

5

Christians and the Arena

This section begins with some basic establishing material about the interaction between the Roman state and early Christianity, starting with the targeting of Christians by Nero in the wake of the Great Fire of 64 CE. This would become a model for Roman initiative, which typically took action only in “crisis” situations, searching for a reason for the eruption of disorder and finding a solution in the disruption presented by the Christians. Pliny’s exchange of letters with the emperor Trajan is vital to understanding the Roman perception of Christians and the official treatment of those accused of this offense; the formal procedure laid out by Trajan and Pliny is essential background to both the denunciation of the spectacles by early Christian authors and the Martyr Acts, which document Christian reactions to the persecution from a partisan perspective. The Martyr Acts offer a window into the ways in which the arena served as a venue for Christian construction of identity and faith. This process partly involved a reworking of the Roman values system embedded in the spectacle, redefining the terms of the performance so that the social stigma attached to those appearing in the arena was now to be understood as a sign of spiritual transcendence, a special elevation conferred by divine favor. Much of the “value” early Christians took from the arena did not, however, require this kind of inversion of Roman standards. Patterns of moral critique of gladiatorial behavior and of the degradation of the audience already existed that could be readily adapted to celebrate the martyrs’ unearthly endurance and the evil of the pagan mob in attendance at the spectacles.

Rome and the Christians: The Official Relationship

During the years immediately after the crucifixion of Christ, the Roman government had no official opposition to Christianity; the legal troubles documented in *Acts of the Apostles* and alluded to in the letters of Paul seem

to be local disputes mostly within Jewish communities of the Diaspora. The differences of practice and doctrine advocated by previously Jewish Christian proselytizers, like Paul, provoked more mainstream Jews to seek out official redress from Roman administrators, charging the proselytizers with “defying the edicts of Caesar” and worshipping in a way contrary to law. Even the deportation of Paul to Rome around 60 CE was the result of escalating tensions in Judaea that had resulted in charges of sedition being claimed against Paul; Paul made use of his right, as a Roman citizen, to appeal local judgment to the emperor.

Four years later, according to Christian tradition, Paul had successfully defended himself and resumed his missionary efforts, only to be caught up in Nero’s persecution, the first officially sanctioned action against Christians.

The Neronian persecution

This represented a shift in Roman policy from the hands-off stance documented in Acts. What catalyzed the change? The most extensive account comes from Tacitus, who places the action in the aftermath of the Great Fire of 64. Tacitus’ focus, however, is not on the Christians so much as the emperor; the Christian incident is added to a long list of Nero’s abuses of power. In order to deflect hostile suspicion from himself, Nero targeted a group despised by the population to take the blame.

Source: Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44:¹ But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man’s cruelty, that they were being destroyed.

Tacitus' version of events raises some questions: to what did the first people arrested confess? What were they guilty of? Tacitus is the only ancient author to connect the Christians to the fire at all and even he finds the arson connection unlikely. He does, however, believe they deserve execution, although not the spectacle to which they were subjected by Nero's "cruelty." Tacitus says they were condemned because of their known *odium humani generis*, hatred of the human race. His narrative of the Christian persecution follows his description of the traditional religious response to disaster, in which Nero, quite appropriately, tried to propitiate the gods who had punished the Romans with the Great Fire, tried to restore the positive relationship with deity by offering public prayers and ritual banquets to make up for some perceived neglect in pious duty. The real crime committed by the Christians is their sociopathic dereliction of their responsibilities toward the human community. By refusing to participate in public religion, Christians threatened everyone by provoking the rage of the gods. The Christians are guilty of organized misanthropy. Under Nero, Christianity became a crime against the Roman state, punishable, like sedition and treason, by death.

Christian sources interpreted the policy as the height of Nero's perversion, emphasizing the emperor's notoriety and lack of moral grounding as the "reason" behind his hostility toward Christians. Nero is evil, through and through, is their argument; he is engaged in a cosmic battle against all goodness. Opposition by such an emperor serves as proof, therefore, of Christian righteousness. Persecution of Christians becomes part of the pattern of praise and blame of Christian historians in their interpretation of the imperial past. Interesting as well is the frequency of a combat metaphor to describe this opposition, used here by Eusebius in the fourth century. Persecuting emperors become killer gladiators in a metaphysical arena.

Source: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25:² When the rule of Nero was now gathering strength for unholy objects he began to take up arms against the worship of the God of the universe. It is not part of the present work to describe his depravity: many indeed have related his story in accurate narrative, and from them he who wishes can study the perversity of his degenerate madness, which made him compass the unreasonable destruction of so many thousands . . . But with all this there was still lacking to him this – that it should be attributed to him that he was the first of the emperors to be pointed out as a foe of divine religion . . . "We boast that such a man was the author of our chastisement; for he who knows him can understand that nothing would have been condemned by Nero had it not been great and good."³ In this way then was he the first to be heralded as above all a fighter against God, and raised up to slaughter against the Apostles.

Trajan's policy

Roman criminal law was not very proactive. The absence of something approximating a public prosecutor meant that criminal procedures were usually initiated by individuals taking it upon themselves to press charges against the alleged malefactor. The criminalization of Christians did not mean, therefore, that the Roman state launched a house-to-house search to hunt down and destroy all believers. The pattern followed by most procedures against Christians, and the reasoning behind it, is laid out in correspondence between the emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger. From about 109 CE, Pliny was acting as an imperial procurator in Bithynia, particularly charged with cleaning up financial corruption and administrative neglect. In this situation, Pliny serves as an agent of Roman law when a group of locals are accused of Christianity; the rarity of the action means that Pliny has no standard procedure to follow. The issue becomes more complicated, as Pliny wonders about the specific relationship these people have with Christianity, and whether this secret cult would involve them in other kinds of criminal activity, and how Roman justice should deal with what may constitute a number of different dangers to the state.

Source: Pliny *Letters* 10.96–7:⁴ I have never been present at an examination of Christians. Consequently, I do not know the nature of the extent of the punishments usually meted out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be pressed. Nor am I at all sure whether any distinction should be made between them on the grounds of age, or if young people and adults should be treated alike; whether a pardon ought to be granted to anyone retracting his beliefs, or if he has once professed Christianity, he shall gain nothing by renouncing it; and whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even innocent of crime, or rather the crimes associated with the name. For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished. There have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens. I have entered them on the list of persons to be sent to Rome for trial. Now that I have begun to deal with this problem, as so often happens, the charges are becoming more widespread and increasing in variety. An anonymous pamphlet has been circulated which contains the names of a number of accused persons. Amongst these I considered that I should dismiss any who denied that they were or ever had been Christians when they had repeated after me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your statue (which I had ordered to be brought into court for this purpose along with the images of the gods), and furthermore had

reviled the name of Christ: none of which things, I understand, any genuine Christian can be induced to do. Others, whose names were given to me by an informer, first admitted the charge and then denied it; they said that they had ceased to be Christians two or more years previously, and some of them even twenty years ago. They all did reverence to your statue and the images of the gods in the same way as the others, and reviled the name of Christ. They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind; but they had in fact given up this practice since my edict, issued on your instructions, which banned all political societies. This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women, whom they call deaconesses. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths. I have therefore postponed any further examination and hastened to consult you. The question seems to me to be worthy of your consideration, especially in view of the number of persons endangered; for a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial, and this is likely to continue. It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult. I think though that it is still possible for it to be checked and directed to better ends, for there is no doubt that people have begun to throng the temples which had been almost entirely deserted for a long time; the sacred rites which had been allowed to lapse are being performed again, and flesh of sacrificial victims is on sale everywhere, though up till recently scarcely anyone could be found to buy it. It is easy to infer from this that a great many people could be reformed if they were given an opportunity to repent.

[Trajan to Pliny]: You have followed the right course of procedure, my dear Pliny, in your examination of the cases of persons charged with being Christians, for it is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula. These people must not be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian, and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance however suspect his past conduct may be. But pamphlets circulated anonymously must play no part in any accusation. They create the worst sort of precedent and are quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

Trajan's rescript becomes imperial policy, validating the actions of Pliny as standard procedure. The criminality of Christians is focused on the name itself, rather than any sinister behavior taking place at their meetings. Pliny's investigation of food and ritual points to the accusations of incest and cannibalism usually leveled against mystery cults like Christianity; it was

feared that these cults of initiation kept their ritual acts private because they were shameful, disgusting and dangerous to the well-being of the community. Trajan's response means that Roman governors should focus on the sole charge of Christianity, rather than the additional alleged crimes.⁵ They should also only condemn those who are presently and persistently Christian. Pliny had given the accused the opportunity to recant, requiring a small proof of their change in orientation, and then executed those who stubbornly clung to the cult, heedless of the threat of punishment.⁶ Former Christians and those who denied the charge presented no danger to the state.

