



The Early Church Martyrs

In the year AD 203, five young people were led out into the amphitheatre of the Roman city of Carthage. Around them the crowds shouted and jeered as they were stripped and whipped and draped in nets in anticipation of the release of the beasts: a leopard, a bear, and a fierce cow. These young people were catechumens, recent converts to Christianity who had been preparing for baptism. Saturninus and Saturus were free-born men, while Revocatus was a slave, as was Felicitas, who had given birth only three days before. Their fifth companion was Vivia Perpetua, a well born and well educated woman, only twenty-two years old, and still breastfeeding her young son.¹ Few eye-witness accounts of the execution of Christians have survived from the first three centuries, yet the martyrdom of these five is a rare exception.² Not only does an account of their deaths by an apparent eyewitness survive, but remarkably so does Perpetua's own diary of the days preceding their entry into the arena.³

ARREST

Nevertheless, it is unclear from these accounts quite why these young Christians had been arrested. Under the emperor Septimus Severus (r. 193-211), conversion to Christianity and Judaism may have been formally criminalised, and other converts seem to have also been arrested in Corinth, Alexandria, and Rome at around this time.⁴ Yet Perpetua's brother, who was also a catechumen, had been able to openly visit them in prison without being arrested himself, as did two deacons.⁵

It was under Nero (r. 54-68) that Christians seem to have first been arrested and executed by Roman authorities for the crime of being Christians, establishing a precedent for Roman governors and magistrates.⁶ It was what the Romans saw as their 'atheism', their refusal to respect the gods and sacrifice to them, which was thought particularly deserving of death.⁷ The gods held in their hands all the unpredictable and irresistible powers of the natural world, and to cause them offence and withhold their

¹ Their trial, imprisonment and execution is recounted in the *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*. Perpetua's martyrdom is also referenced by Tertullian, a contemporary in Carthage: Tertullian, *On the Soul*, 55.

² The Bollandists (Roman Catholic compilers and authenticators of martyr accounts) particularly identified six accounts as confidently authentic, and these are generally also accepted by contemporary scholars: *the Martyrdom of Polycarp*, *the Martyrdom of Ptolemy and Lucius*, *the Martyrdom of Justin and companions*, the account of the martyrs of Lyon in Eusebius' (d. 339) *Ecclesiastical History* (5.1-2), *the Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, and *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*. Other accounts are likely not without kernels of truth.

³ This is also a highly unique example of writing by a woman in the Roman Empire.

⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.1-6.

⁵ *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, 1.1, 2.2, 3.2.

⁶ Suetonius, *Nero*, 16; Tacitus, *Histories*, 15.44. Why the Romans thought Christians deserved death and the circumstances in which Christians were persecuted are discussed in more detail in our previous dossiers: *Early Christians, AD 33-200* and *Early Christians, AD 200-325*.

⁷ The consul Titus Flavius Clemens, who was married to the emperor Domitian's (r. 81-96) niece, was executed in AD 95 on charges of atheism, although it's not clear if he was a Christian or a God-fearing gentile following Jewish beliefs. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 67.14.

dues was to risk their wrath. The Christian scholar Tertullian, a contemporary of Perpetua's in Carthage, wrote that whenever there was a flood or drought, a famine or plague, straightaway the people would cry "away with the Christians to the lions!"⁸ The empire itself was sustained only by the favour of the gods.⁹ The presence of the irreligious Christians, who petulantly disregarded ancestral traditions and stubbornly thought nothing of the public good, drawing the unwanted attention of the capricious gods, was a source of great fear to their neighbours. They heard whisperings of the abominable acts these Christians perpetrated in the dark during their secret meetings: cannibalism, consuming the flesh and blood of a child, and incestuous orgies, love feasts where they called each other brother and sister.¹⁰



Nevertheless, for the first two centuries, there was no systematic empire-wide persecution. This was perhaps because Christians were still relatively few, a local and sporadic challenge to order rather than an existential threat to the empire. Regional governors had wide discretionary powers to prosecute and execute Christians, but they were discouraged from seeking them out.¹¹ Instead, Christians were only to be charged if denounced by a delator, a formal accuser who would act as prosecutor. Punishments for false denunciations could be severe, but a conviction would yield the denouncer a share of the convicted Christian's property.¹² Such accusations were in many cases probably motivated by personal slights from run-ins with Christians in day-to-day life.

