

Emperor Decius' 249 CE Edict Commanding Sacrifice to the Gods.

“What factors may have influenced Emperor Decius to issue his 249 CE Edict compelling an Empire-wide Sacrifice to the gods?”

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Submitted: 23 April 2019

Resubmitted with corrections: 15 July 2019

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Summary

A terrible choice faced Christian Romans in 249 C.E: offer sacrifice to the gods, considered an anathema, or be martyred, as some were, but many more succumbed and sacrificed. Decius has left us no record of his reasons. The only extant sources are either Christian or sympathetic, and they say that he was directly targeting Christians because he hated his predecessor Philip, who was believed to have been a Christian.

Historians have challenged this view over the last hundred years. Since the 1923 initial publication of 41 papyrus *libelli* (certificates of sacrifice), academia has debated this topic and shed new light on Decius' possible reasons. This was a watershed in the history of anti-Christian persecution. Prior to Decius' Edict, religion in the empire was based on local cults which were now weakened. The certificate that was required as proof of sacrifice was an innovation, moreover the Egyptian papyri are dated to five months after the first arrests elsewhere.

After assessing the authenticity of the extant sources, comparing these with the *libelli* and with what can be deduced about Decius himself, from history and coinage, I trace the arguments from modern scholarship to arrive at four assessable hypotheses. The edict was: a) anti-Christian persecution; b) sacrifices to avert danger; c) sacrifices for Decius' accession as Emperor; or d) A re-celebration of Rome's Millennium.

I concluded that it is most likely that Decius' edict was a stipulation of the correct way for his subjects to pray to the gods to ensure safety and security for his dynasty and the empire. It was a grand Accession Ceremony. It is also possible that Decius was motivated to include a re-celebration of Rome's Millennium in the face of fearful portents. It was much less likely that Decius was focussed on the Christians at all. However, the recalcitrance of disobedient Christians under Decius probably contributed to the later fiercer persecutions of Valerian and Diocletian.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Date:

Acknowledgements

I wish to heartily acknowledge and express my indebtedness to my supervisor Associate Professor Paul McKechnie for his conscientious and erudite guidance of this thesis, his vast knowledge of Roman history and his constant encouragement. I also wish to deeply thank Professor Emerita Alanna Nobbs for her helpful comments on this research and her unfailing support and encouragement of me during my many enjoyable years as a part-time student in Ancient History at Macquarie. I have always been impressed by the cheerful assistance given to me by the Library staff.

My friends have prayed for me during these years of study. I would like to sincerely thank them, but, above all, I do thank the One who answers prayer.

Introduction

A terrible choice faced Christians under Roman rule in 249 C.E. (i.e. Roman Christians): offer sacrifice to the gods, which was considered an anathema, or face martyrdom. As inheritors of Jewish monotheism, Christians believe that there is one God, and that the worship of all other gods and idols is forbidden.¹ Instructions from Church leaders to new believers from non-Jewish backgrounds were limited to four prohibitions: "...abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood."² The Jews were traditionally exempted from pagan practices because they were an ancient people,³ but Christianity was a new cult and its adherents had earned the reputation of being recalcitrant. Pliny, governor of Bithynia, knew that Christians would not sacrifice to the gods, and in a letter to emperor Trajan about 112 wrote that their "...stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished."⁴

In 249 the new Roman Emperor Decius issued a decree that all inhabitants of the empire should sacrifice to the gods. Moreover, everyone had to procure a certificate (*libellus*) to prove that they had complied with his order. This was a remarkable innovation, and many Roman Christians were martyred, although probably not as many as has been claimed.⁵ Many more succumbed and either sacrificed or bought the *libelli* from officials without sacrificing,⁶ or went into hiding. Moreover, the *libelli* contained the statement by the one who was offering sacrifice that: "I have always and without interruption sacrificed and poured libation to the gods."⁷

Decius probably gave out his edict between September and December 249.⁸ The 3rd January was the day for a traditional oath of allegiance by the "...senate, religious societies, civil servants and army...", but this date was fixed by tradition,⁹ whereas Decius' edict allowed for a wide variety of dates for local implementations. Selinger writes that habitually, when a new emperor was

¹ *Exodus*, 20, 1 – 4.

² *Acts*, 15. 20.

³ G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?", eds. Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom and Orthodoxy*, Oxford, 2006, p. 135.

⁴ Pliny, *Letters*, 10. 96. 5. The date of c. 112 is provided by W.H.C. Frend, ed. *A New Eusebius*, Cambridge, 1987, p. 18.

⁵ G. W. Clarke, "Third-Century Christianity", eds. Alan K. Bowman, Peter Garnsey and Averil Cameron, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed. Vol 12, Cambridge, 2005, p. 627.

⁶ G. W. Clarke, "Introduction", the *Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, Vol. 1, New York, 1984, pp. 32, 33.

⁷ *P. Oxy. IV. 658*, John R. Knipfing, "The Libelli of the Decian Persecution", *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 16, Oct. 1923, pp. 345 – 390, No. 4, p. 366.

⁸ Reinhard Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions of Decius and Valerian*, Frankfurt am Main, 2., rev. ed. 2004, p. 33.

⁹ Selinger, *The Mid Third-Century Persecutions*, p. 33.

acclaimed by the army, the approval of the senate was secondary.¹⁰ The acceptable way of aligning oneself with a new emperor and showing one's loyalty (especially when there were other contenders for the throne), if one was a provincial governor, was by announcing the changes in power in an edict and then the local officials had to set about organising celebratory festivals which showed a wide variety of colourful ceremonies.¹¹ There were also some autonomous cities, and an emperor reciprocated the honours showered on him by granting his own honours and privileges in turn.¹²

Seen in this light Decius' edict may have been innovatory: it included specific directions to the provincial governors about how Decius wanted his accession and dynastic ambitions to be celebrated, albeit in a minimalist fashion, as no particular gods were specified.

Significance

Decius' edict was a watershed in the history of anti-Christian persecution. Prior anti-Christian actions had been sporadic, in response to local situations and implemented by provincial governors who were tasked with keeping the peace and so had to respond when there were riots because of Christians in the empire. Fox cites only three situations before 250 where there is evidence of "concerted action against Roman Christians."¹³ Elsewhere Fox mentions Nero's vendetta against Christians in 64 CE.¹⁴ Noteworthy is Trajan's reply to Pliny's question about what to do with those who were brought to his attention as suspected of being Christian. Trajan replied that they "...must not be hunted out."¹⁵

Decius' "persecution" was followed by Valerian's direct action against Church hierarchy and property in 256. Valerian demanded that all higher-ranking clergy should sacrifice "on behalf of the emperor". Roman Christian assemblies were proscribed, Church property confiscated and Christians were forbidden to have their own cemeteries.¹⁶ Frend summarises thus: "The aim of the persecution was to destroy the Church, financially and socially."¹⁷ On Valerian's death in

¹⁰ Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions*, p. 37.

¹¹ Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions*, pp. 37, 38.

¹² Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions*, pp. 37, 38.

¹³ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, London, 1986, pp. 422, 423.

¹⁴ Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 432. I realise that the involvement of Nero in anti-Christian persecution is now being challenged by Brent D. Shaw, "The Myth of the Neronian Persecution", *Journal of Religious Studies*, 105, 2015, pp. 73 – 100, but that question is outside the orbit of my thesis.

¹⁵ Pliny, *Letters*, 10. 97. 1, 2.

¹⁶ Maureen A. Tilley, "North Africa", eds. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young, *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Vol. 1, Cambridge, 2006, p. 390.

¹⁷ W. H. C. Frend, "Persecutions: genesis and legacy", *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Vol. 1, Cambridge, 2006, p. 515.

260, Gallienus revoked his father's edict of 256.¹⁸ After many years of peace and church growth, Diocletian in 303 promulgated edicts that resulted in what has come to be known as the "Great Persecution." These required Christians in the empire to relinquish all their scriptures, and all Churches were to be destroyed, followed by even harsher restrictions and penalties.¹⁹ Decius' actions were much milder in comparison to both Valerian (only seven years later) and Diocletian.

What factors may have influenced Decius' decision to mandate this sacrifice and require a *libellus* as proof?

Until about sixty years ago the answer was that Decius was directly targeting Christians, then in the 1960's Frend and Clarke wrote that Decius was not directly targeting Christians through his edict.²⁰ Since then many historians have written and debated on a range of theories about Decius' motivation, because he himself left no trace of why he acted as he did, and my thesis will follow and evaluate the thread of these arguments. As Ando writes: "...one event in the domain of religion (an edict by the emperor Decius) is without doubt the single best-attested event in the third century and quite possibly one of the best-attested actions of government in all antiquity."²¹ Yet historians are still writing on the subject.

Candida Moss in her provocatively titled popular book *The Myth of Persecution* has graphically challenged the previous belief that Decius was directly targeting the Roman Christians:²²

What we have here is a short-lived piece of legislation, designed to elicit social, political and religious conformity. That Christians were caught in the crosshairs of Decius' efforts to secure his empire is deeply unfortunate, but it is not evidence of anti-Christian legislation. This is prosecution, not persecution.

Were Christians only "caught in the crosshairs"? If Decius' edict was not directly targeting them, what possible factors triggered this action which was so innovative, expensive and required implementation through a massive logistical exercise that delayed it in some areas of the empire like Middle Egypt? It was a watershed in the history of anti-Christian persecutions, for even if Decius may not have been directly targeting Christians, the results for the Church were catastrophic. For the first time there was a clear *mandatum* that Christians disobeyed at

¹⁸ Frend "Persecutions," p. 516.

¹⁹ Frend, "Persecutions," p. 520.

²⁰ W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, New York, 1967, pp. 300, 301; G. W. Clarke, "Some Observations on the Persecution of Decius", *Antichthon*, Vol. 3, 1969, pp. 63 – 76, p. 68.

²¹ Clifford Ando, *Imperial Rome 193 to 284: The Critical Century*, Edinburgh, 2012, p. 122.

²² Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*, New York, 2013, p. 151.

their peril,²³ and the reactions from faithful Roman Christians who refused to comply probably laid the framework for subsequent anti-Christian measures. As Cyprian's *Letters* reveal, there was a collapse in Church discipline and authority. In the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, Pionius the presbyter was martyred but Euctemon his bishop performed the sacrifice. Other leading bishops were executed for refusing to sacrifice.

The edict was also the first step in what has been called a "radical restructuring of religious organisation in the Roman world,"²⁴ but whether all this was Decius' intention is improbable. Previously religions in the Roman world had been "fundamentally local"²⁵ and, now the importance of the local cults was diminished.²⁶

The Evidence and Overview of Scholarship

Nothing has survived from Decius himself, nor from non-Christian sources, concerning his motivation and values in issuing the edict. Dio Cassius had finished his history about 229.²⁹ He was a member of the Senate like his father, coming to Rome about 180.³¹ Caracalla had taken him on his Eastern expedition in 216, and under Alexander Severus he was proconsul of Africa, thence governor of Dalmatia then Upper Pannonia. But he was unpopular because of his "disciplinary measures."³² His key contribution is his description of the fear engendered by the Persian Artaxerxes who encamped with a large army to threaten Mesopotamia and Syria, and he laid blame on the disorganisation of the Roman army.³³

In assessing Dio as a historian, note must be taken of "his blind devotion to two theories governing historical writing in his day."³⁴ Firstly was the belief that history demanded dignity, so events and their significance took precedence over personal details; secondly that the historian was also a rhetorician. The resulting is often blurred, imprecise and "impressionistic".³⁵ In Dio's viewpoint of laying blame on the Roman troops, one cannot help wondering if his experience in Pannonia coloured his assessment of the army!

²³ The lack of a legal framework in pre-Decian martyrdoms is analysed in Chapter 1.

²⁴ J. B. Rives, "The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire", *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 89, 1999, pp. 135 – 154, p. 135.

²⁵ Rives, "The Decree of Decius", p. 135.

²⁶ Rives, "The Decree of Decius", p. 136.

²⁹ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 80. 5.

³¹ Earnest Cary, "Introduction", *Dio's Roman History*, pp. ix, x.

³² Cary, "Introduction", *Dio*, p. xii

³³ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 80. 3. 1. 1 - 4.1

³⁴ Cary, "Introduction", *Dio*, p. xv

³⁵ Cary, "Introduction", *Dio*, p. xv

In contrast to Dio Cassius, little is known of Herodian's background. His history ranges from Marcus Aurelius' death in 180 to Gordian III's accession in 238, and he claims that these events are within his own lifetime,³⁶ which surely must be an advantage when assessing the accuracy of his accounts, but some of statements about the dates in his life are ambiguous.³⁷ It is possible that Herodian wrote during Philip's reign (244 - 9). In contrast to Dio, Herodian found "nothing objectionable in an equestrian emperor as such."³⁸ (The first equestrian emperor was Macrinus, who plotted the death of Caracalla as recorded by Dio.³⁹) The most commonly held view of Herodian is that he was a Syrian, from Antioch, although he makes some mistakes when writing about this area,⁴⁰ and that his target audience was probably in Greek.⁴¹

This leaves Dexippus' *Letter of Decius*, and the *Scriptores Historia Augustae* as the key sources of non-Christian material for the period near to the time of Decius' reign. Dexippus' *Letter of Decius*, "like other embedded letters in ancient historiography... is not a genuine historical document"⁴² but it is embedded in the lost history: *Scythica*.⁴³ This provides a contemporary and opposing view of Decius to what was written about him years later in the *Scriptores Historia Augustae*.⁴⁴ Dexippus had a large influence on future Greek historians such as Eusebius of Nantes who came soon after him, and the fifth century historian Eunapius of Sardis. Eunapius began his work in the early fifth century, continuing from when Dexippus *Chronicle* had ended at 270.⁴⁵ Blockley analyses Eunapius, who criticised Dexippus' focus on chronology in his *Chronica*.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, I think this shows Dexippus' concerns for accuracy and pursuing a logical framework for his writing.

Millar analyses what would have been Dexippus' viewpoint and asks what could have been the sources for his information about Decius as, apparently "we have no reason to believe (he) ever left his native city?"⁴⁷ Dexippus' father held an important post in Athens: the Herald of Aeropagus, which was one of the two key civic posts, and possibly was also the President of the

³⁶ C. R. Whittaker, "Introduction", *Herodian*, p. ix.

³⁷ Whittaker, "Introduction", *Herodian*, p. x.

³⁸ Whittaker, "Introduction", *Herodian*, p. xv.

³⁹ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 79. 4 – 5.

⁴⁰ Whittaker, "Introduction", *Herodian*, p. xxv.

⁴¹ Whittaker, "Introduction", *Herodian*, p. xxix.

⁴² Caillan Davenport and Christopher Mallan, "Dexippus' 'Letter of Decius'", *Museum Helveticum*, Vol. 70, No. 1, Juni 2013, pp. 57 – 73, p. 57.

⁴³ Davenport and Mallan, "Dexippus", p. 57.

⁴⁴ *Scriptores Historia Augustae*, transl. David Magie, Loeb, 1922, Vol. 3, 42. 6.

⁴⁵ R. C. Blockley, "Dexippus of Athens and Eunapius of Sardis", *Latomus*, T. 30, Fasc. 3. 3, July – September, 1971, pp. 710 – 715, p. 710.

⁴⁶ Blockley, "Dexippus," p. 710.

⁴⁷ Fergus Millar, "P. Herennius Dexippus: The Greek World and the Third-Century Invasions", *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 59, No.1/2, 1969, pp. 12 – 29, p.26.

Aeropagus.⁴⁸ Thus Dexippus was from Athens, at a time when its intellectual life was at its peak and was a magnet for scholars from other parts of the Greek world. However, unlike some other leading Athenians of his time, neither he nor his father belonged to the Roman Senate.⁴⁹ This would have put him at a disadvantage in assessing the accuracy of his historical knowledge of Decius. Interestingly, Dio. Cassius was a member of the Roman Senate,⁵⁰ so it is unfortunate that Dio Cassius did not live long enough to give us his version of the events surrounding Decius. Millar writes.⁵¹

With Dexippus, it may be suggested tentatively that we are approaching a ‘Byzantine’ viewpoint, with the inhabitants of the principal Greek areas – the Balkans, Greece and Asia Minor – embattled against the barbarian threat... In each case, the primary protagonists are the barbarians and the inhabitants of a Greek city: the barbarians attack, the inhabitants resist, various stratagems are used by both sides and finally the barbarians depart.

Scriptores Historia Augustae (SHA) were a collection of biographies in Latin of Roman emperors, purportedly written by a number of authors and which contain “invented speeches, letters and documents.”⁵² These display “reverence for the Senate, fervours for ‘good’ emperors, dislike of military despotism or the regiment of eunuchs”⁵³ and so on. Syme goes on to explain why he argues, with others, for a single fourth century author (probably near the year 400), a proposal put forward by Hermann Dessau in 1889: “though pagan, it seems crypto-pagan, unobtrusively suggesting a plea for tolerance...It indicates a date towards the end of the fourth century.”⁵⁴ The *SHA*’s reference to Decius, therefore, may be considered to reflect a popular, pagan, retrospective and patriotic view of the emperor, albeit through the lens of the writer’s own bias. Unfortunately, there is a lacuna (which may have been deliberate?) between 244 - 260 with the loss of details on Philip, Decius, Trebonias and much of Valerian.

Decius’ coinage is an important artefact and quite revealing for understanding his dynastic aspirations, and this is analysed in Chapter 3.

Rich material evidence is provided by the (at least) forty-seven *libelli* that have been emerging from the antique rubbish dumps of Oxyrhynchus town and the Arsinoite nome of Middle Egypt in the last hundred years or so. Knipfing’s publication of forty-one of these in 1923 set modern

⁴⁸ Millar, “Dexippus”, p. 20.

⁴⁹ Millar, “Dexippus”, p. 21.

⁵⁰ Millar, “Dexippus”, p. 21.

⁵¹ Millar, “Dexippus”, p. 25.

⁵² Ronald Syme, *Emperors and Biography: Studies in the Historia Augusta*, Oxford, 1971, p. 1.

⁵³ Syme, *Emperors and Biography*, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Syme, *Emperors and Biography*, p. 1, p. 16.

scholarship on its long search for answers.⁵⁵ This has been followed by more publications of others that have come to light since, i.e. by Selinger (2004), Luijendijk (2008), Claytor (2015) and an excellent analysis by Schubert in 2016. Whilst these provide direct material and irrefutable evidence against which to compare the authenticity and veracity of the other sources, these also do not provide any reason(s) for the edict.

The rich volume of texts from contemporary eye-witness Christian sources do provide a detailed picture of events which followed the decree, and these portray Decius as an active persecutor of Christians. They are convinced (or simply assume) that the whole exercise is directed against them, and the immediate arrest of leading bishops did nothing to dissuade that presumption. Interestingly the four key sets of evidence are of different genres.

Letters of St. Cyprian were written by Cyprian from Carthage, where he was in hiding from being forced to comply with Decian's edict to sacrifice, or face torture and probably martyrdom. The letters date to between 250 (but some may be earlier) and 258 when he was martyred post Decius.⁵⁶ He therefore gives a distinctly western perspective, providing not only accounts of events in Northern Africa, but also from Rome as evidenced by the *Letters*. He had access to visitors coming and going from his hiding place, keeping him well updated. The *Letters* were written by Cyprian as pastoral and theological advice, exhortation, decisions on how to handle those who had lapsed and so on. He is, therefore, a fairly reliable witness for the events which took place, albeit a deeply prejudiced one: he called Decius a "tyrannus ferociens."⁵⁷ Cyprian claimed that Decius was afraid (and motivated by fear) of the bishop of Rome, which I argue is probably not true. The evidence and credibility of Cyprian's testimony is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Eusebius' *Church History* derived in part from bishop Dionysius' letters during the edict. Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria wrote during the edict, and narrowly escaped capture himself. He gave graphic accounts of how Christians reacted in different ways to the edict and gives personal names on many occasions, details of which he must have had ready access, although we can presume that he was in hiding at this time. Eusebius claimed to have the actual letters which Dionysius had written, given to him by Fabian, Bishop of Antioch. This gives an eastern perspective to the ramifications of the edict. Eusebius, as will be shown in Chapter 4, firmly believed that Decius was directly persecuting the Christians through the mechanism of the forced

⁵⁵ Knipfing, "The *Libelli*," pp. 345 – 390.

⁵⁶ Clarke, G. W., "Introduction", *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, Vol. 1, New York, 1984, p. 5.

⁵⁷ *Letters of St. Cyprian*, 55. 9. 2.

sacrifice, and that this was due to his “hatred of Philip the Arab.” I argue in Chapter 4 that this was probably not correct, and that there is dubious (at best) evidence that Philip was a Christian.

The Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle is of a completely different genre from the *Letters of Cyprian* or the *History* of Eusebius/*Letters* of Dionysius. “...post eventum prophetic forgeries” is how Clarke summarises the Sibylline oracles⁵⁸ and the *Thirteenth* is no exception. Potter prefers to call it “an unusual example of ‘popular history’, history from the perspective of the man in the street.”⁵⁹ It certainly gives an idea of what some thought of Decius and his supposedly anti-Christian actions. The title derives from a wandering fifth century B.C.E. prophetess Sibyl, who was believed to have “special divine knowledge” and whose utterances were collected into books and circulated, starting a long and varied tradition.⁶⁰ “Like other wandering prophets, she was not associated with a specific shrine.”⁶¹ The important ingredient for an oracle to be accepted as genuine was for it to sound like one, and preferably to have been correct about something that was popularly known in the past but that happened “after the prophet’s lifetime or prediction.”⁶² Potter refutes the charge that generally the oracles were “anti-Roman” but admits that individual emperors could be portrayed negatively,⁶³ such as Decius.⁶⁴

The *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* was a compilation from various contributors over different times, as with the other historical oracles, and Potter believes that Lines 81 – 83, which describe Decius, is a more milder tone than its context of Lines 80, and 84 – 88.⁶⁵ (see Chapter 5). Lines 89 to 154 seem to have been written by one person, whose main interest seems to have been the fate of Syria between Decius’ accession and Uranius Antoninus’ victory in 253.⁶⁶ The *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* agrees with Eusebius that Decius was motivated by his hatred of his predecessor Philip who was reputed to be a Christian. The *Oracle* is analysed in Chapter 5 and is included under “Christian” writers because the lines pertinent to Decius’ motives are most likely Christian in origin.

The *Martyrdom of Pionius*, believed to be partly written by Pionius himself, gives an inside view into several aspects of the process of the making of a martyr in Roman Asia Minor, and is

⁵⁸ Clarke, “Introduction”, *Letters of St. Cyprian* vol. 1, p. 4.

⁵⁹ D. S. Potter, “Preface and Acknowledgements”, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire: A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, Oxford, 1990, p. vii.

⁶⁰ Potter, “Introduction”, *Prophecy and History*, p. 103.

⁶¹ Potter, “Introduction”, *Prophecy and History*, pp. 103, 104.

⁶² Potter, “Introduction”, *Prophecy and History*, pp. 121, 122.

⁶³ Potter, “Introduction”, *Prophecy and History*, pp. 133, 134.

⁶⁴ *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, lines 80 – 88.

⁶⁵ Potter, “Introduction”, *Prophecy and History*, p. 147

⁶⁶ Potter, “Introduction”, *Prophecy and History*, p. 141

analysed in Chapter 5. Unlike the other three Christian sources, the *Martyrdom* does not venture to give a motive for Decius' edict.

Knipfing's 1923 published scholarship on the Decian *libelli* has stimulated ongoing commentary. Since then, modern scholarship has benefitted greatly by G. W. Clarke's intensive analysis of *Letters of St Cyprian*. In 1969, Clarke refuted Ste. Croix's claim that there is no evidence that Christians were judged directly before the emperor Decius.⁷⁰ Celerinus' trial was before Decius, although Celerinus was not highly ranked. After 19 days imprisonment he was released without sacrificing.⁷¹ Decius, then, certainly knew (if not well before) that Christians in his empire would not comply with his edict. We do not know why Celerinus was spared after torture.