The correspondence between Pliny and Trajan points to what was dangerous about Christianity: atheism, here, the rejection of the Graeco-Roman gods. The belief in Christ as sole god defied the positive connection Rome maintained with the pantheon of divine powers and as such acted as a potential catalyst for divine retribution. This atheism had political overtones at a time when the head of the government was himself worshipped as a living god; denying his divinity was at the very least *lèse-majesté*.

During the second century, persecution of the Christians took place usually on a local level, usually as a result of popular agitation in the wake of some sort of crisis. Apparently arguing that the Christians were the source of this disruption, the crowd demanded that the officials take decisive action to resolve the situation.

Eusebius notes that basic premise of Trajan's rescript, i.e. that Christians were not to be sought out. He then discusses the overall effect of the policy to localize persecution of Christians.

Source: Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 3.33:⁷ By this means the imminent threat of persecution was extinguished to some extent, but none the less opportunities remained to those who wished to harm us. Sometimes the populace, sometimes even the local authorities contrived plots against us, so that with no open persecution partial attacks broke out in various provinces and many of the faithful endured martyrdom in various ways.

Christian Denunciation of the Arena

Tertullian provides us with much of the specific reasoning for a Christian stance regarding the arena. In his defense of Christianity, Tertullian launches a counter-offensive against Roman polytheism, questioning the validity of the gods by noting the problematic uses and affiliations of religious symbols in Roman institutions. He frequently makes use of the arena to challenge paganism, referring, here, to the use of gods as characters in the fatal charades of the noon executions and to the arena personnel dressed as Mercury and

Pluto. His implication is that this constitutes disrespect, at the least, but who should respect such sordid characters as these?

Source: Tertullian, *Apology* 15.4–5:⁸ Of course, you are more devout in the seats of the amphitheater where, over human blood and the filth resulting from the tortures inflicted, your gods do their dancing and provide plots and stories for the guilty – except that the guilty, too, often assume the roles of your gods. We once saw Attis, that god from Pessinus, castrated, and a man who was being burned alive played the role of Hercules. Then, too, at the gladiators' midday performance, in the midst of the cruelties of the entertainment, we laughed at Mercury testing the dead with his red-hot iron. We watched Jupiter's brother, too, hammer in hand, dragging away the corpses of the gladiators.

The duty of a Christian is to avoid the taint of spectacle, primarily because of the polytheistic overtones of the shows, but also because the sensationalism of the presentation fosters inappropriate emotional responses, such as rage, desire, and bloodlust. Christians are to remain separate from those institutions of pagan Rome that clash with Christian norms.

Source: Tertullian, *Apology*, 38.4–5:⁹ Likewise, we renounce your public shows just as we do their origins which we know were begotten of superstition, while we are completely aloof from those matters with which they are concerned. Our tongues, our eyes, our ears have nothing to do with the madness of the circus, the shamelessness of the theater, the brutality of the arena, the vanity of the gymnasium. How, then, do we offend you? If we prefer different pleasures, if, in fine, we do not want to be amused, that is our loss – if loss there be – not yours.

Minucius Felix also rejects the polytheistic foundations of the spectacles as well as the emotional impact. Here, he emphasizes the seductive capacities of the shows, their capacity to engage the spectators' feelings with the artifice of performance. The spectator is thus intensely affected, even moved to action, by something that is not real, that is unworthy of such focus.

Source: Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 37.11–12:¹⁰ As a logical result, we, who judge ourselves by our conduct and purity of morals, keep aloof from your wicked amusements, processions, and public shows; we know that they have sprung from your sacred rites, and we condemn their obnoxious seduction. At the chariot races in the circus, who would not be horrified at the frenzy of the brawling populace, or at the fine art of manslaughter in the gladiatorial combats? Nor does raving madness subside in the stage plays, where indecencies are even more luxuriant: at one, a mimic player describes and exhibits ways of adultery;

at another, an effeminate actor arouses feelings of love while he is only playing a role: he vilifies your gods by mimicking their lewd love affairs, their sighs, their hates; feigning grief, he moves you to tears by senseless gestures and motions. Thus, you call for real murder and weep over fictitious ones on the stage.

Some of Tertullian's critique of the arena parallels that found in Seneca, where the passions of the mob act as a corruptive agent on the equanimity and virtue of the individual spectator. The pleasure of the visual stimulation awakens a host of overlapping emotions, such as yearning, aggression, frustration, casting the human spirit into wild turmoil. For Tertullian, such frenzy is the antipathy of the serenity offered by Christian conviction.

Source: Tertullian, *On the Spectacles* 15.2–6:¹¹ God has given us the command both to deal with the Holy Spirit in tranquillity, gentleness, quiet, and peace, inasmuch as, in accordance with the goodness of His nature, He is tender and sensitive, and also not to vex Him by frenzy, bitterness of feeling, anger, and grief. How, then, can the Holy Spirit have anything to do with spectacles? There is no spectacle without violent agitation of the soul. For, where you have pleasure, there also is desire which gives pleasure its savor; where you have desire, there is rivalry which gives desire its savor. And where, in turn, you have rivalry, there also are frenzy and bitterness of feeling and anger and grief and the other effects that spring from them, and, moreover, are incompatible with our moral discipline. For, even if a man enjoys spectacles modestly and soberly, as befits his rank, age, and natural disposition, he cannot go to them without his mind being roused and his soul being stirred by some unspoken agitation. No one ever approaches a pleasure such as this without passion; no one experiences this passion without its damaging effects. These very effects are incitements to passion. On the other hand, if the passion ceases, there is no pleasure, and he who goes where he gains nothing is convicted of foolishness.

Athenagoras, a second-century apologist for Christianity, wrote his *Embassy* as a letter to the emperor Marcus Aurelius around 176–177 CE. He expends some effort defending Christianity as an ethical system, arguing against the allegations of cannibalism and incest and claiming a higher moral ground. Rejection of the arena is part of this claim; he asserts that the audience at an execution is culpable for the death of the criminal.

Source: Athenagoras, *Embassy for the Christians* 35:¹² Who does not reckon among the things of greatest interest the contests of gladiators and wild beasts, especially those which are given by you? But we, deeming that to see a man put to death is much the same as killing him, have abjured such spectacles.

Tertullian also condemns the amphitheater as a noxious means of punishing wrong-doers, because it spreads criminality instead of limiting it. There is always the risk of inflicting fatal punishment upon the innocent, which makes the Roman spectator complicitous in murder. Even for those who are guilty, the actions forced upon them in the arena compound their guilt. The pleasure of the audience, whether it be awakened by a sense of righteous justice or simply arise from the excitement and horror, spreads the infection of crime among the spectators.

Source: Tertullian, *On the Spectacles* 19.1–4:¹³ If we can claim that cruelty, impiety, and brutality are permitted us, let us by all means go to the amphitheater. If we are what people say we are, let us take delight in human blood. It is a good thing when the guilty are punished. Who will deny this but the guilty? Yet it is not becoming for the guiltless to take pleasure in the punishment of another; rather, it befits the guiltless to grieve that a man like himself, has become so guilty that he is treated with such cruelty. And who is my voucher that it is the guilty always who are condemned to the beasts, or whatever punishment, and that it is never inflicted on innocence, too, through the vindictiveness of the judge or the weakness of the defense or the intensity of the torture? How much better it is, then, not to know when the wicked are punished, lest I come to know also when the good are destroyed, provided, of course, that there is savor of good in them. Certain it is that innocent men are sold as gladiators to serve as victims of public pleasure. Even in the case of those who are condemned to the games, what a preposterous idea is it that, in atonement for a smaller offense, they should be driven to the extreme of murder!

