Estne Semen Sanguis Christianorum?

Martyrdom, Noble Death and the Christianization of the Roman Empire

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Table of Contents

0. Introduction

When thinking of Christianity in the Roman Empire prior to Constantine, most of us can easily imagine hapless men and women being thrown to the lions, crucifixions, and other bloody scenes carried out in the midst of Roman arenas. We may also think of the countless martyr tales that recount the words and sufferings of said men and women. And even though modern readers may well find the gruesome details of many such stories distasteful[1], admiration for and veneration of some of these martyrs continue unto the present day – as does the language of 'persecution' and 'martyrdom'. It therefore seems clear that in the ancient and modern world alike, martyrdom was regarded with a great deal of interest and admiration.[2]

It is not surprising, then, that scholars once tended to believe ancient Christian authors when these wrote that martyrs could draw others to the faith[3], as most famously expressed by Tertullian around 200 CE: "the blood of Christians is seed [of the church]".[4] In recent decades, however, researchers have voiced strong doubts about the importance of martyrdom to Christian proselytism, stating that there is little to no evidence of conversions (directly) inspired by martyrdoms.[5] Some have also suggested that crowds witnessing martyrs' public deaths may not have interpreted these deaths in the ways suggested by Christian accounts: rather than realizing that the martyrs had died for some sort of Christian belief, and considering for themselves whether those beliefs were indeed worth dying for, they may also have viewed

1. See: Lucy Grig, 'Torture and truth in late antique martyrology', *Early Medieval Europe* 11:2 (2002) 321-336, 321-322.
2. Compare: Elizabeth A. Castelli, 'Persecution and Spectacle: Cultural Appropriation in the Christian Commemoration of Martyrdom', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 7:1 (2005) 102-136, 102.
3. Danny Praet, 'Semen est sanguis Christianorum (?): Een herinschatting van de rol van de christenvervolgingen in de kerstening van het Romeinse Rijk', *Handelingen: Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis* 47: (1993) 257-268, 257.
4. Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* L.14. For the *Apologeticum,* this thesis uses the Loeb edition by T.R. Glover & G.H. Rendall: *Apologeticum,* in: Tertullian, Minucius Felix. *Apology. De Spectaculis. Minucius Felix: Octavius.* Edited and translated by T.R. Glover & G.H. Rendall, *Loeb Classical Library* 250 (Cambridge, MA 1931).
5. Macmullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (AD 100-400)* (New Haven, CT 1984) 30; Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York, NY 1986) 441; Praet, 'Semen est sanguis (?)', especially 263-264. See also: Jan N. Bremmer, *The Rise of Christianity through the eyes of Gibbon, Harnack and Rodney Stark* (Groningen, 2010) 42/60-61; Éric Rebillard *The Early Martyr Narratives: Neither Authentic Accounts nor Forgeries* (Philadelphia, PA 2020) 20 (who cites Praet 1993).

martyrs as mad, or simply have remained ignorant about their motivations.[6] Finally, it seems that literary accounts of martyrdom were mostly intended for Christian audiences, not for evangelizing purposes.[7] It would seem, therefore, that non-Christians generally had only limited knowledge of and interest in Christian martyrdom and its religious underpinnings.

These reservations about the conversion potential of Christian martyrdom and its literary representations force us to ask important questions about the 'pagan' reception of these phenomena: what evidence do (Christian) sources from the Principate provide for conversions induced by witnessing or reading about Christian martyrdom? How similar was (the literary representation of) Christian martyrdom to the 'noble death'[8] traditions that permeated the Roman Empire, and how would this degree of (dis)similarity have affected the reception of Christian martyr narratives? Do we have evidence of responses to Christian martyrdom besides admiration or conversion?

0.1 Research Question

Taking Tertullian's aforementioned statement as a starting point, this thesis seeks to uncover the ways in which ancient audiences most likely responded to demonstrations and accounts of Christian martyrdom, in order to evaluate their role in the Christianization of the Roman Empire. The overall question of this thesis might hence be formulated as 'to what extent did Christian martyrdom contribute to the Christianization of the Roman Empire (prior to the conversion of Constantine)?'.[9] By substituting 'Christianization' for 'conversion', the thesis aims to expand on investigations that focus exclusively on the ability of Christian martyrdom to convert 'outsiders', and instead opts for a more general examination of the various ways in which Christian martyrdom may have contributed not only to the spread, but also the consolidation of the religion. By only looking at the initial 'conversion' of new

6. Macmullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire,* 20/30. See also: Fox, *Pagans and Christians,* 441; Praet, 'Semen est sanguis (?)', 260-262.
7. Macmullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 20-21; Boudewijn Dehandschutter, 'Leben und/oder sterben für Gott bei Ignatius und Polykarp', in: Regina Grundmann & Sebastian Fuhrmann (eds.), *Martyriumsvorstellungen in Antike und Mittelalter: leben oder sterben für Gott?* (Leiden 2012) 191-202, 195; Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives,* 20.
8. For the meaning of 'noble death', see the section 'Terminology' below (0.3.).
9. For the motivation behind limiting our time-frame to the first three centuries CE, see below (0.4).

members, we might miss the (potential) ways in which martyr stories contributed to Christian identity-formation, religious instruction, and communities' ability to survive 'persecution'.[10] A further reason for moving away from such a limited focus on conversion comes from the fact that the available sources are not well-suited for answering questions about the precise scale on which martyrdom-induced conversion occurred, since they do not contain reliable-enough data about the spread of Christianity to allow for such quantification.[11] What's more, most ancient texts that deal with martyrdom were written by Christian hagiographers and apologists, who would have had obvious incentives to represent martyrdom as being more successful at inspiring positive views of Christianity than it actually was.[12] The same applies to the few extant non-Christian sources that discuss Christian martyrdom, which may contain an obfuscating bias working in the opposite direction.[13]

The most prudent course of action therefore seems to be to adapt our mode of inquiry to the sources' limitations, since each source appears to be suited for answering a distinct set of questions. This thesis' sub-questions therefore vary from chapter to chapter, depending on the ancient texts under investigation. Collectively, they constitute a three-pronged approach. First, this dissertation critically examines ancient claims about audiences' (favourable) reactions to witnessing martyrdom, in order to establish the 'direct' evidence that our sources provide for the supposed *semen-sanguis*-mechanism.[14] To this end, it examines two prominent martyr

10. See for instance Ramsay Macmullen's *Christianizing the Roman Empire,* which argues that the initial act of conversion mostly resulted from witnessing 'miracles' and exorcisms performed by Christian missionaries, not from learning about Christian doctrine. Instead, he argues, converts would only have received much of their knowledge about Christianity during the instruction that followed such conversion: Macmullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire,* 1-9/17-42. See also the work of Rodney Stark, who presents an interesting hypothesis that states that martyrs can increase the perceived 'value' of their religion in the minds of others: Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: a Sociologist reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ 1996) 172-174.
11. See for example Jan Bremmer's critique of the calculations found in the work of Rodney Stark - as well as other commonly cited 'statistics' – about the spread of Christianity, which he argues are based on quicksand: Bremmer, *Rise of Christianity,* 50-51/58/64.
12. See: Praet, 'Semen est sanguis (?)', 257-260/263-264.
13. For example, Loukianos' *De Morte Peregrini* satires Christians as gullible fools who mistakenly believe they will live forever, resulting in a contempt for death and voluntary self-devotion – which are, of course, essential qualities for martyrs: Loukianos, *De Morte Peregrini,* XIII. For an English translation of this text, this thesis uses the translation by H.W. and F.G. Fowler: Fowler, H.W. & F.G., *The Works of Lucian of Samosata* (Oxford/New York, NY 1905). For the Greek original, it uses the edition by A.M. Harmon: Lucian, *Works.* With an English Translation by: A.M. Harmon (Cambridge, MA/London 1936).
14. This term (in Dutch: "semen-sanguis-mechanisme") is used by: Praet, 'Semen est sanguis (?)', 263-264/268.

narratives[15], as well as the oeuvre of the Christian apologist Tertullian.[16] While this evidence has been reviewed before, this paper wishes to add to those investigations by thoroughly contextualizing these claims in light of the intentions and 'strategies' of the texts in which they occur.

Second, the thesis seeks to uncover the similarities and differences between Christian martyrdom narratives and noble death traditions, in order to reconstruct the most likely ancient reactions to martyrdom through a separate, more 'indirect' method as well. This method proceeds from the assumptions that audiences would have been more receptive to Christian martyrdom accounts insofar as these contained 'mainstream' pagan ideas and motifs, and that common themes in the overall tradition of noble death reflect this mainstream. For a comparison of Christian martyrdom to noble death, this thesis relies on an extensive discussion of the *Acta Alexandrinorum*[17], as well as existing historiography on other 'pagan' and Jewish texts.

Finally, the thesis compares the roles that Christian martyr literature and the *Acta Alexandrinorum* played in their respective communities, and discusses to what extent the enduring popularity of martyr texts – as opposed to the disappearance of the *AA* – resulted from the Christian texts' innovative features. This section thus focuses on the role that martyr stories may have played among those who had already joined a Christian community.[18] Together, these direct and indirect methods[19] should provide us with a clearer picture of the role that martyrdom played in the Christianization of the Roman world.

0.2 Historiography

From Eusebius onwards, Church historians have often regarded Christian martyrdom as a crucial factor in the conversion of the Roman Empire. Pagans, the reasoning

15. Namely, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* and *Martyrdom of Polycarp.* For an overview of these texts and the reasons behind their inclusion in this paper, see chapters 0.4-0.5 and I.1.
16. Namely *Ad Martyras* and *Apologeticum*. For an overview of these texts and the reasons behind their inclusion in this paper, see chapter 0.4-0.5 and III.I.
17. For an overview of these texts and the reasons behind their inclusion in this paper, see chapters 0.4-0.5 and II.1.
18. This discussion takes place in the section 'The *Acta Alexandrinorum* and Christian martyrdom' (II.4.).
19. In the remainder of the introduction, the results produced by these methods are refered to as 'direct' and 'indirect' evidence, respectively.

went, were often inspired by the martyrs' willingness to endure persecution, and would subsequently have converted to the religion of those executed. This view can also be found in the works of more modern historians, including E.R. Dodd's influential study 'Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety', who summarized the argument as follows: "…] Christianity was judged to be worth living for because it was seen to be worth dying for".[20] The prominence of this view among previous generations of scholarship is not surprising, since it essentially repeats claims made by a multitude of early Christian authors (including Tertullian) about the importance of martyrdom to the Church. Additionally, a strong focus on martyrdom makes sense in light of the emphasis that scholars often placed on the 'persecution' of Christians in the Roman Empire. Not only did persecution - which until a few decades ago was generally judged to have been a widespread and frequent phenomenon[21] – create the martyrs whose examples supposedly helped to spread Christianity, but is also promoted the belief that Christians found themselves in a state of conflict with their surrounding society.[22] Were one to accept this belief as fact, it would make sense to look for the comparative advantages that led to Christianity's 'victory' over its oppressors. A similar conflict-based approach can also be seen in the works of Peter Brown and E.R. Dodds, who saw persecution and martyrdom as key to Christianity's triumph over competing religious cults.[23]

However, the putative link between martyrdom and conversion has been challenged since the 1980's or so.[24] What's more, the notion that Christians were generally 'persecuted' in the Roman Empire (prior to the mid-third century), and therefore often faced martyrdom, has been substantially nuanced; this places an upper limit on the amount of instances in which ancient audiences would have come into contact with displays of Christian martyrdom.[25] In addition to the reservations mentioned above, Danny Praet has offered several persuasive arguments against the view that martyrdom contributed substantially to the conversion of 'pagans'.

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20. E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge 1965) *Non vidi.* This quote is cited by: Praet, 'Semen est sanguis (?)', 259.
21. Nevertheless, Edward Gibbon argued for the limited extent of the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire already in the eighteenth century. See: Bremmer, *Rise of Christianity,* 20-23.
22. For more complete elaborations of this point, including relevant literature, see chapters I.3 and III.2-3.
23. This paragraph is mainly based on: Praet, 'Semen est sanguis (?)', 257-260.
24. See for example the publications of Ramsay Macmullen, Robin Lane Fox, and Danny Praet (cited in footnote 5).
25. See chapters I.3. and III.2-3.

These range from the limited nature of 'persecution' and actual instances of martyrdom during the first two centuries of Christianity's existence, to pagan authors' comments about the stubbornness or foolishness of Christian 'martyrs', the fact that Christianity remained relatively small in the period before Constantine – even though this was precisely the era in which judicial violence against Christians occurred[26] -, and, finally, the fact that 'orthodox' Christians in Late Antiquity themselves showed little empathy for those 'unorthodox' Christians who were 'martyred' at the hands of the now-Christian authorities. In short, Praet believes, both the frequency with which pagans came into contact with martyrs, as well as pagan reactions to these confrontations, differed significantly from how they are portrayed in earlier scholarship.[27]

It would seem, then, that historians have already presented substantial evidence for the view that acts of witnessing martyrdom were of only minor importance to the conversion of pagans in the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, these studies do not appear to refute – or may even affirm[28] – the notion that martyrdom and its literary representations played an important role in the sustainment and development of Christian groups. Nor do they seem to have undertaken a comparative study of the literary representations of martyrdom and noble death, like this thesis intends to do. To be sure, there are many (recent) studies that focus on the literary aspects of ancient texts that deal with martyrdom and noble death, which have yielded valuable insights into the discourse, ideologies, and intertextuality of those texts.[29] In doing so, they have demonstrated the existence of a considerable degree of cultural overlap

26. See for this point also: Fox, *Pagans and Christians,* 441.
27. Praet, 'Semen est sanguis (?)', 260-268.
28. See for example: Fox, *Pagans and Christians,* 441; Bremmer, *Rise of Christianity,*11/60-61.
29. See for instance: Mary Louise Carlson, 'Pagan Examples of Fortitude in the Latin Christian Apologists', *Classical Philology* 43:2 (1948) 93-104; Grig, 'Torture and truth', 321-336; Elizabeth A. Castelli, 'Persecution and Spectacle: Cultural Appropriation in the Christian Commemoration of Martyrdom', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 7:1 (2005) 102-136; L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York, NY 2008); Jan Willem van Henten, 'Noble death and martyrdom in antiquity', *Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* 80: (2012) 85-110; Ari Z. Bryen, 'Martyrdom, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Procedure', *Classical Antiquity* 33:2 (2014) 243-280; Monika Pesthy-Simon, 'Imitatio Christi?: Literary Models for Martyrs in Early Christianity', 83-96, in: Marianne Sághy & Edward M. Schoolman (eds.), *Pagans and Christians in the Late Roman Empire; New Evidence, New Approaches (4th-8th centuries)* (Budapest 2017); Carly Daniel-Hughes & Maia Kotrosits, 'Tertullian of Carthage and the Fantasy Life of Power: On Martyrs, Christians, and Other Attachments to Juridical Scenes', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28:1 (2020) 1-31; Alexander D. Perkins, 'Tertullian the Carthaginian: North African Narrative Identity and the Use of History in the *Apologeticum* and *Ad Martyras*', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28:3 (2020) 349-371.

between the textual productions of 'pagans' and 'Christians'.[30] These studies, however, are often hesitant about connecting the inner world of the texts to the real world of the Principate.[31]

Thus, while there exist works that deal with the alleged historical link between martyrdom and (initial) conversion on the one hand, and studies that investigate the relationship between ancient texts dealing with Christian martyrdom and/or noble death on the other, there do not appear to be many studies that attempt to integrate the two. This thesis, however, argues that a comparative study of the relevant texts can reveal the broad outlines of ancient debates about topics relating to Christian martyrdom, so that the inner worlds of the texts can be connected to actual cultural dynamics in the empire. Furthermore, this thesis argues that people in the ancient world would have been more likely to embrace 'ideologies' of Christian martyrdom insofar as martyrdom's (literary) representations portrayed it in ways analogous to traditions of noble death and the empire's dominant values. By determining the degree of similarity, then, we gain a clearer image of how ancient audiences would likely have reacted to Christian martyr stories. This thesis also uses such comparisons between 'pagan' and 'Christian' texts as a way to investigate the ways in which martyr stories may have contributed to the 'survival' of Christian congregations, following the assumption that the lasting popularity of such stories resulted from their ability to perform certain functions for their associated communities that texts like the *Acta Alexandrinorum* could not do for theirs.[32] As such, this dissertation argues that literary analyses are relevant to the question of the historical relation between martyrdom and Christianization.

0.3 Terminology

So far, this thesis has used the term 'noble death' to refer to stories about violent deaths that are of an arguably similar character to that of Christian martyrdom. This is

30. For this point, see chapters I and III (*passim*).
31. See for instance Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 4-5, who writes: "Some newer studies of early Christian martyrdom, however, have bracketed the question of "what really happened" and turned instead to the narrative effect of the texts and their function within early Christian communities. Elizabeth Castelli, for example, explains that in her newest book, Martyrdom and Memory, the "'what really happened?' questions that motivate many scholars across the spectrum are displaced by questions of 'what meanings are produced?' and 'what ideological impulses are satisfied?"
32. For the decline of the *Acta Alexandrinorum,* see chapter II.4.

because ‘martyrdom’ is a specifically Christian term that, if used interchangeably, might obscure the differences between it and noble death. This does not mean, however, that there are no significant similarities between Christian martyrdom and its representations, and the assorted set of stories about heroic suicides, deaths in battle, and executed philosophers that scholars refer to as ‘noble death’.[33] Indeed, much of this thesis is dedicated to analysing the ways in which Christian martyrdom was shaped by more widespread beliefs and practices. The thesis therefore employs the distinction between ‘noble death’ and ‘martyr’ simply because of its heuristic value; while the former term points to all individuals in the ancient world who are said to have died ‘heroically’, the latter refers specifically to those whom Christian texts call ‘martyrs’. Likewise, ‘noble death traditions’ refers to instances of noble death as well as their associated literary tropes, discourse, ideologies etc., with ‘martyrdom’ acting as its Christian counterpart.

Another relevant concept is that of ‘conversion’. As Praet has pointed out, ‘conversion’ can be split into two separate ‘schemes’. The first consists of conversion as understood by historians like Ramsay Macmullen, namely the adoption of ‘faith’ in response to witnessing some ‘miraculous’ power or event. The second refers to a ‘socio-psychological’ ‘frame’, wherein pagans would have accepted Christianity based on its doctrines (after witnessing acts of martyrdom).[34] Since Christian texts refer to these phenomena in identical terms, however, this thesis uses ‘conversion’ to refer to both ‘schemes’, even as it seeks to determine in which of these two senses this word must be understood when used in an ancient text.[35]

Lastly, this thesis relies on the term ‘Christianization’ in order to refer to both initial conversion, as well as the processes through which individuals and communities became more ‘Christian’. However, defining what is ‘Christian’ is a more thorny issue, since Christianity in this period (around 200 CE) was not a unified movement, and because the ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’ ‘worlds’ were generally far more intertwined than early Christian authors want us to believe.[36] This thesis therefore regards as ‘Christian’ anyone who would have described themselves as such, and uses

33. For an overview of noble death (and its relation to Christian martyrdom), see: Henten, ‘Noble death and martyrdom’, 85-106.
34. Praet, ‘Semen est sanguis (?)’, 258-259. See also: Macmullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire,* 4-5.
35. See chapter I.5, which discusses the meaning of ‘conversion’ in *Passio Perpetuae*.
36. See especially: Éric Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450 CE* (Ithaca, NY 2012).

'Christianization' to refer to the development of identities, beliefs, discourses, and literature that ancient sources present as 'Christian'.

0.4 Selection of sources

Naturally, a full examination of the role of martyrdom in the Christianization of the Roman Empire would go beyond the scope of this paper, which instead focusses on a small number of Christian and non-Christian texts from around 200 CE. The first and foremost motivation for selecting texts from this particular timeframe resides in the fact that this thesis intends to study the effects of martyrdom prior to the conversion of Emperor Constantine, an event which fundamentally altered the realities of Christian martyrdom and conversion.[37] This leaves us with a number of literary sources from the first three centuries CE. Second, although the exact dating of many texts remains controversial, it seems that Christian martyr literature first appeared around the turn of the second century (broadly defined).[38] Third, the *Acta Alexandrinorum,* a set of texts sometimes depicted as a sort of 'pagan' counterpart to the Christian martyr texts, appear to have reached the height of their popularity around the same period.[39] Lastly, the writings of Tertullian – whose statement that *semen est sanguis Christianorum* provides the impetus behind this paper - date from between approximately 197 and 212 CE.[40] While these sources are unevenly distributed geographically, they are roughly contemporary with another, so that they probably reflect similar political, cultural and social realities.

The first texts this thesis discusses are two martyrological accounts, namely *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* and *Martyrdom of Polycarp.* Since these are some of the earliest and most influential martyr stories, they can provide valuable insights into a variety of issues related to the development of Christian martyrdom. More specifically, these texts are of interest to this paper because they 1) describe the reactions of spectators to the fates of the martyrs; 2) explicitly state what lessons they wish to impart to their readers; and 3) present the events they describe in a moralizing discourse that can be compared to that of other textual traditions. Thus, an

37. See: Praet, 'Semen est sanguis (?)', 263/267.
38. See chapter I.1.
39. See chapter II.1.
40. See chapter III.1.

analysis of these texts may yield both ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ evidence about the relationship between martyrdom and Christianization. Though the texts most likely hail from different parts of the empire, and their original contexts of composition remain controversial, the texts are similar enough to be viewed in conjunction. [41]

Next, this paper looks at the so-called *Acta Alexandrinorum,* which is a scholarly name given to a number of diverse texts written on papyri that in most cases purport to represent the minutes of trials and embassies involving Alexandrian ambassadors and Roman authorities. Historians have revealed, however, that several of these texts clearly contain elements not found in official documents, which suggests that they were the result of the literary reworking of earlier texts, or were outright invented. In these ‘spurious’ texts, one often reads about Alexandrian ambassadors who fearlessly defend the interests of their city’s Greek inhabitants in the face of Roman injustice and Jewish manipulation, which sometimes results in the ambassadors’ execution. Their examples may therefore be classified as instances of noble death. Because of their perceived similarities, the *AA* have also sometimes been compared to Christian martyr texts.[42] As such, a close analysis of the *AA*, followed by a comparison with the martyr texts examined in chapter I, is used to investigate the degree of similarity between noble death traditions and martyrdom. In doing so, it also highlights the latter’s (possibly) unique aspects that allowed it to outlive the *Acta Alexandrinorum*.

Finally, this thesis explores the works of Tertullian, who wrote extensively about various matters related to martyrdom and Christians’ place in the Roman world. Because his oeuvre is too extensive to be reviewed in total, this paper concentrates on two of his earliest works: *Apologeticum* and *Ad Martyras.* The first text consists of an extensive apologetic argument against the ‘persecution’ of Christians, that ends in a full exoneration of Christians and condemnation of their ‘pagan’ neighbours. The relevance of this work resides in its claims about the missionary working of Christian martyrdom, and the fact that it attempts to portray Christianity and martyrdom in such a way as to persuade ‘pagans’, which includes discussions of noble death traditions. Thus, *Apologeticum* helps us understand how martyrdom might have been perceived by ancient audiences. Meanwhile, *Ad Martyras* consists of a letter written to a group of anonymous martyrs, wherein Tertullian tries to convince his readers about the

41. See chapter I.
42. See chapter II.

desirability and value of martyrdom; in doing so, Tertullian somewhat surprisingly invokes a range of 'pagan' *exempla* in order to inspire the martyrs to persevere. *Ad Martyras* thus showcases both the similarities between martyrdom and noble death, as well as the significance of martyrdom to Christian communities.[43] Together, the analyses of these texts may provide invaluable insights into the reception of martyrdom, the similarities and differences between martyrdom and noble death, and the importance of martyrdom (stories) to the development of Christianity.

0.5 Methodology

When discussing 'martyrdom', one should distinguish the act itself from its (literary) representation. First, it is plausible that people in the ancient world would have reacted differently to each phenomenon; while we can imagine that witnessing the act itself evoked a more immediate response than listening to or reading a martyr story would, witnesses might have remained ignorant about the martyrs' motivations, or they might have provided their own 'explanations' for the Christians' conduct. Conversely, while the martyr texts may not have elicited equally strong emotions among their audience, they would have left little doubt about the alleged 'heroism' and religious significance of martyrdom. Second, while the act of witnessing someone's death is a singular and real event, stories can be reshaped, invented, and retold without limit. It is therefore plausible that people in the ancient world were more familiar with Christian martyrdom through its representations than first-hand experience – especially since the number of Christian martyred prior to the persecutions of the third and fourth centuries seems to have been fairly small.[44] Third, our source material largely consists of second-hand accounts that try to paint a favourable image of the figures whose deaths they describe, so that we do not appear to have much reliable evidence of the responses of those witnessing the events themselves. As such, this thesis deals mostly – though not exclusively - with the relation between (literary) representations of martyrdom and the Christianization of the Roman Empire.

43. See chapter III.
44. For the relatively limited scope of 'persecution' during this period, see this paper's section on *Apologeticum* (chapter III.3).

Because of the diverse content and distinctive biases of the relevant sources, each should be approached with somewhat different questions and methodologies in mind; these are more elaborately discussed at the start of each individual chapter. The first chapter looks at *Passio Perpetuae* and *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and deals with the evidence they provide of the ways in which spectators responded to witnessing martyrdom, the similarity between martyrdom (as these texts present it) and noble death traditions, and the importance of martyr stories to Early Christian communities. The second chapter then examines a number of *Acta Alexandrinorum*-texts, with an eye on further revealing the similarities and differences between noble deaths and Christian martyrdom; the chapter ends with a discussion of what this degree of (dis)similarity suggests about the reasons behind the lasting popularity of Christian martyr literature. The final chapter then investigates the writings of Tertullian and what these suggest about the relationship between martyrdom and noble death, as well as crowds' supposed reactions to demonstrations of martyrdom. Finally, the conclusion combines these chapters' findings to reveal the extent to which Christian blood may have acted as 'seed' for the growth and development of the Church.[45]

45. 'Church' is capitalised here because it refers to an idealized collective of Christians, not a unified ecclesiastical structure (which had not yet been formed). As such, this term can be used more-or-less synonymously with 'Christianity', although it should be kept in mind that ancient authors who speak about 'the Church' may be referring only to those whom they considered to be 'true' Christians (excluding 'heretics', for instance). See chapter III, which - among other things – discusses these dynamics of in- and exclusion in the works of Tertullian.

I. Martyrdom and Noble Death in *Passio Perpetuae* and *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis and *Martyrdom of Polycarp* are among the oldest and most influential accounts of Christian martyrdom, probably dating from (somewhat) after 203 CE, and the first half of the third century, respectively.[46] As such, a careful examination of those texts can bear witness to not only conceptions of martyrdom present in these texts' original compositional contexts, but those found in Early Christianity in general as well. Interestingly, though the conceptions of martyrdom found in these two texts are generally quite reminiscent of one another, there also appear to exist some differences regarding their adherence to *imitatio Christi,* and to what extent the deaths of the martyrs took place 'voluntarily'.[47] By comparing these conceptions of martyrdom with broader traditions of noble death, and thus determining how similar they are, our analysis should provide us with indirect evidence for the likely impact of Christian martyr narratives on ancient audiences.[48] In addition, the texts' own descriptions of the reactions of spectators may also provide us with more direct evidence for the reception of Christian martyrdom.

46. For the dating of *Passio Perpetuae,* see: Petr Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae: Recontextualizing a Martyr Story in the Literature of the Early Church* (Berlin/Boston, MA 2015) 14-17. For the likely dating of Polycarp to the first half of the third century, as well as an overview of the debate surrounding the date of *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, see: Candida R. Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp: Rethinking the Place of the Martyrdom of Polycarp in the History of Christianity', *Early Christianity* 1:4 (2010) 539-574. However, due to his belief that martyr texts cannot be accurately dated on the basis of internal evidence, but can only be reliably said to predate their earliest mention by another source, Rebillard (2020) has suggested that both texts may well date from significantly later in the third century; in his view, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was likely composed after the Decian persecution (so postdating 250 CE), while *Passio Perpetuae* (excluding the parts attributed to Perpetua and Saturus) may well date from around 260: Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives*, 4-5/8-19/85-87. See the section 'overview of *Passio Perpetuae* and *Martyrdom of Polycarp'* below (I.1.).
47. For a list of differences between the Passion of Christ (according to the Canonical Gospels) and early Christian Martyr Acts, and the importance of *Imitatio Christi* for these texts in general, see: Pesthy-Simon, '*Imitatio Christi'*, 83-96. For issues of 'voluntary martyrdom' (as well as a critique of this concept for describing cases of martyrdom prior to the third century CE), see: Candida Moss, 'The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern', *Church History* 81:3 (2012) 531-551. For the 'Nachleben' of the *Passio Perpetuae,* see especially: Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* ix-x/56-117. The popularity of *Passio Perpetuae* in the ancient world is also mentioned by: Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 94/171, note 12/173, note 24.
48. See the introduction (0.1-0.2/0.4-0.5).

The analysis of these texts proceeds in several phases. The chapter starts with a brief overview of the content and context of the primary sources, followed by an examination of the intentions with which these texts were composed, the ways in which the texts were used, and who the likely audiences were. Thereafter, the chapter analyses the language, themes and tropes by which the authors sought to convey their intended messages and construct a certain 'model' of Christian martyrdom; these are subdivided between 'Christian-specific' and more 'general' motifs and influences. The chapter ends with a discussion of what the texts suggest about how various audiences might have responded to Christian martyrdom, either by witnessing it directly, or by reading or listening to *Martyrdom of Polycarp* or *Passio Perpetuae*.