In 1973, Clarke, again using Cyprian's *Letters*, argued that there was no evidence of "double trials"⁷² and his 1984 and 1986 meticulous analysis of Cyprian's *Letters* (a monumental task) has revealed a great deal of information about the imposition of the edict.⁷³ These insights have been corroborated by the Christian sources and the *libelli*. Pohlsander (1980) effectively argued against the Eusebian claim that Philip was a Christian, thus weakening the premise that Decius was directly targeting Roman Christians.⁷⁴ Rives (1999) argued that Decius' edict was the religious corollary to Caracalla's citizenship edict.⁷⁵ Whilst this argument seems accepted by some notable scholars such as Frend (2006)⁷⁶, McKechnie (2002)⁷⁷ effectively argued against this theory, because the Caracalla itself had a religious principle built into it. Potter (1990)⁷⁸ has had useful input into the discussion through his intensive analysis and commentary of the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (which he believed to be written by a Christian at the lines pertaining to Decius). Selinger's original research (published 2002)⁷⁹ into the sacrifices for the accession of a new emperor, has highlighted this possible impetus for Decius' edict.

70 G. W. Clarke, "Some Observations on the Persecution of Decius", *Antichthon* Vol. 3, 1969, pp. 63 – 76.

71 Cyprian, *Letters*, 39. 2. 2.

72 G. W. Clarke, "Two Measures in the Persecution of Decius? Two Recent Views," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, No. 20, 1973, pp. 118 – 123.

73 Clarke, G. W., transl. and annot. *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, Vols. 1 and 2, New York, 1984; Clarke, G. W., transl. and annot. *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, Vol. 3, New York, 1986.

74 Hans A. Pohlsander, "Philip the Arab and Christianity", *Historia Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd. 29, H. 4 4th Qtr., 1980, pp. 463 – 473.

75 J. B. Rives, "The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire", *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 89, 1999, pp. 135 – 154.

76 W. H. C. Frend, "Persecutions: genesis and legacy", eds Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young, *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Vol. 1, Cambridge, 2006.

77 Paul McKechnie, "Roman Law and the Laws of the Medes and Persians: Decian's and Valerian's Persecutions of Christianity", *Thinking Like a Lawyer*, ed. Paul McKechnie, Leiden, 2002, pp. 253 – 269.

78 David S. Potter, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire. A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, Oxford, 1990.

79 Reinhard Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions of Decius and Valerian*, Frankfurt am Main, 2., rev. ed. 2004.

Timothy Barnes' scholarship has been very useful, firstly in arguing that there were no legal bases for persecuting Roman Christians before Decius (1968),⁸⁰ then his rehabilitation of Eusebius' reputation (1981, 2011),⁸¹ along with Cameron and Hall's work on Constantine (1999).⁸² Barnes (2010)⁸³ has also argued well for the historicity of *Pionius*. Ari Bryen's 2004⁸⁴ thesis graphically showed that the pre-Decian martyrdoms, which depended on the arbitrary brutal execution of justice by the provincial governors, worked to prepare the populace for the punishments meted under Decius. Burns (2002),⁸⁵ Brent (2010)⁸⁶ and Burns and Jensen (2014)⁸⁷ throw more light on Cyprian. The arguments of these and many other modern scholars are evaluated in the following chapters.

Methodology

I will start by a detailed analysis of each of the texts mentioned above. These will be examined to assess the internal integrity of each and its likely authenticity. I will also compare the relevant texts of the same author with other material he has written where that exists. Each of the four key texts will be compared with each other and with what historians know of events of the period, in order to illuminate any inconsistencies and assess reliability. Finally, the four key texts will be compared with the *libelli*. Of the four texts, Eusebius' writings have received much scrutiny from scholars. Recent scholarship has rehabilitated him somewhat, without ignoring his obvious faults and deficiencies. Inowlocki and Zamagni warn that to reject Eusebius' *Church History* "...on the grounds of his lack of 'objectivity' – whatever this shady term may signify then or now – is greatly problematic."⁸⁸

Secondly, I will trace and compare the modern scholarship which is still debating key points and possible reasons for Decius' edict.

Thirdly, I will draw out what I believe are the main theories as to Decius' motivation, and finally attempt to highlight the one or two most probable answers to this thesis question.

⁸⁰ T. D. Barnes, "Legislation Against the Christians", *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol 58, Issue 1 – 2, November 1968, pp. 32 – 550.

⁸¹ Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge MA, 1981, and *Constantine*, Chichester, 2011.

⁸² Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine*, Oxford, 1999.

⁸³ Timothy Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*, Tübingen, 2010.

⁸⁴ Ari Bryen, "Martyrdom, Rhetoric and the Politics of Procedure", *Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 33, Issue 2, 2014, pp. 243 – 280.

⁸⁵ Patout J. Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, London, 2002.

⁸⁶ Allen Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, Cambridge, 2010.

⁸⁷ Patout J. Burns and Robin M. Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa*, Michigan, 2014.

⁸⁸ Sabrina Inowlocki and Claudio Zamagni, eds. *Reconsidering Eusebius*, Leiden, 2011, p. viii.

I will heed this warning when assessing the evidence of ancient sources:⁸⁹

To the ancients the writing of history was a literary process directly comparable with oratory or poetry: (the ancient historians) aimed at embellishing and inflating their subject matter, and at surpassing their predecessors in stylistic achievement. They had no conception of scientific history, which is mainly a nineteenth century notion, with the result that the modern historian, to whom historical research is scientific, needs to keep these considerations in mind.

⁸⁹ Christina S. Krauss, John Marincola and Christopher Pelling, eds. *Ancient Historiography and its Contexts: Studies in Honour of A. J. Woodman*, Oxford, 2010, p. 4, quoting A. J. Woodman, 1977, *Velleius Paterculus: The Tiberian Narrative (2.94–131)*, Cambridge, 1977, p. 35.

Chapter 1 What the Romans Thought About Christians

The “Christians” referred to here are, of course, those Christians who resided within the Roman Empire of the period, and so were also Romans. By other “Romans” I refer to the general polytheistic populace of the Roman Empire, who worshipped a variety of deities of Greek, Egyptian and Roman origins along with the Imperial cult, and who saw no conflict inherent in this practice.

This chapter tries to understand what the polytheistic populace in general would have thought about the new Christian “cult”. It traces the arguments of some antagonists and protagonists in the philosophical debate, using literature, philosophy and polemics; followed by reference to the apologetics of some early Christian writers who engaged in debate with the polytheists. Then the legal framework, (or lack of) for the per-Decian martyrdoms are discussed. The ugly pre-Decian courtroom scenes and tortures were designed to show Christians as rebellious, undesirable, and subversive; an attitude which must have filtered down to the general populace and influenced their opinions of Christians, preparing the way for the Decian martyrdoms.

Philosophy, Literature and Polemics

The philosopher and military emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote in the late second century that he was “sickened by the displays in the amphitheatre and such places”⁹⁰. The wildly popular gladiatorial games met with revulsion and disapproval from some Stoics.⁹¹ However, this did not prevent Marcus from consigning non-citizen Christians to wild beasts. Reigning 161 – 80, it was during this period that some notable Christian martyrs died: the Scillitan Martyrs at Carthage (180), Justin (165), Polycarp (? 166), at Lyons and Vienne (170), and “sporadic persecutions in the province of Asia” between 165 – 170.⁹² Eusebius wrote:⁹³

For Cæsar commanded that they should be put to death, but that any who might deny should be set free. Therefore, at the beginning of the public festival which took place there, and which was attended by crowds of men from all nations, the governor brought the blessed ones to the judgment seat, to make of them a show and spectacle for the multitude. Wherefore also he examined them again, and beheaded those who appeared to possess Roman citizenship, but he sent the others to the wild beasts.

⁹⁰ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 6.46.

⁹¹ Christopher Gill in Robin Hood, Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, n1.5, p.143.

⁹² W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, Philadelphia, 1984, pp. 920, 921.

⁹³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.47, referring to the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne, 177.

Marcus himself was not impressed by such shows of bravery and these confirmed for him the irrationality of this sect. When writing of how one must be prepared to face death he wrote: ⁹⁴

But this readiness must spring from a specific judgement, rather than mere contrariness as with the Christians, and should be considered, and grave, and, if you want to convince others too, be free of any trace of theatrical bravado.

Some think that the phrase “as with the Christians” is a later addition, but it is in keeping with Pliny’s letter to Trajan about Christians in about 112, where he argued that “their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished.”⁹⁵

Keresztes, however, argues against portraying Marcus Aurelius as a “persecuting emperor”.⁹⁶ “Marcus Aurelius was not, and Decius was, branded by ancient Christian writers as persecutor.”⁹⁷ During the former’s reign his empire was confronted with crises: the Parthians threatened in 161 but were controlled, and there was the plague. He issued an edict of 161 – 168 ordering sacrifices to the gods and it was during this period that some of the martyrdoms took place. In 166/167 Germanic tribes from the north broke through and endangered Italy.⁹⁸ In addition, Keresztes argues convincingly that it was often the populace who instigated government action:⁹⁹

One is justified in ascribing the great majority of persecutions and particular martyrdoms to the hatred and violence of the non-Christian population, especially in Asia and even in Lugdunum. Christians, even more than the Jews, were, traditionally, targets of violence and pogroms in the Greek provinces, especially in the East.

Dionysius as quoted by Eusebius, described attacks on Christians in Alexandria,¹⁰⁰ revealing that it was often the crowds who pursued Christians, and it was the provincial governor who had the final decision on punishment, not the emperor. With Decius’ edict, the legal framework changed.

Whilst Marcus Aurelius was exasperated by the seemingly irrational belief system of Christians, so was his court physician Galen, from Pergamon. Between 162 and 166 in Rome, Galen wrote

⁹⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 11.3.

⁹⁵ Pliny, *Letters*, 10. 96. 4. Date as c.112 is from *A New Eusebius*, ed. J. Stevenson, rev. ed. W. H. C. Frend, London, 1987, p. 18.

⁹⁶ Paul Keresztes, “Marcus Aurelius a Persecutor?”, *Harvard Theological Review* 61, 1968, pp. 321 – 341, p. 321.

⁹⁷ Keresztes, “Marcus Aurelius”, p. 341.

⁹⁸ Keresztes, “Marcus Aurelius”, p. 329.

⁹⁹ Keresztes, “Marcus Aurelius”, pp. 327.

¹⁰⁰ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 41. 1 – 8.

his *On Hippocrates Anatomy* in six volumes in Greek. The original books have been lost, but in one of these, which has been preserved in Arabic, Galen wrote:¹⁰¹

If I had in mind people who taught their pupils in the same way as the followers of Moses and Christ teach theirs – for they order them to accept everything on faith – I should not have given you a definition.

Unlike the emperor, though, Galen admired the way that Christians faced death, their self-control, also “restraint in cohabitation” and the life-long celibacy of some followers.¹⁰² Unlike others, Galen considered Judaism and Christianity to be philosophical schools and understood the close connection between them. By positioning Christianity as a philosophical school, Christian apologists could speak to the Roman intellectuals within that framework, rather than defending what could appear to be simply an irrational superstitious cult.¹⁰³

Apuleius, the North African satirical novelist, philosopher and orator, also a contemporary of Marcus Aurelius, detested monotheists for their refusal to acknowledge any other god but their one God. In *Metamorphoses*, after Apuleius has Lucius turned into an ass because of his dabbling in forbidden magic, a subsequent adventure was encountering a “vile woman” whose “soul was like some muddy latrine”. Apart from her cruelty and other vices, the ultimate insult, so it seemed, was that she “scorned and spurned all the gods in heaven, and instead of holding a definite faith, she used the false sacrilegious presumption of a god, whom she would call ‘one and only.’”¹⁰⁴

After Apuleius writes of Lucius’s deliverance by and conversion to the goddess Isis, Lucius praises her extravagantly, and *almost* in terms implying an exclusive commitment to Isis at the expense of his devotion to other gods. Isis spoke as: “I, the mother of the universe, mistress of all the elements.”¹⁰⁵ Apuleius showed that he was a polytheist because he used his piety and devotion to many gods in his defence against a charge of magician his *Apologia*. He claimed that he had been “initiated into many mysteries in Greece...I learned all kinds of observances, many rituals, and various ceremonies in my pursuit of truth and my reverence for the gods.”¹⁰⁶ He claims that he used to carry around an image of a god wherever he went, along with his books, to “worship it on feast days with incense, wine and the occasional sacrifice of an animal.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ Galen, *On Jews and Christians*, Ref. 5.

¹⁰² Galen *Plato Arabus*, i. p. 99 quoted in *On Jews and Christians*, p. 15.

¹⁰³ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, New Haven, 2nd ed. 2003, p. 73.

¹⁰⁴ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 9. 14.

¹⁰⁵ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 11.5.

¹⁰⁶ Apuleius, *Apologia*, 55.8.9.

¹⁰⁷ Apuleius, *Apologia* 63.

Marcus Aurelius showed much reverence and admiration for the gods. For example: “The gods themselves are kind to such people...such is their benevolence.”¹⁰⁸ By contrast, Apuleius describes in much detail the wrath and jealousy of Venus against a beautiful human princess who was stealing worship from her.¹⁰⁹ Doubtless Apuleius, like other well-read Greco-Roman intellectuals, would have been raised on a diet of Greek classical writers who often portrayed the gods as possessing human foibles. Polytheism could be dangerous if one omitted to give a god its due honour, as happened to the hapless Hippolytus and his parents when the ignored goddess Aphrodite wrought her vengeance on them in a play by Euripides.¹¹⁰

The Greek orator Aelius Aristides was also a contemporary of Marcus Aurelius. He wrote his *Sacred Tales* to describe the psychological healing he had received from Asclepius, often through dreams, and the devotion he subsequently lavished on the god. But Aristides’ worship of Asclepius did not prevent him from worshipping other gods such as Sarapis and Isis. He remained a true polytheist.¹¹¹ An example of this in later years is his *Sacred Tales*:¹¹²

...I had other dreams which uprooted me, and were quite clear that the upper Hellespont was not suitable for a stay. Therefore we returned. For the national sacrifice of Olympian Zeus was drawing near and there were additional indications from all sides that I must be present and sacrifice.

In spite of his devotion to Asclepius, Aristides “did not transcend the rigid hierarchy which he defined for Hellenic deities.”¹¹³

The second century philosophical attack on Christians came from Celsus in about 178. He was a Platonist with a reasonable knowledge of Christian literature. “In varying degrees Celsus was able to provide both the inspiration and the main lines of pagan attack against the Christians as long as the debate lasted.”¹¹⁴ He denounced Jesus as a sorcerer and said that his followers should be punished as “members of an illegal association.” Wilken claims that Celsus “sensed that Christians had severed the traditional bond between religion and a ‘nation’ or people.” In the ancient world religion had been linked to a particular people or place.¹¹⁵ One can imagine the alarm that Celsus felt as he saw Christians “privatising” religion, of “the transferral of

¹⁰⁸ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 9.11.

¹⁰⁹ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, Book 4.

¹¹⁰ Euripides, *Hippolytus*.

¹¹¹ C. A. Behr, *Aelius Aristides and the Sacred Tales*, Amsterdam, 1968, p. 25.

¹¹² Aristides, *Sacred Tales*, 5.47.

¹¹³ Behr, *Aristides*, p. 157.

¹¹⁴ W. H. C. Frend, “Prelude to the Great Persecution: The Propaganda War,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 38, No. 1 January 1987, pp. 5-6.

¹¹⁵ Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, p. 124.

religious values from the public sphere to a private association.” The Christians were setting up a “rival to the one high God who watched over the empire.”¹¹⁶

Philostratus added more ammunition to the polytheists’ armoury with his *Life of Apollonius* early in the third century.¹¹⁷ Apollonius had lived in the first century and had tried to reform paganism of its abuses. Most importantly, as ammunition for debating with Christians, Philostratus portrayed Apollonius as a miracle worker,¹¹⁸ with a miraculous birth.¹¹⁹ Such a hero could be presented as an alternative Jesus-type figure who would be acceptable to Romans and their subjects.¹²⁰ Apollonius had travelled far and wide, gaining wisdom as he conversed with sages and “beyond any other ancient sage, encapsulated the drive (particularly prominent in Hellenistic and later philosophy) towards cosmic, universal wisdom.”¹²¹

Turning to the Christian apologists, from North Africa between 195 and 230, Tertullian and Minucius Felix were active proponents of Christianity,¹²² and both were provocatively direct in expressing their derision for the Roman gods. Their answers reveal the common charges brought against the Christians:¹²³

You do not worship the gods, you say; and you do not offer sacrifices for the emperors. Well, we do not offer sacrifice for others, for the same reason that we do not for ourselves — namely, that your gods are not at all the objects of our worship. So we are accused of sacrilege and treason. This is the chief ground of charge against us — nay, it is the sum-total of our offending; and it is worthy then of being inquired into, if neither prejudice nor injustice be the judge, the one of which has no idea of discovering the truth, and the other simply and at once rejects it. We do not worship your gods, because we know that there are no such beings.

Minucius argued that demons inhabited the statues and images were sacred to the Romans:¹²⁴

These impure spirits, therefore--the demons--as is shown by the Magi, by the philosophers, and by Plato, consecrated under statues and images, lurk there, and by their afflatus attain the authority as of a present deity; while in the meantime they are breathed into the prophets, while they dwell in the shrines...¹²⁵

¹¹⁶ Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, p. 125.

¹¹⁷ Frend, *Prelude to the Great Persecution*, p. 6.

¹¹⁸ Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonia of Tyana*, 4.45.1. Here Philostratus claimed that Apollonius raised a dead girl to life again.

¹¹⁹ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius*, 1.4-5.

¹²⁰ Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 275.

¹²¹ Tim Whitmarsh, *Ancient Greek Literature*, Cambridge, 2004, p. 161

¹²² J. S. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, Cambridge, 2nd rev. ed. 1987, W. H. C. Frend, p.157.

¹²³ Tertullian, *Apology*, 10.1.

¹²⁴ Tertullian, *Apology*, 10.1.

¹²⁵ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 27.1.

Sometime after 245, Origen wrote eight treatises to refute Celsus,¹²⁶ and these reveal some of Celsus' arguments which included the notion that God 'descending to earth' had implied that he had left his throne.¹²⁷ Celsus argued that Christians were not monotheists,¹²⁸ and Frend comments that prior to Decius' edict, there was "no pagan propagandist" of the calibre of Celsus. Demetrian of Carthage voiced the popular complaint that the Christians were the cause of all disasters and woes because they did not worship the gods, and Cyprian refuted him thus:¹²⁹

For these things do not occur, as your false complaints and inexperience ignorant of the truth boast and cry out, because your gods are not worshipped by us, but because God is not worshipped by you.

And further:¹³⁰

Indeed, if your gods have any divinity and power, let them themselves rise to their vindication, let them themselves defend themselves by their own majesty. But of what advantage can they be to their worshippers, who cannot avenge themselves on those who do not worship them.

This "propaganda war" reached its crescendo in the Great Persecution of 303,¹³¹ and the anti-Christian philosopher Porphyry has been implicated in providing "both an intellectual rationale and political influence".¹³² Arnobius refuted Porphyry (who lived 234 – 305) and Arnobius' writings reveal Porphyry as a Neoplatonist philosopher who claimed that Christianity had no rational basis.¹³³ Arnobius wrote some forty years after Decius' edict, but he provides a valuable insight into the pagan intellectual, religious beliefs and practices of a time forty years on from Decius, and this is why he is noted here, because these pagan intellectual ideas at the time of Diocletian provided one reason for the Great Persecution. It must be kept in mind that as a result of the reactions of Christians during the Decius and Valerian eras, general public animosity towards the Christians probably increased and contributed to Diocletian's persecution.

Impious Christians and the Law

Barnes has reviewed the literary evidence searching for legal bases for persecuting Christians prior to Decius' edict, and concluded that the only reliable evidence was Pliny's question to

¹²⁶ Henry Chadwick, transl. and ed., "Introduction", *Origen: Contra Celsum*, Cambridge, 1965, p. xiv. This dating is based on Eusebius' *Church History*, 6.36, 2.

¹²⁷ Origen, *Against Celsus*, 4.2-3, *A New Eusebius*, revd. W. H. C. Frend, 1987.

¹²⁸ Origen, *Against Celsus*, 8.12, 14.

¹²⁹ Saint Cyprian, *To Demetrian* 5.

¹³⁰ Saint Cyprian, *To Demetrian* 14.

¹³¹ Frend, "Prelude to the Great Persecution", p. 5.

¹³² Michael Bland Simmons, *Arnobius of Sicca*, Oxford, 1995, 24-25.

¹³³ Simmons, *Arnobius*, p. 23.

Trajan, and the emperor's now famous rescript.¹³⁴ Christians were not to be hunted out, but if brought to Pliny's attention and proved to be Christians they must be punished.¹³⁵

It is noteworthy that Pliny and Trajan did not prescribe any one particular form of worship by which someone could prove that he or she was not a Christian. Pliny had used a test which meant the accused reciting after the governor "a formula of invocation to the gods" and making "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."¹⁴¹ Trajan simply answers with the test of "offering prayers to our gods."¹⁴² Nothing should be read into this difference, and it illustrates that there were different ways to prove one's piety to the gods. It is noteworthy that traditional Roman religion is here shown intertwined with the Imperial Cult, as indeed it was.

Domitius Ulpianus¹⁴³ was one of seven knights who had served as jurists under Severus (193 – 211) with the task of enabling the emperor to provide "free legal advice" in the form of rescripts.¹⁴⁴ I am using Tony Honoré's scholarship on this topic. Jurists such as Ulpian had two key tasks. The first was to advise the emperor (as a member of his council) in his role of providing free legal advice (rescripts) "in the office *a libellis*", and secondly, jurists wrote treatises for "the use of governors, judges, officials and private citizens."¹⁴⁵

It was Ulpian's Book 7 *de officio proconsulis* which contained rescripts against the Christians,¹⁴⁶ but which has not survived.¹⁴⁷ Its contents are now mostly known through the early fourth century Christian writer Lactantius: "Domitius, in his seventh book, concerning the office of the proconsul, has collected wicked rescripts of princes, that he might show by what punishments they ought to be visited who confessed themselves to be worshippers of God."¹⁴⁸

Barnes claims that some of the "evidence" in the past has been based on "the accretions of later hagiography".¹⁵⁰ "There is no evidence to prove earlier legislation by the Senate or the emperor."¹⁵¹ Crews argues that as Ulpian's custom was to use rescripts to establish a precedent,

¹³⁴ Barnes, "Legislation Against the Christians", p. 50.

¹³⁵ Pliny, *Letters*, 10. 97. 1, 2.

¹⁴¹ Pliny, *Letters*, 10. 95 – 96. 5.

¹⁴² Pliny, *Letters*, 10. 97. 1, 2.

¹⁴³ Tony Honoré, *Ulpian*, Oxford, 1982, p. 8.

¹⁴⁴ Honoré, *Ulpian*, p. 15, p. 3.

¹⁴⁵ Honoré, *Ulpian*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁶ Honoré, *Ulpian*, p. 32.

¹⁴⁷ Barnes, "Legislation Against the Christians", p. 32.

¹⁴⁸ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 5.11.

¹⁵⁰ Barnes, "Legislation Against the Christians", p. 32.

¹⁵¹ Barnes, "Legislation Against the Christians", p. 48.

he probably used Pliny's and Trajan's letters to formulate his Book 7.¹⁵² A Christian's crime was also in "a special category." Unlike the situation of a regular criminal who was prosecuted because of a past crime, an accused Christian could be pardoned at the last minute if he then committed apostasy.¹⁵³

The pre-Decian martyr acts reveal other tests that could be imposed on suspected Christians. In the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, the Christians were told to "swear by the genius of our lord and emperor and...offer prayers for his health".¹⁵⁶ Polycarp was commanded to "swear by the emperor's Genius."¹⁵⁷ This, of course, left them open to the charge of treason if they refused. Justin, his friends and community were brought before the urban prefect of Rome, named Rusticus. After questioning them he pronounced his verdict: "Those who have refused to sacrifice to the gods are to be scourged and executed in accordance with the laws." This implies that they had previously been ordered to sacrifice to the gods and had refused.¹⁵⁸

Geoffrey de Ste. Croix has examined the lack of a legal basis for anti-Christian persecution in the pre-Decian era, and he concluded that they were hated by the general populace and government officials because of their implacable refusal to worship any god but their own. "The monotheistic exclusiveness of the Christians was believed to alienate the goodwill of the gods."¹⁵⁹ I accept his argument that in this period they were punished solely on the basis of *cognitio*, (or *coercitio*, as he later conceded to Fergus Millar);¹⁶⁰ that is, the governor's right to punish, and not *contumacia*, which was the charge of disobedience.¹⁶¹ Generally, from at least 112CE (or even 64CE) they were punished for simply being Christians.¹⁶² De Ste. Croix also argues against emperor cult playing a role in persecution.¹⁶³

De Ste. Croix explains that the deficiencies and vagueness of Roman law concerning "statutory crimes", and that these "were supplemented by direct government intervention."¹⁶⁴ In the *cognitio extra ordinem* (special investigation) there was wide discretion available to the

¹⁵² Rex B. Crews, *The Handbooks De Officio Proconsulis Authorship and Audience*, Chapel Hill, 2016, p. 148.