Yet a governor could also be compelled to act in response to public disorder.¹³ In the city of Smyrna in Asia Minor, around the year 155, the execution of a Christian named Germanicus in the city's arena apparently prompted public outcry for the execution of the elderly leader (episkopos) of the city's Christian community, Polycarp, who was believed to have met the apostle John.¹⁴ The governor responded, seizing Polycarp where he was hiding outside the city. Tried before the public in the amphitheatre, he was sentenced for being "the destroyer of the gods," teaching people not to worship or sacrifice to the gods. Similar events occurred in 177 in Lyon, Gaul. There seem to have been widespread disturbances, with mobs attacking Christians in the streets.¹⁵ The civil authorities rounded up scores of Christians who were tried by the governor and killed in the arena with the consent of the emperor Marcus Aurelius.¹⁶

As the number of Christians grew, they became more familiar figures to the inhabitants of the Roman Empire, and the public became less inclined to believe the rumours about them. Their 'atheism' no longer appeared quite as strange and outrageous. Yet their growing numbers increasingly came to be seen by imperial authorities as an existential threat to the stability and security of the empire. In AD 250, the emperor Decius (r. 249-51), taking the helm of an empire beleaguered by crises, conflicts, and instability, sought to win back the favour of the gods with an empire-wide sacrifice.¹⁷ It is unclear whether this was specifically targeted at Christians but it placed Christians in a very difficult and dangerous position, and

⁸ Tertullian, *Apology*, 40. Echoed in Cyprian of Carthage's (d. 258) *Letter to Demetrius*, 3; Marcus Aurelius' (r. 161-80) *Letter* in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.13.

⁹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*.

¹⁰ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*; Justin (d. 165), *Dialogue with Trypho*; Tertullian, *Apology*, 2; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.1.14.

¹¹ Pliny the Younger (d. 113), *Letter on the Christians*, 10.96. Pliny's correspondence with the emperor Trajan (r. 98-117) is explored in detail in our previous dossier: *Early Christians, AD 33-200*.

¹² Hadrian's (r. 117-38) *Letter to Minucius Fundanus* in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.8-9.

¹³ An early example appears in Acts 16:20-21, when the people of Philippi rioted because Paul was preaching non-Roman Jewish customs. In response the Roman authorities had the local Christians beaten and imprisoned.

¹⁴ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 3. On Polycarp's acquaintance with John, see: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.4; Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 32; *Martyrdom of Ignatius*, 3; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.20. Polycarp was also a correspondent of Ignatius, the leader of the church in Antioch, while Irenaeus, the leader of the church in Lyon, had been his disciple.

¹⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.1.7.

¹⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.1.

¹⁷ Decius' universal sacrifice is explored in detail in *Early Christians, AD 200-325*.



many were executed for refusing to sacrifice.¹⁸ This was the first time Christians across the empire had faced active persecution.

The next, last, and greatest wave of empire-wide persecution came under Diocletian (r. 285-305) and the Tetrarchy of four emperors which he has established to oversee the tottering empire. Seeking to stamp out Christianity, Diocletian nevertheless initially imagined this might be relatively bloodless.¹⁹ Bibles were sought out and burnt, house churches were seized and destroyed, Christians' property was confiscated and Christians were purged from the military and government.²⁰ It was not long, however, before Christian resistance led to executions. While Diocletian abdicated in 305, his co-emperors and successors kept the pressure up, repeating orders for Decian-style universal sacrifices. Many Christians were executed during this period, yet far more were subjected to tortures and maiming, imprisoned and sentenced to work in the mines.²¹ In 311, however, on his deathbed the emperor Galerius (r. 293-311), who had been one of the most enthusiastic drivers of the persecution, abruptly ordered its end.²² Christianity could not be suppressed. This order was confirmed for good by Constantine (r. 306-37) and his co-emperor Licinius (r. 308-24) in 313.²³

TRIAL

After their arrest and imprisonment, Perpetua and her companions were brought before the governor to be tried in front of a large crowd.²⁴ The governor appealed to her, for the sake of her elderly father and suckling child, to go through the simple act of making a sacrifice for the emperor's health. The Christians of Pontus-Bithynia, tried by the governor Pliny the Younger in AD 112, were given a similar test.²⁵ "Why is it so wrong," the governor had put to Polycarp, "to save yourself by saying Caesar is lord and making a sacrifice?"²⁶ It was only a simple act of outward obedience to the gods and the emperor, it did not have to reflect inward beliefs but merely indicate respect to society. Perpetua refused, as had the others. "Are you a Christian?" demanded the governor. No proof of any wrongdoing was required for a conviction, as

¹⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.39-42.