I.1 Overview of *Passio Perpetuae* and *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

Martyrdom of Polycarp describes the arrest, trial, and execution of several martyrs, including Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, during the mid-second century CE. The account has been transmitted to us in several versions: most exist as a stand-alone text found in a variety of manuscripts, while another abbreviated version can be found in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History.* Although the dating of the texts is controversial, Candida Moss has offered convincing arguments against its traditional dating to the second century, and has argued for the composition of the *Ur-text* somewhere in the first half of the third century, with the possibility of redaction and later additions in the fourth.[49] However, Éric Rebillard has critiqued this position on the basis of his belief that martyr acts cannot be accurately dated on the basis of internal evidence – as Candida Moss does -, but can only reliably be said to predate their earliest mention by another text. In addition, he stresses that we should see such accounts as 'living texts' that were continuously retold, in writing or in oration, and that therefore there may not be an actual *Ur-text.* Instead, he suggests that our proposed *Ur-text* of *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was likely composed in the middle of the

49. Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 539-574. For a defense of a composition date no later than 156 CE, see: Sara Parvis, 'The Martyrdom of Polycarp', *The Expository Times* 118:3 (2006) 105-112. For the controversy surrounding the historicity of the text, see also: Pesthy-Simon, '*Imitatio Christi',* 89-90.

third century, after the death of Pionius.[50] Whatever the exact date of (the first) composition may be, the preserved versions are all written in the form of a letter and are addressed to the church of Philomelium from the church of Smyrna.[51] According to *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Polycarp was arrested during a persecution of Christians, tried by a proconsul called Statius Quadratus, and finally executed for being a Christian and his refusal to call the emperor 'Lord' and to offer a sacrifice. After Polycarp was miraculously saved from being burned to death, he was stabbed with a dagger instead. After his death, his body was burned to prevent his burial, but the Christians present still managed to retrieve and bury his bones. The author ends by praising Polycarp and urging the Christians at Philomelium to distribute the letter to other Christian congregations. Finally, the text ends with two short appendices indicating the date of the execution and the letter's (supposed) line of transmission.[52]

Similarly, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* is an account of the martyrdom of several Christians, primarily that of Perpetua, a young woman of upper-class origins who was executed under the rule of Emperor Septimius Severus, presumably in Carthage in 203 CE.[53] There exist many different versions of the tale of Perpetua's martyrdom, which can be grouped together into two categories: the *Passio* and the *Acta.* The *Passio* is the older of the two and presents a biography-like account of the fate of the martyrs between their arrest and their final execution, while the *Acta* involves a later group of texts that present the story in the form of a trial transcript. Since this thesis is concerned with conceptions of martyrdom and noble

50. In addition, Rebillard rejects Moss' proposal for possible redaction in the fourth century, which she bases on the fact that the text contains an *apologia* for the absence of relics, which she regards as anachronistic for a supposedly third-century text. Rebillard, however, believes that such an *apologia* may also fit with a third-century dating: Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives,* 11-14. See also footnote 46.
51. While *Martyrdom of Polycarp* has sometimes been seen as (reflecting) an actual letter, Éric Rebillard has presented a strong case for seeing the epistolary frame of the letter as a narrative device added to challenge the 'impossibility of testimony', as well as help the audience to understand the text's meaning (that is, how a particular editor wished the text to be understood). Yet, rather than call the text a 'forgery', Rebillard posits that ancient martyr texts were never meant to form a historically accurate account, nor were they understood as such by ancient audiences – with the exception that audiences would have assumed there to be a reliable factual core with regard to the names of the martyrs, the date of their executions, and the manner in which they were killed – but rather 'living texts' that were retold and reshaped by authors operating in differing contexts: Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives,* 3-5/13/37-87. For the meaning of 'living texts', see: ibid., 43-58. For the meaning of 'impossibilty of testimony', see: ibid., 83-84.
52. For the primary text of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* this thesis uses the Loeb edition by Bart D. Ehrmann: *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* in: *The Apostolic Fathers, volume I.* Edited and translated by Bart D. Ehrmann, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA 2002) 366-401.
53. See for example: Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae tot Acta Perpetuae,* ix/14-17/117-118.

death around 200 CE, it will only discuss the *Passio,* not the *Acta.*[54] The *Passio* is made up of several parts. The text begins with a preface urging Christians not to limit themselves to Biblical stories of revelation or martyrdom, but to acknowledge and learn from more recent examples as well. The editor then introduces such an example set by several martyrs, including Perpetua. Remarkably, the editor claims that the following section of the text was written by Perpetua herself, which seems to be supported by stylistic differences between this section and the preface, although it is likely that the editor did adapt Perpetua's "*ipsissima verba*" to some degree.[55] Herein, Perpetua tells the reader about her trial, imprisonment, interactions with her family members, Roman authority figures, and her fellow martyrs, and about four visions that she supposedly received. This section ends after her fourth vision, and the overall text continues with another first-person account of a vision, this time (supposedly) experienced and written down by one of Perpetua's fellow-martyrs, Saturus. The text ends with a third-person account of the death of the martyrs in the arena, and an epilogue that praises the martyrs and urges Christians to read the text.[56]

I.2 Context(s), intentions, and readership(s)

First, we should briefly consider the context and role of these writings in Roman society. As some scholars have noted, it seems that such accounts were primarily intended for 'internal' consumption – both by catechumens and the baptized –, not to propagate the faith outside of Christian communities.[57] This has important implications for how we understand the meaning and function of these texts. Furthermore, as befits a largely illiterate society, these accounts would often have been performed orally (as liturgical reading on the 'anniversaries' of the martyrs' deaths), which, when considered alongside the fact that these and similar texts appear to have been frequently redacted, rendering it impossible to reconstruct the

54.. For an overview of these different versions, see especially: Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* 23-29. Note, however, that the complete text of *Passio Perpetuae* - excluding the parts attributed to Perpetua and Saturus, which seem to have been written by the martyrs themselves, and therefore date to 203, the likely date of their martyrdom - may date from significantly later in the third century. See footnote 50.
55. Ibid., 7-29. See also: Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives,* 16-17/78-80.
56. Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae*, 7-13.
57. See footnote 7.

(supposed) *Ur-text*, and the fact that these texts show many parallels with other writings from roughly the same period – originating from different environments and belonging to a variety of genres – means that we cannot trace the exact lines of influence and authorship that resulted in the versions we currently possess.[58] It would therefore be more profitable to approach parallels with other textual traditions as signs that such shared elements were 'in the air', than to try to prove their indebtedness to any specific text or author.[59] This should illuminate how ancient authors engaged with the ideas and conventions of their surrounding society in their construction and propagation of Christian martyrdom.[60]

Luckily, the editors themselves tell their audiences explicitly what they considered to be the benefits of reading or hearing these texts. First, it is clear that the editors believed that their works could serve as 'proof' of the "glory/grace of God"[61], or more generally, the existence and authority of the Christian God.[62] In the preface of *Passio Perpetuae,* the editor also seems to have tried to promote the idea that the Day of Judgment was near, and that the 'new prophets and visions' were the work of the ever-present Holy Spirit – hence why Perpetua, a young female catechumen who received visions upon request, could be venerated as a prophetess, and seemingly be held in higher regard than some clergymen.[63] Scholars have sometimes tried to link these elements to Montanism and its "New Prophecy", but such ideas could also be found among early 'Catholics'.[64] In any case, the presence of these elements may

58. See especially: Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives.* For *Passio Perpetuae's* links with other genres of literature, see: Barbara K. Gold, *Perpetua: Athlete of God* (New York, NY 2018) 47-65. For the recitation of such texts on the 'anniversaries' of the martyrs, see for example: Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* x/11/57-58/121; Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives*, 9.
59. See: Candida R. Moss, 'Nailing Down and Tying Up: Lessons in Intertextual Impossibility from the "Martyrdom of Polycarp"', *Vigiliae Christianae* 67:2 (2013) 117-136, especially 135.
60. See also: Gold, *Athlete of God,* 64-65.
61. See: *Passio Perpetuae,* I/XXI.11. For the primary text of *Passio Perpetuae,* this thesis uses the edition by Thomas Heffernan: Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (New York, NY 2012) 104-124 (the Latin text)/125-135 (an English translation).
62. Ibid. See also: *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* II.1.
63. See: *Passio Perpetuae,* I/XXI.11. As Kitzler has correctly noted, these supposedly Montanist elements only occur in the prologue, so that we may not assume that Perpetua and Saturus themselves interpreted their own visions and martyrdom in this manner: Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* 7/11-12/31/56-57/119. Meanwhile, Rebillard (2020) has argued that *Passio Perpetuae* should likely be situated within the context of the period following the death of Cyprian (so after 258 CE), in which North-African Christians were divided over questions regarding the relative status and authority of martyrs and clergymen: Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives,* 15-19.
64. See: Jane Merdinger, 'Roman North Africa', in: William Tabbernee (ed.), *Early Christianity in Contexts: An Exploration Across Cultures and Continents* (Grand Rapids, MI 2014) 223-260, 238; Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* 29-34. See also the discussion of Tertullian's 'Montanism' in chapter III.1.

result from a phenomenon whereby hagiographies of past martyrs are used to advocate specific theological notions that were not (necessarily) shared by the martyrs themselves[65], since these supposedly Montanist tendencies are not found in the sections of the text written by Perpetua and Saturus.[66] This almost certainly applies to *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* especially to the preface and epilogue, which try to persuade readers about what differentiates a 'just' from an 'unjust' act of martyrdom, and thus appear to be engaging with debates about this topic during Antiquity.[67] As Rebillard has described, the final colophon, which relates the supposed transmission history of the text, differs markedly between the extant versions, and can often be seen to promote a particular understanding of the text as a whole.[68] Thus, due to the status of these works as 'living texts', answering questions of authorship – and whether the martyrs themselves would have agreed with editorial comments about the significance of their martyrdom - may well prove to be impossible.[69] It is therefore more useful to approach the texts as 'participants' in, and indicators of, wider debates about martyrdom, Christian theology and such, rather than as expressions of the views of some identifiable persons.

In addition to supporting religious claims, the editors also clearly aimed to use these martyrologies to promote further willingness to face martyrdom. This is most directly communicated in *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* where it is said that celebration of the 'anniversary' of Polycarp's martyrdom was partially meant "as a training and preparation of those who are about do so"[70]; in addition, the text claims that "all" desire to imitate the martyrdom of Polycarp.[71] What's more, the author even explicitly advocates following Christ unto death, if necessary.[72] Likewise, *Passio Perpetuae* refers to martyrdom as a form of "divine grace" (*gratiam divinitatis).*[73] The promotion of martyrdom is also clear from other remarks in these texts about martyrs being

65. See: Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives,* especially 15-19/37-45.
66. See: Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* 56-57.
67. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* preface-I/IX-XXII.
68. Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives,* 39-43.
69. Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 539-574, especially 539-544; Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives,* especially 37-58. See also: Moss, 'Nailing down', 117-136.
70. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* XVIII.3.
71. Ibid., XIX.1.
72. Ibid., XXII.1: …] *στοιχοῦντας τῷ κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον λόγῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ […] καθὼς ἐμαρτύρησεν ὁ μακάριος Πολύκαρπος, οὗ γένοιτο ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ πρὸς τὰ ἴχνη εὑρεθῆναι ἡμᾶς*: "you who conduct yourselves in the word of Jesus Christ according to the gospel […] just as the blessed Polycarp bore witness unto death. May we be found to have followed in his footsteps in the kingdom of Jesus Christ!"
73. *Passio Perpetuae,* I.5.

thankful and joyous after their convictions, which signify – to them – that they have been 'chosen' by God[74]; naturally, given the hagiographical nature of these texts, this would exhort audiences to follow these martyrs' examples, if they should be 'chosen' themselves.[75]

A final stated motivation for writing down these accounts was to glorify God and bring the believers closer to Christ. This becomes very apparent from remarks found in the opening and closing paragraphs of *Passio Perpetuae*:

> "if the old examples of faith, which testify to the grace of God and lead to edification of men, were written down so that by reading them, God should be honoured and man comforted […] should we not set down new acts that serve each purpose equally?"[76]
>
> "And we, who also acknowledge and honor the new prophecies and new visions […] we both proclaim and celebrate them in reading for the glory of God […."[77]
>
> "And we also announce to you, our brothers and little sons, that which we have heard and touched, so that you who were present may be reminded of the glory of the Lord, and that you who know it now through hearing may have a sharing with the holy martyrs, and through them with our Lord Jesus Christ […"[78]
>
> "O bravest and most blessed martyrs! O truly called and chosen for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ! Anyone who praises, honors, and adores his glory surely should read these deeds […]. For these new deeds of courage too may witness that one and the same Holy Spirit is always working among us even now, along with God, the Father almighty, and his Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ […[79]

74. Ibid., VI.6./XVII.1./XIX.1./XXI.11. Also: *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* XII.1/XIV.
75. See: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 15/93/121-122.
76. *Passio Perpetuae,* I.1. *Si vetera fidei exempla, et Dei gratiam testificantia et aedificationem hominis operantia, propterea in litteris sunt digesta, ut lectione eorum […] et Deus honoretur et homo conferetur, cur non et nova documenta aeque utrique causae convenientia et digerantur?*
77. Ibid., I.5. *Itaque et nos, qui sicut prophetias ita et visiones novas pariter repromissas et agnoscimus et honoramus […*
78. Ibid., I.6. *Et nos itaque quod audivimus et vidimus et contrectavimus, annuntiamus et vobis, fratres et filioli uti et vos qui interfuistis rememoremini gloriae Domini, et qui nunc cognoscitis per auditum communionem habeatis cum sanctis martyribus, et per illos cum Domino nostro Iesu Christo […*
79. Ibid., XXI.11. *O fortissimi ac beatissimi martyres! O vere vocati, et electi in gloriam Domini nostri Iesu Christi! Quam qui magnificat et honorificat et adorat, utique et haec non minora veteribus*

Likewise, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* has Polycarp praise and glorify God for granting him the martyrdom that had earlier been revealed to him.[80] The letter's editor also writes that the church of Philomelium should forward the letter to other 'brethren', so that "they may also glorify the Lord who selects his chosen ones [i.e. as martyrs] from among his own slaves".[81] As further remarks about martyrs being "chosen" by God, and statements about the omnipotence and authority of God show[82], this call to glorify God stems from a belief that martyrdom was not truly about a conflict between a martyr and his human oppressors, but a grand battle between God and the Devil over the martyr's salvation.[83]

In addition, Stephanie Cobb has argued that such martyrological accounts served to develop collective identities and role-models for Christian communities that went beyond the immediate context of the threat of persecution. This is supported by the fact that such accounts were still written and widely used in liturgy during Late Antiquity when persecution of Christians – at least of the 'Catholic' variety – had come to an end. In Cobb's view, those lessons pertain to what a 'life according to the gospel' should look like in general (and that of women specifically), as well as the – ideal – identity of Christians. By creating an opposition between the virtuous and 'manly' behaviour of the martyrs and that of their pagan and Jewish rivals, the authors simultaneously sought to transfer this dichotomy to society at large; thus, the heroes and villains of these stories demarcate between and qualify the Christian in-group and non-Christian out-group.[84]

With regards to the expected audiences, the remark found in *Passio Perpetuae,* that the reading of the "the new prophets and new visions" is intended as "proof to

exempla in aedificationem Ecclessiae legere debet, ut novae quoque virtutes unum et eundem semper Spiritum Sanctum usque adhuc operari testificentur [et] omnipotentem Deum patrem et filium eius Iesum Christum Dominum nostrum […

80. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* XIV.
81. Ibid, XX.1. …] *μαθόντες οὖν ταῦτα καὶ τοῖς ἐπέκεινα ἀδελφοῖς τὴν ἐπιστολὴν διαπέμψασθε, ἵνα καὶ ἐκεῖνοι δοξάζωσιν τὸν κύριον τὸν ἐκλογὰς ποιοῦντα ἀπὸ τῶν ἰδίων δούλων*: "When you have learned these things, send our letter to the brothers who are further afield, that they may also glorify the Lord who selects his chosen ones from among his own slaves."
82. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* I.1/II.1/VI.2-VII.1/XIV/XVI.1/XIX.2-XXII.
83. See the section 'Christian-specific motifs and influences' below (I.3). For the presence of this belief in the theology of Tertullian, see chapter III.1-2.
84. Cobb, *Dying to be men*; Henten, 'Noble death and martyrdom', 96-100. For the exemplary role of the *Passio Perpetuae* in particular, see: Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae, passim.*

the unbelievers and a kindness to believers"[85], suggests that the editor had both a Christian and a non-Christian audience in mind. This may also appear from the editor's remark that the account is "no less worthy than the old ones for building up the church", if 'building up' here refers to proselytism.[86] The other signified purposes of this text, however, as well as its unexplained references to Christian theology, indicate that the primary audience seems to still have been catechumens or the baptized, not outsiders.[87] This also applies to *Martyrdom of Polycarp* which was – probably fictionally – written as a letter sent from one church to another. In addition, this text is replete with references to the Gospels, which would likely have been lost on a non-Christian readership.[88]

All in all, the purposes for which these texts were written are often strongly tied to beliefs and debates specific to Early Christianity, which readily explains their great reliance on parallels with the Gospels and Christian-specific conceptions of the world. On the other hand, as texts like Lucian's satire about Peregrinus or the *Acta Alexandrinorum* show, issues of persecution and violence, 'speaking truth to power'[89], and esteem or even veneration for those dying 'noble deaths' were broadly relevant – and sometimes controversial - topics.[90] It is therefore not surprising that the overall messages of the Christian martyr texts, along with the motifs, language and themes by which the authors seek to bring their readers to accept these messages, show a mixture of Christian-specific and more 'general' elements.

85. *Passio Perpetuae,* I.5. *…] prophetias ita et visiones novas […] non credentibus in testimonium, credentibus in beneficum.*
86. Ibid., XXI.11. *…] haec non minora veteribus exempla in aedificationem Ecclesiae […*
87. See footnote 7 and 57.
88. For a list of similarities between *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and the Canonical Gospels, see: Parvis, '*Martyrdom of Polycarp',* 108; Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp, 551-554; idem, 'Nailing down', 551-552; Paul Hartog, 'The Christology of the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Martyrdom as Both Imitation of Christ and Election by Christ', *Perichoresis* 12:2 (2014) 137-152, 138; L. Stephanie Cobb, 'Polycarp's Cup: *Imitatio* in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp'*, *Journal of Religious History* 38:2 (2014) 224-240; Pesthy-Simon, '*Imitatio Christi',* 90. For the probable fictitiousness of the letter-format, and its role in the narrative as a whole, see footnote 50.
89. Loukianos, *De Morte Peregrini.* For an overview and discussion of (the historical reliability) of Loukianos' depiction of Peregrinus's life and death, see: Wolfgang Spickermann, 'Der Brennende Herakles. Lukian von Samosata und Proteus-Peregrinos', in: Regina Grundmann & Sebastian Fuhrmann (eds.), *Martyriumsvorstellungen in Antike und Mittelalter: leben oder sterben für Gott?* (Leiden 2012) 111-132. For the *Acta Alexandrinorum,* see chapter II. For summary overviews of the 'types' of noble death in antiquity, see: Dehandschutter, 'Leben und/oder sterben für Gott', 193; Henten, 'Noble death and martyrdom', 91-95.
90. See especially: Grig, 'Torture and truth', 323; Henten, 'Noble death and martyrdom', 85-106; Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 243-276; Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power, 1-31. See also: Karen P.S. Janssen, Religio Illicita? Roman Legal Interactions with Early Christianity in Context (PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2020).

I.3 Christian-specific motifs and influences

While it is not always possible to make a clear distinction between 'Christian' and 'non-Christian' ideas, it is still useful to distinguish those elements that are strongly tied to the specific conditions of Early Christianity from more 'general' elements that Christian authors applied and adapted to convey certain messages.[91] Additionally, one must keep in mind that even these 'Christian' elements were not universally shared among Christians, but may in some cases have been contested between various Christian groups. This is most apparent with regard to questions around 'voluntary martyrdom'; the texts (especially *Martyrdom of Polycarp*) not only seek to create a positive image of Christian martyrdom, but are also engaged in distinguishing 'correct' from 'incorrect' forms of martyrdom.[92]

Despite a considerable degree of cultural overlap, Christianity was of course characterised by a number of beliefs and practices that could be at odds with those of its pagan surroundings.[93] Naturally, it was these discrepancies that inspired much of the hostility that Christians experienced, and which in the first centuries CE contributed to occasional, typically local, prosecution, and from the mid-third century onwards, more general persecution. While there exist many indications that early Christians did not always refrain from engaging in 'pagan' activities denounced by ecclesiastical authors, and that they were not condemned merely on the basis of their religious convictions, this is nevertheless the view presented in many early Christian writings.[94] In most accounts of martyrdom, therefore, the conviction of martyrs by Roman authorities is portrayed as stemming from the former's religious opposition to honouring the Emperor as a (quasi-)god and refusal to partake in pagan cultic practices, which the authorities could (mis)interpret as acts of disobedience and 'atheism'.[95] Christian authors, on the other hand, sought to simultaneously disprove these allegations – in addition to other alleged crimes such as incest or cannibalism -, and convince audiences that the martyrs were right in preferring the risk of torture

91. See: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* especially 2/11-18; Gold, *Athlete of God,* especially 23-65.
92. See especially: Moss, 'Voluntary martyrdom', 540-548/551.
93. See for instance: Stark, *Rise of Christianity,* 179.
94. For the realities of prosecution or persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, as well as the diversity of Early Christianity, see chapter III.2-3.
95. Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York, NY 1997) 1-2/77-81.

and execution over denying their Christian identity or carrying out acts of pagan devotion. For this, they relied on a dichotomous worldview that pitted (what Augustine later called) "the City of God" against the "Earthly City".[96] This dichotomy is visible in various aspects of the texts.

First, both *Passio Perpetuae* and *Martyrdom of Polycarp* profess the idea that the martyrdoms have in fact been ordained by God. In *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* we read that God enacted Polycarp's death to show a 'martyrdom in conformity to the gospel'[97], that in fact all 'blessed and noble' martyrdoms took place according to the will of God'[98], and other similar claims[99]. Likewise, we learn that Polycarp held the status of a prophet and had received a vision indicating his impending execution, further cementing the notion that God had carefully planned out the whole affair.[100] Also, as the frequent references to the Gospel, as well as various other obvious parallels with the passion narratives show, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is clearly constructed around the idea that the rightful imitation of Jesus' life (*imitatio Christi*) naturally and justly leads to martyrdom, if a Christian should be 'chosen'; seeking out one's death out of one's own accord, as Quintus is said to have done, is rejected.[101]

Although the motifs of *imitatio Christi* and of being 'elected' as a martyr are not as pronounced in *Passio Perpetuae,* and the martyrs even state that they came to the arena 'voluntarily' (by which they probably mean that they had decided not to resist their fates, rather than suggesting that they played an active role in bringing about

96. See for instance *Martyrdom of Polycarp's* description of Polycarp's resistance to demands made to him by the authorities to call the emperor "lord", to offer a sacrifice, and reproach Christ: *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* IX-XII. See also chapter III, especially the section on *Apologeticum* (III.3.). See also: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 126-127.
97. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* I.1. *σχεδὸν γὰρ πάντα τὰ προάγοντα ἐγένετο, ἵνα ἡμῖν ὁ κύριος ἄνωθεν ἐπιδείξῃ τὸ κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον μαρτύριον*: "For nearly everything leading up to his [Polycarp's] death occurred so that the Lord might show us from above a martyrdom in conformity with the gospel." For the overarching frame of divine sovereignty in *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which renders martyrdom 'necessary' (for the elect few), see: Hartog, 'Christology', 146. Cobb (2008) cites this passage as part of an argument to demonstrate how such martyrological texts were intended to serve as models for other Christians: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 93.
98. Ibid., II.1. *Μακάρια μὲν οὖν καὶ γενναῖα τὰ μαρτύρια πάντα τὰ κατὰ τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ γεγονότα. δεῖ γὰρ εὐλαβεστέρους ἡμᾶς ὑπάρχοντας τῷ θεῷ τὴν κατὰ πάντων ἐξουσίαν ἀνατιθέναι:* "Blessed and noble, therefore, are all the martyrdoms that have occurred according to the will of God. For we must be reverent and attribute the ultimate authority to God."
99. See: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 126.
100. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* 5/12.3/14.2.
101. Ibid, I-XXII. For analyses of the motif of divine election of martyrs in *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* see especially: Dehandschutter, 'Leben und/oder sterben für Gott', 196-198; Moss, 'Voluntary martyrdom', 544-545/547; Hartog, 'Christology', 144-147.

their execution)[102], the overarching idea is the same. Thus, the editor notes his belief that martyrdom is a 'grace of God' which is promised by God[103], and that the martyrs have been "called and chosen for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ".[104] Furthermore, Perpetua receives two visions that do not only confirm that she is to die as a martyr, but also predict some of the circumstances of her death in the arena.[105]

Secondly, and somewhat paradoxically, the authors maintain that the Devil was really behind the persecution, with the Roman authorities merely acting as his unwitting accomplices.[106] For example, with regard to the brutal tortures suffered by previous martyrs, the editor of *Martyrdom of Polycarp* writes that these were designed so that "…] if possible, he [the Devil] might force them [the martyrs] to make a denial through continuous torment. For the Devil devised many torments against them. But thanks be to God: he had no power over any of them."[107] In addition, the author claims that the Devil even directly spoke to the irenarch's (who had arrested Polycarp) father in order to prevent the Christians from retrieving Polycarp's body, and thus stave off his (total) defeat.[108]

This belief is even more clearly visible in *Passio Perpetuae.* In her first vision, Perpetua sees a narrow ladder leading up into heaven, while at the foot of the ladder lies a great serpent that tries to deter people from climbing; spurred on by her 'teacher' Saturus, Perpetua steps on the serpent's head, climbs up the ladder, and

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102. *Passio Perpetuae,* XVIII.5. *Ideo ad hoc sponte pervenimus, ne libertas nostra obduceretur; ideo animam nostrum addiximus, ne tale aliquid faceremus; hoc vobiscum pacti sumus*: "We came here freely, so that our freedom would not be violated, and we handed over our lives so that we would not be forced to do anything like this [i.e. putting on the costumes of priests of Saturn and priestesses of Ceres, respectively). We had this agreement with you."
103. Ibid., I.5. *…] gratiam divinitatis conversatam, sive in martyrum sive in revelationem […] cum semper Deus operetur quae repromisit […* "…] divine grace (either in the form of martyrdom or revelations), since God always grants what he has promised […"
104. Ibid., XXI.11. *O vere vocati, et electi in gloriam Domini nostri Iesu Christi!*
105. Ibid., IV/V/X.
106. For the same paradox in the works of Tertullian, see chapter III.2-3.
107. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, II.4-III.1. …] *ἵνα, εἰ δυνηθείη, διὰ τῆς ἐπιμόνου κολάσεως εἰς ἄρνησιν αὐτοὺς τρέψῃ. Πολλὰ γὰρ ἐμηχανᾶτο κατ' αὐτῶν ὁ διάβολος. ἀλλὰ χάρις τῷ θεῷ· κατὰ πάντων γὰρ οὐκ ἴσχυσεν.*
108. Ibid., XVII.1-2. *Ὁ δὲ ἀντίζηλος καὶ βάσκανος πονηρός, ὁ ἀντικείμενος τῷ γένει τῶν δικαίων, ἰδὼν τό τε μέγεθος αὐτοῦ τῆς μαρτυρίας καὶ τὴν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ἀνεπίληπτον πολιτείαν, ἐστεφανωμένον τε τὸν τῆς ἀφθαρσίας στέφανον καὶ βραβεῖον ἀναντίρρητον ἀπενηνεγμένον, ἐπετήδευσεν, ὡς μηδὲ τὸ σωμάτιον αὐτοῦ ὑφ' ἡμῶν ληφθῆναι […] ὑπέβαλεν γοῦν Νικήτην τὸν τοῦ Ἡρώδου πατέρα […] ἐντυχεῖν τῷ ἄρχοντι, ὥστε μὴ δοῦναι αὐτοῦ τὸ σῶμα*: "But the jealous and envious Evil One [the Devil], the enemy of the race of the upright [the Christians], having seen the greatness of Polycarp's death as a martyr and the irreproachable way of life that he had from the beginning – and that he had received the crown of immortality and was rewarded with the incontestable prize – made certain that his poor body was not taken away by us […]. So he incited Nicetas, the father of Herod [the irenarch] […] to petition the magistrate not to hand over his body."

enters a garden to meet a Christ-like figure. According to the text, Perpetua interpreted her dream-vision as evidence that "we knew we would suffer [as martyrs], and we ceased to have any hope in this world."[109] This theme is then repeated in her fourth vision, in which she struggles with "a certain Egyptian, foul in appearance", whom she defeats by trampling on his head. About the meaning of this vision, Perpetua writes: "And I knew that I was going to fight with the devil and not with the beasts; but I knew that victory was to be mine."[110] The text also describes how at the start of the execution, Perpetua was "already trampling on the head of the Egyptian".[111] Together, these passages make it clear that both the serpent and the Egyptian refer to the Devil, and that the text presents dying violently for one's Christian beliefs as constituting a 'victory' over Satan.

Finally, the text declares that it was the Devil who prepared a wild cow to be sent against Perpetua and Felicitas, which implies that he directed the human authorities organizing the execution.[112] What's more, when describing her father's failure to get Perpetua to deny her Christianity, Perpetua writes: "Then my father, angered by this name [i.e., 'Christian'], threw himself at me, in order to gouge out my eyes. But he only alarmed me and he left defeated, along with the arguments of the devil."[113] In this fashion, the text suggests that not only the formal trial and execution, but also the disapproving comments by her father were in fact instigated by the devil, in order to prevent her from becoming a martyr.

This way, both texts present the reader with a totalizing worldview that conceives of reality as a struggle between the dominion of God and the intrigues of the Devil, and which urges believers to radically choose the former. Since this involved the rejection of 'idolatry' and exclusive adherence to Christian beliefs by people living in a largely pagan world, this would have made martyrdom, in a sense, inevitable.[114] At

109. *Passio Perpetuae,* IV.10. *Et intelleximus passionem esse futuram, et coepimus nullam iam spem in saeculo habere.*
110. Ibid., X.14. *Et intellexi me non ad bestias sed contra diabolum esse pugnaturam; sed sciebam mihi esse victoria[m].*
111. Ibid., XVIII.7. *Perpetua psallebat, caput iam Aegyptii calcans.*
112. Ibid., XX.1. *Puellis autem ferocissimam vaccam, ideoque praeter consuetudinem conparatam, diabolus praeparavit, sexui earum etiam de bestia [a]emulates*: "For the young women, however, the devil prepared a wild cow – not a traditional practice – matching their sex with that of the beast."
113. Ibid., III.3. *Tunc pater motus hoc verbo mittit se in me, ut oculos mihi erueret, sed vexavit tantum, et profectus est victus cum argumentis diaboli.*
114. See: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 125/128, who beliefs that such Christian texts portray the 'prosecution' of Christians, which was carried out on the basis of charges of religious treason, as 'persecution' directed against Christians in general. For the view that Christians sometimes came into conflict with the Roman legal system because of the 'threat' they posed to the *pax deorum,* see also: Praet,

the same time, the uncompromising belief system that would have contributed to martyrdom also legitimized and advocated for the actions of the martyrs – for example, by saying that the persecution proceeded according to the will of God, and that Satan guided the martyrs' persecutors, Christians could reinterpret their disobedience to the judge's demands as a virtuous and empowering act. This was all the more true insofar early Christian apologists generally considered pagan 'gods' to be demons in disguise, and their God the one true god[115]; this allowed Polycarp to turn the crowd's clamour "away with the atheists" against itself.[116]

In addition to making the confrontation between would-be martyrs and authorities part of a moral conflict, these hagiographical tales also offer a more personalized incentive for martyrdom: eternal bliss in the afterlife - and escape from the fires of Hell. For example, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* says about a group of martyrs that:

> "…] clinging to the gracious gift of Christ, they despised the torments of this world, in one hour purchasing for themselves eternal life. And the fire of their inhuman torturers was cold to them, because they kept their eyes on the goal of escaping the fire that is eternal and never extinguished."[117]

'Semen est sanguis (?)', 260-262; Salisbury, ***Perpetua's passion,*** 78-79; Dehandschutter, 'Leben und/oder sterben für Gott', 192-194. Karen Janssen arrives at a similar conclusion, although she argues that the grounds on which Christians were prosecuted were more diverse than the often-mentioned refusal to sacrifice to the emperor or pagan gods: Janssen, Religio Illicita?, especially 209-321. For further discussions of the nature of 'persecution' prior to the mid-third century CE, see chapter III.3. Meanwhile, Salisbury, ***Perpetua's Passion,*** 1-2/4/77-81, does subscribe to the notion that Christians in the Roman Empire constituted a separate culture, which was often in conflict with the pagan world.