¹⁵³ Barnes, "Legislation Against the Christians," p. 48

¹⁵⁶ Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 87, 89.

¹⁵⁷ Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁸ Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, p. 47.

¹⁵⁹ De Ste. Croix, "Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?", p. 133.

¹⁶⁰ Fergus Millar, Review of A. N. Sherwin-White, "The Letters of Pliny", *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 58, 1968, pp. 218 - 224

¹⁶¹ De Ste. Croix, "Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?", pp. 114-5.

¹⁶² De Ste. Croix, "Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?", p. 108.

¹⁶³ De Ste. Croix, "Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?," p. 112.

¹⁶⁴ De Ste. Croix, "Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?," p. 114.

provincial governors.¹⁶⁵ In the case of an imperial *mandatum*, the governors were only bound by those which were still current and relevant, and de Ste. Croix notes that: “Official publications of imperial constitutions seems to have been an extremely inefficient and haphazard process.”¹⁶⁶ A governor’s *mandatum* was to rid his province of undesirables and he would often be swayed by the local population.¹⁶⁷ He would “...not normally take action until a formal denunciation...” was issued. Any informants themselves were at risk of the law of “malicious prosecution” being applied to them, if their accusations against a suspected Christian failed.¹⁶⁸

The arbitrariness of Roman law as practised by provincial governors, and the freedom given to them under *cognitio*, in turn produced the gruesome, bodily disfigurements and stigmatisation of the accused. This stigmatisation was a deliberate practice to demonstrate to the public that the Roman Christians were worthy of such punishment, that Rome and its administrators had the knowledge to know who was deserving of punishment; that is, who were society’s undesirables.¹⁶⁹ It was “arbitrary and terrifying” control at a distance. Bryen, in his excellent analysis, points that “only rarely were governors or judges held accountable for illegal behaviour in the courtroom.”¹⁷⁰ It is important to note that non-Christians were also subjected to this brutal stigmatisation, such as the confrontation between the Alexandrians and the “unjust emperors” described in the *Acta Alexandrium papyri*.¹⁷¹

Not all injustices can be laid at the door of the provincial governors of course. In the case of the philosopher Justin Martyr and his friends, they were tried in Rome by Rusticus, who was prefect of Rome during Marcus Aurelius’ reign, and the reasons for Justin’s arrest are unclear.

Musurillo notes that “...shortly before his death he became involved in bitter debate with a Cynic philosopher named Crescens, and this ultimately may have contributed to his arrest and arraignment in Rome.”¹⁷² Interestingly, Rusticus started his interrogation by asking Justin what meetings he was holding.¹⁷³ It is possible that the Rusticus was allowing Justin a way out, to escape the death penalty.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁵ De Ste. Croix, “Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?”, p. 114.

¹⁶⁶ De Ste. Croix, “Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?”, p. 117.

¹⁶⁷ De Ste. Croix, “Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?”, p. 121.

¹⁶⁸ De Ste. Croix, “Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?”, p. 120.

¹⁶⁹ Bryen, “Martyrdom”, p. 249.

¹⁷⁰ Bryen, “Martyrdom,” p. 247.

¹⁷¹ Bryen, “Martyrdom”, p. 244.

¹⁷² Musurillo, *Acts of the Christians Martyrs*, p. xviii.

¹⁷³ “The Martyrdom of Justin”, *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, Vol.1, Ch. 2.

¹⁷⁴ Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, p. xix.

Above all, the martyr acts were spectacles of Roman state power and the crowds demanded such spectacles. They “expected to see a picture of society’s power painted upon the canvas provided by the bodies of the condemned.”¹⁷⁵ The audience “expected to see penitence and terror in the condemned, they expected to hear them scream, and they expected to see the terror in their faces as they confronted the wild beasts.” “When the condemned did not display suitable contrition, the audience might demand additional flogging or torture.”¹⁷⁶ The condemned had already gone through a trial which “was a contest about truth.”¹⁷⁷ The Christian Martyr Acts show Christians taking full advantage of this opportunity to argue for the Christian truth, to challenge their inquisitors, and to assume a posture of victory over the pagans.

After Decius’ edict there were “confessors”, those who had survived the rigours of torture and were released from prison. Clarke comments that these would “remind communities visibly of the stark realities of persecution.”¹⁷⁸ He also notes that the output of Christian martyrdom literature designed to persuade and instruct believers usually followed periods of persecution. Heroic martyr acts circulated widely, as the Church placed a very high spiritual value on confessors and martyrs. The former would be aware that accounts of their heroic deeds would be incorporated into liturgies and recounted on anniversaries.¹⁷⁹ It was an important apologetic and inspirational tool, as Moss argues in her popular book: “Martyrs were ordinary people – slaves, women and children – as well as bishops and soldiers who had risen above the constraints of their circumstances to display exceptional courage.”¹⁸⁰

Following the Decian edict of 249, those who refused to sacrifice to the gods were deliberately disobeying the Emperor’s command. Surely this is *contumacia*? If *contumacia* was the charge under which Christians were martyred following Decius’ edict then, of what value are Barnes’, de Ste. Croix’s and Bryen’s arguments? I believe that the ugly pre-Decian courtroom scenes and tortures which were designed to portray Christians as dangerous subversives, prepared the way for the public acceptance of the martyrdoms under Decius. A Roman provincial governor’s

¹⁷⁵ David Potter, “Martyrdom as Spectacle”, ed. Ruth Scodel, *Theater and Society in the Classical World*, Ann Arbor, 1993, p. 53.

¹⁷⁶ Potter, “Martyrdom as Spectacle,” p. 53.

¹⁷⁷ Potter, “Martyrdom as Spectacle”, p. 54.

¹⁷⁸ Clarke, “Third-Century Christianity”, p. 668.

¹⁷⁹ Clarke, “Third-Century Christianity”, p. 668.

¹⁸⁰ Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, p. 19.

mandatum was to rid his area of control of any undesirables”, and in doing this, he was often “swayed by local opinion”.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ De Ste. Croix, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?”, p. 133.

Chapter 2 The Crisis of Empire

This Chapter outlines the Persian threat, general military and financial distress, political instability following the demise of the Severan dynasty, and the Plague; all of which probably contributed to a what has been called a “Crisis” in the Empire, and may well have motivated Decius to proclaim his mandatory sacrifice edict to pleading for the gods’ protection.

The Persian Threat

Third century C.E., Sasanian Persia was “the most powerful neighbour and nemesis of the Roman Empire.”¹⁸² Alexander the Great had defeated the prevailing Achaemenid Empire which had been the dominant power in the known world, ruling Persia, Mesopotamia, the Levant, Egypt and Anatolia from the sixth to the fourth centuries B.C.E.¹⁸³ Then in 224 C.E. Ardashir, from a local Persian family known as Sasan, defeated the ruling Arsacid, took the title ‘King of Kings’, established a new dynasty (the Sasanian Empire) and stated to threaten the eastern Roman empire. ‘Ardashir’ (Persian spelling) means ‘Artaxerxes’ (Greek spelling),¹⁸⁴ which reveal Ardashir’s grand imperial ambitions, all of which was unexpected and destabilised the eastern border.

The Roman Empire had been distracted by a litany of successors to the imperial throne, as well as ‘internal problems’, and both Elagabalus (218-222) and Alexander Severus (222-235) had failed to deal with the Arsacids and then the Sasanians.¹⁸⁵ Dio Cassius, writing from the Roman viewpoint of the period 222-229 says:¹⁸⁶

Many uprisings were begun by many persons, some of which caused great alarm, but they were all put down. But the situation in Mesopotamia became still more alarming and inspired a more genuine fear in all, not merely the people in Rome, but the rest of mankind as well. For Artaxerxes, a Persian, after conquering the Parthians in three battles and killing their king, Artabanus, made a campaign against Hatra, in the endeavour to capture it as a base for attacking the Romans. He actually did make a breach in the wall, but when he lost a good many soldiers through an ambush, he moved against Media. Of this country, as also of Parthia, he acquired no small portion, partly by force, and partly by intimidation, and then marched against Armenia. Here ... he either fled, as some say, or, as others assert, retired to prepare a larger expedition. He accordingly became a source of fear to us; for he was encamped with a large army so as to threaten not only Mesopotamia but also Syria, and he boasted that he would win back everything

¹⁸² Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, London, 2010, p. xvi.

¹⁸³ Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, p. 1.

¹⁸⁴ Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, p. 2.

¹⁸⁵ Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, p. 3.

¹⁸⁶ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 80.3.1- 4.1.

that the ancient Persians had once held, as far as the Grecian Sea, claiming that all this was his rightful inheritance from his forefathers. The danger lies not in the fact that he seems to be of any particular consequence in himself, but rather in the fact that our armies are in such a state that some of the troops are actually joining him and others are refusing to defend themselves.

Herodian likewise reports on Ardashir's ambition to recover lands which had once belonged to the ancient Persian empire.¹⁸⁷ Commenting on the lack of sources from the Persian viewpoint of this period, Lee has reported that Iranian scholars have cast doubts about Dio Cassius' and Herodian's claims: "There is no independent oriental evidence that the Sasanians retained detailed knowledge of the Achaemenid period."¹⁸⁸ McKechnie has refuted Lee's claim by arguing that it is possible that Ardashir had informants visiting from the Roman lands. Plotinus had gone with Gordian III's expedition, hoping to contact educated Persians and Indians.¹⁸⁹ In addition, there is the choice of the site that Shapur I chose for his rock-relief at Naqsh-e Rostam where he gloated over his victory against Rome (see below). It is just adjacent to the Achaemenid tombs.¹⁹⁰

Gordian brought the army under control,¹⁹¹ but it was a dysfunctional army and was blamed by Dio Cassius for the Romans' fear of Ardashir as cited above.¹⁹² In the end, whatever the truth or otherwise of Ardashir's aims, the key question is how the Romans perceived Ardashir's aims.¹⁹³

Prominent in this era was the Zoroastrian priest Kerdīr.¹⁹⁴ However, Daryaei notes that Kerdīr's inscriptions on "several places" are misleading.¹⁹⁵ For example, on the Ka'ba-yi Zardusht he wrote that Shapur I "made my position independent and authoritative over religious matters at court and in every province and place, and over the priesthood throughout the empire."¹⁹⁶ He then claims to have assailed those of non-Zoroastrian beliefs. In fact, under Shapur I there was either no religious hierarchy or Kerdīr was just a simple priest.¹⁹⁷ Shapur I maintained a tolerance for other religions, and actively encouraged Mani (born 216) to send out missionaries

¹⁸⁷ Herodian, 6. 2. 1 – 3.

¹⁸⁸ A. D. Lee, *Information and Frontiers: Roman foreign relations in late antiquity*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 21.

¹⁸⁹ McKechnie, "Roman Law," p. 258.

¹⁹⁰ Peter. M. Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia*, Oxford, 2008, pp. 157-158.

¹⁹¹ John Drinkwater, "Maximinus to Diocletian and the 'Crisis'", *The Cambridge Ancient History: The Crisis of Empire, AD 193-337*, 2nd. Ed. Vol. 12, Cambridge, 2005, p. 34.

¹⁹² Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 80.4.1.

¹⁹³ Lee, *Information and Frontiers*, p. 23.

¹⁹⁴ "Kerdīr" is also called "Kirdīr" (Mary Boyce, *Textual Sources for the study of Zoroastrianism*, Chicago, 1984) and "Karder" (Ehsan Yarshater, ed. *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Cambridge, 1983), "Kartir" (Richard Frye, "The Sassanians", *The Cambridge Ancient History: The Crisis of Empire, AD 193-337*, Cambridge, 2005, p. 474).

¹⁹⁵ Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia*, pp. 75-76.

¹⁹⁶ Boyce, *Textual Sources*, 10.3.3 verse 1.

¹⁹⁷ Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia*, p. 76.

“throughout the Sassanian empire”.¹⁹⁸ It was only during the time of Wahram II (274-293CE) that Kerdir started his persecution of “Jews, Christians, Manicheans, Mandeans and Buddhists”, that is the non-Zoroastrians throughout the empire.¹⁹⁹ The dating for Mani’s rise is unclear. His missions into the West began in 244, with Egypt’s Edessa becoming one of the earliest Manichean centres.²⁰⁰ But his influence in the Roman empire would probably have come after Decius’ edict.

After Ardashir’s successful campaign in Mesopotamia in 236, he took Dura in 239 and Hatra “by early 241”. Hatra was a Roman client-city, so Gordian III raised a massive army, took his full court, and arrived at Antioch late 242.²⁰¹ In early 244 Gordian’s army was defeated in Assyria by Ardashir’s son Shapur I, and Gordian lost his life. Philip was chosen as the new Roman emperor by his troops by March 244, but he was unpopular because of the generous terms of settlements he made with Shapur I: a large single payout of ransom and he had to concede that Armenia lay within the Persian sphere of influence.²⁰² Daryaee includes “large parts of Mesopotamia” also in this concession, as Shapur I’s reward.²⁰³ Philip arrived back in Rome in mid- 244, had his young son proclaimed Caesar, then in 245 moved into battle on the Danube. He returned to Rome in 247 and started celebrating Rome’s Millennium.²⁰⁴ Shapur I began a second and very successful campaign against the Romans in 252.²⁰⁵

Military and Financial Distress

Historians classify the fifty years after Severus Alexander (235 – 285) as a period of crisis and great dislocation. The military was quite inadequate to cope with the rising aggression of Persia to the east and the Germanic tribes of Franks, Alamanni and Goths in the north.²⁰⁶ The standing armies were strung out along the frontiers, so that it was a cumbersome exercise to raise a field army that was battle ready. The Romans had adopted a “maintenance” strategy to repel or buy off dangerous raiders, and the field armies were mostly infantry, often commanded by inexperienced senators.²⁰⁷ Potter comments that the Romans had an “obsessive desire” to keep control over any piece of land they had ever controlled to feed their “rigid code of military

¹⁹⁸ Frye, “The Sassanians”, p. 474-475.

¹⁹⁹ Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, pp. 10-11.

²⁰⁰ Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, p. 317.

²⁰¹ Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, p. 35.

²⁰² Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, p. 36.

²⁰³ Daryaee, *Sasanaian Persia*, p. 7.

²⁰⁴ Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, pp. 36-37.

²⁰⁵ Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia*, pp. 157-158.

²⁰⁶ Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian,” p. 28.

²⁰⁷ Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, pp. 58 – 59.

glory,” and the Roman frontier was conceptualised as a wall to keep away the barbarians.²⁰⁸ Furthermore, the frontiers which were beleaguered by bandit attacks, provided opportunities for the emperors to counter these forays for their own prestige.²⁰⁹

Military unpreparedness was exacerbated by financial distress. The military had traditionally been funded by taxes which had been comparatively low, and any attempt to raise taxes was a political risk.²¹⁰ Nero and Commodus had both reduced the weight of the *denarius* in the first and second centuries, but Severus may have chosen “debasement as a less obvious way to reduce the intrinsic value” of the denarius. Crawford also claims that it is probable that this debasement “had no inflationary effect,”²¹¹ at least until Severus Alexander’s reign.²¹²

The debasement continued and by Philip’s time the gold coinage purity was stable but there was a variety of weights in the *aurei*; and Philip had to promise 500,000 *aurei* as a ransom to the Persians, which made him very unpopular. As the number of coins needed to make any payment increased, forgery became prolific as it took too long to check each coin. There was a changeover to making payments to soldiers and officials mostly “in kind.”²¹³ Drinkwater comments that by modern standards the Roman economy was “profoundly underdeveloped and, in certain regions, perhaps already in recession; and the consequent loss of productivity further diminished the tax base.”²¹⁴ The disparity between the economic classes was stark. The top three percent of the population “controlled approximately twenty-two percent of the wealth” but it was very difficult to extract more from them,²¹⁵ and the military defeats “accelerated economic collapse.”²¹⁶

The economic difficulties of this period were evidenced by the lack of public benefactions and by few new inscriptions, and the avoidance of citizens wanting municipal office, which was once a coveted status. City buildings such as the baths, fountains, aqueducts and markets fell into disrepair. In North Africa after the death of Gordian III inscriptions for new buildings or public

²⁰⁸ Potter, *Prophecy and History*, p. 12.

²⁰⁹ John Drinkwater, *The Alamanni and Rome, 213 – 496*, Oxford, 2007, p. 9.

²¹⁰ Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, p. 59.

²¹¹ Michael Crawford, “Finance, Coinage and Money from the Severans to Constantine”, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, 2.2, Berlin, 1975, pp. 563.’/

²¹² Crawford, “Finance,” p. 568.

²¹³ Crawford, “Finance”, pp. 569 – 571.

²¹⁴ Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, p. 59.

²¹⁵ Potter, *Prophecy and History*, p. 10.

²¹⁶ Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, p. 308.

benefactions became rare, whereas previously there had been many.²¹⁷ Liebeschuetz claims that:²¹⁸

It was, by and large, in the years 240 -250 that all over the empire the construction of monumental building and the setting up of new commemorative inscriptions (including – and this is surely significant – dedications to the gods) very nearly stopped, never to be resumed on anything like the old scale.

Political Instability

Between 235 and 285 there were fifty-one men who “legitimately or illegitimately” were proclaimed “emperor”.²¹⁹ There was “no institutional way to select a new monarch,” and civil war could erupt at any time.²²⁰ Severus Alexander was despised by his troops for attempting to negotiate with the Germans when he had a large army who could have defeated them,²²¹ and he was perceived as a “mother’s boy”.²²² He and his mother Julia Mamaea were murdered in 235 by the army’s decision, with Maximinus complicit, and the latter seized power.²²³ One scholar sees it as quite significant that Maximinus subsequently refused to go to Rome to be endorsed as emperor, and that this indicated “a breakdown in that delicate equilibrium between the senate and the army which had hitherto guaranteed the process of imperial legitimation, (though admittedly with varying success.)”²²⁴

Maximinus (235 – 8) was a disciplinarian, and finally his troops mutinied and killed him and his son,²²⁵ then followed Pupienus, Balbinus (238). Pupienus, also known as Maximus,²²⁶ and Balbinus were elected co-emperors to prevent the “tyranny” of the absolute power that had been in the hands of Maximinus.²²⁷ Relationships between the two emperors deteriorated, each vying for precedence over the other,²²⁸ and they were murdered by the praetorian guard, who then proclaimed Gordian III as emperor as he was already “Caesar”.²²⁹

²¹⁷ Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, p. 308.

²¹⁸ Wolf, Liebeschuetz, “Was There a Crisis of the Third Century?”, eds. Olivier Hekster et. al., *Crisis and the Roman Empire*, Proceedings of the Seventh Workshop of the International Network Impact of the Empire, June 20 – 24 2006, Leiden, 2007, pp. 11 – 20, p. 18.

²¹⁹ Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, p. 28.

²²⁰ Potter, *Prophecy and History*, p. 13.

²²¹ Herodian, 6. 7. 9 – 10.

²²² Herodian, 6. 8. 3.

²²³ Herodian, 6. 8. 4 – 6. 9. 8

²²⁴ Elio Lo Cascio, “The Emperor and His Administration”, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol 12, 2nd ed, p 156.

²²⁵ Herodian, 7. 1. 1 – 2; Herodian, 7. 1. 4; Herodian, 7. 5. 1 – 2; Herodian,

²²⁶ Herodian, “Index” to Whittaker’s translation, London, 1969, Vol. II p. 317.

²²⁷ Herodian, 7. 10. 2.

²²⁸ Herodian, 8. 8. 4 – 5.

²²⁹ Herodian, 8. 8. 6 – 7.

Earlier in 238 Gordian I, a senator from a rich family, together with his son Gordian II, tried to usurp power, but Gordian II was killed in battle and his father hanged himself.²³⁰ The army made Gordian III emperor with the agreement of the senate.²³¹ It was hoped that Gordian III (238 – 244) would restore the monarchy as it had been under Severus Alexander; he was required to respect the senate and the army was “brought firmly under control.” But Gordian had to face the aggressive Persian monarch Shapur I. In early 244 he was either killed in battle or by his own men after their defeat by the Persians.²³²

Philip eagerly accepted the emperorship in March 244, which led some to suspect that he had plotted against Gordian.²³³ He was already both unpopular and cash strapped because of the 500,000 *aurei* and the territory of Armenia that he had been made to concede to Shapur I. He was also extravagant, building his home village into the grand city of Philippopolis. His brother tried to raise taxes in Egypt, which resulted in rioting, which in turn may have impeded the all-important supply of wheat to Rome. Philip moved to end the subsidies previously granted to those Goths who “still enjoyed some sort of allied status”, but this proved to be fatal. Goths and their allies poured into Moesia Inferior, and Philip sent Decius to deal with them,²³⁴ which proved to be a fatal mistake on Philip’s part. Decius was so successful that his troops in May or June 249 proclaimed him emperor.²³⁵ The two armies met in Verona in August or September 249, Philip was killed, and his son in Rome was murdered.

Plague

Cyprian’s *To Demetrian* gives insight into commonly held beliefs which blamed the Christians for all kinds of calamities:²³⁶

...when you say that very many are complaining and are blaming us because wars are arising more frequently, because the plague, famine are raging, and because long droughts are suspending rains and showers, I should be silent no longer...

²³⁰ Herodian, 7. 9. 4 – 5; Herodian. 7. 9. 9 – 10. Herodian’s narrative seems to be out of date order, returning to a description of Gordian I’s suicide. Gordian I and II were made emperors in Herodian 7. 7. 2, and Gordian II’s death is recorded by Herodian, 7. 9. 7.

²³² Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, p. 36.

²³³ Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, p. 36.

²³⁴ Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, p. 37.

²³⁵ Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, p. 38.

²³⁶ Cyprian, *To Demetrian*, 2.

Cyprian refers to the devastation now called by Harper as the “plague of Cyprian”.²³⁷ Pandemics in the ancient world were in fact quite rare. The Antonine plague of the mid-160s C.E., described by Galen, was probably smallpox; and the Justinianic plague striking in 541 CE and then intermittently for the next two hundred years has been identified as caused by *Yersinia pestis*.²³⁸ This is a bacterial infection that causes bubonic, septicaemic and pneumonic plague.²³⁹ Soon after the implementation of Decius’ edict had passed, Cyprian refers to another public edict that had been ordered. In *Letter 59*, Cyprian, now out of hiding, stated his refusal to attend “...the sacrifices which the people have been ordered to celebrate by a public edict.”²⁴⁰ Clarke relates this to the summer of 252, notes that the scope was imperial not local, and that the reason for the sacrifices may have been to avert the plague.²⁴¹

Cyprian’s *On the Mortality* (or *The Plague*) clearly describes the range of surprising symptoms which must have struck terror and panic into people:²⁴²

This trial, that now the bowels, relaxed into a constant flux, discharge the bodily strength; that a fire originated in the marrow ferments into wounds of the fauces; that the intestines are shaken with a continual vomiting; that the eyes are on fire with the injected blood; that in some cases the feet or some parts of the limbs are taken off by the contagion of diseased putrefaction; that the weakness arising by the maiming and loss of the body, either the gait is enfeebled, or the hearing is obstructed, or the sight darkened...

Pontius also writes:²⁴³

Afterwards there broke out a dreadful plague, and excessive destruction of a hateful disease invaded every house in succession...All were shuddering, fleeing, shunning the contagion...There lay about the meanwhile, over the whole city, no longer bodies, but the carcasses of many...

Amber Kearns has completed a differential diagnosis of the symptoms and concluded that it was probably a viral haemorrhagic disease like Ebola,²⁴⁴ whilst admitting that there could have been several smaller outbreaks of different causes throughout the empire.²⁴⁵

²³⁷ Kyle Harper, “Pandemics and Passages to late antiquity: rethinking the plague of c249-270 described by Cyprian”, *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Vol.28, 2015, pp. 223 – 260, p. 224.

²³⁸ Harper, “Pandemics and Passages,” p. 223.

²³⁹ Amber Kearns, *A Plague in Crisis: Differential Diagnosis of the Cyprian Plague and Its Effects on the Roman Empire in the Third Century CE.*, Thesis submitted to The University of Arizona, 2018, p. 44.