Tertullian extends his argument on the audience's complicity in crime: a spectator who would not dream of engaging in mayhem outside the amphitheater is embedded in such activity because of his active participation in the spectacles. Here Tertullian indicts the law-abiding, peaceful citizen who applauds fights to the death; he has vicariously participated in homicide.

Source: Tertullian, *On the Spectacles* 21.3–4:¹⁴ The same man who tries to break up or denounces a quarrel in the streets which has come to fisticuffs will in the stadium applaud fights far more dangerous; and the same man who shudders at the sight of the body of a man who died in accordance with nature's law common to all will in the amphitheater look down with tolerant eyes upon bodies mangled, rent asunder, and smeared with their own blood. What is more, the same man who allegedly comes to the spectacle to show his approval of the punishment for murder will have a reluctant gladiator driven on with lashes and with rods to commit murder; and the same man who wants every more notorious murderer to be cast before the lion will have the staff and cap of liberty granted as a reward to a savage gladiator, while he will demand that

the other man who has been slain be dragged back to feast his eyes upon him, taking delight in scrutinizing close at hand the man he wished killed at a distance – and, if that was not his wish, so much more heartless he!

Tatian's denunciation of the games condemns the sociopolitical institution as a whole: *editor*, performers, spectators, all are murderers. Tatian became the founder of a sternly ascetic sect of Christianity in the last quarter of the second century; some of this asceticism appears in the connection he draws between the eating of meat and the spiritual cannibalism of the *munera*.

Source: Tatian, *To the Greeks* 23:¹⁵ He who is chief among you collects a legion of blood-stained murderers, engaging to maintain them; and these ruffians are sent forth by him, and you assemble at the spectacle to be judges, partly of the wickedness of the adjudicator, and partly of that of the men who engage in the combat. And he who misses the murderous exhibition is grieved, because he was not doomed to be a spectator of wicked and impious and abominable deeds. You slaughter animals for the purpose of eating their flesh, and you purchase men to supply a cannibal banquet for the soul, nourishing it by the most impious bloodshedding. The robber commits murder for the sake of plunder, but the rich man purchases gladiators for the sake of their being killed.

The Arena and Christian Identity

Despite its problematic characteristics, the arena served as a venue for Christian construction of identity and faith. This is due primarily to the strong association between Roman spectacle and the highly visible, if relatively infrequent, executions of Christian martyrs. Claiming the arena as a crucial and positive element of Christian symbolism partly involved inverting Roman assumptions about hierarchy and honor, as demonstrated by spectacle, transforming the social stigma transmitted by the arena into marks of "glory." Much of the Christian "value" in the arena is, however, the reworking of patterns of praise and blame for individual achievement already established in Rome. The celebrated indifference to wounds of early martyrs, for example, finds a match with the behavior of "good" gladiators, as does the eager rushing to meet the beasts. The meaning attributed to these actions is what has been transformed.

For Justin, who would himself be martyred, the fearlessness of Christians in the arena was a demonstration that they were innocent of the "other crimes," e.g. incest and cannibalism, that outsiders associated with Christianity and other mystery religions.

Source: Justin *Apology* 2.12:¹⁶ But I saw that [the Christians] were afraid neither of death, nor of anything usually thought fearful, and I considered it was impossible that they were living in wickedness and libertinism. For what libertine or incontinent person, or one who finds good in the eating of human flesh, could greet death, that it might take away all his lusts, and would not try to prolong by all means his present life and to avoid the notice of the rulers, and not give himself up to be murdered?

Minucius Felix compared the heroism of martyrs in the arena to great heroes celebrated in the legends of Rome's foundation; in so doing he claims a Christian monopoly on virtue in Roman terms. The heroes of Roman tradition were cited as proof of Rome's inherent qualities of dedication and selflessness, which served to justify Rome's political prominence: obviously, Rome deserved to rule because of the moral virtue of the Roman people. Minucius, however, claims that these qualities demonstrated by Christians proved that the Christian god, not mighty Rome, was the true source of liberty, power, and militant victory.

Source: Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 37.1–6:¹⁷ How beautiful a spectacle for god, when a Christian measures his strength with pain; when he is in the jaws of threats and punishments and tortures; when, with a scornful smile, he looks down upon the rattling instruments of death and the grim executioner; when, in the face of kings and princes, he esteems his liberty above all things; when he yields to God alone, whose he is; when he, triumphant victor, defies the very one who has pronounced sentence on him! That man has gained the victory who has obtained that for which he strove. What soldier does not court danger more boldly under the eyes of his general? For, none receives the prize before standing the test. Yet, the general cannot give what he does not own; he cannot prolong life, though he can grant distinction for good service. Besides, the soldier of God neither is forsaken when in pain nor is his life ended by death. Thus, the Christian, though he may seem wretched, cannot be found so. You yourselves extol to the sky men visited by great misfortunes, like Mucius Scaevola, who, after his abortive attempt on the king's life, would have perished among the enemy, had he not sacrificed his right hand. How many of our brethren, without cry of pain, have allowed not only their right hand but their whole body to be scorched and turned to ashes, when it depended entirely on them to gain their release. Am I comparing only men with Mucius or Aquilius or Regulus? Why, even our boys and tender women, fortified against pain by heaven, scoff at crosses and tortures, wild beasts, and all the terrors of punishment. And you, miserable wretches, you do not see that, without reason, no one would undergo punishment of his own accord, or be able to endure the tortures without divine assistance.

In Tertullian, the coming apocalypse and final judgment are specifically imagined as an extraordinary spectacle, held to celebrate the triumph of Christ. The justified Christians will be the audience for a variety of events, fatal charades featuring the righteous punishment of deified emperors, Jupiter, and the persecuting administrators of the Roman empire.

Source: Tertullian, *On the Spectacles* 30.1–2:¹⁸ Moreover, what a spectacle is already at hand – the second coming of the Lord, now no object of doubt, now exalted, now triumphant! What exultation will that be of the angels, what glory of the saints as they rise again! What a kingdom, the kingdom of the just thereafter! What a city, the new Jerusalem! But there are yet other spectacles to come – that day of the Last Judgment with its everlasting issues, unlooked for by the heathen, the object of their derision, when the hoary age of the world and all its generations will be consumed in one fire. What a panorama of spectacle on that day! Which sight shall excite my wonder? Which, my laughter? Where shall I rejoice, where exult – as I see so many and so mighty kings, whose ascent to heaven used to be made known by public announcement, now along with Jupiter himself, along with the very witnesses of their ascent, groaning in the depths of darkness? Governors of provinces, too, who persecuted the name of the Lord, melting in flames fiercer than those they themselves kindled in their rage against the Christians braving them with contempt?

Cyprian was Bishop of Carthage in the mid-third century and was himself caught up in the empire-wide persecutions begun by the emperor Decius. His letter to the martyrs completely recasts the arena by removing it from the historical context entirely. The martyrs here are represented as soldiers in the battle against evil, a battle that has been going on since the days of the Hebrew prophets. Cyprian emphasizes how pleasing the wounds of the martyrs are to the Christian god, who is both the main spectator in the cosmic arena and the internal source of strength for the combatants. The blood of the martyrs was a weapon against hellfire in an arena constructed not by Rome but by the Judeo-Christian deity.

Source: Cyprian, *Letter* 7.2–3, 9:¹⁹ The multitude of those who were present saw with admiration the heavenly contest, the contest of God, the spiritual contest, the battle of Christ, saw that His servants stood with free voice, with unyielding mind, with divine virtue – bare, indeed, of weapons of this world, but believing and armed with the weapons of faith. The tortured stood more bravely than the torturers; and the limbs, beaten and torn as they were, overcame the hooks that beat and tore them. The scourge, often used again and again with all its rage, could not conquer invincible faith, even though the membrane which enclosed the guts were broken, and it was no longer the limbs but the wounds of the servants of God that were being tortured. Blood was flowing which would

quench the blaze of persecution, which would overcome the flames of Gehenna with its glorious gore. Oh, what a spectacle was that to the Lord, how sublime, how great, how acceptable to the eyes of God in the allegiance and devotion of His soldiers! This fight, therefore, predicted of old by the prophets, begun by the Lord, waged by the apostles, Mappalicus promised again to the proconsul . . . he exhibited the fight to which he had pledged himself, and he received the reward which he deserved. I not only beseech but exhort the rest of you, that you all follow that martyr now most blessed, and the other partners of that engagement – soldiers and comrades . . . If the battle call you out, if the day of your contest come, engage bravely, fight with constancy, knowing that you are fighting under the eyes of a present Lord, that you are attaining by the confession of His name to His own glory . . . He only looks on His servants, but He Himself also wrestles in us, Himself is engaged, Himself also in the struggles of our conflict not only crowns, but is crowned.