115. Klaus Döring, *Exemplum Socratis: Studien zur Socratesnachwirkung in der kynischen-stoischen Popularphilosophie der frühen Kaizerzeit und im frühen Christentum* (Wiesbaden 1979)*,* 148-149, footnote 24.
116. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* IX.2. For a view that Polycarp's expression is as much aimed at the crowd, as the fact that he is being (illegally) tried in a stadium rather than in a courtroom, see: Parvis, '*Martyrdom of Polycarp',* 108-109. Given that this phrase is preceded by the crowd's condemnation of Polycarp as an 'atheist', and the fact that *Martyrdom of Polycarp* in general contrasts Polycarp's virtuous conduct with the 'injustice' of the crowd, however, the most likely explanation is that the phrase serves mainly to blame and expose the hypocrisy of the spectators. Alternatively, Candida Moss has stated that the charge of 'atheism' and Polycarp's sarcastic reply "seem more in keeping with the trial of Socrates than with the contemporary legal process", which she regards as evidence against the historicity of the text: Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 549; idem, 'Nailing down', 129. However, she bases this verdict on the idea that a prosecutor in this time would likely have followed the precedent of the Pliny-Trajan correspondence, which is doubtful: see chapter III.3. Nevertheless, it is indeed plausible that the text's editor was directly or indirectly influenced by the example of Socrates, even though 'atheism' might in fact have been criminalized during this period.
117. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* II.3. *καὶ προσέχοντες τῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ χάριτι τῶν κοσμικῶν κατεφρόνουν βασάνων, διὰ μιᾶς ὥρας τὴν αἰώνιον ζωὴν ἐξαγοραζόμενοι. καὶ τὸ πῦρ ἦν αὐτοῖς ψυχρὸν τὸ τῶν ἀπανθρώπων βασανιστῶν· πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν γὰρ εἶχον φυγεῖν τὸ αἰώνιον καὶ μηδέποτε σβεννύμενον […* Similarly, Polycarp himself responds to threats of being burned alive with - what Sara Parvis has described as - a "stock Christians answer", namely that the short duration of his death by fire would

The text presents Polycarp's example as favourable to the salvation of others as well, and advances the idea that martyrdom could inspire others to follow Christ or even become martyrs themselves, thus granting them access to God's Kingdom.

> "For Polycarp waited to be betrayed, […] that we in turn might imitate him, thinking not only of ourselves, but also of our neighbors. For anyone with true and certain love wants not only himself but also all the brothers to be saved."[118]

In continuation of this theme, the text on occasion shows disdain for worldly life and the short-lived rule of (hostile) authority figures, as opposed to the eternity of the Kingdom of God[119]:

> "…] he [the martyr Germanicus] forcefully dragged the wild beast onto himself, wanting to leave their unjust and lawless life behind without delay."[120]
>
> "He [Polycarp] was taken by Herod, Phillip the Trallian being high priest, Statius Quadratus being proconsul, but Jesus Christ being King for ever, to whom be […] an everlasting throne from generation to generation".[121]

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pale in comparison to the eternal punishment that awaits the impious (*Martyrdom of Polycarp,* XI.2). See: Parvis, '*Martyrdom of Polycarp',* 110.

118. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* I.2. *περιέμενεν γάρ, ἵνα παραδοθῇ, […] ἵνα μιμηταὶ καὶ ἡμεῖς αὐτοῦ γενώμεθα, μὴ μόνον σκοποῦντες τὸ καθ' ἑαυτούς, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ κατὰ τοὺς πέλας. ἀγάπης γὰρ ἀληθοῦς καὶ βεβαίας ἐστίν, μὴ μόνον ἑαυτὸν θέλειν σώζεσθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ πάντας τοὺς ἀδελφούς.* Later in the text, the editor also writes to the Church of Philomelium: *Ὑμεῖς μὲν οὖν ἠξιώσατε διὰ πλειόνων δηλωθῆναι ὑμῖν τὰ γενόμενα, ἡμεῖς δὲ κατὰ τὸ παρὸν ἐπὶ κεφαλαίῳ μεμηνύκαμεν διὰ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν Μαρκίωνος. μαθόντες οὖν ταῦτα καὶ τοῖς ἐπέκεινα ἀδελφοῖς τὴν ἐπιστολὴν διαπέμψασθε, ἵνα καὶ ἐκεῖνοι δοξάζωσιν τὸν κύριον τὸν ἐκλογὰς ποιοῦντα ἀπὸ τῶν ἰδίων δούλων. τῷ δὲ δυναμένῳ πάντας ἡμᾶς εἰσαγαγεῖν ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι καὶ δωρεᾷ εἰς τὴν αἰώνιον αὐτοῦ βασιλείαν, διὰ τοῦ παιδὸς αὐτοῦ, τοῦ μονογενοῦς Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ᾧ ἡ δόξα, τιμή, κράτος, μεγαλωσύνη εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας*: "When you have learned these things, send our letter to the brothers who are further afield, that they may also glorify the Lord who selects his chosen ones from among his own slaves. And now to the one who is able to lead us all by his grace and gift into his eternal kingdom, through his child, the unique one, Jesus Christ, be the glory, honor, power, and greatness forever." Ibid.*,* XX.1-2.
119. For the opposition drawn between the temporality of earthly- and eternity of divine rulership, see: Cobb, *Dying to be men*, 102/127; Hartog, 'Christology', 147.
120. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* III.1. ...] *ἑαυτῷ ἐπεσπάσατο τὸ θηρίον προσβιασάμενος, τάχιον τοῦ ἀδίκου καὶ ἀνόμου βίου αὐτῶν ἀπαλλαγῆναι βουλόμενος.*
121. Ibid., XXI. *συνελήφθη δὲ ὑπὸ Ἡρώδου ἐπὶ ἀρχιερέως Φιλίππου Τραλλιανοῦ, ἀνθυπατεύοντος Στατίου Κοδράτου, βασιλεύοντος δὲ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. ᾧ […]θρόνος αἰώνιος ἀπὸ γενεᾶς εἰς γενεάν.*

Similarly, Perpetua and Saturus both receive visions of entering a heavenly garden after their demise[122], and *Passio Perpetuae* even describes their martyrdom as a 'second baptism', causing them to be (twice) 'reborn' as Christians.[123] The text also shows a certain rejection of worldly life, insofar Perpetua forsakes her expected social roles as a daughter and mother in order to die alongside her new Christian 'brethren'.[124] What's more, even though Perpetua tells Saturus that she was "happy in the flesh" (though "even happier" in Paradise)[125], the text still describes her death as being "freed from this world".[126] Finally, the martyrs warn spectators that on the Day of Judgment the roles of those judging and those condemned will be reversed – 'reversal' of power being an important theme that is also evident in Perpetua's defiance of her father, and her ability to make certain demands of her executioners:[127]

> "Then, when they [the martyrs] passed under the gaze of Hilarianus [the procurator who had led their trial], they began to say to through gestures and nods: "You [judge] us, but God will [judge] you"."[128]

A final motif that seems to originate in Biblical traditions involves the use of sacrificial metaphors in *Martyrdom of Polycarp.* Here, Polycarp is described – and describes himself – as a ram offered to God as a sacrifice.[129] The imagery of Polycarp being

122. *Passio Perpetuae*, IV/XI-XIII.
123. Ibid., XVIII.3/XXI.2. The appellation of martyrdom as a 'second baptism can also be found in the work of Tertullian, *De Baptismo,* XVI.1. Mentioned by: Salisbury, ***Perpetua's Passion,*** 83; Wiebke Bähnk, *Von der Notwendigkeit des Leidens: Die Theologie des Martyriums bei Tertullian* (Göttingen 2001) 286. See also: Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* 1/52, footnote 234; Gold, *Athlete of God,* 113.
124. See: Salisbury, ***Perpetua's Passion,*** 2/87-117/142; Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 97-109; Kiztler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* 37-51; Gold, *Athlete of God*, 38-39/106-111.
125. *Passio Perpetuae,* XII.7: ***Et [Perpetuae] dixit mihi [Saturo]: "Deo gratias, ut, quomodo in carne hilaris fui, hilarior sim et hic modo".***
126. Ibid., XI.4: *Et liberat[i] primo mundo […*
127. *Passio Perpetuae,* III-XVIII. For the importance of 'reversal' in accounts of martyrdom, see: Grig, 'Torture and truth', 321-334; Henten, 'Noble death and martyrdom', 101-105. See also: Salisbury, ***Perpetua's Passion, passim,*** especially 87-148; Cobb, *Dying to be men, passim,* especially 12-18; Gold, *Athlete of God*, especially 43/106-111/131-132. For similar themes in *Ad Martyras* and *Apologeticum,* see chapter III.2-3.
128 *Passio Perpetuae,* XVIII.8. *Dehinc ut sub conspectu Hilariani pervenerunt, gestu et nutu coeperunt Hilariano dicere: "tu nos", inquiunt, "te auteum Deus".*
129. See: *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* XIV.1. *ὁ δὲ ὀπίσω τὰς χεῖρας ποιήσας καὶ προσδεθείς, ὥσπερ κριὸς ἐπίσημος ἐκ μεγάλου ποιμνίου εἰς προσφοράν, ὁλοκαύτωμα δεκτὸν τῷ θεῷ ἡτοιμασμένον*: "And when he [Polycarp] placed his hands behind his back and was tied, he was like an exceptional ram taken

tied up and offered like a 'ram' of course invokes parallels with traditional Jewish animal sacrifice, as well as the Binding of Isaac (which Christians sometimes treated as a sort of predecessor to the 'sacrifice' of Jesus).[130] Thus, the use of sacrificial metaphors adds to the depiction of Polycarp's death as a proper form of *imitatio Christi* and as an honour granted by God. However, several scholars have noted that the description of Polycarp's death differs from that of Jesus in several ways. For instance, Polycarp refuses to be nailed to the pyre because he is resolved not to move and therefore does not 'need' the nails, while Jesus was fixed to his cross.[131] Likewise, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* mentions a 'cup', which has no obvious parallel in the Canonical Gospels[132], and may – according to Stephanie Cobb - instead be based on the cup of hemlock that Socrates drank in prison.[133] In light of the existence of several parallels between the (literary figures of) Polycarp and Socrates – including the use of sacrificial metaphors in the works of Plato - it is therefore possible that the author relied on the example of Socrates for his presentation of martyrdom of Polycarp.[134] While the editor never mentions Socrates or other figures associated with noble death traditions directly, we cannot exclude the possibility that he had such examples in mind when he wrote his text, and that this may explain (some of) the discrepancies between the deaths of Polycarp and the (canonical) Jesus.

In short, both texts are engaged in depicting martyrdom as the natural and even desirable outcome of a stark opposition between Christians and their non-Christian

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from a great flock for sacrifice, prepared as a whole burnt offering that is acceptable to God […"., and Ibid., XIV.2. *εὐλογῶ σε, ὅτι ἠξίωσάς με τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ ὥρας ταύτης, τοῦ λαβεῖν με μέρος ἐν ἀριθμῷ τῶν μαρτύρων ἐν τῷ ποτηρίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ σου εἰς ἀνάστασιν ζωῆς αἰωνίου ψυχῆς τε καὶ σώματος ἐν ἀφθαρσίᾳ πνεύματος ἁγίου· ἐν οἷς προσδεχθείην ἐνώπιόν σου σήμερον ἐν θυσίᾳ πίονι καὶ προσδεκτῇ, καθὼς προητοίμασας καὶ προεφανέρωσας καὶ ἐπλήρωσας* […: "I bless you for making me worthy of this day and hour, that I may receive a share among the number of martyrs in the cup of your Christ, unto the resurrection of eternal life in both soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. Among them may I be received before you today as a sacrifice that is rich and acceptable, just as you prepared and revealed in advance and now fulfilled […".

130. Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 555, which is also cited by: Hartog, 'Christology', 140. See also: Moss, 'Nailing down', 133; Cobb, 'Polycarp's cup', 226, footnote 6/239. Pesthy-Simon has even argued that the *Aqedah* - and Jewish martyrology in general - forms the primary model for the 'sacrifice' of Polycarp: Pesthy-Simon, '*Imitatio Christi',* 92-94.
131. Cobb, 'Polycarp's cup'*,* 226. See also: Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 554; idem, 'Nailing down', 128-133.
132. Cobb, 'Polycarp's cup', 226-227. However, Hartog does 'locate' the cup in the Synoptic Gospels, without offering further explanation: Hartog, 'Christology', 141, footnote 8.
133. Cobb, 'Polycarps's cup', 227
134. Cobb, 'Polycarp's cup', 224/227-240. See also: Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 549/554-555. For a view that these (supposed) parallels between Polycarp and Socrates are either too superficial or 'forced', and that the similarities between the description of Polycarp's death and 'noble death' stories are due to the fact that those stories had already impacted earlier Jewish and Christian writings, see: Pesthy-Simon, '*Imitatio Christi',* 91-92 (who cites Moss, 2010).

surroundings. To do so, they partially rely on Christian-specific beliefs that help to ground martyrdom and 'persecution' in a larger religious, dualist worldview. At the same time, the texts – particularly *Martyrdom of Polycarp* – are keen to attribute 'persecution' to divine providence, another Christian-specific belief that seems to be at odds with the simultaneous accusations directed against the Devil and his human agents. The notion of divine election of martyrs is of crucial importance to the texts, since it allows the authors to redefine martyrdom as the 'victory' of patient heroes, rather than the execution of religious dissidents to the 'victory' of patient heroes[135]. As in the case of *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* it also helps to resolve a possible conflict between the valorisation of martyrdom on the one hand, and a disavowal of suicide and provocation of the Roman authorities on the other. Thus, the promotion of martyrdom and its interpretation proceeds largely within a Christian-specific discourse that would probably have been unfamiliar or 'odd' to non-Christian observers. At the same time, the existence of apparent links with the *exemplum* of Socrates in *Martyrdom of Polycarp* suggests that more 'general' motifs and influences were also at play in Christian constructions of martyrdom.

I.4 'General' motifs and influences

In addition to the possibility of *imitatio Socratis* in *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* scholars have argued in favour of further influences from (pagan) noble death traditions on both *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and *Passio Perpetuae*. These influences range from the exemplary figures that are (tacitly) invoked, to the language used, and to conceptions of morality. These elements have not merely been copied, however, but have often been adapted to the needs of the authors and have been interwoven with more Christian-specific elements. Thus, the authors created a new discourse that effectively appropriated elements from a culture that was occasionally hostile towards them, and which they themselves often critiqued.[136] The most obvious examples reside in some of the vocabulary that these texts use. For instance, in *Martyrdom of*

135. See I.4.
136. As Barbara Gold puts it: "Early Christian texts are thus founded on a paradox: They arise out of and are clearly indebted to the very pagan tradition that they were trying to subvert: Gold, *Athlete of God,* 64. For a detailed discussion on the 'appropriation' – as well as condemnation, in the case of Tertullian - of the *exemplum* of Socrates among early Christian apologists and martyrological texts, see: Döring, *Exemplum Socratis,* 143-161.

Polycarp, the author repeatedly uses the word 'noble' (*γενναῖος*) to describe martyrdoms that took place 'according to the Gospel'[137], a term which appears to be linked to the martyrs' unflinching loyalty towards God and their exemplary ability to endure suffering and death, as evidenced by the following passage:

> "Blessed and noble, therefore, are all the martyrdoms that have occurred according to the will of God. […] For who would not be astounded by their nobility, endurance, and love of the Master? For they endured even when their skin was ripped to shreds by whips […] while bystanders felt pity and wailed. But they displayed such nobility that none of them either grumbled or moaned […"[138]

Passio Perpetuae also invokes the 'nobility' of the martyrs, which likewise appears to indicate the martyrs' virtuous demeanour in dying for their convictions, rather than refer to their social class (since the group included several slaves).[139] Interestingly, the text has Perpetua call the group the "most noble of the condemned belonging to Caesar" when trying to persuade the tribune into treating the prisoners better – which succeeds.[140] This shows that the editor – or even Perpetua herself, if this exchange did indeed take place - expected that the pagan authorities would have been susceptible to this kind of rhetoric. Thus, both texts invoke 'nobility' in the sense of moral excellence, a term which due to its frequent use in pagan contexts forms the basis for the (scholarly) concept of noble death, and which ancient audiences would probably have readily associated with the pagan (and perhaps Jewish) examples that Christian authors were thus referencing.[141]

As the cited passage from *Martyrdom of Polycarp* shows, the concept of 'nobility' in facing death was closely tied to the virtue of endurance. Traditionally, people in the ancient world had spoken about virtue within a thoroughly gendered discourse that associated most virtues with manliness – which were predominantly of an active

137. See: Dehandschutter, 'Leben und/oder sterben für Gott', 196-197; Hartog, 'Christology', 145. This word occurs four times: *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* II.1-2/III.2.
138. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* II.1-2. *Μακάρια μὲν οὖν καὶ γενναῖα τὰ μαρτύρια πάντα τὰ κατὰ τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ γεγονότα. […] τὸ γὰρ γενναῖον αὐτῶν καὶ ὑπομονητικὸν καὶ φιλοδέσποτον τίς οὐκ ἂν θαυμάσειεν; οἳ μάστιξιν μὲν καταξανθέντες, [..] ὑπέμειναν, ὡς καὶ τοὺς περιεστῶτας ἐλεεῖν καὶ ὀδύρεσθαι· τοὺς δὲ καὶ εἰς τοσοῦτον γενναιότητος ἐλθεῖν, ὥστε μήτε γρύξαι μήτε στενάξαι τινὰ αὐτῶν […*
139. See: Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,* 312/317.
140. *Passio Perpetuae,* XVI.3. *…] noxiis nobilissimis Caesaris […*
141. See for instance: Hartog, 'Christology', 145.

character –, while passive vices were generally attributed to women.[142] However, due to changing political circumstances, which saw people of various backgrounds 'unjustly' tortured and executed by the imperial authorities, pagan, Jewish, and Christian thinkers alike modified this discourse in order to portray the passive victims of Roman (or Hellenistic) rule as active heroes.[143] Most notably, the concept of *patientia,* which had once referred to a 'feminine', passive acceptance of pain and suffering, was partially transformed into an active virtue related to bravery and self-control - so long as the suffering that one underwent was the result of a conscious decision to remain true to one's principles.[144] Naturally, this new ideal of endurance was instrumental in depicting prosecuted Christian - who might otherwise easily have avoided prosecution by denying their Christianity or offering a sacrifice - as martyrs.

Nevertheless, pagan philosophers and the editors of the accounts about Polycarp and Perpetua alike seem to have found it difficult to whole-heartedly embrace this new conception of endurance, so that the victims (real or literary) often also participated in their own deaths more directly[145], which, from a modern perspective, seems to border on suicide.[146] In *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* for instance, Polycarp says he need not be nailed to a pole, stating that "…] the one who enables me to endure the fire [Christ] will also enable me to remain in the pyre without moving, even without the security of your nails"[147] – a statement that seems to be more in line with the conduct of the self-immolating Indian *gymnosophoi* or Peregrinus, or even Socrates drinking the hemlock, than with Jesus whom the (Canonical) Gospels claim was nailed to the cross. While we cannot reconstruct with certainty which particular texts inspired the editor of *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* and thus whether the author was intentionally contrasting Polycarp with Christ in his refusal to be nailed down (more so given that we do not know with what accounts about the death of Jesus the editor was familiar), it seems highly likely that the editor was not only inspired by 'the Gospel'. Interestingly, by both presenting the martyrdom of Polycarp as an imitation

142. Cobb, *Dying to be men, passim,* especially 61-80; Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* 47-51; Gold, *Athlete of God,* 29-41.
143. Ibid. See also: Grig, 'Torture and truth', 323; Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 243-276. See also chapters II.4 and III.3.
144. Gold, *Athlete of God*, 31-35/45.
145. Ibid.
146 For a summary overview of martyrs who appear to commit 'suicide' or 'voluntary martyrdom', see: Pesthy-Simon, *'Imitatio Christi',* 84-85. For a critique of the notion of 'voluntary martyrdom' as a separate category prior to the third century CE, see: Moss, 'Voluntary martyrdom', 531-551.
147. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* XIII.3. …] *ἄφετέ με οὕτως· ὁ γὰρ δοὺς ὑπομεῖναι τὸ πῦρ δώσει καὶ χωρὶς τῆς ὑμετέρας ἐκ τῶν ἥλων ἀσφαλείας ἄσκυλτον ἐπιμεῖναι τῇ πυρᾷ.*

of the Passion of Christ, and describing his martyrdom in ways analogous to that of noble death, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* may be seen to present the death of Jesus as more akin to that of Socrates, including its 'voluntary' aspects.[148]

Similarly, in *Passio Perpetuae,* Perpetua says that the martyrs came to the arena 'voluntarily'.[149] Furthermore, the text states that the martyrs themselves chose by which animals they desired to be killed, and that these wishes were apparently fulfilled by God - even though according to the text, none actually ended up dying accordingly. Instead, the martyrs received their final blows from armed gladiators, after the animals had either non-lethally wounded them, or had 'miraculously' refrained from attacking them.[150] This apparent inconsistency also appears in *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* where Polycarp receives a vision that he is to die by fire, even though the text claims that the fire left him unharmed, and he was instead killed with a dagger.[151] This oddity can perhaps be explained with reference to the semi-suicidal death of Perpetua: when the other martyrs had already allowed themselves to be killed "in silence and without moving"[152], Perpetua was stabbed between her ribs, "and when the right hand of the novice gladiator wavered, she herself guided it to her throat. Perhaps such a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not have been killed unless she herself had willed it."[153]

This remarkable passage suggests two things. First, by contrasting a gladiator hesitant to kill a condemned criminal with the heroic, death-spurning attitude of Perpetua, a young woman, the author created a powerful image of Christian 'masculine' virtue triumphing over the feminine weakness of the executioners. Similarly, Perpetua often 'triumphs' over other male pagans, such as when she defies her father – who, in return, 'feminizes' himself by losing his emotional self-control,

148. Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 554-555; idem, 'Nailing down', 129-135; Cobb, 'Polycarp's cup', 224/227-240. Polycarp has also been compared to the famous *gymnosophoi* by: J.M. Kozlowski (2011) 'Polycarp as a Christian Gymnosophist', *Studia Patristica* 51: 15-22 (*non vidi*; cited by: Hartog, 'Christology', 146, footnote 14). For a defense of the view that the Martyr Acts draw from many different models, which are not necessarily shared between different martyr stories, see: Pesthy-Simon, '*Imitatio Christi',* 83-96.
149. *Passio Perpetuae,* XVIII.5: "*Ideo ad hoc sponte pervenimus, ne libertas nostra obduceretur."*
150. For the ancient (literary) practice of attributing animals' reluctance to attack people to divine providence, including in Christian martyr stories, see: Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion,* 140-141.
151. Compare *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* V.2/XII.3 to ibid., XV-XVI. This oddity has also been noticed by: Pesthy-Simon, '*Imitatio Christi',* 93, who discusses it in relation to the (perceived) similarities between Polycarp's 'sacrifice' and the *Binding of Isaac* (*Aqedah).*
152. *Passio Perpetuae,* XXI.8: *Ceteri quidem immobiles et cum silentio ferrum receperunt […*
153. Ibid., XXI.9-10: *Perpetua autem, ut aliquid doloris gustaret, inter ossa conpuncta exululavit, et errantem dexteram tirunculi gladiatoris ipsa in iugulum suum transtulit. Fortasse tanta femina aliter non potuisset occidi, quae ab immundo spiritu timebatur, nisi ipsa voluisset.*

throwing himself down before his daughter and calling her "lady" (*domina)* – or makes demands of her captors; in doing so, Perpetua exemplifies 'masculine' virtues like self-control, courage, and the ability to persuade rather than to be persuaded.[154] This was possible due to the fact that within the philosophical discourse of the Principate, 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities had been partially divorced from their association with the actual sexes, and instead came to act more as synonyms for 'virtue' and 'vice'; nevertheless, this process of decoupling sex and gender was not complete, so that philosophers like Philo of Alexandria still expected women to be more inclined towards the inferior feminine traits than men, and claimed that there remained certain feminine virtues like modesty that women specifically were expected to display.[155] By making a Christian woman seem superior to a male pagan lacking in determination, the editor was making a powerful statement in favour of Christianity, praising it for its ability to turn its followers, even women, into virtuous, masculine heroes.[156] At other times in *Passio Perpetuae,* however, the editor is keen to stress Perpetua's adherence to typical feminine virtues and patterns of behaviour, for example by introducing her as "a woman well born, liberally educated and honourably married"[157], showing her to be concerned for her baby, and stressing her concern for her 'modesty' in the arena.[158] This demonstrates how the masculine representation of martyrs like Perpetua resulted from strategic choices rather than a radical revision of traditional gender relations. Furthermore, as the command to 'Be strong, Polycarp, and be a man' (coming from a heavenly voice) in *Martyrdom of Polycarp*[159] shows, the masculinization of martyrs was not limited to women, but functioned more as a general way of indicating their mastery of virtues like bravery and endurance.[160]

Second, the passage suggests that martyrs who fearlessly obey God's will, grow so powerful that they actually become impervious to physical harm – a simultaneous testament to the 'miracles' performed by God, and to the perfect *patientia* of the martyrs, through which they vanquish their persecutors. This might then explain why the other martyrs do not die in the ways revealed to them beforehand: in order to

154. Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 97-102. See also: Kiztler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* 47-51 (who cites Cobb's book); Gold, *Athlete of God,* 106-111.
155. Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 20-32; Gold, *Athlete of God,* 31-38.
156. See: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 32/61.
157. *Passio Perpetuae,* II.1: …] *Vibia Perpetua, honeste nata, liberaliter instituta, matronaliter nupta.*
158. See especially: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 14/107-111.
159. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* IX.1. *…] φωνὴ ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἐγένετο·γΐσχυε, Πολύκαρπε, καὶ ἀνδρίζου.*
160. See: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* especially 13-14.

become paragons of virtue, they need to submit themselves to God's will at any cost, but when that means being killed by impious pagans, the authors seem to have felt an urge to portray the martyrs as ultimately killing themselves.[161] As Candida Moss has argued, Christians at this point were not yet - generally speaking - making a clear distinction between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' martyrdom, so that this suicidal aspect might not have been perceived as problematic,[162] even if *Martyrdom of Polycarp* clearly condemns 'martyrs' who turn themselves in.[163]

Another seeming oddity in these accounts is that the choice to suffer seems to be diminished by the texts' firm belief that Christ will be 'inside' the martyrs and hence shield them from suffering.[164] The idea here seems to have been that through imitating Jesus in both life and death, the martyrs were able to attain a certain 'communion' with Christ and thus partially liberate themselves from the flesh. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* writes about a group of martyrs:

> "But they displayed such nobility that none of them either grumbled or moaned, clearly showing us all that in that hour, while under torture, the martyrs of Christ had journeyed far away from the flesh, or rather, that the Lord was standing by, speaking to them."[165]

Likewise, in *Passio Perpetuae,* when an assistant jailor asks Felicitas how she will endure being thrown to the beasts when childbirth already caused her much suffering, she replies:

161. Alternatively, it is possible that the 'failed executions' of the martyrs in these texts reflect historical reality – or at least narratives told about Polycarp's execution that precede our surviving textual versions- and that the discrepancies result from a conflict between the editors' adherence to the 'facts' on the one hand, and the messages they wished to convey about the significance of the described events on the other. For instance, Sara Parvis has suggested that the fire failed to burn Polycarp possibly because a sea-wind kept the fire swirling around his body, and that this may have been interpreted by eyewitnesses as a miracle: Parvis, '*Martyrdom of Polycarp',* 109-110. However, we may still ask why the editors did not choose to leave out or adapt these prophesies to make them agree with the martyrs' ultimate causes of death, or at least refrain from interpreting them explicitly in the texts, if they themselves were aware of these (apparent) discrepancies.
162. Moss, 'Voluntary martyrdom', 540-548.
163. See footnote 101.
164. See: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 9-10/65-66. This phenomenon is also mentioned by: Pesthy-Simon, *'Imitatio Christi',* 86.
165. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* II.2. *τοὺς δὲ καὶ εἰς τοσοῦτον γενναιότητος ἐλθεῖν, ὥστε μήτε γρύξαι μήτε στενάξαι τινὰ αὐτῶν, ἐπιδεικνυμένους ἅπασιν ἡμῖν, ὅτι ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ βασανιζόμενοι τῆς σαρκὸς ἀπεδήμουν οἱ μάρτυρες τοῦ Χριστοῦ, μᾶλλον δέ, ὅτι παρεστὼς ὁ κύριος ὡμίλει αὐτοῖς.*

> "Now I alone suffer what I am suffering, but then there will be another inside me, who will suffer for me, because I am going to suffer for him."[166]

On the other hand, *Passio Perpetuae* also comments that Perpetua screamed out in agony "so that she might taste something of the pain".[167] Perhaps the goal of the editor here was to show the martyrs as being 'in control' of what was happening to them, including their physical responses, which again stresses the active aspect of martyrdom.[168] This communion with Christ might therefore be interpreted as a uniquely Christian claim to being able to withstand pain and death without fear, an ideal much sought after by various contemporary philosophical schools.

Another strategy used by the texts to underline the active and noble character of martyrs' deaths resides in the frequent recurrence of terms related to the world of athletics and gladiatorial combat.[169] This, of course, makes sense in light of the circumstances of their deaths, but it also forms part of the overall trend to shift the presentation from people (supposedly) persecuted for their beliefs from criminals 'deserving' of public execution to gladiators 'fighting' in the arena, who might inspire audiences towards Christianity by means of their fearless performance.[170]

For this, the authors drew from a shared cultural repertoire, since such metaphors occur both in the writings of pagan thinkers like Seneca – who saw actively 'training' oneself to withstand pain and death as a form of 'masculine' *patientia* – as well as in Christian texts from the Pauline epistles onwards.[171] The texts demonstrate that such language had been well-integrated with Christian ideas about the world. For example, they often speak about the martyrs as receiving a 'crown' after their

166. *Passio Perpetuae,* XV.5-6: *Modo ego patior quod patior; illic autem alius erit in me qui patietur pro me, quia et ego pro illo passura sum.*
167. Ibid.*,* XXI.9: *…] ut aliquid doloris gustaret […*
168. Compare: Gold, *Athlete of God,* 44.
169. The use of this metaphor is especially pronounced in *Passio Perpetuae,* but of lesser importance in *Martyrdom of Polycarp.* I disagree, however, with Pesthy-Simon's (Pesthy-Simon, *'Imitatio Christi',* 91) statement that the *agon*-motif is of no importance to *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* given the text's references to the 'crown' that martyrs receive, and a description of martyrs as already having 'engaged in the struggle': *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* XVII.1/XVIII.3/XIX.2. Compare: Dehandschutter, 'Leben und/oder sterben für Gott', 197.
170. See: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 33-59; Dehandschutter, 'Leben und/oder sterben für Gott', 197; Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* 1/50/52, footnote 232; Gold, *Athlete of God,* 25-45. For an overview of scholarly interpretations of the functions and symbolism of the Roman arena, see: Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion,* 119-148; Castelli, 'Persecution and spectacle', 105-112. See also: Grig, 'Torture and truth', 323-324/328-329, as well as this thesis' discussion of *Ad Martyras* in chapter III.2.
171. See especially: Gold, *Athlete of God,* 25-45. See also: Grig, 'Torture and truth', 323.