²⁴⁰ Cyprian, *Letters*, 59. 6. 1.

²⁴¹ Clarke, “Notes”, Vol.3, *Letter 59*, 6. 1, pp. 245, 246.

²⁴² Cyprian, *On the Mortality (or Plague)* 14.

²⁴³ Pontius, *Life of Cyprian*, 9.

²⁴⁴ Kearns, *A Plague in Crisis*, pp. 53, 54.

²⁴⁵ Kearns, *A Plague in Crisis*, p. 41.

The *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* in rather typical fashion includes “plagues” in the list of catastrophes falling on men²⁴⁶, which is hardly conclusive of itself, but is very significant within the gambit of the eschatological dread which may have accompanied the arrival of the millennium.

Dionysius is more specific about the effects on the populace in a letter he wrote from Alexandria to Hierax, an Egyptian bishop, which Strobel dates to 249 CE.²⁴⁷ After a drought then a flood,²⁴⁸ came the pestilence, which gave Dionysius the opportunity to praise the care that Christians gave to everyone and in contrast to the “heathen”.²⁴⁹ This means that the plague which Cyprian described (but he was writing from Carthage), most probably occurred in Egypt before breaking out in Carthage.²⁵⁰

Harper has assembled impressive literary, numismatic and archaeological evidence for this plague.²⁵¹ Along with literary references, he notes that the image of Apollo, with “Apollo Salutari” newly appears on coins of Trebonianus Gallus (dating to the second half of 251 C.E.)²⁵², Volusianus, Aemilianus, Valerian and Gallieus. Apollo was believed to be a protector against plague.²⁵³ An archaeological site near Thebes has a mass grave of the mid-third century and a “body disposal operation” comprising of lime kilns and corpse-incinerators. A second mass burial site has been found in the catacombs of Saints Peter and Marcellinus in Rome, indicating “epidemic mortality”, but the dating is uncertain.²⁵⁴ Harper speculates that the probable cause of the Antonine plague was “a relapse of smallpox²⁵⁵”, and so the appearance of a haemorrhagic disease would be new and strange.

The Historia Augusta, (reporting on the year 262²⁵⁶) in a passage which follows reports of war, earthquake and the earth swallowed up by sea water (a tsunami?) writes:²⁵⁷

Therefore, the peace of God was sought by inspection of the Sibylline books, and a sacrifice was made to Jupiter Salutaris as they had commanded. For such a great plague arose in both Rome and the cities of Greece that in one day 5000 people died of the same plague.

²⁴⁶ Potter, “Commentary”, p. 187.

²⁴⁷ Harper, “Pandemics and Passages,” p. 227, n. 23.

²⁴⁸ Eusebius, *Church History*, 21.

²⁴⁹ Eusebius, *Church History*, 22. 1, 6, 7, 10.

²⁵⁰ Kearns, *A Plague in Crisis*, p. 17.

²⁵¹ Harper, “Pandemics and Passages, Abstract”, p. 224.

²⁵² Harper, “Pandemics and Passages”, p. 225, depicting Trebonianus Gallus’s coinage from *RIC* 4.3, p. 154

²⁵³ Harper, “Pandemics and Passages”, p. 225.

²⁵⁴ Harper, “Pandemics and Passages”, p. 226.

²⁵⁵ Harper, “Another eyewitness,” pp. 474, 475.

²⁵⁶ Harper, “Pandemics and Passages”, p. 235.

²⁵⁷ *Historia Augusta, The Two Gallieni*, 5. 5, quoted in Harper from *SHA*, ed. Hohl. 3rd ed., vol. 2, 1997

Later historians have also reported this plague.²⁵⁸ We cannot presume that the causative virus has remained unmutated for 1800 years, so we cannot extrapolate from the Ebola mortality rates in this century. What we can say with certainty is that to the ancients, this was a new strange and terrifying disease, highly contagious and with a high mortality rate, resulting in sacrifices to the gods. Along with other fears of the age, it is a strong candidate as a trigger for prompting Decius to issue his edict.

An Age of Crisis?

Alföldy has traced what he believes are the viewpoints of the contemporaries of this time, and has concluded that:²⁵⁹

Roman society was generally convinced that it was living in an age of serious transformations, and that the result of these changes meant present collapse or future uncertainty for the Empire. A general transformation of the traditional order was the basic experience of people when considering contemporary events. From third-century authors may be derived a catalogue of basic changes in the situation in the Empire.

Peter Brown has a slightly different slant: the empire's first and second centuries were considered as the "Golden Age". In the third century its citizens "...had to face up to the unpleasant, day to day realities of life in a beleaguered superpower."²⁶⁰ Liebeschuetz claims that many scholars today "positively" reject this designation of a third-century crisis, by stressing rather "continuity" and "transformation".²⁶¹ Liebeschutz refutes these scholars.²⁶²

When looking for a trigger for Decius' edict, what matters is how *he* considered the threats he faced, and unfortunately, he has left us no record of that. We must be careful that we do not put a modern construct on to the ancients.

²⁵⁸ Harper, "Pandemics and Passages", p. 226.

²⁵⁹ Géza Alföldy, "The Crisis of the Third Century as Seen by Contemporaries," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, Spring 1974, 15. 1, pp. 89 – 111, p. 98.

²⁶⁰ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200 – 1000*, Oxford, 2003, p. 56.

²⁶¹ Liebeschuetz, "Was There a Crisis of the Third Century?", p. 11.

²⁶² Liebeschuetz, "Was There a Crisis of the Third Century?", p. 18.

Chapter 3 Events, Evidence and Assessment A

Here the events leading up to the Decian edict are discussed, along with an analysis of the *libelli*, Roman religion and the Caracalla citizenship proclamation. A survey of Roman religion, cults and Imperial Cult is necessary to understand the significance of the edict to both polytheists and (Roman) Christians throughout the Empire, and also to argue against Rives' thesis that the Decian edict was a religious corollary to Caracalla's edict.

Decius

C. Messius Quintus Decius was an Illyrian who married into Roman aristocracy, into the "house of the Herennians."²⁶³ He was born about 190 and his father may have been a senator under Severus, as he himself became.²⁶⁴ According to six inscriptions, Decius was legate of Moesia Inferior, setting up two milestones on the road from Odessus to the Danube.²⁶⁵ Here and in Spain he "...showed himself a keen road builder or a keen erector of milestones".²⁶⁶ Under Philip he became the prefect of Rome.²⁶⁷ By taking the name Trajan on his elevation to the purple he was declaring his conservatism. Trajan was one of the emperors who had "made Rome great" and Decius was probably yearning for those days again.²⁶⁸ Potter suggests that he was "...deeply conservative, that he was deeply pious, that he possessed a ferocious temper, and that he was quite stupid."²⁶⁹ Potter elsewhere modified this statement;²⁷⁰ and, as Birley notes, Decius was "highly rated by Severus Alexander, Maximinus and Philip."²⁷¹

As a good administrator, he would have known the organisational challenges facing his governors when implementing the *libelli*, especially in remote areas of his empire. Therefore, I reject Rives' throwaway line that Decius may have mandated the *libelli* on "a whim".²⁷² Potter (2018) maintains his opinion of Decius as incompetent, at least in military matters, by noting that

²⁶³ Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, pp. 318, 319.

²⁶⁴ A. R. Birley, "Decius Reconsidered", *Les empereurs illyriens, (Actes du colloque de Strasbourg 11 – 13 octobre 1990)* Strasbourg, 1998, pp. 60, 61.

²⁶⁵ Birley, "Decius Reconsidered", p. 63.

²⁶⁶ Birley, "Decius Reconsidered", p. 65.

²⁶⁷ Birley, "Decius Reconsidered", p. 67.

²⁶⁸ Potter, *Prophecy and History*, pp. 41, 42.

²⁶⁹ Potter, *Prophecy and History*, p. 41.

²⁷⁰ Potter, *Prophecy and History*, p. 260.

²⁷¹ Birley, "Decius Reconsidered", p. 74, n. 144.

²⁷² Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 151.

he was “...the first emperor to die in battle against external enemies”, near Abrittus at the end of May 251.²⁷³

Babcock describes an excavation in 1953 at Cosa in central Italy. A former statue base which had cut been into blocks and was weathered badly on the inscribed surface has revealed a text in eight lines, the height of letters being 4.3cm to 5.8cm. Only the emperor’s name has been partly erased but the imperial titles and “*restitutor sacrorum et libertatis*” is untouched. The imperial designation could apply to thirty or more emperors from Commodus to Theodosius 1, and the *restitutor libertatis* title could be used of almost any of the “military usurpers of this era”.²⁷⁴ However, *restitutor sacrorum* is a “...more limiting and specific attribution,” and this was later used of Julian. In this inscription the name of C. Messius Q. Traianus Decius can be reconstructed from the remainder,²⁷⁵ but the identity and motive of whoever tried to erase Decius’ name is unknown. Selinger disagrees with Babcock as to the identity of the emperor, asserting that it is more likely to be that of Julian (360 – 363).²⁷⁶ There is an inscription in Aquileia concerning the restoration of a statue to Neptune, and this is more likely to be of Decius, probably during a visit.²⁷⁷

The *Letter of Decius*, by the Athenian Dexippus and a contemporary of Decius, gives an insight into the perils facing Roman emperors and the risk management challenges that Decius faced daily. An analysis has illustrated “Decius’ reaction to the Gothic incursions into the Balkan provinces.”²⁷⁸ Dexippus recreated what he thinks Decius would have written in the light of the historical facts known by Dexippus.²⁷⁹ The Goths, under Cniva, were about to attack Philippopolis, having come from attacking Nikopolis in Moesia Inferior. Decius wrote to Philippopolis urging that its citizens must not take on the Goths themselves, but should wait for Decius’ arrival. History gives different versions of the outcome: Decius defeated Cniva near Nikopolis, resulting in the deaths of 30,000 Goths; or, Cniva withdrew when Decius arrived.²⁸⁰ Fragment 26.1 reads:²⁸¹

²⁷³ David Potter, “Decian and Valerian”, *Imagining Emperors in the later Roman Empire*, eds. Diederik, W. P. Burgersdijk and Alan J. Ross, Leiden, 2018, p. 18.

²⁷⁴ Charles L. Babcock, “An Inscription of Trajan Decius from Cosa”, *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 83, No. 2 (Apr., 1962) pp. 153, 154.

²⁷⁵ Babcock, “An Inscription”, p. 155.

²⁷⁶ Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions*, 2004, p. 30.

²⁷⁷ Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions*, p. 29.

²⁷⁸ Davenport and Mallan, “Dexippus’ Letter of Decius”, pp. 57, 59, 61.

²⁷⁹ Davenport and Masllan, “Dexippus’ Letter of Decius”, p. 57.

²⁸⁰ Davenport and Mallan, “Dexippus’ Letter of Decius”, p. 62.

²⁸¹ *Letter of Decius*.

...that Decius, the Roman emperor...was afraid of the power growing in Thrace, worried that it might prompt some radical change in the empire's condition. And he tried to stop them from taking up arms against the enemy by writing to them. He did so without revealing his true intentions because he was deeply afraid that, lacking military experience, these men might advance too far and put their ill-timed enthusiasm to the test before reinforcements from him had arrived.

Dexippus presents Decius' real motivation as fear that if the Thracians alone prevailed over the Goths, they may rebel against him as their emperor. In fact, the governor of Thrace did side with Cniva after Philippopolis fell to the Goths,²⁸² just as Decius himself had usurped Philip. Another recently analysed fragment from Dexippus refers to a speech Decius gave to his men after their defeat before Philippopolis was captured by the Goths, and in which he blames the scouts' treachery.²⁸³ Potter refers to yet another fragment of Dexippus where Decius "...lost control of his emotions after the death of his son Herennius Etruscus."²⁸⁴ In summary Dexippus considered Decius to be a failure.²⁸⁵

The Historia Augusta has a very different view of Decius. Within a panegyric to the emperor Aurelian the author writes to the "deified" emperor who ruled later in the third century. He bewails the fact that there have been so few good emperors: "observe...how few in number are the good emperors...but on the other hand, what a list of the evil!"²⁸⁶ Included in that "list of evil" are Vitellius, Caligula, Nero, Maximinus and Philip, but he excepts "the Decii" "...who in their lives and their deaths should be likened to the ancients."²⁸⁷ Decius and his sons represented the good old traditional emperors.

Potter comments that Decius had two sons, Herennius Etruscus and Hostilianus, both aged "under twenty" years of age, as depicted on Decius' coins. Herennius seems to have been Caesar by 8 June 250, and in 251 "was consul with his father and elevated to Augustus". It is not clear when Herennius died; Hostilianus reigned briefly in the east with Gallus.²⁸⁸ The *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* writes: "then the king of the Italians will fall in battle, smitten by gleaming iron, in a state of disarray; and his sons will be destroyed with him."²⁸⁹ Potter points

²⁸² Davenport and Mallan, "Dexippus' Letter of Decius", p. 66.

²⁸³ Potter, "Decius and Valerian," p. 24, n. 20 referring to G. Martin, "'Skythika Vindoboniensia' by Dexippus (?): New Fragments on Decius' Gothic Wars," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 54, pp. 728 – 54.

²⁸⁴ Potter, "Decius and Valerian," p. 26, n. 25.

²⁸⁵ Potter, "Decius and Valerian", p. 26.

²⁸⁶ *Historia Augusta*, Vol. 3, 42. 6, ed. David Magie, London, 1924

²⁸⁷ *Historia Augusta*, Vol. 3, 42. 6, ed. David Magie, London, 1924

²⁸⁸ Potter, "Commentary", *Prophecy and History*. pp. 282, 283.

²⁸⁹ *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, lines 100 – 102.

out that the plural “sons” (*paedeis*) is incorrect and shows the writer’s ignorance about events in other parts of the empire.²⁹⁰

Philip returned to Rome by August 247 after defeating the Carpi and their Gothic allies and pursuing them as far as southern Dacia in the Balkans. That August, he started celebrations for the thousandth anniversary of Rome’s founding. This would have started on 21 April 247 with the main events postponed until the emperor’s arrival back in Rome. This was styled as both a millennium celebration combined with his victories in battle, plus the promotion of his son to the rank of Augustus.²⁹¹ Alternatively, Clarke gives the date for the millennium games as the 21st April 248, and there were “three days and nights of theatrical pageants in Campus Martius.”²⁹² Huskinson agrees with this date, adding that the “secular games” included “...lavish displays of wild animals in the Colosseum”.²⁹³ She also describes Philip’s special issue of coins, which were inscribed with the words *Saeculum Novum* to look forward, not only back.²⁹⁴

The immediate precedent for celebrations for the Millennium would have been those ceremonies popularised by the Severan dynasty. Septimus Severus (acknowledged by the Senate in 197) attempted to portray himself “to spectators in Rome as successor to Augustus”, and he celebrated the *ludi saeculares* (“secular/centenary games) in 204, “precisely 220 years after the Augustan ones in 17 B.C.”²⁹⁵ The games “accurately mirrored” those of Augustus’ games.²⁹⁶

“...the inscribed *acta* for both celebrations reveal many similarities in the forms of ritual. The preliminaries to the games (such as a senatorial decree to curb women’s mourning, and arrangements to distribute purificatory materials to the population), the order of sacrifices and the identity of deities honoured by them, and the wording of the prayers essentially repeated the earlier ones...(there was)... an innovatory approach to documenting the games epigraphically...The Severan *acta* provide a much denser level of individual details.

Alternatively, was Decius wanting a re-celebration of his accession? Selinger has analysed the past ceremonies connected with the accession for a new emperor, and he believes that the

²⁹⁰ Potter, “Commentary”, p. 283.

²⁹¹ Drinkwater, “Maximinus to Diocletian”, pp. 36, 37.

²⁹² Clarke, “Introduction”, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 22.

²⁹³ Janet Huskinson, “Art and Architecture, AD 193 – 337”, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed., Vol. 12, Cambridge, 2006, p. 687.

²⁹⁴ Huskinson, “Art and Architecture”, p. 687.

²⁹⁵ Alison Cooley, “Septimus Severus: the Augustan emperor”, eds. Simon Swain, Stephen Harrison and Jas Elsner, *Severan Culture*, Cambridge, 2007, p. 391

²⁹⁶ Cooley, “Septimus Severus”, p. 391

sacrifices required by Decius mirror those past sacrifices and celebrations. This theory has received strong support from many modern scholars, and I will consider it in the final chapter.²⁹⁷

For Decius' motivation, the most revealing is the image he projected. His coinage depicted eleven of the deified emperors: "Augustus, Vespasian, Titus, Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Septimus Severus and Severus Alexander," for his *antoninianus*, a double denarius. Pohlsander speculates that Decius may have hoped to become the twelfth member of a "pantheon of *divi*." Surely we must understand this series in the context of a general revival of pagan religion and as a statement of both political and religious import."²⁹⁸

Alternatively, Rives argued that the *divi* coinage was not religious, and that "the evidence for Decius' devotion to traditional religion is scantier than one might expect."²⁹⁹ I believe that Decius' edict contradicts Rives here. Selinger may be right when he suggests that "the whole concept of the consecration coins is based on a dynastic rather than a religious idea."³⁰⁰ But Decius was securing his dynasty through religion. I do not believe that we are entitled, from our modern perspective, to divide the narrative of dynastic, political power from that of traditional religion, which was the mechanism by which claims to power were legitimised.

The manner of an emperor's portrayal was vital for the maintenance of his power and legitimacy, and nowhere would this be more important than in the remote provinces, especially amongst illiterates. Visual image was very important: in portraits, statues, on coins and with physical public appearances at festivals, theatres and in battles, as well as his edicts and rulings.³⁰¹ The nomenclature taken by emperors asserted continuity with Augustus.³⁰²

In trying to understand Decius' mind, Brent examines the "iconography of his predecessors and his successes", to define the "conceptual backcloth." This was:³⁰³

...in a pagan and popularly Stoic eschatology about the decline of the golden age into one that necessitated a *restitutio orbis*... Thus a *saeculum novum* would be born along with a *pax eterna*.

²⁹⁷ Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions*, pp. 32 – 33.

²⁹⁸ Hans A. Pohlsander, "The Religious Policy of Decius", *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II, 16. 3, Berlin, 1986, pp. 1830, 1831.

²⁹⁹ J. B. Rives, "The Decree of Decius", p. 143.

³⁰⁰ Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century*, p. 28.

³⁰¹ Burgersdijk and Ross, *Imagining Emperors*, p. 1.

³⁰² Burgersdijk and Ross, *Imagining Emperors*, p. 3.

³⁰³ Brent, Allen, *Cyprian*, pp. 170 – 171. *Restitutio orbis* means literally: "restorer of the world".

Further:³⁰⁴

The restitutor orbis would be a new Sun god...bringing back the kingdom of Saturn, as predicted in the first edition of Oracula Sibyllina 13, written in the apocalyptic genre of a prophecy from the past in which the chaos and decline of the present could be transformed in the felicity of the coming reign.

Decius envisaged himself fulfilling this "...pagan millennialist expectation...not in his own individual person, but in the persons of the dead and deified emperors."³⁰⁵ By omitting some bad emperors (e.g. Nero, Domitian and Elagabalus), and others like the three Gordians and Philip, he was denying them "legitimacy".³⁰⁶

If Brent is right, Decius was thereby disowning Philip's legacy. Decius had more reasons to hate Philip than the latter's purported Christian sympathies. He may well have despised Philip for losing Armenian territory to the Persians and the huge ransom. This line of reasoning justifies the explanation that Decius' edict was a repeat celebration of the millennium. Philip's ceremonies were clearly ineffective and had to be repeated. After all, there may have been no proven model for a millennial celebration!

The *Libelli*

These are the only material evidence of Decius' edict, and now at least forty-seven have been published. Schubert updated Knipfing's original forty-one *libelli* to now forty-six,³⁰⁷ and *P. Luther* 4 was published by Claytor.³⁰⁸ Knipfing's conclusion, from the names on the *libelli*:³⁰⁹

...shows that Decius' original edict of persecution had been framed in general terms, with the command that all inhabitants whether Christian or pagan, citizen or non-citizen, male or female, major or minor, should sacrifice to the gods...

Without evidence some academics still argue that although the sacrifice was compulsory for everyone, certification was only required of Christians or suspected Christians, because of the "administrative burden."³¹⁰ However, elsewhere Mary Beard and her co-authors concede that

³⁰⁴ Brent, *Cyprian*, pp. 170, 171.

³⁰⁵ Brent, *Cyprian*, pp. 171, 172.

³⁰⁶ Brent, *Cyprian*, p. 172.

³⁰⁷ Paul Schubert, "On the Form and Content of the Certificates of Pagan Sacrifice," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 106, November 216, pp. 172 – 198, p. 172.

³⁰⁸ W. Graham Claytor, "A Decian Libellus at Luther College (Iowa)", *Tyche, Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Band 30, 2015, pp. 13 – 18, on *P. Luther*, p. 13.

³⁰⁹ Knipfing, "The Libelli", p. 362.

³¹⁰ Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome*, Vol. 2, *A Sourcebook*, Cambridge, 1998, p. 165.

“...Decius stands as an advocate of traditional religion first, a persecutor of Christians only second.”³¹¹

All the *libelli* (but some names are missing) bear the Aurelian name, denoting Roman citizenship. It was earlier thought that No. 35 in Knipfing’s publication belonged to “Inaris, daughter of Akios”, i.e. not a Roman Citizen, but Clarke reported that a subsequent re-reading of this *libellus* has discerned the “Aurelia” in the text.³¹² I argue that it would be unlikely that Decius would bother to exempt the “unenfranchised *dediticii*” so that this question is not relevant. Brent assumes that the unenfranchised were exempt, but he provides no proof.³¹³

Knipfing tries to ascertain if any of the names in the *libelli* are uniquely Christian. These would be those Christians who had apostasised and sacrificed, and those who had bought the *libelli* without sacrificing. He sensibly refutes a theory that those Christians who had either apostasised or bought *libelli* would have destroyed them after the edict had run its course: two identical *libelli* in the same name have been found, implying that all *libelli* were made out in duplicate and one copy was filed with the local administration which would be out of reach of the *libelli* owners.³¹⁴ As to uniquely Christian names, Knipfing found possibly two Oxyrhynchus *libelli* that could be Christian: *P. Oxy.* 4, No. 658 contains the names “Theodore” and “Dioscorus” among other names. He comments that “Theodore” was a name often used by Christians then; and “Dioscorus”, although pagan, has been found in bishop Dionysius’ letters.³¹⁵ The other *libellus* is *P. Oxy* 12, No. 1464, and contains the name of Thecla, which may have been popularised by the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla.³¹⁶

Luijendijk concludes that: “Although impossible to determine whether any of the *libelli* found thus far attest the sacrifice of Christians, two Oxyrhynchus documents from the same decade explicitly mention Christians.”³¹⁷ However, I do not understand how Luijendijk can then earlier write that: “...therefore the *libelli* do not belong to apostasised Christians”, and then saying that it is impossible to determine if any of the *libelli* belong to Christians! We know from Cyprian’s and Dionysius’ letters, and also from *Pionius* that there were Christians who apostasised.

³¹¹ Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome*, Vol. 1, *A History*, Cambridge, 1998, p. 243.

³¹² Clarke, *Some Observations*, p. 69.

³¹³ Brent, *Cyprian*, p. 6.

³¹³ Knipfing, “The *Libelli*”, pp. 358, 359.

³¹⁴ Knipfing, “The *Libelli*”, p. 359.

³¹⁵ *P. Oxy* 4, No. 658, p. 49, 1904, published in Knipfing, “*Libelli*”, pp. 365, 366.

³¹⁶ *P. Oxy* 12, No. 1464, 1916, published by Knipfing, “*Libelli*” pp. 383, 384.

³¹⁷ AnneMarie Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord. Early Christians and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Cambridge, MA, 2008, p. 174.

