrons.<sup>34</sup>

If we imagine the crowd of 50,000 to 80,000 spectators in the Flavian amphitheater or thousands in provincial amphitheaters, then we need to hear not only the deafening general roar as the crowd cheered but also the rhythmic chanting of slogans. The chants both expressed and formed the will of the crowd into a unified voice or into competing sections of unified voices coming from different sectors of the stands. This sound, even when contentious, was the Romans vocalizing their own united imperial power. They were not just observing the spectacle of imperial power; they were participating in it and creating it.

The spectacles themselves were also a means of social cohesion, a bonding experience in the spectacle of death.<sup>35</sup> Such spectacles unified the crowd at each event and promoted social cohesion across the empire as crowds participated in similar spectacles held in similar structures.<sup>36</sup> The spectacles and the arenas that housed them not only projected imperial power but also offered a means for imperial subjects across the empire to participate in Rome’s victory. The spectacles also projected the power of the crowd. Emperors and provincial leaders produced the spectacles in order to please the crowds and thus maintain their political power, and these events projected the power of the crowds to demand them.<sup>37</sup> This projection of power all centered on the spectacles of blood-drenched and painful death that became emblematic of *Romanitas*.

To understand how witnessing these gory entertainments unified the crowd in the arena, it will be helpful first to know what they saw in the spectacles. Then we can more clearly see the importance of the audience in witnessing the deaths of the performers, particularly the gladiators. We will also see the role

31. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas”; Potter, “Performance,” 138.

32. Potter, “Performance” 140, citing Dio 75.4.4.

33. Potter, “Performance”; Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 140–41.

34. Potter, “Performance,” 142–43.

35. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 84.

36. For an extended treatment that emphasizes the incorporation of the provinces, see Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*.

37. See Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 11–21, on the importance of sponsoring games for anyone with political ambitions and the costs involved. In the imperial period this became an expectation of the emperor and provincial officials. See e.g. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 8–9.

of performers, especially the gladiators, as more than passive recipients of the imperial power displayed in the arena.

### **The Arena Program: Bleeding and Dying for Imperial Power**

The program for spectacles at the arena followed a standard format (*munus legitimum*) established by Augustus.<sup>38</sup> There were variations and special additions for particular events, of course, and the program could also be extended over several days or even months as well.

A sponsor and producer, known as an *editor*,<sup>39</sup> oversaw preparations and publicity for event. Preparations included negotiations with *lanista*, a manager of a gladiatorial school, as well as arrangements for all elements of the performance and the amenities for the audience, from shade to door-prizes. Advertisements would be posted as graffiti, and a program was distributed that included names of gladiators as well as other elements of the show. The *editor* also provided a banquet for the performances the night before the event.<sup>40</sup> The event itself opened with a *pompa*, a parade that performed the social ordering for the event, prominently featuring the *editor*.<sup>41</sup> In the imperial period at Rome, the *editor* was the emperor, and the *pompa* thus projected his power.

### **Morning: Venationes, Slaughter of the Beasts**

The morning entertainments were the *venationes*, presentations of wild animals collected from Rome's military campaigns at the boundaries of the empire. The entertainments could include animals pitted against each other, as well as human *venatores* fighting the animals.<sup>42</sup> This event popularized the hunt that was the sport of eastern kings.<sup>43</sup> This "grandiose display of exotic animals" emerges with the extension of the empire.<sup>44</sup>

### **Midday: Ludi Meridiani, Executions**

Animals not slaughtered in the morning *venationes* could also be used in midday events (*meridiani*), where executions of condemned criminals and prisoners of war, people considered disposable,<sup>45</sup> were staged in creative ways for

38. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 84.

39. Coleman ("Fatal Charades," 50–51) uses the term *munerarius* for this role. Other sources refer to the individual as the *editor*.

40. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 84–86.

41. For a description of the *pompa* based on a relief from Pompeii, see Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 87–88.

42. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 89.

43. Edmondson, "Dynamic Arenas," 83.

44. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 7.

45. On the supply of "performers" considered dispensable to provide entertainment by their deaths in the arena, see Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 54.

the crowd's entertainment. In David Potter's words, the forms of execution were "plainly calculated to debase the victim as completely as possible."<sup>46</sup> This humiliation formed part of the assurance of a just order of law already mentioned by "distancing the onlooker from the criminal and reducing the possibility of a sympathetic attitude towards him on the part of the spectators" and uniting the spectators in a common feeling of "moral superiority as they ridiculed the miscreant," in K. M. Coleman's description.<sup>47</sup> Members of the elite classes (*honestiores*) who were convicted of capital offenses were not usually subjected to this publicly humiliating form of execution but executed swiftly (e.g., by beheading) at a more secluded location. The "performers" at the midday execution entertainments were defined as disposable "others."<sup>48</sup>

The event began with *bestiarii* ("animal-handlers") or soldiers leading the condemned into the arena.<sup>49</sup> Evidence from reliefs indicates that they could be yoked in twos or threes or tied to stakes or chariots. They usually had very little clothing, men naked or wearing a loin cloth, women in a light tunic or skirt and brassiere or sometimes naked. They would be presented to the audience and "bound to stakes or placed in stocks on a raised platform in the middle of the arena."<sup>50</sup> Then they would receive the specific method of execution that had been designated for them at their trial.

Many were condemned to the beasts, perhaps with the crowd's chant of "*ad bestias*" at their trials. The beasts, including lions, leopards, and bears, were goaded by the *bestiarii* to "bite, trample, gore, or . . . to have intercourse with . . . the victim."<sup>51</sup> Reliefs and mosaics depict such scenes, including the fear on the faces of the condemned.<sup>52</sup>

The condemned could also be sentenced to fight one another to the death without protection, with the last one standing killed by some other means.<sup>53</sup> Imaginative sets could be devised to create a fate deemed fitting for the condemned individual's offense. Strabo, for example, describes an execution

46. Potter, "Martyrdom," 66. Potter also offers the convenient summary description followed here. Coleman ("Fatal Charades," 44–49) discusses this humiliation in the context of the aims of the Roman penal system.

47. Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 47.

48. Gunderson, "The Ideology," 133–34.

49. Potter, "Martyrdom," 66, 44–73.

50. Potter, "Martyrdom," 66.

51. Potter, "Martyrdom," 66. Potter indicates that the actual death of and disposal of the victim may have taken place outside of the arena, but his primary evidence is *Perpetua*.

52. Potter, "Martyrdom," 66–67.

53. See Seneca, *Letters* 7, in Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 91. Seneca was compelled to commit suicide under Nero in 65 CE as an accused participant in an assassination attempt, so his critical description of the lunch-hour execution entertainments precedes the construction of the Flavian amphitheater.

scene during a gladiatorial fight program in the Roman forum during the late Republic. Selurus, "son of Etna," the captured leader of an army in the area around Mt. Etna, was placed on top of a structure depicting the mountain, and when the structure was collapsed, he fell into the cages of wild animals below.<sup>54</sup> Others were forced to dance in luxurious clothing that would randomly explode, the *tunica molesta*.<sup>55</sup>

Some executions were live portrayals of mythic scenes, what Coleman has termed "fatal charades"<sup>56</sup> and Barton calls "snuff plays."<sup>57</sup> Lucillus describes the immolation of a condemned man named Meniscus in a scene depicting Heracles being burned alive in Zeus's garden.<sup>58</sup> Martial's poems for the inauguration of the Flavian amphitheater contain several more descriptions. An "Orpheus," for example, wandered as a minstrel among the stage props of moving cliffs and woods representing the grove of the Hesperides, presumably charming less harmful animals with his music until he is torn apart by an "ungrateful bear" in place of the Thracian women.<sup>59</sup> In another re-enactment, a "Pasiphae" was "coupled" with the "bull of Dictæ."<sup>60</sup> Suetonius also relates an incident (before the construction of the Flavian amphitheater) in which an "Icarus" in "flight" crashed into Nero's box and splattered the emperor with blood.<sup>61</sup>

At this point, if we listen as well as see, we will hear the screams of the victims as well as the roar of the crowd. Our reaction may not be the same as that of the crowd in the arena, however. These spectacles of death were popular, and the crowds in the Roman era reportedly enjoyed them and demanded them. As Coleman points out, enjoyment of such spectacles is evident in the fact that the spectacles lasted for four centuries, as well as in abundant visual representations of the spectacles in household art and in literary descriptions of the crowds' pleasure in these macabre entertainments.<sup>62</sup> She lists some of the psychological factors in their appeal. In watching the executions, members of the audience could identify themselves with those who implemented justice, concurring in the justice of the fate of the condemned and sharing in the power of condemnation, sometimes exercising their will by unison chanting. The simple fascination of horrific images is another factor. The element of chance produced an antidote to boredom essential to entertainment, with unpredictable wild

54. Strabo 6.2.6. See Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 91; Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 53.

55. Plutarch, *Moral Essays* 554b, in Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 92. See also Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 60, for additional citations.

56. Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 44.

57. Barton, "Savage Miracles," 41.

58. *Anth. Pal.* 11.184, discussed in Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 60.

59. Martial, *Lib. Spect.* 21, discussed in Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 62–63.

60. Martial, *Lib. Spect.* 7, discussed in Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 64.

61. Suetonius, *Nero* 12.2, discussed in Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 68.

62. Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 57–58.

beasts and suspenseful gladiatorial combats. Another factor was "morbid desire to witness the actual moment of death."<sup>63</sup>

Coleman describes the midday executions as providing the horror needed for an effective deterrent for the enforcement of Roman order, yet she also acknowledges that "horror and aversion" were not the dominant emotions of the crowd: "so effective was the gulf created between the spectacle and the spectators that the dominant reaction among the audience was pleasure rather than revulsion."<sup>64</sup>

Before Christian martyrs are ever reported to have entered the arena, gladiators managed to traverse that great gulf marked by the podium wall and create a human connection with the audience during the afternoon portion of the program.

### **Afternoon: *Munera*, Gladiatorial Games**

Like the executions, the gladiatorial combat reserved as the afternoon entertainment was apparently designed to debase its participants. Yet the gladiators themselves appear to have taken up the performance of their ill fate as a means to achieve honor in a performance of *Romanitas*.

In the afternoon entertainments, gladiators fought in pairs, matched by armaments and skill level, according to rules of combat.<sup>65</sup> They normally fought to a conclusion, not a tie. If the loser was not killed or mortally wounded in the combat, when he (or she) was disarmed or immobilized, the loser "lowered any remaining weapons and raised one finger in submission."<sup>66</sup> This was the dramatic and decisive moment the crowd craved. Waiting in a pause as the *editor* decided the loser's fate, the crowd would chant its own decision. To spare his life to fight another day, they would chant "*Missum!*" or wave cloths. To indicate their desire for the final blow that would cut the loser's throat, they would chant "*Iugula!*" or raise down-turned thumbs.<sup>67</sup> The *editor* would then give the final signal to please the crowd.

The performance of the losing gladiator in this final decisive moment became an opportunity to demonstrate Roman *virtus* and to die in front of a Roman audience in a way that reclaimed the gladiator's honor and status as a subject with whom the audience would want to identify rather than a disposable object for their entertainment. This decisive moment, with the victorious gladiator holding the blade over the defeated one's neck awaiting the signal of the *editor* as the crowd chanted its decision, becomes a focal point in defining Roman culture.

63. Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 58–59.

64. Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 49.

65. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 99–101, 121.

66. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 101.

67. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 101.

This moment, and the figure of the defeated gladiator at the center, are worth more focused attention.

### Gladiators: From “Disposables” to Icons of Roman *Virtus*

The gladiators held an ambivalent position in the arena. On the one hand they were forced into mortal combat by their status among the “other” and uncivilized non-Romans like the beasts and criminals of the first two entertainments of the day. On the other, they performed the essential *virtus* that defined Roman identity.<sup>68</sup> This Roman identity was part of what may be more generally defined as a military culture, and there were strong associations between gladiatorial schools and the military.<sup>69</sup>

#### Gladiators as Slaves and Captives (Involuntary)

Prisoners of war provided a large supply of gladiators, allowing large numbers to be “used up” in lavish spectacles. Dio Cassius (60.30) reports, for example, that the general Aulus Plautius “took pride” in using up many British captives in gladiatorial combats to celebrate victory over Britannia in 43 CE.<sup>70</sup> In 70 CE, Titus also used thousands from the capture of Jerusalem in spectacles along his return route to Rome.<sup>71</sup> Rome’s military victories produced a continuing supply of gladiators for the spectacles, and consuming them in large numbers was part of making an impressive display. As fighters in military forces opposing Rome, many of these captives already possessed skills for combat that were part of the training in the gladiatorial schools (*ludi*).

Condemned criminals were another source. While many were sentenced to be executed in the midday spectacles, some received a lesser penalty and were sentenced to the gladiatorial schools. Gladiators who fought well enough to survive might be granted their freedom.<sup>72</sup>

Whatever their origin, the gladiators’ legal status was that of slaves, and they were considered *infames*, categorized in the occupations of shame with actors, prostitutes, pimps, and the *lanistae* (overseers of the gladiatorial schools).<sup>73</sup> As

68. See e.g. Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 136–37. While *virtus* is associated with “manliness,” we should note that women also competed as gladiators in the arena. This is a topic that merits more extended discussion in a continuing examination of the questions raised in this article. See Garraffoni and Lorena, “O feminino adentra a arena”; Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 143–44.

69. Janković, “Violent Ethnicities,” 52–53.

70. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 121–22.

71. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 122. She includes passages from Josephus, *J.W.* 6.418, 7.37–40.

72. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 122–23, citing *Collatio Mosaicarum et Romanarum legume* 11.7 on Hadrian’s rescripts on the punishment of cattle rustlers.

73. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 130–31.



such, they shared aspects of the identity of those executed during the midday entertainments as “disposable” others. Their use as objects forced to kill or be killed as part of the afternoon entertainment made them part of the spectacles’ projection of Roman military might and the rule of Roman law. They were despised, on the one hand, and referring to one’s political enemies as “gladiators” was considered an insult.<sup>74</sup>

Yet they became something more.

### Gladiators as Icons of *Virtus* and Nobles as Gladiators (Voluntary)

As early as the end of the era of the Republic, half of the gladiators were volunteers, according to one informed estimate.<sup>75</sup> Even if this is an overestimate, evidence of free persons, nobles, and even emperors participating in the arena as gladiators is plentiful.<sup>76</sup> Some apparently entered the arena for a special performance without pay to demonstrate their courage and fighting ability, while others became gladiators as a career choice, fighting for pay.<sup>77</sup> While some apparently volunteered due to impoverishment, others appear to have become gladiators for reasons associated with the changing identity of the gladiator.

Those who volunteered to be gladiators bound themselves in servitude to a gladiatorial manager, a *lanista*,<sup>78</sup> by swearing an oath, the *sacramentum gladiatorum*, by which they promised to be “burned, bound, beaten, and slain by the sword.”<sup>79</sup> Members of the elite, senators and equestrians included, were known to volunteer themselves as gladiators. This was considered a shaming of the traditional elite, and during the early Principate the senate expressed concern about it for the *dignitas* of their social order.<sup>80</sup>

Given the many negative associations with the position of the gladiator, the question Barton poses is apt: “What was it that drew free men to discard community, status, dignity and power to fight in the arena, in the space allotted to the ruined and condemned?”<sup>81</sup> Barton’s answer to this question lies in her ongoing studies of the emotional life of the ancient Romans.

74. See e.g. Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 136, citing Cicero, *Phil.* 6.5.13.

75. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 14, cites Ville, *La Gladiature en Occident*, 255.

76. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 132–35; Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 50–51, 55; Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 136–42.

77. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 107–9.

78. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 107.

79. “*uri, vinciri, verberari, ferroque, necari patior*” (Petronius, *Satyricon* 117; Seneca, *Ep.* 71.23); in Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 14; “Savage Miracles,” 52, 66 nn. 66–67. See also Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 132–33, including a translation of Seneca, *Ep.* 37.

80. Edmondson (*Dynamic Arenas*, 108) refers to two instances in 11 and 19 CE. He also cites this as an example of actions in the arena to shape the social order.

81. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 26. Elsewhere: “What . . . motivated men and women of the free and privileged classes to identify with and even assume the role of the gladiator both publicly and privately?” Barton, “Savage Miracles,” 1.