Martyr Acts

The narratives circulated within the Christian community that celebrated the martyrs offer an intriguing perspective on the arena, written from the viewpoint of those unsympathetic to the Roman power structure. They focus on the impact that condemnation to the arena or to the beasts had on the community of the person condemned. Though the lens of the Christian interpreters has a specific ideological bent, nevertheless it has a distinct take on the relationship between Rome and its subjects at a local level. Martyr Acts capture the judicial procedure in the provinces in the wake of Trajan's rescript. They reconfigure the meaning of the arena, however, claiming martyrdom as a demonstration of Christian authority rather than that of Rome. In doing so, they drew upon Jewish experience of martyrdom under Seleucid authority, when death for one's belief was considered a righteous act and a demonstration of particular holiness. The strong Christian strain of asceticism powered the Martyr Acts as well, referencing its exhortations to disregard the body and the things of this world as distractions from the proper focus on the world to come. Christian tradition could make use of Roman ethical interpretations of the arena as well, both praise of gladiators as moral exemplars and condemnation of the crowd as irrationally carnal. The circulation of the Martyr Acts throughout the Mediterranean consolidated these identity-forming patterns within the group; it also made them part of a vicarious audience to a re-imagined Christian spectacle.

Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, is thought to have been martyred later in the reign of Trajan, not too distant in time from the correspondence between that emperor and Pliny, and thus one of the earlier martyr texts circulating among Christian groups. The existence of these letters suggests the deliberate use by Ignatius of his judicial experience as a teaching opportunity, in which

Ignatius himself interprets the looming execution in accordance with Christian belief. The congregations receiving his letters become vicarious audiences in the arena, who are meant to revisualize the spectacle as affirmation of their convictions instead of confirmation of the Roman structure of power. Imagery of the arena runs throughout Ignatius' letter, as he identifies his struggle in parallel with someone *damnatus ad bestias*. For him, the fight is not just the resistance to the criminalization of Christianity, but resistance to efforts by friends and colleagues to intercede with Roman authorities on his behalf, for a lifting of the sentence.

Source: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.36:²⁰ The story goes that [Ignatius] was sent from Syria to Rome to be eaten by beasts in testimony to Christ. He was taken through Asia under most careful guard, and strengthened by his speech and exhortation the diocese of each city in which he stayed . . . He wrote one letter to the church at Ephesus . . . another to the church at Magnesia on the Meander . . . he also wrote to the church at Rome, and to it he extended the request that they should not deprive him of the hope for which he longed by begging him off from his martyrdom . . . He writes as follows: "From Syria to Rome I am fighting with wild beasts, by land and sea, by night and day, bound to ten 'leopards' (that is, a company of soldiers), and they become worse for kind treatment . . . I long for the beasts that are prepared for me; and I pray that they may be found prompt for me; I will even entice them to devour me promptly; not as has happened to some whom they have not touched from fear; even if they be unwilling of themselves, I will force them to it. Grant me this favor. I know what is expedient for me; now I am beginning to be a disciple. May I envy nothing of things seen or unseen that I may attain to Jesus Christ. Let there come on me fire, and cross, and struggles with wild beasts, cutting, and tearing asunder, rackings of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil, may I but attain to Jesus Christ!"

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, had received one of Ignatius' letters, but scholars agree that some decades lapsed before Polycarp himself was martyred, an event which took place sometime in the 150s. The account circulated after his death has features typical of Martyr Acts, such as the introduction and conclusion that exhort the faithful to become like the martyrs, who are assimilated to Jesus. The courage and stamina of the martyrs are praised, qualities also praised in gladiators by pagan authors. Here, however, these qualities are seen as clear indications of the direct intervention of divinity. Miracles pepper the narrative, as does fulfillment of prophecy, situating the martyrdom as part of the great plan of the Christian god, rather than an assertion of control by Rome over a marginalized group. The interactions between the martyrs and the non-Christians fall into two categories: the frustrated rage of the mob against the imperturbable Christians and the dialogue between the magistrate and the martyr, in which standardized judicial

procedure is made into an articulation of belief by the accused Christian. Notable in this Martyr Act is the prominence of the spectators; as seen above, the audience chants judicial petitions in the stands of the arena, petitions granted by Rome's agents in Smyrna who obediently arrest Polycarp at their demand. The frenzy of the audience, however, is much in line with the condemnations of spectacle mobs pronounced by Seneca and other Roman analysts; here the passion of the crowd is not a moral failing but a tool of cosmic evil.

Source: *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1–3, 9–16:²¹ We are writing to you, dear brothers, the story of the martyrs and of blessed Polycarp who put a stop to the persecution by his own martyrdom as though he were putting a seal upon it . . . Just as the Lord did, he too waited that he might be delivered up, that we might become his imitators . . . Who indeed would not admire the martyrs' nobility, their courage, their love of the Master? For even when they were torn by whips until the very structure of their bodies was laid bare down to the inner veins and arteries, they endured it, making even the bystanders weep for pity. Some indeed attained to such courage that they would utter not a sound or a cry, showing to all of us that in the hour of their torment these noblest of Christ's witnesses were not present in the flesh, or rather that the Lord was there present holding converse with them. Fixing their eyes on the favor of Christ, they despised the tortures of this world, in one hour buying themselves an exemption from the eternal fire . . . The most noble Germanicus gave them encouragement by the perseverance he showed; he even fought manfully with the beasts. The governor tried to persuade him, telling him to spare his young manhood; but he with a show of force dragged the beast on top of him, intending to be freed all the more quickly from this unjust and lawless life. At this then all the mob was astonished at the courage of this pious and devoted race of Christians, and they shouted out: "Away with these atheists! Go and get Polycarp!"

. . . As Polycarp entered the amphitheater²², a voice from heaven said: "*Be strong, Polycarp, and have courage.*"²³ No one saw who was speaking, but those of our people who were present heard the voice.

Then, as he was brought in, a great shout arose when the people heard that it was Polycarp who had been arrested. As he was brought before him, the governor²⁴ asked him: "Are you Polycarp?" And when he admitted he was, the governor tried to persuade him to recant, saying: "Have respect for your age"; (and other similar things that they are accustomed to say); "swear by the Genius of the emperor. Recant. Say, 'Away with the atheists!'"

Polycarp, with a sober countenance, looked at all the mob of lawless pagans who were in the arena, and shaking his fist at them, groaned, looked up to heaven, and said: "Away with the atheists!"

The governor persisted and said: "Swear and I will let you go. Curse Christ!"

But Polycarp answered: "For eighty-six years I have been his servant and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme against my king and savior?"

But the other insisted once again, saying: "Swear by the emperor's Genius!"

He answered: "If you delude yourself into thinking that I will swear by the emperor's Genius, as you say, and if you pretend not to know who I am, listen and I will tell you plainly: I am a Christian. And if you would like to learn the doctrine of Christianity, set aside a day and listen."

The governor said: "Try to move the people."

And Polycarp said: "I should have thought you worthy of such a discussion. For we have been taught to pay respect to the authorities and powers that God has assigned us (for this does not harm our cause). But as for the mob, I do not think they deserve to listen to a speech of defence from me."

The governor said: "I have wild animals, and I shall expose you to them if you do not change your mind."

And he answered: "Go and call for them! Repentance from a better state to one that is worse is impossible for us. But it is good to change from what is wicked to righteousness."

And [the governor] said again to him: "Since you are not afraid of the animals, then I shall have you consumed by fire – unless you change your mind."

But Polycarp answered: "The fire you threaten me with burns merely for a time and is soon extinguished. It is clear you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment and of the judgement that is to come, which awaits the impious. Why then do you hesitate? Come, do what you will."

As he said these and many other words he was filled with a joyful courage; his countenance was filled with grace, and not only did he not collapse in terror at what was said to him, but rather it was the governor that was amazed. He sent his herald into the center of the arena to announce three times: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian."