¹⁹ Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 11.8.

²⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.1-4.

²¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8. Eusebius lived through and witnessed these persecutions first hand.

²² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.17.

²³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 9.10.

²⁴ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 2.2.

²⁵ Pliny, *Letter on the Christians*, 10.96.

²⁶ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 8.2.



Tertullian and Justin Martyr complained.²⁷ Admission of the name ‘Christian,’ as the emperor Trajan had confirmed to Pliny, was alone enough to deserve death.²⁸ “I am a Christian,” declared Perpetua.

Still, the governor would not give up so easily. “Out of pity for them, we treated them with even greater cruelty, torturing them to deny their faith, so as to save their lives.”²⁹ Perpetua’s elderly father was thrown down in front of her and beaten. But she would not be moved.³⁰ The martyrs of Lyon had been repeatedly tortured and forced to watch each other’s suffering, as the governor attempted to compel them to take an oath by the gods.

At times, some clearly did give in. During the universal sacrifices ordered under Decius and the Tetrarchs, many Christians had been executed for refusing. Yet others had found workarounds, buying certificates of sacrifice or having someone else make the sacrifice on their behalf, while many others had given in, going through with the simple action of throwing a pinch of incense and pouring a few drops of wine.³¹ When the dust settled, these ‘lapsed’ Christians were often keen to return to their church communities. Yet those who had stood fast and suffered for refusing to sacrifice were often less ready to accept them back. The Novatians, after Decius’ persecution, and Donatists, after Diocletian’s, took a hard line, refusing to forgive those who had lapsed. However, Dionysus and Cyprian, the leaders of the churches in Alexandria and Carthage in the mid third century, argued that, with sincere repentance, even those who had once denied Christ could be forgiven and readmitted, and this became the consensus amongst Christians.³²



Still, very many chose martyrdom. Some even volunteered. Saturus, who entered the arena alongside Perpetua, had not been taken with the other catechumens, but had given himself up voluntarily to the authorities after their arrest.³³ Such actions of solidarity and protest were not uncommon. Tertullian recounted a story that, following a wave of executions, the Christians of Asia Minor appeared en masse before the Roman governor demanding to be executed. Having killed several of them, he soon gave up and dismissed the others.³⁴ In this way, Tertullian argued, Christians could stand up and be counted, demonstrating their numbers and leaving the authorities overwhelmed and powerless against them. More than a century later, Eusebius had witnessed a similar demonstration during the trial of Christians in Upper Egypt. No sooner was one believer condemned to death than

²⁷ Justin, *First Apology*; Tertullian, *Apology*.

²⁸ Trajan, *Letter on the Christians*, 10.97; Tertullian, *Apology*, 2.

²⁹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 28.

³⁰ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 2.3.

³¹ The Letter from Copres to Sarapias (P.Oxy. XXXI 2601) discovered in Egypt offers a fascinating glimpse of a Christian whose non-Christian brother made the sacrifice on his behalf.

³² Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.43-46, 49.

³³ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 1.3.

³⁴ Tertullian, *To Scapula*, 5.



another would jump up from the onlookers to declare themselves a Christian.³⁵ Around this same time, following a number of executions in Caesarea, a rumour spread that Christians were to be executed in the amphitheatre for an upcoming festival. Six young men went before the magistrate, having bound their own hands, and volunteered to be among the number chosen to be killed.³⁶ A perhaps spurious story was later told about a woman martyred under Decius, Agathonice, who, it was claimed, while witnessing the deaths of two other martyrs, had even jumped onto the pyre to join them.³⁷ But Eusebius also described unambiguous acts of suicide; Christians who jumped from buildings rather than face torture or threw themselves into rivers rather than allow themselves to be raped.³⁸

Such action was not uncontroversial, and there was a fine line between solidarity and too eagerly seeking martyrdom.³⁹ Christian leaders feared that those who volunteered were relying on their own will and strength, rather than on the Holy Spirit, and that they were at greater risk of falling when the real trial of suffering came. Prior to Polycarp's arrest, a Christian named Quintus had reportedly given himself up, only to give in and make the sacrifice. "We do not commend those who give themselves up," writes the recounter of Polycarp's martyrdom, "seeing that the Gospel does not teach us to do so."⁴⁰