'contest' – terms drawn from the world of Roman spectacle - which are here predicated on Christian beliefs about salvation and the intervention of God and the Devil in the world. The clearest illustration of this phenomenon can be found in the fourth vision of Perpetua. Here, Perpetua sees herself entering an arena, being stripped naked, rubbed in with oil, and engaging a certain 'Egyptian' in *pankration*-like combat. The text even notes how Perpetua 'became a man' - a much-debated phrase that seems to mark the culmination of Perpetua's quest to become a heroic, 'manly' martyr, which had already forced her to abandon her roles as a wife, daughter, and mother.[172] After defeating the Egyptian, an enormous man, who is twice described as a 'gladiator trainer', congratulates her and says: "Daughter, peace be with you".[173] In light of similar imagery in other texts like Tertullian's *Ad Martyras,* this figure can only plausibly be identified as a symbol for Christ or God, who is therefore conceived of as a trainer of Christian 'gladiators', the martyrs.[174] Thus, even though Christians like Tertullian offered virulent criticism of the spectacles provided by pagan society, they were not averse to appropriating the positive image of athleticism and gladiatorial combat for their presentation of martyrdom.[175]

A final strategy employed by both texts revolves around issues of justice. Like most virtues, justice was perceived as a male trait[176], so that the editor makes a powerful statement when he closes off Perpetua's successful refusal to put on priestly costumes, as a Roman tribune had desired, with the phrase "Injustice recognized justice".[177] Justice also plays an important role in *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* where the editor creates a very clear contrast between the calm and constant demeanour of Polycarp, and the proconsul and crowd gathered in the stadium, who prosecute Polycarp without concern for formal procedure and who act furiously and violently when Polycarp refuses to cave in to their threats:[178]

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172. *Passio Perpetuae,* X. For the meaning of Perpetua's 'transformation' into a man, see: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 105-107; Gold, *Athlete of God,* 25-41.
173. *Passio Perpetuae,* X.10-13: *"Filia, pax tecum."*
174. Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* 67-68; Gold, *Athlete of God,* 25. See also chapter III.2., which discusses Tertullian's *Ad Martyras*.
175. Compare: Castelli, 'Persecution and spectacle', 113-136.
176. Cobb, *Dying to be men,* especially 14-15/70-72. See also: Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae,* 48/51 (who cites Cobb, 2008).
177. *Passio Perpetuae,* XVIII.4-6: *Agnovit iniustitia iustitiam.*
178. For the 'strange' aspects of the 'trial' reported in *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* see: Parvis, '*Martyrdom of Polycarp*', 109-111 (who nevertheless regards the description as authentic and historically accurate), and: Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 548-550 (who uses these oddities to argue against the authenticity of *Martyrdom of Polycarp*). For an analysis of the role of 'justice' in *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* see: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 70-72; Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 257-259.

> "The chief of police Herod, along with his father Nicetas, met him […]. Sitting on either side, they were trying to persuade him, saying: "Why is it so wrong to save yourself by saying 'Caesar is Lord', making a sacrifice, and so on?" He did not answer them at first; but when they persisted, he said: "I am not about to do what you advise." Having failed to persuade him, they began to speaking horrible words and hastily shoved him out, so that when he came down out of the carriage he scraped his skin."[179]
> "Again the proconsul said to him, "[…] I will have you consumed by fire, if you do not repent." Polycarp replied, "You threaten with a fire that burns for an hour and after a while is extinguished; for you do not know about the fire of the coming judgment and eternal torment, reserved for the ungodly. But why are you waiting? Bring on what you wish." While he was saying these and many other things, he was filled with courage and joy, and his face was full of grace, so that not only did he not collapse to the ground from being unnerved at what he heard, but on the contrary, the proconsul was amazed and sent his herald into the centre of the stadium to proclaim three times, "Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian." When the herald said this, the entire multitude of both Gentiles and Jews who lived in Smyrna cried out with uncontrollable rage and a great voice […"[180]

While these passages are clearly reminiscent of the trial of Jesus, who likewise refused to explain himself and was condemned by a mixture of Roman officials and a

179. Ibid., VIII.2-3. *καὶ ὑπήντα αὐτῷ ὁ εἰρήναρχος Ἡρώδης καὶ ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ Νικήτης, οἳ καὶ μεταθέντες αὐτὸν […] παρακαθεζόμενοι καὶ λέγοντες· τί γὰρ κακόν ἐστιν εἰπεῖν· Κύριος Καῖσαρ, καὶ ἐπιθῦσαι καὶ τὰ τούτοις ἀκόλουθα καὶ διασώζεσθαι; ὁ δὲ τὰ μὲν πρῶτα οὐκ ἀπεκρίνατο αὐτοῖς, ἐπιμενόντων δὲ αὐτῶν ἔφη· οὐ μέλλω ποιεῖν, ὃ συμβουλεύετέ μοι. οἱ δὲ ἀποτυχόντες τοῦ πεῖσαι αὐτὸν δεινὰ ῥήματα ἔλεγον καὶ μετὰ σπουδῆς καθῄρουν αὐτόν, ὡς κατιόντα ἀπὸ τῆς καρούχας ἀποσῦραι τὸ ἀντικνήμιον.*

180. Ibid., XI.2-XII.2. *ὁ δὲ πάλιν πρὸς αὐτόν· πυρί σε ποιήσω δαπανηθῆναι […] ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήσῃς. ὁ δὲ Πολύκαρπος εἶπεν· πῦρ ἀπειλεῖς τὸ πρὸς ὥραν καιόμενον καὶ μετ' ὀλίγον σβεννύμενον· ἀγνοεῖς γὰρ τὸ τῆς μελλούσης κρίσεως καὶ αἰωνίου κολάσεως τοῖς ἀσεβέσι τηρούμενον πῦρ. ἀλλὰ τί βραδύνεις; φέρε, ὃ βούλει. Ταῦτα δὲ καὶ ἕτερα πλείονα λέγων θάρσους καὶ χαρᾶς ἐνεπίμπλατο, καὶ τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ χάριτος ἐπληροῦτο ὥστε οὐ μόνον μὴ συμπεσεῖν ταραχθέντα ὑπὸ τῶν λεγομένων πρὸς αὐτόν, ἀλλὰ τούναντίον τὸν ἀνθύπατον ἐκστῆναι, πέμψαι τε τὸν ἑαυτοῦ κήρυκα ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ σταδίου κηρῦξαι τρίς· Πολύκαρπος ὡμολόγησεν ἑαυτὸν Χριστιανὸν εἶναι. τούτου λεχθέντος ὑπὸ τοῦ κήρυκος, ἅπαν τὸ πλῆθος ἐθνῶν τε καὶ Ἰουδαίων τῶν τὴν Σμύρναν κατοικούντων ἀκατασχέτῳ θυμῷ καὶ μεγάλῃ φωνῇ ἐπεβόα […*

Jewish mob[181], the image of a venerable old man[182] being unjustly convicted for his beliefs may also easily have evoked an association with Socrates; this again demonstrates how difficult, if not impossible, it is to identify particular elements of the texts' presentations of martyrdom as being either 'Christian' or 'non-Christian'.

Thus, we can see that both martyr texts are firmly embedded in wider cultural debates regarding noble death, masculinity and virtue, and judicial violence. At the same time, this cultural continuity is problematized by the fact that the texts portray their non-Christian neighbours precisely as lacking these masculine virtues. It would seem, therefore, that early Christians authors were not so much dismissing and critiquing the value systems of their 'parent culture', as depicting their own (idealized) in-group as holding a monopoly on the exercise of virtues that others merely talked about. While the martyr texts under consideration do not explain why only Christians would have mastered these virtues, the works of Tertullian and other apologists suggests that their editors would have defended this view by stating that morality derives from God, and 'true' virtue therefore requires knowledge of Christian theology. Similarly, the Christian-specific beliefs that Christ will suffer instead of the martyrs, and that martyrs will be rewarded for their sacrifice, are portrayed as bringing about the indifference to death and suffering that various philosophical schools likewise sought, yet 'failed', to achieve.[183] In short, the editors of *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and *Passio Perpetuae* appear to have shared many ideas about morality with their pagan contemporaries, but to have combined these with Christian-specific beliefs to form a novel constellation of morals that was then passed off as quintessentially Christian, as well as the one true system of morality. This 'appropriation' of widely-shared cultural norms then explains how authors could

181. See: Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 551-557; idem, 'Nailing down', 121; Cobb, 'Polycarp's cup', 224. Jesus refusal to explain himself before Pilate occurs in the three synoptic Gospels, but not in the Gospel of John (John 18:33-38/19:11) - mentioned by: Pesthy-Simon, *'Imitatio Christi',* 85.

182. See especially *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, VII.2-3. …] *θαυμαζόντων τῶν παρόντων τὴν ἡλικίαν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ εὐσταθές, καὶ εἰ τοσαύτη σπουδὴ ἦν τοῦ συλληφθῆναι τοιοῦτον πρεσβύτην ἄνδρα. εὐθέως οὖν αὐτοῖς ἐκέλευσεν παρατεθῆναι φαγεῖν καὶ πιεῖν ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ ὅσον ἂν βούλωνται, ἐξητήσατο δὲ αὐτούς, ἵνα δῶσιν αὐτῷ ὥραν πρὸς τὸ προσεύξασθαι ἀδεῶς. τῶν δὲ ἐπιτρεψάντων, σταθεὶς προσηύξατο […] καὶ ἐκπλήττεσθαι τοὺς ἀκούοντας, πολλούς τε μετανοεῖν ἐπὶ τῷ ἐληλυθέναι ἐπὶ τοιοῦτον θεοπρεπῆ πρεσβύτην*: "…] and those who were there were astonished at how old and composed he was, and they wondered why there was so much haste to arrest an old man like him. Straight away he ordered them to be given everything they wanted to eat and drink, then and there. And he asked them for an hour to pray without being disturbed. When they gave their permission, he stood and prayed […]. Those who heard him were amazed, and many of them regretted coming out for such a godly old man."

183. See chapter III.

simultaneously invoke pagan *exempla* and make claims about Christian moral superiority.

I.5 Martyrdom and the Crowd

Like the other texts examined in this thesis, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and *Passio Perpetuae* show us what the authors imagined to be the most likely responses from audiences, both those of the crowds attending the events they describe, and those of the expected reader-/listenership. Naturally, since the texts also aim to evoke certain responses to the examples of the martyrs, and because they are engaged in drawing boundaries between the Christian 'in-group' and pagan, Jewish or 'apostate' 'out-groups', we should be wary with regard to the historicity of claims about audiences' responses.[184] Nevertheless, because the authors had to present these reactions in a way that was plausible to the Christian congregations that used their texts, it is probable that they more-or-less reflect 'mainstream' Christian – and perhaps also non-Christian - ideas about these matters.

The sections above have already described the purposes of these texts with regard to their intended effects on readers or listeners. Interestingly, the notion that accounts of Christian martyrdom could be experienced as inspirational by those witnessing it seems to be confirmed by *Martyrdom of Polycarp's* references to the presence of Christian spectators. The text gives two suggestions for why these Christians were present. First, the editor suggests that the Christians present were granted to behold miracles, and were afterwards 'preserved', that they might report it to others[185], which may well imply that witnessing and passing on the examples set by the martyrs was the reason why they attended such trials in the first place. Second, given the text's references to the 'holy' character of Polycarp's body and the concern shown for the preservation of his corpse, it seems likely that Christians also attended such events in order to collect the martyr's relics for veneration.[186]

184. See: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* especially 80-91.

185. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* XV.1. …] *θαῦμα εἴδομεν, οἷς ἰδεῖν ἐδόθη· οἳ καὶ ἐτηρήθημεν εἰς τὸ ἀναγγεῖλαι τοῖς λοιποῖς τὰ γενόμενα*. See also: IX.1. *καὶ τὸν μὲν εἰπόντα οὐδεὶς εἶδεν, τὴν δὲ φωνὴν , ὧν ἡμετέρων οἱ παρόντες ἤκουσαν*: "No one saw who had spoken, but those among our people who were there heard the voice."

186. Ibid., XVII-XVIII. However, Candida Moss has offered strong arguments for why these two elements might be anachronistic fabrications designed to strengthen the character of the text as an eyewitness report, and, in the context of the Cult of the Saints, offer an explanation for why Polycarp's body has not survived. In that case, the presence of Christian spectators might be more

The texts also make comments about the supposed reactions of pagan or Jewish spectators. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* describes how the crowd consisted mostly of pagans and Jews, who reacted with great anger and violence towards Polycarp. At some points in the text, they are described as a homogenous group of 'lawless Gentiles' (*ἀνόμων ἐθνῶν)*[187]*,* who collectively condemn Polycarp for teaching "many not to sacrifice or worship the gods" – which fails to make a relevant distinction between the pagans and the Jews - after he has been confirmed to be a Christian.[188] At other points, the editor singles out the Jews as Christians' adversaries: the Jews, apparently following their 'custom', were especially eager to collect wood for a pyre[189], and also urgently persuaded the governor not to release Polycarp's corpse to the Christians, "lest […] they desert the one who was crucified and begin to worship this one."[190] Especially this latter point makes no sense, as pagans and Jews alike would not at all have been opposed to Christians abandoning their worship of Jesus; instead, this comment seems to have been added for the editor to make a theological claim about the compatibility of the adoration of martyrs like Polycarp with an acknowledgement of the exceptional status of Christ.[191] The accentuation of the role of the Jews in the death of Polycarp and their being mentioned in the context of Christ also betrays a desire on the part of the editor to draw a strong line between the Christian in-group and a 'despicable' Jewish out-group.[192] Finally, the act of singling out the role of Jews in the death of Polycarp further enhances the parallelism between Polycarp's martyrdom and the Passion of Christ.[193] While it is possible that pagan or Jewish spectators would have acted in a fashion similar to that described, the

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reflective of the period in which the surviving text was written than the mid-second century. See: Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 546-547/565-568. Moreover, Rebillard has argued that such eyewitness claims may not have been intended to appear (completely) historically accurate at all, but rather serve to challenge the 'impossibility of testimony'. While he therefore rejects calling texts that contain such invented eyewitness 'forgeries' like Candida Moss and Bart Ehrmann do, the point remains that texts may well reflect concerns that did not yet exist at the time when the martyrs were executed: Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives,* 37-84.

187. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* IX.2.
188. Ibid., XII. …] *ὁ πολλοὺς διδάσκων μὴ θύειν μηδὲ προσκυνεῖν τοῖς θεοῖς.*
189. Ibid., XIII.1. …] *τῶν ὄχλων παραχρῆμα συναγόντων ἔκ τε τῶν ἐργαστηρίων καὶ βαλανείων ξύλα καὶ φρύγανα, μάλιστα Ἰουδαίων προθύμως, ὡς ἔθος αὐτοῖς, εἰς ταῦτα ὑπουργούντων*: "The crowds immediately gathered together wood and kindling from the workplaces and the baths, with the Jews proving especially eager to assist, as is their custom."
190. Ibid., XVII.2. …] *μή, φησίν, ἀφέντες τὸν ἐσταυρωμένον τοῦτον ἄρξωνται σέβεσθαι·.* Note that while this comment is made by Nicetas, one of Roman officials, it was the Jews whom the author claims 'suggested' and 'urgently persuaded' him to say this.
191. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* XVII.2-3. For this interpretation, see: Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 567-568.
192. See: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 81-84.
193. Moss, 'On the dating of Polycarp', 548, footnote 18/551/554; Cobb, 'Polycarp's cup', 224.

presentation of the reactions of the crowd here is clearly in service of the text's overall goals.

In *Passio Perpetuae,* the description of the reactions of pagans observing the martyrs in prison or in the arena differs significantly from that in *Martyrdom of Polycarp.* While we still encounter hostile reactions coming from the crowd[194], we also read about witnesses being impressed and 'converted' by the martyrs. So Perpetua writes that while they were still in prison, a military adjutant called Pudens "began to show us considerable respect, recognizing that there was some great power in us."[195] What's more, it is later described that at least some days prior to the games, the adjutant in charge of the prison "was a believer" [196]; that this refers to Pudens is made more likely by the fact that, according to the text, Saturus gave him a ring dipped in his blood with the words "remember the faith"[197]. Moreover, the text claims that the martyrs were able to convert many of the people who had come to watch the martyrs on the day prior to the games:

> "They [the prisoners] boldly flung their words at the mob, threatening them with the judgment of God, bearing witness to the happiness they found in their suffering, and mocking the curiosity of those who jostled to see them. Saturus said: "Will not tomorrow be enough for you? Why do you so long to see that which you hate? Today our friends, tomorrow our enemies. But take a good look at our faces, so that you will be able to recognize us on that day." And so the crowd left the prison stunned, and many of them became believers."[198]

194. See: *Passio Perpetuae,* XVIII.9/XX.7/XXI.2/XXI.7
195. *Passio Perpetuae,* IX.1: *Deinde post dies paucos Pudens miles optio, praepositus carceris, qui nos magnificare coepit intellegens magnam virtutem esse in nobis […* For the character of the 'conversion' of Pudens, as described in *Passio Perpetuae,* and its relation to the way in which pagans normally came to adopt new gods and their cults, see: Praet, 'Semen est sanguis (?)', 258-259.
196. Ibid., XVI.4: *…] iam et ipso optione carceris credente*.
197. Ibid., XXI.3: *Tunc [Saturus] Pudenti militi inquit: "Vale", inquit, "et memento fidei et mei; et haec te non conturbent, sed confirment."*
198. *Passio Perpetuae,* XVII: *...] eadem constantia ad populum verba iactabant, comminantes iudicium Dei, contestantes passionis suae felicitatem, inridentes concurrentium curiositatem, dicente Saturo: "Crastinus dies satis vobis non est? Quid libenter videtis quod odistis? Hodie amici, cras inimici. Notate tamen vobis facies nostras diligenter, ut recognoscatis nos in illo die." Ita omnes inde adtoniti discedebant, ex quibus multi crediderunt.*

Passio Perpetuae thus implies that people might be converted by the bold and joyous demeanour of the martyrs, coupled with threats about the divine judgment that would await their adversaries. While the passage is far too unspecific and unsubstantiated to constitute real evidence for conversion – what does it mean that the spectators became 'believers', for instance? -, it is still noteworthy that the editor at least found witnessing the manly behaviour of the martyr a plausible reason for people to become 'believers'.

At other times, the text zooms in on the gaze of Perpetua and the other martyrs, which was apparently able to intimidate and anger the crowd.[199] Similarly, Polycarp is described as 'gazing' at the crowd with a stern face, while refusing to give in to the demands of the proconsul.[200] Mutual hostility was therefore another possible outcome, in which case the texts needed to make sure the martyrs appeared to be winning; hence why the editor is keen to note that though the crowd demanded Perpetua and her fellow-martyrs be brought to the middle of the arena to be finished off, it was the martyrs who "got up unaided and moved to where the crowd wished them to be"[201]. This shows how the description of the interaction between the spectating crowd and the martyrs is intimately tied to the messages that the editors sought to convey about the inspirational effects of martyrdom and the reanalysis of martyrdom as heroic combat, rather than the execution of criminals. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that, with the possible exception of the tribune's concession to Perpetua's refusal to put on a costume, and the crowd's shock at seeing the naked maternal bodies of Perpetua and Felicitas[202], the text makes it seem as if spectators could only react with either outright hostility, or conversion. In *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* meanwhile, it seems that the crowd's reactions were almost universally hostile.

I.6 Conclusion

199. XVIII.2/8-9. See also: Gold, *Athlete of God,* 43.
200. *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* IX.2. *ὁ δὲ Πολύκαρπος ἐμβριθεῖ τῷ προσώπῳ εἰς πάντα τὸν ὄχλον τὸν ἐν τῷ σταδίῳ ἀνόμων ἐθνῶν* [… For the significance of the gaze as an indicator of (masculine) strength, see: Cobb, *Dying to be men,* 106-107; Gold, *Athlete of God,* 43.
201. *Passio Perpetuae,* XXI.7: *Et cum populus illos in medio postularet, ut gladio penetranti in eorum corpore oculos suos comites homicidii adiungerent, ultro surrexerunt et se quo volebat populus transtulerunt […*
202. *Passio Perpetuae,* XX.2.

We have seen that *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and *Passio Perpetuae* cannot be neatly separated from pagan culture with regard to their discourse, themes, or conceptions of morality. While both texts are clearly conceived around Christian beliefs such as the aim to honour God, the opposition between Satan and God, salvation and eternal life, and the example of Christ, it is clear that the authors recognized, or were perhaps unconsciously influenced by, similar phenomena in pagan and Jewish traditions. Since it is unlikely that the authors were primarily focused on influencing non-Christians through these texts – which contain a lot of Christian-specific themes and also engage in intra-church discussions -, this shows that (aspiring-)Christians shared many of their values and discourse with that of their pagan peers. Martyrdom, as constructed by these texts, is the result of divine will rather than human endeavour, and revolves around dying for 'the truth' and being rewarded with eternal life. This shows many similarities with the examples of Socrates, or even Peregrinus, who supposedly received visions showing that the gods favoured his intention to burn himself, and who believed he would become a 'guardian spirit of the night'.[203] Perhaps the most important aspect distinguishing these texts' conceptions of martyrdom from noble death resides in the notion that all Christians should be willing to die as martyrs if God would so demand, which is itself couched in oppositions such as that between pagans and Christians, or between God and Satan, that were not (as such) present in philosophical traditions espousing noble death.

Since many elements from these two accounts appear in later hagiographic literature, a very popular genre in Late Antiquity, one may argue that these texts were indeed perceived as bringing about their desired effects – these being to create Christian models for imitation both during and outside of persecution, provide Christian congregations with a collective identity constructed largely in opposition to pagans (and Jews), and make certain theological claims about divine 'election' or the continuing influence of the Holy Spirit. Drawing pagans to the church seems not to have been the editors' goal, however, nor can we say much about the likely effects of these texts on pagan readers, other than that they would likely have recognized much of the texts' moral landscape.

While both texts feature pagan – as well Jewish, in the case of *Martyrdom of Polycarp* – crowds attending the trials and executions of the martyrs, it seems clear

203. For Peregrinus, see: Loukianos, *De Morte Peregrini,* XXVII-XXIX.

that the ways in which the interaction between the martyrs and spectators are presented are subservient to the didactic or polemical intentions of the texts. While both the hostile responses and conversions induced by witnessing the conduct of Perpetua and her companions had to be somewhat plausible to Christian audiences (among whom there may well have been many who converted later in life), suggesting some degree of historical accuracy, the absence of less pronounced reactions seems dubious and is more convincingly explained by keeping in mind the messages that the texts were trying to convey about the praise-worthy conduct of the martyrs and the 'wickedness' of pagan society. Neither does the vague description of some pagans becoming 'believers' tell us how effective this proselytism was; does this mean that they became catechumens, or were they merely impressed by the martyrs, without becoming interested in the theology they had died for? All in all, the texts seem too engaged in the valorisation of martyrdom to present a balanced or honest image of the actual effects of martyrdom, real or literary, on the minds of contemporary individuals.

II. *Acta Alexandrinorum*

Acta Alexandrinorum (AA) is a scholarly name for a diverse set of texts written on papyri that in most cases purport to represent the minutes of various trials and embassies involving Alexandrian Greeks and Roman authorities, though it is possible that the existing versions represent literary adaptations of earlier texts, or even outright inventions.[204] They are also sometimes called the *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs,* which reflects a view found in past scholarship that these texts show a considerable degree of similarity with Christian martyr texts.[205] Because of this supposed similarity, a study of these 'pagan' *Acta* might shed valuable light on Christian martyrs texts, either by demonstrating that certain themes, motives and such were shared by both sets of texts, or by highlighting the uniqueness of certain aspects of the Christian martyr literature.

This chapter starts by offering an overview of the *Acta Alexandrinorum,* including an explanation for the selection of primary sources analysed in the rest of the chapter. Next, it discusses the authenticity and intended readership of the *AA,* which are crucial for understanding the intentions with which these texts were written and disseminated. These intentions, and the means by which authors sought to persuade readers/listeners of certain messages, are then analysed in the following section. The final section of this chapter compares these findings to those of chapter I on Christian martyr texts, in order to estimate the relative novelty of Christian martyr texts and the popularity and reach of the ideas found therein – the two guiding assumptions here being that the popularity and reach of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* to some degree reveals how common the ideas found in the *AA* were among pagans in the Roman Empire, and that newly-initiated Christians would have been more receptive to ideas also found in their pagan parent cultures.

II.1 Overview of the *Acta Alexandrinorum*

204. See footnote 207.
205. See: Herbertus Anthony Musurillo, *The Acts of the Pagan Martyrs: Acta Alexandrinorum* (Oxford 1954) 260-262; Andrew Harker, *Loyalty and Dissidence in Roman Egypt: the Case of the Acta Alexandrinorum* (Cambridge 2008), especially 1-3/7-8/160-164/178.

Acta Alexandrinorum refers to a set of about 40 papyri which date from between the first and third century CE and that have been found in various sites along the Nile Valley (mostly at Oxyrhynchus) and the Fayum. Many of these texts show scenes of Alexandrian Greek nobles being prosecuted by Roman emperors - and often sentenced to die -, in some cases because of their quarrels with Alexandrian Jews, in other instances because of their complaints against Roman prefects or emperors.[206] However, the name has also been used to refer to texts similar to these martyrdom-like tales in either form or content, such as imperial edicts or accounts of imperial visits to Alexandria, since *Acta Alexandrinorum* is a scholarly category whose range is open to interpretation.[207] As such, the classification and nomenclature of these texts are (slightly) controversial, and different scholars seem to hold different ideas about what unites these texts and whether particular examples should be seen as part of the *AA* or not.[208] The name *Acta Alexandrinorum,* for instance, implies that the texts are all copies of the actual minutes taken at a trial, which has been questioned

206. After Octavian's conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE, the city of Alexandria was incorporated into the Roman Empire and hence lost a degree of its autonomy. In particular, Octavian either dissolved or failed to reinstate the municipal council, which was only granted more than two centuries later by Septimius Severus. The city did possess a *gerousia* and *gymnasium,* however, whose leadership was limited to legal 'Greeks'. Besides these Greeks, who formed an exclusive body of citizens that controlled a number of political and cultural institutions and were granted certain privileges regarding taxation and corporal punishment, the city was also inhabited by large numbers of legal Egyptians and Jews: while the former were legally inferior, the Jews also possessed a number of privileges and separate organizations (such as a *gerousia*), mostly to allow them to live in accordance with their religion and ancestral customs. However, because of factors like cultural interaction, intermarriage, and the ways in which these legal classifications were assigned, these ethnic-sounding labels did not necessarily indicate a person's cultural identity. For instance, Egyptians and Jews could aspire to Greek citizenship through engaging in Greek education or gymnasial activities. There also existed a series of disputes about the relative legal status and privileges of the Greeks and Jews, whose representatives urged for the reduction of Jewish privileges, or equal legal treatment (*isopoliteia)* of both groups, respectively. Thus, it is plausible that the privileged Greek citizenry of Alexandria felt threatened by Roman 'interference' in the city and the possibility of Alexandrian Jews either entering the body of citizens, or securing a legal position rivalling their own. For an overview of the demographic constitution of Roman Alexandria and the legal and cultural significance of 'Greeks', 'Egyptians, and 'Jews' in the Roman era, see especially: Jürgen K. Zangenberg, 'Fragile Vielfalt: Beobachtungen zur Sozialgeschichte Alexandrias in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit', in: T. Georges, F. Albrecht & R. Feldmeier (eds.), *Alexandria. Stadt der Bildung und der Religion* (Tübingen 2013) 91-107. See also: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 212-220; Sandra Gambetti, *The Alexandrian Riots of 38 C.E. and the Persecution of the Jews. A Historical Reconstruction* (Leiden 2009) 57-76; Joana Campos Clímaco, '*Acta Alexandrinorum:* questionamento dos alexandrinos às practicas imperiais romanas', *Revista de História* 161: (2009) 301-338, 302-308.

207. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 1-3/7-8/178; Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 309-310. See also: Roger S. Bagnall, 'Talking back to the Emperor', *Journal of Roman Archeology* 22: (2009) 783-786, review of: 'Andrew Harker, *Loyalty and Dissidence in Roman Egypt: the Case of the Acta Alexandrinorum* (Cambridge 2008)', 783-784.

208. See: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 2.

by scholars for over a century.[209] Furthermore, the voguish alternative title *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs* may well be seen as misleading because it implies a situation akin to that of Christian martyrs, whereby Alexandrian ambassadors die at the hands of 'tyrannical' Roman emperors in the name of some greater cause[210]; this, however, can only reliably be said to apply to a select number of texts, if only because many texts are preserved only fragmentarily and we should avoid filling in the gaps too assiduously.[211]

Nevertheless, there exists a degree of overlap between these diverse texts that may indicate - as seems to have been the *communis opinio* following Herbert Musurillo's authoritative work[212] -, that the more 'literary' examples were developed by adding elements to otherwise 'documentary' texts, or were perhaps works of pure fiction that still adopted a documentary veneer.[213] In both cases, these texts could not be fully understood without taking into consideration the connections between what are often called 'documentary' and 'literary' papyri. Andrew Harker has therefore opted to preserve *Acta Alexandrinorum* as a scholarly category, whilst subdividing the texts assigned to this category between '*Acta Alexandrinorum* proper' and '*Acta* related literature'. In his understanding, these texts constitute a spectrum running from more documentary to more literary examples, whereby the *Acta Alexandrinorum* proper display the most literary characteristics.[214] He defines the '*AA* proper' as "capital trials of Alexandrian citizens in the imperial court reported in the form of minutes"[215], which only applies to a handful of texts.[216] Since this chapter is concerned with those texts that most clearly resemble accounts of Christian martyrdom or noble death, it examines the four texts from around 200 CE[217] that

209. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 178. See also: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 250-252; Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 332.
210. Compare: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 178. In his influential work, Musurillo seems to use the term 'pagan martyr' to refer to a variety of pagans whom Church authors such as Tertullian considered as having died an exemplary death, not to figures who died for their 'pagan' beliefs *per se*: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 243-246.
211. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 2-3. For a *AA*(-related) text that may date back to the final years of Ptolemaic rule in Egypt, see: Carla Balconi, 'Rabirio Postumo dioiketes d'Egitto in P.Med.inv. 68.53.? ', *Aegyptus* 73:1 (1993) 3-20.
212. Herbertus Anthony Musurillo, *The Acts of the Pagan Martyrs: Acta Alexandrinorum* (Oxford 1954).
213. See: Musurillo, *Pagan Martyrs,* 250-252; Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 1/48-98, especially 96-98/99-112; Bagnall, 'Talking back', 785. See also: Clínaco, 'Questionamento', 331-334/336.
214. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 1-2/48-98. See also: Bagnall, 'Talking back', 783-784.
215. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 48.
216. These are discussed in: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 84-96.
217. Interestingly, the surviving *Acta Alexandrinorum* in general mostly date from the reign of the Severan Dynasty around 200 CE, so that they are relatively contemporary with the other texts

Harker considers *AA* proper, as well as a few texts involving accusations against Roman prefects by prominent Alexandrians, which appear to be most clearly related to the AA proper.[218]

II.2 *AA* proper: authenticity and readership

Since their discovery in the late 19th century, scholars have proposed various ideas about the historicity and intended readership of the texts designated as '*Acta Alexandrinorum*'*.* In general, we may summarize the debate up to Musurillo's study as alternating between the view that the *AA* largely or entirely reflect authentic accounts of trials and hearings, and between approaches that argued that the *AA* were literary inventions[219] – although in the latter case, scholars could not agree on the purpose of the *AA,* for example whether they served as anti-Jewish martyr literature, or whether they were predominately of an 'anti-Roman' and 'nationalist' character.[220] Wilcken, who had erstwhile defended the view that the *AA* represented the authentic minutes of actual trials, later put forward the view that the texts also showed signs of 'fictional frameworks' and reworking, while in some cases, the *AA* might not have been based on official *commentarii* at all. Musurillo, while allowing for a greater deal of "political propaganda", adopted this view[221], and this seems to have been the general interpretation at least up to Andrew Harker's publication in 2008.[222]

However, as Bagnall points out in a review of Harker's book, this idea is based on the questionable assumption that the documentary style of these accounts indicates that they did in fact originate from authentic documentary sources.[223] Indeed, this assumption was questioned as early as 1901, when Bauer put forward the view that the minute-like appearance of the texts was a mere literary form*,* and claimed that there existed a great degree of similarity (including their *acta*-style) between the *AA*

examined in this thesis. See: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 2/130-140/177; Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 309-310/334-335. See also: Bagnall, 'Talking back', 786.

