

“BURNING KNOWLEDGE”:
STUDIES OF BOOKBURNING IN ANCIENT ROME

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the ancient Roman practice of bookburning. The public destruction of religious writings by fire was a development of the Hellenistic period. It was in this period that strictly religious associations began to develop and writing was first becoming important for religious practices of many kinds, and for the dissemination of religious ideas. The earliest incidents of bookburning suggest that this action was taken from time to time against religious activities and practitioners that were outside of the supervision and control of Roman officials, who saw these novel and foreign practices as a threat to the proper religious observances that were believed to ensure the harmony with the gods upon which the security and stability of Roman society depended. To burn a forbidden book was, therefore, an act of piety on the part of the destroyer, who in this early period was invariably a representative of the state. It was commonly performed as a religious ritual and care was taken to make certain that it was seen by the greatest number of witnesses.

During the period of the Roman Empire, further developments to the practice of bookburning occurred as this ritual came to be used by religious officials in intercommunal conflicts within the Graeco-Roman religious milieu. They were not strictly representatives of the state. Bookburning became a method by which religious

communities and authorities could express their power and opinions regarding their rivals and their beliefs. However, Roman emperors continued to authorize and even oversee bookburning for the same reasons as their predecessors during the Roman Republic.

With the rise of Christianity to the status of Roman state religion during the fourth century C.E., bookburning came to be an activity performed by a wide range of individuals, from imperial officials, to bishops and other Christian religious authorities, and even pious laypersons. The purpose of bookburning remained the protection of harmony with the divine, but the locations and performers of these destructions came to associate this activity more and more with the interests of the Christian Church.

To my mother and father

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ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviating conventions used in this dissertation are, with slight modifications, based on Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. ed. by H.S. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961); and G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

AJP = *American Journal of Philology*

ANRW = *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ed. W. Hasse and H. Temporini (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974–)

CA = *Classical Antiquity*

C&M = *Classica et Mediaevalia*

CIG = *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*, ed. A. Boeckh (Berlin: Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, 1828–1877)

CIL = *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (Berlin: Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, n.d.)

C.J. = *Codex Justinianus*

CSEL = *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* series

C.Th. = *Codex Theodosianus*, ed. and trans. Clyde Pharr (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952)

GOTR = *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*

HSCP = *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*

HTR = *Harvard Theological Review*

ILLRP = *Inscriptiones Latinae Liberae Rei Publicae*, ed. A. Degraffi (Florence: La Nuova Italia, [vol. 1²] 1965, [vol. 2] 1963)

ILS = *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, ed. H. Dessau (Berlin: Weidmann, 1892–1916)

JAC = *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*

JECS = *Journal of Early Christian Studies*

JEH = *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*

JHP = *Journal of the History of Philosophy*

JHS = *Journal of Hellenic Studies*

JRA = *Journal of Roman Archaeology*

JRH = *Journal of Religious History*
JRS = *Journal of Roman Studies*
JTS = *Journal of Theological Studies*
PCPS = *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*
P.G. = *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Garnier, 1857–1889)
PGM = *Papyri Magicae Graecae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*. Ed. K. Preisendanz
and A. Henrichs, 2 vols., 2d ed. (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1973–74)
P.L. = *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Garnier, 1844–1880)
P&P = *Past and Present*
TAPA = *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*
VC = *Vigiliae Christianae*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE LOGIC OF BOOKBURNING

PART 1.1: BOOKBURNING: A HISTORICAL PROBLEM?

This dissertation is a study of the origins of bookburning in western culture. As most readers will recognize, books and writings have been fundamental to western civilization for thousands of years. They have been a chief vehicle through which humans have organized society, recorded past events, and expressed ideas and beliefs about this world as well as that which may lie beyond it. Understandably, not all of these writings have received universal approval. At various times and places, especially when conflicts and other crises seemed poised to overwhelm society, people performed spectacular acts of public destruction by fire, burning the books of individuals and groups whose ideas and beliefs were regarded as a threat necessitating special eradication.

Most readers will be familiar with what a bookburning is, since the past century witnessed numerous incidents of this type. Perhaps the best-known acts of bookburning of the twentieth century occurred on 10 May 1933 and following, when supporters of the National Socialist party forcibly seized books written by Jews, communists, socialists, pacifists, liberals, and others from libraries, booksellers, and private collections throughout Germany and burned them publicly in bonfires. Bookburnings were staged in

virtually every large city and at thirty German universities, where student organizers attempted to synchronize them from eleven until midnight. These destructions were carefully orchestrated “media events” by which the perpetrators transmitted an explicit social message to witnesses and the world. In Berlin, youths belonging to a student organization burned some 25,000 volumes in Franz Joseph Platz near Berlin’s Opera House. More than two weeks of careful preparation had preceded the spectacle. At the event, works by the proscribed authors were condemned and Joseph Goebbels, the party’s minister of propaganda, gave a speech on its meaning before the bookburning commenced.¹ As they burned, the students chanted *Feuersprüche*, or “fire sayings,” enumerating the objectionable characteristics of the destroyed volumes.² In Frankfurt, the books were conveyed in rented manure carts pulled by oxen adorned with garlands and then burned to the music of Frédéric Chopin’s “Funeral March.” Their message was

¹ Leo Lowenthal, quoting from Goebbel’s speech, noted that the predominant theme was the erasure of the past: “Thus you do well, at this nocturnal hour, to commit the evil spirit of the past to the flames. That is a great, powerful, and symbolic act . . . that will show the world: here the spirit of the November Republic sinks to earth, but from these ruins, the phoenix of a new spirit will rise victorious.” See “Caliban’s Legacy,” *Cultural Critique* 8 (Winter 1987–88): 5–17, at 10. See also the discussion of the speech by Hans Naumann (a professor who spoke at the bookburning that was held in Bonn) by George L. Mosse, “Bookburning and the Betrayal of German Intellectuals,” *New German Critique* 31 (Winter 1984): 143–55.

² See Leonidas E. Hill, “The Nazi Attack on “Un-German” Literature, 1933–1945,” in *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation*, ed. Jonathan Rose. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001): 9–46, particularly 12–16. For a version of *Feuersprüche*, see *Nazism, 1919–1945, A Documentary Reader, Vol. 2: State, Economy and Society, 1933–39*, ed. J. Noakes and G. Pridham. (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1983), 402–3.

clear: the Jews and other writers who espoused ideas that were in opposition to Nazi ideology were a source of pollution, a poison, which threatened to destroy German culture from within. For that reason they had to be destroyed.

Amid the seemingly insurmountable economic and social problems of the post-war period in Germany, the Nazis had risen to power, in part, by expressing their resentment for the miserable conditions in their country and the belief that they were the result of foreign intrusions into the German body politic, or *Volk*. This was an almost numinous conceptual category that designated the pure, undifferentiated, original German people, as well as their unique culture and beliefs.³ In Nazi ideology, the Jews and other foreigners, such as the Poles, other Slavic peoples, and the Gypsies, foreign religious minorities, and social ‘deviants’, like homosexuals, were a cancer threatening to plunge the pure German people and spirit into irreparable ruin. As such, the Nazis relentlessly argued that the Germans must rid themselves and their homeland of all these threats that imperiled German society.

Localized incidents of violence proliferated following the Nazi seizure of power on 30 January 1933, as adherents of the Nazi message began to implement their purification of German society. Many in other countries immediately decried the horror of the Nazi bookburning.⁴ Hearing of the burnings, which included some of his own

³ Leonidas E. Hill, “The Nazi Attack on “Un-German” Literature, 1933–1945,” 10–12.

⁴ See Guy Stern, “Nazi Book Burning and the American Response,” in *Zensur und Kultur: Zwischen Weimarer Klassik und Weimarer Republik mit einem Ausblick bis heute*, ed. John A. McCarthy and Werner von der Ohe. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1995): 161–78.

books, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud retorted, prophetically, “Only our books? In earlier times they would have burned us with them.”⁵ The purges of books in 1933 were followed by other, even more violent actions taken by the Nazis against non-Germans. Beginning in 1938, Jewish synagogues were targeted for destruction and many burned to the ground along with the Torah scrolls and other religious writings enshrined within them. Ultimately, millions of Jews and other “non-Germans” were systematically killed in the Holocaust and millions more died in the bloodshed and upheaval caused by the Second World War. According to one assessment of the toll of these events on Europe’s literary heritage, during the twelve years of Nazi rule an estimated one hundred million books and manuscripts were destroyed.⁶

Despite the wide-spread condemnation of the Nazi party over the past seventy years for burning books and for the many other atrocities they perpetrated, bookburning has continued to be a method by which the proponents of strongly-held ideologies have inflicted harm on their opponents and expressed their own beliefs about the way society ought to be. In fact, in the past half century bookburnings have occurred throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas, in a variety of circumstances and contexts.⁷

⁵ See Gerhard Sauder, ed., *Die Bücherverbrennung: Zum 10. Mai 1933* (Munich: Hanser, 1983), 34.

⁶ Leonidas E. Hill, “The Nazi Attack on “Un-German” Literature, 1933–1945,” 32.

⁷ See the recent general study of the phenomenon of book destruction in the twentieth century by Rebecca Knuth, *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

Like Germany, the People's Republic of China has seen many bookburnings. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, this country struggled to modernize its agriculture and industry during the "Great Leap Forward." Like Germany, China experienced severe economic difficulties during the following decade, including a catastrophic famine. In the midst of these troubles the Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong sought to renew the revolutionary fervor of the earliest years of the communist revolution, calling on his country's youth to spearhead a movement against latent remnants of China's past and against bureaucratic complacency in contemporary Chinese society, which he believed had retarded modernization. During this Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), groups of Red Guards undertook a nationwide assault on "The Four Olds" (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits). These Red Guard units, made up of millions of Chinese teenagers mobilized at Mao's call, attacked, harassed, and publicly humiliated party and government officials as well as China's intellectual and artistic elites. During the most intense early years of this movement, individuals suspected of "counter-revolutionary" sentiments and activities were assaulted. Their homes were ransacked for writings that were out of line with the Chinese Communist Party's ideology. Many scientists, scholars, and artists saw their life's work destroyed or simply carted away, never to be seen again. Books were consumed in bonfires in many places throughout China.⁸ Mosques were ransacked and copies of the Koran belonging to the Uighurs, an ethnically

⁸ See Witold Rodzinski, *The People's Republic of China: Reflections on China's Political History since 1949* (London: Collins, 1988), 126.

Turkic Muslim minority, were burned in the Xinjiang province of western China.⁹ Buddhist statuary, scrolls, and temples were again subjected to the same kind of annihilation as they had been following the takeover of Tibet in the 1950s.¹⁰ In Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius, the Red Guards damaged or destroyed every relic associated with the sage.¹¹ Although its impact was not the same everywhere, China's Cultural Revolution caused so much chaos and upheaval that the country's army eventually stepped in to prevent further escalation. Nevertheless, by the time of Mao's death in 1976, hundreds of thousands had been killed and more than three million people had had been sent to work in the countryside, condemned to lengthy sentences of manual labor.

Just as the burners of books in Germany and China sought texts belonging to private individuals, they also removed them from libraries. In fact, libraries were special targets in many twentieth- and early twenty-first-century conflicts, especially where ethnic, cultural, and/or religious issues have motivated or justified the violence. In Sri Lanka, for example, on 1 June 1981 Sinhalese nationalists burned down the Tamil Library of Jaffna, which contained an enormous collection of rare palm-leaf scrolls and manuscripts in sandalwood boxes, and an estimated 97,000 books.¹² Most were

⁹ Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, trans. and ed. D.W.Y. Kwok. (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 73.

¹⁰ Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, 70; and see Holmes Welch, *Buddhism under Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

¹¹ Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, 89.

¹² Celia W. Dugger, "Effort to Rebuild Tamil Library Becomes a Symbol of Sri Lanka's Struggle," *International Herald Tribune*, 20 August 2001.

destroyed in the blaze. This act of vandalism set the Tamils, who are mostly Hindu, and the Sinhalese, who are primarily Buddhists and compose nearly three-quarters of Sri Lanka's population, into a spiral of ethnic violence and civil war that is still going on. After standing empty for almost twenty years, the library's shell is now finally being restored.

The triangular conflict that erupted in Bosnia-Herzegovina following the dissolution of Yugoslavia that began in 1990 also witnessed repeated attacks on the cultural heritage of the Bosnian Muslims, with public libraries, archives, museums, and private collections specially targeted for destruction. On 17 May 1992 the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo, home to the region's largest collections of manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, Bosnian Slavic written in Arabic script, and other archival documents from the period of Ottoman rule, was shelled and completely burned to the ground.¹³ In what has been called the largest single incident of bookburning in modern history, Serbian nationalist forces in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo set fire to the National and University Library, which held an estimated 1.5 million volumes, including thousands of rare books and manuscripts—the raw materials for 500 years of Bosnian history.¹⁴ The burning began on 25 August 1992 when the building was fired on from nearby heights. Repeated bombardments kept it aflame for three days during which

¹³ András Reidlmayer, "Convivencia under Fire: Genocide and Bookburning in Bosnia," in *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation*, ed. Jonathan Rose. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 274.

¹⁴ András Reidlmayer, "Convivencia under Fire: Genocide and Bookburning in Bosnia," 273. See also Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), particularly 1–28 and 149–52.

approximately 90 percent of its holdings were destroyed. In 1994 the Bosnian Manuscript Ingathering Project was established to facilitate the recovery of photocopies and other facsimiles of documents formerly held in these destroyed libraries and archives.¹⁵

Even more bookburnings have occurred in just the past few years. The Taliban, who came to rule Afghanistan in the mid-1990s during the civil war that erupted after the withdrawal of Soviet forces, are most notorious for their purposeful destruction on 10 March 2001 of the eighth-century statues of the Buddha that stood in the rock cliffs above Bamiyan. However, bookburning was also employed as part of that regime's effort to eradicate foreign and non-Muslim influences on Afghan society. Three years before the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, on 18 August 1998, the Taliban burned more than 55,000 books from the Hakim Nasser Khosrow Balkhi Cultural Center, an important repository for the region's multi-cultural heritage, in the main public square of the Afghan city of Pol-I-Khomri.¹⁶ In March 2001 about two hundred right-wing Hindus burned copies of the Koran and destroyed posters of Islamic shrines in New Delhi, India, as protest and retaliation for the destruction of the ancient Buddhist statues at Bamiyan and repressive measures taken against Hindus living in Afghanistan.¹⁷

¹⁵ For the project's home page on the World Wide Web:
<http://www.aplicom.com/manu/ingather.htm>.