Among Roman authors, Christians' disdain for death became one of their most noted characteristics. Romans understood the willingness to die for personal glory or honour, or for a noble cause, for country and loved ones.⁴¹ They also admired the resolve of philosophers like Socrates and the Stoics, who faced death with dignified resignation, unafraid of a change they could not prevent. In contrast, Christians seemed to them pitiable fools, driven by the horrifyingly foolish hope that they would live again.⁴² They might act like philosophers, but, as Marcus Aurelius warned in his famous *Meditations*, they acted merely out of stubborn obstinacy and not reasoned decision.⁴³ Ordinary Romans, too, were baffled and dismayed that Christians would rather face suffering and death than make the everyday sacrifices to their traditional and beloved gods. Lactantius, a teacher of rhetoric who had worked for Diocletian before becoming a Christian, wrote during the great persecution that many were coming to wonder what was so good that it was worth dying for?⁴⁴

³⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.9.5. Following Cyprian's sentencing, his followers reportedly similarly rose and demanded to be executed with him: *Acts of Cyprian*, 4.3–5.1.

³⁶ Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, 3.2–4.

³⁷ *Martyrdom of Carpus*, 42–44.

³⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.12.

³⁹ A sharp criticism, from the late second century, is offered by Clement of Alexandria in *Miscellanies*, 4.16.3–17.3.

⁴⁰ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 4.

⁴¹ See the contrast made in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.1.4.

⁴² Epictetus (d. 135), *Discourses*, 4.7.1–6; Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 8–9; Lucian, *Peregrinus*, 13; Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 11.

⁴³ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 11.3. See also: Galen, *Summary of Plato's Republic* (preserved in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *Lives of the Physicians*; al-Qifṭī, *The Biographies of the Great Philosophers*). Eusebius had similarly compared Christians' deaths to those of philosophers: *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.32, 8.9–12.

⁴⁴ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 5.23.



COUNTING THE COST

In prison, Perpetua's father came and pleaded with her, that for the sake of his love she might abandon her faith. She brought his attention to a jug beside them. "Is this a jug or something else?" she asked, "can it be known by any other name?" No. "Neither can I call myself anything other than what I am, a Christian."⁴⁵

Facing pressure to give in and sacrifice, early Christians looked back to scripture, to the example of those who had died rather than disobey or deny God; rather than fail to trust Him. They recalled the words of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. God could deliver them from the furnace, but even if He didn't, they would not bow before the golden image. They thought also of the various Jews in the books of Maccabees who had been killed rather than break the law or commit idolatry.⁴⁶ They remembered the martyrdom of Stephen and stories of the fates of the apostles, and the words of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin, which they echoed in their confessions: "We must obey God rather than men."⁴⁷ Jesus had himself told them to expect these trials. Because of His name they would be dragged before governors and put to death.⁴⁸ To suffer and die was not a sign that God had abandoned them, but that He was with them.

In AD 236, Origen, a Christian scholar in Alexandria and one of the leading minds of his age, wrote a letter to his friend Ambrosius who had been arrested during an outbreak of persecution against Christian leaders.⁴⁹ Origen encouraged his friend to remain steadfast as he faced death. He was himself intimately acquainted with martyrdom. Around the same time that Perpetua was arrested, Origen's father had also been charged. Still a boy, Origen had frantically sought to join him but was apparently prevented from leaving the house after his mother hid all his clothes. Nevertheless, he had sent his father a similar letter to the one he later wrote to Ambrosius, exhorting him not to deny Christ for the sake of his family.⁵⁰ When in 250, the authorities came for Origen himself, he proved the sincerity of his words, enduring days of torture, and finally dying from his wounds.⁵¹

For Origen there was no question about giving in and denying Christ by word or deed. If you truly loved Christ why would you ever want to deny him or pass up the opportunity to confess him?⁵² As he wrote to Ambrosius, if it seemed a hard decision, choosing to die rather than offer the sacrifice, then "you have not thirsted and longed for God."⁵³ This trial was a test of his love for God.⁵⁴ But, Origen marvelled, "how

⁴⁵ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 1.2.

⁴⁶ Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 22.

⁴⁷ Acts 5:29.

⁴⁸ Matthew 10:16-22.

⁴⁹ On which: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.28.

⁵⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.2.2-6.

⁵¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.39.5.

⁵² Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 10.

⁵³ Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 3.