218. Especially: *Acta VII (Acta Maximi I)* = P.Oxy. III 471; *Acta VIII (Acta Hermaisci)* = P.Oxy. X 1242 = *P.Lond.Lit.* 117 = CPJ II 157; *Acta IX (Acta Pauli et Antonini)* = CPJ II 158a; *Acta IX B (Acta Pauli, Recension B)* = BGU I 341; *Acta X (Acta Athenodori)* = P.Oxy. XVIII 2177; *Acta XI (Acta Appiani)* = CPJ 159a & 159b.
219. See: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 259-265.
220. Ibid. See also: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 8.
221. Musurillo, *Pagan Martyrs,* 260-266.
222. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 99-100; Bagnall, 'Talking back', 784-786. See also: Janssen, Religio Illicita?, 158.
223. Bagnall, 'Talking back', 785.

and Christian martyr texts, which, in his view, showed that these were literate works somehow dependent on one another.[224] Musurillo's subsequent rebuttal to views like Bauer's, meanwhile, seems to be based on the idea that the theory of a documentary origin for the *AA* could be salvaged by arguing that there only exist limited correspondences between the *AA* and Christian martyr literature (or other types of literature, such as the ancient novel) and that we therefore need not regard these parallels as proof of literary indebtedness.[225] Instead, Musurillo believed that the similarities between the texts about these 'pagan' and Christian 'martyrs' resulted from similar 'stimuli', namely their harsh treatment at the hands of the Romans, and the desire of their peers to "preserve an account of their heroes' tribulations for the edification of prosperity".[226] But of course, being able to refute a counterargument does not prove that one is right, and Musurillo may in this case only have demonstrated that the *AA* are more idiosyncratic literary texts than scholars like Bauer believed, not that they derive from actual trial minutes. Likewise, demonstrating that Alexandrians could have consulted public archives does not prove that they did.[227]

While there exists more secure evidence that authors did indeed sometimes rework earlier texts, this still does not mean that the original texts were official, unembroidered accounts. First, Harker states that the surviving *AA* contain multiple inconsistencies in the narratives, which would make little sense if they were unitary literary compositions.[228] Second, some *AA* stories are known in various 'recensions'. For instance, the so-called 'recension B' of *Acta Pauli et Antonini* consists of an abbreviated version of the story found in recension A wherein everything except the speeches by the Alexandrians has been drastically shortened.[229] Since the *AA* (proper) are generally quite heavily focused on the speeches of Alexandrians, it is at

224. Musurillo, *Pagan Martyrs,* 260.
225. See: ibid., 260-266. According to Musurillo, "'obvious similarities' include: "(1) the use of the dramatic 'protocol' style; (2) the emphasis on lively verbal exchanges and aphorisms; (3) the display of heroic contempt for death (although the motives of the Christian are obviously different); (4) rather long, irrelevant speeches delivered by the martyrs; and, lastly, (5) the caricature of Roman officialdom. But these parallels are mostly external; and with regard to the last two points, it is only in the later and admittedly fictional Christian passiones that there is any basis for comparison at all." Musurillo, *Pagan Martyrs,* 262.
226. Ibid., 262.
227. For defenses of the proposed documentary/archival origin of (some) of the *AA*, see Musurillo and especially Harker: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 249-252/274; Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 99-112.
228. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 111.
229. *Acta IX B (Acta Pauli, Recension B)* = BGU I 341. For instances of abbreviation in recension B, see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 188.

least possible that they too emerged from a pro-Alexandrian reworking of texts that once offered Roman emperors and Jewish embassies more room to speak.[230] Thus, while it is plausible that the *AA* 'proper' result from the literary reworking of earlier texts, Musurillo and Harker's arguments are insufficient to prove that these textual precursors were indeed authentic copies of trial minutes.

The existence of these processes of reworking has important implications for understanding why people read the *AA*. It is important to note in this respect that these texts, which deal exclusively with the fates of prominent Alexandrians, were found in multiple sites across the Egyptian *chora.* While this might be explained by supposing that these texts were owned by Alexandrian citizens who took up (temporary) residence elsewhere in Egypt, this is unlikely to be true in all cases; indeed, Socrates, a second century resident of the village of Karanis, who possessed copies of the *AA*, seems to have been a Hellenised Egyptian who was firmly embedded in his local community.[231] Why would people of legal Egyptian status, who were prevented from acquiring citizenship or pursuing political careers in Alexandria, have been interested in the *AA?* One obvious possibility would have been to use these texts for legal reasons[232], but this only seems likely in the case of the more documentary examples belonging to the *Acta Alexandrinorum* related literature. The *AA* proper, on the other hand, often omit crucial information such as the date and location of the trial, the list of witnesses, the name of the emperor, or even the nature of the case.[233] If these were present in earlier texts, their omission in later versions shows that these 'copies' cannot have been made with legal purposes in mind.

Another explanation therefore goes that these texts are some sort of political pamphlets, which found fertile ground in the *chora* because of shared anti-Roman or anti-Jewish sentiments. While texts like (Roman-era versions of) *Oracle of the Potter* seem to confirm the existence of anti-Jewish feelings,[234] Harker and Clímaco warn

230. See: Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 325-328/331-332.
231. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 49/112-119.
232. See: Bagnall, 'Talking back', 784. The (possible) legal use of several documents commonly listed as belonging to the *AA* is also mentioned by Harker, though he believes that other factors must be involved to explain their distribution: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 49/55/65/101.
233. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence* , 89-90/96. The omission of the names of emperors is also mentioned by: Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 332.
234. For the Oracle of the Potter, see for instance: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 122-124. Although some scholars have detected in the extant texts classified as 'Oracle of the Potter' both an anti-Greek and anti-Jewish tradition, Sandra Gambetti has offered a convincing case for seeing the texts as only anti-Jewish: Gambetti, *The Alexandrian Riots.,* 201-202, footnote 27. For an overview of

against overstating the 'dissidence' expressed in the *Acta Alexandrinorum*.[235] Such sentiments are not found in all of the *AA,* so that they cannot provide a full explanation for their appeal.[236] Furthermore, there are no indications whatsoever that the authorities tried to censor the *Acta Alexandrinorum*[237]*,* and similar pro-Greek and empire-critical ideas can be found in the works of 'loyalist' authors belonging to the Second Sophistic, who were not persecuted either.[238]

Harker therefore considers these 'propagandistic' and 'legal' interpretations as insufficient for explaining the *AA's* appeal, and suggests that the stories may also have been read for entertainment. While this might be borne out by the bold and perhaps humorous remarks made by the Alexandrians, and the somewhat theatrical-style of some of the *AA*,[239] this assertion lacks further proof.[240] Moreover, Harker posits that Hellenised Egyptians may have read these texts in order to claim for themselves a Greek identity that would have provided them with increased status in their local communities.[241] The first point, that the *AA* would have been read mostly by such elites is indeed likely, given that these are the most likely audience for Greek texts in the *chora* in general, but also because the fact that the *AA* do not seem to be mentioned by more mainstream literary sources suggests that they were not well-known beyond this small group.[242] The notion that these texts might have been status-increasing for aspiring Hellenes, furthermore, is rooted in Harker's belief that what unites the *AA* is the glorification of Alexandria and its Greek heroes[243]; this notion is discussed in the next segment. Whether the editors of texts associated with the *AA* intended for their works to be used this way, or whether the editors of various texts were aiming at (somewhat) different audiences, is difficult to say, since we do not know where the texts originated, or how they arrived at the sites where the papyri have been found. The intentions of the editors and the expectations with which

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further Egyptian anti-Jewish myths and how these might have impacted relations between Alexandrian Greeks and Egyptians, and Jews, see: ibid., 195-212.

235. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 8/118-119/170-177; Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 326/330-335. Clímaco, nevertheless, does refer to the *AA* as "a kind of literary resistance of the Alexandrians towards the Empire in the II and III centuries": ibid., 302.
236 See the section 'intentions and strategies' below (II.3).
237. Unlike oracular literature like *Oracle of the Potter*, which was periodically suppressed: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 124/176.
238. Ibid., 165-173.
239. Ibid., 8/51/117-120/149/177.
240. This assertion has also been criticized in a review by Roger Bagnall: Bagnall, 'Talking back', 784.
241. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 112-119/140/177.
242. Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 310-311/330-335.
243. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 96/175.

various readers approached these texts may therefore have differed from one another.

In short, though it is possible that the *AA* proper are ultimately rooted in documentary sources, there are sufficient indicators to suggest that they have been modified, sometimes to a considerable degree. Because the practice of reworking would have made these accounts biased towards the Alexandrian side and generally unfit to serve as evidence in legal proceedings, the authorial attentions behind these texts should be sought in the likely reactions that the editors believed these texts would evoke among the rather small, but geographically diffuse elite of Alexandrians Greeks and 'cultural' (not necessarily 'legal') Greeks in the *chora* that probably formed their main audience. While it is possible that these texts had an entertaining aspect to them, their focus on political matters, which frequently pit heroic Alexandrians against Jewish or Roman antagonists, suggests a more 'propagandistic' or 'ideological' aspect as the most likely driving force behind their creation and distribution. Finally, even if the surviving texts are ultimately inspired by historical events or based on official reports, they contain many elements that have clearly been modified or inserted for non-practical purposes. We may therefore treat those elements as literary phenomena that can be understood as serving a particular set of goals, and which may be compared with strategies found in (other) texts about forms of martyrdom or noble death.

II.3 Intentions and strategies

Since the *AA* typically deal with trials involving historical figures, scholars have often attempted to relate these to actual events involving Roman Alexandria. More specifically, the *AA* usually depict disputes between members of the Alexandrian elites and Roman authorities, or describe cases wherein the Alexandrian Greeks and Jews both send embassies to Rome, but the latter is (unjustly) favoured by the emperor. Hence, they are typically associated with complaints about individual prefects or episodes of Greek-Jewish violence in Alexandria, as well as more constant issues like discontentment about the decreased autonomy of Alexandria or the respective privileges of Alexandrian Greeks and Jews.[244] These more recurring

244. See: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs*; Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*; Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 308-336. See also: Gambetti, *The Alexandrian riots.*

issues have also been invoked in order to explain why the surviving versions of the *AA* (proper) often postdate the events they describe by several decades, and must therefore have still been considered relevant by later generations.[245] What might this relevance have been? While some historians have attempted to prove that one particular factor was responsible for the emergence and appeal of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* - which range from views that the *AA* represent a type of 'resistance' literature against the Roman Empire[246], anti-Semitic propaganda, or that they reflect concerns among the Alexandrian gymnasiarchal class about the autonomy of Alexandria, in particular the city's lack of a municipal council (*Βουλή*)[247] prior to the reforms of Septimius Severus -, Andrew Harker has offered a solid analysis that shows how none of these explanations account for all of the surviving texts.[248] Rather, he believes that the only constant factor in the *Acta Alexandrinorum* is their pride in the city of Alexandria and its elite Greek heroes.[249] Furthermore, instead of characterizing the *Acta Alexandrinorum* as 'anti-Jewish', he believes they instead express disdain for all non-Greeks.[250]

While this thesis believes that his interpretation is largely correct, it somewhat disagrees with his aforementioned claim that the *Acta Alexandrinorum* were read as entertainment, and also believes that the texts sometimes seek to invoke a sense of affinity between the Alexandrian Greeks and the Roman emperor that does not seem to fit with the perceived disdain for all non-Greeks. While this might well have been done strategically, the fact that Alexandrian ambassadors apparently believed that the emperors would listen to their grievances suggests that they did regard the Roman authorities as inclined to favour the interests of Alexandrian Greek elites (over those of the Alexandrian Jews). In order to illustrate these points, the remainder of this section investigates a number of texts with a focus on the identity of the

245. See footnote 217. See also: Janssen, Religio Illicita?, 158/201, footnote 455.
246. This classification that has been countered by Andrew Harker; see footnote 235.
247. See: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 8/96/118/138-140/174-175. For the theory that the *Acta Alexandrinorum* were inspired by a decrease of Alexandria's autonomy under the Roman Empire, in particular the city's lack of a *boule,* see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* especially 273-277.l
248. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, especially 8/96/138-140/174-175. In addition, Roger Bagnall, in a review of Harker's book, has pointed out the *Acta Alexandrinorum* seem to have been reached the height of their popularity in the Severan period, which renders it unlikely that Emperor Severus' grant of a municipal council to Alexandria led to the decline of the *AA*: Bagnall, 'Talking back', 786.
249. See footnote 243.
250. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 175. See also: Janssen, Religio Illicita?, 158, footnote 195 (citing Harker, 2008).

protagonists and antagonists, the nature of the discussed grievances, and some aspects of the literary strategies found in these texts.

The first example involves the so-called *Acta Maximi I,* found at Oxyrhynchus and dating to the mid- or late-second century, which falls outside of Harker's definition of the '*AA* proper' and instead contains a long speech held before the emperor regarding the misconduct of the prefect Maximus.[251] In this speech, the unnamed speaker (likely an Alexandrian envoy) accuses the prefect of several crimes, which include demanding interest on loans that had not yet been received, (apparently) orchestrating the appointment of certain gymnasiarchs, illegally confiscating someone's property, and a somewhat mysterious comment about executing a man not wearing white clothes.[252] The allegation given most attention, however, involves the prefect's sexual relationship with a seventeen-year-old youth, whom he also supposedly kept from attending school or training. In the words of the speaker, the prefect thus 'corrupted' a handsome and wealthy youth through his 'shameful' behaviour.[253] Lastly, the speaker accuses the prefect of greed and a lack of *gravitas* in his conduct.[254]

Overall, this text lends itself well to the interpretation that the Alexandrian Greeks did not protest Roman imperial rule as such, but rather attacked what they perceived to be the misbehaviour of individual authority figures[255] as well as disrespect for the autonomy and privileged status of an elite of Greek Alexandrians; this latter point is reflected in the complaints about the prefect's appointment of gymnasiarchs, as well

251. *Acta VII (Acta Maximi I)* = P.Oxy. III 471. For an overview of the text, see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 150-159.
252. *Acta Maximi I,* col.ii.1-col.iii.58/col.iv.94-101. See also: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 75-76, who succinctly notes that gymnasiarchs wore white garments, yet claims that the reference to the man being killed does not seem to describe the murder of a gmnasiarch, leaving the mystery unsolved. Meanwhile, Musurillo suggests that the white garments may refer to festive clothes, which the man in question failed to wear, leading to his execution; Musurillo cites some precedent for this practice. For this point, as well as brief examinations of the other alleged acts of wrongdoing, see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 156-158.
253. *Acta Maximi I,* col.ii.16-20/col.ii.30-col.iv.92/col.v.109-135.
254. With regards to the prefect's greed, the speaker claims that the prefect did not easily allow men to dine with him after attaining his position. See: ibid., col. iii.51-56. An attack against the prefect's *gravitas* can be read in the speaker's sarcastic sneer about the prefect's 'severe bearing and austere looks' in the context of his lover's misbehaviour: "And you [the prefect], with your severe bearing and austere looks, why did you not try to stop him?" (*τί οὖν ὁ κατηφὴς σὺ καὶ ὑπεραύ-[σ]τηρος οὐκ ἐκώλυες*); ibid., col.iv.92-94. For the notion that references to the prefect's appearance were meant to indicate a lack of *gravitas,* see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 158.
255. Which in this case is supported by rather cliché elements of invective directed against the prefect's moral character. Compare: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 157. For a concurrent view that the *Acta Alexandrinorum* criticized rather than outright resisted the Roman justice system(s), see: Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 269-271/275.

as the emphasis put on his 'corruption' of a noble Alexandrian boy. The emperor and Roman rule *an sich* receive no criticism, though this may be because the speaker had to persuade the emperor. As the text adheres rather closely to the style of official *acta,* it is possible that the text represents a (fairly) accurate account of a prosecution speech held in the early-second century[256], with few added elements. That the text contains no anti-Roman sentiments does not deny that the copyist may have held such views, however. The same applies to the absence of overt Alexandrian patriotism.

In many ways, this text stands in sharp contrast to our second example, *Acta Hermaisci.* This text, also found at Oxyrhynchus and dating to around the late-second or early-third century, relates the fate of two rival Greek and Jewish delegations sent to Rome in response to some apparent conflict. Unfortunately, large sections of the papyrus are missing, so that the dramatic date and exact point of contention are unknown.[257] Enough survives, however, to see that the text has a strong literary and polemical quality. The remaining text, consisting of a mixture of narrative and direct-speech segments, starts with an overview of the Alexandrian and Jewish embassies sent to Rome, who apparently each took 'their own gods' with them.[258] After their arrival, the empress Plotina approached both Trajan and the members of his *consilium*[259] and persuaded them to favour the Jewish side.[260] Thus, Trajan is said to have greeted the Jewish delegation most cordially, while he refused to greet the Alexandrians because of what they 'had dared to do to the Jews'.[261] After a long *lacuna,* the text resumes with an almost cartoonish dialogue between Trajan and the Greek Hermaiscus, wherein the emperor threatens to execute Hermaiscus for his 'insolence', while the latter accuses the emperor of 'playing advocate' for the Jews

256. Observe the *caveats* discussed above (II.2), however.
257. *Acta VIII (Acta Hermaisci)* = P.Oxy. X 1242 = *P.Lond.Lit.* 117 = CPJ II 157. For an overview of *Acta Hermaisci,* see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs*, 161-178.
258. *Acta Hermaisci,* col.i.17-18. *ἕκαστοι βαστάζοντες τοὺς ἰδίους θεούς, Ἀλεξανδρεῖς*: "each party taking along its own gods, the Alexandrians […" It is unsure how we should interpret the statement that the Jews brought along their own god(s), which may be taken to mean that the Jews brought along a Thora scroll or some other sacred object, but it may also be a literary invention, designed to act as a counterpart to the bust of Serapis (supposedly) carried by the Alexandrian Greeks. See: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 165/174-175; Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 95; Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 323-324.
259. For a brief overview/discussion of the roles and composition of an imperial *consilium*, see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 202-204. For the (limited) role that such *consilia* play within the *AA,* see: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 92-93.
260. *Acta Hermaisci,* col.ii.26-32.
261. Ibid., col.ii.32-37.

under the influence of the 'impious' Jews in his *consilium.*[262] After the emperor has complained about the 'insolence' of Hermaiscus' remark that his *consilium* is full of Jews, Hermaiscus boldly replies:

> "So, then, the word "Jew" is offensive to you? In that case you rather ought to help your own people and not play the advocate for the impious Jews."[263]

Hereafter, we read how the statue of Serapis that the Alexandrians had brought along with them started to sweat, leaving the emperor astounded and the people of Rome fleeing to the hills.[264] Because of both the inherent improbability of this event and the unlikeliness that this would be recorded in official *acta,* scholars have generally interpreted this final element as an example of an aretology of Serapis[265] that has been added to the text in order to show that the Alexandrian Greeks' patron deity was in their favour and might punish the Romans for their injustice, as well as possibly indicate the superiority of Serapis over the god of the Jews.[266]

While the text contains an obvious anti-Jewish message, its presentation of the Romans is more ambiguous. On the one hand, the text clearly relates how it was the Roman empress who turned the emperor against the Alexandrians, how Trajan acted as a(n almost) proverbial tyrant by threatening to kill Hermaiscus for his 'insolence', and how the inhabitants of Rome fled in fear after witnessing the Serapis miracle - all of which invoke a sense of opposition between the Romans and the Alexandrian

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262. Ibid. col iii.40-50. As Musurillo writes: "The portrait of Trajan is surely a caricature" – Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs*, 162. For the stereotyping of emperors as cruel tyrants in the *AA,* see also: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 91/120/173/176.

263. *Acta Hermaisci,* col.iii.48-50. *οὔκουν χαλεπόν ἐστι τὸ ὄνομα τῶν ᾽Ιουδαίων; ὀφείλεις οὖν πάλι τοῖς σεαυτοῦ βοηθεῖν καὶ μὴ τοῖς ἀνοσίοις ᾽Ιουδαίοις συνηγορεῖν*.

264. Ibid., col.iii.50-55. As Musurillo has insinuated, the reference to 'the hills' may well indicate that the editor of *Acta Hermaisci* was not familiar with the geography of the city of Rome: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 178. Whether the hills were intended to be real or metaphorical in this case, the point remains that such an event would not have been described (in such a manner) in an official trial transcript.

265. In Alexandria, there existed professional storytellers who gathered accounts of miracles attributed to Serapis (*aretologies*), copied and published these, and stored them in temple libraries: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 67-68. One such aretology may then have been consulted by the editor(s) of *Acta Hermaisci*, or the story may have been spread orally – see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 163.

266. For various interpretations of the significance of this 'miracle' in the text, see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 163-165/174-175; Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 323-326/330-331. See also: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 95, footnote 209, who merely states that sweating statues were supposedly seen as a 'bad omen'. However, Musurillo explains that sweating statues could be interpreted as both a favourable or an unfavourable omen, depending on the context: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 163-164.

Greeks. On the other hand, Hermaiscus' comment that Trajan should 'help his own people'[267] – which implies a certain degree of affinity between the Romans and the Alexandrian Greeks - and the text's efforts to show that the emperor fell prey to the intrigue of others, suggest that the Alexandrian Greeks expected the emperor to normally favour their side over that of the Jews. It seems, therefore, that the text's criticism is not directed against imperial rule in general, but against individual figures who let themselves be deceived by Jewish intrigue.[268]

Overall, the text seems to serve several purposes, namely to 'explain' why the emperor might have favoured the Jewish side (if *Acta Hermaisci* reflects an actual trial) even though the Alexandrians believed themselves to be right, to promote the image that the interests of (elite) Alexandrian Greeks were being threatened by Jewish influence within the imperial court, and to present figures like Hermaiscus as fearless defenders of said interests.[269] Also interesting to note is the presence of a certain Paulus of Tyre as an advocate for the Alexandrians, which shows that Greeks from other cities might aid each other during such disputes, possibly because of a sense of shared 'Greekness'.[270] As such, *Acta Hermaisci* shares an interesting

267. *Acta Hermaisci,* col.iii.49. *ὀφείλεις οὖν πάλι τοῖς σεαυτοῦ βοηθεῖν καὶ μὴ τοῖς ἀνοσίοις 'Ιουδαίοις συνηγορεῖν*: "In that case you you rather ought to help your own people, and not play advocate for the impious Jews." See also: Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 324-235.

268. This also applies to Trajan's wife, Plotina, who was apparently persuaded by the Jewish embassy, before she herself managed to sway Trajan and his *consilium* into favouring the Jewish side. Musurillo mentions various possible origins of this accusation, which range from ancient suspicions about Plotina's role in the adoption of Hadrian, the 'extension' of a accusation against Poppaea's supposed favouritism towards the Jews, the belief that women were likelier to become Jewish converts, and lastly, that there should be an element of truth to the allegation: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 162-163. Harker, however, has suggested that the allegation, like the accusation that Trajan's council was full of Jews, was more symbolic and intended to explain the council's supposed pro-Jewish stance. In addition, he mentions the existence of a story in the Palestinian Talmud, which shows some similarity with *Acta Hermaisci,* wherein Plotina persuades her husband to attack against the Jews: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 92-93/153-155. This suggests that the allegations against Plotina do not so much reflect her actual stances, but rather attempts by negatively-affected parties to fix the blame on some identifiable and high-ranking person. Without suggesting a definite solution to the problem, this paper would add that holding empresses responsible for their husbands' controversial decisions would make sense in light of ancient beliefs about the inferiority of women – see chapter I.4 – as well as the fact that they would be easier targets than the emperors themselves.

269. This last point is also reflected by Trajan's mention of the noble birth of Hermaiscus (*Acta Hermaisci,* col.ii.44-45).

270. Paulus is mentioned in: *Acta Hermaisci,* col.i, 9-11. For the identity of Paulus, see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs*, 173-174; Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 85-86/125-127. While Musurillo denies that Paulus of Tyre is the same Paulus mentioned in *Acta Pauli,* Harker affirms this identification. What's more, Harker even argues that this Paulus became a 'stock character' in *Acta Alexandrinorum* texts set in the early second century CE, since he appears in several texts and his role in these stories differs little from that of other Alexandrian ambassadors.

parallel with *Acta Athenodori*[271]*,* wherein Athenian and Alexandrian ambassadors appear together before the emperor to defend a certain petition; when the emperor questions them about this, the ambassadors reply that the city[272] they represent is 'their own', since the Athenians and Alexandrians share the 'same' laws.[273] Thus both texts may belong to a wider tradition of celebrating the shared Greekness of these cities, as this also appears in the Greek novels[274] and other works belonging to the Second Sophistic.[275] This seems to support Harker's statements about the overall importance of Alexandrian patriotism and pro-Greek sentiments in the *AA* – even if those elements are not everywhere as pronounced as in *Acta Athenodori.*

Another text that clearly exhibits many of these elements is the so-called *Acta Appiani,* found at Oxyrhynchus and dating to the early-third century[276], which describes a conflict between Commodus[277] and the Alexandrian Appian. After a *lacuna,* the surviving text starts with Appian accusing the emperor of illegally receiving money from the Egyptian grain trade; when Appian admits his accusation rests on a rumour, the emperor orders his execution.[278] As Appian is taken away, he notices and speaks to a corpse[279] as well as a man called Heliodorus.[280] When the latter is asked whether he has anything to say about Appian's impending execution, he replies that no one would listen, and that Appian will have the glory of dying for his dearest native Alexandria. [281] For unclear reasons, Commodus then resummons

271. *Acta X (Acta Athenodori)* = P.Oxy. XVIII 2177. For an overview of *Acta Athenodori,* see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs*, 196-201.
272. The city they are defending is likely Alexandria, not Athens: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 196-197; Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 86/125-126.
273. *Acta Athenodori,* col.1.6-8/13-18. See also: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 127. In addition, Athenodorus praises their cities for having laws that are 'stronger' than all others, with a 'happy admixture of clemency', which hints at a belief in Greek (cultural) superiority. *πάν[των] γαρ νόμων ἰσχυρότε[ροι ὄ]ντες τὴν εὐκρασία(ν) [τῆς] φιλανθρωπίας ἔχουσι(ν)*: "It is; and they are stronger than all other laws, having a happy admixture of clemency." According to Musurillo, the Greek novels present 'clemency' as characteristic of all Greeks: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 200.
274. Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 253-255.
275. See: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 165-172.
276. *Acta XI (Acta Appiani)* = CPJ 159a & 159b. For an overview of *Acta Appiani,* see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 205-220.
277. For a defence of the view that the emperor in this text is to be identified as Commodus, rather than his father Marcus Aurelius, see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 206-207.
278. *Acta Appiani,* col.ii.17-26 (P.Yale.Inv.1536).
279. This corpse may belong to another victim of execution, which would certainly add to the dramatic nature of the text. See: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 214.
280. *Acta Appiani,* col.ii.17-26 (P.Yale.Inv.1536)/col.i.30-36 (P.Oxy.33).
281. Ibid., col.i (P.Oxy.33) 39-43. *καὶ τίνι ἔχομεν λαλῆσαι μὴ ἔχον[τ]ες τὸν ἀκούοντα; τρέχε, τέκνον, τελεύτα. κλέος σοί ἐστιν ὑπὲρ τῆς γλυκυτάτης σου πατρίδος τελευτῆσαι. μὴ ἀγωνία*: "To whom can we speak, if we have no one who will listen? On, my son, go to your death. Yours shall be the glory of dying for your dearest native city. Be not distressed […".

Appian, and asks whether he knows to whom he is speaking. When Appian replies by calling him a 'tyrant', Commodus insists he be called 'emperor'.[282] Appian disagrees, and contrasts the 'tyrannical' Commodus with his virtuous father.[283] Again, Appian is led away to be executed, and he asks the emperor's permission to wear his noble insignia. After donning his costume, Appian (rhetorically) calls on the Romans to witness an Alexandrian gymnasiarch being led to execution. When the emperor is subsequently informed about the 'complaints' of 'the Romans', Appian is recalled for a second time.[284] Apparently displeased about not being able to greet 'Hades' and Theon, Lampon and Isidorus, who died before him, Appian calls Commodus a 'brigand-chief'.[285] Commodus then insinuates that Appian is 'raving' and has lost his shame, which Appian denies. Seemingly responding to the emperor's 'tyrannical' statement that Appian may speak only so long as he permits, Appian makes an appeal on behalf of his 'noble rank' and privileges. The emperor then makes a strange reply by asking whether Appian is suggesting that he himself is not of noble

282. Ibid., col.ii.46-50 (P.Oxy.33). *αὐτοκράτωρ εἶπεν νυν οὐκ οἶδας τίνι [λα]λεῖς; Ἀππιανός: ἐπίσταμαι Ἀπ[πι]ανὸς τυράννῳ. αὐτοκράτωρ: [οὔκ,] ἀλλὰ βασιλεῖ*: "The emperor said: 'Now you know whom you are speaking to, don't you?' Appian: 'Yes, I do: Appian speaks to a tyrant.' The emperor: No, to an emperor.'"

283. Ibid., col.ii.50-56 (P.Oxy.33). Ἄππιανός τοῦτο μὴ λέγε τῷ γὰρ θεῷ Ἀντωνείνῳ [τ]ῷ π[ατ]ρί σου ἔπρεπε αὐτοκρατορεύειν. ἄκουε, τὸ μὲν πρῶτον ἦ[ν] φιλόσοφος, τὸ δεύτερον ἀφιλάργυρος, τ[ὸ] τρίτον φιλάγαθος. σοι τούτων τὰ ἐναντία ἔνκειται, τυραννια ἀφιλοκαγαθία ἀπαιδία: "Say not so! Your father, the divine Antoninus, was fit to be an emperor. For, look you, first of all he was a philosopher; secondly, he was not avaricious; thirdly, he was good. But you have precisely the opposite qualities: you are tyrannical, dishonest, crude!"