A core aspect of the emotional motivation for becoming a gladiator was the opportunity to make the involuntary voluntary. This started with the oath, as Barton says: "The gladiator, by his oath, transforms what had originally been an involuntary act to a voluntary one, and so, at the very moment that he becomes a slave condemned to death, he becomes a free agent and a man with honor to uphold."<sup>82</sup> In the same manner, the gladiators sought to gain ultimate freedom and honor by performing their death upon defeat in the arena as a voluntary action, offering their neck to the blade of the victor and waiting for the *editor's* decision at the behest of the crowd.<sup>83</sup> The defeated gladiator's performance in this decisive moment could persuade the crowd to chant to save him and the *editor* to comply, thus making a good performance of *virtus* a more immediate survival strategy as well.<sup>84</sup>

In the transition from the Republic to the Principate, when the elite classes were losing out as power was being centralized in the emperor, some sought a gladiatorial "solution" for regaining lost honor. As Barton states this, "The importance of the social and psychological role of the gladiator among the free and privileged classes in Rome developed apace with the notion that with the failure of the aristocratic Republic, *dignitas*, social worth, had become a word whose only content was humiliation."<sup>85</sup> Rome was in a transition from the warrior culture of the Republican era, when there was something closer to a fair competition between equals, to the triumph of the culture of the rule of the "rogue male" who has become a father figure (the emperor)—a fundamental re-ordering of competition as unequal.<sup>86</sup> Fighting an equal opponent as a gladiator in the arena allowed aristocrats to seek the glory that was being lost as they were becoming a new form of underling in the restructuring of the social order.<sup>87</sup>

The gladiators themselves appear to have used their position in the arena to create this path for redemption of lost honor by performing what the Roman audience wanted to believe about their identity as Romans. This could have

82. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 15. She says this in the context of a discussion of a satirical tale of two shipwrecked freedmen enslaving themselves to the shady character of Eumolpus; see Petronius, *Satyricon* 117.

83. In this performance the gladiators conform to the Romans' expectation of sacrificial animal victims that they appear to be cooperating in their being offered on the altar. See Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 23.

84. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 61. Another line of inquiry should be acknowledged here. Similar behavior has been studied in animal fights, and particularly in wolves. The signals of deference to the alpha animal are part of preserving the social cohesiveness of the pack.

85. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 27. Barton examines this phenomenon at greater length in her most recent book, *Roman Honor*.

86. Barton, *Roman Honor*.

87. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 28.

benefits for them as individuals. Some were successful enough to have left a record in stone in funerary and honorific inscriptions.<sup>88</sup> Individual gladiators were also celebrities, and their fame was seen not only in graffiti but also in mosaic portraits and other visual artworks, poetry, and inscriptions.<sup>89</sup> Their performance of manly *virtus* and their libertine image also gave the gladiators sex appeal, as graffiti about two popular gladiators in Pompeii indicate: “*suspirium puellarum*” and “*puparum dominus*” (“the sigh of the maidens” and “the master of girls.”)<sup>90</sup> A luxuriously dressed woman’s body found in the gladiators’ barracks in the ashes of Pompeii, where some of the seventeen gladiators were found bound in stocks, also suggests their appeal to women.<sup>91</sup>

In a more general way, the path they forged to claim themselves as subjects and restore their own honor also became the path for others, and in the process they became icons of Roman *virtus*.<sup>92</sup> To illustrate this Roman identity and *virtus*, Barton uses the figure of Mucius Scaevola, a popular hero of the Roman Republic, who had achieved “status as a martyr as a testament of Roman *fides*.”<sup>93</sup> As the story goes, Mucius had entered into the enemy camp by stealth and attempted to assassinate King Porsena during his siege of Rome in 508 BCE in the Etruscan wars. He killed the wrong man, however, and was caught. The words Livy puts in his mouth as he is brought before Porsena’s tribunal frame have subsequent actions as defining of Roman identity:

“I am a Roman citizen,” he cried; “men call me Gaius Mucius. I am your enemy, and as an enemy I would have slain you; I can die as resolutely as I could kill: both to do and to endure valiantly is the Roman way.”<sup>94</sup>

He then demonstrates “the Roman way” by thrusting his right hand into the fire prepared to burn him, and holding his hand there to let it burn up, saying: “Look, that you may see how cheap [the Romans] hold their bodies whose eyes are fixed upon renown (*gloriam*)” (2.12.13).<sup>95</sup> Mucius’ action became emblematic of Roman identity and honor.<sup>96</sup> This is just one illustration.

88. Carter and Edmondson, “Spectacle in Rome.”

89. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 135–38.

90. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 47–48.

91. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 81. For some suggestive lines of inquiry on sexual dynamics and implications for women in the development of the image of the gladiator as a “cipher for the noble Roman male,” see also Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 142–46.

92. Edwards (*Death in Ancient Rome*, 68–75) also discusses the gladiator’s noble image, mostly in philosophical literature.

93. Barton, “Savage Miracles,” 43. Barton uses this story as a focal point in her other studies as well.

94. Livy, *History of Rome* 2.12.8–10: “*Romanus sum*,” inquit, “*civis*; C. Mucium vocant. hostis hostem occidere volui, nec ad mortem minus animi est quam fuit ad caedem: et facere et pati fortia Romanum est.”

95. “*en tibi*,” inquit, “*ut sentias quam vile corpus sit iis qui magnam gloriam vident*.”

96. See e.g. Livy, *History of Rome* 2.12–13.

Gladiators, who were originally “disposables” forced into the arena to fight for the entertainment of the onlookers, redefined themselves as subjects rather than objects in performing their life and death struggle in the Roman way (illustrated in the stories of Scaevola) by disposing of themselves in a voluntary action. While this took place in performances designed by their Roman masters, for which they were methodically trained in the masters’ schools, we must also recognize their agency in redeeming their own honor on Roman terms. The image of the gladiator was being transformed over the course of centuries as the spectacles emerged as a central focus in Roman culture. Yet an incident during the Republican era demonstrates the agency of the disposable captives in this process.

Diodorus Siculus (36.10) relates an incident that shows a group of prisoners taking initiative in reclaiming their honor by action considered to model Roman *virtus*. In 100 BCE Manius Aquillius defeated a slave rebellion (the second Sicilian slave war) and had planned to execute the captives who had surrendered by having them battle beasts in the arena. Instead, they chose their own deaths in a more honorable display: “they brought their lives to a most glorious end; for they avoided combat with the beasts and cut one another down at the public altars . . . the final survivor died heroically by his own hand.”<sup>97</sup> Rather than waiting for an ignominious death *ad bestias* or committing a secluded suicide in their place of captivity, they chose to demonstrate their voluntary embrace of death by fighting one another as gladiators in front of an audience, thereby resisting humiliation.

The audience is essential. The Roman eye fixed on *gloriam*, as Livy’s Scaevola puts it, requires an audience to grant the glory, and the gladiators sought their *gloriam* by putting the power of affirmation into the hands of the audience in the arena.<sup>98</sup> The image of the gladiator is created in a performative intersection in the arena—the gladiator performing his death to redeem his honor in the eyes of a crowd who identifies with him and desires the performance he offers.

What happens to the audience watching this display? Watching the gladiatorial games was considered part of military training, and for those not destined for battle, it was a form of participation in the Roman military ethos, an inspiration to live with Roman *virtus*. In praising the emperor Trajan’s gladiatorial exhibition, for example, Pliny the Younger says he “produced ‘nothing spineless or flabby, nothing that would soften or break the manly spirit [*animos virorum*] of the audience, but a spectacle which inspired the audience to noble wounds and to despise death, since even in the bodies of slaves and criminals the love of praise and desire for victory could be seen.’”<sup>99</sup> In observing the gladiatorial

97. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 121.

98. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 34.

99. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 21. She cites Pliny the Younger, *Pan.* 33.1.

display, then, members of the audience would identify with the gladiators and experience their *virtus* vicariously.

We might expect that the audience would identify with the victor in this display, yet this was not simply “sadistic voyeurism,” as Edwards points out in a discussion of the crowd’s pleasure.<sup>100</sup> Philosophers encouraged a focus on the defeated as a learning exercise for facing death. While their encouragement may have been addressed primarily to elites, gladiatorial combat, “like so many other spectator sports, enabled its observers to rehearse for themselves the role of the victor *and* the role of the defeated opponent.”<sup>101</sup>

When we consider the audience identifying with the gladiators and longing for this vicarious experience of honor courageously snatched from humiliation, a sense of their own empowerment in witnessing a victim dying *invictus* (“unconquered”), we can understand their contempt for the gladiator who showed an unwillingness to die. They felt his shame. A display of weakness would disgust the audience and would be rewarded with chants for his death.<sup>102</sup> A display of courage could lead to chants to spare his life. This vicarious identification with the defeated as well as the victor created the gladiator as an icon.

As the image of the gladiator began to be an emblem of Roman *virtus* as well as one of degradation, the gladiator also began to be used as a compelling metaphor.<sup>103</sup> Seneca (*On Tranquility* 11.1–6), for example, uses the gladiator as a metaphor for the wise man, who acknowledges that his body is the property of the master/deity and knows that he “must surrender life and limb to his divine master without murmur or hesitation.”<sup>104</sup> The gladiator metaphor is also important in other Stoic philosophers’ accounts of death.<sup>105</sup>

We need to see the gladiators, then, as engaged in a performance of death in which they moved themselves from being “othered,” uncivilized objects outside of Roman “civilization,” to being subjects emblematic of *Romanitas* and Roman *virtus* itself, from expendable outsiders to central icons of Roman identity and even Roman citizenship. In the process, they and the crowds for whom they performed were using the arena to shape a workable subjective identity for themselves within an imperial social hierarchy that on some level made all of them humiliated objects. From a status of what Orlando Patterson has aptly termed “social death,”<sup>106</sup> the gladiator, especially the defeated one, provided a Roman audience a momentary glimpse of a live human being, defined in the terms of Roman cultural currency, by fusing defiance and acquiescence. The

100. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 66–67.

101. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 67.

102. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 22–24, 35.

103. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 17.

104. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 18–19.

105. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 144–60.

106. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

crowd vicariously experienced that same moment of freedom in embracing this image of dying *invictus* and thus elevated the gladiator as an icon for their Roman identity. In a revision of Thomas Weidemann's description, "Instead of seeing a gladiatorial combat as a public display of killing, it might be useful to see it as a demonstration of the power to overcome death," we might add *social* as well as physical death.

At the same time, we must recognize that the spectacle of gladiatorial combat and the iconic image of the gladiator played a role in the stability of the empire by making its humiliations emotionally manageable. We must also remember that, in the decisive moment, the gladiators fix their gaze on the *editor* as the central spectator in the audience for whom their combat with death has been performed. As they became icons of Roman identity, however, what had been their departure from the script becomes the script.

Accounts of the Christian martyrs move the martyrs into the arena to take their place in a similar trajectory from "othered" disposables to icons of a new form of Roman identity.

### Christian Martyrs in the Arena

The Christian martyrs portrayed in the accounts of their trials and deaths entered the arena as a location where the Roman social order was being defined, and the accounts offer both a challenge to that order and a redefinition that re-inscribes it.

In lieu of a survey of all of the *Acts of the Martyrs*, here I will consider a few illustrations from three accounts of martyrdoms: Polycarp (*Polycarp*), an account sometimes considered paradigmatic for other accounts, although its dating is disputed;<sup>107</sup> Perpetua and Felicitas (*Perpetua*); and the martyrs of Lyons (*Lyons*). This project will not include discussion of secondary literature on these texts.

This final section will examine some general aspects of the accounts of the martyrs in light of the understanding of the arena and the gladiators presented in the first two sections.

### Accounts of the Martyrs as Social Critique

Recent decades have produced many fine studies of the accounts of the martyrs as forms of social critique, and the martyrs have traditionally been perceived as a challenge to Roman imperial authority.<sup>108</sup> Without in any way discounting

107. Carbonell, "Roman Spectacle Buildings," 12. For one extended discussion of the dating, see Moss, "On the Dating of Polycarp." Moss argues for a dating of the composition of the text in the first half of the third century.

108. As just two examples, see Perkins, "Fictional Narratives," 27–45; Young, "Martyrdom as Exaltation," 70–94.

such studies or the social critique they demonstrate, we should be careful not to uncritically assume a status of Christian exceptionalism for the martyrs. For example, in a 1998 article on “The Voice of the Victim,” Kate Cooper capsulized the image of the martyr as a social critic:

The spectacle of the arena was centred around a crushing assertion of the right order of society. . . . In such a society, so pointedly aware of the dynamics of authority and representation, for a Christian to subvert humiliation by embracing death with equanimity would have constituted a powerful social gesture.<sup>109</sup>

While with Cooper and others we need to recognize the *power* in this social gesture, we should not imagine that it was *original*. The path to subversion of “humiliation by embracing death with equanimity” was already well-worn by the gladiators’ performance of death in the arena and by the tales Romans told themselves about the essence of their identity.

### **Martyrs as Gladiators Displaying Roman *Virtus***

To associate the martyrs and the gladiators is hardly a stretch given that their performances of death both take place in the Roman arena, and identifying martyrs and gladiators as similar figures is not new. In a 1994 article, Carlin A. Barton proposed that, rather than “operating in mutually exclusive emotional spheres” assumed in conventional interpretations, the gladiator and the martyr both “operated within an ambivalent vocabulary of emotion and gesture—the vocabulary of the condemned, the defeated, the dishonored.”<sup>110</sup> In this article and later works, Barton proposes the “dominant heroic model” of the “failed hero” that has been the basis for the discussion of the figure of the gladiator above. More recently, Catharine Edwards indicates the commonalities in her book on death in Roman culture. She also points to a common emphasis on the voluntary acceptance of death, honor, and self-actualization, as well as the importance of the spectacle as the context in the accounts and the direct identification of the martyrs as gladiators in Christian texts.<sup>111</sup>

### **The Arena as Setting for Martyrdom**

The spectacle of the martyrs is most often set in the arena. Spanish archaeologist Jordina Sales Carbonell catalogues the association of the accounts of martyrs’ deaths with spectacle buildings and the Roman spectacle program.<sup>112</sup> Her list includes many of the most prominent accounts, as well as late traditions,

109. Cooper, “The Voice of the Victim,” 148.

110. Barton, “Savage Miracles,” 41.

111. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 210.

112. Carbonell, “Roman Spectacle Buildings,” 12–13. Her list is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Carbonell’s archaeological research is investigating the construction of churches in the arenas of spectacle buildings on the sites of martyrdoms.

that indicate that the arena was assumed as the location for martyrdoms.<sup>113</sup> She also points out that the vocabulary for the buildings in late antique accounts is ambiguous.<sup>114</sup> In addition to accounts that specifically mention a spectacle building, several mention a form of execution that places it in the spectacle program. Execution by beasts, for example, requires the infrastructure and specialized staff present in the amphitheaters.

In some of the accounts, martyrs were beheaded at a more secluded location. This would generally indicate the social status of the individual being executed, since beheading was the honorable form of execution reserved for members of the elites. As David Potter points out, some accounts relate a specific effort to avoid the spectacle of earlier martyrdoms.<sup>115</sup> Even these include some aspect of performance before the crowd, however, and some of the authors of the accounts specifically include some passage through the spectacle building.<sup>116</sup>

Martyrdom was a spectacle performed in the context of the buildings the Romans constructed for their program of spectacles.

### Martyrs Displaying Roman Virtus, Martyrs as Gladiators

No extended search is necessary to find mention in the accounts of the Christian martyrs that extol them for qualities associated with Roman *virtus*.

113. Peter in 67 CE at Rome (Carbonell indicates that "according to the tradition" Peter was martyred in the circus of Caligula and Nero). While Tacitus' account of the executions of Christians (*Ann.* 15.44) indicates that their executions took place in Nero's garden rather than in a spectacle building, we cannot determine that Peter was among them. What is significant is that the tradition appears to require the spectacle context in the circus prior to the construction of the Flavian amphitheater; Ignatius of Antioch in 107 at Rome in the Flavian amphitheater; Polycarp in 155 in the stadium at Smyrna; Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice around 161–180 in the amphitheater at Pergamon; the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne in 177 in the amphitheater at Lugdunum; Perpetua, Felicitas, and others during some *munera castrensia* in the amphitheater at Carthage; Priscus, Malchus, and Alexander during the reign of Valerian (253–260) at Caesarea in Palestine; Fructuosus, Augurius, and Eulogius in 259 in the amphitheater at Tarragona; Germanus (according to tradition) in the amphitheater at Pula (Istria in modern Croatia) in 284; Sebastian (according to a *passio* from the fifth century) in the hippodrome at Rome in the late third or early fourth centuries; Agapius and Thecla in the amphitheater at Gaza c. 304; Maxima, Secunda, and Donatella in the amphitheater in the city of "Turbitanam" in Africa in 304; Tarachus, Probus, and Andronicus, martyred in an amphitheater a mile outside of an unspecified town in Cilicia in 304; Alban in the arena at Verulamium in England during the Diocletian persecutions or perhaps earlier in 287; several Christians, including the priest Asterius, four soldiers of Diocletian's personal guard (Antiochianus, Gaianus, Paulinianus, and Telius) and the bishop Domnius (successor to Venantius) in the amphitheater of Salona (Solin, Croatia) in 304; Agnes (according to tradition) at the stadium of Domitian at Rome in the mid-third century or during the persecutions of Diocletian; Acisclus (according to late tradition and Prudentius) in the amphitheater at Cordoba in the tetrarchic period (293–313); and Almachius/Telemachus (according to tradition) stoned by the crowd in an arena at Rome in the late fourth or early fifth century. Carbonell, "Roman Spectacle Buildings," 12–13.