⁵⁴ Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 6.



much power does the spell of love for God have against suffering... Human weakness is driven abroad by that spell of love.”⁵⁵ Martyrdom was the greatest gift one could give to God, but it did not compare to what He had already given.⁵⁶ “We should give him our full attention, because He had given us His.”⁵⁷ His sentiments echoed those of Polycarp as the governor had appealed to him to save his life by offering the sacrifice: “eighty-six years I have served Him, and He never did me any wrong, how can I deny my King and my Saviour?”⁵⁸

Yet death too was not really a loss. On the other side was freedom and glory. “When one puts off the body, one puts off death,” wrote Origen.⁵⁹ Leaving the body was to leave the power of death, and beyond it was something much better than what was left behind. Origen concluded with Paul’s words to the Romans: “the sufferings of the present are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed.”⁶⁰

In prison Perpetua received several visions while she slept, which she recounted in her diary. In the first of these she found herself before a golden ladder which stretched up into the sky. Satorius was already climbing, beckoning her to follow, but along the sides of the ladder were sharp weapons, leaving only a narrow path that was safe, while at its base was a great coiled dragon. “In Jesus’ name, he shall not hurt me,” she declared as she took the first step. The dragon recoiled in fear and she stamped upon its head. Finally, reaching the top, she surveyed an immense garden. There sat a white haired shepherd, milking sheep and surrounded by many white-robed figures, martyrs who had gone before. “Welcome, daughter,” the shepherd greeted and handed her a chunk of cheese. She woke still tasting its sweetness.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 27.

⁵⁶ Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 28.

⁵⁷ Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 9.

⁵⁸ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9.

⁵⁹ Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 3.

⁶⁰ Romans 8:18 in Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 35.

⁶¹ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 13. This vision of Perpetua’s is also referenced in Tertullian, *On the Soul*, 55.

Saturus also wrote about a vision he had had. He and Perpetua were carried by angels into the east. Entering through boundless light they found themselves in a garden, where enormous rose trees continually dropped their leaves. There they were greeted by other martyrs, before being led by the angels beneath walls of light and clothed in robes of white. Here, Saturus likewise saw a young man with white hair. In his dream Saturus turned to Perpetua. “Now you have what you wish,” he said, and she thanked God: “joyous as I was in the flesh, I am now more joyous here.”⁶²

DEATH

At last the day arrived, the birthday of Geta Caesar, the emperor’s son, in celebration of which the Christians were to face the wild beasts.⁶³ The five young people stepped out into the arena, singing psalms. They had refused to wear the costumes of Roman priests, so instead they stood naked beneath the gaze of the crowds. A leopard and a bear were first released upon the three men, but they survived their attacks, the bear refusing even to leave its den. Perpetua and Felicitas, meanwhile, were sent before a fierce cow. It charged them, throwing and trampling them, but they helped each other to their feet and were led back out of the arena. Saturus was then thrown once again to the leopard, which inflicted a single fatal bite, drenching him in blood. At this the crowds chanted “saved and washed, saved and washed,” a mocking reference to baptism. The remaining four were again led out into the arena, where they embraced and kissed one another, before being killed by a gladiator. Coming to Perpetua, the gladiator thrust his sword between her ribs, at which she cried out in pain. Slowly and deliberately, she took hold of the young man’s sword arm, placing the blade herself at last on her throat.⁶⁴ The spectacle had been messy and inglorious, punctuated by random pain and drenched in blood, the air rent by the turbulent chaos of the baying crowd. The martyrs were denied the dignified death to which a Roman might aspire. It was not just death they had accepted when they set out on the path of martyrdom, but all the senselessness of suffering. Yet for Christians there was another, unseen reality behind the shadows of indignity and bloody chaos.



SPIRITUAL CONTEST

The night before she was to enter the arena, Perpetua recorded another vision. She stepped out through the gates into an arena, and was greeted by the noise of a vast crowd of onlookers, many times larger than that which could be accommodated by Carthage’s amphitheatre. No beasts faced her, but rather a huge ugly man. Attendants came to her, stripped her and rubbed her down with oil like a fighter, a contestant in the pankration. This was an Olympic sport, an unarmed combat in which practically nothing was forbidden. She was not being prepared as a gladiator, but as an athlete. Above the amphitheatre now loomed a towering figure, a man in purple and gold, with the staff of a trainer of gladiators in one hand, and in the other a fresh green branch sprouting fruits of gold. Should she lose, he declared, her opponent would kill her with a sword. Should she win, the branch was her reward. They faced and circled one another, and the ugly fighter sprang for her feet, but she kicked his face away with her heels. They struggled longer but at last she brought him down on the dusty arena floor and stood on his head.⁶⁵ Amidst the roaring excitement of the crowd, the trainer awarded her the sprouting golden branch: “Daughter, peace be with you.” “Then I awoke,” wrote Perpetua, “and perceived that I was not to fight with beasts, but against the devil. Still, I knew that that victory was awaiting me.”⁶⁶

⁶² *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 4.1-2.