284. Ibid., col.ii.56 (P.Oxy.33)-col.iv.74. *κύριε, κάθῃ; 'Ρωμαιοι γονγύζο[υσ]ι. αὐτοκράτωρ: περὶ τίνος; 'ο ὕπατος περὶ τῆς ἀπάξεως τοῦ Ἀλεξανδρέως. αυτοκρατωρ μεταπεμφθήτω*: "'Do you sit idle, my Lord, while the Romans murmur in complaint?' The emperor: 'What are they complaining about?' The consul: 'About the execution of the Alexandrian.' The emperor: Have him brought back.'"

285. Ibid., col.iv.74-81 (P.Oxy.33). *τίς ἤδη τὸν δεύτερόν μου ἄδην προσκυνοῦντα ~ καὶ τοὺς πρὸ ἐμοῦ τελευτήσαντας, Θέωνά τε καὶ 'Ισίδωρον καὶ Λαμπωνα, μετεκαλέσατο; αρε ἡ σύνκλητος ἢ σὺ ὁ λήσταρχος*: "Who is it this time that called me back as I was about to greet Death again and those who died before me, Theon and Isidorus and Lampon? Was it the Senate or you, you brigand-chief?"

rank; Appian denies this.[286] The text ends with a fragmentary and ambiguous lecture by Appian on an event in the time of Caesar and Cleopatra.[287]

Overall, *Acta Appiani* may be regarded as an almost archetypal instance of an '*Acta Alexandrinorum* proper' text, due to both its heavy use of literary *topoi* [288] and its overall presentation of the conflict between Appian and Commodus as being one of tyrannical emperors condemning an Alexandrian gymnasiarch to die a glorious death for his native city. Interestingly, with its reference to previous Alexandrian 'heroes', *Acta Appiani* appears to be the only example of an *AA* text explicitly relating the events it describes to older events associated with other examples of the *Acta Alexandrinorum.*[289] Yet, unlike *Acta Isidori et Lamponis,* this text does not involve the Jews, but is instead centred on a very specific charge about the emperor's illegal profiteering. The perceived similarity between Appian and these earlier 'heroes' must therefore have been due to something else. Since Appian's negative comments are directed solely at Commodus, while Appian praises Marcus Aurelius and the crowd in Rome apparently objects to Appian's impending execution, the antagonist of this text appears to be an individual ruler, not the Roman Empire as a whole. Naturally, the respective rulers critiqued in these texts were not the same people. The most obvious similarities between these ambassadors would therefore appear to be that these 'heroes' belonged to the same select group of Alexandrian Greeks, and were in all cases convicted by Roman emperors and led away to die for the sake of Alexandria.

All in all, we may state that that which unites these texts resides principally in their glorification of certain ambassadors as bravely defending the privileges and

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286. Ibid., col.iv.82 (P.Oxy.33)-col.v.96. *Ἀππιανέ, (ε)ιώθαμεν καὶ ἡμεῖς μαινομένους καὶ ἀπονενοημένους σωφρονίζειν: λαλεῖς ἐφ' ὅσον ἐγώ σε θέλω λαλεῖν. Ἀππιανός νὴ τὴν σὴν τύχην οὔτε μαίνομαι οὔτε ἀπονενόημαι, 'αλλα ὑπὲρ τῆς ἐμαυτοῦ εὐγενειας καὶ τῶν ἐ[μοὶ προσηκόντων] ἀπαγγέλλω. αὐτ[οκράτωρ' πῶς; Ἀππιανός: ὡς εὐγ[ενὴς καὶ γυμνασι]αρχος. αὐτοκράτω[ρ φὴς οὖν ὅτι ἡμεῖς] ἀγενεῖς ἐσμεν; [Ἀππιανός τοῦτο μὲν] οὐκ ο[ι]δα: ἐγὼ [ὑπὲρ τῆς ἐμαυτοῦ] εὐγενείας και των [ἐμοὶ προσηκόν-]των ἀπαγγέλλ[ω*: "The emperor: 'Appian, I am accustomed to chasten those who rave and have lost all sense of shame. You speak only as long as I permit you to." Appian: 'By your *genius,* I am neither mad nor have I lost my sense of shame. I am making an appeal on behalf of my noble rank and my privileges.' The emperor: 'How so?' Appian: 'As one of noble rank and a gymnasiarch.' The emperor: 'Do you suggest that I am not of noble rank?' Appian: 'That I know not; I am merely appealing on behalf of my own nobility and privileges.'"

287. Ibid., col.v.96ff (P.Oxy.3). For various proposals of what this passage might be referring to, see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 220; Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 91/166; Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 330;

288. These can be seen, for instance, in Appian's speech to a corpse, the accusations and stereotypes associated with 'tyranny', and the frequent use of oppositions, such as that between *mania* and *sophronein*, and the noble birth of Appian versus the (implied) lowly birth of Commodus. See: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 211-212; Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 90-95/159-163/170-172.

289. Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 329.

autonomy of Alexandrian Greeks, and not their use of a particular *acta*-'style', anti-Jewish sentiments, or opposition against the empire. While complaints against the Jews are frequent, this seems to be due to the fact that many of the conflicts in Alexandria around this time involved Jews, and both the Alexandrian Greeks and Jews attempted to gain imperial favour, in order to, respectively, decrease or enhance the legal status of Jewish Alexandrians.[290] Similarly, the texts directed against Roman prefects or emperors appear to be inspired by specific grievances and never amount to a rejection of imperial rule. In other words, the primary intention of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* proper is to claim and legitimize the exclusive position of the Alexandrian Greek citizenry – in particular that of the gymnasial class -, by painting a picture of heroic in-group members defending the safety[291], autonomy, or privileges of said citizenry against a variety of outsiders, while praising Alexandria and (elite) Greeks inhabiting various cities in the Roman East.[292] The main strategies used for his purpose reside in the depiction of the ambassadors as fearlessly speaking truth to power[293], the stress put on the glorious nature of their deaths, and the employment of 'dramatic' dialogues and literary conventions. As such, the texts show certain parallels with the Christian martyr texts examined earlier in this thesis.

II.4 The *Acta Alexandrinorum* and Christian martyrdom

In order to explain the existence of (supposed) links between the *Acta Alexandrinorum* and Christian martyr texts, scholars have proposed interpretations ranging from Christian martyr stories being dependent on the *AA*[294], to claims that

290. See footnote 247.
291. See in this case also the *Acta Pauli et Antonini,* a fragmentary text that describes an exchange between the emperor (Hadrian?) and Alexandrian Greek and Jewish embassies. Although many of the details are unclear, the text clearly talks about instances of Jewish-Greek violence in the city. Like *Acta Hermaisci,* this text also condemns the Jews as 'impious', and has the emperor order a Greek ambassador to be executed: *Acta IX (Acta Pauli et Antonini)* = CPJ II 158a. For an overview of the text, see: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 179-194. See also: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 76-79/88-89.
292. See also: *Acta Pauli et Antonini,* col.vi.119-120. *τὴν εὐπρ[ο]σώνυμον ἡμῶν πόλιν*: "Our well-named city" [the ambassador Paulus is referring to Alexandria].
293. See also: ibid., col.vi.103-110. [*Π]αῦλος: ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ τάφος μοι μόνος πεφρόντισται, ὃν νομίζω καταλαβεῖν. ἐπὶ τοῦτον δὲ πορευόμενος οὐ δειλιάσω σοι τὴν ἀλήθειαν εἰπεῖν. οὕτως ἄκουσόν μου, Καισαρ, ὡς μεθ' ἡμέραν μηκέτ' ὄντος*: "Paulus: 'My only concern is for the grave in Alexandria which I expect to have. Advancing as I am towards this, I shall have no fear of telling the truth. Listen to me, then, Caesar, as to one who may not live beyond the morrow.'"
294. See: Musurillo, *Pagan martyrs,* 261.

both types of literature may have come about independently due to similar 'stimuli'[295], to the idea that both text groups represent variations within a tradition of 'trial literature' that was popular among pagan Greeks and Romans, Christians, and Jews alike.[296] While the notion that the Christian martyr texts were directly dependent on the *AA* is doubtful because of both chronological[297] and geographic[298] reasons, there is sufficient reason to see both groups of texts as belonging to a shared tradition. This tradition, which we might call 'trial literature', is also compatible with Musurillo's theory of similar 'stimuli', insofar some Christian martyr texts *like Passio Perpetuae*[299]*,* as well as some *AA* texts involving historical characters, reflect actual instances of persons being tried and condemned by Roman imperial authorities, which then inspired their followers to write accounts about their heroes that made use of contemporary literary conventions.

Since researchers like Harker have already discussed many aspects of specific *AA* texts in the context of trial literature from the Principate, this section instead provides a more general discussion of the similarities and differences between the *AA* and early Christian martyr literature as a whole, and discusses how these (dis)similarities might relate to the respective context, readership and authorial intentions of these texts. To begin with the similarities, we may indeed concur with Musurillo that these are relatively minor[300] and that the *AA,* like Harker has demonstrated, instead find their closest parallels in stories of Greeks (especially philosophers) bravely defying Roman authority figures.[301] These similarities, which seem to be explained best by the existence of a broad tradition of trial literature, mainly manifest themselves in the use of a protocol-style[302], the emphasis put on the

295. See the section '*AA* proper: authenticity and readership' (II.2).
296. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 141-173. See also: Grig, 'Torture and truth', 323; Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 243-276; Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 7-17. See furthermore chapters I.4 and III.3.
297. Christian martyr texts only became widespread from the third century onwards, when the *AA* tradition seems to have had largely come to an end. See: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 140/161; Bagnall, 'Talking back', 786.
298. The Christian martyr texts hail from various parts of the Empire, while there is no clear evidence of (texts like) the *AA* existing outside of Egypt. For this latter point, see: Bagnall, 'Talking back', 785. For the geographic spread of Christian martyr texts, note for example that some of the earliest extant compositions seem to come from Asia Minor (such as Martyrdom of Polycarp), while others hail from North Africa (*Passio Perpetuae,* for instance); see chapter I.1.
299. See chapter I.
300. Musurillo, *Pagan Martyrs,* 262.
301. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 141-173/177, especially 164.
302. Nevertheless, the Christian martyr literature also includes many *passiones* that consist mostly of narrative rather than in-court dialogue, such as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* or the *Passion of Perpetua.* See chapter I.

'noble' or 'ignoble' character of the defendants and persecutors – though crucially, the defendants in the *AA* are always men of high status, while Christian martyrs include women and slaves[303] –, critique and ridicule of the injustice of the presiding authorities - sometimes combined with demonstrations of loyalty to and respect for imperial rule[304] -, the inspiring and altruistic character of the death faced by the 'heroes', and finally, the authors' desire to depict those persecuted as in control.[305]

These similarities, however, are overshadowed by the differences, such as the greater focus on trials in the *AA*[306], and the virtual absence of comments about reactions towards the condemnation and execution of the Alexandrians.[307] While both of these factors might be explained with reference to the fact that the *AA* deal with trials that apparently took place in Rome, so that the 'aftermath' was not known or considered important by Alexandrians highlighting the behaviour of their heroes in court, a more obvious explanation might be that pagans in Alexandria did not share the Christian writers' valorisation of death, which originated in the latter's religion-based understandings of 'martyrdom'. This religious dimension seems to be totally absent from the *AA* - with the exception of the sudden appearance of sweat on the bust of Serapis in *Acta Hermaisci* -, since the conflicts described only concerned 'worldly' affairs, and this fact alone explains most of the divergent aspects of the Christian martyr texts.

303. For example, the martyrs in *Passio Perpetuae* include several women and slaves: see chapter I. Note, however, that there exists a fragmentary papyrus associated with the *AA* in which a woman appears to be defending herself in court. In Musurillo's view, this text may therefore provide evidence for a first female 'martyr' in the *Acta Alexandrinorum.* See: Herbertus Anthony Musurillo, 'A New Fragment of the *Acta Alexandrinorum*', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 47:1 (1957) 185-190, 185-186.
304. In the case of Christian martyr texts, see for instance the trial of Polycarp; *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* VIII-XII (discussed in chapter I.3-5). In the case of the *Acta Alexandrinorum,* see for instance *Acta Appiani* ii.50-56 (P.Oxy.33), wherein Appian praises Emperor Marcus Aurelius, or *Acta Hermaisci* col.ii.50-56 (P.Oxy.33), wherein Hermaiscus makes it clear that he considers the Alexandrian Greeks to be the emperor's "own". See also: Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 243-276, who argues that both sets of texts tend to criticize the working of Roman criminal law, in particular the conduct of individual judges or the influence of hostile crowds, rather than advocate for resistance against the Roman Empire.
305. In the case of the *AA,* such 'control' manifests itself in the way that the Alexandrians are given much more room to speak, while the emperors are often only allowed short statements or questions that seem effectively designed to facilitate the points that the Alexandrians want to make. See: Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 326/328/331-332.
306. The Christian martyr texts often place more emphasis on the torture and execution of the martyrs. See: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 163-164.
307. Within the texts examined above (II.3), there appear two notable exceptions. First *Acta Hermaisci* describes how witnessing the appearance of sweat on the bust of Serapis created panic among Roman crowds; *Acta Hermaisci,* col.iii.53-55. Second, *Acta Appiani* describes how 'the Romans' complained about the impending execution of Appianus; *Acta Appiani,* col.iii.71-col.iv.74.

For instance, the Christian texts emphasize the salvation and heavenly rewards to be experienced by the martyrs, while the Alexandrian heroes' hopes of posthumous honours seem to stretch no further than receiving a grave in Alexandria[308] or 'greeting' earlier heroes (possibly in an afterlife, otherwise metaphorical).[309] As such, although the *AA* typically depict the Alexandrians as fearless of death[310], or perhaps even glad to have the honour of dying for their native city[311], they lack the expressions of joy and gratitude of Christian martyrs like Polycarp and Perpetua, and the texts generally appear to condemn the emperors for orchestrating show trials.[312] The condemnation of the Roman authorities also proceeds on different grounds, since the *AA* attribute their heroes' unjust treatment to pro-Jewish biases[313] or to the vices of individual emperors[314] - that is, strictly 'earthly' matters, as opposed to divine destiny or the machinations of Satan. Finally, because the Alexandrian Greeks and the Romans held similar polytheistic beliefs, the notion of the religious 'truth' of the persecuted is present only in one of the *AA,* where it is contrasted with the monotheism of the Jewish embassy.[315]

This religious dimension may also explain the more lasting popularity of the Christian martyr acts. The *Acta Alexandrinorum,* with their focus on elite Alexandrian Greeks being heard by emperors in relation to their accusations against Roman prefects, Greek-Jewish conflicts in the city, or complaints about undue imperial interference in Alexandrian institutions, seem to have been strongly tied to the worries of elite (aspiring) Greeks living in Egypt.[316] Even though the exact causes for the *AA*'s apparent disappearance after the third-century are disputed, there exist good reasons to believe that this is not due to a gap in the archaeological record, and

308. See: *Acta Pauli et Antonini,* col.vi.103-105.
309. See: *Acta Appiani,* col.iv.76-80.
310. See for instance: *Acta Pauli et Antonini,* col.vi.103-110; *Acta Appiani, passim.*
311. See especially: *Acta Appiani,* col.ii.28 (P.Yale.Inv.1536)-col.i.43 (P.Oxy.33).
312. See: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence*, 91. As an example in the *AA*, see *Acta Pauli et Antonini,* wherein the ambassador Paulus already during the trial states that he expects to be executed: *Acta Pauli et Antonini,* col.vi.103-110.
313. See especially *Acta Hermaisci* col.ii.26-col.iii.50.
314. See for instance *Acta Appiani*, wherein Appian explicitly contrasts the 'tyrannical' behaviour of Commodus with his father's virtuous rule; *Acta Appiani,* col.ii.50-56 (P.Oxy.33).
315. This occurs in *Acta Hermaisci,* where the bust of Serapis begins to sweat, apparently in response to the threat posed by the Jews' successful persuasion of Plotina and Emperor Trajan; *Acta Hermaisci,* iii.50-55. However, the recounting of this miracle may not have been intended so much as too demonstrate the 'falseness' of the Jewish god, as to indicate the superiority of Serapis and the support he provides to his Alexandrian followers. See footnote 266.
316. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* especially 112-119/140/175-177; Clímaco, 'Questionamento', 310/330-335.

more likely the result of declining popularity.[317] It is probable that the universal grant of Roman citizenship and greater autonomy to various Egyptian cities decreased the relative status and importance of Alexandrian citizenship to which the *AA* proper owed their existence. The martyr texts, on the other hand, remained popular for centuries after the end of official persecution in the fourth century, which shows that their heroes' examples had a far bigger 'timeless' relevance.[318]

It seems that Christian martyr literature was far more effective at constructing powerful role-models for their respective in-group than the *AA* were for theirs, due to its fundamentally religious understanding of the confrontation between martyrs and imperial power-figures as a conflict about an eternal 'truth' whose relevance did not decrease in later eras.[319] While the ideal of speaking truth to power is also visible in the *AA*[320], these 'truths' concern specific political problems in Alexandria that were only relevant to contemporary Alexandrians, or later generations who encountered similar problems and therefore called upon the heroic examples of their forbearers. It is probable that the universal grant of Roman citizenship and greater autonomy to various Egyptian cities decreased the relative status and importance of Alexandrian citizenship, and therefore also the relevance of the *AA*.[321] Another important factor resides in the fact that Christian churches used martyr texts in their liturgy and catechesis, thus providing them with an institutional base that helped to secure their status and dissemination. Conversely, while it is theoretically possible that the *AA* were read together by the gymnasial class of Alexandria, there is no (strong) textual or archaeological evidence to support this.[322] Public or didactic uses like those attested for Christian martyr texts therefore may have been absent in the case of the *AA.* In other words, the *AA* were too dependent on transient political and cultural

317. See: Bagnall, 'Talking back', 786.
318. See chapter I.
319. See chapters I and III.
320. See footnote 293. For the importance of *parrhesia* in the Second Sophistic and 'trial literature' involving Greek philosophers, with which the *Acta Alexandrinorum* share many similarities, see: Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 142/147-151/165-172.
321. Harker, *Loyalty and dissidence,* 138-140.
322. See: ibid., 119-120. The notion that some of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* texts may have been publically performed among the gymnasial class is based on the ideas that that group formed their main intended audience (which is plausible), and that the texts are written in a theatrical style seemingly designed with dramatic performance in mind. Given the absence of evidence that such performances indeed occurred, and the fact that it becomes harder to explain the lack of references to the *AA* or similar traditions in more 'mainstream' literary sources if their performance was part of (elite) public life in Roman Alexandria, this notion lacks substantial support.

realities to achieve the more time- and place-independent attraction of Christian martyr literature.

Thus, the contrast between the relatively short lifespan of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* and the more lasting appeal of Christian martyrdom stories suggests that it was the differences – mostly relating to religion - between these traditions and their respective in-groups that explain the latter's success. Unfortunately, the *Acta Alexandrinorum* on their own are less useful for answering the question of what ideas Christian initiates would have brought along with them from their pagan parent cultures, as the *AA* do not seem to have been well-known or popular outside of Egyptian elites during the first three centuries CE, and may therefore not be representative of the views of lower-class pagans or people residing elsewhere in the empire. Their mentalities might perhaps only be reconstructed by taking into examination the entire tradition of trial literature, which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

II.5 Conclusion

This chapter set out to analyse a number of texts commonly designated as examples of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* with two questions in mind: 1) what do the similarities and differences between these texts and Christian martyr literature suggest about the latter's level of uniqueness and the reasons for its relative 'success', and 2) what do these so-called 'pagan martyr acts' tell us about the popularity and reach of ideas and motifs found in both the *AA* and Christian martyr texts? After establishing that the *AA* texts under consideration are most likely the result of processes of literary reworking - or perhaps even invention -, and therefore warrant a comparative literary approach, it appeared that the similarities between these two groups of texts are relatively minor and the *AA* proper instead find their closest parallels in other instances of 'pagan' trial literature. As such, the most likely explanation for the detected similarities, which mostly pertain to the *acta*-format that some of these texts employ, and their overall presentation of the conflicts between their respective 'heroes' and the authorities that condemn them, is that both sets of texts represent group-specific adaptations of widely shared ideas and literary strategies. Furthermore, as the *Acta Alexandrinorum* do not appear to have been popular or well-known outside of a narrow stratum of upper-class inhabitants from Roman

Egypt, they reveal little about the pagan parent cultures that Christian converts would have brought along with them to their new faith and which would have affected their reception of Christian martyr texts.

The differences, on the other hand, appear to be much more significant. Overall, it seems that the Christian martyr texts out-lived the *AA* because they were better at creating heroic accounts that valorised the self-image and values of their in-group, due to their focus on religious issues largely independent of time and space, as well as the continuous existence and growth of Christianity itself. The *AA,* on the other hand, were dependent on the political and cultural realities experienced by elite Greek Alexandrians and other culturally Greek inhabitants of Roman Egypt; when changes in the third century altered both these dynamics of Alexandrian politics, and the legal status and prestige of Alexandrian Greeks (as compared to those of the Alexandrian Jews, for instance), these texts likely lost their *raison d'être.* As a final note, it bears mentioning that the question whether the *Acta Alexandrinorum* texts studied in this chapter were successful at influencing the opinions of out-group members is unknown, so that they cannot be compared in this regard with the conversion potential of Christian martyr literature.

III. Tertullian and Martyrdom in *Ad Martyras* and *Apologeticum*

Tertullian is commonly regarded as the first theologian of the Latin West, and as such his works have received a significant amount of attention by scholars interested in a wide variety of theological and historical topics.[323] This includes Christian martyrdom, which in Tertullian's view worked as 'seed' for the development of the Church; since this thesis is interested in the possibility of Christian martyrdom having such a 'missionary' effect, it makes sense to investigate what Tertullian meant by his famous remark, and what evidence his writings provide for this supposed effect. [324] Furthermore, this thesis also seeks to uncover through a more indirect method the impact that Christian martyr narratives may have had on ancient audiences, by investigating the similarities and differences between Christian martyrdom accounts and broader traditions of noble death. For this, Tertullian's treatment of martyrdom and noble death provides important evidence.[325] Tertullian's works therefore provide us with both direct and indirect evidence about the reception of Christian martyrdom in pre-Constantinian Carthage.[326]

Because Tertullian's textual corpus is too large to be treated in full, this chapter restricts itself largely to a discussion of two of his earliest texts, *Ad Martyras* and *Apologeticum*.[327] Our investigation proceeds in several phases. First, the chapter provides a summary account of Tertullian's career and writings, as well as an overview of the contents of *Ad Martyras* and *Apologeticum* and the reasons for their selection. Next, the chapter examines these sources themselves, which are each treated in a separate section. This is because, although the works contain overlapping themes, they serve different purposes and Tertullian's rhetoric (about martyrdom) differs markedly depending on the respective audience of and intentions

323. David E. Wilhite, *Tertullian the African: An Anthropological Reading of Tertullian's Context and Identities* (Berlin/New York, NY 2007) 189-190; Perkins, 'Tertullian the Carthaginian', 350. See also: Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens*, 10; Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 2-3, especially footnote 3.
324. See the introduction.
325. See chapter I.
326. See the following section for an overview of Tertullian's temporal and geographic background.
327. See the following section, as well as the introduction (0.4), for why this thesis has selected these specific primary sources for its investigation.

behind a specific text.[328] This 'obfuscation' is best treated by first studying each text on its own. After providing a summary account of some of Tertullian's views on martyrdom and noble death, the chapter ends with answering questions about to what extent Tertullian's views were shared by his fellow Christians, as well as non-Christians, and concomitantly, what this suggests about the validity of his statement that *semen est sanguis Christianorum.*

III.1 Overview of Tertullian and his *Ad Martyras* and *Apologeticum*

Although many details about the life of Tertullian are disputed, contemporary historians generally agree that he likely came from a high social background, lived in Carthage during the late second and early third centuries CE, was well-educated in classical Greek and Roman learning, converted to Christianity later in his life, probably did not hold any official position in Carthage's Christian organizations, and wrote a large number of theological works between approximately 197 and 212 CE.[329] These works range from apologetic texts meant to defend Christians against Roman/pagan hostility and persecution, polemical tracts directed against what he considered 'heretical' views, various works on 'proper' Christian behaviour, and a consolatory-exhortative letter to imprisoned martyrs (*Ad Martyras*).[330] Although earlier scholars generally believed that Tertullian 'converted' to a prophetic movement called Montanism during his writing career and simultaneously broke with (what later became) the 'Catholic' Church, the common view nowadays is that there were no such formally differentiated groups, and that Tertullian rather adopted a stricter, minority view present among the collection of Christian organizations in Carthage.[331] In addition, the 'rigor' of Tertullian's remarks about martyrdom and Christian ethics presented in his 'Montanist' writings has been nuanced somewhat by paying

328. See: Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 19-21/107-108/240-249.
329. Perkins, 'Tertullian the Carthaginian', 350; Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities,* 9-10. Rebillard, however, believes that Tertullian served as a presbyter, while many other historians contend that he was a layperson. This controversy continues in modern scholarship. See: Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 265-266, footnote 58. Bähnk also mentions 197-212 as the period in which Tertullian wrote his extant works: ibid., 29-30. The status of Tertullian as a presbyter is summarily denied by: Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy and Polluted Sacraments: Ecclesiastical and Imperial Reactions to Montanism* (Leiden 2007) 129.
330. For an overview of Tertullian's oeuvre, see: Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 11-12.
331. Tabbernee, *Fake prophecy,* 129-164, especially 129-132; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African,* 167-176; Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities,* 10. See also: Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 18-20/38/109/246/266, footnote 58.

attention to the polemical intentions behind these remarks - which suggests that their greater 'radicalism' was often the result of Tertullian's rhetorical strategies, not his Montanist views *per se* -, as well as continuities between these and his 'pre-Montanist' writings.[332] The two sources studied in this chapter belong to this 'pre-Montanist' phase.

Commonly dated to 197 CE, *Ad Martyras* involves a letter[333] written to a number of unnamed martyrs who had been imprisoned and were awaiting execution. Herein, Tertullian presents himself as a layman wishing to 'nourish' the spirits of the martyrs. In order to do so, Tertullian starts by consoling the martyrs by presenting their ordeal in religious terms, by subsequently proposing that the Holy Spirit has accompanied them into prison, that they are 'trampling' on the Devil by keeping their 'concord' and 'peace' while imprisoned, and that their imprisonment represents a welcome 'retirement' from the evils of 'the world'.[334] Tertullian then exhorts them to persist in their martyrdom, by presenting it as a cosmological 'battle' and athletic 'contest' for which they will be amply rewarded, and by reminding them that many past figures have already undergone similar suffering and death for less noble purposes.[335] As such, *Ad Martyras* provides valuable insights into the sorts of ideas and rhetoric – in Tertullian's view at least – that would have incited Christians to become (would be-)martyrs. These can then be compared to both that of Christian martyrdom accounts

332. See: Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 240-249.

333. Or, perhaps, a tract written in the form of a letter, as some scholars contend. This uncertainty is mentioned by: Wilhite, *Tertullian the African,* 162. While the historicity of the imprisonment of the martyrs mentioned in *Ad Martyras* is of obvious importance to historians trying to reconstruct the actual legal and political treatment of Christians in North Africa around 200 CE, for those interested in Tertullian's conceptions and representation of martyrdom and noble death, this historicity is of lesser concern; whether the martyrs were real or not, Tertullian would in both cases have tried his best to persuade his audience of the value of enduring martyrdom, even though martyrdom was only a remote possibility for most North African Christians. For the limited extent of 'persecution' of Christians prior to the mid-third century, see the section on *Apologeticum* below (III.3).

334. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* I.1-II.10. For an English translation of *Ad Martyras,* this thesis uses the translation by T.Herbert Bindley: T. Herbert Bindley, *The Epistle of Gallican Churches: Lugdunum and Vienna – with an appendix containing Tertullian's Adress to Martyrs and The Passion of St. Perpetua. Translated with introduction and notes.* (London 1900) 51-61. For the Latin text, this thesis uses the edition by Franciscus Oehler: Tertullian, *Quinti Septimii Florentis Tertulliani quae supersunt omnia.* Edidit Franciscus Oehler (Leipzig 1853).

335. Ibid., III.1-VI.2. The rationale behind this 'use' of well-known pagan *exempla* has been accurately summed up by Mary Louise Carlson in an article on the use of pagan examples of fortitude among Latin Christian apologists: "There was already at hand the dialectical means to aid in the adapting of pagan examples for Christian use – argument from the lesser to the greater. If certain pagans were acknowledged to be courageous, surely the Christians, by being reminded of these models of fortitude, could be spurred on with hopes of eternal reward to emulate and surpass their feats." Carlson, 'Pagan examples of fortitude', 96. See also the section on *Ad Martyras* below (III.2).

like *Passio Perpetuae,* as well as that of non-Christian traditions of noble death, from which the moral *exempla* invoked by Tertullian originated.[336]

Apologeticum, probably written several months after *Ad Martyras,* is an apologetic work (supposedly) addressed to Roman magistrates.[337] In it, Tertullian seeks to demonstrate the injustice of the imperial treatment of Christians, the truth and innocence of the Christian religion and its followers, and the wickedness and false beliefs of the pagans. In doing so, Tertullian makes several remarks that relate to Christian martyrdom and persecution, whereby he seeks to demonstrate the injustice and uselessness of the persecution of Christians, even stating that the sight of martyrdom leads non-Christians towards conversion.[338] Even if there is no evidence that Tertullian's work was actually received and read by imperial magistrates, it is plausible that Tertullian would have presented his views in a way that, according to him, could have convinced upper-class pagans. Considering that Tertullian himself likely came from a similar background, it seems logical that Tertullian would have had a relatively accurate understanding of their worldview. As such, *Apologeticum* probably contains the greatest degree of interaction between Christian and 'pagan'[339] views of martyrdom and noble death of all the texts examined by this thesis, making it a valuable source for investigating the probable reception of Christian martyrological discourse by pagans in the Roman Empire.