After the herald had spoken, the entire mob of pagans and Jews from Smyrna shouted out aloud in uncontrollable rage: "Here is the schoolmaster of Asia – the father of the Christians – the destroyer of our gods – the one that teaches the multitude not to sacrifice or do reverence!"

And while they were saying all this they shouted and asked Philip the Asiarch²⁵ to have a lion loosed on Polycarp. But he said that he was not allowed to do this since the days of the *venationes* were past. Next they decided to shout out all together that Polycarp should be burnt alive. For the vision he had seen regarding his pillow had to be fulfilled, when he saw it burning while he was at prayer and he turned and said to his faithful companions: "I am to be burnt alive."

All of this happened with great speed, more quickly than it takes to tell the story: the mob swiftly collected logs and brushwood from workshops and baths, and the Jews (as is their custom) zealously helped them with this. When the fire was prepared, Polycarp took off all his clothing, loosed his belt and even tried to take off his own sandals . . . Straightway then he was attached to the equipment that had been prepared for the fire. When they were on the point of nailing him to it, he said: "Leave me thus. For he who has given me the strength to endure the flames will grant me to remain without flinching in the fire even without the firmness you will give me by using nails."

They did not nail him down then, but simply bound him; and as he put his hands behind his back, he was bound like a noble ram chosen for an oblation from a great flock, a holocaust prepared and made acceptable to God . . . A great flame blazed up and those of us to whom it was given to see beheld a miracle. And we have been preserved to recount the story to others. For the flames, bellying out like a ship's sail in the wind, formed into the shape of a vault and thus surrounded the martyr's body as with a wall. And he was within it not as burning flesh but rather as bread being baked, or like gold and silver being purified in a smelting-furnace. And from it we perceived such a delightful fragrance as though it were smoking incense or some other costly perfume.

The Martyrs of Lyons met their end in 177 CE, the same year that the emperor Marcus Aurelius issued the *senatus consultum* on the reduction of costs for arena performers. Like the account of Polycarp's end, this narrative claims to be a letter circulated by the Christian congregations in Gaul for the benefit of their co-religionists. The congregation was reeling from what seems to have been a mass martyrdom of unusually large proportions, directed specifically against a group of Christians recently emigrated from the eastern Mediterranean; one of their number, a Pergamene named Attalus, seems to have been particularly disliked by some of the locals. At any rate, these Christians may have been especially visible in the community, not yet assimilated to local customs. Some of the typical features are present in this account: the role of the demon-inspired crowd in promoting the persecution and the spectacle as a manifestation of the power of the divine. There is much less emphasis on the trial as a setting for the accused to declare the truth of his belief; instead, the narrative spends much time on torture in prison, intended by the Roman authorities to make the Christians knuckle under to religious conformity. Torture was regularly applied to witnesses in Roman judicial procedure, as it was believed to elicit truth by pushing the body to the limits of endurance; here, torture has that effect among the Christians, although the "truth" being witnessed to here is not held as such by the officials. Particulars of administrative procedure prolong the executions into two phases and may reflect a genuine reluctance on the part of the praefect to submit to the will of the crowd. Present also is an investigation into allegations of cannibalism, not unlike the inquiry launched years earlier by Pliny in Bithynia. The focus on particular martyrs, such as the female slave Blandina, particularly serves as a striking example for the reader, who is not meant to feel horror and pity for her wounds: these are beautiful, badges of honor. The weak female body of a lowly slave raised to such spiritual strength heightens the lesson to be learned by the contemporary Christian. The surprising contrast recalls pagan praise for gladiators, whose shameful bodies yet are able to reveal nobility of character.

Source: *The Martyrs of Lyons* 1.4–7, 12–15, 18–19, 33–35, 37–42, 47, 53–56.²⁶ The intensity of our afflictions here, the deep hatred of the pagans for the saints, and the magnitude of the blessed martyrs' sufferings, we are incapable of describing in detail; indeed, it would be impossible to put it down in writing. The Adversary swooped down with full force, in this way anticipating his final coming which is sure to come. He went to all lengths to train and prepare his minions against God's servants . . . they heroically endured all that the people en masse heaped on them: abuse, blows, dragging, despoiling, stoning, imprisonment, and all that an enraged mob is likely to inflict on their most hated enemies. They were dragged into the forum and interrogated before the entire populace by the tribune and the city council. When they confessed, they were locked up in prison to await the arrival of the governor . . . But the arrests continued, and every day the finest were taken to fill up the number of the martyrs. The result was that they collected all the most zealous Christians of the two communities and those on whom everything most depended.

Arrested too were some of our servants who were pagans. For the prefect had publicly ordered a full-scale investigation of all Christians. This the servants, ensnared by Satan and terrified of the tortures they saw the faithful suffering, at the soldiers' instigation falsely accused the Christians of Oedipean marriages and dinners in the manner of Thyestes²⁷, and many other things that it would be sinful for us even to think of or speak about – indeed, one doubts whether such things ever happened among men at all. But these stories got about and all the people raged against us, so that even those whose attitude had been moderate before because of their friendship with us now became greatly angry and gnashed their teeth at us. Thus the Lord's saying was proved true: *The time is coming when whoever kills you will think he is doing a service to God.*²⁸

All of us were in terror; and Blandina's earthly mistress, who was herself among the martyrs in the conflict, was in agony lest because of her bodily weakness she would not be able to make a bold confession of her faith. Yet Blandina was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way from dawn to dusk were weary and exhausted. They themselves admitted that they were beaten, that there was nothing further they could do to her, and they were surprised that she was still breathing, for her entire body was broken and torn. They testified that even one kind of torture was enough to release her soul, let alone the many they applied with such intensity. Instead, this blessed woman like a noble athlete got renewed strength with her confession of faith: her admission, "I am a Christian; we do nothing to be ashamed of," brought her refreshment, rest, and insensibility to her present pain . . .

At the first arrest those who denied their faith were locked up with the others and shared their privations; at this point they had gained nothing by their denial. On the other hand, those who admitted what they were were detained as Christians, but no other charge was preferred against them. The others, however, were held on the charge of being murderers and criminals²⁹ and were punished twice as much as the rest. . . . The former advanced joyously, with majesty and great beauty mingled on their countenances, so that even their

chains were worn on them like some lovely ornament . . . but the others were dejected, downcast . . . the pagans taunted them . . . their resistance was stiffened and those who were arrested straightway confessed their faith without one thought for the Devil's suggestions . . . Maturus, then, Sanctus, Blandina, and Attalus were led into the amphitheater to be exposed to the beasts and to give a public spectacle of the pagans' inhumanity, for a day of gladiatorial games was expressly arranged for our sake. Once again in the amphitheater Maturus and Sanctus went through the whole gamut of suffering as though they had never experienced it at all before – or rather as though they had defeated their opponent in many contests and were now fighting for the victor's crown. Once again they ran the gauntlet of whips (according to the local custom), the mauling by animals, and anything else that the mad mob from different places shouted for and demanded. And to crown all they were put in the iron seat, from which their roasted flesh filled the audience with its savour. But that was not enough for them, and they continued to rage in their desire to break down the martyrs' resistance. But from Sanctus all they would hear was what he had repeated from the beginning, his confession of faith.

Though their spirits endured much throughout the long contests, they were in the end sacrificed, after being made all the day long a spectacle to the world to replace the varied entertainment of the gladiatorial combat. Blandina was hung on a post and exposed as bait for the wild animals that were let loose on her. She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross, and by her fervent prayer she aroused intense enthusiasm in those who were undergoing their ordeal, for in their torment with their physical eyes they saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them, that he might convince all who believe in him that all who suffer for Christ's glory will have eternal fellowship in the living God.

But none of the animals had touched her, and so she was taken down from the post and brought back to the prison to be preserved for another ordeal . . . tiny, weak, and insignificant as she was she would give inspiration to her brothers, for she had put on Christ, that mighty and invincible athlete, and had overcome the Adversary in many contests, and through her conflict had won the crown of immortality.

Now it was the emperor's order that these should be beheaded, but that those who had denied their faith should be released. Thus at the outset of the festival³⁰ here (and it was one that was crowded with people who had come to it from all countries) the governor brought the blessed martyrs before the tribunal to make a show and a spectacle of them before the crowds. This was the reason why he had them questioned once again, and all those who were thought to possess Roman citizenship he had beheaded; the rest he condemned to the animals. . . .