¹⁶ See Latif Pedram, "Afghanistan: The Library is on Fire,"
http://www.autodafe.org/autodafe/autodafe_01/art_03.htm.

¹⁷ See "Kashmir leader held on holy book burning protest,"
<http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/south/03/16/Kashmir.leader.detained/>.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government has again acted to suppress the culture and religious practices of the Uighurs in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of western China. According to a statement posted on the World Wide Web by the Uyghur American Association, Chinese officials recently burned thousands of books documenting Uighur history and culture, many only recently published, as part of a policy reportedly aimed at erasing the heritage of this Turkic Muslim ethnic minority. Many incidents occurred in the city of Kashgar, where a local newspaper published a list of 330 banned titles.¹⁸ In the time since the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, the suppression of Uighur culture has intensified and individuals advocating a separate Uighur state have been labeled “terrorists” by the Chinese government.

Even more recently, on 14 April 2003 during the ouster of the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein, looters in the city of Baghdad set fire to the National Library and the library of Iraq’s Ministry for Religious Endowments.¹⁹ In addition to its many rare books and manuscripts, the National Library housed archives from the region’s Abbasid and Ottoman periods, as well as the modern state. The library at the Ministry contained one of the most important collections of Islamic literature in the world, including thousands of illuminated Korans. Although many of the most cherished items were spirited out of these buildings in the weeks before the war, innumerable irreplaceable documents of Mesopotamian civilization were destroyed in the flames. Similarly in Basra, the librarian

¹⁸ See “Uyghur American Association Statement on Book Burning” <http://www.uyghuramerican.org/statements/bookburning.html>.

¹⁹ See Matthew Battles, “Knowledge on Fire,” *The American Scholar* 72.3 (Summer 2003), 46–7.

removed more than 30,000 books from the city's Central Library to a nearby restaurant before the library was destroyed in a fire.²⁰ Despite the many small miracles that have occurred as the result of the heroic efforts of librarians, scholars, and concerned individuals, some of whom were illiterate, the impact of these violent actions can be regarded as catastrophic.

Indeed, it would appear that bookburning has become a phenomenon of worldwide scope. Such a summary of recent incidents in other parts of the world should not, however, give the impression that bookburning is no longer an activity performed in the West. During the mid-1990s a Christian minister, for example, held a bookburning each year in Kansas City, Missouri, to protest the donation of gay-themed books to the city's school district by a local gay and lesbian organization.²¹ Similarly, a Christian minister in New Mexico held a bookburning on Sunday 30 December 2001 of books from the popular "Harry Potter" series by J.K. Rowling, which tell the story of a young magician. The organizer contended that these books and others pertaining to magic, witchcraft, and the occult are "an abomination to God."²²

Reflecting on these circumstances, namely, that all over the world parties espousing strongly-held religious beliefs and political ideologies are consciously and intentionally burning books, the historian turns to the past to seek answers to the

²⁰ Shaila K. Dewan, "Books Spirited to Safety Before Iraq Library Fire," *New York Times*, 27 July 2003, National edition.

²¹ See "Book-Burning in Kansas City (October 1996)," <http://youth.org/loco/PERSONProject/Alerts/States/Missouri/burning.html>.

following questions. What is this mania all about? Why do people burn books and writings? What does it mean to burn a book? More importantly, what are the historical roots of this behavior? What can be ascertained about the earliest episodes of this form of violence, that is, who were the earliest book burners and what did it mean for them to destroy writings? What were the conditions in which they came to devise this activity that continues to be such a potent symbol even into the twenty-first century? What, if anything, can reflecting on its origins tell us about this activity and, perhaps, about those who still burn books today. This study will attempt to answer these questions.

²² John Killinger, *God, the Devil, and Harry Potter: A Christian Minister's Defense of the Beloved Novels* (New York : Thomas Dunne Books, 2002), 3.

PART 1.2: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It may be surprising to discover that over the past century only a small number of specialists in ancient history have reflected on bookburning as a human activity.

Although modern studies of bookburning in antiquity are quite few in number, it should be no surprise that some of the earliest studies of this phenomenon in the Greek and Roman worlds were published in the wake of the Nazi bookburnings and again at the end of the Second World War, when the topic again erupted so forcefully into the public consciousness.²³ All of these early studies noted that bookburning was generally an expression of religious intolerance. As Clarence A. Forbes argued, “[r]eligion has always been the chief cause for the deliberate destruction of books, and the histories of western religions have about them the pungent smell of smoke.”²⁴

²³ Henry Tristram, “The Burning of Sappho,” *The Dublin Review* 197 (July-December 1935): 137–49; Clarence A. Forbes, “Books for the Burning,” *TAPA* 67 (1936): 114–25; Fred A. Sochatoff, “Some Remarks of Seneca on Book-Burning,” *Classical Outlook* 16 (1939): 82; Frederick H. Cramer, “Bookburning and Censorship in Ancient Rome: A Chapter from the History of Freedom of Speech,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6 (1945): 157–96; Arthur Stanley Pease, “Notes on Book-Burning,” in *Munera Studiosa*, ed. Massey Hamilton Shepherd, Jr. and Sherman Elbridge Johnson. (Cambridge, MA: The Episcopal Theological School, 1946), 145–60.

²⁴ Clarence A. Forbes, “Books for the Burning,” 118; see also Henry Tristram, “The Burning of Sappho,” 139, and Arthur Stanley Pease, “Notes on Book-Burning,” 147–48.

Although substantially in agreement about the cause of bookburning, they offered a variety of opinions about its actual impact. Henry Tristram, for example, questioned the likelihood that intentional destruction was the chief cause, or even a contributory cause, for the disappearance of the works of ancient writers.²⁵ However, since he limited his analysis to the works of the poet Sappho, his opinion can have only limited relevance in regard to all of the many genres of literature that circulated in the ancient world. Forbes and Arthur Stanley Pease, who each looked at a larger pool of data, were more emphatic about the deleterious effect of intentional destruction. Forbes concluded: “The surprising thing is not that some books got burned in the conflict between moribund paganism and nascent Christianity, but that the burned books were so few.”²⁶

Pease offered four possible explanations for this method of destruction.²⁷ First, burning has a finality that is lacking in other forms of destruction—it is irreparable. Second, better than other forms of intentional destruction, burning lends itself to “conspicuous, public, communal expressions of condemnation,” that is, bookburning offers a unique opportunity for public display to perpetrators.²⁸ Third is the purifying power of fire, which, as Pease noted, would be highly appropriate in cases of books that were considered to be of a polluting or blasphemous character. Last, the ancient belief

²⁵ Henry Tristram, “The Burning of Sappho,” 149.

²⁶ Clarence A. Forbes, “Books for the Burning,” 125. See also Arthur Stanley Pease, “Notes on Book-Burning,” 147–48.

²⁷ Arthur Stanley Pease, “Notes on Book-Burning,” 158–59.

²⁸ Arthur Stanley Pease, “Notes on Book-Burning,” 158.

that an author's writings were an extension of his or her person; therefore burning a book was like burning its author in effigy: it was a form of sympathetic magic. Pease's observations about the reasons for the destruction of books with fire, although supported only by a few, brief examples, remain important insights for any study of this phenomenon in the ancient world.

After a period of more than twenty years in which few studies on bookburning were published, in the late 1960s and early 1970s G.W. Clarke published two articles on bookburning.²⁹ Although Clarke furnished no additional insight into the act of bookburning, he did provide more thorough documentation of incidents into the period of the later Roman Empire than the earlier studies. In this tradition, Wolfgang Speyer, an eminent specialist in apocryphal literature, has provided the most thorough documentation of the subject.³⁰ His study discussed the phenomenon of bookburning in some detail, but was more general in scope and concerned primarily with examining the many forms of intentional and unintentional book destruction in the Graeco-Roman world, as well as the Christian Roman Empire. Although not particularly concerned with analyzing bookburning as an activity, Speyer provided remarkably thorough coverage of the incidents of bookburning that were known to scholars up to the time of his

²⁹ See G.W. Clarke, "The Burning of Books and Catullus 36." *Latomus. Revue d'Études Latines* 27.3 (July-September 1968): 575–80, and "Books for the Burning," *Prudentia* 4.2 (November 1972): 67–81.

³⁰ Wolfgang Speyer, "Büchervernichtung," *JAC* 13 (1970): 123–52, and idem, *Büchervernichtung und Zensur des Geistes bei Heiden, Juden, und Christen* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann Verlag, 1981).

publication.³¹ Echoing Pease's observations, Speyer noted the purifying aspect of fire, the finality of this method of destruction, and the close affinity between author and work as reasons that burning came to be among the favored methods of destroying dangerous writings.³² Speyer also explained that the notions of pollution and purification were primary motivations for Christians to burn the books of heretics just as it had been for earlier Romans to burn the religious and philosophical writings they had regarded as dangerous.³³ His work remains an exceptionally important contribution to the study of this topic.

Many of the earliest scholars who examined ancient bookburnings, including both Forbes and Pease, located its origins in Greece during the classical period based on the testimony of later sources. However, a more recent and careful examination of bookburning in ancient Athens by Robert W. Wallace has suggested otherwise.³⁴

³¹ Other, previously unknown episodes have continued to come to light. Since the publication of Speyer's monograph on the topic in 1981, J. Divjak, for example, published letters written to Augustine by a Christian named Consentius living in the Balearic Islands. They detail the case of a monk, Fronto, who uncovered a circle of heretics in Tarragona, Spain, one of whom, a local priest, possessed magical books. In order to bring a speedy conclusion to the inquiry, which threatened to discredit several local bishops and other members of prominent families, a group of seven bishops decided to burn the incriminating books and all other documents related to the case and restore everyone to communion. See J. Divjak, ed., *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Opera. Epistolae ex duobus codicibus nuper in lucem prolatae*, (CSEL 138) = *Epp.* 11 and 12 (pp. 51-80); and also Raymond Van Dam, "'Sheep in Wolves Clothing': the Letters of Consentius to Augustine," *JEH* 37.4 (October 1986): 515-35.

³² Wolfgang Speyer, *Büchervernichtung und Zensur*, 30-33.

³³ Wolfgang Speyer, *Büchervernichtung und Zensur*, 128-29.

³⁴ Robert W. Wallace, "Book Burning in Ancient Athens," in *Transitions to Empire: Essays in Greco-Roman History, 360-146 B.C., in honor of E. Badian*, eds. Robert W.

Regarding five putative cases of bookburning in classical Athens, Wallace found that the reports were unhistorical and derived from the late-fourth century B.C.E.³⁵ Although he dispelled the earlier conclusion that bookburning had been a means of hostile suppression employed against philosophers in Athens during the classical period, Wallace did not delve into the earliest actual cases of bookburning in the Graeco-Roman world.

However, he did make some noteworthy observations about the timing of the earliest accusations of bookburning. Chief among them is that reports of earlier bookburnings were the product of a few fundamental cultural and political developments that occurred in the later fourth century B.C.E. and following.³⁶ Among these developments was a transition from a primarily oral culture to one where written texts played increasingly important roles. Only as writing became important for expressing, recording, and disseminating ideas did bookburning become a feasible and worthwhile endeavor for individuals who were keen to suppress those ideas. Additionally, this period witnessed the political transition from more democratic governance to state authoritarianism.

Although Wallace did not explicitly indicate that the earliest historical cases of bookburning occurred in the Hellenistic period and following, his rejection of the earlier reports and his explanation for doing so hold out the implication that the conditions necessary for bookburning were not met until the late fourth century B.C.E. Frederick H.

Wallace and Edward M. Harris. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 226–40.

³⁵ Robert W. Wallace, “Book Burning in Ancient Athens,” 228–29.

³⁶ Robert W. Wallace, “Book Burning in Ancient Athens,” 227.

Cramer, and later Clarke and Speyer, pointed to the Roman world as the proper location and context for exploring the phenomenon of bookburning in antiquity.³⁷ Along the same lines, Rosalind Thomas, who examined the subjects of orality and literacy in ancient Greece, concluded that bookburning was a “Roman peculiarity.”³⁸

This study will differ from previous examinations of bookburning in a number of ways. Except for a few instances where it is possible to draw a firm link between acts of intentional destruction and the disappearance of written works, no attempt will be made to quantify the impact of bookburning on ancient literature. It is perhaps enough to recognize that many books were forcibly burned, but far more probably succumbed to “natural causes,” like accidental fires, the prolonged effects of moisture, and pests.³⁹ Moreover, the wholly incomplete nature of the evidence for the intentional destruction of books, as well as the vast scope of such an undertaking, would make it impossible to offer a reasonable assessment here. In contrast to earlier efforts, this examination will focus on specific cases of conflict during the Roman period in which bookburning was a prominent form of violence. In this way, it is hoped that a more nuanced appraisal of bookburning can be developed, one that is sensitive to the conditions and circumstances in which incidents of bookburning actually occurred, to the mindset and motivations of the perpetrators, and to the messages they sought to transmit to witnesses. This more

³⁷ Frederick H. Cramer, “Bookburning and Censorship in Ancient Rome: A Chapter from the History of Freedom of Speech,” 157–96.

³⁸ Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 169, and see n. 31.

³⁹ Wolfgang Speyer, *Büchervernichtung und Zensur*, 25–42, passim.

nuanced approach will examine bookburning not as a factor relating to the problem of the disappearance of ancient literature, but as a form of communal, religiously-inspired, ritualized violence. As such, the syntactic features of the act of bookburning and the sequence of events that framed it will receive special attention. This study will focus on incidents drawn from the Roman world during the Republic and the empire through the time of the Emperor Justinian I. As such, it will encompass more than seven hundred years of Roman history—a very lengthy period of time indeed, but the wealth of evidence for this phenomenon in the Roman world allows us to mark out some of the signposts in the early development of bookburning in western culture.