One *libellus* from Ptolemais Euergetis in the Arsinoite nome³¹⁸ is from Aurelia Ammonous, who adds that she is the priestess of the god Petesouchos. An intriguing addition to this *libellus* is the inclusion of number 433 at the beginning. Schubert plausibly argues that this denotes the 433rd *libellus* that was part of a pile that had been secured together.³¹⁹ Considering that sometimes whole families were included on one *libellus*,³²⁰ it would be unlikely for 433 or more Christians or families to be in Theadelphia (also in the Arsinoite nome) at this time, especially as the lead time to the edict's implementation in Middle Egypt would allow Christians to flee.³²¹ Bagnall estimates that the population of the Arsinoite nome in Roman Egypt would be over 120,000.³²²

All the *libelli* date to between June and July 250 (spring or summer),³²³ and the majority originate from the village of Theadelphia in the Arsinoite nome. Others are from elsewhere in the Arsinoite and Oxyrhynchite nomes.³²⁴ *Libelli* from outside Theadelphia but still inside the nome are more like the Theadelphian *libelli*, and the Oxyrhynchite *libelli* "...display the most important variation in layout."³²⁵

Schubert has compared the Arsinoite and Oxyrhynchus *libelli*.³²⁶

Past conduct Arsinoite nome: "The applicant has always taken part in sacrifices (and shown piety towards the gods)."

Past conduct Oxyrhynchite nome: "The applicant has always taken part in sacrifices (and shown piety) and poured libations for the gods." Those of Arsinoite do not mention libations.

Present action Arsinoite nome: "He takes part in a sacrifice, pours libations, tastes the offering and requests that his action be certified."

Present Action Oxyrhynchite nome: "He takes part in the sacrifice, pours libations, tastes the offering and requests that his action be certified." Agrees with Arsinoite wording.

In Egypt it is likely that Decius' edict was sent to the Prefect who forwarded it in Greek to the *strategoi* in charge of the nomes. The actual certificate template would have been decided at the

³¹⁸ No. 3, *P. Alexandrin.* (1900) republished by Knipfing, "Libelli", pp. 364, 365.

³¹⁹ Schubert, "On the Form and Content of the Certificates," p. 175.

³²⁰ Schubert, "On the Form and Content of the Certificates," p. 175. There is also evidence of whole households coming together or of one person sacrificing on behalf of his whole household in Cyprian's writings e.g. *Letter* 55, *Letter* 15. 4, and *Letter to the Lapsed*.

³²¹ Dionysius bishop of Alexandria reported people vanishing into the deserts and wilderness: Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 42. 2.

³²² Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 55.

³²³ Schubert, "On the Form and Content of the Certificates," p. 177.

³²⁴ Schubert, "On the Form and Content of the Certificates," p. 179.

³²⁵ Schubert, "On the Form and Content of the Certificates," p. 179.

³²⁶ Schubert, "On the Form and Content of the Certificates", p. 187.

level of the nomes.³²⁷ The address in the Oxyrhynchite *libelli* is “notably inconsistent” compared with the Arsinoite *libelli*.³²⁸ In Theadelphia “several scribes” wrote and some wrote more than one document, as illustrated by Schubert.³²⁹ In other centres of the Arsinoite nome outside Theadelphia, the scribes “...seem to rely on a model that is basically the same as in Theadelphia, although the scribal habits can vary.”³³⁰ In the Oxyrhynchus nome “...as far as we can judge from the scanty evidence available, models are not as consistent as in the Arsinoite.”³³¹

The *Martyrdom of Pionius* agrees with the elements of the sacrifice in the *libelli*. “The apostate bishop Euctemon had brought a little lamb to the temple of Nemesis, and after it was roasted and had eaten of it...”³³²

A study of Egypt’s census and other official documents can be compared with the *libelli*.³³³

To the commission in charge of the sacred victims and sacrifices of the city. From Aurelius L(...)thion, son of Theodore and Pantonymis, his mother, of the same city. I have always and without interruption sacrificed and poured libation to the gods, and now in your presence in accordance with the decree I have poured a libation, and sacrificed, and partaken of the sacred victims, together with my son Aurelius Dioscorus and my daughter Aurelia Lais. I request you to certify this for me below. Year one of Emperor Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Traianus Decius Pius Felix Augustus.

This seems to “parallel the process of tax collection very closely.” The *libellus* obtained after compliance was like the tax receipt after payment.³³⁴ Papyrologists have discovered vast numbers of formal petitions, receipts, liturgies, exemptions and so on.³³⁵ Roman administrators knew a great deal about their subjects! The basis of the taxes was the census which was held every fourteen years, from at least 33 – 257 CE, the wording of which included the words: “In accordance with the orders...I register for the house-by-house census...the quarter share of vacant lots belonging to me...” in papyri from the same village five years earlier. The applicant swore an oath as to the veracity of the statement then received a copy.³³⁶

Cyprian concurs with the reading aloud of the text of the applicant’s oath: “those who had betrayed their own loss of faith by unlawfully acknowledging to be their own sacrilegious

³²⁷ Schubert, “On the Form and Content of the Certificates”, p 187.

³²⁸ Schubert, “On the Form and Content of the Certificates,” p. 186.

³²⁹ Schubert, “On the Form and Content of the Certificates,” pp. 181 – 182.

³³⁰ Schubert, “On the Form and Content of the Certificates”, p. 184.

³³¹ Schubert, “On the Form and Content of the Certificates,” p. 187.

³³² *Martyrdom of Pionius*, 18. 10 – 13.

³³³ *P. Oxy. IV. 658*, No. 4, Knipfing, “The Libelli”.

³³⁴ Potter, *Prophecy and History*, p. 43.

³³⁵ e.g. Naphtali Lewis, *The Compulsory Public Services of Roman Egypt*, Florence, 1997; Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, Cambridge, 1994.

³³⁶ *P. Oxy. L.3565*, trans. J. R. Rea, republished by Rives, “The decree of Decius”. p. 149, n. 78.

certificates”.³³⁷ A verbal agreement was also required for the benefit of those who were illiterate: “is cui libelleous acceptus est”, which Clarke says is the equivalent of saying “he who acknowledged a certificate to be his own.”³³⁸

The lateness of the decree’s implementation in Middle Egypt (earliest being 4 June 250 in *P. Luther*³³⁹, but commonly later in June) has been explained variously by modern historians, but I believe this indicates a lack of urgency. Similarly in Carthage under Diocletian, in the year 303, the sacrifice he mandated was implemented in June but had reached Nicomedia in February.³⁴⁰ In light of the administrative machinery through the regular census, taxes, and other papyri, we can assert that officials, scribes and the populace were familiar with the processes of making official declarations and that the dates were set locally.³⁴¹ Thoroughness was more important than the speed of compliance that would be expected for a sacrifice to avert war or plague.

The Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World, gives a realistic synthesis of financial constraints, alternative routes, methods of transport, and seasonal variations of all possible routes between the main sites of the Roman World.³⁴² It cannot provide for unknown factors such as weather, wars or pirates. The Stanford Model shows that the fastest journey for a messenger to go from Rome to Alexandria in winter (by whatever means or cost) was fifteen days, and the distance was 2,685 kms. This was also the cheapest journey.³⁴³ Selinger notes that Mediterranean sailing in winter was slowed or nil.³⁴⁴ The Stanford model only goes to Alexandria, then the messenger could face difficult travel conditions down to Middle Egypt. The harvest there was in May or June, and nothing would be allowed to delay it as the empire had to be fed.³⁴⁵

Roman Religion

It is important to note that Decius ordered sacrifice to “the gods” without specification. This can be deduced by the wording of the *libelli*. He was not imposing deities linked to the city of Rome; local deities were acceptable, e.g. Nemesis in Smyrna.³⁴⁶ To Pionius, a frustrated proconsul

³³⁷ Cyprian *Letters*, 30. 1.

³³⁸ Clarke, Cyprian, *Letters*, 55.14. 1, Notes Vol. 3, p. 187, no. 61.

³³⁹ *P. Luther* 4.

³⁴⁰ Burns and Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa*, p. 16.

³⁴¹ Rives, “The Decree of Decius”, p. 149.

³⁴² W. Scheidel, and E. Meeks (2012) *ORBIS: The Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World*, www.orbis.stanford.edu, Introduction on website.

³⁴³ www.orbis.stanford.edu.

³⁴⁴ Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions*, p. 43.

³⁴⁵ Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions*, p. 52.

³⁴⁶ *Pionius*, 7. 2.

retorted: “What then, do you attend to the air? Then sacrifice to the air.”³⁴⁷ The emperor-cult “was not directly involved” but could be used as a means of testing Christians,³⁴⁸ as, for example a way offered by Polemon to Pionius as a minimum gesture: “Make a sacrifice at least to the emperor.”³⁴⁹ I do not understand how Frend could write that: “In Carthage...and there as elsewhere sacrifice was made on the capitols to the specifically Roman gods and the emperor’s genius, rather than to local gods.”³⁵⁰ Certainly Cyprian’s *Letter* 42. 3 refers to “those lapsed...heap abuse upon their bishops with those same tongues and lips through which they have sinned on the Capitol.”³⁵¹ And Rives notes that the sacrifices in Rome also seemed to have taken place in its Capitoline temple, (not to be confused with the Capitol hill in Rome). But not every city had Capitols.³⁵² Beard and her co-authors point out that, although Christians (and the rest of the empire’s inhabitants) were not commanded by Decius’ edict to worship specifically Roman gods, in general, as Tertullian wrote in his *Apology*, the main accusation against Christians was that they were “slighting especially Roman *religio*”.³⁵³

We give offense to the Romans, we are excluded from the rights and privileges of Romans, because we do not worship the gods of Rome. It is well that there is a God of all, whose we all are, whether we will or no. But with you liberty is given to worship any god but the true God, as though He were not rather the God all should worship, to whom all belong.

The wording on all *libelli*: “taken part in the sacrifice” would not mean that every man, woman and child in a family group would have to take part in the actual slaughtering of the animal being sacrificed. Also, some in these groups could presumably quietly avoid taking part in the pouring of the libations if there was a crowd; but the actual ingestion of the meat could not be avoided.³⁵⁴ Rives corroborates this idea, noting that in public festivals, people were obliged to dress up and have fun, but that it was the officials who mainly made the wine and incense offerings.³⁵⁵ In Roman religion a *supplicatio* was a public ceremony of either thanksgiving e.g. after victory in war, or of a supplication to avert danger, e.g. war or plague. The importance of the *supplicatio*

³⁴⁷ Pionius, 19. 11.

³⁴⁸ Clarke, “Third Century Christianity”, p. 626.

³⁴⁹ Pionius, 8.4.

³⁵⁰ Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, p. 320.

³⁵¹ Cyprian, *Letters* 42. 3.

³⁵² J. B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine*, Oxford, 1995, p. 260, n. 14.

³⁵³ Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome*, Vol. 1, pp. 239, 240; and Tertullian, *Apology*, 24. 1.

³⁵⁴ Schubert, “On the Form and Content of the Certificates,” pp. 188, 191.

³⁵⁵ Rives, “The Decree of Decius,” p. 147.

declined in the Imperial period and became a vehicle for the avowal of loyalty to the Imperial house.”³⁵⁶

The oversight and authority of all “interactions between the community and the gods” was in the hands of the priests and magistrates of a city, and one of their functions was ensuring the correct performance, i.e. the focus was on performance not belief. They did not try to explain the meanings of the rituals, so there much scope outside the remit of the “civic religious officials’ authority.”³⁵⁷ Although “every emperor since Augustus on served as *pontifex maximus*...in practical terms it was significant only in the city of Rome itself.”³⁵⁸ There was no equivalent to the “civic religious officials” in the form of “imperial religious officials”. The empire’s city states retained their own civic priests who were not answerable to Rome.³⁵⁹

The wellbeing of the emperor was vital for the welfare, safety and unity of the empire.³⁶⁰ As Rives writes: “The emperor was the concrete embodiment of what was otherwise an almost unimaginable abstraction.”³⁶¹ The term “imperial cult” could imply a regulated worship system, with the emperor as a god, but this is “misleading”. A variety of ways integrated “the emperor into religious life”. Sometimes he was “unambiguously” treated as if he was a god, and other times not.³⁶² It was the Senate who decided which deceased emperor would be considered to be a god, and unpopular ones were denied this status.³⁶³

The Roman authorities kept the “official collection” of the Sibylline books to consult when the empire faced a crisis.³⁶⁴ When this need arose, it was the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* who consulted the *Sibyllini libri*, and, or, the *pontifices* or the *haruspices*, and the Senate gave its approval.³⁶⁵ There was also a variety of other Sibylline oracles to be found elsewhere in the empire.³⁶⁶

In a *supplicatio* “a procession of all participants went from temple to temple... The *quindecimviri* spoke the prayer...and the participants gave the responses.” The importance of the causative

³⁵⁶ Anne Viola Siebert, “Supplicatio,” Brill’s New Pauly, 2006.

³⁵⁷ James Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, Oxford, 2007, p. 45

³⁵⁸ Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, pp. 45, 46.

³⁵⁹ Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, pp. 45, 46.

³⁶⁰ Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, p. 141.

³⁶¹ Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, p. 149.

³⁶² Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, p. 149.

³⁶³ Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, p. 150.

³⁶⁴ Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, p. 159.

³⁶⁵ Siebert, “Supplicatio”. Haruspex (pl. haruspices) was a religious official in ancient Rome “...who interpreted omens from the inspection of animals’ entrails”, ed. Bruce Miller, *Australian Oxford Dictionary*, 2004.

³⁶⁶ Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, p. 159

event was reflected in the number of days.³⁶⁷ It is unclear how much the general populace was expected to participate apart from being there. The individual ingestion of meat in the Decian *libelli* made this an extra-ordinary *supplicatio* (if indeed it can be fitted into this traditional category) as it mandated an individual commitment by the act of swallowing.

Hahn has emphasised that the correct words of a prayer in Roman rituals were vital for the success of the ceremony. If the correct format was not followed the prayer was deemed ineffective and a repeat performance was undertaken.³⁶⁸ In Antioch in 298 the “genesis” for Diocletian’s edict occurred, with an “...absence of entrails in animals sacrificed to the gods in honour of the successful conclusion of the Persian war,” and the emperor ordered the removal of those Christians from the army and civil services who had been present at the sacrifice.”³⁶⁹ Late 302, when Diocletian and Galerius visited Apollo’s oracle at Didyma, the “utterances were confused” and Christians were blamed.³⁷⁰ It is possible, but unproveable, that Decius received similar direction from the haruspices and oracles.

Caracalla

Rives has argued that Decius’ edict was “in some ways the religious analogue to Caracalla’s citizenship decree.” By it, Roman religion was defined and boundaries set.³⁷¹ This explanation has been accepted by many historians, including Frend.³⁷² Brent argues that Caracalla’s citizenship law of 212 “was to have its religious counterpart in the succeeding reign of Elagabalus (212 – 218).”³⁷³ He had sought to promote the “universal cult of the Unconquered Sun” to prevent “social disintegration.”³⁷⁴ However, Paul McKechnie argues that Caracalla’s edict already had a religious principle built into it. The fragment of P. Giessen 40, col. 1 “framed the emperor’s decision in religious terms.”³⁷⁵ Ari Bryen provides a translation of the Greek fragment P. Giessen 40, Column 1, edict 1, but some words are missing:³⁷⁶

³⁶⁷ Siebert, “Supplicatio”.

³⁶⁸ Frances Hickson Hahn, *Performing the Sacred: Prayers and Hymns*, ed. Jorg Rupke, *A Companion to Roman Religion*, 2007, pp. 262, 263.

³⁶⁹ Frend, “Persecutions: genesis and legacy,” 2006, p. 519.

³⁷⁰ Frend, “Persecutions,” p. 519.

³⁷¹ Rives, “The Decree of Decius,” p. 153.

³⁷² Frend, “Persecutions” p. 513.

³⁷³ Brent, *Cyprian*, p. 78.

³⁷⁴ Brent, *Cyprian*, p. 78.

³⁷⁵ McKechnie, “Roman Law,” p. 255.

³⁷⁶ *P. Giessen 40*.

Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus Pius declares:...rather...the causes and the reasons...that I might please the immortal gods since from such a...they saved me (?). Therefore I think it so...to be able to do (?) something befitting their greatness...as often as they enter into my people...bring them to the ? of the gods. I give to everyone (?)...throughout the world the citizenship of Romans, (poleitain Romaiown) without prejudice to local rights (?), aside from the dediticii (?). For it is fitting...all the ? and by victory...increase (?) the greatness of the Roman...concerning the...happen by which...of each...

I cannot understand Brent's agreement with Rives that there was "the failure of the Greco-Roman pantheon to assert a religious identity within the Empire against the force of native divinities not wholly assimilated with their alleged counterparts as a disintegrative force against the emergence of a common imperial culture."³⁷⁷ Surely the Decian edict's lack of stipulation of any particular god argues against this. Far more plausible is Brent's argument that the edict was a reaction to both the eschatological fears and hopes of the new millennium, within the Stoic worldview of the need for a *resitutor orbis*.³⁷⁸ It seems to me to be a hopeless task to try to disentangle the "political" from the "religious" in discussion of Decius' motivations.

Ando helpfully clarifies two features of Roman religion: "Political boundaries were understood to map religious boundaries, more or less exactly."³⁷⁹ And, in Roman religious thought there were structures that separated what was within an individual's ambit of control (family, guild, etc.), from the Roman idea of "public". The public "had a powerful normative and communal component: membership in a political community brought specific obligations in many domains, including religious life."³⁸⁰

³⁷⁷ Brent, *Cyprian*, p. 78.

³⁷⁸ Brent, *Cyprian*, p. 170.

³⁷⁹ Clifford, Ando, *Imperial Rome AD 193 to 284: The Critical Century*, Edinburgh, 2012, p. 124.

³⁸⁰ Ando, *Imperial Rome*, pp. 123, 124.

Chapter 4 Evidence and Assessment B

This chapter analyses the evidence provided by Eusebius, and charts the arguments provided by modern authors against Philip the Arab's purported Christian beliefs or at least sympathies, as claimed by both Eusebius and the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*. as the motive for Decius's edict.

Eusebius

Eusebius' *Church History* was written about sixty years after Decius' edict. Nevertheless, he is an invaluable source for Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, whose Letters, written from Alexandria, Eusebius claims to use.³⁸¹ Dionysius wrote of the hatred against the Christians in Alexandria a year before, which shows the depth of anti-Christian feeling in that city.³⁸²

The same writer, in an epistle to Fabius, bishop of Antioch, relates as follows the sufferings of the martyrs in Alexandria under Decius: The persecution among us did not begin with the royal decree, but preceded it an entire year. The prophet and author of evils to this city, whoever he was, previously moved and aroused against us the masses of the heathen, rekindling among them the superstition of their country. And being thus excited by him and finding full opportunity for any wickedness, they considered this the only pious service of their demons, that they should slay us. They seized first an old man named Metras, and commanded him to utter impious words. But as he would not obey, they beat him with clubs, and tore his face and eyes with sharp sticks, and dragged him out of the city and stoned him. Then they carried to their idol temple a faithful woman, named Quinta, that they might force her to worship. And as she turned away in detestation, they bound her feet and dragged her through the entire city over the stone-paved streets, and dashed her against the millstones, and at the same time scourged her; then, taking her to the same place, they stoned her to death. Then all with one impulse rushed to the homes of the pious, and they dragged forth whomsoever any one knew as a neighbor, and despoiled and plundered them. They took for themselves the more valuable property; but the poorer articles and those made of wood they scattered about and burned in the streets, so that the city appeared as if taken by an enemy.

This is unrestrained mob violence, not judicial killings which were authorised by the governor, although he would probably have been complicit. It shows the depth of anti-Christian feelings in this era. In *The Martyrdom of Pionius*, the crowd also plays a part, but not in the actual death sentence.

Eusebius wrote:³⁸³

³⁸¹ Eusebius, *Church History*, Book 7 Introduction.

³⁸² Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 41. 1 – 8.

³⁸³ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 39. 1 – 4.

After a reign of seven years Philip was succeeded by Decius. On account of his hatred of Philip, he commenced a persecution of the churches, in which Fabianus suffered martyrdom at Rome...in Palestine, Alexander, bishop of the church of Jerusalem, was brought again on Christ's account before the governor's judgement seat in Caesarea, and having acquitted himself nobly in a second confession was cast into prison, crowned with the hoary locks of venerable age. And after his honourable and illustrious confession at the tribunal of the governor, he fell asleep in prison. Babylas in Antioch, having like Alexander passed away after his confession, was succeeded by..."

Dionysius records the seemingly immediate arrival of the edict in Alexandria, compared to the June to July 250 date for the Egyptian *libelli*.³⁸⁴

So we breathed for a little while as they ceased from their rage against us. But presently the change from that milder reign was announced to us, and great fear of what was threatened seized us. For the decree arrived, almost like that most terrible time foretold by our Lord which if it were possible would offend even the elect.

Dionysius claims he was spared by divine intervention when a *frumentarius* (secret policeman) was sent to arrest him when Decius' order arrived. Dionysius was waiting at home to be arrested but the official was struck down with blindness. After four days of waiting, Dionysius and his entourage fled, only to be seized by soldiers. One of Dionysius' friends Timothy found them later, and he arrived with local reinforcements to rescue them from the soldiers.³⁸⁵

Dionysius describes different reactions among the Christians in Alexandria: All were afraid; some came forward immediately; others were pressured by fellow public service officers to sacrifice and did so; others were urged on by friends and sacrificed:³⁸⁶

And as their names were called they approached the impure and impious sacrifices. Some of them were pale and trembled as if they were not afraid to sacrifice, but to be themselves sacrifices and offerings to the idols; so that they were jeered at by the multitude who stood around, as it was plain to everyone that they were afraid either to die or to sacrifice. But some advanced to the altars more readily, declaring boldly that they had never been Christians.

Of those refusing to sacrifice, some prisoners recanted before their trial and others retracted after torture.³⁸⁷ Others remained faithful and suffered being burnt alive after severe torture.³⁸⁸ A soldier named Besas rebuked the crowd for insulting the Christians, and was himself beheaded; three women were spared torture and beheaded; yet another was released because of his youth to

³⁸⁴ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 41. 9, 10.

³⁸⁵ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.40.

³⁸⁶ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 41. 11.

³⁸⁷ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 41. 13.

³⁸⁸ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.41.15, 17, 20, 21.

give him time to change his mind. When another Christian was at the point of apostasy, four Christian soldiers and an old man rushed forward to declare that they were Christians.³⁸⁹

Dionysius relates the fate of those who escaped. A “multitude” fled to the mountains and deserts to avoid having to face such a terrible choice. They wandered there “...and perished by hunger, and thirst, and cold, and sickness, and robbers, and wild beasts.”³⁹⁰ “And many who fled to the same Arabian mountain were carried into slavery by the barbarian Saracens. Some of them were ransomed with difficulty and at a large price; others have not been (seen?) to the present time.”³⁹¹ There was widespread apostasy and chaos in Church discipline, as revealed in Cyprian’s *Letters*.

Several challenges faced Eusebius (and subsequent early Christian historians) during his writing of *Church History* and later works such as *Life of Constantine*, which is both biography and an “uneasy mixture of panegyric and narrative history”.³⁹² Against a pagan culture of confusing worldviews which regularly saw the gods intervening in the affairs of mankind, Eusebius wanted his history to show the actions of the one omnipotent God from the dawn of human history, culminating in Jesus Christ and his Church.³⁹³

The historian who assumed free will had to insist on principle that every meaningful human decision could only be judged as good or evil. Hence, a history written along these lines would have to show a dearth of causal explanation coupled with a strong element of moral judgement, whenever free will was supposed to be at work.

Another challenge which Eusebius faced was to explain Judaism, the Old Testament and the Roman Empire within his worldview, and to incorporate these factors within his overarching Christian “salvation history” and the Church.³⁹⁴ He had to argue that Christianity was not “new”, but in fact, very ancient and therefore respectable.³⁹⁵ It is not surprising then that Eusebius’ views changed over the course of his life, as he was forced to interpret new events. Eusebius continued to alter what he wrote about Constantine in *Church History*, as the politics developed and after Constantine had attacked Licinius.³⁹⁶ Eusebius’ “early ideas of religious tolerance, nonviolence and the peaceful spreading of the gospel” changed during the Great

³⁸⁹ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 41. 16, 18, 20, 22.

³⁹⁰ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 42. 2.

³⁹¹ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 42. 4.

³⁹² Cameron and Hall, “Introduction”, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine*, p. 1.

³⁹³ Glenn F. Chestnut, *The First Christian Histories*, 2nd ed., Macon GA, 1986, p. 63.

³⁹⁴ Chesnut, *First Christian Histories*, p. 65, 66.

³⁹⁵ Arnaldo Momigliano. *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography*, Oxford, 1977, p. 110.

³⁹⁶ Cameron and Hall, “Introduction”, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine*, p. 5.