114. Carbonell, "Roman Spectacle Buildings," 11 n. 34.

115. Potter, "Martyrdom as Spectacle."

116. Carbonell, "Roman Spectacle Buildings," 14–15.



A passage near the beginning of *Polycarp* repeats the adjectives of nobility and courage and describes the endurance of pain associated with Roman *virtus*.<sup>117</sup> This image of *virtus*, nobility and courage and withstanding pain, is a general characteristic of the accounts.

Popular traditions also associated the martyrs with athletes and gladiators. Just as people collected oil from the athletes and blood from the gladiators as cures for fever and epilepsy, Christians collected fragments of martyrs' remains and believed in the relics' magical properties.<sup>118</sup>

Christian writers associate the martyrs with athletes and gladiators in their performance in the arena. As Catharine Edwards summarizes, "martyrs are encouraged to see themselves as performers, rising to a challenge—and with an audience to impress."<sup>119</sup> She points, for example, to the writings of Ignatius of Antioch exhorting Polycarp: "It is like a great athlete to take blows and yet win the fight."<sup>120</sup> Blandina is also described as a "noble athlete."<sup>121</sup> Perpetua envisions herself as an athlete and gladiator in the arena in one of her dreams. At first she enters the arena expecting to meet the beasts, but instead she finds herself confronting "an Egyptian" of "vicious appearance." The description at first indicates a wrestling match, but then a "man of marvelous stature" portrayed as an athletic trainer rises to the top of the amphitheater and announces the consequences of the match as a gladiatorial combat: "If this Egyptian defeats her, he will slay her with the sword. But if she defeats him, she will receive this branch," referring to the branch with golden apples.<sup>122</sup> What starts as a wrestling match clearly has the consequences of gladiatorial combat.

The presentation of Germanicus in *Polycarp* 3 also corresponds to the essential *Romanitas* of the popular figure of Mucius Scaevola. Rather than waiting for the fate to which he has been sentenced, he seizes hold of it. Like Mucius Scaevola thrusting his right hand into the flame and holding it there to burn, Germanicus seizes the beast presented to kill him in the same language of gesture of Roman identity that the gladiators use by offering their throat upon defeat.

117. *Polycarp* 2; Musurillo, *Acts*, 1–2. Words Musurillo translates as "noble" are variations of γενναῖος. Musurillo's translation (*Polycarp* 3) also describes Germanicus as "fighting manfully" with the beasts, although the adverb in the Greek is ἐπισήμως, more simply "in a distinguished manner." Extensive discussion of the Greek vocabulary merits another project.

118. Carbonell, "Roman Spectacle Buildings," 11.

119. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 211.

120. Edwards cites *Polycarp* 2.3, but the reference is at 3.1. She also mentions Tertullian's (*Ad mart.* 1.2) justification of his address to the martyrs by indicating that amateurs and spectators as well as expert trainers give advice to skilled gladiators. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 211.

121. *Lyons* 19; Musurillo, *Acts*, 66–67.

122. *Perpetua* 10; Musurillo, *Acts*, 116–19.

Christian writers also emphasize martyrdom as a voluntary action, and the martyrs' oaths echo the *sacramentum* of the gladiators.<sup>123</sup> For example, Ignatius (*Rom.* 4.1) asserts "I die willingly for God,"<sup>124</sup> and his oath is patterned after the gladiator's "Come fire, cross, battling with wild bears, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel torture of the devil—only let me get to Jesus Christ."<sup>125</sup> Tertullian and Cyprian refer to a *sacramentum* that binds the martyr. While modeled on the soldier's oath, the relevant warrior, as Barton points out, was "not the warrior of the field but the warrior of the arena."<sup>126</sup> The oath not only indicates the importance of their voluntary embrace of torture and death as martyrs but also, as can be seen in the case of Ignatius, transfers the allegiance to a different kind of gladiatorial manager: God and Christ. This transference indicates the reshaping of the arena as the martyrs became central icons for an empire defined as Christian.

### Differences in the Setting: An Arena of Narrative and a Christian Empire

The accounts of the martyrs portray an arena where a Christian vision of the empire is being constructed around performances of iconic martyrs. While the accounts portray the martyrs nobly taking their final stand on the sands of the arena, the setting for the martyrs' combat and performance of death differs significantly from that of the gladiators.

#### Performance of Death in the Noonday Program, Not the Afternoon

The accounts bring the *virtus* and the voluntary choice of the Christian martyrs into a different position in the spectacle program. What the gladiators accomplished in the afternoon program by becoming icons of Roman *virtus* rather than forced participants in a spectacle of combat, the martyrs accomplish in the noonday program by becoming icons of Christian *virtus* rather than the image of dying as *noxii*. As Edwards indicates, it is significant that the martyrs are portrayed as associated with the bravery of the gladiators and "not with the misery of the *noxii*."<sup>127</sup>

From the viewpoint of the Roman crowd, the Christians were part of the "others" executed during the noonday entertainments. Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44)

123. The reference to "voluntary martyrdom" here is in connection with the pattern of making the involuntary voluntary discussed in the first portions of this article. This is not to be confused with the issue of volunteering for martyrdom and status as an "authentic" martyr. On this, see Moss, "The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom," 531–51.

124. Translation from Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 175.

125. Straw, "A Very Special Death," 45–46, 55 n. 40. She cites Ignatius, *Rom.* 3.3, but the reference is at 5.3. Straw also points to additional examples of vows modeled after military oaths and indicates the "blurred lines between the gladiator and the soldier" (pp. 45–46).

126. Barton, "Savage Miracles," 56.

127. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 211.

describes this “othering” of the Christians under Nero in spectacles that included putting the hides of beasts on them and letting them be torn apart by dogs, spectacles that, as Erik Gunderson points out, “assimilated them unambiguously to the inhuman/uncivilized fictional space generated by the arena.”<sup>128</sup> In the framework of the spectacle program, the Christians were supposed to be displayed as part of the “other” to be destroyed, among criminals and other threats to Roman legal order. They were the *noxii*, not trained for the fight as the gladiators were. They were outsiders who deserved destruction, not the fair fight of the afternoon entertainment.

Yet the accounts portray a martyr performance that echoes the gladiators’ refusal to accept the “despised other” identity assigned to them. Using the same strategy of voluntarily embracing the death to which they have been sentenced, they reveal themselves in the decisive moment as subjects rather than objects. The narratives make a concerted effort to portray them achieving recognition of their humanity and status as subjects in spite of being in a position designed to debase, humiliate, and de-humanize them.<sup>129</sup> The martyrs make an identity shift in the noonday program similar to the one the gladiators have made in the afternoon.

### Combat by Trial, Not on the Sands of the Arena

The accounts of the martyrs also portray them as gladiators skilled and trained for combat, but the combat takes place at their *trials*. They were not portrayed as the untrained *noxii* thrown into the arena to die in entertainments entirely controlled by the spectacle producers. Like the gladiators, the Christian martyrs are portrayed as trained for their role.<sup>130</sup> Yet the content of their training does not emphasize technical skills for the performance in the arena so much as training to speak eloquently and stand courageously at their trials before Roman authorities. Their prowess is not military skills for a theatrical battlefield but rhetorical skills and valor to win hearts and minds in a court of opinion beyond the Roman legal system.

128. Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 134. He places this image in the space created by the arena, even though Nero’s gardens were the site of these particular spectacles.

129. Note that this is not necessarily an effort to force the spectator to view *all* of those debased in the midday spectacles as human. The focus in the narratives is on the courage of the exceptional Christian martyrs and their refusal to capitulate to the loyalty demands of Roman imperial worship in order to demonstrate loyalty (and *pietas*) to a different deity, but one who also expects exclusive devotion.

130. Training was an important theme in the accounts of the martyrs and in early Christian writings on martyrdom, as Robin Darling Young has emphasized. She points to differing traditions of training. In North Africa, Asia Minor, and Irenaeus’ Gaul, training for martyrdom had apocalyptic qualities, while in Alexandria, Clement and Origen emphasized detachment from the body; see Young, *In Procession Before the World*, 10–11. She discusses the discourses on training by Clement (pp. 37–47) and Origen (pp. 52–60) at greater length.

Most of the accounts include a trial scene that incorporates some common elements. A normal public trial was structured, as David Potter characterizes it, as “a contest about truth between magistrate and defendant set on a playing field that was designed to give all the advantages to the representative of the imperial government.”<sup>131</sup> The official functioned as both prosecutor and judge. In most of the martyr accounts a crowd is present too, and acclamations of the crowd often decide the verdict. Polycarp’s trial, for example, takes place in a stadium. In this instance the crowds are already roaring as he is led in.<sup>132</sup> In the account of Perpetua the trial takes place in the forum, but the presence of the crowd is not mentioned, and the official Hilarianus renders the verdict.<sup>133</sup> The account of the martyrs of Lyons, however, emphasizes the role of the crowd in bringing them to the forum before the “entire populace” in what appears to be a series of public trials.<sup>134</sup>

The official, according to trial procedure, states the charge and asks basic questions.<sup>135</sup> He establishes the defendant’s identity (“Are you Polycarp?”) and in many cases in the martyr narratives offers an opportunity for the defendant to recant and swear by or sacrifice to the *genius* of the emperor.<sup>136</sup> This element may well reflect a standard pattern in the trials of the historical martyrs. Yet as an element in the narrative, it emphasizes the volition of the martyr in embracing an involuntary fate (à la Mucius Scaevola). Most contain the affirmation “I am a Christian.”

Some of the narratives also include more interchange between the official and the martyr and sometimes a longer speech by the martyr. The governor trying Polycarp, for example, engages him in some dialog that includes threats and offers to let him change his mind. The first threat is the beasts, and Polycarp responds “Go and call for them!” Then the governor threatens fire, and Polycarp contrasts the temporary threat with the eternal “fire of everlasting punishment” and again offers a version of “Bring it on!” saying, “Why then do you hesitate? Come, do what you will.” After a dramatic pronouncement by the herald in the center of the arena—“Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian”—the crowd present then shouts denunciations and calls for the lion to be loosed on him.<sup>137</sup>

In the account of Polycarp’s trial, we can see the acquiescence and defiance of the gladiator that embodies the Roman identity expressed in the popular

131. Potter, “Performance,” 147.

132. *Polycarp* 9; Musurillo, 8–9.

133. *Perpetua* 6; Musurillo, *Acts*, 112–15.

134. *Lyons* 7–8, 17; Musurillo, *Acts*, 62–69.

135. Potter, “Performance,” 147.

136. The *genius* was the image of what may be described as the guardian spirit of the *paterfamilias* of a Roman household. The image of the emperor in temples of the imperial cult and elsewhere was this image of the paternal *genius*.

137. *Polycarp* 11–12; Musurillo, *Acts*, 10–11.

stories of Mucius Scaevola. Instead of saying "I am a Roman. . . . Look, that you may see how cheap [the Romans] hold their bodies whose eyes are fixed upon renown (*gloriam*)," Polycarp, like many of the other martyrs portrayed in the accounts, says effectively, "I am a Christian! See how cheaply we hold our bodies whose eyes are fixed upon eternal glory!" In effect he says "See how I am more Roman than the Romans!" This interchange becomes the martyr's combat scene where his or her victory is won by refusing to be intimidated by the threat of torture and death and by making an involuntary fate voluntary. In the narratives the trial scene becomes part of the spectacle.

Torture and execution in the "contest" in the arena then become a continuation of the combat in the trial and another opportunity to provide victorious testimony. Kate Cooper points to the importance of torture in obtaining credible testimony from slaves and people of low rank, people who would be susceptible to pressures exerted by their owners or who would be easy targets for bribery. If such a person did not change his or her testimony under torture, the testimony was true. In the narratives, the tortures and death to which the martyrs are subjected in the arena continue their "witness" and testimony at the trial. However, the martyr has been reframed "as a witness under torture rather than a criminal under investigation," and the question of truth has been shifted from the Christian martyr's guilt to the content of the Christian message.<sup>138</sup> In effect, the narratives put the interrogators on trial before the audience of the text.<sup>139</sup>

### **An Arena of Narrative, Not Stone; An Audience in the Text, Not the Stands**

The narratives depict the martyrs crossing not only the podium wall but also the usually hostile arena crowd in the stands to perform a death scene that connects them to the audience of the text and to a celestial audience, the audience(s) of decisive consequence for their combat/trial. With a few exceptions they remain "othered" objects in the eyes of the arena audience portrayed in the text. For the audience of the text, however, they become subjects and icons of a Christianized *Romanitas* and *virtus*. They connect to an audience beyond the confines of the amphitheater, and the texts envision a new celestial amphitheater in the pattern of the earthly Roman one.

The spectators in the arenas and the crowds at the trials are generally portrayed as hostile to the Christian martyrs. Polycarp (*Polycarp* 9), for example, refers to "the mob of lawless pagans," and he considers them undeserving of

138. Cooper, "The Voice of the Victim," 152–53. Following the work of Page duBois (*Torture and Truth*) on this legal theory in Athenian democracy, she describes this theory of *basanos*. The same assumption applied in the Roman era. The word used in *Polycarp* 2 to describe the martyrs' "hour of torment" is the same root.

139. Cooper, "The Voice of the Victim," 154.

his speech of defense (10).<sup>140</sup> The crowd chants for his death by the lion, as has been mentioned, and many other crowds chant for the execution of the martyrs in other accounts. The crowd has empathy only in rare instances, such as the crowd described as “horrified” and able to see Perpetua and Felicitas as “a delicate young girl” and “a woman fresh from childbirth with milk still dripping from her breasts,” that is, as human beings for whom they appear to be able to have some form of compassion rather than as objects for their entertainment.<sup>141</sup> Most of the crowds portrayed remain hostile.

The audience of the arena in the texts is not the audience of consequence for the martyrs’ performance, however. Within the text the martyr often performs his or her death for a celestial audience. In the general description of the martyrs in *Polycarp* (2), for example, they are praised not only for their nobility and courage but for their “love of the Master,” and they are said to “fix their eyes on the favour of Christ.”<sup>142</sup> Like the gladiator in the decisive moment with eyes fixed on the *editor* who will deliver the decision on his fate, the exemplary martyr fixed his or her eyes on Christ as an *editor* beyond the physical arena, an *editor* with the power to grant “favor.”<sup>143</sup>

A few paragraphs later as Polycarp enters the amphitheater for his trial, a voice from heaven cheers him on (“be strong, Polycarp, and have courage”) even as the hostile crowd in the earthly arena is making a deafening roar. An explanation reveals the significant audience: “No one saw who was speaking, but those of our people who were present heard the voice.”<sup>144</sup> The performance of Polycarp that follows, for which the voice from heaven provides the cheering section, is intended then for “our people” present in the earthly audience represented in the text and in the audience of the text itself. This describes the framework for most of the accounts. The martyr’s performance is for the celestial audience and “our people” as the audience of the text, not for “those people” in the hostile crowd of the earthly arena in the text—and “those people” in the world of the audience of the text.

In the celestial audience and the audience of the text we can see a new arena being constructed, not in stone but in story.<sup>145</sup>

140. Musurillo, *Acts*, 9.

141. *Perpetua* 20.2; Musurillo, *Acts*, 128–29.

142. Musurillo, *Acts*, 1–2.

143. Perpetua is also described entering the amphitheater to perform her death as “a wife of Christ” with an “intense gaze” that puts down everyone’s stare. The implication is that she is victorious in the staring contest, but her gaze could also implicitly be fixed on Christ. *Perpetua* 18; Musurillo, *Acts*, 124–27.

144. *Polycarp* 9; Musurillo, *Acts*, 8–9.