Finally, on the last day of the gladiatorial games, they brought back Blandina again, this time with a boy of fifteen named Ponticus. Every day they had been brought in to watch the torture of the others, while attempts were made to force them to swear by the pagan idols. And because they persevered and condemned their persecutors, the crowd grew angry with them, so that they had little pity

for the child's age and no respect for the woman. Instead, they subjected them to every atrocity and led them through every torture in turn, constantly trying to force them to swear, but to no avail.

Ponticus, after being encouraged by his sister in Christ so that even the pagans realized that she was urging him on and strengthening him, and after nobly enduring every torment, gave up his spirit. The blessed Blandina was last of all: like a noble mother encouraging her children, she sent them before her in triumph to the King, and then, after duplicating in her own body all her children's sufferings, she hastened to rejoin them, rejoicing and glorying in her death as though she had been invited to a bridal banquet instead of being a victim of the beasts. After the scourges, the animals, and the hot griddle, she was at last tossed into a net and exposed to a bull. After being tossed a good deal by the animal, she no longer perceived what was happening because of the hope and possession of all she believed in and because of her intimacy with Christ. Thus she too was offered in sacrifice, while the pagans themselves admitted that no woman had ever suffered so much in their experience.

Perpetua is one of the best-known among early Christian martyrs, due to the wide circulation of the account of her trial and execution in 202 CE at Carthage. It is also valuable in that so much of it comes from Perpetua herself, written or dictated while she was in prison; little female-authored material survives from the ancient Mediterranean. This also offers us a first-person perspective on the experience of martyrdom and the anticipation of the arena. The Act follows the pattern of arrest, trial and spectacular execution, with sprinklings of the typical Christian interpretation of these events. Some distinctive features should be noted: first, the strong presence of Perpetua's family, especially her father, who is much more an opposing force to her confession of belief than the Roman authorities. This reflects the power of the *paterfamilias* in Roman society, the fact that, as a woman, Perpetua was much more likely to have her daily choices circumscribed by her father than by Roman administrators. Her conversion is a rebellion more against the domestic power structure than the emperor; she has redirected her family loyalties toward the family of Christian believers. The removal of her baby becomes a small miracle, demonstrating the worthiness of her choice. Unusual here as well is the sequence of elaborate visions Perpetua had in prison, which become expressions of her sanctity and power as a confessor-martyr. The form these visions take is interesting; near-cinematic in their imagery, they present tangible (and spectacle-oriented) metaphors for sanctity and they feature an extremely dynamic heroine who transcends gender boundaries and works for the salvation of herself and those around her. Her interactions with the military tribune demonstrate her social power as well; despite the fact that she has been condemned and, by Roman law, is now *serva poenae*, she argues for better treatment and gets it.

Source: *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* 2, 4–6, 10, 16–18, 20–21.³¹

A number of young catechumens were arrested, Revocatus and his fellow slave Felicitas, Saturninus and Secundulus, and with them Vibia Perpetua, a newly married woman of good family and upbringing. Her mother and father were still alive and one of her two brothers was a catechumen like herself and she had an infant son at the breast. She was about twenty-two years old. From this point she herself told the whole story of her martyrdom and left an account written by her own hand and with her interpretation.

... Then my brother said to me: "Dear sister, you are greatly privileged; surely you might ask for a vision to be shown whether you are to suffer or to be freed." And I faithfully promised that I would, for I knew that I could speak with the Lord, whose great blessings I had come to experience. And so I said: "I shall tell you tomorrow." Then I made my request and this is the vision I had.

I saw a ladder of tremendous height made of bronze, reaching all the way to the heavens, but it was so narrow that only one person could climb up at a time. To the sides of the ladder were attached all sorts of metal weapons: there were *gladii*, *lanceae*, hooks, *machaerae*, and spikes; so that if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled and his flesh would adhere to the weapons.

At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them into not climbing. And Saturus was the first to go up, he who was later to hand himself over of his own accord. He had been the builder of our strength, although he was not present when we were arrested. And he arrived at the top of the staircase and he looked back and said to me: "Perpetua, I am waiting for you. But watch out and don't let the dragon bite you."

"He will not harm me," I said, "in the name of Jesus Christ."

Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Then using his head as my first step, I stepped on it and climbed up.

Then I saw an immense garden, and in it a grey-haired man sat in the clothes of a shepherd, a tall man, milking sheep. And standing around him were many thousands of people dressed in white. He raised his head, looked at me, and said: "I am glad you have come, my child."

He called me over to him and gave me, as it were, a mouthful of the milk he was drawing; and I took it into my cupped hands and drank it. And all those who stood around said: "Amen!" At the sound of this word I came to, with the taste of something sweet still in my mouth. I at once told this to my brother, and we realized that we would have to suffer, and that from now on we would no longer have any hope in this life.

A few days later a rumor made the rounds that we would be given a hearing. My father also arrived from the city, worn out with worry, and he came up to me in order to persuade me, saying: "Daughter, have pity on my gray head, have pity on your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have raised you with these hands to this prime of life, if I have favored you over your brothers; do not abandon me to the reproach of men. Think of your brothers,

think of your mother and your aunt, think of your son, who will not be able to live after your death. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us! None of us will ever be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you."

This was the way my father spoke out of family feeling for me, kissing my hands and throwing himself at my feet, and, weeping, he called on me now not as his daughter but as a woman. I was sorry for my father's sake, because he alone of all my kin would be unhappy to see me suffer.

I tried to comfort him, saying "It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills; for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power."

And he left me in great sorrow.

One day while we were eating breakfast we were suddenly taken off for a hearing. We arrived at the forum, and immediately the rumor went around the neighborhood of the forum and a huge crowd gathered. We walked up to the prisoner's dock. All the others when questioned confessed. Then, when it came my turn, my father appeared with my son and dragged me down from the step saying, "Make the sacrifice! Have pity on your baby!"

Hilarius the procurator, who as the successor to the late proconsul Minucius Timinianus had received his judicial powers, said to me: "Have pity on your father's gray head; have pity on your baby son. Make the sacrifice for the health of the emperors."

"I won't do it," I responded.

"Are you a Christian?" said Hilarius.

"I am a Christian," I said.

And when my father continued trying to persuade me, Hilarius ordered him to be thrown down and beaten with a stick, and I felt sorry for my father, as if I had been beaten. I felt sorry for his wretched old age.

Then Hilarius passed sentence on all of us; we were condemned to the beasts, and we returned to prison happily. But my baby had gotten used to being nursed at the breast and to staying with me in prison. So I sent the deacon Pomponius immediately to my father to ask for the baby. But father refused to give me the baby. And as God willed, the baby had no further desire for the breast nor did I suffer from any anxiety for my child and any discomfort in my breasts.

The day before we were to fight with the beasts I saw the following vision: Pomponius the deacon came to the prison gates and began to knock violently. I went out and opened the gate for him. He was dressed in an unbelted white tunic, wearing elaborate sandals. And he said to me: "Perpetua, we are waiting for you; come."

Then he took my hand and we began to walk through rough and broken country. At last we came to the amphitheater out of breath, and he led me into the center of the arena and said to me: "Do not be afraid. I am here with you and struggle alongside you." And he left.

I looked at the huge crowd who watched in astonishment. I was surprised that no beasts were let loose on me; for I knew that I was condemned to die by the beasts. Then out came an Egyptian to fight against me, of vicious appearance, with his supporting fighters. And some handsome young men came up to me

as my supporters. My clothes were stripped off and I was made into a man. My supporters began to rub me down with oil, as they do before a contest. Then I saw the Egyptian on the other side rolling in the dust. Next a man of amazing size came out, so large that he rose above the top of the amphitheater. He was dressed in a beltless purple tunic with two stripes, one on either side, running down the middle of his chest. He wore sandals that were extravagantly made of gold and silver, and carried a rod like a *lanista* and a green branch on which there were golden apples. And he asked for silence and said "This Egyptian, if he defeats her, will kill her with the sword. But she, if she defeats him, will receive this branch." Then he went out.

We drew close to one another and began to let loose with punches. He wanted to get hold of my feet, but I kept kicking him in the face with my heels. Then I was raised up into the air and I began to strike him without as it were touching the ground. Then when I noticed there was a lull, I put my two hands together, joining the fingers of one with the other and I grabbed his head. He fell onto his face and I stepped on his head.