III.2 *Ad Martyras*

Ad Martyras takes up an unique place in Tertullian's corpus; whereas his other works generally contain aggressive apologetics addressed to non-Christians, or polemical tracts written against 'heretics' or Christians who 'failed' to follow 'proper' religious

336. See: Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* IV.3-8. For specific discussions of these *exempla* and their (respective) significance in Tertullian's works and 'noble death' traditions in general, see: Carlson, 'Pagan examples of fortitude', 97-98/101-103; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African,* 164-167; Perkins, 'Tertullian the Carthaginian', 362-371.
337. For the dating of these two works, see: Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 28, footnote 1/30, footnote 14/250.
338. See the section on *Apologeticum* below (III.3).
339. Note that the distinction between 'Christian' and 'pagan' constitutes somewhat of an idealized binary opposition that in many cases probably did not map neatly unto the social realities of life in Roman Carthage, or elsewhere. This relates to people's self-identification and association, the existence of beliefs and values shared by both of these idealized groups, and disagreements within each group. See especially: Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities.* See also the section on *Apologeticum* below (III.3).

discipline, *Ad Martyras* attempts to console and inspire martyrs who had already shown themselves willing to testify to their beliefs during trial.[340] Given their willingness to suffer martyrdom, then, it is likely that they would have shared many of Tertullian's ideas about the 'meaning' and purposes of martyrdom. This is especially true since motifs found in *Ad Martyras* appear to largely overlap with those of *Passio Perpetuae* - which is nearly contemporaneous[341] with *Ad Martyras* and hails from the same region - so that together, these texts likely reflect a common 'ideology' of martyrdom present among (some) members of the Carthaginian Christian organizations. As the background and cultural significance of many of these aspects have already been treated in a previous chapter, the present discussion will focus mostly on which of these elements are present, their relationship to 'trends' found in Tertullian's oeuvre in general, and the ways in which Tertullian's tract differs from *Passio Perpetuae.*

To start with the similarities, both texts present martyrdom as part of cosmological battle between God and the Devil, with especially *Ad Martyras* almost completely ignoring its political, 'worldly' dimension. In *Ad Martyras,* Tertullian does not provide any information as to why or how the confessors were apprehended, by whom they were charged and convicted, or on what legal grounds their sentence was passed. The only (possible) references to their conviction reside in Tertullian's remark that the martyrs had already engaged with the devil outside the prison[342] – if this refers to the trial that lead to their imprisonment – and his general statement that the world "awaits […] the judgment, not of the proconsul, but of God"[343], which suggests that the martyrs may have stood trial before the proconsul.[344] Instead, Tertullian describes the prison that holds them as "the devil's house" and the martyrs as 'trampling' on the

340 See: Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* I.4, *Iam enim foris congressi [Diabolum] conculcaveratis*: "For already have ye trampled on him [the devil], having engaged with him outside".

341. Note, however, that that the existence of the 'complete' text (as opposed to the sections ascribed to Perpetua and Saturus) of the *Passio Perpetuae* is not attested prior to around 260 CE: Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives,* 10-11/15-19.

342. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* I.4.

343. Ibid., II.3.

344. Given the ways in which *Africa Proconsularis* was organized, it is indeed likely that the martyrs would have been tried before the proconsul, even though Tertullian's statement here serves more as a general point about the ultimate authority of God as a judge, and he therefore probably would not have cared much about informing the reader which specific 'worldly' figures conducted such trials. For the political and administrative organization of Roman provincial rule, including the position of governors, see: Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 4-9; Janssen, Religo Illicita?, 299/318. For a view that Tertullian's discourse here contains "a Rome/Carthage dichotomy in terms largely encoded for insiders", see: Wilhite, *Tertullian the African,* 163.

Devil, stating that their 'peace' – probably referring to the martyrs' remission of sins as a result of their obedience to God's Will[345] - is 'war' to the Devil[346], all of which serves to cast the experiences of the martyrs in religious, dualist terms. Indeed, the first half of the letter consist almost entirely of creating oppositions that serve to 'inverse' the apparent evil that the martyrs find themselves in: by maintaining their 'peace' and 'concord' in prison, the martyrs are actually waging a successful 'war' against the devil[347]; the martyrs may have been judged by the proconsul, but God – and the martyrs themselves - will come to judge the world[348]; whilst they have lost some pleasures of the flesh, their spirits benefit from being removed from pagan worship and the games[349]; by being locked up in a prison, the martyrs have actually been 'freed' from the 'prison' of the world, in which all men are 'criminals'[350]; and finally, the loss of some 'joys of life' will be amply compensated by post-mortem rewards.[351]

While a lack of references to the 'worldly' origins of their ordeal is readily understandable since the martyrs themselves would have been aware of them, it is also worthwhile to consider this absence in light of Tertullian's wider corpus. There exists a notable trend in Tertullian's depiction of martyrdom: whereas texts addressed to 'outsiders' tend to put the blame of 'persecution'[352] on (Roman) magistrates or mob violence, works addressed to Christians – including those who, in Tertullian's view, sought to unjustly avoid martyrdom - attribute persecution to a mixture of divine will

345. I base this interpretation of the meaning of the word 'peace' (*pax*) on the fact that Tertullian writes "And this "peace" some in the Church having lost, have been wont to entreat from martyrs in prison" (*Quam pacem quidam in ecclesia non habentes a martyribus exorare consueverunt*; Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* I.6.), which appears to refer to a belief that martyrdom could lead to the remission of major sins, and the documented practice of Christians visiting convicted confessors in prison in order to receive forgiveness 'through' them. See: Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 283; J. Patout Burns & Robin M. Jenssen, *Christianity in Roman Africa: The Development of Its Practices and Beliefs* (Grand Rapids, MA 2014) 303/520. This passage thereby also contradicts Tertullian's claim in *Apologeticum* that Christians who committed immoral acts ceased to be considered Christians, since he here recognizes the continuing Christian membership of sinful believers. See: Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* XLVI.17. The (possible) continuing membership of sinful members in Carthage's Christian communities is discussed by: Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities,* 12.
346. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* I.5.
347. Ibid., I.4-5.
348. Ibid., II.3-4.
349. Ibid., II.1-2/5-10.
350. Ibid., II.1-3.
351. Ibid., II.6/9-10.
352. As explained in the following paragraphs, 'persecution' is here placed between apostrophes because there does not appear to have been – as most scholars now agree – any concerted legal persecution enacted against Christians prior to the mid-third century, so that earlier martyrdoms were actually the result of more localized and 'isolated' instances of legal prosecution.

and Satanic influence.[353] This leads to an apparent paradox whereby Tertullian simultaneously appears to be trying to persuade pagans to end their persecution of Christians, and to be depicting martyrdom as the inevitable result of a conflict between God and his faithful, and the pagans (whom he frequently places in the camp of the Devil and his demons). One possible solution for this paradox may be that Tertullian hoped not merely to end pagans' violence against Christians, but to convert them to Christianity as well. This seems to be borne out by the intellectual defence of Christian theology and critique of pagan culture and religion that accompanies his condemnation of pagan hostility in *Apologeticum.*[354]

Another possibility is that for Tertullian and (some) Carthaginian Christians, persecution exacerbated the conflict between their identities, loyalties and roles as Carthaginians and subjects of the Roman emperor, and as Christians. As Éric Rebillard has convincingly argued, Tertullian's works provide ample evidence that many Christians did not share (all of) his rigorist views about the exclusivity of Christian membership and worship, or his condemnation of many common aspects of life in a Roman city as 'idolatry'.[355] By omitting the worldly aspect of persecution in *Ad Martyras* and discussing persecution solely in dichotomous, religious terms, Tertullian may thus be seen to be engaged in not merely describing, but actively creating and reinforcing an exclusive view of Christian 'groupness' and a specifically 'Christian' way of life. Since it is very likely that Tertullian's tract was also read and copied by Carthaginian Christians other than the martyrs – otherwise the letter would not have been preserved – Tertullian may have written his letter with them in mind, in which case *Ad Martyras* could be seen as engaging in such a project of communal self-identification.[356]

Another, though compatible, possibility for the omission of the 'worldly' circumstances surrounding the confessors' conviction may be that these did not support Tertullian's theological interpretation of martyrdom, which hinged on the existence of a general hostility against Christians.[357] Among ancient historians, there now exists a growing perception that our textual evidence does not support the

353. Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 40/106-109.
354. See the section on *Apologeticum* below (III.3).
355. Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities,* 9-60, especially 25-33.
356. For the notion that *Ad Martyras* can be seen as a 'communal response', see: Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities,* 43.
357. See the discussion of *Apologeticum* below (III.3).

existence of 'anti-Christian' laws or general persecutions prior to the mid-third century, and that (juridical) violence against Christians before this point was rather the result of mostly local and temporary outbursts of 'mob' violence and trials conducted by local magistrates.[358] For instance, both *Passio Perpetuae* and *Ad Martyras* clearly show that most Christians surrounding the martyrs were free and even able to support their imprisoned 'brethren', which suggests that the confessors in question had been specifically targeted.[359] While *Ad Martyras* provides no information about the impetus behind the confessors' investigation or the grounds for their conviction, evidence from other encounters between Christians and the justice system suggests that these might have ranged from specific criminal allegations, to concerns about political loyalty towards the Empire and its monarch.[360] It is interesting in this regard that *Ad Martyras* makes an allusion to people of high status having recently been killed by either the supporters or opponents of a particular 'man'.[361] Given the date of the text, it has been plausibly suggested that this refers to the violence surrounding the ascension of Emperor Septimius Severus, which might well have involved persons in Roman Africa.[362] If so, it is possible that in this context of political conflict, Roman officials were more wary of potential sedition, and that this affected their treatment of 'religious outsiders' like Christians, about whom we know that they were sometimes suspected of political disloyalty and that this might have

358. For the relatively limited nature of the 'persecution' of Christians in this period, see: Praet, 'Semen est sanguis (?)', 265-268; Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 253-254; Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 29, footnote 7/31-32, footnote 22/36-38; Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 17-25/29; Daniel Rebillard, *Christians and their many identitites,* 34-60; Janssen, Relligio Illicita?, 15/252/299/303/319-320.
359. In the case of *Ad Martyras,* Tertullian – besides evidently being free himself – mentions visits and support provided to the confessors by both the 'Church' and individual Christians on several occasions: I.1/I.6/II.7. For the case of Perpetua, see chapter I.
360. See especially: Janssen, Religio Illicita?, 6/210/242/247/302/304/318-320/400.
361. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* VI.2: *Nemo non etiam hominis causa pati potest, quod in causa Dei pati dubitat. Ad hoc quidem vel praesentia nobis tempora documenta sint, quantae qualesque personae inopinatos natalibus et dignitatibus et corporibus et aetatibus suis exitus referunt hominis causa: aut ab ipso, si contra eum fecerint, aut ab adversariis eius, si pro eo steterint*; "One will even suffer for the sake of a man, what he hesitates to undergo in the cause of God. On this point, indeed, even the present times may furnish us with proof, when so many persons of dignity are meeting with deaths never dreamt of for them, in view of their family, rank, bodily condition and age – and all in the cause of a man, being punished either by himself if they have acted against him, or by his opponents if they have ranged themselves on his side."
362. Wilhite (2007) appears to follow Barnes in relating this passage to Septimius Severus' defeat of Albinus in 197: Wilhite, *Tertullian the African,* 163, footnote 92. Similarly, Antony Birley (as cited by Rebillard, 2012), has suggested that the persecution of Christians in North-Africa from 197 to 198 may have been sparked by the purges that followed Septimius' defeat of Clodius Albinus: Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities,* 38.

affected verdicts on (otherwise unrelated) charges issued against them.[363] Such an 'incidental' background for 'persecution' would hardly have been acknowledged by a theologian trying to paint the threat of- and preparedness to undergo martyrdom as a quintessential part of Christian life.[364]

In seeming contrast with Tertullian's efforts to depict martyrdom as a 'natural' consequence of Christian-pagan rivalry, the second part of *Ad Martyras* – which exhorts the confessors to bravely face their deaths – explicitly invokes moral *exempla* and ideals that originated in 'pagan' culture. First, Tertullian employs the imagery of military- and athletic/gladiatorial training extensively in order to depict imprisonment as a requisite 'preparation' for martyrdom.[365] As we saw in our discussion of *Passio Perpetuae*, this focus on suffering for one's belief in terms of 'training' and 'contests' can be found in both pagan and Christian (and Jewish) writings from the Principate.[366] Perhaps even more so than in *Passio Perpetuae,* however, Tertullian has thoroughly 'Christianized' this discourse by citing several examples of such motifs found in the Pauline Epistles, by relying on a clear Biblical distinction between the 'flesh' and the 'spirit' (whereby the former suffers for the sake of the latter)[367], and by referring to God, Christ and the Holy Spirit with function-titles drawn from the world of Roman spectacles.[368] On the one hand, this Christian interpretation of (what can

363. Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities,* 38; Janssen, Religio Illicita?, 247-248/252/303/312-313.

364. Within *Ad Martyras,* the view that the acceptance of martyrdom should follow 'naturally' from the tenets of Christianity is most clearly expressed in Tertullian's statement that "We have been called to the military service of the living God since we responded to the words to the Sacrament" (*Vocati sumus ad militiam Dei vivi iam tunc, cum in sacramenti verba respondimus)*. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* III.1.

365. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* III.1-5.

366. See chapter I.

367. See especially Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* IV.1-2: *Scimus ex dominico praecepto, quod caro infirma sit, spiritus promptus. […] Dominus consensit carnem infirmam esse. Propterae enim praedixit spiritum promptum […] quid cui debeat esse subjectum, scilicet, ut caro serviat spiritui, infirmior fortiori, ut ab eo etiam ipsa fortitudinem assumat. Colloquatur spiritus cum carne de communi salute, nec iam de incommodes carceris, sed de ipso agone et proelio cogitans. Timebit forsitan caro gladium gravem, et crucem excelsam, et rabiem bestiarum et summam ignium poenam, et omne carnificis ingenium in tormentis.* "We know from the Lord's teaching that the flesh is weak, the spirit ready. […] the Lord allowed that the flesh is weak. For He said first that the spirit was ready […] which ought to be subject to the other; namely, that the flesh should be subservient to the spirit, the weaker to the stronger, so that itself also may receive strength from it. Let the spirit confer with the flesh about the salvation of both, not now thinking of the hardships of the prison, but of the actual contest and battle. The flesh perhaps will fear the heavy sword and the uplifted cross and the fury of the beasts and the extremest punishment of fire and all the ingenious devices of the torturer."

368. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* III.3-4. *Bonum agonem subituri estis in quo agonothetes Deus vivus est, xystarches Spiritus Sanctus, corona aetnernitatis, brabrium angelicae substantiae, politia in caelis, gloria in saecula saeculorum. Itaque epistates vester Christus Iesus, qui vos Spiritu unxit, et ad hoc scamma produxit, voluit vos ante diem agonis ad duriorem tractationem a liberiore condicione seponere, ut vires corroborarentur in vobis*: "You are about to undergo a good contest wherein the

summarily be called) the '*patientia*-motif' allowed Tertullian to continue his argument that persecution and martyrdom arise according to the will of God, and that God supports his confessors. On the other hand, by contrasting the 'corruptible' wreath that ordinary athletes received with the 'eternal crown' and everlasting rewards of the martyrs, Tertullian is using an argument from the lesser to the greater: if pagans are willing to undergo similar hardships for much lesser rewards, Christians should show themselves even more eager to undergo the 'training' issued by Christ.[369]

This principle of 'arguing from the lesser to the greater' is most clearly visible in Tertullian's subsequent invocation of the *exempla* of several pagan men and women - legendary or historical, Roman, Greek or Carthaginian - who voluntarily killed themselves for "fame and glory"[370]. Tertullian explains his purpose behind this as follows:

> Consequently, if it is allowed to earthly glory to have such sway over the powers of body and mind, so that the sword and fire, and the cross, and beasts and tortures are despised for the sake of the reward of human praise, I am able to assert that those sufferings of yours which lead to the attainment of celestial glory and divine reward are unworthy of mention. Is the glass bead of such value? How much more the true pearl! Who, then, is not bound to undergo most willingly as much for the real as others do for the false?[371]

As the passage clearly indicates, Tertullian selected a number of exemplary figures who died for relatively 'lowly' goals as a way to reinforce the notion that the sufferings inherent to martyrdom are trivial in comparison. In doing so, he reinforces a sense of

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living God is the President [*aganothetes*],the Holy Spirit is the Trainer [*xystarches*], the wreath is that of eternity, the prize, angelic being, the citizenship in the heavens, the glory unto ages of ages. Therefore your Master [*epistates*], Christ Jesus, Who anointed you with the Spirit, and hath brought you forth to this wrestling-ground, hath willed before the day of contest to set you apart from a less restrained condition unto a sterner training, that your powers may be strengthened within you."

369. Ibid., III.4-5. As we have seen, the metaphor of martyrs winning an eternal 'crown' or 'wreath', an image drawn from the world of Roman spectacles, is also attested in *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and *Passio Perpetua.* See chapter I.4.
370. Ibid., IV.3: …] *famae et gloriae causa* […
371. Ibid., IV.9: *Igitur si tantum terrenae gloriae licet de corporis et animae vigore, ut gladium, ignem, crucem, bestias, tormenta contemnat sub praemio laudis humanae, possum dicere, modicae sunt istae passiones ad consecutionem gloriae caelestis et divinae mercedis. Si tanti vitreum, quanti verum margaritum? Quis ergo non libentissime tantum pro vero habet erogare, quantum alii pro falso?* This message is essentially repeated in V.2.

Christian ‘groupness’ by claiming a monopoly on truth, and by making it seem as if pagan role-models only ever died for personal glory. Nevertheless, his individual treatment of various typical role-models, especially women like Lucretia, Dido, and the wife of Hasdrubal, still appears relatively favourable; indeed, Tertullian also invokes Dido and Lucretia as positive examples of female chastity in some of his other works.[372] This suggests that his ‘use’ of *exempla* was largely based on their ability to support a particular argument, rather than on a fixed evaluation of their moral ‘worth’. Thus, Tertullian seems to be making strategic use of the cultural icons of those whom he portrays as an inferior out-group.[373]

As Mary Carlson has outlined, such uses of ‘pagan’ *exempla* can be found in many Early Christian writings, and this likely reflects their authors’ education in Classical rhetoric. In this rhetorical tradition, historical or mythological *exempla* were often invoked to make moral arguments, so much so that a virtual ‘canon’ of such *exempla* developed.[374] As a comparison of *Ad Martyras’* selection of *exempla* with that of other texts – pagan or Christian –, and Tertullian’s own statement that the holds the example of Lucretia “at hand”[375] shows, Tertullian was clearly familiar with this (quasi-)canon.[376] Interestingly, since his letter is addressed to a fully Christian audience, *Ad Martyras* indicates that many other Carthaginian Christians also valued the ‘use’ of these canonical *exempla*, even interpreting them positively in some cases, despite Tertullian’s denunciation of ‘pagan’ ‘wickedness’ and ‘falsehoods’.

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372. Carlson, ‘Pagan examples of fortitude’, 97-98; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African,* 164-167; Perkins, ‘Tertullian the Carthaginian’, 362-365/368-371. Tertullian invokes many of the same *exempla* – namely Empedocles, Mucius (Scaevola), Dido, Regulus, Leaena, and the Spartans – near the end of *Apologeticum*. Compare: Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* IV.4-8, and idem, *Apologeticum,* L.5-9.
373. See: Carlson, ‘Pagan examples of fortitude’, 96-98; Musurillo, *Acts of the pagan martyrs,* 243-244; Perkins, ‘Tertullian the Carthaginian’, 350/355. See also: Wilhite, *Tertullian the African,* 164-167, especially 167, footnote 107. Scholars have also noted the absence of Christian martyrs as role-models in *Ad Martyras*, although Tertullian would certainly have been familiar with the examples of Peter, Paul, and others. This, in my view, can be easily explained by the fact that Tertullian’s strategy here consists of arguing from the lesser to the greater, which prevents him from using examples of equal ‘nobility’ to that of the confessors whom he addresses. For a view that Tertullian was most probably aware of the existence of North African martyrs and/or executed figures mentioned in New Testament writings, see: Wilhite, *Tertullian the African,* 164; Perkins, ‘Tertullian the Carthaginian’, 362, footnote 47. See also: Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, ‘Fantasy life of power’, 21. For a view that Tertullian’s selection and treatment of these *exempla* shows (Carthaginian/North African) antagonism towards Rome, see: Wilhite, *Tertullian the African,* 162-167; Perkins, ‘Tertullian the Carthaginian’, 361-371.
374. Carlson, ‘Pagan examples of fortitude’, 93-104. See also: Perkins, ‘Tertullian the Carthaginian’, 355-357.
375. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* IV.4: *De feminis ad manum est Lucretia […* The significance of this phrase is discussed by: Perkins, ‘Tertullian the Carthaginian’, 362-363.
376. See: Carlson, ‘Pagan examples of fortitude’, 93-94/97-98/104. See also: Perkins, ‘Tertullian the Carthaginian’, 350.

Tertullian's treatment of these *exempla,* then, seems to demonstrate a sense of 'ambiguity' as experienced by some Christians when faced with their shared culture and interaction with the 'pagan world', and their simultaneous desire to separate themselves from that world.

Given the significant number of parallels between *Ad Martyras* and martyrological texts like *Passio Perpetuae,* as well as various suggestions within the former that (some of) its ideas were shared by other Carthaginian Christians, *Ad Martyras* reveals the existence of at least relatively widespread ideas about the virtuous or desirable nature of martyrdom and its 'cosmological' significance. At the same time, a summary view of Tertullian's work shows that his presentation of Christians as a unified group of like-minded people absolutely prepared to undergo martyrdom is often more reflective of his personal ideals than historical reality. For instance, scholars have noted that Tertullian's 'theology of martyrdom' is rather 'legalistic' and 'individualistic', insofar as he defines martyrdom mostly in terms of contract-like arrangements between God and individual believers.[377] In contrast, *Passio Perpetuae* openly states that the example of the martyrs should aid in the 'edification of the Church', while *Martyrdom of Polycarp* makes it clear that martyrs have to be 'chosen' by God first; these texts also place greater emphasis on the roles of the Holy Spirit and Christ in allowing the martyrs to endure torture and death than Tertullian does.[378] In these texts, martyrdom thus appears as an ideal reserved for a few devout members, yet of value to the 'Church' as a whole. Tertullian's 'universalization' of the need to risk martyrdom therefore appears to have been a rather fringe idea. His - prescriptivist - statement that Christians in general had 'renounced the world' is similarly contradicted by his critique of 'lax' Christians in other works.[379] What's more, Tertullian's use of rhetoric and themes related to

377. Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 15-17/21-22/24/282-289.

378. See chapter I. While Tertullian does describe the martyrs as *designati (*designated) in the opening paragraph of his letter*,* his comment later in the text that all Christians are 'called' (*vocati*) to the 'military service of the living God' (*ad militiam Dei vivi*) from the moment of their initiation (*iam tunc, cum in sacramenti verba respondimus*) suggests that he considers all Christians to have been 'chosen' to be potential martyrs, even if very few of them actually end up being tried or executed. See: Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* I.1./III.1. For the (virtual) absence of the notion of divine election in the theology of Tertullian, see: Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 243/246. Bähnk also discusses the relatively limited role played by the Holy Spirit, as well the absence of a belief that Christ is suffering 'in' the martyrs, in the works of Tertullian: ibid., 22-24/242-244/287.

379. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras,* II.5: *Christianus etiam extra carcerem saeculo renunciavit*. See also footnote 345.

Roman spectacle[380] and noble death show that both he himself and his audience were familiar with, and (partially) subscribed to cultural traditions found outside the idealized 'Church'. *Ad Martyras,* therefore, advocates for martyrdom and a 'rigorist' interpretation of Christian 'groupness'[381] and ethics on the basis of a mixture of Christian-specific and 'general', though Christianized, motifs and beliefs.

III.3. *Apologeticum*

Tertullian wrote his *Apologeticum* in defence of the moral and epistemic value of Christianity, and against that of 'paganism', with a specific focus on criticizing the 'persecution' of Christians in the Empire. As such, the text discusses various topics relating to the legal and social interactions between Christians and their surroundings, including the supposed basis and 'nature' of the 'persecution' of Christians, the role of 'mobs' and false rumours in cases of violence against Christians, and the perceived futility of persecution. Particularly interesting furthermore is the fact that Tertullian addressed his work to (unnamed) magistrates, implying that he wrote the work in such a way that he considered it to be able to change the mind of outsiders.

Apologeticum starts with an extended critique of the supposed basis for the 'persecution', whereby Tertullian especially mocks the principle of *conquirendi non sunt* ("they are not to be sought out")[382] found in the well-known correspondence between Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia et Pontus during the early second century CE, and Emperor Trajan. Herein, Trajan decrees that Christians who have been brought to court and refuse to recant their faith should be executed, though Pliny ought not to actively seek out potential Christians.[383] This principle makes no legal or moral sense in the eyes of Tertullian.[384] Furthermore, Tertullian argues that

380 For Tertullian's – as well as other early Christian apologists' – 'ambivalent' relationship with the world of Roman spectacles, see especially: Castelli, 'Persecution and spectacle', 102-136.

381. For this terminology of 'groupness', see: Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities,* 2/7/93.

382.. Tertullian paraphrases Trajan's reply in the following *accusativus cum infinitivo* construction: *Tunc Traianus rescripsit hoc genus [Christanorum] inquirendos quidem non esse, oblatos vero puniri oportere*: "Trajan replied in a rescript that men of this kind were not to be sought out, but if they were brought [before Pliny] they must be punished". Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* II.7-8.

383. Pliny, *Epistulae,* X.96. This thesis' interpretation of these letters (both Pliny's letter to Trajan, and the emperor's subsequent reply), is based on: Janssen, Religio Illicita?, 241-253.

384. Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* II.8-9: *O sententiam necessitate confusam! Negat inquirendos ut innocentes, et mandat puniendos ut nocentes. Parcit et saevit, dissimulat et animadvertit. Quid temetipsum censura circumvenis? Si damnas, cur non et inquiris? si non inquiris, cur non et absolvis?*

martyred Christians are not convicted on the basis of actual criminal acts, but rather because of their *nomen* ("name") of 'Christian', and that this is at odds with ordinary judicial principles.[385] In combination with frequent – rhetorical – allusions to large numbers of executed believers[386] and (mob) hatred against Christians[387], Tertullian's narrative therefore suggests that there existed in his time a widespread, official persecution of anyone who called him-/herself a 'Christian'.

The accuracy of this presentation has been evaluated differently in historical scholarship. As summarized by the doctoral thesis of K.P.S. Janssen, there exist roughly three theories about the (basis of) Roman 'persecution' of Christians: one posits the existence of general anti-Christian legislation passed sometime in Rome's history, another suggests that Christians were convicted on the basis of several, not specifically anti-Christian laws, and a last states that 'persecution' was mostly carried out by individual governors relying on their own judgment.[388] This is by no means an exhaustive overview, and there also exist other, more recent interpretations – such as that of Janssen herself – that do not fit neatly within any of these three theories. Perhaps of particular interest to us are studies that highlight the literary and rhetorical aspects of Tertullian's representation, and that have (in some cases) cast doubt on the very existence of a 'persecution' of Christians in Tertullian's time. Such discussions about the historical accuracy and/or apologetic character of Tertullian's

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Latronibus vestigandis per universas provincias militaris statio sortitur. In reos maiestatis et publicos hostes omnis homo miles est; ad socios, ad conscios usque inquisitio extenditur. Solum Christianum inquiri non licet, offerri licet, quasi aliud esset actura inquisitio quam oblation em. Damnatis itaque oblatum quem nemo voluit requisitum, qui, puto, iam non ideo meruit poenam, quia nocens est, sed quia non requirendus inventus est: "What a decision, how inevitably entangled! He says they must not be sought out, implying they are innocent and he orders them to be punished, implying they are guilty. He spares them and rages against them, he pretends not to see and punishes. Why cheat yourself with your judgement? If you condemn them, why not hunt them down? If you do not hunt them down, why not also acquit them? To track down bandits through all the provinces is a duty assigned by lot to the garrisons. Against those guilty of treason, against public enemies, every man is a soldier; inquiry is extended to confederates, to accessories. The Christian alone may not be hunted down; but he may be haled before the magistrate; as if hunting down led to anything but haling to the court. So you condemn a man when haled to court—a man whom nobody wished to be sought out, who (I suppose) really has not deserved punishment because he is guilty, but because, forbidden to be looked for, he was found!" See also: Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion,* 78-79, who regards Tertullian's assessment as 'accurate'.

385. Ibid., I.4/II.1-6/II.10-III.8.

386. Ibid., see especially XLIV.1-2. *At enim illud detrimentum reipublicae tarn grande quam uerum nemo circumspicit, illam iniuriam ciuitatis nullus expendit, cum tot iusti impendimur, cum tot innocentes erogamur*: "Yet there is one loss to the State, as great as it is real, and no one gives it a thought; one injury to the common weal, and nobody computes it; when upright men, such as we, are wasted in such numbers, in such numbers are done to death, innocent as we are."

387. Ibid., XXXV.8/ XXXVII.2-3/XLIX.4-6/L.12.

388. Janssen, Religio Illicita?, 4-8/210-211.

representation of pagan-Christian relations have obvious implications for our interpretation of statements like *semen est sanguis Christianorum.*

How, for instance, are we to understand Tertullian's mention of the Pliny-Trajan correspondence in his polemic against the 'unlawful' treatment of Christians? An obvious answer goes that Trajan's rescript to Pliny had gained the status of a general law during the second century CE, and that Tertullian was therefore simply referring to the legal basis for the persecution of Christians in his time.[389] However, proof for the existence of empire-wide laws against Christians before the mid-third century is generally lacking, and as researchers like Janssen have pointed out, various Christian and Roman sources from the second or early-third centuries suggest that there were no fixed procedures or legal imperatives for the conviction of Christians yet.[390] The lack of fixed empire-wide procedures for more than a century after the issuing of Trajan's rescript suggests that this document held no 'universal' value, but was like most legal documents in the Roman Empire intended mainly to guide legal action within a specific region and period.[391] Why, then, did Tertullian discuss the contents of Trajan's letter?