145. The story leads to stone constructions as well, as the churches constructed on the sites of martyrdom in abandoned arenas attest. See Carbonell, “Roman Spectacle Buildings.”

### **The More Things Change, The More They Remain the Same**

The new arena in Christian martyr narratives accomplished much of what the Roman stone arenas did. This narrative arena became the edifice for a Christianized Roman empire with the martyrs as its icons.

#### **Still an Arena for the Pleasures of Spectacle**

The new arena created in narrative was still constructed for spectacle. While the martyr's performance for the audience of the text was a performance of a victory in the pattern of the gladiator enacting Roman identity, it remained, also in the pattern of the gladiatorial combat, a *spectacle* for Christian audiences still hungry for the pleasures of the arena. Edwards points to evidence in Tertullian and Augustine that the martyr narratives were used as a Christian substitute for the Roman arena as a way for Christians to satisfy the need for the bloody "pleasures" that continued to draw them to the arena in spite of Christian writers' exhortations against attendance. In response to the question of how Christians can cope without such entertainments, Augustine, for example, proposes the passions of the martyrs as better entertainment. God's provision of such entertainments casts him in the role of emperor of the celestial arena.<sup>146</sup> The Christian arena of narrative is still very much an arena for spectacle patterned after the physical Roman arena.

#### **Still an Arena for the Enactment of Victory over the "Other"**

In addition to the graphic images of torture and death that could compensate for the pleasures of the arena program, Christian writers offered a spectacle that provided an image of retribution. We can see this stated briefly in Polycarp's response at his trial to the governor's threat of fire, as has been mentioned. To the temporary fire of the arena, Polycarp contrasts the "fire of everlasting punishment and of the judgement that is to come, which awaits the impious."<sup>147</sup> We can see in this brief description the seeds of the image of the fires in the celestial arena.

Tertullian provides a more detailed description of a retributive spectacle at the last judgment. Looking forward to the day of judgment, Tertullian (*Spect.* 30) describes it as a spectacle of consuming fire. He envisions the officials who had persecuted Christians "melting in flames" and a similar fate for philosophers and their pupils who subscribed to a point of view Tertullian deems heretical. He continues to describe in graphic detail the incineration of actors and charioteers as well. He presents this as the "nobler" spectacle.<sup>148</sup>

146. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 214. She cites *Enarrationes in psalmos* 39.9.

147. *Polycarp* 11; Musurillo, *Acts*, 10–11.

148. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 207–8.

If we read this retributive spectacle of the last judgment together with the accounts of the martyrs, what emerges is a spectacle program that accomplishes the edifying and unifying purposes of the Roman arena discussed in the first part of this article. The audience in the Roman amphitheater viewed the spectacle of the triumph of Roman order as the wild beasts were slaughtered, then the barbarians and criminals. Viewing these spectacles unified the audience as participants in the Roman empire by “othering” the beasts and opponents of Roman order. The third part of the program provided an image for their identity as Romans in the form of the gladiator, a complex image, as we have seen. The whole program offered an opportunity for spectators to participate in Roman imperial power.

Likewise, the audience of the Christian spectacle texts were united and edified by the spectacle program presented, and they were offered an opportunity to participate in the divine imperial power of the new arena. They became the “real audience” with the celestial observers who could watch as the Roman officials and the hostile arena crowd become the “other.” They could also identify with the martyr who took the role of the gladiator as the edifying icon for a new form of Roman imperial culture. The new icon of the martyr is as complex as the icon of the gladiator, but complex in similar ways, as we have seen. We can also observe that for them, as for the gladiators before them, the departure from the script becomes a new script.

### **Epilogue: Power Relations in a Christian Arena**

Christian writings constructed a new arena around the edifying iconic performance of the Christian martyrs. The new arena thus replaced the Roman arena with the edifying performance of the iconic gladiator at its center. Just as the gladiators asserted their status as subjects by offering their audiences a model of “the Roman way” for imitation, the martyrs offered a model for imitation in what might be described as “an even more Roman way.”

The Christian arena was intended to project imperial power just as much as the Roman amphitheater was. In the Roman amphitheater, however, a human emperor or his representative was physically present in a physical crowd where a dynamic negotiation of power relations was still possible. The Christian narrative amphitheater constructed for the performance of the martyrs, where Christ and ultimately God hold the position of the emperor, presents a more absolute image of power relations. Iconic portrayals of Christian martyrs have a place in an absolutist vision of power relations in a Christianized Roman empire, a place worth examining in relation to the place the image of the gladiator had in the Roman empire.

The iconic image of the martyr takes its place in the context of this Christianized Roman empire and the absolute power of the new emperor as the



celestial God/Christ. Rather than challenging the empire, the martyr image is part of the transformation of the empire in a more virulent form, as expressed in the chorus of a song by Silvio Rodriguez that describes a dream of the great imperial serpent. Like the martyrs of narrative arriving to make their stand in the cultural center of Rome's empire, the dreamer finally arrives into the belly of the beast and plants truth with a verse to defeat the beast, but "I kill it and it appears one greater with much more hell in its digestion."<sup>149</sup>

149. "Oh, la mato y aparece una mayor, Oh, con mucho más infierno en digestión." Sylvio Rodriguez, "Sueño con serpientes."

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# What Do Fiction, Mass Crucifixions and Killer Seals<sup>1</sup> Add Up To?

Summarizing Breakthroughs in  
Martyrdom Scholarship Since 1990

Hal Taussig

Written fifty years ago, W. H. C. Frend's *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* was in a short time received as the definitive book on the topic. It held sway with such authority for more than a generation and is still cited often today. But within the last twenty-five years so much new scholarship on martyrdom in the first five centuries of the common era has been produced that Frend's work now is in many circles cited primarily as the best summary of how not to think about the topic. Indeed, current scholarly conversation has shifted so completely that current scholarship has more than several scholars suspecting that martyrological discourse in the first centuries may well have been a defining dimension of the emergence of Christianity itself.

This paper is meant to survey the last twenty-five years of work related to topics of Jewish and Christian martyrdom as our Christianity Seminar enters the fray of this dimension of the writing of the history of early Christianity. It is done primarily to provide snapshots of this recent work, both for those of us who have forgotten what has been done on this subject or who have not had a chance to keep up. I apologize in advance for the inevitable missing of important scholarship in this review and for the ways my summaries do injustice to so much valuable, indeed ground-breaking, insight and research. I have also chosen to do this review in relationship to particular subject matter, which has become the focus of these recent studies, rather than more straightforward summaries of each author's work. This choice has also (with some predictability) aimed to integrate advances in scholarship and resulted in some presumption on my part.

## **Imperial Violence in Relationship to Ideas and Events of Martyrdom**

Seleucid and Roman imperial violence are boldly inscribed in the very portraiture and events of Jewish and Christian martyrdom. Although these two

1. Cf. n. 31 below for the story of a "martyr" and killer seals.

historical imperial phenomena play large parts in the imaginal and narrative vocabularies of martyrdom within eventual Jewish and Christian literature, critical attention to both the historical and imaginal relationships have only become focused in the last several decades. The fields of empire-critical NT studies and gender studies have paid most attention to the historical roles of Seleucid and Roman violence with regard to the plethora of stories of executions at the hands of these empires.

Empire-critical NT scholarship has called important attention to Roman imperial violence in relationship to emerging notions of at least rhetorical resistance by first- and second-century Christ followers to Rome. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza was almost certainly the first to raise this in her 1985 volume on the Revelation to John, where she takes very seriously the violent vocabulary of this book as directly critical of and resistant to Roman violence.<sup>2</sup> She was almost certainly the first in a now long list of studies to see the Revelation to John's aggressive and barely subliminal critique of Rome's portrait of the great prostitute of Babylon and its destruction in chapters 17 and 18. Similarly, and more directly to the point, her work inaugurated direct links between Roman imperial violence and both the "souls of those under the altar who had been killed for the *martyrion* . . . crying in a loud voice, "How long, sovereign Lord, holy and true, before you will give judgment and avenge our blood" (6:9–10), and the 144,000 standing with the Lamb (14:1–5).

Both 2 and 4 Maccabees have extensive narratives of the noble deaths of leaders and spokespersons of late Israel, particularly concerning the persecutions of late Israel by the pre-Maccabean rule of the Seleucid empire. Second Maccabees is substantially earlier than 4 Maccabees, and the rhetoric and theological perspectives differ somewhat. But beginning with George Nickelsburg's studies,<sup>3</sup> the Maccabean portraits have been seen as pivotal developments in the function of stories of voluntary death by those resisting the Seleucid empire. Burton Mack<sup>4</sup> and his former student David Seeley<sup>5</sup> took up Nickelsburg's work and elaborated it powerfully into a much broader consciousness in NT studies of the connection between the framing of Maccabean martyrological meaning<sup>6</sup> to a wide swath of Pauline and gospel meaning-making about the death

2. Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*.

3. Nickelsburg, "The Genre and Function."

4. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*; and *Who Wrote the New Testament*.

5. Seeley, *The Noble Death*.

6. Daniel Boyarin has observed that there are very large differences between the meanings made of martyrdom in Maccabean literature and the later second- and third-century Jewish and "proto-Christian" martyrological meanings. For Boyarin the Maccabean literature portrays martyrdom as resistance to an imposing and violent empire (Seleucid or Roman), whereas the later period has more to do with an assertion of identity. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 94–118, 187–92.

of Jesus. The most accessible application of this emergent meaning of a noble (Maccabean style) death to Jesus' death is from Stephen Patterson's *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus* (2004).

A wide range of empire-critical study of the NT has brought new emphasis to imperial violence through its explicit attention to Roman methods of torture, military slaughter and cruelty, and state terror against civilian populations. Primary leadership<sup>7</sup> in this more graphic portrayal of Roman violence belongs to Richard Horsley and Warren Carter. Their attention to the overlapping imperial strategies of widespread crucifixions, mass slavery and incarceration, and demonstratively cruel battlefield tactics have helped understand Jesus' crucifixion as part of much broader violence.

Similar in subject matter but focused mostly on public monumentalism of Rome throughout the empire, the ground-breaking work of Davina Lopez and Brigitte Kahl has placed a wide range of NT vocabulary in direct contact with and rebuke of Rome's graphic sculpture and facades' picturing of gruesome military conquest and degradation of conquered populations. Lopez's study of the hyper-masculinized Roman images of cruelty to conquered nations represented as humiliated and raped women<sup>8</sup> broke crucial ground in the study of Paul. Kahl's opus on ancient conversation between Paul's letter to the Galatians and the Great Altar of Pergamon has been appropriately called the most significant Pauline scholarship since Karl Barth's commentary on Romans.<sup>9</sup> Most recently, Celene Lillie's newly minted dissertation<sup>10</sup> on the rape of Eve among the documents from Nag Hammadi within the context of a wide spectrum of Roman rape stories looks at both monumental images and stories charting an additional large aspect of imperial violence.

Before this recent attention to Seleucid and Roman imperial violence, martyrdom literature made a somewhat bizarre impression whose very horror seemed so ensconced in layers of Christian piety that it was rarely understood as real violence within systems of state terror. Indeed, the pastiche of huge European canvases of white tortured bodies gazing heavenward overlaying the

7. Prior to the strong new scholarship by the likes of Horsley and Carter, Martin Hengel's somewhat flawed yet gripping monograph, *Crucifixion* (1977), on the socio-historical practice of crucifixion in the Mediterranean and Near East prefigured the recent focus on state terror by the Romans and Seleucids. Horsley's extensive work in this vein includes *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (2002); *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea* (2007); *Hearing the Whole Story; Jesus and the Powers* (2001); *Religion and Empire* (2003); *Paul and Empire* (2004); and, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (2000). Carter's extensive work on this subject includes *The Roman Empire and the New Testament* (2006); *John and Empire* (2008); *Matthew and Empire* (2001); and *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor* (2003).

8. Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*.

9. Robbins, review of *Galatians Re-Imagined* (by Brigitte Kahl).

10. Lillie, "The Ruler's Rape of Eve."

iconic single crucifixes in churches and various manifestations of intolerance of religion throughout the world often produces something between incredulity and teenage horror flicks when one reads martyrological literature. The renewal of attention on the systematic practices and policies of the Seleucids and Romans has helped cut through the later pieties and the imaginative character of many early Jewish and Christian narratives in order to consider the effects of insistent state terror as a dimension of martyrdom scholarship.

### **Historical Reassessments of Martyrdom Narratives**

At the same time that empire-critical scholarship has helped resurface consciousness of systemic imperial violence in the ancient Mediterranean world and its sponsorship of mass and/or spectacle-like executions, scholars have also undertaken close readings and intertextual study to assess the likely historicity of martyrdom stories. Important assessment has been done by Daniel Boyarin, Judith Lieu, and to some extent Candida Moss. Perhaps one of the most cogent, careful, and relatively short summaries is that of Elizabeth Castelli:

Paul himself made use of the authority that came from imprisonment by the Romans, laying the groundwork for a complex martyrological tradition that would accrue to him in the decades and centuries after his death. . . . The first narrative of the church, Luke-Acts, made the predictions of persecution an organizing feature of the triumphant story it told. The gruesome portraits of righteous suffering and vindication in the book of Revelation wrote the story of Christian suffering within the broadest framework imaginable with a driving apocalyptic beat establishing the rhythms for understanding historical experience in cosmic terms. . . .

Christian sources routinely portray the Christian communities that emerged around the Mediterranean basin as embattled enclaves of right teaching and innocent practice positioned amidst profound and hostile error. Although the rhetoric may be the fruit of a propagandistic impulse, it is also likely that these texts reflect the fierce and alienated sentiments of members of these small, sectarian communities—even as the same texts generate and sustain such sentiments. . . . Most centrally, the Christian tendency to generate identity through rhetorical strategies of differentiation and assertions of radical superiority intersected with the social and political realities implied by quite small numbers and significant social marginality. . . . Read through Christian lenses, the story of Christian encounters with their Roman others is a cosmic battle narrative in which the opposition embodied by the Roman authorities takes on demonic auras and resonances. Read through the Roman lenses, this same story is often an incidental account of a minor set of skirmishes with unruly subjects—or indeed, a story that does not even merit being recorded.

Historians of the conflict between Christians and imperial authorities generally agree that, prior to the mid-third century, violence against Christians was sporadic, decentralized, and the product of primarily local conditions and



hostilities. Local authorities possessed considerable latitude in applying very general principles to the circumstances that obtained in their jurisdictions. The year 250, meanwhile, is generally considered a pivotal point in the periodization of Roman persecution and Christian martyrdom, marking the occasion of the decree of Decius. This decree required that everyone in the empire offer sacrifice to the gods and secure a receipt affirming that one had done so. For obvious reasons, Decius's decree presented a peculiar challenge to Christians and resulted in the first centralized persecution of Christians. Significantly, a certain percentage of the Christian evidence for this persecution produces a portrait not of Christian constancy, but of accommodation, evasion, and failure. Moreover . . . the decree of Decius was aimed more centrally toward religious reform within the Roman world, grounded more in Decius's desire to unify diverse and local religious observances around a common practice (e.g. sacrifice) than in the persecution of Christians per se. The Valerian persecution (257–260) and the so-called Great Persecution of Diocletian and others in the early years of the fourth century (303–314) followed Decius's decree. . . .

Diocletian had inherited a broad set of political instabilities from his predecessors, and these inspired sweeping military, economic, and administrative reforms alongside an intensification of conservative religious and moral programs. Christians were growing in numbers and influence, and the anti-Christian edicts that were issued in 303 and 304 were aimed at containing the threat this growth represented. . . .

Central to any reconstruction must be the recognition of how thoroughly Roman law, civic identity, and religious obligation overlapped in the ideology of empire. . . . In forming the tetrarchy, itself a pragmatic gesture aimed at restoring some stability to the succession of emperors, Diocletian named himself not only Augustus but also son of Jupiter, aligning his political role and his imperial persona with the deity responsible for order and law. . . . Christian affiliation served as a serious challenge to the religious traditions that assured order, stability, and peace. . . .

In the traditional periodization of persecution, the year 250 operates as a watershed. But even after 250, the shift to more top-down and systematic attempts at suppression did not result in wholesale violence against all Christians everywhere. This observation does not mean to diminish the sufferings of those who did endure torture and execution, but it suggests that these experiences were likely those of a very small minority within the minority communities of Christians. . . . [T]his is to . . . provide a context for interpreting it (as a historical experience) and understanding how that experience figured into Christian attempts to render it meaningful. Indeed, one might argue that the capriciousness of state violence . . . performed a critical kind of psychological work for all manner of subjected peoples, Christians included. . . . It may be precisely because of the unpredictability of persecution as a practice that it came to loom even more largely in the Christian imagination.<sup>11</sup>

11. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 36–38.