The crowd began to shout and my seconds to sing psalms. Then I walked up to the *lanista* and took the branch. He kissed me and said to me: "Daughter, peace be with you." And I began to walk in glory to the Gates of Life. And I woke up. And I realized it was not against beasts but against the devil that I would be fighting, but I knew the victory would be mine. So much for what I did up until the eve of the contest . . . [Perpetua's first-person account ends here; the story of what happened in the arena is given by the witness-editor of the Martyr Act.³²]

. . . The military tribune had treated them with extraordinary severity because, due to the warnings of certain very foolish people, he became afraid that they would be spirited out of the prison by magical incantations. Perpetua spoke to him directly. "Why can you not even allow us to refresh ourselves properly? For we are the most distinguished of the condemned prisoners, as we belong to Caesar, and will fight on his birthday. Would it not be to your credit if we were brought forth on the day in a healthier condition?" The tribune was disturbed and turned red. And so he gave the order that they were to be treated more humanely . . .

On the day before, when they had their last meal, which is called the free banquet, they celebrated not a free banquet but the love feast.³³ They spoke to the populace with the same steadfastness, warned them of God's judgment, stressing the joy they would have in their suffering, and ridiculing the curiosity of those who came to see them . . .

The day of their victory dawned, and they processed from the prison into the amphitheater happily as if they were going into heaven, with calm faces, trembling with joy not fear. Perpetua followed with bright face and calm step, as the wife of Christ, as the darling of God, putting down everyone's stare with her own intense gaze. With them also was Felicitas, glad that she had safely given birth so that now she could fight the beasts, going from one bloodbath to another, from the midwife to the *retiarius*, ready to wash after childbirth with a second baptism.

They were then led up to the gates and were forced to put on outfits, clothing of the priests of Saturn for the men, of the priestesses of Ceres for the women. But the noble Perpetua strenuously resisted this to the end.

She said: "We came to this of our own free will, that our freedom should not be violated. We agreed to pledge our lives in order not to do such a thing. We agreed upon this with you."

Even injustice recognized justice. The military tribune agreed. They were to be brought into the arena just as they were. Perpetua then began to sing a psalm: she was already stepping on the head of the Egyptian. Revocatus, Saturninus, and Saturus began to give dire warnings to the crowd of spectators. Then when they came within sight of Hilarianus, they began to say with motions and gestures to Hilarianus: "You have condemned us, but God will condemn you," they were saying. At this, the crowd became enraged and demanded that they be beaten with whips by a group of *venatores*. And they were happy at this, that they be able to copy the sufferings of the Lord. . . .

For the young women, however, the devil had prepared a ferocious cow. This was an unusual animal, but it was chosen so that their sex might be matched with that of the beast.³⁴ So they were stripped naked, placed in nets and brought out. The crowd was horrified³⁵ when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other had recently given birth and had breasts dripping milk. And so they recalled them and dressed them in unbelted tunics. First Perpetua was thrown by the cow and fell on her back. And when she sat up, she pulled down the tunic that had been torn on the side to cover up her thigh, more mindful of her modesty than of her pain. Then she asked for a pin to fasten her disordered hair: for it was not appropriate that a martyr die with dishevelled hair, lest she seem to be in mourning at the moment of her glory. Then she got up and when she saw that Felicitas had been trampled, she went over to her and gave her a hand and lifted her up. Then the two stood side by side. But the cruelty of the audience was by now appeased, so they were called back through the Gates of Life. There Perpetua was stopped by a certain catechumen named Rusticus who at that time was keeping close to her, and she woke up as if from sleep, so intensely was she in spirit and in ecstasy, and she began to look around her and to the amazement of all said: "When are we going to be thrown to that cow or whatever?" and when she heard that it had already happened, she refused to believe it until she noticed the marks of her rough experience on her body and her dress. Then she called for her brother and that catechumen and addressed them, saying "Stand fast in the faith and all love one another and do not be scandalized by our suffering."

. . . And so the martyrs got up and went to the place the crowd wanted them to go to, and kissing one another they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual of peace. The others took the sword in silence and without moving. . . Perpetua, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone and then took the trembling hand of the novice gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be killed unless she herself were willing.

Fructuosus, Bishop of Tarragona, was executed in 259 CE. The context here is the first empire-wide persecution, originally launched by the emperor Decius. In 249, he demanded that all residents of the empire offer sacrifice to the gods of Rome, a vigorous effort to address the system-wide problems using a traditional solution: seek divine help. Furthermore, everyone needed a *libellus* or ticket affirming that they had done their bit for the empire. Christians were unable to fulfill this requirement and a number, who could not or would not evade enforcement, were imprisoned and executed. In 257, five or so emperors later, the emperor Valerian called for the arrest of church hierarchy and the enforcement of sacrifice, and then for the execution of persistent clerics, along with that of resistant Christian elite converts, whose property was also to be confiscated. The passage of time has seen the expansion of Christianity and has affected the Martyr Act's composition. Here, the arrest and execution of Fructuosus and his companions is not demanded by a local mob, but results from imperial decree. There is no hostile crowd; even the governor's household is filled with Christians and Christian sympathizers. The trial section of the Act is fairly perfunctory, as is the description of the execution in the amphitheater, in which Fructuosus declares his duty to provide an example to the whole Christian community. This is, however, a fairly inarticulate example; presumably the audience for the Martyr Act could supply details from tradition. There is an allusion to "the usual miracles"; this reminder of Christian tradition would also recall more elaborate narratives of the manifestation of divinity called forth by martyrdom. A more imagistic version of Fructuosus' miracle is depicted by Prudentius, writing some years after the event. Prudentius carefully supplies a manic governor and a frenzied demonic crowd.

Source: *Passion of the Holy Martyrs Bishop Fructuosus and his Deacons, Augurius and Eulogius* 2–3; 5, 7:³⁶ The governor Aemilianus said: "Bring in the bishop Fructuosus, Augurius and Eulogius." A court official said, "They are present."

The governor Aemilianus said to Fructuosus: "Were you aware of the emperors' orders?"

Fructuosus said: "I do not know their orders. I am a Christian."

The governor Aemilianus said: "They have ordered you to worship the gods."

Fructuosus said: "I worship the one God who has made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them."³⁷

The governor Aemilianus said: "Do you know that the gods exist?"

"No, I do not," said Fructuosus.

Aemilianus said: "You will know later."

Fructuosus looked up to the Lord and began to pray within himself. . . .

Aemilianus the governor said to Fructuosus: "You are a bishop?"

"I am," said Fructuosus.

"You were," said Aemilianus. And he sentenced them to be burnt alive.

As Bishop Fructuosus was being taken to the amphitheater with his deacons, the people began to sympathize with him, for he was much beloved of pagans

and Christians alike. For he was all that the Holy Spirit, through Paul, “the vessel of election”³⁸ and “the teacher of the Gentiles”³⁹, declared that a bishop should be. For this reason his brothers, who knew that he was going on to such great glory, were happy rather than sad.

. . . When he arrived at the amphitheater, he was approached by one of his readers named Augustalis, who begged him with tears that he might remove his shoes for him. The blessed martyr replied: “No, let it go, my son. I shall remove my own sandals in courage and joy, certain of the Lord’s promises.” Then, after he had removed his sandals, a fellow soldier and Christian came up named Felix, who grasped his right hand and begged him to remember him. The holy bishop Fructuosus answered him in a loud voice so that all could hear: “I must bear in mind the entire Catholic Church spread abroad in the world from East to West.” . . . After this the usual miracles of the Lord were not lacking. Babylas and Mygdonius, two of our brethren in the household of the governor Aemilianus, saw the heavens open, and this they also revealed to Aemilianus’ daughter, their mistress according to the flesh: there was the saintly bishop Fructuosus together with his deacons rising crowned up to heaven, with the stakes to which they had been bound still intact. They summoned Aemilianus and said: “Come and see how those whom you have condemned to death today have been restored to heaven and to their hopes.” But when Aemilianus came, he was not worthy to behold them. . . . Ah, blessed martyrs, who were tested in the fire like precious gold, clad in the *lorica* of faith and the *galea* of salvation, crowned with a diadem and a “crown that does not fade”⁴⁰ because they trod underfoot the Devil’s head!