This approach has not been devised *ex nihilo*. In fact, it is rooted in the works of scholars from many fields, including recent studies of ancient Roman society, theoretical works by anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural critics on the interaction between religion and culture, and examinations of contemporary religious violence. A brief discussion of these works will help to set the foundation for the present study.

In a recent essay, John North ably summed up the religious developments that highlight the period under examination in this dissertation.⁴⁰ Up to the Hellenistic period, religion was an integral, embedded part of life in ancient cities. In that time, communities as a whole generally held single, shared conceptions of the cosmos. But

⁴⁰ John North, “The Development of Religious Pluralism,” in *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, eds. Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak. (London: Routledge, 1992), 174–93; and see also the illuminating general discussion of the religious world of the Roman Empire by David S. Potter, “Roman Religion: Ideas and Actions,” in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*, eds. David S. Potter and D.J. Mattingly. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 113–67.

during the last three centuries B.C.E., interaction between distinct, identifiable religious groups came to be more and more a part of life in the cities of the Greek East. Italy, as North noted, also witnessed a striking growth of autonomous religious groups outside the control of religious authorities during the third and second century B.C.E.⁴¹ This new religious situation was linked to wider social changes brought about by Roman imperial expansion, including the movement of peoples about the whole Mediterranean basin. The result was the formation of a plural or pluralist society, a mixture of diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups in cities throughout the region, initiating a period of great religious interaction, adaptation, and creativity, as well as competition and conflict, which lasted for centuries.

⁴¹ John North, "The Development of Religious Pluralism," 181.

In the terminology of another recent analysis, there existed in this period an ongoing visual and verbal discourse between these diverse interests that was articulated through a wide array of symbolically charged signifiers, such as monumental architecture, statuary, coins, written propaganda, and through visual displays and spectacles. They expressed a “symbolics of power” that mediated the intersection between religion, society, and politics.⁴² The significance of this “symbolics of power” for understanding the social and cultural history of the Roman world is fundamental. In recent years, scholars have begun to focus particular attention on the influence that these symbols made on people in this complex, changing world. These symbols could, and did, take a tremendous variety of forms in the daily struggle to influence public opinion and personal beliefs. Public life was sometimes vigorously contested and symbols and spectacles were utilized to communicate many messages.

The use of visual displays and spectacles by the Roman government, which came to hold dominion over the entire region and needed to maintain political stability and social order over this diverse mixture of peoples, has been the subject of several important scholarly investigations in recent years. Simon Price, for example, who examined the role of the imperial cult in Asia Minor, argued that its rituals presented a

⁴² Douglas R. Edwards, *Religion and Power: Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greek East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7. On the “symbolics of power,” see Clifford Geertz, “Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power,” in *Culture and Its Creators: Essays in Honor of E. Shils*, ed. Joseph Ben-David and Terry Nichols Clark (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977): 150–71.

way of conceptualizing the political world to participants and witnesses.⁴³ According to Price, the processions, sacrifices, and other ceremonies associated with the imperial cult accommodated the ruler to traditional religious ceremonial and evoked an impression of the emperor as an important mediator between the gods and humanity.⁴⁴ Works on individual rulers, like Augustus, have also made clear that the emperors, and the government more generally, made conscious use of a vast range of symbols, spectacles, and visual cues to affirm their right to rule and their central role in ensuring harmony and prosperity among their diverse subjects.⁴⁵

The Roman government also used public displays of force and violence to maintain order and stability. A study of crucifixion by Martin Hengel, for example, suggested that this notorious form of public execution functioned as a deterrent through its manipulation of religious and political symbols and spectacle.⁴⁶ As Hengel explained, crucifixion was one of three *summa supplicia*, or supreme penalties, along with *crematio* (burning) and *decollatio* (decapitation), which were inflicted by the Roman government on slaves, foreigners, violent criminals, and others as exemplary punishment.⁴⁷ Likewise,

⁴³ Simon R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 7.

⁴⁴ Simon R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power*, 233–48.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Paul Zanker's compelling study of the use of symbols during the reign of the first emperor, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. A. Shapiro (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1988).

⁴⁶ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1977), *passim*.

⁴⁷ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 33–38.

K.M. Coleman's recent study of 'fatal charades' in the amphitheaters of the Roman Empire suggested that the presentation of ritualized reenactments of mythological and historical deaths in the arena, with criminals sentenced to death playing in the leading roles, served to assert the crucial role of the emperor in dispensing punishment and also served to reflect and affirm the existing social order.⁴⁸ Following Hengel, Coleman, and others, Donald G. Kyle has explained that such public, ritualized executions began to be employed by the Romans in the third century B.C.E. and over the following centuries their forms proliferated and their function changed from simply necessary punishments to a variety of public entertainments held throughout the empire by which misbehavior was deterred and order and security affirmed. "Roman blood sports legitimized, dramatically communicated, and reinforced the social and political order of the community."⁴⁹ The disposal of the dead, a primary concern of Kyle's investigation, most clearly revealed the significance of notions of pollution and purification. Victims of the arena and other public executions were routinely denied proper burial rites and their remains were removed from the community in order to prevent religious pollution.⁵⁰ These scholarly

⁴⁸ K.M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Executions Staged as Mythological Reenactments," *JRS* 80 (1990): 44–73. Coleman emphasizes that these displays were complex, presenting an opportunity to exact punishment in a manner that served as deterrents to others. At the same time the underlying religious motivations and the need to provide entertainment are involved in the development and elaboration of these public displays under the Empire. See also Erik Gunderson, "The Ideology of the Arena," *CA* 15.1 (1996): 113–51; and David S. Potter, "Martyrdom as Spectacle," in *Theater and Society in the Classical World*, ed. Ruth Scodel. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993): 53–88.

⁴⁹ Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998), 265, and 269–71.

⁵⁰ See Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, 155–83, 213–53.

discussions have pointed to public space as a venue in which the Roman government transmitted and affirmed ideological messages about the nature of the state, its rulers and gods, and about the place of the individual in society. Violent, destructive acts, like public torture, execution, and burning, were a regular part of the Roman state's idiom for expressing these messages.

That the emperors, or the Roman government more generally, made use of symbols of all sorts in its effort to maintain the existing *status quo* is not surprising, but imperial Rome was conspicuous for the tremendously important role that verbal and visual displays and spectacles played in society at large. So significant, in fact, was the role of spectacle that we should not be surprised to find that not only did the agents of government utilize displays, but that many private groups engaged in this public discourse, groups representing diverse philosophical creeds, religious orientations and traditions, esoteric doctrines, as well as political, economic, and ethnic interests, who sought to make an impact on their communities by public displays that exhibited their influence and opinions. As Charlotte Roueché has demonstrated, for example, the chanting of slogans, or acclamations, by the masses, played an important role in expressing consensus and in conveying sentiments to other parties within the community.⁵¹

⁵¹ Charlotte Roueché, "Acclamations in the Later Roman Empire: New Evidence from Aphrodisias," *JRS* 74 (1984): 181–99. Roueché highlights the increased tendency to use chanted slogans as a form of political and theological decision making into the fifth century C.E. The crowd expressed a corporate *parrhêsia* when chants were performed *en masse*. Acclamations were recorded and formally sent to the emperor, in this way, the groups expressed their will in a public forum. Peter Brown also discusses the role of

Aspects of the use of violence in antiquity by parties outside of the government have also received a number of recent, illuminating treatments. Timothy E. Gregory explored the issue of urban riots in relation to religious controversies in the fifth century C.E. and found that the people who participated in these popular disturbances did so because they believed that their personal salvation was at stake in the proper resolution of the particular conflict.⁵² More recently, David Frankfurter examined a local conflict between Christian monks and practitioners of traditional cult in Egyptian Panopolis in the late-fifth century.⁵³ As Frankfurter explained, the traditionalists performed rites and ceremonies to protect their temple and way of life. In turn, the monks perpetrated several acts of iconoclastic violence in their struggle to overcome their religious rivals, desecrating private shrines, smashing religious statues, and destroying prohibited books. These acts were meant to cleanse the “pagans” who were regarded as a threat to the new religious situation and to local prosperity and to expose their weakness to public view. It is in the spirit of these investigations and in the context of the pluralistic, richly symbolic, and sometimes violent world they have helped to bring to light, that this examination of ancient bookburning is situated.

parrhêsia in *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

⁵² Timothy E. Gregory, *Vox Populi: Popular Opinion and Violence in the Religious Controversies of the Fifth Century A.D.* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1979). See also Michael Gaddis, “There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire,” (Ph.D. Dissertation: Princeton University, 1999).

⁵³ David Frankfurter, ““Things Unbefitting Christians”: Violence and Christianization in Fifth-Century Panopolis,” *J ECS* 8.2 (2000): 273–95.

A debt is likewise owed to specialists from other fields, whose contributions to the study of religion, ritual, culture, and violence have provided much-needed insights for the contemporary understanding of ancient society. Foremost among them is anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose theoretical analyses of religion and culture have helped to shaped the contemporary understanding of how these forces influence a society's worldview and how individuals and groups interact and respond to them.⁵⁴ As Geertz explained in his study of religion as a cultural system, culture itself is a system of symbols and meanings that work on people to establish powerful and pervasive patterns of belief and action. As this system of meanings acts upon people, it also is acted upon by individuals in a dialectical fashion.⁵⁵ His semiotic approach to culture, which Geertz calls "thick description," seeks to isolate and inspect events and actions in order to illuminate the symbol systems and conceptual worlds they express.⁵⁶ His methodological and interpretive influence is acknowledged by almost all the Roman historians discussed above as well as specialists in contemporary religious violence who will be discussed below.

⁵⁴ See Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton. (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1966): 1-46.

⁵⁵ "Culture can be defined as a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life." See Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 89.

⁵⁶ Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973): 3-30.

Many of these scholars also cite the seminal work of the cultural critic Michel Foucault, which is also significant for the issues under investigation here. As Foucault's work demonstrated, punishment in the pre-modern world was frequently a spectacle where torture, the application of pain to the body, was theatricalized.⁵⁷ Such punishments were expressions of power on the part of the parties who authorized them and carried them out.

Studies of ritual—and bookburning is surely to be understood as a ritual—also inform this analysis. Gerd Baumann, an anthropologist studying rituals in modern plural societies, found that such rituals were concerned as much with “Others” as with perpetuating the social values and self-knowledge of the actors.⁵⁸ Equally, they spoke of cultural change. Jan Platvoet, who also examined the place of rituals in contemporary plural societies, found that in situations of cultural and/or religious plurality rituals allow groups “to express their separate identities, boundaries, strife with, indifference to, or respect for, each other.”⁵⁹ In his work and others, an awareness of the place of rituals in the struggle between hostile parties has begun to take shape.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

⁵⁸ Gerd Baumann, “Ritual Implicates ‘Others’: Rereading Durkheim in a Plural Society,” in *Understanding Rituals*, ed. Daniel de Coppet. (London: Routledge, 1992): 97–116, at 99.

⁵⁹ Jan Platvoet, “Ritual in Plural and Pluralist Societies,” in *Pluralism and Identity: Studies in Ritual Behaviour*, ed. Jan Platvoet and Karel Van Der Toorn. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995): 25–51.

Lastly, studies of contemporary manifestations of religious violence provide substantial food for thought to those wishing to delve into the violent side of religion and culture.⁶¹ Among the most noted specialists in this field, Mark Juergensmeyer has attempted to understand contemporary episodes of religious strife from the point of view of those involved in these struggles.⁶² As he observed, most perpetrators of religious violence do not give political, economic, or social explanations for their actions, but rather, they see them as part of a mythic, cosmic struggle, a battle between good and evil.⁶³ “By identifying a temporal social struggle with the cosmic struggle of order and disorder, truth and evil, political actors are able to avail themselves of a way of thinking

⁶⁰ See, for example, Jan Platvoet, “Ritual as Confrontation: The Ayodhya Conflict,” in *Pluralism and Identity: Studies in Ritual Behaviour*, ed. Jan Platvoet and Karel Van Der Toorn. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995): 187–226; and David I. Kertzer, *Rituals, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁶¹ Among the most insightful and detailed examinations of a contemporary example of this phenomenon is Stanley Tambiah’s study of twentieth-century conflicts in South Asia. See Stanley J. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996). For discussions of the terrorist attacks against the United States that occurred on 11 September 2001 from this same general perspective, see Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), and Suman Gupta, *The Replication of Violence: Thoughts on International Terrorism after September 11th 2001* (London: Pluto Press, 2002). On the connection between religion and violence in general, see David C. Rapoport, “Some General Observations on Religion and Violence,” in *Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer. (London: Frank Cass, 1992), 118–40.

⁶² See, for example, Mark Juergensmeyer, “The Logic of Religious Violence,” in *Inside Terrorist Organizations*, ed. David C. Rapoport. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988): 172–93.

⁶³ Mark Juergensmeyer, “The Logic of Religious Violence,” 174–5.

that justifies the use of violent means.”⁶⁴ In such situations, according to Juergensmeyer, where violent acts take on a cosmic significance, it is not the rules of ordinary morality and behavior that apply, but the rules of war. Such observations, drawn from recent events whose documentary evidence is abundantly rich, echo many aspects of the findings of scholars who have examined ancient religious conflicts, like Gregory, Gaddis, and Frankfurter, mentioned above, and suggest that a careful study of bookburning in the ancient world is a valuable contribution to the study of religion and violence in ancient society, but also to the study of religious violence more generally.