Judith Lieu, whose case for martyrdom as a central characteristic of early Christian identity<sup>12</sup> is somewhat stronger than Castelli's,<sup>13</sup> nevertheless also hesitates to assign too much historicity to stories of the martyrs. In her concluding chapter of *Neither Jew nor Greek?* in which she makes a sudden and assertive turn toward the role of martyrdom, she takes pains to distinguish the historical record from the portrait of martyrs in story and literature:

Implicit in all I have said . . . is that the martyrs as I have been speaking of them, and as they construct Christian identity, are themselves constructs, constructed by the texts which tell their story and by the survival of those texts. . . . Imperiously plagiarizing the prologue of I John, the author of the *Passio Perpetuae* declares:

And so now that which we have heard and have touched, we proclaim also to you, brothers and little children so that you also who took part may recall the glory of the Lord, and who now learn through hearing may have fellowship with the holy martyrs and through them with our Lord Jesus Christ (*Pass. Perpet.* 1.6).

The martyrs there act as mediators of Christian identity for a new audience, but they do so only through their textualization.<sup>14</sup>

Daniel Boyarin's assessment of the historical accuracy of martyrdom stories is similarly nuanced and more interested in the stories about martyrs than their historical lives.<sup>15</sup> The other major contribution Boyarin makes relative to historicity is his striking paralleling of Jewish and Christian martyr stories/events in the second century CE. Although his treatment is so deft that he never actually says that there were some Jewish and Christian martyrs, and he nuances in significant ways how Jewish and Christian labels are not mutually exclusive in the second century, it seems clear to me that Boyarin does think that there were some actual executions of "Jewish" and "Christian" leaders in the second century CE.<sup>16</sup> This Jewish-Christian overlap (both in terms of discourse and history) complicates in crucial ways any formulation of martyrdom as a significant

12. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 211–31. I will take this dimension of her scholarship up directly later in this essay.

13. Castelli and Lieu make similar cases but with different nomenclature. Whereas Lieu seems to be the first scholar in this latest generation to appeal to the category of "Christian identity" (and has been followed in this regard by Karen King, Hal Taussig, and Phil Harland, and critiqued as well by Harland and Maia Kotrosits), Castelli has proposed another highly useful and creative, yet less followed, category of "early Christian culture making." Given Kotrosits and Harland's more recent reservations concerning the category of "early Christian identity," I can see our Christianity Seminar seriously considering Castelli's term as the more theoretically complex and useful.

14. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 218.

15. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 22–41, 93–111.

16. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 95–125.

factor in the emergence of Christian culture. Strictly in terms of issues of historicity, Virginia Burrus has a similar nuanced and complicating examination of martyrdom as she examines women and men as martyrological subjects.<sup>17</sup>

Candida Moss's *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (2013) sensationalizes the above near consensus of recent martyrdom scholars in terms of how broad and frequent actual executions of "early Christians" occurred. When read closely amidst her rhetorical bombast, Moss actually acknowledges the general position of the most recent generation of martyrdom scholars that executions were not all that frequent and that the stories themselves are about something else than a recording of events. But her hyperbole and her eagerness to make comparisons between the ancient world and various current events of the last decade short-circuits the larger historical task of understanding what the martyrdom stories do during the crucial second through fourth-century emergence of Christian cultures.

### Discursive Martyrdom

More or less all recent scholarship on martyrdom establishes and assumes that the stories of Jewish/Christian executions in the second through sixth centuries participate in discursive reality. In the same vein as Lieu's distinction between textualized and historical martyrdom, these scholars of the last three decades speak of martyrdom that belongs to larger discourse. For all of them, this distinction is less a put down that these events did not occur and more a way to think with larger discursive categories to understand what are the meanings/realities within and behind the stories.

Approached from the perspective of discursive martyrdom, the work of Nickelsburg, Seeley, Mack, Patterson, and Arthur Dewey about noble death in relationship to first-century applications of Maccabean portrayals of executions to the meaning of Jesus' death is both very significant and, according to most recent scholars,<sup>18</sup> quite different than later martyrdom literature. Here it is simply important to see what discursive functions the Maccabean and early Jesus death stories have when considered through the Nickelsburg optic.

Firstly, the discursive field of noble death is significant. Emerging first in early Greek military stories and adeptly shaping the stories of Socrates' death, this discourse maps a world in which a human being volunteering to die and/or not resisting being killed becomes noble and exemplary. As Daniel Boyarin points out, here the human that dies does so voluntarily mostly as a gesture of resistance. So noble death discourse plots ways of responding to coercive power

17. Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame*.

18. Cf. Boyarin's review in *Dying for God*, 93–130.

and violent subjection so that some threatened way of life negotiates survival. In addition, Burton Mack and David Seeley spurred further discursive understanding of noble death in their suggestions that noble death also functioned etiologically. Here the death of the noble executed one helps establish a foundational story for those threatened by coercive and violent power. The nobleness of the death establishes terms for living courageously into the future for those who claim the legacy of the one who died. The deaths of the Maccabees and Jesus function discursively at least through the end of the first century CE as pivotal markers for how to live amidst danger in the traditions of Israel. The way the stories are told focus on the noble way the protagonists faced death (e.g., courage, resistance, compassion, and loyalty), creating and participating in a discourse that undergirds the character of the hearers in the face of imperial violence.

Boyarin distinguishes this Maccabean resistance discourse from later second century CE stories of proto-rabbinic and rabbinic martyrdom<sup>19</sup> discourse. In these stories Boyarin finds less of a resistance modality and more of an affirmation of the particular teacher's lively and deep relationship to Torah. That is, the stories seem more to focus on who the teacher is when facing violence or death. It is the depth of the teacher's devotion to God in often brash demonstration of public teaching of Torah that is the heart of the story, rather than the death itself. Boyarin's larger point in his entire book, *Dying For God*, is that there is a strong lineage of such stories paralleling the more famous Christian stories of the second through fourth centuries.<sup>20</sup> I will return later to his important characterizations of storied Jews and Christians facing death in the section of the various subjectivities in these later martyrological narratives.

Judith Lieu and Boyarin have made similar points about the shift in discourse from the second century on in distinguishing the more resistance-centered discourse about the Maccabees from the later stories' concentration on the identity of those dying. Lieu's case about the Christian stories focuses on the explicit confessions of a "Christian identity" in the stories. In making this case, she reveals her own surprise at this discovery in those stories: "This essay was not scheduled as a discussion of the martyr literature, but as exploring the 'beginning' of 'Christian' identity."<sup>21</sup> Lieu stumbled upon what she has

19. Boyarin tends to place this kind of martyrological story before the Bar Kochba rebellion, rather than in the later second and early third century when he finds similar Christian stories of the same character. Cf. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 118–25, 208.

20. While still also interested in some differences between the Jewish and Christian martyrdom stories, much of Boyarin's larger case is that scholars have erred in portraying the Christians as the martyrological heroes and Jews as the compliant and collaborative characters relative to Roman threats of death and violence.

21. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 226.

seen as the first self-identifications of “Christians as Christians” in this literature, and lays it out<sup>22</sup> in the last chapter of her thesis on the historical process of “constructing early Christianity.”<sup>23</sup> She cites a series of stories of Carpus, Tertullian, Perpetua, Ignatius, Vettius Epagathos, Alexander of Phrygia, Lucius, Agathonike, Sanctus, Polycarp, Germanicus, and Justin<sup>24</sup> in which either the one executed or an observer of an execution uses the phrase “I am a Christian” at or near the moment of an execution.

So for Lieu the discourse in which (at least in story form) the martyrs rest contains a perhaps first, and at least an enduring, emergence of Christianity identity:

[I]t is the textualizing and memorializing of the trials, the often extended suffering, and the deaths of believers which becomes determinative not only of the idea of “the martyr” and martyrdom, but also of what it is to be among those who can say, “I am a Christian.” . . . [T]hose who go to their deaths are not victims but the central actors in a drama through which a new way of understanding is created and maintained. . . . [T]he individual identity of Christian belongs to the martyr.<sup>25</sup>

Yet Lieu does not overestimate the meaning of this alliance between stories of martyrdom and understanding the character of martyrological discourse. In fact, as she explores this connection she discovers ironies and ellipses that make it clear that the martyrdom-Christian formula contains as many contingencies around Christian identity as affirmations.

Central is the act of public affirmation: we might suppose this implicitly conveys allegiance—to Christ; association—with others who claim the same allegiance; adherence—to articles of belief and behavior. Yet for the most part these implications are not exploited, except perhaps in the refusal to sacrifice which is conceived more as a refusal to negate that affirmation than as part of a[n] articulated system of belief. The association with others is ambiguous: they—the churches, the readers—draw their identity from the martyrs, not vice versa; the martyrs do not die for Christianity or for the church; neither, as in the Jewish tradition, do they represent the restoration of a way of life against those who sought, even from within, to mutate it. The expanding concentric circles from local to universal are united only by their common gaze and by the refusal to allow any alternative construction of what they see; their unity is ensured by the unadorned *christianus/christiana sum*.<sup>26</sup>

22. Lieu comes then to propose that these confessions “set[s] the martyrs and the memorializing of their deaths at the centre of the construction of Christian identity.” Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 211.

23. This is the name of her book’s subtitle, with the main title of *Neither Jew nor Greek?*

24. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 213–25.

25. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 212–13.

26. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 228–29.

So discursive martyrdom, including the link between execution and the label “Christian” in Lieu’s analysis, does not mark or contain the arrival of Christian identity per se, but marks a contingent alliance among the readers, the textualized martyr, and the writer. There is a partial tie between the “local” and the “universal,” which in Lieu’s reflection also contains some other elements, even if they too have primarily a resistant, rather than affirmative, character:

The exclusivity built into the martyr’s confession and its consequences coalesces with the opposition to society and the world. It is an opposition which subverts the social reality within which it perforce exists by refiguring both of them. We have seen the construction of an alternative set of values, a diametrically opposed interpretation of experience, a pattern of symbols which invert those that are familiar. Such a construction draws boundaries which are unmistakable and indisputable—against the lawless, the violent, those bent on and destined for destruction.<sup>27</sup>

Perkins’s larger agenda in *The Suffering Self* attends also to martyrdom as discursive. As she puts it, “discursive focus in the second century on the suffering body contributed to Christianity’s attainment of social power by helping to construct a subject that would be present to its call.”<sup>28</sup> Although her scope is significantly larger than martyrdom, it is important that “[t]he Apocryphal Acts, like the Martyr Acts, encoded for Christians a “happy ending” that entailed death that was both personal and social and scripted for Christians a life centered on death and suffering.”<sup>29</sup> She takes special note that martyrdom stories specifically feature the transformation of bodies.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most compelling analyses of discursive martyrdom in the last two decades is Elizabeth Castelli’s examination of the figure of Thecla in her *Martyrdom and Memory*. Dripping with irony and creativity, the lively development of Thecla in Castelli’s chronicle and analysis includes at least five centuries of active elaboration of this figure. Perhaps most stunning is that technically Thecla never was a martyr. That is, even from her very popular beginnings in the late first or early second century through wide-spread devotion to her in painting and objects, she is never executed. The earliest stories have her thrown to the wild beasts in the arena<sup>31</sup> and on a burning pyre, but in each case she escapes death to live a long life as a colleague of Paul, a healer, and a teacher. Yet by the fifth century she is represented visually primarily as a martyr with

27. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 229.

28. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 4.

29. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 30.

30. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 34.

31. When the lions, bulls, bears, and other wild beasts are unable to kill Thecla, she is forced toward a great pit of water full of killer seals (?!), who themselves are killed by lighting when Thecla throws herself into the water to baptize herself.

her hands tied behind her back amidst the wild beasts and is listed among the martyrs. Castelli reflects on the discursive breadth and power of Thecla:

The (fifth century) *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla* documents the emergence of a particular piety devoted to Thecla's intercessory power, but it also offers compelling testimony to the role of collective memory in generating a useable past for Christians out of a story that incorporates compelling episodes of innocent suffering and eventual vindication. Meanwhile numerous other early Christian texts recall the story and example of Thecla, emphasizing variously her averted martyrdom, her ascetic fervor, and her role as healer, traveling evangelist, and apostle. Together with the visual testimony of artistic representations—some produced contemporaneously but most in later periods—these texts amplify and transform earlier traditions about Thecla, creating a new set of memories through processes of association, displacement, consolidation, and expansion. In the hagiographic elaboration of the founding narrative, the diegetical scaffolding remains largely in place, while the discursive elements of the story broaden and take on more responsibility for bearing the increasing weight of the account's theological message. . . . [B]oth the literary and the artistic remnants stage different modes of memory work, reframing and reformulating the Thecla story in terms that render it into a useable past.<sup>32</sup>

With Castelli's analysis one sees that discursive martyrdom can claim as a central figure someone who never was a martyr and who was at the same time one of the central meaningful characters of the broadest spectrum of veneration of martyrs.

In addition to these efforts to think about the kind of discourse in which martyrdom occurs, several scholars have paid attention to the drama of martyrdom as a part of its discursive character. Virginia Burrus examines the Revelation to John, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Martyrs of Lyon*, and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* as improbable enactments that often present unexpected and sometimes even inverted characteristics of the main personae.<sup>33</sup> Especially in his treatment of Jewish "trickster" stories on Jews threatened with state violence and execution, Boyarin describes the performance of these highly comic<sup>34</sup> tales with "plots"<sup>35</sup> as dramatic portraits of negotiative events of resistance and accommodation. Castelli examines the theatricality and dramatic narratives of the martyr Euphemia, "whose suffering and . . . rejoicing at her death recalls the familiar trope of the martyr whose performance answers back to the spectators in an audience-disappointing (or transforming) refusal of the more conventional script of execution."<sup>36</sup> Lieu

32. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 135–36.

33. Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 19–33, 28–35, 67–80.

34. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 55.

35. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 50–51.

36. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 131.

points out that the character of the crowd in the martyrdom stories plays on several levels, so that the drama of the crowd watching the execution (and its active responses of repulsion, spontaneous claims in the crowd of becoming “a Christian,” and admiration of the courage and resolve of the one executed) almost certainly prompts the readers (who in the Mediterranean world of the second through fifth centuries almost always “read” as a public) to respond like the crowd in the story.<sup>37</sup>

Both Castelli and Burrus study the highly designed theatre of the Roman arena as it turns executions into spectacles. Depending on a wide range of scholarship of the arena as spectacle,<sup>38</sup> Castelli shows the wide range of public functions that the arena spectacle performs. And she notes how especially second-century early Christian writers (Athenagoras, Tatian, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom) condemn Roman spectacle, portraying Christians in contrast “as ascetic, violence deploring, and deeply moral.”<sup>39</sup> She probes more deeply, however, as the genre of martyr stories develop, finding in the martyrology itself an appreciation of the spectacle and a development of a spectacular narrative style:

[W]hat is . . . striking is the degree to which Christian accounts of martyrdom nevertheless highlight the spectacular nature of the events they recount. Of course they do so with rhetorical and didactic goals in mind, attempting both to shame the fictive audience for its bloodlust and to offer up exemplars of courage and virtue in the figures of the martyrs. But these rhetorical and didactic goals require graphic descriptions to assure their achievement. . . . Many readers have observed that as the past of Christian suffering recedes, the spectacular quality of martyrdom intensifies. The more distant the events being narrated, the more gruesome and detailed the accounts and the more blood-saturated the representations seem to become. The bodies of the martyrs are increasingly on display, not only for the audience in the narrative, but for the readers/hearers of the narratives as well.<sup>40</sup>

Although too vast to chronicle properly here, it is here where Burrus, Boyarin, and others<sup>41</sup> have found complex counterscripts in the more spectacular martyr stories, especially counterscripts that complicate and in some cases model new kinds of femininity and masculinity. Boyarin especially finds in both the “Jewish” and the “Christian” martyr stories a positive feminization of the male martyrs and a gender-bending of both men and women in their following

37. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 211–19.

38. Cf. Castelli’s two-page long footnote on this scholarship in chapter 4 (*Martyrdom and Memory*, 248 n. 6).

39. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 112.

40. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 120–21.

41. Cf. also Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 24–28, 113–18, 206–9, for her attention to the stories of courage and strength of women martyrs and how that shifts the valence of gender relations and identity.