⁶³ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 2.3, 5.3.

⁶⁴ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 2-4.

⁶⁵ Both here and in the crushing of the dragon’s head in Perpetua’s first vision, there are echoes of Genesis 3:15 – the son of Eve, usually interpreted as Jesus, who would crush the head of the serpent that bit his heel.

⁶⁶ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 3.2.



The Roman authorities might have thought they were defeating the martyrs, but really they were unwitting participants in the real confrontation. The sufferings of the martyrs were not the sufferings of victims, but the strivings of athletes straining for victory. The deprivations of prison and the tortures intended to persuade them to recant were their training, and the Holy Spirit was their trainer.⁶⁷ So wrote Tertullian in one of his earliest surviving works, his own letter to prisoners facing martyrdom a few years before Perpetua. The harder the athlete strains, he wrote, the greater the hope of victory.⁶⁸ This was not meaningless suffering, but a contest, with a prize and a purpose. And around them, a great unseen host looked on. The arena was the demons' natural home, and here they were, waiting to cheer should the martyrs fail.⁶⁹ Yet the Holy Spirit had entered the arena with them, and the angels and all creation looked on too, cheering them on.⁷⁰

To all observers there was no contest between the naked prisoners and the ferocious animals, and no struggle when they knelt to receive the gladiator's blade. But this was the climax of the pitched battle against the devil, the "warfare of the living God."⁷¹ They were warriors, and now was their time. "Let us slay the dragon!"⁷²

As they entered the contest of suffering and the struggle with death, they entered into the same battle which Jesus had fought on the cross, and He entered the arena with them. They were led naked and in chains, but really they were celebrating their triumph, the great parade of conquering emperors and heroes of the empire.⁷³ Just as they imitated Christ in his apparent defeat, so they shared in his victory. They had accepted the same sufferings as Christ. They suffered with Him, and now He suffered in them, bearing their pain as they embraced His. Their sufferings manifested His glory, and where Christ's glory was, all pain was an illusion.⁷⁴ Three days before entering the arena, Felicitas had given birth to a premature but healthy daughter. Having heard her cries during the delivery, the Roman attendants reportedly asked her how on earth she was going to endure the suffering that awaited her in the arena. "At present I suffer alone," she acknowledged, "but then there will be another in me, who will suffer for me, because I am about to suffer for Him."⁷⁵

⁶⁷ Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, 3.

⁶⁸ Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, 3. See also: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.Intro.4. The metaphor of the life of faith being like the striving of an athlete is used frequently by Paul, including in: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Galatians 5:7; Philippians 3:12-14; and 2 Timothy 4:7, as well as in Hebrews 12:1-2.

⁶⁹ Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 18; Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, 1; Tertullian, *On the Spectacles*, 22, 26.

⁷⁰ Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 18.

⁷¹ Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, 3.

⁷² Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 33.

⁷³ Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 42.

⁷⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.1.23.

⁷⁵ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 5.2.



POWER OF THE MARTYRS

Because they drank from the same cup of suffering as Jesus had, they would also rule and judge with Him.⁷⁶ Indeed, even before their deaths, having confessed Christ and become, as Tertullian put it, martyrs designate, they already began to manifest Christ's power.⁷⁷ Perpetua's brother encouraged her that she was now in a position of favour to ask God for a vision of her future. She agreed, declaring how great she had already found God's kindness to be, and that night she was granted the vision of the ladder to heaven.⁷⁸ Having held firm through her court trial, she was praying one day when the name of her other brother came to mind. He had died some years before from a disease while he was still a child, before Perpetua or her surviving brother had become Christians. She felt now a sudden sense that she was worthy to pray to God on his behalf. That night she had a vision of him, pale and weak and desperately thirsty, but though he was near a pool, he could not raise himself to drink. For the next few days she prayed intently and constantly for him. With the day of the arena fast approaching, she now had another vision. She saw her young brother again, but this time refreshed and happy, drinking deeply from the pool, before running off to continue his child's play.⁷⁹ This was the power of a martyr, to ask God to save a child who had died without hearing the gospel.