Although this investigation is informed by these many works, it will attempt to offer something new to this ongoing discourse on religion and violence in the western tradition. Bookburning, as will become abundantly clear from the following discussion, was from its earliest beginnings a kind of religious ritual and a spectacle of power. I will try to ascertain of what it meant to participants, victims, and witnesses. Sometimes these events were violent public purges of texts in the marketplace, while at other times they were highly ceremonialized actions taken by the Senate, the emperors, their representatives, religious officials, or private individuals. They were always expressions of a complex and symbolic visual language. The Roman government and many groups within the empire drew on the symbolic power of bookburning in negotiating relationships with parties espousing differing religious, theological, or philosophical

⁶⁴ Mark Juergensmeyer, “The Logic of Religious Violence,” 182. For more on this notion of a cosmic war, see also by the same author, *The New Cold War?: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), particularly 153–70; and *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 145–63.

orientations. Burning books served to express messages about identity in seas of difference, about the nature of society in times of crisis and change, and cosmic aspirations about the future of society and human fate.

CHAPTER 2

BURNING OCCULT RELIGIOUS TEXTS IN THE ROMAN WORLD¹

The complexity of the ancient practice of bookburning is nowhere more evident than in the burning of the texts of magicians, astrologers, diviners, and other practitioners of pseudo-religious disciplines in the Roman world. Occult religious texts were among the earliest sacred or ritual texts subjected to destruction on religious grounds and they continued to be sought out and were purged perhaps more frequently than almost any other religious literature in the Mediterranean world in the period from the Republic through the late Empire. In addition to the frequency and wide geographic dispersal of

¹ Although the dominant trend among classical scholars and historians of religion has been to discuss ancient religious texts, their authors, and the communities they represented with greater and greater specificity, and thereby avoid sweeping generalizations, for the purposes of the present study a wide spectrum of texts known to scholars and ancient peoples alike by such terms as Bacchic, Orphic, Pythagorean, magical, astrological, divinatory, as well as instructions for the performance of rituals, prayers, and prophecies, will be linked together under the broad category of *occult religious books*. This expression is, naturally, not one used by ancient Romans to refer to such texts and their readers (and is therefore an etic category), but is both useful and appropriate for present purposes. The term “occult” commonly suggests the notions of something hidden, concealed, secret, and beyond the range of ordinary understanding or knowledge, and all of the texts examined in this chapter make claims to contain such knowledge. Moreover, the term has been used since the early modern period to denote a range of ancient practices and disciplines founded on secret or mysterious knowledge, including many of the kinds of texts mentioned above. For our purposes, it is important to note that all of these texts and their readerships were viewed with suspicion by authorities at some time or other during antiquity on the grounds that they subverted or

this phenomenon, the immolators themselves represent a much wider spectrum of society than the often quite specific perpetrators and contexts in which other types of sacred or religious texts were destroyed. This chapter explores the polysemous nature of burning occult religious books in the Roman world.

The earliest incidents in which these types of books were burned are discussed in Part 2.1. During the Republic and early empire, the writings of itinerant diviners, ritual experts, astrologers, and prophets came to be forcibly rounded up and, at times, burned by the state. The public destruction of these writings, like public execution, was an event designed to assert the power of the authorities in whose name the action was carried out and the manner in which it occurred expressed clear religious and social messages. The destruction of these banned writings was, however, sporadic and never became systematic. They were temporary measures enacted by individuals and parties with genuine religious concerns to meet specific religious circumstances. In the Republic and early Empire, these individuals were representatives of the state acting in their capacity as officers of state.

Part 2.2 presents a brief discussion of the historical development of magical, astrological, and other occult practices in the Greco-Roman world with special interest in their textualization. Forms of magic, astrology, and other occult practices were indigenous to virtually every Mediterranean people. During the Hellenistic period and following, purveyors of textualized magic and astrology from the East began to spread throughout the Roman world and to intermingle with the existing religious fringe of

threatened normative or traditional religious practices; many were consequently

Roman society. Because of their similarity (in methods and goals) to other secret religious practices that had been prohibited in earlier periods, these practices came to be assimilated to each other from the perspective of Roman authorities and suppressed by the same methods.

Following these analyses of occult bookburnings in the Republic and early Empire, and the growth in the textualization of these practices, further developments to the burning of these books in the later Empire are discussed in Part 2.3. The right to wield the power to burn prohibited occult books, making a highly visible and memorable statement within a public discourse whose audience responded to symbols and stylization, devolved to individuals beyond the apparatus of the state. Members of the Church hierarchy, as well as private individuals who were eager to assert their personal spiritual authority, which granted them the *parrhesia* to speak out in the symbolic language of spectacle, also burned the texts of magicians, astrologers, and similar occult practitioners. Many pious individuals considered acts of “holy violence” to be beneficial for Christians to take part in, and, this particular form religiously-motivated violence, burning books of sorcery and other occult practices, came to epitomize Christianity’s triumph over the ignorance of idolatry, magic, and heresy.

PART 2.1: THE EARLY DESTRUCTION OF OCCULT RELIGIOUS TEXTS IN THE ROMAN WORLD

In the simplest terms, there existed in Roman religion and Roman society a tension between two forces in opposition. On the one hand, the Romans revered what they took to be the traditions and customs of their ancestors and strongly believed that their fortunes as a people had been, and continued to be, a result of upholding and preserving these traditions. On the other, the Romans were open to innovations and adjustments to their religious practices throughout their history, particularly during periods when conflicts and crises seemed poised to rupture the stability and prosperity of Roman society. As we shall come to see, the forces of change, modification, and innovation were irresistible, especially as Rome developed from an undistinguished settlement on the Tiber River into a vast empire, and thus conflicts did arise over religious issues. The origins of bookburning in Roman society lay in the friction between these two opposing forces.

Tradition and Innovation in Roman Religion

Early ancient sources that provide evidence concerning the religion of the Romans, such as the work of the Greek historian Polybius (ca. 200–ca. 118 B.C.E.), leave no doubt as to its central importance to all aspects of civic life.² Religion, in the shape of public rites, ceremonies, and festivals, held Roman society together. Although the religious system of the Romans seems to have come into being by about the time of the foundation of the Republic in the late sixth century B.C.E., there is a wide gap in our evidence between these foundations and the period when it began to be set down in writing, at least three centuries later.³ Concerning the third and second centuries B.C.E., the historical record of the Republic has been preserved in the works of first century C.E. authors such as Livy and Dionysios of Halikarnassos, allowing a glimpse at Roman society in the period when it was first growing into an empire. This section will, therefore, be concerned primarily with this period, the middle Republic (ca. 264–133 B.C.E.).

Much of the earlier history of the Romans and their religious practices is shrouded in the mists of myth and legend; however, Rome's second king, Numa Pompilius (who was said to have ruled from 715 to 673 B.C.E.), was regarded as something of a founding figure of Roman religion by later Romans.⁴ Even before assuming office, Numa took the

² Polybius, *The Histories* 6.56.6–11.

³ John A. North, *Roman Religion*, New Surveys in the Classics, no. 30. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21.

⁴ On Numa, see Liv. 1.17.1–1.21.5; and Plutarch, *Numa* 10. On Numa's importance as a founding figure of Roman religion, see, for example, Liv. 1.21.2, where Livy refers to

auspices in emulation of his predecessor, Rome's founder, Romulus, and more directly, for the purpose of determining the will of the gods.⁵ Throughout his reign Numa exhibited exemplary *pietas*, the ideal Roman attitude of duty and respect for the gods, by his attention to Rome's state religion.⁶ As king Numa was credited with establishing the calendar that marked out the months and days, fixing some as holidays and others as suitable for conducting public business.⁷ Likewise, he came to found many of the principal Roman religious festivals to the gods, and the rites and ceremonies by which they were to be honored. He also established many of the major priesthoods who were responsible with overseeing public cult activities to ensure that they were conducted in the proper manner, including the *flamines*, who were each assigned to the worship of a single specific deity, and the *pontifices*, who oversaw the sacrifices, festivals, and other ceremonies of the state cult. As with government officials, these priests would come to be drawn from Rome's wealthy elites during the period of the Roman Republic.

Numa as the "unique exemplar" (*unici exempli*) for the Roman people in his care for religious observances.

⁵ Liv. 1.18.6–10. On the auspices, see below, p. 36.

⁶ See Gary B. Miles, *Livy: Reconstructing Early Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 122–23.

⁷ Liv. 1.19.6–7.

In the conduct of their religion, the Romans placed tremendous emphasis on the correct performance of religious rituals.⁸ For animal sacrifice, perhaps the central act of Roman ritual, as for all rites, the rules and traditions particular to the god and the occasion had to be followed scrupulously by the sacrificer and other participants for the sacrifice to be acceptable. In this way, a line of communication was opened up between the gods and humankind. Interpreting this communication was the purpose of much of Rome's public religion. To this end, the college of augurs (*augures*), Rome's official diviners, specialized in the procedures for taking the auspices (*auspicia*, "watching the birds"), signs by which the gods expressed their consent or objection to a given course of public action. Just as Numa had done prior to becoming king, the auspices were taken before all public actions.

Another group of divinatory experts employed by the Roman state were not Romans at all, but rather Etruscan diviners, or *haruspices*, members of the Etruscan aristocracy who were experts in the interpretation of lightning and other unusual occurrences that were presumed to be portents from the gods. When the need arose the Roman Senate could call on them to interpret these signs. Portents and prodigies (*prodigia*) were understood by the Romans to refer to the conditions of the state and served as indications that the *pax deorum* ("peace of the gods") had been disrupted.⁹

⁸ Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume 1: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 32; and see Charles King, "The Organization of Roman Religious Beliefs," *CA* 22.2 (2003): 275–312, at 297–301.

⁹ "The keynote of Roman divination remains clear, however: it was a matter of establishing and maintaining the *pax deorum* (peace of the gods) in relation to the city."

Whereas the augurs concerned themselves with determining the consent of the gods to present actions, the *haruspices* were concerned with the future. After almost every animal sacrifices, a *haruspex* performed *extispicina* (the examination of the *exta*, or entrails, especially the liver) to detect if the sacrifice was acceptable and to observe other signs that might be interpreted as divine messages for the sacrificer or the entire city if he were a magistrate.¹⁰

Thus, Roman religion was primarily public in terms of its intention, and was aimed at preserving the goodwill of the gods upon whom all Romans depended for their prosperity.¹¹ The rites, sacrifices, ceremonies, and festivals were community affairs, and were performed for the benefit of the entire community. This was the essence of Roman state religion. However, as has already been noted, Roman religion did not remain static.

A collection of oracles in Greek known as the Sibylline Books were one of a number of mechanisms by which the Romans came to legitimate importations and changes which could have been seen as deviations to traditional Roman religious customs. They were themselves a deviation from traditional religion.¹² These writings

See Tamsyn Barton, *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics, and Medicine under the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 34.

¹⁰ The public *haruspices* had counterparts in the *vicani haruspices*, freelance diviners who examined the *exta* of sacrifices for private clients. See Cic. *De div.* 1.132, for his disparaging comments. And see A.T. Nice, “Ennius or Cicero? The Disreputable Diviners at Cic. *De div.* 1.132,” *Acta Classica* 44 (2001): 153–66.

¹¹ Charles King, “The Organization of Roman Religious Belief,” 304–09.

¹² According to legend, the Sibylline Books came to Rome during the reign of King Tarquinius (traditionally ruled 616–579 B.C.E.), who bought them from an old woman who claimed they were the writings of the Italian or Cumaean Sibyl, a mysterious

were kept by another college of priests, the *duoviri sacris faciundis* (“two men for the performance of rites”), which was later increased to ten, and then fifteen members. At the command of the Senate, the members of this priesthood consulted these books. The Sibylline oracles appear to have contained sets of *remedia*, rites by which the Romans might avert threats signaled by prodigies and catastrophies. They also played a significant role in the invitations given to many foreign gods, especially Greek ones, to come to Rome.¹³ This practice, known as *evocatio*, occurred most commonly when the Romans offered vows to the gods of their enemies promising them that they would receive a new home and cult at Rome if they transferred their protection over to them.¹⁴ It also occurred during other crises.

Change, in the form of new gods, temples, cults, and new or altered ceremonies and other aspects of Roman religious life, was a common feature during the early centuries of the Republic. In fact, the third century B.C.E. was conspicuous for Rome’s openness to gods and religious practices that were not native born.¹⁵ One notable

expositor of prophecies and oracles who received her inspiration from the Greek god Apollo. He entrusted their care and use to this priestly college. See Dionysios of Halikarnassos, *Roman Antiquities*, 4.62.

¹³ “It was in this context that the [Sibylline] Books suggested new cults and rituals, legitimating innovation by their very antiquity. . . .” Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume 1: A History*, 62.

¹⁴ See, for example, the *evocatio* of the goddess Juno Regina from the Etruscan city of Veii in 396 B.C.E. at Liv. 5.21.1–7.

¹⁵ According to Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, the third century was the high point of religious innovation for the Romans, when numerous foreign cults and religious practices were welcomed into the city with no suggestion that they posed any threat to

importation occurred in 293 B.C.E., when the Greek healing god Asklepios (Latin Aesculapius) was introduced into Rome during an epidemic. After consulting the Sibylline Books, the god, in the form of a snake, was brought from his famed cult center at Epidauros in the Peloponnesos and took up residence at a new cult center on the island in the Tiber.¹⁶ When the epidemic ended soon after, the Romans built the god a temple and Aesculapius came to be incorporated into Roman religious life.

However, as noted above, the importation of new practices and beliefs could potentially create friction with the Roman need to uphold and preserve the rites handed down to them by their ancestors. Near the conclusion of the Second Punic War (in 205 B.C.E.), the Anatolian goddess Cybele, the Magna Mater, was vowed a temple in Rome. She was introduced into Rome in the form of a black stone the following year, brought from her cult center at Pergamon.¹⁷ By 194 B.C.E., a temple had been built on the Palatine hill and games instituted in her honor. However, the apparent openness to foreign cults and practices that had so characterized the third century seems to have come to an end by the late 200s. Shortly after the Great Mother was brought to Rome, certain regulations were established aimed at limiting participation by Romans in this cult and segregating its Phrygian priests from the general population.¹⁸ The reason for this change

native traditions. See Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume 1: A History*, 79.

¹⁶ See Liv. 10.47.6–7; on the snake, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.736–44; Pliny, *H.N.* 29.16; 72; and Plutarch, *Roman Questions* 94.