God's Torah or the emerging Christian gesture of dying. Burrus shows how the portrayal of women killed or threatened in the arena take a gladiatorial pose in ways that reconfigure both the women and the men as more complex agents. Particularly, Burrus underlines how the shame of women in the arena is itself<sup>42</sup> reworked in the martyr stories to give women more agency and to reframe their shame into something powerful and exemplary. In this way she notes how "masculinity is itself queerly rendered malleable and unstable with its explicit link with the suffering endurance of women."<sup>43</sup>

### Who Were the Subjects of Martyrdom?

The last generation of scholarship has been very interested in who were the subjects of discursive martyrdom in the context of Seleucid and Roman executions and the literary work of Jewish and Christian writers between the second century BCE and the sixth century CE. Of course, when raised from this theoretical and literary perspective, the question becomes more complex and the interpretive stakes become higher. The issues here circle around three questions: (1) the relationship of the readers and writers of the martyr stories to the characters in the stories; (2) what the terms "gentiles," "Jews," and "Christians" mean on the levels of both those executed and the writers, readers, and protagonists of the martyr stories; and, (3) the largely unaddressed categories of the wider range of persons (beyond the semi-biblical categories of Jews and Christians) executed by Roman imperial agents.

In terms of the relationship of martyr stories' readers, writers, and protagonists, scholarship has generally moved its focus from an historical imagination of and interest in actual events to the attention to what the stories do for the readers/hearers of the stories. For instance, relative to early Christian martyr stories (as well as a broader range of phenomena), Perkins has:

a particular preoccupation in the discursive climate of the early Roman empire . . . the human self as a body liable to pain and suffering. . . . This representation challenged another, prevailing, more traditional Greco-Roman repre-

42. Castelli also comments at length on these gender dynamics: There are various elements of the Christian appropriation of spectacle that I want to stress in particular here. First, the narrative elements of performance, theatricality, and stage-managing that emerge out of various martyrological texts invite readers to understand the contest that is staged to have multiple layers of resonance and significance—and to begin to see the performative as itself a source of Christian commemorative counterscripts. Second, this negotiation with spectacle often involves a troubling of the received cultural conventions of gender in at least two ways. The masculine ideal of stoic fortitude dominates the arena, and it is so crucial to Christian claims to virtue that women can provisionally embody it—sometimes quite literally. And when this happens, Christian polemics against gender confusion—in the liturgy, certainly, but all the more in the spectacles—dissolve into praise for the woman who has managed to transcend superficial elements of sexual difference.

43. Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 32.

sensation of the self as a soul/mind controlling the body. I intend to try to locate the “triumph” of Christianity within the discursive struggle of these representations. It would be around one of these representative “subjects,” the suffering self that Christianity as a social and political unity would form and ultimately achieve its institutional power.<sup>44</sup>

In this optic, then, subject(s) of Christian martyr stories is/are primarily the “Christian” readers and writers, rather than the protagonists of the stories. As she points out, “The Apocryphal Acts, like the Martyr Acts, encoded for Christians a ‘happy ending’ that entailed death that was both personal and social and scripted for Christians a life centered on death and suffering.”<sup>45</sup> One would wonder in terms of Perkins’s attentiveness to the rise of Christian social and political unity whether the subject of the martyr stories also included people who came from beyond “Christianity” from a variety of peoples, but for some of whom the martyr stories were attractive stories.

Boyarin and Lieu ask respectively very similar questions of the complex intersection of “Jews” and “Christians” in the second through fifth centuries. Both assert that Christians and Jews produce martyr stories as ways of thinking about violence and as ways of negotiating their relationships with Roman domination.<sup>46</sup> In this regard Lieu and Boyarin each are eager to concentrate primarily on the subjects of the readers and writers rather than the historical personae of the stories’ protagonists. Both also see minor dimensions of the stories serving the writers and readers/hearers to negotiate emerging differences between Jews and Christians in the Roman context. But particularly Boyarin presses to see martyr stories as vehicles by which Jews and Christians primarily worked on their self-understanding(s) in the context of Roman domination. He insists that these respective Jewish and Christian martyr stories provided both self-understandings that Jews and Christians (relatively unconsciously) shared and self-understandings that at several particular junctures also included differences between Jew and Christian.

Burrus and Castelli actively assume that the subjectivity of the readers/hearers and writers of the martyr stories are primary. Moss’s focus is on who did or did not do what, and in this regard thinks mostly about the protagonists of the martyr stories. Methodologically, she consults issues around who the writers and readers/hearers of the stories are in order to debunk various historical assumptions about the stories’ protagonists.

In terms of the second significant issue of how the terms “gentiles,” “Jews,” and “Christians” connote, confuse, and/or signify the subjects of martyrdom,

44. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 4.

45. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 30.

46. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 93–126; Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 211–32.

both Lieu and Boyarin again contribute similar and complementary analyses in terms of the ambiguities of distinctions between “Christians” and “Jews” in the first through at least the fourth centuries. Lieu sums her position on this up right after she has laid out a case for martyr stories featuring “I am a Christian” as an important stage in the development of Christian identity:

When and of whom may we use the label “Christian”? The New Testament, notoriously, is far more sparing with the term than most of those who teach and write about it. And, our problem is born out of the tension between, on the one hand, a literature which either does address, or which we have been schooled into reading as if it did address, both individuals and communities as self-consciously involved in the creation of “a new people”, and on the other, a growing historical and social sensitivity which drives us toward seeing both the non-communicating diversity within and beyond the “New Testament churches”, and the capacity to encompass diversity, perhaps even that diversity within first-and second-century “Judaism.” . . . It seems to me equally justifiable to “construct” “Christianity” in opposition to “Judaism” at the moment when Jesus “cleansed the Temple” at least in the literary representation of that event, and to think of that separation only in the fourth century, stimulated by dramatic changes in access to power. . . .

What we think of as “early Christian literature”, particularly but not only that enshrined within the New Testament—but what makes it non-Jewish—constructs for us, and suspect for its readers, an identity. . . . Certainly we cannot imagine that first Jesus, the apostles, or Paul founded a religion. . . . [T]he literature participates in the attempt to give shape and content to the inchoate experiences and conflicting currents of practice which *we* label early Christianity.

The Martyr Acts offer us a glimpse into this process, perhaps more, because they are so highly rhetorically constructed, they invite us into it.<sup>47</sup>

Boyarin works on a similar proposal, but with much more attention to the actual parallel and divergent martyr stories from second- to fifth-century “Jewish” and “Christian” sources. He is most convincing when he quotes “Jewish” and “Christian” sources, taking very similar positions relative to the possibility of being executed by Roman authorities, and then parallels such comparisons with partial evidence that some Jewish teachers may have been somewhat more accommodating in relationship to Roman pressure.<sup>48</sup> So it is clear in Boyarin and Lieu that martyr stories of “Judaism” and “Christianity” manifest strong martyrological subjectivity of the readers/hearers writers, but that the readers/hearers/writers’ subjectivity is often, but not always, enmeshed in conglomerate Judaism/Christianity.

A similarly mixed result also results when one looks carefully at the third issue of overlapping subjectivity of “gentiles” and “Christianity.” One sees

47. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 226–28.

48. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 22–40, 42–61, 63–66, 93–116, 119–25.

such overlapping subjectivity in two kinds of recent scholarship. First of all, the assumption in much empire-critical study of imperial violence is that both Christians and gentiles were being executed according to the same Roman military standards, laws, and jurisprudence.<sup>49</sup> The empire-critical cases portraying Christ movements as expressing resistance against deportation, torture, slavery, and crucifixion base themselves on the links between NT/early Christian texts and Roman practice and legal legitimization of violence and execution. In this regard one must take seriously Pauline, gospel, and apocalyptic texts as understanding their protest against Roman torture as pertaining to the wider population of the nations beyond Christ movement victims.

Although in a completely different vein is Perkins's brilliant case that the "Christian" suffering self relies deeply on pre-Christian and non-biblical literary portraits, sensitivities, and anthropologies. In other words, the subtlety of Perkins's portrait of the early Christian openness to suffering and pain lies to a large degree in her strong case that such openness in Christianity depends to a significant degree on non-Christian and non-Jewish "gentile" insight and writing.<sup>50</sup>

### Concluding Observations

The telling and writing of early Christian history has from its beginnings in the Luke/Acts early epic and Eusebius' various efforts to set everyone straight on what happened contained a strong diet of martyr stories. More or less all later frames of reference in religious elaborations or modern histories have also included substantial doses of martyr stories. Despite the steady salute of early Christian martyrdom throughout both Christian lore and critical scholarship, it seems to me that there are quite significant developments in the way scholarship of the last twenty-five years has approached and treated the stories and subjects of early Christian martyrs. Likewise, it seems to me that these recent decades of scholarship—although not because it has either solved the puzzles of this ancient literature and history or has unified the field methodologically—provide extremely valuable resources for Westar's Christianity Seminar.

Much more clearly than Frensd's famous work fifty years ago, the field of early "Christian" martyrdom studies today brings important nuance to the complex questions of historical record and significant ancient meaning-making relative to the martyr stories. This has much to do with the progress of discursive analysis for the many martyr stories. The strong shift away from seeing the martyr stories as either a basic, if somewhat flowery, historical record or

49. Cf. Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, chap. 1.

50. In many ways this is the entire thesis of the book, and examples occur throughout the whole work; e.g. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 157–214.

curiously pious folklore has opened up ways to study these stories as valuable representations of emerging identity and social expression in the first five centuries CE. Perhaps most promising in these regards is a new way of doing history of early Christian history that is not primarily deconstructive and is instead characterized by interest in social history rather than more bald historical events or personalities.

It is my opinion that serious advance has been made in the comparisons and contrasts of noble death martyrdom from the second century BCE through the first century CE and later stories of the Acts genres of the second through fifth centuries. The field seems perched on the edge of seeing this whole period as connected but with serious shifts from the early era to the latter.

Finally, the last twenty-five years of scholarship has found its voice to do technical studies of specific texts and culture-making, even while speaking in broader terms that allow swaths of portraiture of what discursive martyrdom was. This scholarship is perhaps one of the first elements of writing early Christian history in the past century that allows social history and constructionist methodology to flourish.

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# Sovereignty in Ruins

## The Death of Ignatius and Ecologies of Destruction

Maia Kotrosits

All the pleasures of the world, and all the kingdoms of this earth, shall profit me nothing. It is better to die in Christ Jesus than to reign over the ends of the earth. (Ignatius, *Rom.* 6.1)

But if anyone should interpret Judaism to you, do not hear him. For it is better to hear Christianity from a man who is circumcised than Judaism from one who is uncircumcised. But if neither one speaks about Jesus Christ, they both appear to me as monuments and tombs of the dead, on which are written merely human names. (Ignatius, *Phld.* 6.1)

### Introduction

Ignatius has been a figure of intrigue in the history of early Christianity—his apparent obsession with his own death has attracted both worry and confusion. The idea that his death is not only highly anticipated, but also expressed as emphatically voluntary, has lent Ignatius to overtly pathologizing interpretations that echo ancient worries about a certain “zeal for death” apparently associated with Christians.<sup>1</sup> Stepping to the side of the pathologizing or puzzlement, scholars such as Elizabeth Castelli, Judith Perkins, Judith Lieu, and Daniel Boyarin have read Ignatius’ letters as a construction of a subjectivity or identity, suggesting that he is not only representing himself as self-constituted by suffering<sup>2</sup> but constructing a Christian identity,<sup>3</sup> and even a burgeoning Christian orthodoxy,<sup>4</sup> through his doubly fortifying role as bishop/martyr.

Ignatius is one of the earliest sources for the apparent phenomenon of Christian martyrdom. There is virtual consensus that he dies during the reign

1. On pathologizing tendencies and interpretations of Ignatius (and martyrs at large), cf. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 79; Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 33, 173.

2. Cf. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 173–99.

3. Cf. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 79–85; Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 24, 54, 130–33.

4. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 11.

of Trajan and dies for being a Christian. But the particulars of his arrest are opaque, and there are a few problems with the historical thesis of Ignatius being arrested and executed for being a Christian. I'll begin from this problem of why Ignatius is sent to Rome to die—not to answer the question conclusively, but as an entrée into untangling the larger presumptions of what we think Ignatius' investments to be. The notion that Ignatius dies for being a Christian, that his letters are some of the earliest sources for the phenomenon of Christian martyrdom and an emergent orthodox Christianity already articulating itself as Judaism's "other," is substantially questioned and rethought here.<sup>5</sup> I attempt to localize and contextualize Ignatius apart from the assumed landscape of "Christian orthodoxy," or even an already-operating Christianity. Stepping to the side of not only readings that pathologize Ignatius but also the broader tendency to focus on Ignatius as a singular authority figure, unique deployment of discourse, or an otherwise curious individual, I read Ignatius ecologically, as a thoroughly unexceptional negotiation of national losses and imperial biopolitics. By "ecologically" I mean a reading that is not only cued into the socio-political and material "environment" forming Ignatius and leaving traces in his letters—a dynamic, complicated landscape with multiple networks, forces, and factors in play. But I also mean "ecology" as a term that suggests questions of life/vitality, death, complex interdependence, sustainability, and vulnerability. While "ecology" in liberal culture typically contains subtexts of "the natural," in this paper, in line with theories of biopolitics that follow certain strands of the work of Michel Foucault, the terms of life, death, and sustainability are explicitly de-naturalized and considered as scenes of immanence for state or imperial power.<sup>6</sup> "Environment" is neither a flat landscape nor "nature" as separate from "civilization," but it is full of social, political, discursive, affective, and material elements in dynamic relationship.

To be more explicit about what "ecology" means for this paper, I suggest Ignatius should be understood in the larger ecology of the ancient Mediterranean in the late first and early second centuries that includes aspirations of Judean national sovereignty and their failure, state disciplinary tactics and imperial politics of life and death, diasporic cultural questions (questions of Jewish/Judean practices in Antioch and Syria and Asia minor generally), up-

5. This follows the line of argumentation I offer in my recent monograph, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*. I reproduce the argument here in part in order to build on my reading of Ignatius' letters as haunted responses to diasporic loss and grief.

6. To just briefly offer an example of expressions of biopolitical theory, cf. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, eds., *Biopolitics: A Reader*, which takes as its points of departure Foucault's two essays, "The Right of Death and the Power Over Life" and "Society Must Be Defended." It includes the compatible work of Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Gilles Deleuze, and Slavoj Žižek, among others. This book is a good sampling, but only a sampling, of work theorizing the entwinements of life, death, and state power.



risings of Judean populations across the Mediterranean and their suppression, and material ruins.

I will begin by rereading the Pliny-Trajan correspondence not as a definitive source for locating “Christians” or diagnosing what these “Christians” are doing or as an explanation for why Ignatius dies, but as a source for understanding certain imperial disciplinary mechanisms and how those mechanisms are reflected and engaged in Ignatius’ letters. I will follow by discussing Ignatius’ use of *christianismos* (and *ioudaismos*) as implying not separate religious or cultural phenomena, but questions of sovereignty, steeped in the difficult politics of being Judean in the late first- and early second-century Mediterranean world. Finally, I will re-read Ignatius’ representation of his own death as a way of registering and reflecting on the imperial biopolitical landscape and suggest some ways this reading of Ignatius might bring us toward new understandings of martyrdom at large.

### Pliny, Trajan, and Ignatius: Reconsidering Being “Christian”

The correspondence between Trajan and Pliny, often cited as evidence of subversive Christian practices, or at least tension between Christians and Roman authorities, does not offer as much clarity on Christians as one might hope. While Pliny is writing about his concerns about Christians, Trajan himself seems to have little concern about them and tells Pliny not to seek them out. First, it is clear that Pliny does not know much about the “Christians” or what standard practice is for those being so accused. He is unsure if the problem is just the very designation or whether there is a criminal component to the accusation. He is mostly worried about their ostensible stubbornness in the face of authority. He also notices that the more he addresses the problem the more (and more various) the charges tend to be.<sup>7</sup>

First, it seems that charges are flying, and the specificity of the charges does not matter all that much.<sup>8</sup> Pliny in fact illustrates a kind of arbitrary and casual attitude towards questions of who lives and who dies, and for what. It is also clear that the admission of being a “Christian” occurs in contexts of imperial law, justice, and torture. At least in Asia Minor and, importantly, for Trajan, the problem of “Christians” is murky, relatively innocuous, and subject to torture and death just like anyone else. As I have suggested, this exchange hardly witnesses to a coherent movement with any kind of obvious content—a

7. Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96–97.

8. The primary charge is “superstition,” which was a common slander for suspicious populations. Both Phil Harland and Richard Ascough have emphasized how standard are the charges Pliny applies to the “Christians” here. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 42–43; Ascough, “Translocal Relationships,” 241.