Persecution in the face of such brutality against innocent Christians. “He saw the Christians saved from that onslaught only by a warrior who, in the name of Christ, resorted to force of arms...and that paganism and all its rites must be extirpated from the empire by force of law and all the power of the state.”³⁹⁷ Thus his *Church History* is apologetical above all else. It is “rather polemical than historical...”, showing that “Christ was the fulfilment of prophecy.”³⁹⁸

Eusebius was criticised severely in the mid-nineteenth century from Jacob Burckhardt who claimed that there was no evidence that Eusebius’ hero Constantine had ever pretended to be a Christian.³⁹⁹ Eusebius has been described variously as “an unreliable historiographer, a mediocre thinker and writer, a dishonest apologist” and much more.⁴⁰⁰ Focussing mainly on his *Chronological Tables*, *Church History*, and *Life of Constantine* I will examine four complaints against him, and where his reputation has been somewhat rehabilitated in recent decades:

- a) The puzzling inaccuracies in the *Chronological Tables*, and the multiple texts of his *Church History*.

Burgess gives a reasonable (but hypothetical) solution to the problem of Eusebius’ chronology in his *Chronological Tables* and *Church History*. In the *Chronological Tables*, by trying to align the regnal years with calendar years, Eusebius had reached the erroneous position where Caracalla had reigned seven years instead of six and Philip reigned seven years not five years and Decius only one year, not two.⁴⁰¹ He says in his *Church History* that “Antoninus had reigned seven years and six months”,⁴⁰² and Philip reigned seven years.⁴⁰³ In *Chronological Tables*, Decius reigns only one year instead of two years, but in *Church History* he says that “Decius reigned not quite two years.”⁴⁰⁴ So, by the time of Carus’ accession in 282, Eusebius’ chronology was “two years ahead of itself.”⁴⁰⁵ Obviously Eusebius was trying to finish his chronology with a correct parallel between “calendar and regnal years.”⁴⁰⁶ Eusebius wrote that his *Chronological Tables* (*Chronicle*) were completed before *Church History*,⁴⁰⁷ and it is likely

³⁹⁷ Chesnut, *First Christian Histories*, p. 110.

³⁹⁸ H. J. Lawler and J. E. L. Oulton, *Eusebius*, Vol. 2, London, 1928, p. 12.

³⁹⁹ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, transl. Moses Hadas, Berkeley, 1949, p. 261

⁴⁰⁰ Sabrina Inowlocki and Claudio Zamagni, *Reconsidering Eusebius*, eds. Sabrina Inowlocki and Claudio Zamagni, Leiden, 2011, p. vii.

⁴⁰¹ R. W. Burgess, “The Dates and Editions of Eusebius’ ‘Chronici Canones and Historia Ecclesiastica’”, *Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, Vol. 48, No.2 October 1997, pp. 471 – 504, p. 478.

⁴⁰² Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 21.1.

⁴⁰³ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 39. 1.

⁴⁰⁴ Eusebius, *Church History*, 7. 1. 1.

⁴⁰⁵ Burgess, *Dates and Editions of Eusebius*, p. 478.

⁴⁰⁶ Burgess, *Dates and Editions of Eusebius*, p. 482.

⁴⁰⁷ Eusebius, *Church History*, 1. 1. 7.

that by the time he discovered errors in the *Tables*, he was too busy with his new major work to amend it.⁴⁰⁸

Multiple texts of *Church History* reveal that far from being careless, Eusebius was keen to correct any previous editions whenever he received better sourced information. Papyrus texts had to be copied every hundred years or so to preserve the text, and in the pre-printing press era, there was no way to announce a recall of prior texts and issue a revised edition.⁴⁰⁹

b) A failure to acknowledge his sources.

Eusebius' sources for the *Chronicle* have been under discussion and he has long been accused of taking this information from Julianus Africanus without due acknowledgement, and against his claim to originality.⁴¹⁰ Mosshammer argues against this theory, as "Africanus did not write a work to which such a list would have been appropriate," and that Cassius Longinus is "a better candidate."⁴¹¹ Interestingly, Eusebius complained that the "Greeks plagiarized shamelessly."⁴¹² However, he usually omits the sources for his *Chronicle*!⁴¹³ But he is not alone. One of his successors, Sozomen, made heavy use of Socrates Scholasticus' history without acknowledgement.⁴¹⁴ Are we expecting too much from Eusebius by applying a higher standard than we would to his contemporaries?

Justin Barber has analysed Eusebius' "citation methodology" in the *Church History*, within the context of practices in ancient historiography. He argues that Eusebius:⁴¹⁵

...abandons the monologic citation methodology typical of previous Greek and Hellenistic historiography and introduces a polyphonic citation methodology that influences subsequent late-ancient Christian historiography to varying degrees. Whereas pre-Eusebian Greek and Hellenistic historiographers typically use citations to support the single authorial consciousness of the historiographer, Eusebius uses citations to counterbalance his own shortcomings as a witness to past events. Eusebius allows his citations to retain their own voice, even when they conflict with his. The result is a narrative that transcends the point of view of any single individual and makes multiple witnesses, including the narrator, available to the reader.

⁴⁰⁸ Burgess, *Dates and Editions of Eusebius*, p. 482.

⁴⁰⁹ This is common knowledge, being taught to ancient history undergraduates, according to my supervisor.

⁴¹⁰ Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, MA, 1981 pp. 117, 118.

⁴¹¹ Alden A. Mosshammer, *The 'Chronicle' of Eusebius and Greek Chronographic Tradition*, London, 1979, p. 157.

⁴¹² Mosshammer, *The 'Chronicle' of Eusebius*, p. 205.

⁴¹³ Mosshammer, *The 'Chronicle' of Eusebius*, p. 128.

⁴¹⁴ Chesnut, *The First Christian Histories*, p. 205.

⁴¹⁵ Justin Otto Barber, *Citation Methodologies in Eusebius' "Historia Ecclesiastica" and Other Ancient Historiography*, Dissertation, University of Denver, 2015, p. ii.

Barber's claim concerning Eusebius' use of different "voices", (that is, expressing the different viewpoints of his sources) needs some qualification, because he does admit that Eusebius uses this approach most often in Books 1 - 3, where he quotes Jewish authors and the Hebrew Bible. In contrast, Eusebius rarely uses a polyphonic approach in Books 6 and 7, where he uses primary material most related to his own section of Christianity. "He rarely cites the voices most distinct from his own, namely the voices of the heterodox communities, probably because he once suffered an accusation of heterodoxy against himself."⁴¹⁶ Barber defends Eusebius here against the charge that he ignores Christian voices from areas other than his own brand: "Eusebius is investigating the history of his own form of Christianity, not every form of Christianity that ever existed up to his own time. He has selected his sources accordingly."⁴¹⁷

- c) Political and theological manipulations for recognition of the supremacy of his See of Caesarea over the See of Jerusalem in Palestine; the Arian Controversy and his association with Eusebius of Nicomedia.

There are differing views among Eusebian scholars as to whether his "turf wars" in competition with the Jerusalem bishops (Macarius and then Maximus) were for the political control of Palestine for its own sake, or whether the conflict was doctrinal, originating from the Arian controversy.⁴¹⁸ I suggest that perhaps it was both, the one feeding and justifying the other. The Arian controversy was a theological posture that emerged in Alexandria in 317 – 318. One of its key tenets was that "there is a hierarchy in the Godhead", and some would argue that it had its origins in the third century.⁴¹⁹ This controversy threatened to tear the Church apart in the east and eventually in the western empire.⁴²⁰

Alexander of Alexandria totally rejected Arius' views, so the latter went to Palestine and found support from Eusebius of Caesarea (whom I will call simply "Eusebius" here), and others including Eusebius of Nicomedia.⁴²¹ Eusebius barely escaped banishment at a council in Antioch.⁴²² The Arian and the opposition group both claimed that they were "orthodox", and

⁴¹⁶ Barber, *Citation Methodologies*, p. 111.

⁴¹⁷ Barber, *Citation Methodologies*, p. 111.

⁴¹⁸ Oded Irshai, "Fourth Century Christian Palestinian Politics", *Reconsidering Eusebius*, eds. Sabrina Inowlocki and Claudio Zamagni, Leiden, 2011, pp. 27, 28.

⁴¹⁹ Irshai, "Fourth Century Christian Palestinian Politics", p. 28.

⁴²⁰ Irshai, "Fourth Century Christian Palestinian Politics", p. 31.

⁴²¹ Irshai, "Fourth Century Christian Palestinian Politics", p. 28, 29.

⁴²² Averil Cameron, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 2, eds. Alan K. Bowman, Peter Garnsey and Averil Cameron, Cambridge. 2005, p. 98.

this question was decided and ruled on against the Arian position in 325 at the Council of Nicaea.⁴²³

In the lead up to the Council of Nicaea, Eusebius' arch enemy and anti-Arian bishop of Jerusalem, Macarius, asserted his claim that the "*apostolic* reputation of his see" should be acknowledged as supreme in Palestine.⁴²⁴ Eusebius used Book 8 of *Church History* to narrate the events of the persecutions under Diocletian to produce a document called the *Martyrs of Palestine* which follows Book 8 in most editions.⁴²⁵ Irshai considers Eusebius' focus on the martyrs from this area as part of his "turf war" with Macarius.⁴²⁶

In the course of his 'Martyrs of Palestine' Eusebius seems to draw a map of the Christian 'Holy Land' consecrated by the blood of the martyrs coming from all regions of Palestine. At the heart of this consecrated land of the Martyrs lay Caesarea where these heroes of Christianity were tried and executed.

I do not think this criticism is fair. It was natural for Eusebius to focus on those he knew and of which he had first-hand information. He does mention other martyrs outside his area, for example Romulus of Diospolis northwest of Jerusalem",⁴²⁷ and in Chapter 13 Eusebius ranges through Libya, Egypt, Syria, Italy, Sicily, Gaul, Spain and Mauritania.⁴²⁸ I also take issue with Irshai where he states that Eusebius claimed in his *Theophania* 4.6⁴²⁹ that St. Peter founded the Churches in Caesarea ("of Palestine"⁴³⁰), Antioch and Rome *because of Peter's confession of faith* (emphasis mine) recorded in Matthew 16.18.⁴³¹ The reference in *Theophania* 4.6 is to Jesus' promise to Peter that he would "henceforth catch men into life", and that took place after the miraculous load of fish which were caught in the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum,⁴³² which is neither near Caesarea Maritima where Eusebius' church was located, nor Caesarea Philippi where Peter was told that he was the Rock. An alternate view is that Eusebius "could easily include Galilee in "Caesarea"!"⁴³³ Nevertheless, this is a good example of Eusebius' stretching" the truth in argument. He pointedly omits Jerusalem!

⁴²³ Cameron, *Cambridge Ancient History*, p. 98.

⁴²⁴ Irshai, "Fourth Century Christian Palestinian Politics", p. 32.

⁴²⁵ Hugh Jackson Lawler and John Ernest Leonard Oulton, *Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea: The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, London, Vol. 2, 1928, p. 46.

⁴²⁶ Irshai, "Fourth Century Christian Palestinian Politics", p. 27, n. 7.

⁴²⁷ Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, 3.3.

⁴²⁸ Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, 13.

⁴²⁹ Eusebius, *Theophania*, 4.6.

⁴³⁰ Eusebius, *Theophania* 4.6.

⁴³¹ Irshai, "Fourth Century Christian Palestinian Politics", p. 33, n. 18.

⁴³² *Matthew* 4.19.

⁴³³ Dr Amelia Brown, Examiner of original thesis, now amended.

What has impinged greatly on Eusebius' reputation for integrity was his supposed duplicity at the Council of Nicaea.⁴³⁴

In the course of the council he managed to manipulate his opponents and embark on a new and assertive political path...A more nuanced reading of the records shows that Eusebius with his outstanding diplomatic skills managed to draft a document of faith which avoided the pitfalls of contemporary theology, defused the tension and rallied all present in support...was Eusebius acting upon his better instincts about the need for peace and concord in the Church?

In the *Church History*'s earlier chapters Eusebius had argued that persecutions were caused by the "demon"⁴³⁵ who attacked the "divine message", but that this was futile and God brought blessing out of it for the Church.⁴³⁶ Tabbernee has outlined how Eusebius' theology concerning persecution changed and developed during the years,⁴³⁷ and by the time persecution came in "our times,"⁴³⁸ (that is, the Diocletian persecution) Eusebius had pinpointed divisions within the Church as one reason for the persecution:⁴³⁹

But when on account of the abundant freedom, we fell into laxity and sloth, and envied and reviled each other, and were almost, as it were, taking up arms against one another, rulers assailing rulers with words like spears, and people forming parties against people, and monstrous hypocrisy and dissimulation rising to the greatest height of wickedness the divine judgment with forbearance, as is its pleasure, while the multitudes yet continued to assemble, gently and moderately harassed the episcopacy.

I do not think we can decide if Eusebius acted out of genuine concern for the Church's unity, or as a veiled warning to the bishop of Jerusalem, or indeed to protect his own interests.⁴⁴⁰ After the Council, Eusebius refused to sign the "accompanying anathema on Arius", although he signed the creed to show his orthodoxy.⁴⁴¹ Eusebius clearly did not believe that Arius was guilty of the false doctrine of which he was accused.⁴⁴²

Eusebius' reputation has probably suffered by his association with Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia. David Gwynn has concluded that "the Eusebians", so named because they

⁴³⁴ Irshai, "Fourth Century Christian Palestinian Politics", p. 34.

⁴³⁵ Eusebius, *Church History*, 4. 7. 1, 2.

⁴³⁶ Eusebius, *Church History*, 1. 1. 29.

⁴³⁷ William Tabbernee, "Eusebius' 'Theology of Persecution', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Fall, 1997, pp. 319 – 334, p. 327.

⁴³⁸ Eusebius, *Church History*, 8. 1. 7.

⁴³⁹ Eusebius, *Church History*, 8. 1. 7.

⁴⁴⁰ Irshai, "Fourth Century Christian Palestinian Politics", p. 34, p. 34 n. 7, p. 35.

⁴⁴¹ H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, Baltimore, 2000, p. 259.

⁴⁴² Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, p. 259.

supposedly followed Eusebius of Nicomedia, were neither a defined party nor of Arian doctrine, but were a “polemical construct” by Athanasius.⁴⁴³

d) His unqualified valorisation of Constantine.

Timothy Barnes writes that Burckhardt’s denunciation of Eusebius as a “thoroughly dishonest historian” was based on the “false assumption that the bishop of Caesarea in Palestine was somehow a habitué of the imperial court who displayed the manners of a courtier and flattered his royal master, often with conscious dishonesty.”⁴⁴⁴ Barnes points out that the pamphlet *On the Death of the Persecutors* written by the Christian apologist Lactantius’ in 314/315 and the “anti-Christian epigrams” by Palladas, do reveal Eusebius’ truthfulness in all key aspects about Constantine.⁴⁴⁵ His view of Eusebius is that he is a “a historian whose interpretation of early Christian history is circumscribed by both his prejudices and his sources.”⁴⁴⁶

e) Summary of arguments about Eusebius’ reliability as a historian.

A change in personal views over a lifetime does not mean that one’s earlier writings reveal insincerity or inconsistency; rather that one’s understanding has developed with new circumstances; and this must be true of a historian such as Eusebius who had few antecedents to draw on. With the emergence of a Roman emperor who took a position so favourable to the Christian faith, Christian scholars were in uncharted waters. Chesnut points out that within the prevailing “Romano-Hellenistic tradition of divine kingship ideology”, the Roman ruler could be idealised as the “Living Law.” Eusebius inherited this ideology and “once he became convinced that Constantine was sincere in his commitment to Christianity and was going to be able to control the empire, he linked himself firmly to it.”⁴⁴⁷ He went so far as to compare Constantine allegorically with the Logos.⁴⁴⁸

Chesnut summarises his position which I believe is very reasonable.⁴⁴⁹

My position is that the “Life of Constantine” is by Eusebius, that it is an understandable development from the ideas expressed in his other works, and fits into both the rhetorical conventions of the time and the political situation of the period immediately after Constantine’s death. It is as sound textually and correct in its assertions of historical facts as the “Church History”, which also has its problem passages, as anyone who has worked on it is well aware. But with the aid of modern critical scholarship both the “Life”

⁴⁴³ David M. Gwynn, *The Eusebians*, Oxford, 2007, p. vii.

⁴⁴⁴ Barnes, *Constantine*, pp. 10, 11.

⁴⁴⁵ Barnes, *Constantine*, p. 8.

⁴⁴⁶ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. v.

⁴⁴⁷ Chesnut, *First Christian Histories*, p. 159.

⁴⁴⁸ Chesnut, *First Christian Histories*, p. 162.

⁴⁴⁹ Chesnut, *First Christian Histories*, p. 142.

and the “History” may be used to reconstruct the history of the later Roman Empire, and both reflect quite accurately the ideas, prejudices, inconsistencies, and misconceptions of Eusebius himself.

Therefore, in assessing Eusebius’ reliability concerning the events of the Decian edict, which is all that we are engaged with here, I argue that we are on a safe ground, except concerning Philip the Arab (see below). Fortunately, Eusebius has named his source as Bishop Dionysius who wrote letters to the bishop of Antioch at the time of the edict. There appears to be no contradiction with the other contemporary sources about the events that followed the edict. Concerning Decius’ motives, Eusebius does not give his source. He agrees with the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* about Decius’ hatred of Philip; but differs from Cyprian who claims that Decius was afraid of the bishop of Rome. Of course, both could be true, but one or both could also be untrue.

Philip the Arab

Eusebius’ sixth Book is largely concerned with Origen’s heroic actions, writings, influence and theological refutations. Chapter 33 reads:⁴⁵⁰

The elder brethren among us have handed down many other facts respecting Origen which I think proper to omit, as not pertaining to this work. But whatever it has seemed necessary to record about him can be found in the Apology in his behalf written by us and Pamphilus, the holy martyr of our day. We prepared this carefully and did the work jointly on account of faultfinders.

His very next chapter is about Philip Caesar, and so it is possible that Origen was his source for this story:⁴⁵¹

Gordianus had been Roman Emperor for six years when Philip, with his son Philip, succeeded him. It is reported that he, being a Christian, desired on the day of the last paschal vigil, to share with the multitude in the prayers of the Church, but that he was not permitted to enter, by him who then presided, until he made confession and had numbered himself among those who were reckoned as transgressors and occupied the place of penance. For if he had not done this, he would never have been received by him, on account of the many crimes which he had committed. It is said that he obeyed readily, manifesting in his genuine conduct a genuine and pious fear of God.

If there is any truth at all in this story, one could imagine how angry Decius would have been *if* he had heard the story: a Roman emperor barred from a building and asked to humble himself before a non-Roman deity! Lawlor and Oulton suppose that the bishop who confronted Philip

⁴⁵⁰ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 33. 4.

⁴⁵¹ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 34.

was Babylas of Antioch, quoting St. Chrysostom.⁴⁵² Unfortunately they do not comment on the veracity of this story. Sage writes: “Eusebius states that the Emperor Philip and his son were Christians”.⁴⁵³ Actually, Eusebius did not write that. He simply stated that: “It is reported that he, being a Christian desired...to share with the multitude in the prayers of the Church.”⁴⁵⁴ Eusebius is unusually circumspect here and does not name his source. One can imagine that if such a story were true, this would have been spread quickly by Christian apologists.

Pohlsander asserts that the continuation of this story by ancient and medieval chroniclers is due to Eusebius.⁴⁵⁵ He argues against the idea that Philip was a Christian, on the basis that his actions would scarcely be believable if he was a Christian, although he does admit its possibility.⁴⁵⁶ Philip had probably ordered the murder of Gordian.⁴⁵⁷ He acted as the pagan priest-emperor (*Pontifex Maximus*) in the Secular Games to celebrate the millennium of Rome’s founding, involving the slaughter of one thousand gladiators.⁴⁵⁸ Philip had his father deified,⁴⁵⁹ and his coinage reveals the usual pagan symbols: “the radiate crown, the wolf and the twins, the goddess Roma, most of the other traditional deities, and the emperor at sacrifice.”⁴⁶⁰ Neither did Philip do anything to quell the anti-Christian riots in Alexandria which were recorded by Dionysius in the year before the edict.⁴⁶¹

However, we must be consistent when we apply the rules for assessing historical veracity. For many years Constantine’s Christianity was suspect for similar reasons, which Barnes has efficiently refuted, for example, Constantine’s coinage which continued to use pagan symbols such as the Unconquered Sun.⁴⁶²

Later in Chapter 36, Eusebius writes:⁴⁶³

There is extant also an epistle of his (Origen) to the Emperor Philip, and another to Severa his wife, with several others to different persons.

⁴⁵² Lawlor and Oulton, *Eusebius*, p. 225.

⁴⁵³ Michael M. Sage, *Cyprian*, Cambridge, MA, 1975, p. 173.

⁴⁵⁴ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 34.

⁴⁵⁵ Pohlsander, “Philip the Arab”, p. 463.

⁴⁵⁶ Pohlsander, “Philip the Arab”, p. 465.

⁴⁵⁷ Pohlsander, “Philip the Arab”, p. 464.

⁴⁵⁸ Pohlsander, “Philip the Arab”, p. 465.

⁴⁵⁹ Pohlsander, “Philip the Arab”, p. 467.

⁴⁶⁰ Pohlsander, “Philip the Arab”, p. 467.

⁴⁶¹ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 41. 1 – 8.

⁴⁶² Barnes, *Constantine*, p. 18.

⁴⁶³ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 36. 3.

Many Christian apologists wrote letters to emperors,⁴⁶⁴ and we do not know if Origen's letters actually reached Philip.⁴⁶⁵ "Surely Eusebius and Jerome would not fail to mention if Origen had received a response."⁴⁶⁶ Also, "Eusebius evidently had these letters in his library, and Jerome says that they were still extant in his times. But it is to be noted that Eusebius did not use the two letters to prove Philip's adherence to Christianity."⁴⁶⁷ This strongly suggests that the story of Philip being a Christian was untrue.⁴⁶⁸

Quoting Dionysius, Eusebius writes:⁴⁶⁹

But presently the change from that milder reign was announced to us, and great fear of what was threatened seized us.

Lawler and Oulton translate it as a "rule that had been more kindly."⁴⁷⁰ Brent strikes a warning: "Eusebius' alternation between good and bad emperors is, however, notorious as part of a suspect historiography that regarded all good emperors as clandestine Christians."⁴⁷¹ Brent also points out that Eusebius, quoting Dionysius, also said something similar about Valerian, before he persecuted the Church.⁴⁷²

It is wonderful that both of these things occurred under Valerian; and it is the more remarkable in this case when we consider his previous conduct, for he had been mild and friendly toward the men of God, for none of the emperors before him had treated them so kindly and favourably; and not even those who were said openly to be Christians received them with such manifest hospitality and friendliness as he did at the beginning of his reign. For his entire house was filled with pious persons and was a church of God. But the teacher and ruler of the synagogue of the Magi from Egypt persuaded him to change his course, urging him to slay and persecute pure and holy men because they opposed and hindered the corrupt and abominable incantations.

This tendency to consider emperors as alternating between "good" and "bad", until they revealed their true attitude to the Church, could in part explain their (possibly wishful thinking?) claim that Philip was a Christian or at least interested.

In summary, I do not believe that Philip was a Christian. He may well have been friendly towards Christians and even curious about their beliefs, but he did nothing to amend the "legal

⁴⁶⁴ Pohlsander, "Philip the Arab", p. 469.

⁴⁶⁵ Pohlsander, "Philip the Arab", p. 468.

⁴⁶⁶ Pohlsander, "Philip the Arab", p. 468.

⁴⁶⁷ Pohlsander, "Philip the Arab", p. 469.

⁴⁶⁸ Pohlsander, "Philip the Arab", p. 469.

⁴⁶⁹ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 41. 9.

⁴⁷⁰ Lawler and Oulton, *Eusebius*, p. 229.

⁴⁷¹ Brent, *Cyprian*, p. 129.

⁴⁷² Eusebius, *Church History*, 7. 10. 3, 4.

status” of Christians.⁴⁷³ Clarke claims that there is no “circumstantial evidence” for Philip’s Christian sympathies.⁴⁷⁴

Ancient historiography was strongly inclined to discern personal caprice (beyond documentation) behind major historical events. Indeed, it is possible to suspect that, initially, the Christian sympathies of Philip were discovered precisely in order to account for the facts of Decius’ persecution; at a second stage in the circular argument, the fact of Philip’s Christian sympathies, so deduced, could be exploited to account for Decius’ actions as persecutor. We are in no position to deny outright such private hostility on the part of Decius, but neither ought we, as a matter of method, to rely on Eusebius’ testimony for it.