The martyrs had gained the authority to loose, but also to bind.⁸⁰ They would sit with Christ in judgement and would judge the judges.⁸¹ While Perpetua sang psalms on her way to the arena, Saturus and the other men shouted warnings at the crowds and the governor. "You judge us," they declared, "but God will judge you."⁸² But martyrs might also pronounce forgiveness. The martyrs of Lyon were reported to have "absolved all, and bound none," praying for those who tortured them as Stephen, the first martyr, had, repeating the prayer of Christ from the cross.⁸³

The martyrs, even when preparing for martyrdom, had great spiritual power, and as they stepped out to fight a spiritual contest, power swirled around them and they became bridges with the unseen world and the unseen battle.

COMMEMORATION

For the first few centuries there was no common practice of recording the accounts of martyrs so that they might be remembered. The genre of hagiography, the writing of saints' lives and martyrdoms for the purpose of their commemoration, was yet to emerge. The account of Polycarp's martyrdom, for instance,

⁷⁶ Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 28, referencing Matthew 20:21-23.

⁷⁷ Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, 1.

⁷⁸ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 1.3.

⁷⁹ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 2.3-4.

⁸⁰ Matthew 16:19; 18:18.

⁸¹ Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, 2.

⁸² *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 6.1.

⁸³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.2.5. Acts 7:60; Luke 23:34.

was written as a letter from the Christians of Smyrna, communicating recent events to the Christians in Philomelion, further inland. The account of the martyrs of Lyon was similarly communicated in a letter to be circulated among the churches of the provinces of Asia and Phrygia.⁸⁴ The descriptions of other martyrdoms were seemingly recorded within Roman court transcripts, identified and preserved by later generations of Christians. Among these were the accounts of the Scillitan martyrs and Cyprian of Carthage. On the other hand there were many Christians executed of whom no Christian account survives. The many Christians killed by Pliny in Bithynia-Pontus, for instance, are known only from Pliny's own letter of inquiry to the emperor.⁸⁵

The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity was one of the first accounts compiled explicitly for commemoration. The stories of ancient heroes of faith had long helped to strengthen the faith of believers, its compiler wrote.⁸⁶ Since God continued working in the world, pouring out His Holy Spirit, why shouldn't examples of contemporary heroes of faith also be recorded, as a witness to people in the present and the future. Through their stories, the hearer could also encounter Christ, for as the martyrs imitated Him, so they also witnessed to Him.⁸⁷ This, indeed, was why they were called 'martyrs,' which means witnesses in Greek. In the lives of the martyrs you could see the life of Christ acted out in your own place and time.

The example of Jesus had created an entirely new kind of hero, not a hero who fought for honour and glory, but one who gave these up. Not a great man, but a simple and humble person who became great through accepting dishonour in humility. Even a slave woman, like Felicitas, could follow His example and become like Him, and, like Him, become a mighty hero. In Lyon, another young slave, Blandina, had gained particular renown. Putting on Christ, she had become a mighty warrior and athlete. Through her, wrote the author of the martyrs' account, Christ showed that those whom men despised as poor and insignificant, were worthy of glory before God. Her love for God gave her great power.⁸⁸ Despite everything about her status in the world, in prison and in the arena, Blandina had become the leader of the other Christians, among them wealthy citizens and slave owners, including her own mistress, inspiring and encouraging them to persist to death.⁸⁹



The account of Blandina's martyrdom and that of the other martyrs of Lyon only survives through a retelling by Eusebius, apparently based on the original letter. To Eusebius, a confidant of the emperor Constantine writing in the early fourth century, this slave girl remained the stand-out hero of these events. Perpetua and Felicitas were similarly being celebrated around this same time, commemorated in the calendar of the Christians in Rome. The account of their martyrdom and Perpetua's visions was soon the subject of an annual sermon by Augustine the bishop of Hippo (354-450), preaching not far from the very city where they had been killed.

The great proliferation of increasingly romantic hagiographies that came in the fourth century started only after the martyrdoms in the Roman world had stopped. Constantine's declaration of toleration and his increasing affinity to Christianity marked the triumphal conclusion of this era, the almost decade

⁸⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.1.2. This may well have been written by Irenaeus, Polycarp's student, who was the leader of the Christians in Lyon but originally came from Asia.