“Christianity.”<sup>9</sup> I have also suggested that, understood in the context of the rest of the Pliny-Trajan correspondence in which Trajan *does* express anxiety over the mixing/unidentifiability of associations in general, “Christian” appears to be more of a smear, and imperial slander, which picks up on circulating rhetoric around Christ in order to produce delinquents. In other words, the Pliny-Trajan correspondence demonstrates a racializing dimension to the term “Christian” that produces, not represents, a population.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, given the contingencies of truth in contexts of torture, the fact that “Christian” seems primarily to be an accusation and that “confessing” one is a Christian occurs in contexts of torture should immediately make us suspicious of the referentiality of “Christian,” at least in any definitive way.

If the Pliny-Trajan correspondence can be said to witness to some broad set of circumstances that affect or explain Ignatius’ situation, it is unlikely that he goes to Rome to die “for being a Christian”—a formulation, by the way, that Ignatius himself never makes.<sup>11</sup> It could be, however, that in Ignatius one hears the echoes of some of the imperial dynamics in the Pliny-Trajan exchange in which “Christian” appears as the racializing assemblage/production of a population through the disciplinary mechanisms of the state. For example, it seems that Ignatius attaches a lot of contingency to being a Christian. He writes to the Romans, “For me, ask only that I have power both inside and out, that I not only speak but also have the desire, that I not only be called a Christian but also be found one. For if I am found a Christian, I can also be called one, and then be faithful, when I am no longer visible in the world” (*Rom.* 3.2). He hopes not only to be “called” (*legōmai*) a Christian, but hopes to be “found” (*eurethō*) one as well. This gap here between being called and being found is provocative, and a similar formulation appears elsewhere in Ignatius’ letters.<sup>12</sup> The notion that for Ignatius his Christian-ness is in question until he dies, that he anticipates

9. Cf. Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, 58–59.

10. Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, 60.

11. Ignatius does say that he dies “for the sake of/on behalf of the name” (*Eph.* 1.1), suggesting that he sees himself as an ambassador or exemplar rather than “martyr” as we have construed it.

12. He writes to the Magnesians that “it is fitting not only to be called Christians, but also to be Christians” (*Magn.* 4.1). Similarly, the moment of his death is also the moment in which Ignatius truly becomes a disciple, in which he will “belong” to Jesus Christ. Ignatius would seem to be scolding the Magnesians for behavior, and while part of this line’s context is about listening to the bishop (“God sees what you’re doing,” he writes in *Magn.* 3.2), the line links instructions to listen to the bishop with waxing on death: “Since then, these matters have an end, and the two things are set together, death and life, and each person is about to depart to his own place. . . .” (*Magn.* 5.1). Indeed, the full line reads, “And so it is fitting not only to be called Christians, but to be Christians, just as there are some who call a person the bishop but do everything without him” (*Magn.* 4.1). The “just as” (*hōsper*) indicates an *analogy* rather than an assumption that “being Christian” has to do already with obedience to the bishop.

the revelation of his being Christian in the arena, would seem to confirm that “Christian” carries the valence of imperial targeting, if not tortured-induced truth production, rather than an identity with obvious or given content. The “truth” of being a Christian, for Ignatius, is revealed primarily in the cross-hairs of state discipline.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the only real content to “being Christian” for Ignatius is imitating Christ in death (as someone else who died under the auspices of the state): he hopes to become worthy of “the name” by dying honorably and voluntarily. In anticipation of his death, he figures himself as Christ or as about to “attain” Christ, thus becoming a “sacrifice” for those in the *ekklēsiai*.<sup>14</sup> Consonant with the noble death traditions that shaped understandings and representations of Jesus’ death, for Ignatius the concept of “Christian” is what gives *meaning* to his death or, put differently, what *rescues his death from meaninglessness* rather than what causes it.

As Elizabeth Castelli writes, “Visibility, remainders, physical presence are all obstacles to Ignatius’ achievement of a stable spiritual selfhood. . . . Indeed, there is a deep-seated tension in Ignatius’ letters between notions of presence and absences, visibility and identity, the body and language.” Ignatius’ desires to disappear completely, to be sublimely transfigured in death,<sup>15</sup> are thus intimately entangled with imperial visibility politics, since “Christian” appears on the imperial map as a way to identify and thus produce a (racialized) population out of the mess and mixing of the late first- and early-second century social landscape. It is an ironic politics, for sure—the moment one is “seen,” located, or pinpointed is the same moment in which one is destroyed. But it is what animates Ignatius’ very sense that dying as a “Christian” is what renders one legible, consequential, and against the threat of oblivion.

### Christianity, Judaism, and Crises of Sovereignty

Related to being “Christian,” of course, is Ignatius’ use of “Christianity.” When Ignatius evokes *christianismos*, readers typically assume that he is referencing a phenomenon, one which (at least for Ignatius) is distinct from Jewish identity. Despite this standard reading of Ignatius in which he represents a burgeoning orthodox Christianity at odds with “Judaism,” though, the term *christianismos* is not attested anywhere before Ignatius. Polycarp, who follows Ignatius, only contains the second usage.<sup>16</sup> This leads Judith Lieu to conclude that Ignatius

13. Ignatius obviously claims “Christian” though. The fact that he has adopted “Christian” for himself and those he is in correspondence with does not mean he is not also witnessing to the circumstances under which “Christian” came into being.

14. More will be said about being a sacrifice later in the paper.

15. Cf. Seeley, *The Noble Death*; Patterson, *Beyond the Passion*, 45–52.

16. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 54.

actually coins the term.<sup>17</sup> How might we understand Ignatius' invention of "Christianity"? What are the quiet resonances of the term that we may have missed, living as we are in the wake of a world religion that goes by the same name?

The contexts in which Ignatius evokes *christianismos* are of course crucial:

But if anyone should interpret Judaism to you, do not hear him. For it is better to hear *christianismos* from a man who is circumcised than *iudaismos* from one who is uncircumcised. But if neither one speaks about Jesus Christ, they both appear to me as monuments and tombs of the dead, on which are written merely human names. (*Phld.* 6.1)

For this reason, since we are his disciples, let us learn to live according to *christianismos*. For whoever is called by a name other than this does not belong to God. So lay aside the bad yeast, which has grown old and sour, and turn to the new yeast which is Jesus Christ. Be salted in him, that no one among you become rotten; for you will be shown for what you are by your smell. It is outlandish to proclaim Jesus Christ and judaize (*ioudaizein*). For *christianismos* did not believe in *ioudaismos*, but *ioudaismos* in *christianismos*, in which every tongue that believes in God has been gathered together. (*Magnesianis* 10)

In both of these quotes Ignatius articulates *christianismos* in relationship to, even in contrast to, *ioudaismos*. The modern connotations of "Judaism" as a religion or as synonymous with Jewish identity have cast these statements in a decidedly supersessionist light. But it is important to note the ancient connotations of both *ioudaismos* and *ioudaizein*. First, as Lieu notes, *ioudaismos* initially appears in Maccabean literature as that for which one dies.<sup>18</sup> She writes that it was an

all-embracing term to encompass the life and belief for which the battle was fought: "those who for the sake of Judaism vied in acting the man" (2 Macc. 2.21; cf. 8.1; 14.38; 4 Macc. 4.26). Perhaps inevitably, bound up with the threat of martyrdom there developed an understanding of Judaism and of the Jewish people set over against a hostile world which was bent on its destruction. Judaism demanded a loyalty of belief and life that could lead to death itself and set the Jewish people apart from all other peoples. It provided a citizenship or city life of its own, even when circumstances gave this no political reality.<sup>19</sup>

Lieu sees *ioudaismos* as imagining universality ("all embracing term," "the Jewish people"), but notes that the term itself is rare outside of Maccabean literature.<sup>20</sup> Paul of course evokes the term, which perhaps accounts for some of Ignatius' interest in it since he is an avid reader/interpreter of Paul's letters,

17. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 54.

18. Cf. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 59; Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 106.

19. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 59.

20. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 192–93.

but the larger meaning and context for *ioudaismos* is what it at stake. If this term is not universally claimed in Ignatius' time and inherently carries Maccabean subtexts, it thus gestures to a very particular way of conceptualizing belonging to Israel, as well as particular meanings around "what one dies for." The history of the Maccabees as primarily associated with an investment in Israel's sovereignty in the face of foreign domination, as well as its militaristic (if contradictory) approach to gentile/hellenistic culture, means that *ioudaismos* is not simply an abstraction of belonging to Israel, though it is that for sure. It is also a political orientation (a decidedly sectarian one), and given the ambivalent and contested nature of Maccabean rule and traditions, would certainly have mixed resonances.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the term "judaize" (*ioudaizein*) was often used to denote a political affiliation, to "side with the Jews," which could of course include adopting some of the cultural markers or practices of Israel such as circumcision.<sup>22</sup> Given the deep entanglement of cultural practices and political affiliations for Israel in the hellenistic and Greco-Roman periods (and before), it would be difficult say that *ioudaizein* only indicates a political orientation or cultural one.

One noted instance of the use of *ioudaizein* to indicate a political (or cultural-political) affiliation appears in Josephus:

Frightful disorder took hold of the whole of Syria; every city was divided into two camps, and the safety of one party lay in their anticipating the other. They (the inhabitants of the cities of Syria) passed their days in blood, their nights, yet more dreadful, in terror. For, though believing that they had rid themselves of the Jews (*ioudaioi*), they kept the judaizers under suspicion. And no one dared kill offhand the ambiguous element in their midst, and it was feared as if it were truly foreign, although it was mixed.<sup>23</sup>

As Cohen observes, the "judaizers" here are those who are "ambiguous" or "mixed," and the passage, as well as the circumstances it depicts, are obviously politically charged.<sup>24</sup> Although Cohen translates *ioudaioi* as "Jews" here, the use of the term "foreign" in the passage to denote the *ioudaioi* suggests "Judean" (as a more concerted geographical or ethnic designation) might be a better fit. The "judaizers" are those for whom a cultural or ethnic category, and thus political affiliation, is hard to pinpoint.

21. Cf. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 19–100.

22. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 182. Cohen's very important book is marked by a number of problematic distinctions, including the assumption that Paul is easily or obviously aligned with a burgeoning Christianity. He thus suggests Paul is one of the singular uses of "ioudaizein" to imply only cultural, not political, domains. Distinguishing cultural and political is itself tricky business, especially regarding "Jewish" culture in the Greco-Roman world.

23. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.462–63 (translation Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*).

24. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 184.

The fact that this passage refers to a conflict in Syria, although one before the Jewish war and thus fifty or more years before Ignatius, gives it even more relevance for understanding Ignatius' use of the same term. In fact, for decades preceding Ignatius' execution, questions of practices associated with "Judeans" or belonging to Israel, were quite thorny in Syria. John Barclay outlines how from the period of the Maccabees and through the Bar Kokhba revolt, associations with Israel/Judea, its traditions, and its practices were regarded suspiciously by others throughout Syria.<sup>25</sup> Barclay also describes the ways in which sabbath observance was part of the struggle for self-preservation and colonial negotiation in this broad period. Sabbath was not just simply what Jews/Judeans might have done, it was a point of contention between authorities and Israel-affiliated people across the board. According to Josephus, Antiochus tried to stop sabbath observance,<sup>26</sup> and in both Asia and Antioch more generally, sabbath observance was not only fought for but seen as a "social and cultural offense."<sup>27</sup>

This gives us some subtext for understanding Ignatius' possible associations around and between *ioudaismos*, *ioudaizein*, and the only Jewish tradition that seems to be a problem for Ignatius: sabbath.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, in his letter to the Magnesians, Ignatius warns against "sabbatizing" (*sabatizantes*):

And so those who lived according to the old ways came to a new hope, no longer practicing sabbath, but living according to the Lord's, in which also our life arose through him and his death, which some deny. (*Magn.* 9.1)<sup>29</sup>

While interpretational history has read this passage as an early attestation to Sunday gatherings of Christ groups, Richard Lewis has shown that this passage hardly confirms the picture. First, while standard translations (including the Loeb Classical Library) insert "day" after "living according to the Lord's," the word "day" does not occur here. It is an insertion meant to clarify the sentence. Early manuscript traditions, according to Lewis, either end the clause at "Lord's" (Latin manuscripts) or (in an early Greek manuscript) read "the Lord's life" (*zōēn zōntes*). While Lewis suggests the latter is the more "correct" version, it seems in any case to be a problem to assume Ignatius is talking about Sunday gatherings, especially since he would be one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest, attestation of it anyway.<sup>30</sup>

25. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 255–58.

26. Josephus, *J.W.* 7.52–53; Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 256.

27. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 442.

28. Even then it appears only to be a problem with respect to the Magnesians since he doesn't mention it anywhere else.

29. My translation is from the Loeb Classical Library.

30. Lewis, "Ignatius and the Lord's Day." Lewis also picks up on the verb "sabbatize," noting that it need not necessarily mean simply "practice sabbath." The Greek fragment of the Gospel of Thomas, for example, includes the awkward-seeming phrase "sabbatize the sabbath": If you do not fast with regard to the world, you will not find the kingdom of

What emerges out of this is a much more fluid and nuanced picture of Ignatius in relationship to Israel's traditions. The Maccabean underpinnings of *ioudaismos*, as well as the long history in Syria (and Antioch specifically) in which Israel's traditions were issues of considerable political controversy and danger, alters our understandings of Ignatius' use of the term *ioudaizein*, as well as his presentation of sabbath. Add to this the intense humiliation and resentment that circulated after the Jewish war, perhaps particularly in Antioch, which was a gathering point for Roman legions assigned to suppress the Judean revolt and where accusations flew regarding rebellious intentions amongst those affiliated with Israel.<sup>31</sup> Driving home the larger sense of turbulence and humiliation, and in the more immediate temporal vicinity of Ignatius' letters, were the rebellions in Egypt, Cyprus, and Cyrenaica (116–117 CE),<sup>32</sup> which resulted in even more casualties and crushing defeats for people affiliated with Israel. The precarity and suspiciousness associated with belonging to Israel in this period was so distinct that Barclay writes that "it would take many generations before their revolutionary reputation would be shed."<sup>33</sup> It seems that especially around the time of the revolts in Egypt, Cyprus, and Cyrenaica one would attract a lot more imperial ire with the label *ioudaios* than *christianos* (although we would be mistaken to think these labels refer to distinct groups of people).

All of this gives us some clue, I think, about why Ignatius might be coining *christianismos* as a verbally and conceptually similar counterpart to *ioudaismos*.<sup>34</sup> If *ioudaismos* resonated with the Maccabean tradition and investments in Israel/Judea's sovereignty, it might very well seem to be an ambivalent or, more to the point, futile cause with which to associate oneself.<sup>35</sup> How could *ioudaismos* give meaning to Ignatius' death if it felt like the hopes for sovereignty associated

God. If you do not sabbatize the sabbath (*sabbatizate ton sabbaton*) you will not see the father. (*G.Thom.* 27) The phrase has been almost universally translated to suggest "practice a true sabbath."

31. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 256. Whether Josephus can be trusted on the details is of course always the question. But his impression of strife, contestation, and resonating effects of the Jewish war can nonetheless be taken seriously.

32. Syria's placement on the edge of Trajan's Parthian campaign (according to Cassius Dio, Trajan dies in Antioch in 117) and the timing of the revolts with this campaign could not have been comfortable. Cassius Dio even describes a dramatic scene of things falling apart in Antioch (*Roman History* 68.24) at the time of Trajan's death.

33. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 258.

34. Ignatius also casts his death as a "ransom" (*Eph.* 21.1; *Smyrn.* 10.2; *Pol.* 2.3; 6.1), which has a history in Maccabean contexts, as well, again suggesting that he is relying on Maccabean conceptualities to make sense of his own death while at the same time eschewing them. Otto Perler, "Das vierte Makkabaerbuch," 47–72. Cf. 4 Macc 6:29; 17:21.