⁴⁷³ Pohlsander, “Philip the Arab”, p. 468.

⁴⁷⁴ Clarke, “Introduction”, *Letters of St. Cyprian*, Vol. 1, p. 25.

Chapter 5 Evidence and Assessment C

This chapter assesses the evidence from Cyprian's *Letters*, the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, and the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*.

Cyprian

While Eusebius gives a distinctly eastern perspective, the *Letters of St. Cyprian* reveal much information from North Africa with his copious *Letters* and *Treatises* which are contemporary with the actual events Cyprian describes. He also had access to news from Rome. The *Letters* date to between 250 (but some may be earlier) and 258 when he was martyred,⁴⁷⁵ post-Decius. Cyprian was writing from Carthage, which was a well-endowed city, and one of the four great cities of the time along with Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. Rome was dependent on Carthage's rich agricultural countryside. Cyprian was an upper-class man, an *honestior*, with a strong sense of his own status and education.⁴⁷⁶ He was elected as bishop of Carthage in 248, just two years after his conversion, and this office in effect made him "leader of all Latin Africa", which had eighty-five bishops in all. It seems that in his election, the laity overrode the presbyters,⁴⁷⁷ but there were five presbyters who continued to object to his appointment on the grounds of his inexperience as a Christian.⁴⁷⁸

I will examine those letters which are relevant to the Decian edict, of which *Letter 7* is considered to be the first,⁴⁷⁹ and Cyprian is in hiding, as he has been from the beginning of the edict, but he is still exercising his episcopal authority, by showing his concern for the poor and he sends money for them. He fears that if he came out of hiding, his presence may "...provoke an outburst of violence and resentment among the pagans...And so I will come to you only when you write that affairs have been settled."⁴⁸⁰ From this we may deduce that Cyprian seems to expect that he will be able to return home soon, that "the lapse of Christians generally has not as yet started, ...and there are no imprisoned confessors to visit."⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁵ Clarke, "Introduction", *The Letters of St. Cyprian*, Vol. 1, p. 5.

⁴⁷⁶ Clarke, "Introduction", *The Letters*, Vol. 1, pp. 12 – 14.

⁴⁷⁷ J. Patout Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, London, 2002, p. 1.

⁴⁷⁸ Brent, *Cyprian*, p. 3.

⁴⁷⁹ Clarke, "Notes", *Letter 7*, Vol. 1, p. 198.

⁴⁸⁰ Cyprian, *Letters*, 7.1.

⁴⁸¹ Clarke, "Notes", *Letter 7*, Vol. 1, p. 198.

Letter 21 is from Rome from Celerinus, who had “flourished in the flower of confession”,⁴⁸² and he was a confessor who had survived prison and was one of the first to be arrested in Rome.⁴⁸³

For a period of nineteen days he was shut up in prison under close guard, in chains and irons. But though his body was in bondage his spirit remained unfettered and free. His flesh grew emaciated by prolonged hunger and thirst, but his soul, living by faith and courage, God nourished with spiritual sustenance.

Celerinus was arrested and tried before Decius himself, in “the last weeks of 249 or the early weeks of 250 when Decius was present in Rome.”⁴⁸⁴ He was released afterwards because within the year he had returned to Carthage,⁴⁸⁵ and Cyprian’s *Letter 39* asks his clergy to appoint Celerinus as a “reader” with another young confessor Aurelius.⁴⁸⁶ Clarke comments that from this we can deduce that the death sentence was rarely imposed: “Here, as before, the (variable) mood of the local populace (which it was the course of prudence to assuage), or the patience (or piety) of the governor, could be determining factors.”⁴⁸⁷ Dionysius, quoted by Eusebius, not only demonstrates the power of the crowd to initiate assaults but also to carry out what appears to be their own extra-judicial assaults on Christians, even before Decius’ edict had arrived.⁴⁸⁸

In *Letters 5* and *6* Cyprian advises his clergy to care for the imprisoned confessors, but to be cautious about acknowledging their new celebrity status: “Avoid visits in crowds.”⁴⁸⁹ *Letter 9* refers to Cyprian’s “colleague, that good man,”⁴⁹⁰ who was Bishop (Pope) Fabian of Rome, and whose martyrdom Clarke estimates to have taken place in “late January 250”.⁴⁹¹

Letters 13 and *14* are encouragement for the imprisoned confessors, along with biblical warnings and exhortations to right living, as well as the provision of funds for their support. By *Letter 11* Cyprian writes about “the raging devastation of this persecution which has ravaged the major part of our flock, and continues still to ravage it,” and he believes that this calamity has come upon them because of ‘our’ failure to live godly lives. “What blows, what flogging do we in fact not deserve when even good confessors...fail to keep discipline.”⁴⁹² *Letter 10* refers to the (presumably) first martyrs in Carthage: “You have not hung back from the battlefield for fear of tortures...Some of your number, I hear, have already received their crowns...” Then follows

⁴⁸² Cyprian, *Letters*, 21. 1. 2.

⁴⁸³ Cyprian, *Letters*, 39. 2. 1, 2.2.

⁴⁸⁴ G. W. Clarke, “Some Observations on the Persecution of Decius”, *Antichthon*, Vol. 3, 1969, pp. 63 – 76, p. 66

⁴⁸⁵ Clarke, “Some Observations”, p. 67.

⁴⁸⁶ Cyprian, *Letters*, 39. 4. 3.

⁴⁸⁷ Clarke, “Third-Century Christianity”, p. 627.

⁴⁸⁸ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 4. 1 – 5.

⁴⁸⁹ Cyprian, *Letters*, 5. 2. 1.

⁴⁹⁰ Cyprian, *Letters*, 9. 1. 1.

⁴⁹¹ Clarke, “Third-Century Christianity”, p. 634.

⁴⁹² Cyprian, *Letters*, 11. 1.2, 1.3.

descriptions of brutal tortures and more exhortations. And the spectacles have their publicity pulling power: “The throng of by-standers watched in wonderment this heavenly, this spiritual contest of God, this battle of Christ...”⁴⁹³

Letter 22, from one prisoner Lucianus, to Celerinus, gives glimpses of life in prison for the confessors and the tortures and deprivations they endured, but Clarke points out that “they are not legal penalties...imprisonment was merely detentive, not punitive.”⁴⁹⁴:

...Bassus (died in the mines), Mappalicus (under interrogation), Fortunio (in prison), Paulus (after interrogation), Fortunata, Victorinus, Victor, Herennius, Credula, Hereda, Donatus, Firmus, Venustus, Fructus, Iulia, Martialis, and Ariston – all by God’s will starved to death in prison. You will hear that we too will be joining their company within a matter of days. For it is now eight days - up to the time I write to you – since we have been shut up again. And for the five days previous to that we received but a small amount of bread and a ration of water.⁴⁹⁵

Letter 12 refers to those “who without being tortured, nevertheless die in prison, departing this life in glory. They are inferior neither in valour nor in honour, so that they too, should be added to the company of the blessed martyrs.”⁴⁹⁶ Cyprian further instructs his clergy to keep note of the days on which they died so that their memories would be celebrated along with the other martyrs.⁴⁹⁷ Their bodies also should receive “special care and solicitude.”⁴⁹⁸ *Letter 15* is addressed to “the martyrs and confessors, his dearest brothers.”⁴⁹⁹

Getting letters into prison was no problem to Cyprian whilst at the same time remaining in hiding, nor did there seem to be any impediment for letters to be sent out from prisoners. It is important to note also that there was no record of torture being applied to Christians in Carthage in order to reveal Cyprian’s hiding place to the authorities.

Cyprian thought that the “presbyters and deacons” in Carthage had been visiting those in prison to encourage and exhort them but he is disappointed to learn that this has not been the case. These clergy had not only neglected their duty towards those the prisoners, but “had prematurely reconciled some of the fallen, contrary to that gospel. The confessors are showing the true

⁴⁹³ Cyprian, *Letters*, 10. 1. 2, 2.2.

⁴⁹⁴ Clarke, “Notes”, *Letter 22*, Vol. 1, p. 330.

⁴⁹⁵ Cyprian, *Letters*, 22. 2. 2.

⁴⁹⁶ Cyprian, *Letters*, 12. 1. 2.

⁴⁹⁷ Cyprian, *Letters*, 12. 2. 1.

⁴⁹⁸ Cyprian, *Letters*, 12. 1. 2.

⁴⁹⁹ Cyprian, *Letters*, 15.1.

discipline by directing to their bishop requests for reconciliation.”⁵⁰⁰ In *Letter 15*. 1 Cyprian expresses the optimistic hope that the persecution will soon be over:⁵⁰¹

You have addressed a letter to me in which you petition that your requests might be examined and that peace be granted to certain of the fallen as soon as the persecution is over and we can meet together with the clergy and reassemble.

Cyprian’s pastoral concern is for those who gave in to pressure and either sacrificed or bought the *libelli* without sacrificing. These are the lapsed, the *lapsi*, and Cyprian does not see any difference between these two groups; both were denying their faith. Clarke estimates that this letter was written about May 250, by which time there were “significant” numbers of those who had purchased the *libelli*.⁵⁰² We get a sense of how serious a matter apostasy was for Cyprian in *Letter 15* which was addressed to the martyrs and confessors and referred to these clergy who had inappropriately pardoned the lapsed:⁵⁰³

Whereas they acted contrary to the law of the gospel...before penance had been done, before confession of the most serious and grievous of sins has been made, before there has been the imposition of hands by the bishop and the clergy in token of reconciliation, they have the audacity to make the offering on their behalf and give them the Eucharist, that is to say, to profane the sacred body of the Lord.

Clarke points out that in the east Dionysius accepted back those who had repented after apostasy, but they do not appear to have been readmitted to communion.⁵⁰⁴ In *Letters 15* to *20*, Cyprian lacks a clear distinction between “martyrs” and “confessors”; however the “certificates of peace” granted to those who apostatised are “always ascribed to the martyrs, never to confessors.” “Martyrs are confessors who have died or are expected to die soon.”⁵⁰⁵

Clarke gives the date for Cornelius’ election as Bishop as early March 251.⁵⁰⁶ *Letter 44* to Cornelius from Cyprian reveals Cyprian’s animosity to Novatian who had been made a bishop of Rome: “...a wicked and illegal appointment.”⁵⁰⁷ Cornelius was finally elected to replace him as Pope on 4 June 251.⁵⁰⁸ Cyprian lays the blame for all the troubles of the persecution squarely on the shoulders of Decius. Writing in the context of Cornelius’ appointment, Cyprian says:⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁰ Clarke, “Notes”, *Letter 15*, Vol. 1, p. 269.

⁵⁰¹ Cyprian, *Letter*, 15. 1. 2.

⁵⁰² Clarke, “Introduction”, *Letters*, Vol 1, p. 32, 33.

⁵⁰³ Cyprian, *Letter*, 15.1. 2.

⁵⁰⁴ Clarke, “Notes”, *Letter 15*, Vol. 1, p. 271, referring to Eusebius, *Church History*, 42. 5.

⁵⁰⁵ Clarke, Notes, *Letter 15*, Vol. 1 p. 272.

⁵⁰⁶ Clarke, “Notes”, *Letter 55*, Vol. 3, p. 177.

⁵⁰⁷ Cyprian, *Letter 44*. 1. 1.

⁵⁰⁸ Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, p. 324.

⁵⁰⁹ Cyprian, *Letter*, 55. 9. 1.

For he took his seat on his bishop's chair in Rome without a tremor of fear precisely at the time when that savage tyrant was menacing bishops of God with dire and dreadful horrors, at a time when news of a rival emperor was being raised up against him he would receive with far greater patience and forbearance than word that a bishop of God was being appointed in Rome.

Clarke comments that this indicates that by March 251, all danger had not yet passed.⁵¹⁰

From passages such as *Letter* 15.4 we learn that whole households "...having lapsed were seeking readmittance to communion...up to twenty and thirty and more at a time who claim to be the relations, in-laws, freedmen and domestics of the person holding the certificate of forgiveness" (issued by one of the martyrs).⁵¹¹ *Letter* 55 also indicates that whole families had to sacrifice, describing "another who alone confronted the test on behalf of everyone else, thereby protecting his wife, his children and his entire household at the cost of endangering himself." Here Cyprian is concerned for the man's *spiritual* safety. The term for entire households (*domus totae*) may then mean that slaves were included in the Decian edict. Clarke writes that the phrase "freedmen or domestics" (*liberti ac domestici*) used in *Letter* 15. 4 "strongly suggests (but does not establish) that *entire* households were therefore involved in the sacrifices, that is to say, embracing even freedmen and slaves."⁵¹² Cyprian's *Letter to the Lapsed* indicates that even babies were included in the scope of the edict.⁵¹³

Cyprian's *Letter* 24 illustrates the disruption to Church discipline and confusion that arose in the Churches as a result of the edict. Clergy such as Bishop Caldonius wrote to Cyprian for pastoral advice. Caldonius appears to have been in prison, but is now released, and he seemed ignorant of the fact that Cyprian had been in hiding.⁵¹⁴ Caldonius related the situation (which may well have been common) of a woman named Bona being dragged to sacrifice against her will by her husband who held her hands out for the sacrifice. After this she cried out: "I did not do it; you have done it." Whereby "she too, was exiled." Caldonius believed that such as these deserved to be reconciled, but he deferred the matter to Cyprian.⁵¹⁵

Lapsed 8, reveals that there was more than one altar set up in the Carthage forum, as it uses the plural "altars".⁵¹⁶ From *The Lapsed* 3 Cyprian gives us valuable information about the process:

⁵¹⁰ Clarke, "Notes", Vol. 3, *Letter* 55. 9. 1, p. 177.

⁵¹¹ Clarke, "Third-Century Christianity", p. 628.

⁵¹² Clarke, "Notes", *Letter* 15, Vol. 1, p. 282.

⁵¹³ Cyprian *The Lapsed*, 9.

⁵¹⁴ Clarke, "Notes", *Letter* 24, Vol. 1, p. 345.

⁵¹⁵ Cyprian, *Letter* 24.

⁵¹⁶ Cyprian, *The Lapsed*, 8.

“When the time appointed for the recanters had passed, whoever had not confessed in that time to be a Christian confessed that he was.”⁵¹⁷ Burns summarises:⁵¹⁸

A fixed date was also set locally by which the inhabitants were to have presented themselves; thereafter the commissioners would have had to deal with latecomers, defectors, or defaulters drawn to their attention. The recalcitrant were left to languish in prison, awaiting trial before the higher magistrate to whom their cases were referred. All indications are that after a lapse of twelve months from the date set for the sacrificial rites, the various commissions were dissolved, Christians still imprisoned released, and exiles were recalled.

Burns’ and Jensen’s chronology is optimistic. The process most likely went on for more than twelve months, because, as noted and quoted above from *Letter* 55. 9. 1, Cornelius showed great courage in accepting the bishopric of Rome as his life would have been in danger. Clarke estimates that Cornelius was elected bishop in early March. “It should, therefore, follow that at the time of his election all danger had not yet passed, even though about that period prisoners were being released.”⁵¹⁹

Cyprian writes that: “These brothers of ours had previously been arrested during the persecution and had withstood the violence of the magistrate and the attacks of the frenzied mob.”⁵²⁰

Cyprian names these three brothers and wrote that although they had initially withstood “extreme torments” and “protracted agony” they finally succumbed. They had been doing penance continuously for three years and he decides to refer the matter to his colleagues after Easter.⁵²¹

Clarke surmises that the time allotted for the sacrifices in Carthage was completed by mid-April 250, the persecution merely petering out, but he does admit that there is no clear proof of this.⁵²²

In *Letter* 21 Celerinus writes to Lucianus asking for forgiveness for Numeria and Candida, the first who had avoided the sacrifice through bribery, and the second who succumbed to the edict to sacrifice. Clarke argues for a likely dating of this letter to after Easter (which was April 7, 250). Reports of starvation, thirst, and the “overwhelming” heat of the prison cells⁵²³ could indicate a date in June or even later.⁵²⁴

⁵¹⁷ Cyprian, *The Lapsed*, 3.

⁵¹⁸ Burns and Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa*, p. 14.

⁵¹⁹ Clarke, “Notes”, Vol. 3, *Letter* 55. 9. 1, p. 177.

⁵²⁰ Cyprian, *Letter* 56. 1.

⁵²¹ Cyprian, *Letter* 56.3.

⁵²² Clarke, “Introduction”, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 31.

⁵²³ Cyprian, *Letter* 22. 2. 1.

⁵²⁴ Clarke, “Notes”, *Letter* 21, Vol. 1, p. 313.

This is important information for the academic argument about whether there were one or two edicts, (the first directed at the bishops), as has been argued in the past.⁵²⁵ In Carthage ordinary Christians were arrested with the leaders.⁵²⁶ Later in 1973 Clarke very plausibly explains away a theory of “Double-Trials”, and the phrase “two harvests of glory” awaiting surviving confessing sufferers, which had been referred to by Bishop Cornelius in a letter to Bishop Fabian: “Maximus, one of our presbyters, and Urbanus, who twice gained the highest honour by confession.”⁵²⁷ At Carthage there is evidence that the persecution intensified for initial confessors when they faced a second hearing before the proconsul, but this does not mean that there were two Decian edicts or “double-trials”.⁵²⁸

Cyprian’s *Letters* provide graphic and credible accounts of what happened in the western empire. He was able to receive visitors to his hiding place and send and receive letters from Rome. His evidence supplements Eusebius’ accounts. There is doubt about Decius being motivated by his supposed fear of Fabian, bishop of Rome. He certainly had him executed early in the outworking of his edict, “by 20th January” and he was tried and condemned by Decius himself according to Frend.⁵²⁹ Babylas bishop of Antioch was martyred “perhaps on 24 January”.⁵³⁰ Because of Valerian’s attack on both prominent clergy and Church buildings only a few years later, it is likely that Decius was becoming concerned about the sophisticated structures of control of the increasing number of adherents of Christianity throughout the empire, and perceived divided loyalties.

Eusebius corroborates Decius’ action against Fabian and Babylas, and adds that Alexander, bishop of Jerusalem was also a martyr.⁵³¹ Dionysius of Alexandria was hunted (but escaped), and implies that action in the east was swift.⁵³² Bishops were the first to be targeted to comply with the edict, but arrests from among the general populace followed, as evidenced by reports from both Dionysius (via Eusebius) and Cyprian. Cyprian implies that “*all inhabitants* of the Empire were involved, regardless of age, sex and citizen-status.”⁵³³ It is likely that the Church leaders were pressed to sacrifice in order to encourage their followers to obey the order. As for

⁵²⁵ Clarke, “Two Measures in the Persecution of Decius? Two Recent Views, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, No. 20, 1973, pp. 118 – 123.

⁵²⁶ Clarke, “Two Measures,” p. 120.

⁵²⁷ Clarke, “Double-Trials,” p. 650; and Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 43. 6.

⁵²⁸ Clarke, “Double-Trials,” p. 663.

⁵²⁹ Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, p. 319.

⁵³⁰ Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, p. 319.

⁵³¹ Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 39. 1 – 4.

⁵³² Eusebius, *Church History*, 6. 41. 11.

⁵³³ Clarke, “Introduction”, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 26.

the universality of the scope of the edict, in *Letter 19* Cyprian argues that the correct response to the vexing question of those who had lapsed and sought readmittance to communion, "...does not affect just a few or one church only or one province but it concerns the entire world."⁵³⁴

Cyprian indicates that a number of Christians including bishops fled to Rome to avoid the edict,⁵³⁵ but by the time of his African Council "in the first half of 251"⁵³⁶, a "copious number of bishops" could be assembled.⁵³⁷ Clarke's translation uses the word "generous number". These were "preserved safe and unharmed."⁵³⁸

Clarke issues a warning that: "We cannot be sure...that we have here historically valid information about Decius' personal animosity towards Christianity and not a rhetorical contrivance devised on the part of Cyprian to achieve his desired portrait of Cornelius...Given the unlikelihood of accurate stories reaching Cyprian from Decius' court... (and) at the time of Cornelius' appointment the emperor was away in the Danube area, never to return."⁵³⁹ Like Eusebius, writing some sixty years later, Cyprian's theology, letters and interpretations of current events were the out workings of local controversies. Cyprian's valorisation of bishop Cornelius was probably prompted by his hatred for Novatian and the latter's theology. *Letter 55* which was a response to a letter from "Antonianus his brother", says about Novatian that "it is not right for us even to want to know what it is he is teaching, since he is teaching *outside*."⁵⁴⁰

The Martyrdom of Pionius

Eusebius writes of the martyrdom of Pionius occurring within the period of the martyrdoms in Smyrna of Polycarp and Metrodorus between the years 161 and 168.⁵⁴¹ However, the writer of *The Martyrdom* specifically refers to Pionius' arrest as taking place on the "the second day of the sixth month...on the anniversary of the blessed martyr Polycarp, while the persecution of Decius was still on,"⁵⁴² and later makes a reference to emperor Gordian⁵⁴³, who ruled from 238 to 244.⁵⁴⁴ The final chapter in *The Martyrdom* gives and correctly spells out the names of

⁵³⁴ *Letters* 19. 2. 1, and Clarke, "Notes", Vol. 1, p. 135, n. 147, referring to Firmilian's account, written in late 256, which indicated that Cappadocia was included in Decius' edict.

⁵³⁵ Cyprian, *Letters* 30. 8. 1.

⁵³⁶ Burns and Jensen, *Christianity in Northern Africa*, pp. 17, 18.

⁵³⁷ Cyprian, *Letters*, 55. 6. 1, Patout and Burns' translation.

⁵³⁸ Cyprian, *Letters*, 55. 6. 1, Clarke's translation.

⁵³⁹ Clarke, "Notes", Vol. 3, *Letter 55*, p. 178.

⁵⁴⁰ Cyprian, *Letters*, 55. 24. 1.

⁵⁴¹ Eusebius, *Church History*, 15. 46 – 8.

⁵⁴² Musurillo, "The Martyrdom of Pionius," p. 2.

⁵⁴³ *Pionius*, 9.

⁵⁴⁴ Barnes, "Pre-Decian 'Acta Martyrium'", *The Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 19, NO. 2, October 1968, pp. 509 – 531, p. 529.

Quintilian as proconsul of Asia, and Decius as emperor, and dates Pionius' martyrdom to 12 March 250.⁵⁴⁵ Eusebius and the writer of *The Martyrdom* must therefore have had access to different records. Eusebius agrees with the writer of *The Martyrdom* that Pionius had visitors whilst he was in prison, and on part of his manner of death "the nailings", but not his death by fire. Eusebius also relates the fact that Pionius made lengthy speeches whilst in prison to whomever would listen.⁵⁴⁶

Barnes has analysed the queries around the date of Pionius' martyrdom and concludes that: "There is, therefore, no valid reason to imagine that those passages which indicate that Pionius met his death in the Decian persecution are interpolated...Decius was the first emperor to promulgate such an edict, and to impose the responsibility for enforcing it on local officials."⁵⁴⁷

The Martyrdom of Pionius, unlike the other three sources, does not venture attributing a motive for Decius' edict; however, this literature does provide extra information. For example, Pionius was martyred just before "a man named Metrodorus from the Marcionite sect."⁵⁴⁸ Mention is also made of others whom he met in prison, including a "Phrygian" named Eutychian,⁵⁴⁹ which indicated that he was a Montanist.⁵⁵⁰ The authorities made no difference between those claiming to be "true" Christian and those belonging to "sects", assuming that these two men were in prison for refusing to sacrifice. The inclusion of "heretical martyrs" is a pointer to the *Martyrdom's* authenticity, as the Church did not accept them.⁵⁵¹

The consensus amongst scholars is that *The Martyrdom of Pionius* is authentic. Fox writes: "Fictitious prologues and chains of authority have hampered other stories of martyrdom to the point where none can be taken on trust."⁵⁵² He verifies the historicity of "Rufinus the sophist,"⁵⁵³ of the governor Quintilian under whom Pionius was sentenced,⁵⁵⁴ and of "Terentius", the official in charge of the wild beast shows.⁵⁵⁵ Such a position would be that of an "Asiarch". There is a 240's coin from Smyrna inscribed as "Marcus Tertius the Asiarch", and the names could easily be confused.⁵⁵⁶ Finally, referring to *Pionius* 11, where "a Macedonian

⁵⁴⁵ *Pionius*, 23.