⁸⁵ Pliny's letter was also known to Tertullian who seemingly had no other knowledge of these events: Tertullian, *Apology*, 2.

⁸⁶ It is possible that the compiler was Tertullian himself, who elsewhere shows his knowledge of his contemporary Perpetua's visions: Tertullian, *On the Soul*, 55.

⁸⁷ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, preface.

⁸⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.1.17.

⁸⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.1.18, 41, 55.



long, empire-wide persecution of Christians by Diocletian and the other Tetrarchs. Eusebius, who had witnessed this persecution first-hand, became the great chronicler of the persecutions and martyrs of the past three centuries. His triumphing in the new reign of Constantine was that of someone who had lost friends and felt the fear and pressure personally. Following the greatest wave of persecution and the greatest shedding of martyrs' blood, not only had the demons been trampled, but the empire itself had been conquered. As in the famous words of Tertullian, which have resonated with Christians down the ages, the blood of the martyrs had been the seed of the church.⁹⁰

MARTYRS DOWN THE AGES

As we will see in future episodes, that Christians had once experienced persecution did not prevent other Christians, once they had assumed the reins of power, from themselves becoming persecutors. The Constantinian revolution changed everything and the experience of holding institutional power was something for which Jesus had left no obvious roadmap. Often driven by similar motivations to the Romans, a desire to prevent people going astray and to maintain God's favour, Christians increasingly turned on one another.

In the modern West, perhaps especially the United States, Christians have at times had something of a persecution complex. The roots of this likely lie in America's history, built by Christian minorities fleeing persecution by Christian states in Europe, inherently suspicious of the state as a potential persecutor. Nevertheless, persecution has been a very real and continued experience for Christians in many places in the world where they have never been a majority or in power.

In the Sasanian Persian Empire Christians had faced death at the hands of the authorities since at least the third century.⁹¹ While in the Roman world Constantine brought about the end of persecution, in the Persian Empire, persecution was only just getting started, reaching its height during the reign of Shapur II (r. 309-79), and continuing through to the sixth century. We'll come to these in future episodes. The stories of these Persian martyrs echoed across Asia, and in the Middle Ages we find Christians reading their stories and naming children after them in far off Central Asia and China.⁹²

Christians in Tang China and the medieval Islamic Caliphate faced official opposition and bouts of popular violence. Christians in seventh-century Japan were subjected to particularly bitter persecution,

⁹⁰ This is a popular misquote of Tertullian's actual words "the blood of Christians is seed." Tertullian, *Apology*, 50.13.

⁹¹ See Kartir's inscription of 280 on the Ka'ba-ye Zartosht, Naqsh-e Rostam, Iran, also discussed in *Early Christians, AD 200-325*.

⁹² See the Chüy Valley gravestones, dating between 1201-1345, from Kyrgyzstan, and the Turfan manuscripts, dating between the eighth and fourteenth centuries, from Xinjiang, China.

and the stories of Japanese martyrs' trials and tortures are strikingly similar to those from the Roman Empire, and better evidenced. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries millions of Christians across the world have been killed by communist regimes and Islamic extremists.

So it continues ... A bomb goes off in a church in Syria. A congregation is massacred in a remote valley in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A little further down the African coast from Carthage, men in orange jumpsuits kneel on the beach shore, where in the next moments their blood will mingle with the indifferently lapping waves.⁹³ Still there are people ready to kill others because they will not deny the name of Christ. Still there are many people ready to die rather than deny the name.

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⁹³The story of the 21 Coptic martyrs, killed in Libya in 2015, is retold in the short film *The 21*, available on YouTube.

Recommended reading:

PRIMARY SOURCES

- Acts 7 and 19.
- *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*.
- *Martyrdom of Polycarp*.
- Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 5, Chapters 1 and 2.
- Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*.
- Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*.

SECONDARY READING

- W. H. C. Frend 'Martyrdom and Political Oppression,' in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip F. Esler (London: Routledge, 2000), 840-68.
- Tom Holland, *Dominion*, Chapter 4.
- Geoffrey E. M. de Ste Croix, 'Why were the early Christians persecuted?' *Past & Present* 26.1 (1963): 6-38. [Republished in: *Studies in Ancient Society* (Routledge, 2013): 210-248.]
- Larry W. Hurtado, *Why on Earth did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* (Marquette University Press, 2016).