¹⁷ Liv. 29.10.4–11.8, 14.5.

¹⁸ Dionysios of Halikarnassos, *Roman Antiquities* 2.19.4–5.

is unclear, but may have had something to do with the “foreignness” of the cult as it was practiced in Asia Minor. There, the goddess was served by self-castrated priests; its rites were accompanied by “barbarous” music, dancing, and chanting, which induced ecstatic states in participants. When these made their appearance at Rome, they were likely seen as out of step with Roman practices and thus circumscribed by the authorities, but not excluded.

As these examples indicate, the Romans were open to the possibility of importing religious cults and practices from their neighbors, especially when political or social crises indicated that extraordinary measures needed to be taken to ensure the survival and prosperity of Rome. In these circumstances, as in any, the Senate and magistrates of the Roman government sought to maintain control over such innovations and to manage them within the existing framework of religious practices.

“[A]t least until the middle Republic, there is no sign in Rome of any specifically religious groups: groups, that is, of men or women who had decided to join together principally on grounds of religious choice.”¹⁹ When expressly religious groups began to develop in this period, however, the tension between tradition and innovation could come to a flashpoint of violence. This is highlighted in the accounts of the suppression of foreign religious beliefs, cults, and ritual specialists found in writers of the Republic and early Empire, some of which will be discussed below.

¹⁹ Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume 1: A History*, 42.

213 B.C.E.: The First Act of Roman Religious Censorship

Within the history of Rome composed by Livy is evidence that the Senate and magistrates of the Republic did punish groups or individuals for importing foreign beliefs and practices to the city on several occasions, although the details of these events are often vague. In some instances, state-sponsored repression entailed the expulsion or execution of foreign ritual technicians and the confiscation, destruction, and even burning of their texts. The earliest known incident occurred in 213 B.C.E., when, as Livy states, “sacrificial priests and prophets captivated the imaginations of the people” and many persons abandoned traditional religious practices and turned instead to offering sacrifices and prayers according to foreign rites.²⁰ These events occurred during the difficult days of the Second Punic War (218–201 B.C.E.), when Hannibal’s army had invaded the Italian peninsula and handed the Romans several serious military setbacks.²¹ As the Carthaginians raged throughout the countryside with veritable impunity, numerous refugees were forced into the city of Rome.²² As Livy explains, the longer the war dragged on under such difficulties, the more people turned to foreign practices, even in public.²³ At first, the authorities turned a blind eye to these activities, but following

²⁰ Liv. 25.1.8: *Sacrificuli ac vates ceperant hominum mentes*. For Livy’s description of this incident, see Liv. 25.1.6–12.

²¹ Notably, Hannibal crushed the Romans at Trebbia (218), Lake Trasimene (217), and Cannae (216) at the beginning of the war, leading some forty percent of Rome’s allies to defect.

²² Liv. 25.1.8.

²³ Liv. 25.1.6.

official complaints the aediles and *tresviri nocturni* were ordered to disperse these gatherings. When they attempted to expel participants from the forum, they were driven off by the threat of violence.²⁴ The Senate charged the *praetor urbanus*, Marcus Aemilius, with the task of “freeing the people of such superstitions” and he decreed in the assembly that all persons in possession of books containing prophecies, forms of prayers, or written formulae for the performance of rituals must surrender them to him by an appointed date.²⁵ A second injunction prohibited anyone from performing sacrifices in a public or sacred place according to any new or foreign ritual.

In this incident, the war seems to have caused such serious economic and social disruption for the Romans and their allies that many turned to offering rites and prayers according to foreign customs. These were presumably administered by foreign ritual specialists, *sacrificuli ac vates*, who kept their rites in books. As the decrees handed down by the praetor indicate, it was these practitioners who the Roman authorities sought to suppress. Who were they and what sorts of rites and books did they make use of that the government took such action? Sacrificial priests and prophets appear to have been a

²⁴ See Rachel Feig Vishnia, *State, Society and Popular Leaders in Mid-Republican Rome 241–167 BC* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 109–10.

²⁵ Liv. 25.1.11–12: *Ubi potentius iam esse id malum apparuit quam ut minores per magistratus sedaretur, M. Aemilio praetori urbano negotium ab senatu datum est ut eis religionibus populum liberaret. Is et in contione senatus consultum recitavit et edixit ut quicumque libros vaticinos precationesve aut artem sacrificandi conscriptam haberet, eos libros omnis litterasque ad se ante kal. Apriles deferret, neu quis in publico sacrove loco novo aut externo ritu sacrificaret.*

type known at Rome by the middle Republic, frequently seen in the forum or in the vicinity of the circus, where they offered to conduct purification rites, forms of divination, and private initiations into the mysteries.

The famous suppression of the Bacchanalia, which occurred in 186 B.C.E. and following, provides some additional details by way of comparison. Although bookburning does not seem to have occurred in the actions taken against the mystery cult devoted to Dionysos/Bacchus, there are notable similarities.²⁶ Livy describes the priests of the Bacchanalia with exactly the same terms as he used to describe the practitioners whose books were confiscated in 213—*sacrificuli et vates*. A sacrificial priest and prophet of unknown Greek origin was said to have introduced this mystery cult into Rome from neighboring Etruria; another, a Campanian priestess named Annia Paculla, transformed the entire ceremony.²⁷ The tremendous influence that the leaders of these Bacchic cells wielded within their religious communities also gravely concerned Roman officials.²⁸ The cell leaders, as seen in Livy's account, were itinerant religious specialists, whose expertise in conducting rituals of initiation and other rites, and quite

²⁶ On mystery cults, see below, pp. 61–3.

²⁷ Liv. 39.8.3–4: *Graecus ignobilis in Etruriam primum venit . . . sacrificulus et vates*. Annia Paculla: Liv. 39.13.8–14. According to Livy's account, the priestess allowed men to be initiated for the first time, transferred the rites from day to night, and increased their frequency from three days a year to five days every month.

²⁸ This is evident from the special attention given to dismantling the organizational structure of the Bacchic cells (their leadership, their membership and oaths of loyalty, their property and methods of funding) on the inscription that records the substance of the Senate's decree that was discovered at Tirolo in Calabria. See *ILS* 18 = *ILLRP* 511 = *CIL* I² 581.

probably in divination and other occult activities, endowed them with the personal authority to alter the rites to suit their own purposes and to demand intense loyalty from their followers.²⁹ It was even reported that they had induced their followers to commit many heinous crimes.³⁰ For these reasons, the Senate sanctioned measures that went far beyond what had occurred twenty-seven years earlier, calling for an extraordinary inquiry into this cult and the arrest of its priests and others suspected of participating in its alleged criminal activities. The investigation caused a panic throughout the city and the rest of Italy.³¹ In all, it was reported that more than seven thousand people had taken part in what the Roman government came to call a *coniuratio*, or conspiracy.³² An even greater number were said to have been executed than were imprisoned for their participation.³³ All over Italy, many centers of Bacchic worship were destroyed and rites at other shrines strictly curtailed. Other, more localized suppressions followed two years later and again in 181 B.C.E.³⁴

²⁹ On the composition of Bacchic cells and their leaders in the Hellenistic period, see Walter Burkert, "Bacchic *Teletai* in the Hellenistic Age," in *Masks of Dionysus*, eds. Thomas H. Carpenter and Christopher A. Faroane. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 259–75.

³⁰ Liv. 39.13.11.

³¹ Liv. 39.17.4.

³² Liv. 39.17.6; and by association, 39.41.6.

³³ Liv. 39.18.5: *Plures necati quam in vincula coniecta sunt*.

³⁴ Liv. 39.41.6–7; 40.19.9–11.

Livy provides no evidence that any further actions were taken in 213 B.C.E., and no persons seem to have been arrested or executed in connection with these activities, as occurred almost thirty years later during the suppression of the Bacchanalia. Presumably, by simply confiscating the texts they effected the suppression they desired. Nevertheless, it is clear from these events that at least as early as the late third century such practitioners of foreign rites, as well as their religious knowledge in book form, had come to be perceived as potentially dangerous to traditional religion and society and, therefore, could be subject to government repression. As the suppression of the Bacchanalia indicates, the Roman state was willing to take even more severe measures when circumstances seemed to call for them.

The Burning of the Books of Numa: Rome's First Bookburning

This kind of repression is evident also in actions against other religious writings, which were likewise regarded as a threat to traditional religious practices. The earliest recorded incident of this sort occurred shortly after the suppression of the Bacchanalia and should be seen in light of those events. Although the sources agree on few specific details, the basic facts are not disputed. Two stone chests were discovered in 181 B.C.E. at the foot of the Janiculum hill near Rome on land belonging to a Roman scribe. One was marked as containing the body of Rome's second king, Numa Pompilius, and the other, his books.³⁵ Numa, as noted above, was credited by later Romans with establishing

³⁵ On the discovery of the books of Numa, see Liv. 40.29.3–14; Plin. *H.N.* 13.84–87; Varro in Aug. *C.D.* 7.34; Val. Max. 1.1.12; Plut. *Numa* 22.2–5; Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 1.22.5–8; ps. Aur. Vict. *De Viris Illust.* 3.3.

much of the public religion of the Romans through the institution of cults, rites, and priesthods.³⁶ No remains were found in the first chest, while in the second, a number of books were found in remarkably good condition. Half of these books were written in Latin and concerned with pontifical law, that is, the established religious customs of the Roman state, while the others were written in Greek and were connected with some system of knowledge.

According to Valerius Antias, a Roman historian who wrote in the first century B.C.E., these others were concerned with Pythagorean philosophy.³⁷ Numa was believed by many Romans to have been a student of Pythagoras, the famed philosopher and holy man who had lived and taught in southern Italy and was associated with the cities of Croton and Metapontum. However, Numa died in the early seventh century, while Pythagoras did not arrive in Italy until around 530 B.C.E., a discrepancy that led Cicero, Livy, and others to reject any connection.³⁸ That is not to suggest, however, that these writings were not concerned with Pythagoreanism. They certainly could have been. Pythagorean pseudepigrapha, writings on Pythagorean themes, many attributed to Pythagoras's best-known disciples or even to the sage himself, are known to have been circulating in Italy from the third century B.C.E.³⁹ Nor was Pythagoras unknown at Rome

³⁶ See above, pp. 34–5.

³⁷ Plutarch, *Numa* 22.

³⁸ See Cicero, *Resp.* 2.28–29; and Liv. 1.18.1–2.

³⁹ See Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. Edwin L. Minar, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 166–92, 218; and Charles

in this period, his statue had even been erected there during the Samnite War (298–290 B.C.E.) following the consultation of the Delphic oracle.⁴⁰ Many scholars have concluded that they were a “bold forgery”, as did the Senate at the time.⁴¹

Upon deliberation, these books were deemed incompatible with established religion.⁴² They were burned by the praetor Quintus Petellius in the *comitium* and in the sight of the people.⁴³ According to Valerius Maximus, *victimarii* were employed to prepare the bonfire and burn the books. These sacrificial attendants, or sacrificial slaughterers, assisted the person in charge of a sacrifice with the prayers and symbolic acts that preceded the ritual killing of the sacrificial animal. When these preliminary activities had been concluded, the *victimarii* performed the actual killing and butchering. Their participation highlights the fact that the destruction of these books was similar to the act of religious censorship that occurred in 213 B.C.E. recounted above, and yet it was

H. Kahn, *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), 74–83, 141.

⁴⁰ Pliny, *H.N.* 34.26.

⁴¹ See, for example, Clarence A. Forbes, “Books for the Burning,” *TAPA* 67 (1936): 114–25.

⁴² See Liv. 39.16.9 and 40.29.11.

⁴³ As Valerius Maximus relates this event, “They saw to the preservation of the Latin [texts] with all diligence, but the city praetor Quintus Petellius, by the Senate’s authority, burned the others publicly in a fire made by the sacrificial attendants because they were believed in part to pertain to the dissolution of religion. For the men of old did not want preserved that by which men’s minds might be turned away from the worship of the gods.” See Val. Max. 1.1.12.

also something much more. By the use of religious officials to kindle the fire and perform the other tasks involved, this act of religious censorship became a sacred ceremony, or even a sacrifice.⁴⁴

Why would fire be used in these circumstances? Surely these books, which were deemed so dangerous to established religion that they should be destroyed, were not a pure and unblemished gift to the gods, as would be the case for almost any appropriate sacrifice. The connection between bookburning and sacrifice merits a closer examination. As Walter Burkert has explained for animal sacrifices in Greek religion, sacrifice was at its heart a form of ritualized, theatricalized aggression.⁴⁵ Theatricalized aggression, according to Burkert, served to create a community out of the participants and witnesses and thus accomplished the function of preserving the social structure. Surely burning these books in this manner could be understood to be an act of ritualized aggression by which the Roman authorities intended to preserve order in a time of crisis and upheaval, but why fire?

⁴⁴ Eric Orlin, "Why a Second Temple for Venus Erycina?" in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History X*, ed. Carl Deroux. (Brussels: Latomus, 2000), 77; Andreas Willi, "Numa's Dangerous Books: The Exegetic History of a Roman Forgery," *Museum Helveticum* 55.3 (September 2003), 146.

⁴⁵ Walter Burkert, *Homo necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 22–48.

Fire, of course, was omnipresent in Roman religion as it was among the Greeks: the doorway of interaction between gods and men hinged on fire.⁴⁶ Theophrastos, Aristotle's successor as head of the Lyceum, recognized that among all elements fire has the most special powers.⁴⁷ However, despite this acknowledgement of fire's universal importance and others, it does not appear to have ever been made the subject of a comprehensive examination by any ancient author.⁴⁸ We must therefore rely on hypotheses and analogies. William D. Furley, who has made a study of the use of fire in ancient Greek religion, has argued that the burning of an animal in a sacrificial fire effected a separation from the past for the sacrificer to make way for the new.⁴⁹ Thus the burning of these texts could be seen to serve as a sort of rite of separation and purification.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ William D. Furley, *Studies in the Use of Fire in Ancient Greek Religion* (New York: Arno Press, 1981), 239.