35. Since Ignatius is an avid reader and interpreter of Paul, some of the traction Paul's letters contain for Ignatius might be because of Paul's own change of mind about his affiliations with *ioudaismos*. Paul, too, is less concerned with Jesus' life or teachings than what his death and resurrection mean, not only for belonging to Israel's god, but Israel's collective fate as well.

with it were themselves dead? Indeed, Ignatius himself pointedly relegates *ioudaismos* to the realm of the dead:

But if anyone should interpret Judaism to you, do not hear him. For it is better to hear Christianity from a man who is circumcised than Judaism from one who is uncircumcised. But if neither one speaks about Jesus Christ, they both appear to me as monuments and tombs of the dead, on which are written merely human names. (*Phld.* 6.1)<sup>36</sup>

*Christianismos* is thus not only Ignatius' own rhetorical concoction, but a haunted one at that, calling to mind not only the imperial disciplinary state and visibility politics embedded in "Christian," but Israel's violent, colonial history of struggles for sovereignty (and the impossibility of aspirations of sovereignty) as well.<sup>37</sup> Adding gravity to this haunted rhetorical turn, Ignatius figures his own path to death as a processional in honor of Israel's god in which the recipients of his letters are imagined to be carrying Israel's precious cultic objects.<sup>38</sup> In the wake of the Temple's destruction (and the imperial looting of the Temple, including its sacred objects), this processional resonates as eerie at least, if not a ghostly enactment of Israel's defeat.<sup>39</sup> He associates his own death not only with Christ's, but with the destruction of the Temple, thus implicitly associating Christ's death too with the destruction of the Temple—an association that was of course already at play in earlier literature.<sup>40</sup>

Despite their apparent futility on a national level, aspirations of sovereignty do not completely disappear from Ignatius' letters, however. Ignatius' worries about order in the *ekklēsiai* and the authority of the bishops and his longing to refigure his impending execution as a "voluntary" death, I want to argue, all suggest a kind of melancholic recapitulation of national sovereignty; these are

36. His evocation of circumcision here sounds ironic to modern ears, which anticipate the clusters of Judaism/Jewish/circumcised and Christianity/gentile/uncircumcised to not only align within themselves but oppose each other. But what if we take Ignatius somewhat seriously on this point? If markers of belonging to Israel were manifold and debated (not only in terms of what constitutes "real" belonging, but what was worth putting up a fight for), it seems that Ignatius chooses circumcision as one of the criteria. Nonetheless, *christianismos*, *ioudaismos*, circumcised or not, Ignatius emphasizes that anything without Christ means death.

37. Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, 71–83.

38. Cf. Brent, "Ignatius of Antioch," 30–58; Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 52–59.

39. See my longer discussion in Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, 75–76. Strikingly, Ignatius describes the Ephesian *ekklēsia* as constructing the Temple (*Eph.* 9.2; 15). Paul also describes the social body as a temple (1 Cor 6:19–20), but the question is not just whether he gets it from Paul but why does he like this metaphor of Paul's and what new meaning or poignancy might it contain?

40. E.g., consider Mark's association of the destruction of the Temple with Jesus' death (the tearing of the Temple veil at the moment of Jesus' death and abandonment by God), or Hebrews' figuration of Jesus as both high priest and sacrifice, or the Gospel of John's rather direct affirmation that Jesus body is the new Temple.



locations in which crises of national sovereignty are mourned and anxiously worked out. For instance, at one point Ignatius writes, "all the pleasures of the world, and all the kingdoms of this earth, shall profit me nothing. It is better to die in Christ Jesus than to reign over the ends of the earth" (*Rom.* 6.1), but Ignatius' emphasis on Christ as the "seed of David" also suggests an investment, if a distant or changed one, in sovereignty as an idea. Even the fact that Ignatius preserves the notion of an *entity* (an "*ismos*") for which one dies and that makes one's death meaningful, while on an explicit level it eschews certain forms of national sovereignty, itself seems to express a certain desire to protect against social dissolution or scattering.

I should note that I am assuming that Ignatius' body, the body of the *ekklēsiai*, and the larger social body of Israel are implicated in each other and even have a kind of metonymic relationship to each other. Particularly in the ancient world, the "individual" body was always already a social body.<sup>41</sup> It was both a version of the cosmos in miniature (according to Plato at least) and a reflection of social collectivities (e.g. the *demos* or the *ethnos*). Likewise, the association gatherings and their meals (which is where Ignatius' readers, like so many other groups, are gathering) were expressly understood as little versions of the world (literally, as microcosms) in which social relationships were subject to consideration, perfection, and experimentation.<sup>42</sup>

The notion of sovereignty is specifically a notion in which the registers of individual and social bodies are mutually constituting. Individual citizens' bodily boundaries and presentations or performances were understood to have implications for collectivities in their entirety. Questions of collective political autonomy and subjection resonated explicitly through representations of masculinized conquerors or feminized conquered peoples, for example, and citizens of such collectivities were seen to express or endanger the invulnerability/intactness of the social whole.<sup>43</sup> In other words, while in contemporary theory and philosophy "sovereignty" tends to refer to *either* political salience/autonomy *or* personal self-determination, in the ancient world there would be no "or."

Therefore, in Ignatius aspirations of nationalist sovereignty have collapsed, but they have also been collapsed and concentrated into smaller frames, for example in his intensified focus on oneness, which appears as fears that there

41. There has been much scholarship noticing the metonymic or otherwise connected figurations of the individual and social body in the ancient world, indeed too much to name specifically. Some representation of this work from a variety of fields and perspectives include Halperin, "The Democratic Body"; Douglas, *Purity and Danger*; Martin, *The Corinthian Body*; Perkins, *The Suffering Self*.

42. Taussig, *In the Beginning*, chaps. 3, 4, 7.

43. Cf. Halperin, "The Democratic Body"; Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*; Burrus, "The Heretical Woman"; Knust, *Abandoned to Lust*.

will be “corruption” or too much fracture or variety,<sup>44</sup> or in his reprimand to act “civilized” and maintain self-control.<sup>45</sup> Ignatius’ worries about dissolution, about the loss of integrity/wholeness, inflect his bodily self-presentation a bit differently, however. He insists he must die “voluntarily,” echoing his larger interests in mastery and self-control, but he manages his impending dissolution metaphorically. He becomes “food for beasts,” but in doing so becomes wheat ground for the “pure bread of Christ” (*Rom.* 4.1). He wants nothing of himself to remain, for his total disappearance means he will “truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ” (*Rom.* 4.2).

Indeed, worries about “remains,” and deadness regularly drift in and out of Ignatius’ letters.<sup>46</sup> Ignatius rankles at the apparent deadness of *ioudaismos* and seeks a vitality only thought possible through Christ. But ironically his own sovereignty, his own hopes for life in Christ, are articulated in and through death and ruin: Ignatius’ body itself becomes the ruins out of which *christianismos* becomes possible, and the *ekklēsiai*, as the social body whose wholeness saves Ignatius from insignificance, become a resurrected, or at least reconstructed, temple.<sup>47</sup> Ignatius’ worries about deadness and remains are not only a response to the rubble of the Temple or Israel/Judea’s sovereignty in ruins, however. They register another related set of vulnerabilities of which the inherent vulnerability of belonging to Israel is a part: the larger imperial ecology of life, sustenance, and death.

### Death in the Social Body: Violence, Vitality, and Eating

I have no pleasure in the food that perishes nor in the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, from the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is imperishable love. (*Rom.* 7.3)

If Ignatius expresses hopes for a kind of sovereignty outside of the national frame, his imagination of his death as haunted processional casts hope for any kind of sovereignty as haunted. That hope is haunted not just by the nation, but also by a politics of life and death (a biopolitics) in which vitality is inextricably tied to destruction. Theories of biopolitics (and their corollary, theories of necropolitics), which (following Foucault) highlight the variety of ways that nation-states and imperial powers assume the prerogative of deciding who lives and

44. *Eph.* 3.2; 4.2; 5.1; 13; 14.1; 20.2; *Magn.* 1; 6.2; 7.2; 11; 13; 15; *Phld.* 3.3; 4; *Smyrn.* 1.2; *Trall.* 11.

45. *Eph.* 10.2–3; 14.1.

46. At one point Ignatius also tells the Magnesians not to be “rotten” (*Magn.* 10.2). Cf. also Ignatius’ accusation that whoever denies Christ’s actual suffering “bears a corpse” (*Smyrn.* 5.2).

47. *Eph.* 15.3.

who dies, including through direct violence or war, neglect the allocation and withdrawing of healthcare, food, and other resources, uneven crisis management, environmental wreckage, and particularly through policies of eminent domain and American exceptionalism seek to preserve “a way of life” or “our way of life.”<sup>48</sup> While I do not wish to transpose contemporary systems of the management of life and death onto the first and second centuries, I do think a general recourse to biopolitical theory offers new ways to consider ancient cultural habits, sensibilities, and discourses that find confluence in Ignatius.

I am particularly interested in Ignatius’ desire to become “food for beasts,” wheat ground for the “pure bread of Christ.” Ignatius not only reverses the familiar so-called “words of institution” (instead of bread becoming body, body becomes bread here, as Castelli notes), thus placing himself via metaphor at the center of the meal gatherings. But a few lines later, Ignatius likens the soldiers attending him to “wild beasts . . . who become worse when treated well” (*Rom.* 5.1), not only insulting them by calling them animals, but making a kind of subtle commentary on the imperial “food chain.”<sup>49</sup> In doing so he is echoing back darkly the Roman imperial propaganda that connected war and the subjection of peoples to “prosperity,” often represented as abundance, harvest, or the fertility of land. So of course for Ignatius, life in this world is death, and death nonetheless promises vitality.<sup>50</sup>

The arena, the scene of Ignatius’ impending death, has already been described by scholars in somewhat ecological terms, and even with some biopolitical/necropolitical subtexts.<sup>51</sup> The theatrical dimension of the arena in which battles, both mythological and historical, are re-enacted, in which criminals are executed and animals devour the condemned, all might be imagined as a kind of “biopolitical drama” that offers up for consideration (through “consumption” by spectators) the ways in which imperial power orchestrates the terms of life and death at large and how the imperial social body feeds and sustains itself with the bodies of certain (criminalized, racialized) populations. Ancient discourse on the arena is full of latent recognitions that the people who die in the arena die “like animals” and that the arena is a place in which “civilization” both depends on the dehumanization of certain populations and itself comes

48. On American exceptionalism, biopolitics/necropolitics, and the sliding referentiality between queerness and terrorism, see Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

49. In a perhaps similar vein, in *Eph.* 7.2 Ignatius also describes those who “bear the name in wicked deceit” as “raving dogs who bite.”

50. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 83.

51. Cf. while not using the term ecology or biopolitical analytics, the following scholars do analyze the arena for its drama of imperial violence and self-understanding, attending to many actors, participants, and cultural dynamics in the spectacles; see Kahl, *Galatians Reimagined* (chap. 3); Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*; Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*; Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*.

dangerously close to devolving into “animalistic” states.<sup>52</sup> The boundaries of civilization in the arena, particularly, are understood through the category of the animal and terms of consumption, either visual or literal.

Ignatius’ recourse to sacrifice as a way of understanding his death too might be read ecologically. Sacrifice has been naturalized as a (loaded) term around Jesus’ death and, while it is clear that Ignatius is borrowing from earlier links between Jesus’ death and sacrifice (links that seem especially strong after the practice of sacrifice in Judea was foreclosed by the destruction of the Temple), the context for that link itself requires unpacking. First, as Andrew McGowan has argued, there is material context for such a link: associations often met in dining rooms adjoining temples where sacrifices were performed; this is indeed often where they got their meat for their meals (and what may have been causing problems at the Corinthian gatherings). Association gatherings were also a primary place in which the dead were remembered. So the link between the practice of sacrifice (and its many various meanings) and the remembrance of the dead is not surprising.<sup>53</sup>

But whatever those various meanings, sacrifice was also part of material economies and expressions of cultural distinctness, as well as simply a mode of production of food. As a mode of production of food, however, it was one in which (at least in the sacrifice of animals) it likely contained in it already ample space for biopolitical reflections about the inter-implication of life/sustenance and death, especially on a grand scale (i.e., the imperial level). In combination with the “for you” formulation of noble death mythologies, such a notion of a death being a “sacrifice” or “ransom” (if we can separate those terms from their over-familiarization) manages to double or at least intensify the sense that one’s living is entwined with another’s dying.

Yet Ignatius’ use of sacrifice, ransom, and “for you” language for conveying the meaning of his death is also where his re-figuration of sovereignty becomes troubled. His sovereignty, as a wish for the autonomy and integrity of the social body, is figured through his voluntary and virtuous death. But because his death is figured as a sacrifice “for you,” it partakes of the same economies, cultural politics, and imperial regimes of life and death from which he wishes to sublimely absent himself in the first place. The figure and rhetoric of “Christ” for Ignatius encapsulates and entwines questions of biopolitics and sovereignty distinctly: he is the “seed of David” whose sacrificial death promises a kind of

52. Cf. Kotrosits, “Seeing is Feeling.”

53. Cf. Andrew McGowan, “Eucharist and Sacrifice.” See also Knust and Varhelyi, eds., *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice* for a richer, more complicated picture of practices and meanings associated with the term “sacrifice.” Because of the variety of practices and meanings accorded to “sacrifice” in the ancient world, the question of biopolitics/necropolitics and sacrifice is a knotty one, on which I only offer some initial and quick reflections here and which deserves much more time and space.

post-imperial vitality for those who can die in heroic subjection. Christ renders senseless violence as cosmically meaningful, but so does the imperial rhetoric of life and death as that which is destroyed or eaten is absorbed into the social body for its "greater good." That is to say that Ignatius is not *refusing* the imperial politics of life and death as much as simply *registering* those politics in a Judean key, registering himself and his ruined nation as part of an intimate and sorrowful ecology in which the life and prosperity of the imperial social body depends on a set of sinister and consumptive interrelations.

### Conclusion: Reading "Martyrdom" Ecologically

Far from a singular figure who contributes unique theological content to an always-already phenomena of Christianity or one of the first people to be put to death for his faith in Christ, Ignatius is simply another link, vulnerable and complicit, but also creative, in the chain of Rome's politics of living and dying. Rather than pathologically obsessed with his own death, he is captivated by imperial politics of visibility in which the promise of being seen goes hand-in-hand with heightened odds of being destroyed. Perhaps most significantly, rather than offering evidence of supersessionism at the heart of early orthodoxy, Ignatius' letters and language are tightly knotted to the history and precarious nature of belonging to Israel. They are haunted by proximity to revolt, cultural ambivalences, social suspicion, and longings for and collapses of national sovereignty. In fact, those are the ruins that Ignatius seems most unable to stand. An already diffuse Israel is continuously being (or at least fears being) "swallowed" into the imperial whole, and so Ignatius will "volunteer" himself to become food for beasts if he thinks it means the social body can in some manner remain intact. I would like to underline here that Ignatius needs to be seen *as a Judean diasporic figure*, one whose ambivalences about certain strands or dimensions of Judean/Israelite tradition (Maccabean traditions, sabbath) are not only completely understandable in the larger ecology of the early second-century Mediterranean world but need to be understood alongside his deep connection to scripture/prophetic traditions, the Temple, certain recapitulations/recalibrations of national sovereignty and, of course, Israel's god. Not only is Ignatius fully connected to Israel/Judea, but it is obvious that his congregations are too, since they are the ones "sabbatizing," "judaizing," and questioning whether Ignatius' *christianismos* coheres with Hebrew scriptures.

With this reading I would also like to propose a reconsideration of not just Ignatius' death but martyrdom at large in ecological terms. Rather than a phenomenon, and even more than a discourse or a construction, what we call "martyrdom" might be reconsidered as unexceptional symptoms of and reckonings with biopolitical and necropolitical networks of power. I would also like to suggest that the (overlapping) questions of agency, selfhood, self-mastery,

power, and Christian identity that typically attend readings of martyrological materials be recalibrated as questions of sovereignty, belonging, diaspora, and social integrity/vulnerability. While questions of discourse, identity, and power that arose relative to martyrdom in the wake of the linguistic turn certainly moved us forward in terms of understanding the possible contexts and effects of “martyrdom” (or more broadly construed, narratives of empire and violent death), importantly differentiating certain constructions of victimhood from their realities, I want to suggest that reorienting ourselves toward sovereignty, belonging, diaspora, and social integrity/vulnerability will push us even further into non-exceptionalist interpretations of “martyrdom.” In other words, what if what we call martyrdom is neither particularly special, problematic, or subversive? This changes the frame so that the question is not even “what is martyrdom,” which will probably always cause us to seek a definition of it as curious, special, or unique in either its subversiveness or its problematics. The question is how to thoroughly reconsider the social fabric of Ignatius’ (and others’) presumed historical moment so that he is not a strange outlier, extreme pathological case, narcissistic authority figure, or even a keystone in the arch of orthodoxy, but simply a thermometer of the moment in which he lives and dies, a knot in a network, (or better) one point of convergence of numerous historical forces, factors, and feelings—and only one among others.

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