Prudentius’ fourth-century paean to the revered martyrs concentrates especially on those from his native Spain. His version of Fructuosus’ martyrdom ratchets up the emotional ambience quite a bit in comparison to the earlier martyr act, making the contrast between Christian martyrs and the pagan persecutors a stark one. The Romans rave and thirst for the blood of beasts and men and the Christians eagerly escape from the body’s prison into the eternal light.

Source: Prudentius, *Book of the Crowned* 6.49–50, 61–72:⁴¹ Too mad with passion to defer or check his wrath, [the judge] appoints that they shall be burned with cruel fire. They, rejoicing, bid the throng not weep . . . By this time they were entering a place enclosed by tiers of seats in a circle, where frenzied crowds attend and are drunk with much blood of wild beasts, when the din rises from the bloody shows, and as the gladiator, whose life is held cheap, falls under the stroke of the stark sword there is a roar of delight. Here the black official, bidden to make ready the fiery torture on a blazing pyre, had laid the topmost brands on the pile which, by destroying the bodies condemned to the flames, was to break open the prison cell and set free from it the souls which were burning with love of the light.

Christian Rome and the Arena

By the time of Augustine, Christianity had become an officially sponsored religion of the Roman state. The continuation of blood spectacle still made the question of Christians at the games relevant. Here, Augustine reiterates the connection between the shows and polytheism, referring to the traditional pantheon as “demons.” The performers in the spectacles, he claims, are actively worshipping the old gods in their performances; the gods are likewise pleased by the marginalized existence of the performers. The terms of the critique have been shifted somewhat; the institution of the spectacles is incongruous in an increasingly Christianized society.

Source: Augustine, *Sermons* 198.3:⁴² For such demons are pleased with misleading songs, with worthless shows, with the varied foulness of the theatre, with the frenzy of the games, with the cruelty of the amphitheatre, with the violent contests of those who undertake strife and controversy provocative even of hostility in their support of noxious characters, for instance, of an actor in a mime, a play, or a pantomime, of a charioteer, or of a *venator*. By acting in this way they, as it were, offer incense to the demons within their hearts. For the deceptive spirits rejoice in seduction; they feast upon the evil customs and the notoriously vile life of those whom they have misled and entrapped.

Prudentius wrote in the late fourth and fifth centuries CE, like Augustine at a time when the emperors typically played an active role in the official promotion of Christianity. He draws the explicit connection between the deaths of gladiators and pagan sacrifice, claiming that a variety of chthonic deities are propitiated by blood spectacle, and questions the state support of rituals to please infernal gods.

Source: Prudentius, *Against Symmachus* 1.379–392:⁴³ Look at the crime-stained offerings to frightful Dis, to whom is sacrificed the gladiator laid low on the ill-starred arena, a victim offered to Phlegethon in misconceived expiation for Rome. For what means that senseless show with its exhibition of sinful skill, the killing of young men, the pleasure fed on blood, the deathly dust that ever enshrouds the spectators, the grim sight of the parade in the amphitheatre? Why, Charon by the murder of these poor wretches receives offerings that pay for his services as guide, and is propitiated by a crime in the name of religion. Such are the delights of the Jupiter of the dead, such the acts in which the ruler of dark Avernus finds content and refreshment. Is it not shameful that a strong imperial nation thinks it needful to offer such sacrifices for its country's welfare and seeks the help of religion from the vaults of hell?

The ambience of the arena retained its power for Christian-era writers. Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, roughly translated as *Spiritual Battle*, makes extensive use of arena imagery to present the cosmic battle between good and evil as combats of pairs in a metaphysical amphitheater. The poet thus appropriates a powerful symbol of Roman authority for the purpose of asserting the eventual victory of Christianity. In *Psychomachia*, female virtues, whose appearance and motivations match those of celebrated Christian martyrs, fight against pagan "vices" or rather pagan customs that a newly Christian Rome must now jettison. These are combats *sine missione*, with much detail on the defeat of the opponents.

Source: Prudentius, *Psychomachia* 21–37:⁴⁴ Faith first takes the field to face the doubtful chances of battle, her rough dress disordered, her shoulders bare, her hair untrimmed, her arms exposed; for the sudden glow of ambition, burning for new battles, takes no thought to strap on weapons or armor, but trusting in a brave heart and unprotected limbs challenges the dangers of furious war in order to break them down. Behold first Reverence to the Old Gods dares to match her strength against Faith's challenge and strike at her. But she, rising higher, strikes her opponent's head down, its brows bound with fillets, and pushes to the dust the mouth sated with the blood of beasts and tramples underfoot the eyes, squeezing them out in death. The throat is choked and the scant breath confined by the blocking of its passage and long gasps make a hard and agonizing death. The conquering legion exults, which Queen Faith had assembled from a thousand martyrs and inspired against the enemy.

A strong element of the fatal charade's mortal irony infuses the death of Luxuria in Prudentius' poem, as the essence of self-indulgence is killed in a grotesque parody of self-consumption. Luxury is an *essedaria*, brought down by Sobrietas or Self-Control.

Source: Prudentius, *Psychomachia* 412–429:⁴⁵ The driver, leaning backwards and pulling back on the reins, nevertheless is carried along, her dripping hair fouled with dust. And then [Luxuria] is thrown out and the spinning wheels tangle the driver, for she falls forward under the axle and with her mangled body slows the chariot down. Sobrietas gives her the death blow as she lies there, hurling at her a great stone from the rock . . . to smash the breath-passage in the middle of the face . . . the teeth within are loosened, the gullet cut, and the mangled tongue fills it with bloody fragments. Her gorge rises at the strange meal; gulping down the pulped bones she spews up again the lumps she swallowed. "Drink now your own blood, after the many winecups," says the virgin [Sobrietas], upbraiding her. "Let these be your grim morsels, in place of the excessive sweets you enjoyed in time past."

The allure of the spectacles was present for the Christianized audience still; Prudentius capitalized on its powerful combination of blood, excitement and horror in his depiction of the battle between good and evil. Augustine relays the immediacy of the arena's power in a famous story about his student, Alypius, whose Christian convictions did not render him "safe" against the compelling pull of the spectacles. Here, Augustine echoes the misgivings about the impact of the crowd that had been expressed earlier by Seneca in a polytheist context.

Source: Augustine, *Confessions* 7.8:⁴⁶ But there was no abandoning of the worldly career which his parents were always talking to him about. He had gone to Rome before me in order to study the law and in Rome he had been quite swept away, incredibly and with a most incredible passion, by the gladiatorial shows. He was opposed to such things and detested them; but he happened to meet some of his friends and fellow pupils on their way back from dinner, and they, in spite of his protests and his vigorous resistance, used a friendly kind of violence and forced him to go along with them to the amphitheater on a day when one of these cruel and bloody shows was being presented. As he went, he said to them: "You can drag my body there, but don't imagine that you can make me turn my eyes or give my mind to the show. Though there, I shall not be there, and so I shall have the better both of you and of the show."

After hearing this his friends were all the keener to bring him along with them. No doubt they wanted to see whether he could actually do this or not. So they came to the arena and took the seats which they could find. The whole place was seething with savage enthusiasm, but he shut the doors of his eyes and forbade his soul to go out into a scene of such evil. If only he could have blocked up his ears too! For in the course of the fight some man fell; there was a great roar from the whole mass of spectators which fell upon his ears; he was overcome by curiosity and opened his eyes, feeling perfectly prepared to treat whatever he might see with scorn and to rise above it. But he then received in his soul a worse wound than that man, whom he had wanted to see, had received in his body. His own fall was more wretched than that of the gladiator which had caused all that shouting which had entered his ears and unlocked his eyes and made an opening for the thrust which was to overthrow his soul – a soul that had been reckless rather than strong and was all the weaker because it had trusted in itself when it ought to have trusted in you. He saw the blood and he gulped down savagery. Far from turning away, he fixed his eyes on it. Without knowing what was happening, he drank in madness, he was delighted with the guilty contest, drunk with the lust of blood. He was no longer the man who had come there but was one of the crowd to which he had come, a true companion of those who had brought him. There is no more to be said. He looked, he shouted, he raved with excitement; he took away with him a madness which would goad him to come back again, and he would not only come with those who first got him there; he would go ahead of them and he would drag others with him.