⁴⁷ Theophrastos, *De igne*, ed. and trans. Victor Coutant. (Assen: Royal Vangorcum Ltd., 1971), 1.

⁴⁸ Johan Goudsblom, *Fire and Civilization* (London: Allen Lane, 1992), 98; see also, for example, Pliny, *H.N.* 36.10.

⁴⁹ William D. Furley, *Studies in the Use of Fire in Ancient Greek Religion*, 238.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of rites of purification and bookburning as a rite of purification, see Chapter 3 below, pp. 125–33.

As Burkert also noted, the execution of criminals at festivals corresponded to a sacrificial ritual too.⁵¹ According to a law attributed to Romulus, a traitor died “as a sacrifice to Zeus of the Underworld” (ὡς θῦμα τοῦ καταχθονίου Διός).⁵² This has been interpreted as punishment by crucifixion, but it certainly indicates that forms of punishment could clearly be understood as sacrifice in Roman law and religious practice during the Republican period.⁵³ For the Romans, punishment by burning (known by such Latin terms as *crematio*, *vivicomburium*, *vivus uri/exuri/incendi*, and *igni necare*) was one of three *summa supplicia*, or “aggravated forms of the death penalty.”⁵⁴ This form of punishment was very rare during the Republic and early Empire; however, it was prescribed as a punishment (for arson) as early as the Twelve Tables, and in later periods it is recorded as the proper punishment for those found guilty of sacrilege, sorcery and other occult practices, and for enemies of the state.⁵⁵ Certainly, the sacrificial aspect seems to be present in the manner of the destruction of these books and their destruction should probably be understood in this way.

⁵¹ Walter Burkert, *Homo necans*, 46.

⁵² Dionysios of Halikarnassos, *Roman Antiquities* 2.10.3. Holocausts, in which the sacrifice was burned completely in the fire, were frequently associated with chthonic deities. See Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 63.

⁵³ See Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 39.

⁵⁴ Peter Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 122–31.

⁵⁵ On the punishment for arson in the Twelve Tables, see *Dig.* 47.9.9. Of course, Christians were burned alive in Rome during the persecution of Nero, for example, and elsewhere throughout the Roman Empire in the second through the fourth centuries. See

Fire's destructive potential is unmistakable to all who see and experience it. The location of this bookburning in the *comitium*, the chief place of political assembly in republican Rome, located north of the *forum Romanum*, no doubt made certain that many did. It had been consecrated as a *templum*, a sacred ground for performing important state functions, which suggests that this was too. The fact that Livy notes that it occurred "in sight of the people" further served to make this ceremony into a public event, a spectacle, which would have wide and lasting dissemination. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, festivals in which the fires were kindled on open-air altars were known to be impressive ceremonies.⁵⁶ The importance of spectacles in Roman society is well known and the role played by many rites, festivals, games, and other presentations in promoting social cohesion and group identity has been discussed above in the Introduction.⁵⁷ Like those other public ceremonies, burning these books made it into a spectacle, one expressing a very powerful religious message.

Some scholars, such as Eric Orlin, have seen this action by the Senate, and in fact all of the Senate's actions in 181 B.C.E. as measures intended to restore social harmony and confidence in the governmental officials following the turbulent years that had

Tac. *Ann.* 15.44; and Chapter 3, below, for later incidents. According the jurist Iulius Paulus, *crematio* was prescribed for magicians in the third century C.E. See Paulus, *Sententiae* 5.23.17.

⁵⁶ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 60–64, at 61. And no doubt fire festivals continued to be a part of the seasonal calendar of holidays and festivals, even into the early modern period. See Johan Goudsblom, *Fire and Civilization*, 132–34; and see Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

⁵⁷ See Introduction, pp. 19–23.

preceded it.⁵⁸ As Orlin notes, that same year a temple was dedicated to the Sicilian Venus Erycina, whose cult was known for its associations with sexuality and temple prostitution; however, it was accepted into the official state religion “because it came to Rome through the mediation of the Senate.”⁵⁹ Interestingly, in the context of these times, a temple to the goddess Pietas, the deified personification of the ideal Roman attitude of duty towards the gods, was dedicated in 181 B.C.E., this same year.⁶⁰

It is exceedingly unfortunate for those wishing to piece together the Roman response to the growing influence of foreign cults and foreign beliefs and practices that so little mention of these events survives from the late Republican era.⁶¹ There are a handful of passing references to other episodes from the Republic during which foreign beliefs and practices were suppressed; however no other bookburnings are recorded in the existing sources.⁶²

⁵⁸ Eric Orlin, “Why a Second Temple for Venus Erycina?” 81.

⁵⁹ Eric Orlin, “Why a Second Temple for Venus Erycina?” 87.

⁶⁰ Liv. 40.34.4.

⁶¹ Livy, arguably our most important source for both religious innovations and religious conflicts at Rome during the middle Republic, is incomplete and only the period from his narrative covering the years 219–167 B.C.E. are preserved.

⁶² In 139 B.C.E., for example, practitioners of astrology were expelled from the city and Italy during the period of growing social tensions over land reform that led up to the murders of the Gracchi brothers and to the Republic’s final century of political upheaval. The Senate viewed them as foreign troublemakers who could potentially kindle the smoldering fire of discontent among the poor and displaced into an open flame. See Val. Max. 1.3.3; Frederick H. Cramer, “Expulsion of Astrologers from ancient Rome,” *C&M* 12 (1951), 14–17; and idem, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1954), 57–8. Practitioners of the mysteries of Sabazios were also expelled this same year. From a reference to the cult in an oration written by

As the above examples indicate, the magistrates of the Republic took action from time to time to limit the presence and activities of foreign ritual specialists, sometimes with grotesque consequences. Such persons and, more importantly for our discussion, their texts were destroyed by the state, in at least one instance by burning them in a highly public ceremony. In this manner, the Senate and officials asserted their authority over religious issues.⁶³ Their successors during the empire, beginning with Augustus, would continue in similar fashion.

Augustus Burns Prophetic Books as *Pontifex Maximus*

After the battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E., and after more than a century of civil war, Octavian, the grand-nephew and heir of Julius Caesar, consolidated his power and began to restore stability to Roman political and civil life. By 27 B.C.E. Octavian officially “restored the Republic” by returning control of the State to the Senate and people of Rome.⁶⁴ In reality, Octavian retained a number of special privileges and political offices, as well as enormous wealth, which allowed him to maintain control over the Roman army

Demosthenes in the later fourth century B.C.E., it is evident that its priests, like those of Dionysos and the Great Mother discussed above, also possessed books containing the cult’s rituals for purification, initiation, and other ceremonies. See Demosthenes, *De Corona* 258. On the rites of Sabazios, see also Iamblichos, *De Mysteriis* 3.9; and Sherman E. Johnson, “The Present State of Sabazios Research,” *ANRW* 2.17.3 (1984), 1599–1600.

⁶³ So argues Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume 1: A History*, 87–108; John A. North, *Roman Religion*, 54–62; Eric Orlin, “Why a Second Temple for Venus Erycina?” 70–90.

⁶⁴ *Res Gestae* 34.

and thus the whole Roman world. Thenceforth, Rome would be ruled by emperors. For his “restoration,” Octavian was awarded the new name Augustus by the Roman Senate. He presented himself in his actions and in images and public works as a model of *pietas*.

Augustus’s concern for religious and moral issues, as well as his careful manipulation of religious symbols, is well known.⁶⁵ In keeping with his predecessors, Augustus was keen to preserve what he felt to be truly Roman. To this end, the emperor built many temples and restored many others; he also revived archaic rites that had lapsed, such as the Secular Games in 17 B.C.E., and filled traditional priestly offices that had long been vacant.⁶⁶ According to Alan Wardman, in Augustus’s revival of archaic practices, “[p]eople were able to see the ceremonies of the past again, not just from curiosity but to confirm their sense that a period of disorder and conflict had come to an end.”⁶⁷ These spectacles had the social and political function of uniting the Roman people.

⁶⁵ See J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 55–100; Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988); and G.W. Bowersock, “The Pontificate of Augustus,” in *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate*, Kurt A. Raaflaub and Mark Toher, eds. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 380–94, at 382.

⁶⁶ On Augustus’s construction and rededication of temples, see his *Res Gestae*, 20, and Liv. 4.20.7.

⁶⁷ See Alan Wardman, *Religion and Statecraft among the Romans* (London: Granada, 1982), 63–79, at 75.

The culminating period of Augustus's program of restoring Roman religion occurred around the time he assumed the one priestly office he had long coveted, *pontifex maximus*.⁶⁸ It was during this period that some of the greatest and most ideologically meaningful monuments of the Augustan period were unveiled, such as the Ara Pacis and the *solarium Augusti*, a huge sundial constructed in the Campus Martius, the largest ever built.⁶⁹ Both featured Augustus as *pontifex maximus* prominently. Although the *pontifex maximus* had been the leading and most influential member of the college of *pontifices* during the middle Republic and following, by Augustus's assumption of this particular priesthood and his uniting it with the other powers he held as *princeps*, the *pontifex maximus* took on the role of a 'high priest' for Roman state religion. Later emperors continued to assume this priestly office through the fourth century C.E.⁷⁰

Suetonius reports that the first official act of Augustus upon assuming this office in 12 B.C.E. was to burn publicly in the forum more than 2,000 divinatory texts in Greek and Latin.⁷¹ Although both Bowersock and Wardman overlooked the incident,

⁶⁸ The pontificate had been held by M. Aemilius Lepidus, one of Augustus's triumviral partners, since the 40s B.C.E. and, although Lepidus had fallen from power and had been living in seclusion in Circeii, Augustus was unwilling to strip him of this office. When Lepidus died in 13 B.C.E., Augustus gladly took it for himself.

⁶⁹ On these imperial monuments, See G.W. Bowersock, "The Pontificate of Augustus," 383–94.

⁷⁰ Concerning this priesthood, Bowersock explained "[n]othing is more consistently or ostentatiously paraded by the Roman emperors apart from their tribunician power." G.W. Bowersock, "The Pontificate of Augustus," 381.

⁷¹ Suetonius, *Div. Aug.* 31: *quidquid fatidicorum librorum Graeci Latinique generis nullis vel parum idoneis auctoribus vulgo ferebatur, supra duo milia contracta undique*

Augustus's burning of prophetic texts can be seen in this same light, a deliberate attempt to revive a by then venerable Roman ceremony and to bring it to life for the purpose of restoring social harmony. Unfortunately, Suetonius does not record how these prophetic texts were burned, or by whom it was carried out. Presumably Augustus himself would have been present on the occasion. It could have been carried out in the manner of the bookburning of 181 B.C.E., given Augustus's interest in reviving ancient rituals, but no further details have survived. Earlier, as Suetonius also explains, Augustus had taken steps to conserve the Sibylline oracles and even later added some of these confiscated prophetic texts to this collection.⁷²

Some scholars, like David S. Potter, have suggested that these books may have come from a number of *chresmologoi* or "oracle mongers," who were rounded up and their books seized.⁷³ The writings of inspired prophets, such as the Sibyl, whom we have already mentioned, and other figures such as Orpheios, Musaios, Bakis, and Epimenides, appear to have been circulating in Greece at least as early as the sixth century B.C.E.⁷⁴

cremavit ac solos retinuit Sibyllinos, hos quoque dilectu habito; condiditque duobus forulis auratis sub Palatini Apollinis basi.

⁷² On the date, see H.W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy*, ed. B.C. McGinn. (London: Routledge, 1988), 149, n. 11.

⁷³ David S. Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 95.

⁷⁴ See Hdt. 7.6.3; and see H.W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy*, 174–89. On Orpheios, see Albert Henrichs, "Hieroi Logoi and Hierai Bibloi: The (Un)Written Margins of the Sacred in Ancient Greece," *HSCP* 101 (2003), 212–16; and W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952).

Unlike these prophetic figures, most *chresmologoi* did not present themselves as divinely inspired, but rather as dealers and sellers of authentic prophetic texts, although the categories of purveyors, interpreters, and creators of prophetic writings do seem to have overlapped.⁷⁵ These individuals, known in Latin by such terms as *vates*, *prophetes*, and *harioli*, and their prophetic and oracular books were “a feature of the literary environment of the Roman empire,” and like the other occult religious texts mentioned above they offered solace and inspiration to their readers. What made them dangerous is that they could be used to interpret contemporary events and to foretell, for example, the time of the emperor’s death or the identity of his successor. For these reasons, it was necessary for the emperor to be in control of “authentic” prophecy.

Later emperors followed this precedent of seizing and destroying occult religious books and punishing those who made, sold, or used them.⁷⁶ The evidence for the later Principate records the occurrence of no other bookburnings, but the treatment of such practices in this period clearly differed little from the third and second centuries B.C.E. Especially during periods of political or social crisis, the emperors took action to expel or otherwise punish religious specialists who were seen to be a danger to society, or even to the emperor himself. In this manner, Augustus, Tiberius, and later emperors expelled

⁷⁵ David S. Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus and Theodosius*, 95, and 243, n. 98.

⁷⁶ On these incidents, see especially Frederick H. Cramer, “Expulsion of Astrologers from ancient Rome,” *passim*. For example, the emperor Vitellius (69 C.E.) employed the imperial edict to expel astrologers and anonymous pamphleteers (booksellers) from Rome and Italy. See Tac. *Hist.* 2.62; Suet. *Vitellius* 14.4; Dio Cassius 63 (65) 1.4; 65 (66) 9.2.

diviners and astrologers from Rome on some seven occasions during the first century C.E. and held numerous trials of astrologers and their clients who were accused of attempting to ascertain the future of the emperor or the identity of his successor.⁷⁷ Likewise, sorcery or magic became a crime punishable by the most extreme penalties.⁷⁸ Later emperors continued to periodically round up prophetic texts as well.⁷⁹

Conclusions

As this section has highlighted, the rulers of the Republic and early Empire felt a strong need to preserve and uphold what they took for their ancestral religious traditions, while at the same time allowing for change in religious practices, especially if these could be linked to earlier precedents or through existing means of introducing innovations, such as the Sibylline Books. In this manner, the arbiter of religious change remained the state. When religious innovations surfaced at Rome rather than being called in by some sort of official invitation, the Roman government at times reacted with harsh measures to defend society from activities and beliefs perceived as subversive or dangerous to traditional practices, which they were duty-bound to protect. For this reason, various occult religious texts came to be collected up from their owners from time to time from as early

⁷⁷ See Frederick H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics*, 81–145.