⁵⁴⁶ *Pionius*, 4, addressing Jews, "men of Judaea", and Greeks, those "who glory in Homer".

⁵⁴⁷ Barnes, "Pre-Decian 'Acta Martyrium'", p. 531.

⁵⁴⁸ *Pionius*, 21.

⁵⁴⁹ *Pionius*, 12.

⁵⁵⁰ Musurillo, "The Martyrdom", p. 151, n. 23.

⁵⁵¹ Louis Robert, *Le Martyre De Pionius*, ed. G. W. Bowersock and C. P. Jones, Washington, 1994, pp. 74, 75.

⁵⁵² Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, London, 1986, p. 468.

⁵⁵³ Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, pp. 465 – 467, and referred to in *Pionius* 17.

⁵⁵⁴ Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 467, and referred to in *Pionius* 19, and 23.

⁵⁵⁵ Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 467, 468. *Pionius* refers to a "Terentius", in 10.

⁵⁵⁶ Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 467, 468.

woman from the town of Karine...⁵⁵⁷ was among those already in the prison when Pionius and his companions arrived, Fox writes: “If fictions, like forged paintings, betray themselves by their smaller details, this Macedonian proves that Pionius’s story is not ‘late and obviously embroidered’”.⁵⁵⁸ Barnes (2010) concurs: “The *Passion of Pionius* proves its credentials as a contemporary witness...by showing precise and accurate knowledge of facts that were soon forgotten.”⁵⁵⁹

Bowersock outlines three types of documentary sources for some early martyrdoms and these are illustrated in the Pionius account. There are: “alleged writings of the martyrs themselves”; “eyewitness accounts” which include impressions after the martyrdom from “a sympathetic viewer”; and “apparently official transcripts” of the interrogation before a “Roman magistrate”. The latter document would state the “judicial decision to punish and the character of the punishment”, but not record the execution itself.⁵⁶⁰

The opening chapter of the *Martyrdom of Pionius* said that Pionius “left us this writing for our instruction that we might have to this day as a memorial of his teaching.”⁵⁶¹ Although the text is in the third person for the most part, it does lapse into the first person plural “us” at times,⁵⁶² as if the narrator was using Pionius’ direct speech. It is very interesting that Pionius does not hesitate to call out the apostate and once Christian leader Euctemon. The narrative goes on to describe Euctemon’s actions:⁵⁶³

Later it was said that Euctemon had decided to force our hand. He had brought a little lamb to the temple of Nemesis, and after it was roasted and he had eaten of it, he intended to bring all the rest back home. He had indeed become ridiculous because of his false oath, wearing his crown and swearing by the emperor’s genius and the goddess of Fate that he was not a Christian and that, unlike the rest, he would omit nothing that would manifest his denial.

Pionius refers to “crowns” (*stephanoi*) that had been placed on them, but they tore them off.⁵⁶⁴ Louis Robert points out that the reference to Euctemon was suppressed in the Latin, Armenian and Old Church Slavonic translators and this appears to be a pattern in later martyrologies.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁵⁷ *Pionius*, 11.

⁵⁵⁸ Fox, *Pagan and Christians*, p. 468.

⁵⁵⁹ Timothy D. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*, Tübingen, 2010, p. 74.

⁵⁶⁰ G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 27.

⁵⁶¹ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, pp. 28, 29, referring to *Martyrdom of Pionius*, 1. 9, 10.

⁵⁶² Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, p. 29, referring to *Martyrdom of Pionius*, 18.

⁵⁶³ *Pionius*, 18. 10 – 15.

⁵⁶⁴ *Pionius*, 18. 4.

⁵⁶⁵ Louis, *Le Martyre de Pionius*; note by Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, p. 29.

An interesting comparison can be made between Cyprian's, Dionysius' and Pionius' reactions to the Decian edict. Cyprian went into hiding; Dionysius said that he initially waited to be arrested then hid, was captured, then escaped! Pionius waited in chains to be arrested. Moss draws out regional responses to the threat of martyrdom. In Asia Minor it was "imitating Christ"⁵⁶⁶, and this is reflected in Pionius' reaction. Cyprian, in *On the Mortality* offering advice to any who would feel cheated if deprived from martyrdom, writes: "In the first place, martyrdom is not in your power, but in the condescension of God."⁵⁶⁷ Pionius does not appear to take on himself the power to forgive those who had apostasised, in contrast to the "atoning power" taken on by the martyrs in Africa.⁵⁶⁸

Musurillo has analysed the *Martyrdom of Pionius* for themes which have appeared in other martyrologies in the same volume.⁵⁶⁹ There is a general lack of sympathy faced by Christians as "aliens in a hostile world...attributed to the malevolence of the Demon."⁵⁷⁰ Pionius' stand is seen as an avowal of his faith, there are scenes from his imprisonment and leading up to his execution, the soldiers or gaolers are cruel (*Pionius* 15. 15 – 20; 18. 5 – 10), the crowds call out (e.g. *Pionius* 10, 17; 18. 1), the use of the first person, commented on above, and the apologetic speeches (but see below). Pionius is also begged to reconsider, even at the end (e.g. *Pionius* 20).⁵⁷¹

Pionius rebuked the temple verger Polemon who arrived with a large contingent of soldiers to try to force him to sacrifice: "It is proper" said Pionius, "that those who have been imprisoned should await the arrival of the proconsul. Why do you take on yourselves his task?"⁵⁷² This Roman protocol, that only a proconsul could pronounce capital punishment, has been testified to elsewhere.⁵⁷³

Pascoe argues that *Pionius'* second speech (*Pionius* 12 – 14) is incompatible with the rest of *Pionius* especially the first speech (*Pionius* 4 – 5) which explains to the Jewish audience where they have misunderstood the Old Testament.⁵⁷⁴ This reveals a good understanding of Jewish and

⁵⁶⁶ Moss, Candida, *Ancient Christian Martyrdoms*, Yale, 2012, p. 49.

⁵⁶⁷ Cyprian, *On the Mortality (or Plague)*, 17. 1.

⁵⁶⁸ Walter Ameling, "The Christian *lapsi* in Smyrna, 250 A.D. (*Martyrium Pionii* 12 – 14)," *Vigiliae Christianae* 62, 2008, pp. 133 – 160, p. 155.

⁵⁶⁹ Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, pp. lii – liii.

⁵⁷⁰ Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, p. xxix.

⁵⁷¹ Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, p. xxix.

⁵⁷² *Pionius*, 15. 10.

⁵⁷³ Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 484, and Pliny, *Letters*, 10. 96. 3, 3.

⁵⁷⁴ Samantha L. Pascoe, *Pionius as Martyr and Orator: A Study of the Martyrdom of Pionius*, Thesis submitted to the University of Manitoba, 2007, pp. 83, 85.

pagan beliefs. The second oration is addressed solely to the Jewish community,⁵⁷⁵ it does not refer to sacrifice or offerings to the emperor; it is adversarial and “in stark opposition to the other communities.”⁵⁷⁶ The main thrust of the second speech is to warn Christians against being led astray by the Jewish community. If indeed the second speech is a later interpolation, this does not in any way reflect on the overall authenticity and value of *Pionius* as a witness to the Decian edict.

Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle

The first 88 lines of the *Thirteenth Oracle* were probably composed by various contributors. The writer is most concerned about the fate of Syria in this period between Decius’ accession and the victory of Uranius Antoninus in 253. As the death of the latter is not recorded and his coinage stops in 253, it is reasonable to suggest that this was written around 253.⁵⁸⁴

The lines directly relevant to Decius’ edict are below:⁵⁸⁵

After him another great-hearted king will rule mighty, flourishing Rome, skilled in war, emerging from the Dacians, of the number three hundred; he will be of the fourth race and destroy many, then indeed the king will destroy all the brothers and friends of the slaughtered kings, and immediately there will be spoliation and murder of the faithful because of the former king.

Line 80 refers to “him”, which is preceded by line 79:⁵⁸⁶

Then the great-hearted man with his mighty son will fall treacherously because of the elder king.

Potter writes that this verse is “utterly obscure”, noting that the details of Philip’s death (Decius’ predecessor) are “difficult to reconstruct.”⁵⁸⁷ “Of the faithful” in Line 87 is a reference to Christians and is used similarly in another oracle.⁵⁸⁸ Lines 81 – 3 describe Decius but in a milder way than lines 84 – 88. Decius was of Dacian origin and he took the name Trajan (“Traianus” meaning “three hundred”) on his ascension. Potter believes that Lines 81 – 3 are written by a different but still contemporary author. Decius is called “great-hearted...skilled in war,”⁵⁸⁹ and these words were “...included by the principle compiler because he thought they gave a reasonable view of Decius.”⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁷⁵ Pascoe, *Pionius*, p. 83.

⁵⁷⁶ Pascoe, *Pionius*, p. 85.

⁵⁸⁴ Potter, “Introduction”, *Prophecy and History*, pp. 141, 142.

⁵⁸⁵ *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, lines 80 – 88.

⁵⁸⁶ *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, line 79

⁵⁸⁷ Potter, “Commentary”, *Prophecy and History*, p. 254

⁵⁸⁸ Potter, “Commentary”, *Prophecy and History*, p. 261.

⁵⁸⁹ *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, lines 81 – 83.

⁵⁹⁰ Potter, “Introduction”, *Prophecy and History*, p. 147.

Lines 87 and 88 are contested. They declare that Decius' edict was motivated to "spoliation and murder of the faithful because of the former king," that is Philip. Rives claims that because it is the only reference to Christians it was likely a later interpolation.⁵⁹¹ I agree with Potter that the inclusion of the words "of the faithful" favours a Christian writer⁵⁹² and there is no reason that these were not in the original which in any case was probably a compilation of various hands.⁵⁹³ This would explain the obvious pagan references elsewhere, such as the god Ares and the Hypsistos;⁵⁹⁴ although it is possible that even pagan references were included by a Jewish or Christian hand, because the popular readership would expect it from this genre. I have argued elsewhere that Philip was probably not a Christian.

This *Oracle* reveals Philip's reputation to be a Christian and that this was believed to be Decius' motive for the edict. We are also reminded of the eschatological fears of this period, especially in connection with Rome's destiny and millennium,⁵⁹⁵ for example lines 46 – 9. This is an important factor in trying to understand the prevailing mindset of the Roman rulers and their subjects in this period, and it is a strong pointer to a possible motivation for Decius' edict.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Potter, "Commentary", *Prophecy and History*, pp. 258, 259.

⁵⁹¹ Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 136, n.9.

⁵⁹² Potter, "Commentary", *Prophecy and History*, p. 259.

⁵⁹³ Potter, "Introduction", *Prophecy and History*, pp. 141, 142.

⁵⁹⁴ Potter, "Introduction", *Prophecy and History*, p. 147.

⁵⁹⁵ Potter, "Introduction", *Prophecy and History*, p. 145.

This chapter draws together the arguments from the preceding chapters, summarises the key arguments to distil four possible answer. These four are then assessed to produce the most likely one or two answers to the thesis question, which are summarised under “Final Summary.”

In the analyses of Cyprian’s *Letters* and his other writings, Dionysius’ *Letters* as found in Eusebius’ *Church History*, the *Martyrdom of Pionius* and the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, there are no contradictions within the texts. *The Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* is a popular history composed from multiple sources, based on hearsay and commonly held views, but written in a style to reflect “oracles”, and so it is more difficult to analyse than the other three texts. When analysing Eusebius’ *Church History*, I have noted that his sullied reputation has been somewhat rehabilitated. He clearly misplaced Pionius’ martyrdom to an earlier time, and there is no proof of the veracity of his claim that Philip was either a Christian or sympathetic to Christianity, but his statement cannot be dismissed out of hand. His writings on the actual events following Decius’ edict are reliable, because they come to us through Dionysius, who was himself in hiding at the time. *The Martyrdom of Pionius* may have at least one speech interpolated at a later date (plus an account by an unknown writer of the final days or hours of Pionius’ life), but there is no reason to reject any of these four texts as inauthentic. Cyprian’s *Letters* and Pionius’ account provide dates which enable a valuable reconstruction of events.

Most importantly, these sources mirror the primary irrefutable material evidence provided by the *libelli*, which are also datable. Dionysius/Eusebius, Cyprian and the Oracle are unequivocal that Decius’ edict was meant specifically to be anti-Christian. Eusebius and the Oracle state that it was because of Decius’ hatred of Philip who was reputed to be a Christian or sympathetic to their cause. Cyprian calls Decius a “savage tyrant”, and in the context of Cornelius’ appointment as bishop of Rome, states that Decius was afraid of him.⁵⁹⁶ This last claim was unlikely, as argued in Chapter 5. Eusebius, Cyprian and Pionius offer various theological explanations for why the Church is under this attack, which are outside the scope of this thesis. One dominant theme is that they are engaged in a spiritual battle, for example, Cyprian’s reference to the “combat”, “combatants”, and “battlefront.”⁵⁹⁷

Decius’ coinage provides the most valuable evidence about how Decius wanted to project his dynastic aspirations. It is noteworthy that he omitted Philip his predecessor from the selected group of eleven traditional emperors on his coins. Judging from the historical events

⁵⁹⁶ Cyprian, *Letter* 55. 9. 1.

⁵⁹⁷ Cyprian, *Letter* 10. 1. 1.

surrounding both Philip's appointment as emperor (he was under suspicion for plotting this), the army's humiliating defeat by the resurgent Persians, and the circumstances when Philip's army turned against him and proclaimed Decius as their new emperor, Decius probably had other reasons to despise and even hate Philip, apart from his dubious sympathies. The key historians Dio Cassius and Herodian are silent about this period. Dexippus portrays glimpses of the man and the, often perilous, position that a Roman emperor could find himself in at this time, and *Historia Augusta* give conflicting views. It is his actions at key points in his life which give the best clues as to his thinking.

The consensus amongst scholars now is that Decius' edict applied to everyone in the empire, including all ages and probably also slaves; but that the Jewish people were exempt and maybe those few who were not citizens, the *dediticii*. Furthermore, most scholars now accept that everyone had to obtain a *libellus*, and that some *libelli* covered many family members. It is not possible to establish whether there were any Christians among the *libelli*. One exception to this position is that Mary Beard and her co-authors in 1998, wrote that only Christians were required to obtain a certificate because of the administrative work load.⁵⁹⁸ A comparison between the *libelli* and the other Egyptian documents which were required of the population from time to time (for example the census papyri), parallels closely the process of the tax collection.

That the edict was the religious corollary of Caracalla's 212 grant of citizenship to almost everyone within the borders of the Roman empire, was strongly claimed by Rives in 1999,⁵⁹⁹ and accepted by many historians, including Frend.⁶⁰⁰ However, McKechnie argues conclusively that Caracalla's edict already had a religious principle built into it,⁶⁰¹ and I have discussed and dismissed Rives' thesis in Chapter 3.

Anti-Christian Persecution

One of the most powerful arguments against believing that Decius' edict was directly targeting Christians is what he did not do, compared to his successors.⁶⁰² It is indeed remarkable that the two key eye witnesses to the outworking of Decius' edict, and who have left us graphic records, were themselves able to hide away successfully for the duration of the edict's out workings. Both were prominent and easily recognisable figures in their respective localities. In the case of

⁵⁹⁸ Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome*, Vol 2, p. 165.

⁵⁹⁹ Rives, *The Decree of Decius*.

⁶⁰⁰ Frend, "Persecutions", p. 513.

⁶⁰¹ McKechnie, "Roman Law," p. 255.

⁶⁰² Rives, "The Decree of Decius", p. 142.

Cyprian, he was a well-known landed aristocrat in North Africa in his own right before he converted to Christianity. Dionysius was able to escape after having been captured. There are no indications that soldiers were sent to search out and rearrest Dionysius, nor that any of Cyprian's Christian contacts were themselves tortured in order to reveal his secret location. Only a short while after the Decian edict had simply died away, the anger of the public against Cyprian had still not dissipated. In the summer of 252 there was an imperial edict to attend the sacrifices which Clarke says may have been to avert the plague, but Cyprian refused to attend, and the crowd howled for him to be thrown to the lions.⁶⁰³

It was a very different situation under Emperor Valerian only a few years later, and this is one of the strongest arguments against the hypothesis that Decius was primarily and directly trying to catch and martyr Christians in the empire. In 256 Valerian demanded that all high-ranking clergy should sacrifice "on behalf of the emperor". Christians were forbidden to have their own cemeteries, and Church property was seized.⁶⁰⁴ Diocletian went even further. The point here is that Decius could have directly attacked the Church by attacking all Church properties and assets, which by now must have been becoming visible enough for Valerian to be provoked to take action. We do not know what would have happened if Decius had not been killed in battle in May 251. By then the edict has run its course. Clarke suggests that Decius chose to have Celerinus's trial brought before him as a "test trial of an initial recusant" who was of no particular status in the church hierarchy, and who seems to have been released after nineteen days and set free without recanting.⁶⁰⁵

Of course, Decius did order the arrest of prominent bishops immediately after his edict was promulgated, and that must have been by forethought and planning, because Babylas bishop of Antioch was arrested in Alexandria only four days or so after bishop Fabian in Rome. Both were tried and executed, and Alexander of Jerusalem died in prison.⁶⁰⁶ It is likely that Decius was hoping that the bishops would relent and sacrifice, and that the Christians under their care would follow their example. I believe, with Clarke, that Decius wanted Christians to offer sacrifices. He wanted apostates not martyrs; and "he wanted his subjects to honour the gods."⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰³ Clarke, "Notes", Vol 3, *Letters* 59. 6. 1, pp. 245, 246.

⁶⁰⁴ Tilley, "North Africa", p. 390.

⁶⁰⁵ Clarke, "Some Observations," p. 67.

⁶⁰⁶ Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, p. 319.

⁶⁰⁷ Clarke, "Some Observations", p. 68.

Bill Leadbetter has asked why Decius could not have exempted the Christians, as he presumably did for the Jews, as had been the custom since at least the time of Augustus.⁶⁰⁸ The proposition that he did make an exemption for the Jews is on a sure footing, because Decius, as a traditionalist, and with Augustus as his hero (evidenced by his coinage) would be unlikely to contradict Augustus. However, Christianity was a new sect, and the breadth and extent of what was involved in carrying out Decius' edict shows how much it meant to him. Decius' edict was largely successful in achieving his aims, for many Christians did offer the sacrifices, much more, probably, than those who did not.

Sacrifices to Avert Danger

As discussed to Chapter 3, there were several threats to the empire's stability leading up to Decius' reign. He was not to know that the political instability which followed the end of the Severan dynasty in 235, was in fact to continue until late in the third century. I argue that what would be uppermost in his mind would be the very real threat of a rising and belligerent Persia. Philip's humiliating defeat against Shapur I in early 244, and the ongoing aggression of the Germanic tribes of the Franks, Alamanni and Goths to the north, would have justifiably given Decius cause for alarm. It was at the hands of the Goths, probably in early June 251, that Decius himself and his sons were killed. He had reasons to fear for his safety, the survival of his dynasty, and that of his empire.

The plague would have been another immediate cause for fear. In a letter that bishop Dionysius wrote to another bishop Hierax in Egypt he refers to the plague. This has been dated to 249, and probably preceded the outbreak in Carthage.⁶⁰⁹ The plague's symptoms must have been truly alarming, and probably previously unknown.

However, if wars and the plague were the catalyst for Decius' edict, why was there such a seeming lack of urgency in carrying out his orders? The whole process would have been delayed by his insistence on setting up the administrative processes with appointment of magistrates and professional scribes, so that there would be witnesses to one's sacrifice and obtaining the *libellus*. *Pionius* reveals that the sacrifice took place on 23 February in Smyrna in Asia.⁶¹⁰ Babylas of Antioch was arrested and executed "perhaps on 24th January." We do not know when

⁶⁰⁸ Bill Leadbetter, "Imperial Policy and the Christians in the Late Third Century", ed. Matthew Dillon, *Religion in the Ancient World*, Amsterdam, 1996, pp. 247, 248.

⁶⁰⁹ Kearns, *A Plague in Crisis*, p. 17.

⁶¹⁰ *Pionius*, 2.1. Selinger translates "the second day of the sixth month" as 23 February: Selinger, *The Mid-Third Persecutions*, p. 51.

Dionysius was hunted out, but the impression is that it was soon after Decius came to power. The point is that Decius' edict had probably already travelled across the Mediterranean to Antioch by January. Scholars have pointed out the danger of Mediterranean travel in winter and so on. But surely the delay of the sacrifices in Middle Egypt to 3 June (per the earliest date on the *libelli*) does not indicate a sense of urgency, unless there were indeed two edicts which I have discounted.

I argue, rather, that the key crises which Decius faced, namely the wars and plague were probably seen by Decius as generally symptomatic of a worrying discord in the heavens, prompting the need for a very grand and thorough gesture of devotion to the gods. This can be plausibly linked with the possibility of a re-celebration of the Millennium or with his accession as emperor, or both.

Sacrifices for Decius' Accession as Emperor

Selinger's study claims to show that the sacrifices followed the usual pattern of the accession of an emperor. We know from *Pionius* that garlands were worn, animals were sacrificed and the meat eaten.⁶¹¹

Selinger includes a table of "Sacrifices for the Succession of a new Emperor."⁶¹³ However, these reveal a great degree of variation and I am not wholly convinced that a direct correlation can be found with Decius' sacrifice. Some practices in Selinger's list specified "sacrifices of oxen", for example, on the occasion of Nero's accession.⁶¹⁴ Other directions simply seemed to consist of "prayers", "sacrifices", "processions", "sports", "horse-races", "oaths", "feasts", "statues", "garlands", "honours" and so on.⁶¹⁵ There seems to have been a wide range of acceptable practices, and therefore one is left asking, then, how do the Decian sacrifices differ from the *supplicatio*? The very act of consuming the meat required a deliberate opting in by the one offering the sacrifice. This was no mere observant act and by it those pagans who had been lax in showing their piety were now compelled to take part. The ingestion of sacrificial meat may have made Decius' ceremonies an extra-ordinary *supplicatio* but this is not able to be proved.

Selinger may be right: that Decius ordered this sacrifice to announce to the empire the arrival of his dynasty and in order to make a show of loyalty to him, and the timing of the edict points

⁶¹¹ *Pionius*, 18. 4.

⁶¹³ Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions*, pp. 98 – 103.

⁶¹⁴ Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions*, p. 100.

⁶¹⁵ Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions*, pp. 98 – 103.

towards this view. He was acclaimed by his army as emperor, and after a battle against Philip “in the summer of 249”, arrived in Rome “in September 249 and stayed there until summer 250.”

As argued in the Introduction, the evidence and timing could well point to a re-celebration of what his army would have done when they proclaimed him emperor. Now he wanted his accession celebrations to be carried out empire-wide and mandatory, but he did not specify any particular gods, judging by the wording on the *libelli*.

A Re- Celebration of Rome’s Millennium

We know from the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* that there were eschatological fears associated with the Millennium, but also that Philip had celebrated this momentous event on either 21 April 247 or 21 April 248 (see Chapter 3). In celebrating a millennium, and knowing the precise prayers and rituals required by the gods, Philip and his religious advisers would have been in uncharted waters. It is just possible, although unable to be proved, that Decius’ edict was to re-celebrate the millennium because of the dire and fatal events which certainly befell Philip after his millennium celebration. There were still border conflicts to deal with and a terrifying new plague was raging, at least in Egypt.

Final Summary

When I started this research, my research question was: “Why did Emperor Decius issue his 249 C.E. Edict...” I then realised that the answer could not be an “either”, “OR”, but “possibly one reason” AND “possibly the other reason” AND...” My research question changed to become: “What factors may have influenced Emperor Decius to issue his 249 C.E. Edict.”

The search for motives in the mind of a third century Roman ruler is like navigating a minefield, where he has not expressed himself in any extant source. The most that can be stated is “perhaps” or “probably”.

It is most likely that Decius’ edict was his way of stipulating the correct way for his subjects to pray to the gods for his emperorship and that of his dynasty and secure the safety of the empire. It was a grand Accession Ceremony and everyone in the empire (except possibly the *dediticii*) was included in the order.

It is also possible that Decius was motivated to include a re-celebration of Rome’s millennium in the face of fearful portents.

It is much less likely that Decius was focussed on the Christians at all. He knew that some would resist, as they did (thereby branding themselves as treasonous), but the majority complied with his order. He did not interfere with Christian worship or assets. He simply could not understand the recalcitrance of those who did resist him. We cannot be dogmatic about this though, for no one knows what would have happened if his life had not been cut short.

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