In a recent article about Tertullian's employment of 'juridical scenes'[392], Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits propose that Tertullian should be seen as a 'colonial' subject who, like other authors in the Principate[393], tried to make sense of the realities of Roman rule through (literary) juridical scenes that offered a (false) sense of 'truth', clarity, and justice. They argue that since the Roman Empire "took hold in the minds of its provincial subjects through a curious combination of symbolic presence and concrete administrative absence"[394], colonial subjects who felt themselves to be persecuted had trouble with understanding their situation or how to respond to the

389. See: Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 29, footnotes 7-8/32, footnote 22/36.
390. Janssen, Religio Illicita?, 252-253/299-307/316-320. See also: Fox, *Pagans and Christians,* 424; Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 247, footnote 20.
391. Ibid.
392. Carly Daniel-Hughes & Maia Kotrosits, 'Tertullian of Carthage and the Fantasy Life of Power: On Martyrs, Christians, and Other Attachments to Juridical Scenes', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28:1 (2020) 1-31.
393. We already saw, for instance, how some of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* use fictional dialogue to depict the presiding Roman emperors as suffering from pro-Jewish bias, which helps to create a black-and-white picture that casts executed Alexandrian ambassadors as maltreated heroes. See chapter II. For a discussion of how the *AA* reflect 'provincial subjects'' wishes about a rationally operating Roman justice system, see: Bryen, 'Martyrdom, Rhetoric', 244/269-271. 2 See also: Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 11-12 (which summarizes Bryen's analysis of the *Acta Alexandrinorum*).
394. Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 1.

threat of prosecution, and therefore took recourse to literary trial scenes that offered 'explanations' for the maltreatment of their particular group.[395]

In addition to helping 'explain' and criticize the purported legal targeting of particular groups, Kotrosits and Daniel-Hughes highlight how judicial scenes could be used to offer a sense of clarity and justice. For example, Tertullian describes God's Last Judgment within 'Roman disciplinary frames' of the arena, trials, prisons, and military triumphs[396], that, though it resembles the legal framework responsible for 'persecuting' Christians, offers justice and truth since God is a perfect and omniscient judge.[397] The trials conducted by Roman officials against Christians, on the other hand, appear to be guided solely by popular hatred and ignorance[398], with Tertullian

395. Ibid., 1-31, especially 25-31. See also: Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 243-276.
396. Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 22-25.
397. See especially: Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* XLV.5-7. *Sed quanta auctoritas legum humanarum, cum illas et evadere homini contingat et plerumque in admissis delitiscenti, et aliquando contemnere ex voluntate vel necessitate deliquenti? Recogitate ea etiam pro brevitate supplicii cuiuslibet, non tamen ultra mortem remansuri. Sic et Epicurus omnem cruciatum doloremque depretiat, modicum quidem contemptibilem pronuntiando, magnum vero non diuturnum. Enimvero nos qui sub deo omnium speculatore dispungimur, quique aeternam ab eo poenam providemus merito, soli innocentiae occurrimus, et pro scientiae plenitudine et pro latebrarum difficultate et pro magnitudine cruciatus non diuturni, verum sempiterni, eum timentes quem timere debebit et ipse qui timentes iudicat, deum, non proconsulem timentes*. "But what authority can man's laws have, when a man may have the luck to evade them, again and again undiscovered in his guilt, sometimes to despise them, as he breaks them of choice or of necessity? Think over all this, remembering how short is any punishment that will not continue after death. That is why Epicurus makes light of all torture and pain; if it is slight, he says, you may despise it, if it is great it will not be long. Yes! We who are examine [sic] in the sight of God who sees all, we who foresee an eternal punishment from His hand, we well may be the only ones to attain innocence; since, at once from fullness of knowledge, from the difficulty of concealment, from the greatness of the torture (not long, but eternal), we fear Him, whom he, too, must fear who judges us who fear—who fear God, that is, and not the proconsul." For a similar statement by the second-century Christian apologist Athenogoras on the need of divine judgment for ensuring virtuous behaviour, see: Candida R, Moss, 'Dying to Live Forever: Identity and Virtue in the Resurrection of the Martyrs', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 84:2 (2019) 155-174, 171, which cites Athenogoras, *On the Resurrection,* 19.3.
398. See especially: Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* I.4-7. *Hanc itaque primam causam apud vos collocamus iniquitatis odii erga nomen Christianorum. Quam iniquitatem idem titulus et onerat et revincit qui videtur excusare, ignorantia scilicet. Quid enim iniquius, quam ut oderint homines quod ignorant, etiam si res meretur odium? Tune etenim meretur, cum cognoscitur an mereatur. Vacante autem meriti notitia, unde odii iustitia defenditur, quae non de eventu, sed de conscientia probanda est? Cum ergo propterea oderunt homines, quia ignorant quale sit quod oderunt, cur non liceat eiusmodi illud esse, quod non debeant odisse? Ita utrumque ex alterutro redarguimus, et ignorare illos, dum oderunt, et iniuste odisse, dum ignorant. Testimonium ignorantiae est, quae iniquitatem dum excusat, condemnat, cum omnes qui retro oderant, quia ignorabant quale sit quod oderant, simul desinunt ignorare, cessant et odisse. Ex his fiunt Christiani, utique de conperto, et incipiunt odisse quod fuerant, et profited quod oderant, et sunt tanti quanti et denotamur.* "This, then, is the first plea we lodge with you—the injustice of your hatred of the Christian name. The very excuse that seems to acquit it, at once aggravates and convicts that injustice—to wit, ignorance. For what could be more unjust than for men to hate a thing they do not know, even though it really deserves hatred? It can only deserve hatred when it is known whether it does deserve it. But so long as nothing at all is known of its deserts, how can you defend the justice of the hatred? That must be established, not on the bare fact of its existence, but on knowledge. When men hate a thing simply because they do not know the character of what they hate, what prevents it being of a nature that does not deserve hate at all?

being keen to stress that he believes Rome's justice system itself to be just and its emperor to have been appointed by God.[399] This results in an image of the 'persecution' of Christians as a concerted action born out of the ignorance and hatred of particular people, rather than the fault of either Christians (who appear in *Apologeticum* as nigh-perfect citizens)[400] or the Roman Empire as an (idealized) 'system'. Hence, those people would have needed only to learn the truth about Christianity, repent, and any and all conflict would have been resolved.[401] Given Tertullian's apologetic aims, this explanation appears a little too convenient, and one is left wondering about the factual basis for his account.

As Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits have called to attention, Tertullian makes no mention of actual examples of North African martyrs around his time, even though some of his other works show that he was familiar with African governors who (supposedly) conducted trials against Christians, the martyrs mentioned in *Ad Martyras,* and perhaps other examples.[402] Instead, the executed Christians

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Whichever alternative you choose, we maintain both points: they are ignorant so long as they hate, and their hate is unjust so long as they are ignorant. It is evidence of an ignorance which, while it is made an excuse for their injustice, really condemns it, that all who once hated Christianity because they were ignorant of the nature of what they hated, so soon as they cease to be ignorant of it, leave off hating it. From their number come the Christians; it is on the basis of knowledge, nothing else; and they begin to hate what once they were and to profess what once they hated; and we are as many as we are alleged to be."

399. For Tertullian's claim that the Roman emperor has been installed by God, see: Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* XXX.1-XXXIII.4. The idea that the Empire's laws themselves are ultimately just is voiced in: ibid., II.14-15. *Plane aliis negantibus non facile fidem accommodatis: nobis, si negaverimus, statim creditis. Suspecta sit vobis ista perversitas, ne qua vis lateat in occulto, quae vos adversus formam, adversus naturam iudicandi, contra ipsas quoque leges ministret. Nisi fallor enim, leges malos erui iubent, non abscondi, confessos damnari praescribunt, non absolvi. Hoc senatusconsulta, hoc principum mandata definiunt. Hoc imperium, cuius ministri estis, civilis, non tyrannica dominatio est. Apud tyrannos enim tormenta etiam pro poena adhibebantur: apud vos soli quaestioni temperatur*. "Clearly, when others deny [their alleged criminal acts], you do not readily believe them; if we [the Christians] have denied, you at once believe us. Let this topsy-turvy dealing of yours suggest to you the suspicion that there may be some hidden power which makes tools of you against the form, yes, against the very nature, of judicial procedure, against the laws themselves into the bargain. For, unless I am mistaken, the laws bid evil men to be brought to light, not hidden; they enact that those confessing be condemned, not acquitted. This is laid down by decrees of the Senate, by rescripts of the emperors. This Empire of which you are ministers is the rule of citizens, not of tyrants. With tyrants torture was also used as penalty; with you, it is moderated and used for examination only. Maintain your law by it till the necessary confession is made." For the view that Christians did not resist, but rather sought to critique and influence the Roman Empire and its justice system(s), see: Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 243-276.
400. Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 24.
401. See: Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* I.4-7. See also: Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 244-267.
402. For Tertullian's familiarity with the treatment of Christians by various North-African proconsuls, see: Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 11/28-30/33-37. See also: Janssen, Religio Illicita?, 287-292/302. While Tertullian does describe Vigellius Saturninus as *qui primus hic gladium in nos egit,* revealing his knowledge of this proconsul's executions of Christians, this does not necessarily mean that Tertullian was familiar with the Scintilian Martyrs whom this proconsul apparently condemned to death. See: Rebillard, *The early martyr narratives,* 10. For Tertullian's awareness of the martyrdom

mentioned in *Apologeticum* remain completely anonymous, and Tertullian finds his opponents mainly in temporally- and spatially distant figures like Tacitus or Pliny the Younger. When viewed in tandem with his long, 'bookish' criticisms of Greek and Roman history, religion and philosophy, it therefore seems that Tertullian based his work mainly on written works, rather than first-hand experience.[403] Hence, the 'persecution' sketched in *Apologeticum* appears largely as a product of Tertullian's own imagination - not in a sense of outright invention, but rather insofar as Tertullian combined what were probably mostly unrelated instances of (judicial) violence against Christians to construct an overarching narrative of Christian-pagan conflict. His invocation of the Pliny-Trajan correspondence therefore appears to be the result of his reliance on (older) texts, as well as the 'support' the letters provide for his argument that the ways in which convicted Christians had sometimes been treated in court did not comply with his understanding of how the (Roman) justice system should work.[404] Likewise, while Tertullian's extensive defences against charges of, say, incest and cannibalism, or accusations of impiety or disloyalty towards the emperor, certainly reflect existing rumours and accusations,[405] he may well be overstating the actual amount of (popular) antagonism faced by Christians in order to neatly divide Roman society into Christians and ignorant Christophobes.[406] The fact that Tertullian's rebuttals to these points often result in sweeping generalizations about pagan depravity and hypocrisy, further illustrates the importance of this black-and-white thinking to Tertullian's narrative.[407]

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of Perpetua (commonly dated to 203, and hence postdating both *Ad Martyras* and *Apologeticum*), see for instance: David E. Wilhite, 'Tertullian on the Afterlife: "Only Martyrs are in Heaven" and Other Misunderstandings', *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 24:3 (2020) 490-508, 490-491/506-508; Rebillard, *Early martyr narratives,* 10. There is also the soldier executed for refusing to wear a crown described in *De corona militis,* but current research suggests he was killed in Rome, not North-Africa. See: Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities,* 40; Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 21, footnote 76 (citing Rebillard).

403. Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 3/17/19-22.
404. Compare: Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 1-31, especially 17-31. Furthermore, Ari Bryen has suggested that Pliny's letters reveal that even he himself "struggled to explain his own violence when punishing Christians in the rational language of legal procedure": Bryen, 'Martyrdom, rhetoric', 252.
405. For Tertullian's defense against accusations of incest and cannibalism, see: Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, II.1-IX.20. For his defense against accusations of impiety towards the emperor and the gods, see: Ibid., X.1-XLIV.7. For an overview of criminal acts that Christians might have been accused of, see: Janssen, Religio Illicita?, 6/210/241-253/302/304/318-320/400. See also: Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion,* 78.
406. See especially: Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* I.2-8.
407. Tertullian voices his denunciation of 'pagans' as a group most clearly in IV.1-2 and XLV.1-2. …] *iam de causa innocentiae consistam, nec tantum refutabo quae nobis obiciuntur, sed etiam in ipsos retorquebo qui obiciunt, ut ex hoc quoque sciant homines in Christianis non esse quae in se nesciunt*

In addition to criticizing the historicity of Tertullian's representation of 'persecution'', Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits also problematize the notion that Tertullian can serve as a "window into early Christian martyrological discourse and the concerns of real Christian communities."[408] As discussed in the section on *Ad Martyras,* there did not yet exist a unified 'Church' in Tertullian's time, and even Tertullian's works themselves show that the religious and social identity and 'lifestyle' of many Christians were not as exclusive and 'rigorous' as Tertullian desired them to be. *Apologeticum's* repeated statements that Christians were readily prepared to die for one another[409], that they were 'eager' to leave their worldly life behind[410] and even thanked God when convicted[411] - though attested in the cases of martyrs like Perpetua – therefore appear to merely reflect Tertullian's normative view of what it meant to be a 'Christian'*.* In fact, Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits posit that the term *Christianus* itself seems to have originated in judicial contexts to refer to a particular class of 'criminals', and that it was through the popularity of martyrdom accounts that

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esse, simul uti erubescant accusantes non dico pessimi optimos, sed iam, ut volunt, conpares suos. Respondebimus ad singula quae in occulto admittere dicimur, quae illos palam admittentes invenimus, in quibus scelesti, in quibus vani, in quibus damnandi, in quibus inridendi deputamur: "Now I will take my stand on the plea of our innocence. I will not only refute the charges brought against us, but I will turn them against those who bring them; so that, in this too, all may learn that they will not find in Christians what they are unaware of in themselves, and that at the same time they may blush to accuse—no, I will not say that the worst of men are accusing the best, but I will put it, as they would wish, and say—their equals. We will reply in detail as to the crimes we are alleged to commit in secret, but which we find them openly committing matters in which we are set down as guilty, empty-headed, damnable, ridiculous"; *Nos ergo soli innocentes. Quid mirum, si necesse est? Enimvero necesse est. Innocentiam a deo edocti et perfecte eam novimus, ut a perfecto magistro revelatam, et fideliter custodimus, ut ab incontemptibili dispectore mandatam. Vobis autem humana aestimatio innocentiam tradidit humana item dominatio imperavit; inde nec plenae nec adeo timendae estis disciplinae ad innocentiae veritatem*: "We, then, alone are innocent. What is surprising in that, if it must be so? And it must be. Innocence we have been taught by God; in its perfection we know it, as revealed by a perfect teacher; faithfully we keep it as committed to us by one who reads the heart and cannot be despised. It was but man's opinion that gave you your idea of innocence, man's authority that enjoined it. So your rule of life is neither complete nor does it inspire such fear as to lead to true innocence." For similar attempts by early Christian apologists to simultaneously exonerate Christians and condemn (certain aspects of) pagan society, see for instance: Castelli, 'Persecution and spectacle', 113-118.

408. Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 1.
409. Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* XXXIX.7-8. *Vide, inquiunt [pagani], ut invicem se [Christiani*] *diligant; ipsi enim invicem oderunt: et ut pro alterutro mori sint parati; ipsi enim ad occidendum alterutrum paratiores erunt*: ""Look," they say, "how they love one another" (for themselves hate one another); "and how they are ready to die for each other" (for [sic] themselves will be readier to kill each other)."
410. Ibid., XLI.5. …] *quia nihil nostra refert in hoc aevo nisi de eo quam celeriter excedere* […: "…] nothing matters to us in this age but to escape from it with all speed [….". See also XXXVII.5. …] [Nos Christiani] *qui tam libenter trucidamur, si non apud istam disciplinam magis occidi liceret quam occidere?*: "we who are so glad to be butchered—were it not, of course, that in our doctrine we are given ampler liberty to be killed than to kill?"
411. Ibid., XLVI.14. *Christianus etiam damnatus gratias agit*: "…] the Christian even when condemned to death gives thanks."

this term came to be adopted as a positive self-identification by the communities that venerated those 'martyrs'.[412] While they may go too far in (seemingly) denying the existence of Christian communities prior to the third century[413], their discussion shows that 'martyrdom', its associated discourse (as found among writers like Tertullian), and the notion of a fundamental opposition between 'pagans' and 'Christians' do not simply reflect the experiences and beliefs of groups calling themselves 'Christians', but were to some extent involved in creating those communities in the first place.[414]

All in all, a critical investigation of *Apologeticum* reveals that it is a highly rhetorical and imaginative account of the 'persecution' faced by 'Christians', whose presentation of the nature and 'scale' of the hostility faced by members of the nascent Christ organizations appears to be largely dictated by the apologetic aims of the author. Not only do its references to the – often completely anonymous - perpetrators and victims of 'persecution' generally amount to no more than rhetorical exclamations, its generalizations about Christian willingness to undergo martyrdom are often contradicted by other sources. Tertullian's aim, therefore, appears to be to promote his own understanding of 'martyrdom' among other members of the (Carthaginian) Christian communities, to create a sense of Christian 'groupness' rooted in firm anti-pagan and 'anti-worldly' attitudes, and to morally and intellectually condemn the 'pagans', through a starkly black-and-white worldview. As such, Tertullian's famous remark about the missionary potential of Christian martyrdom fails to impress, since Tertullian does not provide empirical evidence for this supposed effect, let alone mention any specific cases of Christian converts created this way. Also, the supposed existence of such a strong missionary effect seems suspiciously convenient given Tertullian's apologetic goals, since it allows him to both highlight the futility of pagan persecution, and to demonstrate that Christians had succeeded in convincing others to endure pain and death, while the words of pagan philosophers had not.[415] There thus appears to be no reason to regard Tertullian's statement

412. Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 28-30.
413. See: ibid., 17/24-28/30.
414. For the view that Tertullian tried to mobilize Christians by emphasizing the communal hostility of pagans, see: Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities,* 42-43/46.
415. Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* L. Bähnk reaches a very similar conclusion about the presentation of martyrdom and persecution in the final section of *Apologeticum*, namely that Tertullian thus combines his apologetic goal of demonstrating the injustice of the 'persecutions' with an accentuation of the Christians' (purported) preparedness to suffer. Also, Tertullian's comments

semen est sanguis Christianorum as compelling evidence for the missionary potential of Christian martyrdom.[416]

Nevertheless, *Apologeticum* does provide valuable insights into what Tertullian considered to be effective strategies for convincing others of the moral and intellectual superiority of (his particular understanding of) Christianity and martyrdom. Overall, Tertullian's discussion of ethics focuses on countering accusations levelled against (particular) Christians, and subsequently accusing pagans of committing these alleged crimes and vicious deeds themselves. In addition, Tertullian provides an elaborate theological and historical defence for Christianity itself, whereby he mocks and criticizes 'pagan' religion and philosophy as a collection of 'corrupted' Judeo-Christian revelations, demonic lies, and incoherent or immoral nonsense; interestingly, he does so on the basis of both Christian religious doctrines[417] and learned (though not always fair) discussions of Classical literature.[418] In both cases, Tertullian ends up creating a complete 'reversal', whereby Christianity is transformed from a dangerous *superstitio* into a sophisticated faith holding a monopoly on both truth and morality. Yet, while this would seem to imply a complete rejection of 'pagan' culture, Tertullian clearly subscribes to the values that the Christians are accused of lacking, therefore depicting Christians as loyal, chaste, charitable and pious inhabitants of the Roman Empire. Similar to *Ad Martyras,* Tertullian ends *Apologeticum* by bringing to mind pagan examples and discussions of noble death, which he contrasts with the 'superior' Christian willingness to endure for God, further demonstrating how the value of *patientia* pervaded thinking in the Principate regardless of religious boundaries.[419] Hence, while Tertullian's argument is partly

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about the coming Judgment of God and the supposed missionary effect of Christian martyrdom serve to emphasize the futility of 'persecution': Bähnk, *Notwendigkeit des Leidens,* 249-250.

416. The same conclusion is reached by: Praet, 'Semen est sanguis (?)', 264-268.

417 Tertullian himself describes the importance of Christian scripture and 'spiritual powers' (such as the ability to exorcise 'demons') for proving his 'case' as follows: *Constitimus, ut opinor, adversus omnium criminum intentationem, quae Christianorum sanguinem flagitat. Ostendimus totum statum nostrum, et quibus modis probare possimus ita esse sicut ostendimus, ex fide scilicet et antiquitate divinarum litterarum, item ex confessione spiritualium potestatum:* "We have stood our ground, I think, on every charge brought against us, and the demand therewith made for the blood of the Christians. We have set forth our whole position and our method of proving the case set forth—to wit, by the evidence and antiquity of the divine books, and by the confession of spiritual powers." Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* XLVI.1.

418. For example, Tertullian uses the *Aeneid* and his knowledge of early Roman history and religion to ridicule the claim that Rome rose to power because of divine favor. See: Perkins, 'Tertullian the Carthaginian', 357-361, which discusses Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* XXV.2-9.

419. Tertullian, *Apologeticum,* L. For the general importance of *patientia* in writings from this period, see for instance: Gold, *Athlete of God,* 30-35.

based on Christian-specific beliefs – most clearly seen in his discussion of the age of Jewish prophets and scriptures, and his sustained references to the Day of Judgment – his moral landscape closely resembles that of his (literary) antagonists. Whether Tertullian managed to convince many 'outsiders' this way, however, is doubtful, given both the text's increasingly hostile tirades against non-Christians[420], as well as the fact that apologists like Tertullian clearly failed to prevent the pro- or persecution of Christians prior to the age of Constantine.[421]

III.4 Conclusion

This chapter has investigated two early works by Tertullian with the dual intention of establishing the 'missionary potential' of Christian martyrdom through a critical, contextual analysis of Tertullian's claim that *semen est sanguis Christianorum,* and studying the relationship between (the textual traditions belonging to) Christian martyrdom and noble death. It quickly became apparent that Tertullian's rhetoric and treatment of these particular topics is substantially affected by the aims and intended audience of both works. Specifically, Tertullian's oeuvre betrays a clear discrepancy between his desire to create a strictly-demarcated Christian in-group on the one hand, and a far more 'ambiguous' socio-cultural reality outside of it on the other. The reality that Carthaginian 'Christians' formed a rather amorphous grouping was something that Tertullian generally sought to deny in his pro-Christian apologetics, but had to (stealthily) acknowledge in his attempts to promote Christian uniformity.[422] When one takes this in consideration, alongside the fact that Tertullian provides little or even misleading information regarding the actual 'persecution' faced by his fellow-Christians and their willingness to endure martyrdom, the statement that *semen est sanguis Christianorum* seems hardly convincing. While this does not deny that Tertullian may in some cases have been right that the act of witnessing martyrdom led to interest in Christian beliefs, or even conversion, his works alone just do not provide evidence that is reliable enough to know how common this effect would have been.

420. See footnote 88 [*!].
421. See: Janssen, Religio Illicita?, 306-307/400.
422. See for instance: Rebillard, *Christians and their many identities*, 7; Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 26-27.

Nevertheless, since much in *Ad Martyras* and *Apologeticum* is of such a rhetorical character, Tertullian's writings do provide valuable insights into the sorts of textual strategies that – according to Tertullian – would have been effective in convincing others about the 'nature' and value of martyrdom and noble death. Summarily put, Tertullian's presentation of martyrdom greatly resembles that of Early Christian martyr texts like *Passio Perpetuae,* insofar as he relies on both Christian-specific, as well as (Christianized) 'general' motifs and themes, particularly with regards to his appreciation of 'active' *patientia,* his use of metaphors drawn from the world of Roman spectacles, and his creative treatment of 'canonical' *exempla.* The ways in which Tertullian used trial scenes and imagery in particular, demonstrate how much he was wont to adopt and transform more generally-occurring textual devices in service of promoting ideals framed in opposition to the same 'pagan world' from which these motifs and themes originated. All in all, while Tertullian's works reveal some of the cultural dynamics involved in the appropriation of trial literature in favour of certain communities and their associated heroes – the Christian martyrs, in this case -, the development of Christian-pagan relations during the third century suggests that his attempts to promote the value of martyrdom and Christian 'exclusivism' among other members of Carthage's Christian communities, and his efforts to influence the outcome of judicial processes involving Christians, were largely unsuccessful. Tertullian and his views may therefore have been far less influential than is suggested by his current status as 'the first theologian of the Latin West'.[423]

423. A very similar conclusion is reached by: Daniel-Hughes & Kotrosits, 'Fantasy life of power', 2-3/20.

IV. Conclusion

Ever since antiquity, scholars have often viewed martyrdom as a crucial factor in the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity. As such, these historians have tended to repeat the triumphalist narrative found among early Christian writers, who had a habit of making bold statements about the conversion potential of Christian martyrdom. This narrative, however, has been substantially challenged in recent decades. First, various studies have argued that the 'persecution' of Christians before the mid-third century CE was generally confined to local and sporadic acts of prosecution, thus putting a firm upper limit on the number of instances in which 'pagan' spectators would actually have encountered displays of martyrdom. Second, some scholars have claimed that martyr texts were intended mainly for 'internal' use, not proselytizing. Finally, researchers like Danny Praet have presented a variety of cogent arguments against the idea that witnessing acts of martyrdom regularly led to conversion. Thus, recent scholarship appears to have refuted the notion that martyrdom – both the act itself and its (literary) representations – contributed substantially to the conversion of 'pagans' to Christianity.

This does not mean, however, that martyrdom did not contribute to Christianization in other ways. If we define 'Christianization' in such a manner that it includes the processes through which converts became more 'Christian' – whether with regard to their (group-)identity, adherence to specific doctrines, or behaviour –, and if martyrdom instigated or supported such processes, martyrdom can be said to have assisted in the Christianization of the Roman Empire. These processes, have not been much considered in the aforementioned works that deny the existence of a causal link between martyrdom and conversion. Instead, the study of the development of martyrdom, its conceptualisation, and its representations is the province of studies that focus on the literary analysis of martyr texts and other Christian writings. These studies, however, often refrain from connecting the worlds of the texts to the external world. Thus, there do not appear to have been substantial attempts to use comparative literary analysis as a way to approach the importance of martyrdom and its associated narratives to ancient Christian communities.

This thesis has endeavoured to fill this gap through a threefold approach. First, the dissertation has reviewed the evidence found in Christian sources for martyrdom-inspired conversion, seeking to expand on previous treatments of this topic by contextualising the evidence in light of the authorial intentions behind the respective texts. Second, the paper has compared ancient conceptualisations and representations of martyrdom with ideas, rhetorical strategies, literary *topoi* etc. found in noble death traditions. This way, the paper has sought to reconstruct how ancient audiences (particularly new converts) would likely have reacted to listening to or reading martyr stories, particularly the extent to which such audiences would have adopted positive views of Christian martyrdom. We proceeded from the premises that audiences would have been more receptive to presentations of martyrdom insofar as these congrued with commonly held (moral) beliefs, as was the case in noble death traditions. Finally, this thesis has investigated the role(s) that martyr stories played in Christian communities, as well as the factors that allowed Christian martyr literature to attain its lasting popularity. Thus, our inquiry has dealt with both conversion and Christianization in the broader sense.

Our investigation has focused on a small number of Christian and non-Christian texts dating from around 200 CE. Hence, the findings of this paper mainly reveal developments that took place in the second and third centuries, a period wherein Christianity was still a relatively small, hetereogenous and (sometimes) marginalised movement. Moreover, this dissertation has concentrated on the Christianization of 'pagans', not Jews, and has therefore omitted Jewish martyr narratives from its analysis. This left three 'clusters' of related texts: *Passio Perpetuae* and *Martyrdom of Polycarp,* a number of second- or third century examples of the *Acta Alexandrinorum*, and two works by Tertullian. While these texts contain common elements, they differ significantly from one another with regards to their authorship, authorial intentions, and textual formats, so that they were best treated in separate chapters.

The first chapter has investigated *Passio Perpetuae* and *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and what these texts reveal about 1) the degree of (dis)similarity between (early) Christian martyrdom and noble death; 2) the ways in which (pagan) audiences reacted to displays of martyrdom; and 3) the roles that martyr texts played among Christian groups. With regard to the first point, it became clear that these accounts present martyrdom through a mixture of 'general', Christian-specific, and Christianized (textual) elements, thus portraying martyrdom as similar to noble death.

However, since these texts often expect their audiences to be well familiar with Gospel narratives and Christian traditions in general, or appear to weigh in on controversies within the 'Church', they seem to have been intended for insiders, not missionary work or the instruction of those newly-initiated. As such, it remains doubtful whether their similarities with noble death traditions alone were enough to inspire positive estimations of martyrdom. Similarly, a contextual approach to these texts' depictions of the interactions between martyrs and spectators revealed that these were heavily biased. *Passio Perpetuae,* for instance makes claims about the 'conversion' of a warden and several spectators, but these are ambiguous and appear exaggerated. Moreover, these texts generally make it seem as if audiences could only respond to the martyrs' conduct with either admiration or hostility. While these descriptions must have been considered plausible by Christian editors, and may therefore have an element of truth to them, they fail to reveal the probably far more complex 'pagan' reception of martyrdom. Instead, the texts are mainly engaged in imparting moral lessons to their Christian readership, which, incidentally, make them good sources for studying the importance of martyr accounts to the 'Church'. In short, their intra-communal functions range from providing believers with Christian role-models and communal identities, and using the examples of the martyrs as a vehicle for promoting a variety of theological claims. Given the popularity of these texts among these communities, they were likely considered highly effective in this regard.

The second chapter continued our comparison of martyrdom and noble death, this time by examining the *Acta Alexandrinorum.* Here, it was revealed that the so-called 'Acts of the pagan martyrs' show only some similarities with Christian martyr literature, which resulted from the fact that both belonged to an empire-wide tradition of trial literature. This suggests that the people who valued the *AA* might have perceived Christian martyr stories as strange or objectionable. However, the readership of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* seems to have been confined to a small stratum of cultural 'Greeks' living in Egypt, which warns against using these texts as indicative of the beliefs and values of 'pagans' in general. Hence, the *Acta Alexandrinorum* are only of limited use for estimating the reception of Christian martyr texts among 'ordinary' people. Yet, because of their dissimilarities, the *AA* can be used to uncover the reasons behind the relative 'success' of Christian martyr stories. In short, it seems that the latter were able to survive beyond the fourth century

because of their ‘timeless’ religious importance, as well as the fact that Christianity itself continued to grow. Conversely, the *Acta Alexandrinorum* were closely tied up with political and social realities that changed dramatically around the Severan period, thus undermining the very reason for their existence.

The final chapter concluded our investigation by exploring Tertullian’s *Ad Martyras* and *Apologeticum*. Similar to the claims found in *Passio Perpetuae,* Tertullian’s assertions about the missionary working of martyrdom proved to be of a highly rhetorical nature. More specifically, the chapter demonstrated how Tertullian’s statements about the threat of persecution and Christians ‘eagerness’ to face martyrdom reflected not so much historical realities, but rather Tertullian’s beliefs about what an ideal Christian ‘Church’ should look like – namely, austere, and strongly opposed to the ‘idolatry’ of ‘pagan’ society. His works, therefore, do not provide reliable evidence for determining how important martyrdom was to Christian proselytism. Nevertheless, his works do reveal a complex interaction between martyrdom and noble death traditions – even in *Ad Martyras,* which is addressed to his fellow-Christians –, which shows how Christians could define and advertise their heroes’ stories in idioms shared by their surrounding culture. Moreover, his use of noble death *exempla* in *Ad Martyras* and *Apologeticum,* respectively, reveals how their similarities with Christian martyrs could be explained both positively and negatively, though Tertullian is in both cases keen to suggest that Christian martyrs are superior to their ‘pagan’ counterparts.

Taken together, the findings of this dissertation agree with earlier studies arguing against the idea that martyrdom formed an important factor in the conversion of ‘pagan’ Rome. While this paper contends that the ubiquity of this notion in early Christian texts shows that conversions inspired by martyrdom did sometimes occur - or otherwise such claims would not have been considered plausible -, there is little to be said for – and much against – the idea that it took place on a large scale. Similarly, the Christian texts examined in this paper appear to have been intended mostly for audiences already familiar with Christian traditions, and there seems to be no evidence that they were used for either proselytism, or the instruction of catechumens. The similarities between Christian martyr narratives and noble death traditions, therefore, were probably not intended to help persuade ‘pagans’ unfamiliar with the specifically-Christian aspects of such stories of the ‘heroic’ nature of the martyrs’ actions; instead, the prominence of ideas associated with noble death in

martyrological accounts results from the fact that early Christians themselves shared many of their beliefs, values and traditions with the ‘pagan’ society they inhabited. Indeed, as *Passio Perpetuae, Martyrdom of Polycarp* and *Apologeticum* show, it was a common strategy of such texts to portray Christians as the sole possessors of virtues whose value was universally acknowledged.

Yet, while martyrdom – real or literary - and conversion are only tenuously related, the findings of this paper do show that martyr stories contributed significantly to the survival and development of Christian communities. In particular, these texts appear to have been rather successful at presenting what were most likely isolated incidents of judicial violence as part of a cosmological drama, whose significance did not diminish after Constantine granted official toleration of Christianity. This religious aspect meant that martyrological legends could aid in the construction of Christian identities, embody the values of their associated in-group(s), and recast Christian opposition to Roman judges as a virtuous and empowering act. In this sense, then, the blood of martyrs did act as seed for the Christianization of the Roman Empire.

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