⁷⁸ See Section 2.2, below.

⁷⁹ Tiberius, for example, investigated after books of prophecy in 19 C.E. See Dio Cassius 57.18.5.

as the late third century B.C.E. Little more than thirty years later, by 181 B.C.E., such books were not only rounded up by the authorities, they were burned in a public ceremony.

From this incident, the very earliest of any sort recorded in Roman history, a number of the key features of bookburning become discernible: similar to public executions, bookburning was a spectacle that forcefully exhibited the power of the Roman State to determine the content of important aspects of private life and behavior, including prohibiting practices that were regarded as dangerous to traditional religion. The location of bookburnings in highly public and symbolic places, such as Rome's *comitium*, and the care taken to perform bookburnings "in sight of the people" highlights the aspect of spectacle evident in the earliest incidents. Also like public executions, bookburning was a religious ritual. The role played by sacrificial attendants and Roman political-religious authorities suggests that the burning of the texts had a deeply meaningful religious significance for the performers of bookburning as well as witnesses.

Now that we have examined several early incidents of bookburning and seen the act from the perspective of the Roman government, who sanctioned and performed it from at least as early as the middle Republic and following, the next section will turn to the books themselves and the authors who wrote them and the communities who utilized them for religious purposes. By briefly looking at the creators and users of occult religious texts, we may come to understand more clearly the importance of these religious writings to their practices and, in so doing, perhaps how burning them could have been perceived by their victims.

PART 2.2: THE TEXTUALIZATION OF OCCULT PRACTICES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD

Although the place of writing in Roman religion has often been relegated to a secondary or even negligible importance, recent scholars, like Mary Beard and John North, have shown that within the Graeco-Roman religious context “communications with the divine could be seen as embedded in, or formed by, written texts.”⁸⁰ The Sibylline Books, mentioned above, were one of a number of writings used by the Romans for religious purposes.⁸¹ Likewise, the *pontifices*, *haruspices*, and augurs kept a variety of priestly records as well as prophetic writings by which they recommended *remedia* when called on by the Senate.⁸² Clearly, the Romans, as John North noted, “had a

⁸⁰ Mary Beard, “Writing and Religion: *Ancient Literacy* and the Function of the Written Word in Roman Religion,” in Mary Beard, et al. *Literacy in the Roman World*, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series, no. 3. (Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1991), 35–58, at 53. For a more limited view of the role of writing in Roman religious practices, see William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), particularly 218–21, 298–306.

⁸¹ See above, pp. 37–8.

⁸² See Jerzy Linderski, “The *Libri Reconditi*,” 207–34; and John North, “Diviners and Divination at Rome,” in *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in Ancient Rome*, ed. Mary Beard and John North. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 49–71, at 66; and idem, “Prophet and Text in the Third Century B.C.,” in *Religion in Archaic and Republican Rome and Italy: Evidence and Experience*, eds. Edward Bispham and Christopher Smith. (Chicago, IL: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), 104.

bookish religious tradition in which texts and written records played an important role.”⁸³ These texts, however, were officially sanctioned and under the control of the Roman government. Other religious texts, as we have already seen, were beyond the general supervision of the Senate and magistrates. It is to the content and context of these writings that our discussion now turns.

The Religious Fringe

We have already had occasion to mention a number of types of occult religious texts in the preceding section, including the writings of itinerant diviners, experts in rituals of initiation and other ceremonies, astrologers, and prophets. We have seen, for example, that texts were used for initiations into the mysteries. Mystery cults were a prominent example of the voluntary religious associations that came to exist in the Greek-speaking East in the Classical period and at Rome by the Hellenistic period.⁸⁴ Of course, the mysteries themselves were a complex phenomenon that had a wide range of manifestations. The classic example was Eleusis.⁸⁵ Other mysteries, such as those devoted to Dionysos and the Magna Mater, seem to have offered participants the opportunity to achieve intense, ecstatic communion with the god in their ceremonies,

⁸³ John North, “Prophet and Text in the Third Century B.C.,” 92–107, 164–66.

⁸⁴ See John A. North, “Religious Toleration in Republican Rome,” *PCPS* 205 (1979): 85–103, at 93–97; and idem, “The Development of Religious Pluralism,” in *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, eds. Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak. (London: Routledge, 1992), 174–93.

⁸⁵ On which, see George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

temporarily freeing them from the constraints of everyday life, while still others offered more individualized union with the divinity through mysteriosophic contemplation of secret cosmogonic, anthropological, and eschatological myths.⁸⁶

According to Walter Burkert, “[b]ooks were used in mysteries from an early date.”⁸⁷ As early as the fifth century B.C.E., Bacchic groups in the eastern Mediterranean appear to have expressed a specific eschatological vision promising life after death to initiates.⁸⁸ The recent publications of new texts, in the form of inscribed gold leaves, or lamellae, interred with deceased members, have provided insight into these beliefs as well as further evidence of the role texts played in these groups.⁸⁹ The similarities between many of these gold lamellae suggest that they were made from prototypes kept

⁸⁶ It is in this regard that these mysteries share much common ground with Orphism, as well as later movements, such as Hermetism and Gnosticism. On Gnosticism, see Chapter 4 below, pp. 172–76.

⁸⁷ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 70.

⁸⁸ Fritz Graf, “Dionysian and Orphic Eschatology: New Texts and Old Questions,” in *Masks of Dionysus*, Thomas H. Carpenter and Christopher A. Faraone, eds. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 240.

⁸⁹ Fritz Graf, “Dionysian and Orphic Eschatology,” 239–58. These new texts, moreover, have made clear that the scholarly distinctions between Dionysiac, Orphic, and Pythagorean doctrines, especially in regards to eschatological beliefs, are no longer tenable and, therefore, suggests that significant assimilation or admixture occurred between these presumably distinct disciplines. On the connections between Orphism and Pythagoreanism, see Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, 125–36.

by the priests. But these were probably not their only writings; mysteries were presumed to transmit a *hieros logos*, or sacred tale, which may have been kept in a book as well.⁹⁰

It is in these texts, as well as their shared eschatological beliefs, that Bacchic communities are associated with other occult religious movements of the Hellenistic period, such as Orphism and Pythagoreanism.⁹¹ Like the Bacchic/Dionysian mysteries, Orphic rites were typically organized by itinerant priests (*orpheiotelestai*, “initiators according to Orpheios”) who presided with the assistance of a “mass of books.”⁹² However, the evidence for uniquely Orphic communities is very thin, while Pythagorean communities seem to have been in existence in southern Italy from the sixth century B.C.E. and following both as a distinctly scientific and philosophical community (the *mathematikoi*), and as a religious sect (the *akousmatikoi*).⁹³ Pythagorean religious

⁹⁰ See Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 69–70. On *hieroi logoi*, see Albert Henrichs, “*Hieroi Logoi* and *Hierai Bibloi*: The (Un)Written Margins of the Sacred in Ancient Greece,” 207–66.

⁹¹ Burkert, discussing the fifth-century graffiti from Olbia that contained the term *Orphikoi*, “life after death,” and an abbreviation for the name Dionysus, concluded that the term Orphic was connected with the Bacchic mysteries from the early fifth century B.C.E. See Walter Burkert, “Die neuen Orphischen Texte: Fragmente, Varianten, ‘Sitz im Leben,’” in *Fragmentsammlungen philosophischer Texte der Antike* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998), 395–7.

⁹² Plato, *Republic*, 2.364e.

⁹³ Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, 192–208.

communities may have even utilized rites of initiation.⁹⁴ Pythagorean writings continued to be in circulation throughout Italy and even experienced a resurgence during the Roman Empire.⁹⁵

Whereas initiations into the mysteries were often conducted in the context of religious groups, the existence of independent ritual specialists, as well as diviners and astrologers, is also well known. Likewise, the incidence of investigations after such books and their destruction during the middle Republic, discussed above, indicates that they too were active in Rome by the second century B.C.E. and following. References from contemporary sources indicate that itinerant diviners and ritual experts had already been operating on the fringes of Greek society during the Archaic period.⁹⁶ By the Classical period, these professionals specialized in the performance of a multitude of secret rites and ceremonies throughout much of the Mediterranean world.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, 156–61.

⁹⁵ In opposition to Burkert, Peter Kingsley has argued that the Pythagorean tradition continued to thrive in the period between its Classical efflorescence and first century B.C.E. revival. See Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and the Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 217–391.

⁹⁶ See Walter Burkert, “Itinerant Diviners and Magicians: A Neglected Element in Cultural Contacts,” in *The Greek Renaissance in the Eighth Century B.C.: Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Robin Hägg. (Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Athen, 1983), 115–19.

⁹⁷ Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1; and see Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001), 60–74.

These various types of occult religious texts and practices share certain affinities with another, similar form of literature known from the Graeco-Roman world—texts of magic or sorcery.⁹⁸ Like the other practitioners and texts discussed above, the practices of magicians were based on secrecy and secret writings.⁹⁹ Also similar to most of the other occult practices discussed above, the purpose of magic was to achieve direct contact with the divine, which was accomplished by rituals of initiation and other ceremonies.¹⁰⁰ Magicians began to appear in the Greek-speaking world during the Hellenistic period, and seem to have been emerging in the Roman world at this time, perhaps by the end of the second century B.C.E.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ In the words of Fritz Graf, itinerant religious specialists were polyvalent experts who combined initiations with private mysteries and “black” magic. The link between experts in the performance of mystery cult initiations and itinerant magicians is very close. See Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 22; and see Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, 60–74.

⁹⁹ See Hans Dieter Betz, “Secrecy in the Greek Magical Papyri,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, eds. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 153–175.

¹⁰⁰ On these similarities, see Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 99; and see idem, “The Magician’s Initiation,” *Helios* 21 (1994): 161–78.

¹⁰¹ Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, 128–41, at 133.

Some scholars of ancient magic have identified Egypt as the birthplace of magical texts.¹⁰² In Pharaonic and Ptolemaic Egypt, magical practices were widely accepted and even understood to be essential for the proper functioning of the universe and preservation of the state. It was in this context that magical spells began to be committed to writing and, eventually, to be collected into handbooks and formularies that were enshrined for safekeeping within temple libraries. This process began well before Alexander the Great entered Egypt in 332 B.C.E. In this early period, temple priests were responsible for the collection and transmission of magical lore in Egypt. The magician, as Hans Dieter Betz notes, was a resident member of the temple priesthood.¹⁰³ Just as Graeco-Roman ideas came to infiltrate the textualized magic of Egypt, its ideas and techniques, including the widespread use of ritual handbooks, or *grimoires*, were transported beyond the confines of Egypt to the cities and provinces of the Roman Empire. The evidence provided by “activated” magical devices, whose manufacture required a template in the form of a magical recipe, and which hail from throughout the confines of the Empire and beyond, lend credence to this conclusion.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² See David Frankfurter, “Ritual Expertise in Roman Egypt and the Problem of the Category ‘Magician,’” in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Hans G. Kippenberg. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 115–35; and idem, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 198–264.

¹⁰³ Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, including the Demotic Spells*, Vol. 1, *Texts*, 2d ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xlv.

¹⁰⁴ On the potentially wide geographical dispersion of textualized magic in the Roman world, consider the evidence of “activated” magical texts in the form of curse tablets, amulets, voodoo dolls, and other *magica materia*, which have surfaced from all over the Roman world, and whose manufacture and activation are dependent upon magic in

During the centuries following Alexander's conquest, Egypt's indigenous magical practices began to commingle with the native traditions of its neighbors, among them, the Babylonians, Greeks, Syrians, Jews, Persians, and ultimately the Romans. The tools and techniques of native ritual specialists, more easily distinguishable from each other in earlier periods, blended together with temple magicians during centuries of widespread Greek and Roman cultural interaction that followed. The result of this convergence was an international form of magical practice that was never completely uniform across the Mediterranean world, but was characterized by tremendous commonality throughout the eastern Mediterranean and in many locations all over the Roman Empire in terms of its technical operation and the possession of a common mindset.¹⁰⁵

During the period in which this convergence was taking place, there emerged two trends whose ultimate consequence was the conspicuous targeting of magical texts for destruction and, therefore, set the stage for many of the burnings of occult books that occurred during the later Roman world: 1) magical spells and operations became

bookform. See, for example, John Gager, ed. *Curse tablets and binding spells from the ancient world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Roy Kotansky, *Texts and Studies in the Graeco-Egyptian Magical Lamellae: An Introduction, Corpus, and Commentary on the Phylacteries and Amulets, Principally Engraved onto Gold and Silver Tablets* (Ph.D. Diss. University of Chicago 1988).

¹⁰⁵ Great allowance should be given for variations according to regional, cultural and social status, processes like hellenization and romanization served as much to provide a common context as it worked to preserve, amplify, and give voice to local interests and traditions. On this important issue, see David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance*; Roger S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), and G.W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

textualized to a greater degree than ever before, and 2) the generally held opinion about magic changed from one characterized primarily by indifference to suspicion, fear, and outright hostility.

According to William Brashear, an expert on Greek magical texts, beginning about the first century C.E. the form of magical texts was greatly elaborated, from simple, direct spells and curses with little accompanying ritual to highly involved formulae, giving the precise, step-by-step instructions necessary for performing elaborate magical ceremonies. The length and complexity of magical texts was increased, in particular, by the development of a growing specialized vocabulary of magical words, or *voces magicae* (unintelligible and foreign-sounding names and words as well as lengthy strings of vowels), and so-called ring letters, or *characteres* (magical images and symbols), within the texts. Increased dependence on written copies of the magical formulas and operations was the necessary outgrowth of this increasing complexity and textualization: it became essential for practitioners of magic to possess their own copies of spells and ritual actions to ensure their proper activation. “No longer could an individual simply write a text on papyrus or foil and deposit it under a doorway, in a tomb, or carry it on his person, as in times past. He was now constrained to conduct a whole ceremony, reproducing an entire incantation, with all its dozens—even hundreds—of lines of magical words.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ William Brashear, “The Greek Magical Papyri: an Introduction and Survey; Annotated Bibliography (1928–1994),” *ANRW* 2.18.5 (1995), 3414.

Magical texts of the Roman period reflect a different sort of magician than the temple priests of ancient Egypt.¹⁰⁷ Although some individual magicians may have continued to be associated with temples, the magicians of the Roman period were more commonly itinerant ritual experts, who freely drew from many religious traditions and combined them for their own purposes and those of their clients. The existing magical handbooks from the Roman period are, as we might conceive of them, “the most heterogeneous pastiches imaginable”: in the manner of recipe books, directions for the production of magical amulets and gemstones, metal curse tablets, figurines, and potions appear interspersed among instructions for performing exorcisms, various techniques for divination, healing rituals, prayers, and amatory magic, to name only the most commonly preserved materials. Some magical texts note carefully within them that they are copies and from whom they are derived. That these books were not wholly original compositions can also be discerned by internal evidence, such as references here and there to “other copies,” glosses to variant readings within the margins, and obvious scribal errors.¹⁰⁸ Parallel texts have surfaced as well: for example, much of the text of the Philinna Papyrus (dated to the first century B.C.E.) is reproduced in fragmentary form in

¹⁰⁷ See Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 5–6.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, the discussion of David Jordan of a group of *defixiones* discovered in a well in the Athenian agora. The author suggests that several hands are present, including a master and one or more pupils. David R. Jordan, “Defixiones from a well near the southwest corner of the Athenian agora,” *Hesperia* 54 (1985): 205–50.

another magical text unearthed at Oxyrhyncus and dating to the fourth century C.E.—almost five centuries later.¹⁰⁹ There was a textual tradition, a pedigree of texts, which functioned to transmit them through time.¹¹⁰

To be sure, novelty must have always played an important role in magic, but nevertheless, all magical literature is or at least makes claim to be part of an ongoing tradition. “No magician who is worth his reputation would ever claim to have invented or made up his own spells.”¹¹¹ Moreover, the collection and redaction of magical formulae seems to have been a central preoccupation of magicians in the Graeco-Roman period, who, beyond their need to possess handbooks to meet the day-to-day requests of their clientele, were concerned with the preservation, and ultimately, the transmission of presumably authentic, effective magical lore to future magicians. Certainly, the personal relationship between the learned magician and apprentice facilitated the education of many would-be sorcerers, numerous references from contemporary literature and from the surviving magical texts themselves support this inference, but the role played by

¹⁰⁹ P. Maas, “The Philinna Papyrus,” *JHS* 62 (1942): 33–8.

¹¹⁰ Astrological texts, as will be discussed below, exhibit the same sort of textual conservatism and long-term continuity demonstrated by magic texts in the Greco-Roman world. For example, ancient Alexandrian doctrines continued to be preserved scrupulously in astrological texts well into the Late Antique period. See Tasmyn Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (London: Routledge, 1994), 80–5.

¹¹¹ Hans Dieter Betz, “The Formation of Authoritative Tradition in the Greek Magical Papyri,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, Vol. 3. *Self-Definition in the Greco-Roman World*, eds. Ben F. Meyer and E.P. Sanders. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982), 162.

books in the transmission of magical knowledge must not be underestimated. The significance of these books to the tradition was well understood not only by the magicians themselves, but also by Roman society at-large.

For their knowledge, which was commonly believed to be able to provide an edge in the face of life's vicissitudes, magicians were consulted by many people, from all walks of Roman life.¹¹² In spite of the tremendous power that magicians were presumed to wield, or perhaps because of this power, many Romans came to regard magic with the same disapproval that they had held for earlier occult practices. Like these other practices magic claimed to be able to upset the normal course of events, and consequently magic came to be seen as a danger to the *pax deorum*.

The art of astrology also developed in the eastern Mediterranean during the Hellenistic period. Although rooted in Babylonian astronomical knowledge, astrology was chiefly a development of the Alexandrian milieu. It was based on a principle of cosmic sympathy linking all things together everywhere. Relying on this principle, astrologers predicted the outcome of events and even human destinies with their knowledge of the arrangement of the celestial bodies. Although magic and astrology are now generally seen as separate enterprises, the terminology was frequently

¹¹² Fritz Graf, "How to Cope with a Difficult Life," in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Hans G. Kippenberg. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 93–114, particularly 103–14.

interchangeable and there was no strict separation.¹¹³ By the time of the Christian Roman Empire, magic and divination had come to be assimilated and were treated “as one and the same crime.”¹¹⁴

As discussed in this section, many occult practitioners came to make extensive use of writings in the Hellenistic period and following. During the Roman Empire writings continued to grow in importance to these practices. Books and formularies came to be indispensable tools for magicians, astrologers, diviners, and other religious specialists and were no doubt a principal accessory of many individuals. As they spread throughout the vast expanse of Roman dominion, they offered their initiations, spells, and ceremonies whose authenticity and power were evident from their careful and secretive transmission and preservation. These practices had clearly become bookish religious practices. The consequences of this development will be discussed below.

¹¹³ Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, 16; and Tamsyn Barton, *Ancient Astrology*, 64–85.

¹¹⁴ Tamsyn Barton, *Ancient Astrology*, 195; and see 64–85.

PART 2.3: BURNING OCCULT RELIGIOUS TEXTS IN THE LATER ROMAN WORLD: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

In the Late Roman world, the role of burning prohibited religious texts, although long the prerogative of the State, became increasingly a concern of religious authorities. For the most part, our discussion of later Roman bookburnings will appear chronologically in a later chapter. However, for the sake of continuity, this section will examine some later developments in the burning of occult texts.

As was discussed above, during the Republic and empire the state suppressed religious activities it considered objectionable from time to time, and magic and other occult practices were targeted by the state because they were understood to be illegitimate and anti-social forms of congress with supernatural powers. In Late Antiquity, the rulers continued to condemn offenders and to use the apparatus of the state in punishment, but in this period, they were joined in ceremonially burning books by Christian bishops and other ecclesiastical office-holders, as well as pious individuals, whose own claims to authority and legitimacy prompted them to take upon themselves the task of pursuing rumors and suspicions and punishing guilty parties.

Just as the book burners began to vary (and reflected the conditions of their time), so too did the act itself and its potential meanings vary in the late Roman period. For the Roman state during the Republic and early empire, burning books had been a method of suppressing offensive or potentially dangerous religious ideas that forcefully asserted the

power of the state in defense of traditional religion. Within the Christian church, acts of book destruction were understood from earliest days to signify a sincere change of faith, as, for example, when the former practitioners of occult disciplines, who recognized the greater power of the Christian God and renounced their old beliefs, burned their books in public ceremonies. In Late Antiquity, burning books also became a form of religious violence that was acceptable for Christians to perform against non-believers, and in particular, against the practitioners of occult disciplines.¹¹⁵ Acts of “holy violence,” such as burning prohibited writings, became a sign of the faithfulness and zeal of pious Christians. In fact, burning forbidden books became an activity that could serve to assert an individual’s spiritual authority through their use of violent destructive force. The following section will take stock of these developments.

Antioch was turned into a “Slaughterhouse”

Perhaps it is best to begin with the account of the suppression of magic and the immolation of magical books that is most widely known from Late Antiquity, events recounted in the *Res Gestae* of Ammianus Marcellinus, which provides invaluable information for the second half of the fourth century C.E.¹¹⁶ His image of the investigation of magical and astrological practices in the later fourth century differs little

¹¹⁵ As discussed in elsewhere in this study, the writings of heretics and heretical sects share with books of magic the unfortunate distinction of being the focus of much Christian sacralized violence. See below, Chapter 5.

¹¹⁶ On which, see R.L. Rike, *Apex Omnium: Religion in the Res Gestae of Ammianus* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

from those connected with earlier non-Christian emperors, but their scope and severity make it a worthy point of departure for the purposes of this study of ancient bookburning. He reports that in the year 371–2, in the city of Rome as well as in the eastern portion of the empire, the emperors Valentinian and Valens authorized investigations of supposed occult practices that eventually grew out of control, entangling numerous individuals from all strata of late Roman society.¹¹⁷

Looking at this example, we see the mechanisms of the state functioning as they had in times past. What began as an inquiry into a single crime expanded into a general investigation of prohibited practices. The investigation, spearheaded by Maximinus, a former governor and vice-prefect of Rome, initially developed out of an accusation of attempted murder by poisoning.¹¹⁸ Magicians, we ought to remember, were believed to be particularly adept in the manufacture of effective potions, including poisons. A former Roman governor, Chilo, and his wife Maxima complained to authorities that three conspirators—an organ builder, a wrestler, and a soothsayer—had attempted to poison them. Under torture the conspirators named others whom they claimed had made use of occult specialists and poisoners as well. The emperor Valentinian gave Maximinus freedom to pursue the investigation to the limit, lifting the restriction on the torture of

¹¹⁷ Rome: Amm. Marc. 28.1.1–29; the East: Amm. Marc. 29.1.5–44.

¹¹⁸ Amm. Marc. 28.1.8.

well-placed Romans. As a result Maximinus tortured, exiled, and executed many people, even senators, until he was summoned by the emperor. The soothsayer (*haruspex*), named Campensis, was executed. He was burned at the stake.¹¹⁹

In the eastern cities the situation was no different than in Rome: accusations of attempted poisoning and the recourse to occult practices by private individuals were brought to the attention of the authorities.¹²⁰ In this instance, the events in question concerned a private ceremony conducted to determine the identity of the successor to the emperor Valens—the infamous Theodorus affair. This was a prohibited astrological consultation and the incident was similar to many from the early empire.¹²¹ However, the eastern emperor Valens, as Ammianus takes pains to emphasize, pursued the investigations beyond the limits of justice, and despite his initial reservations about recording the events, Ammianus amply provides a gruesome account of the arrests, imprisonments, grisly tortures, confiscations of property, and, of course, brutal executions that resulted.¹²²

The role of magic and occult books in these events is worthy of comment. As in times past, some individuals were executed because they had sought out prohibited magical solutions to their problems.¹²³ But other individuals were convicted simply for

¹¹⁹ Amm. Marc. 28.1.29.

¹²⁰ For the account, see Amm. Marc. 29.1.5–44.

¹²¹ See above, Part 2.1.

¹²² Amm. Marc. 28.1.1; 29.1.38–40.

¹²³ Amm. Marc. 28.1.10–15.

their possession of magical texts. The crime of a young aristocrat, identified by the author as Lollianus, was not to have actually applied his knowledge of magic, but to have written (or perhaps copied) a book on “hurtful arts.”¹²⁴ For his crime, Lollianus, like many other owners of such writings, “met his fate at the hands of the executioner.”¹²⁵ Dangerous occult religious texts, like books of sorcery and astrology, appear to have been one of the items that the authorities were looking for in particular, and, as Ammianus tells us, at the conclusion of the inquiries, books and other documents too numerous to count were piled up and burned before the judges.¹²⁶ According to Ammianus a vast crowd attended the spectacle at which the emperor ordered the execution of all of the accused with one decree prior to the burning.¹²⁷ In response to these investigations, private individuals in many cities destroyed their books, and even entire libraries, keen, as they were, to escape the possibility of arrest, torture, and execution for the books they owned.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Amm. Marc. 28.1.26: *codex noxium artium*.

¹²⁵ Amm. Marc. 28.1.24–25.

¹²⁶ Amm. Marc. 29.1.4.

¹²⁷ Amm. Marc. 29.1.38.

¹²⁸ Amm. Marc. 29.1.41: *innumeri codices et acervi voluminum multi*. Pierre Chuvin (echoing Ammianus’s words at 29.1.40) explained dramatically, “Antioch was turned into a “slaughterhouse.” The carnage was accompanied by pyres of books, “under the eyes of the judges.” These books were deemed illicit, meaning that they were presumed to contain predictions, or magical recipes, or astrology.” Pierre Chuvin, *Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, trans. B.A. Archer. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 52.

We should be suspicious of Ammianus's treatment of the events, knowing as we do that he considered the emperor Valens to be paranoid, cruel, and not particularly bright, but this story should not be discounted, remembering that it fits in a context where the state applied such coercive measures more freely.¹²⁹ Precedents had already been established not only by the Senate and magistrates of the Republic, who were known to have suppressed similar practices by the same violent means from time to time, but also by Augustus, Tiberius, Diocletian, members of the house of Constantine, and a great many other emperors from the late fourth to the sixth century, all of whom burned books of the occult at one time or another, or executed practitioners.¹³⁰ Moreover, contemporary evidence also suggests that Ammianus's account is plausible. John Chrysostom, who was bishop of Constantinople from 328 to 404, once recounted in a sermon a personal anecdote from his childhood in Antioch when he and a companion happened upon an unfinished magical manuscript.¹³¹ While walking along the banks of

¹²⁹ See, for example, Amm. Marc. 29.1.11. In the late Roman period, the penalties for many crimes, especially serious ones, became more severe. See Peter Garnsey, "Why Penalties Become Harsher: the Roman Case, Late Republic to Fourth-Century Empire," *Natural Law Forum* 13 (1968): 141–62; and Ramsay MacMullen, "Judicial Savagery in the Roman Empire," *Chiron* 16 (1986): 147–66.

¹³⁰ For the legal suppression of occult practices by Augustus, Tiberius, and other early Roman emperors, see Section 2.1 above. For Diocletian, see *C.J.* 9.18.2 (294 C.E.), and Chapter 4 below, p. 172–3. For Constantine, see *C. Th.* 9.40.2 (314 C.E.); 9.16.3 (317–319/321–324 C.E.); 9.16.1 (319 C.E.); and 9.16.2 (319 C.E.). For Constantius, see *C. Th.* 9.16.4 (357 C.E.); 9.16.5 (357 C.E.); and 9.16.6 (358 C.E.). For Valentinian and Valens, see *C. Th.* 9.16.7 (364 C.E.); 9.38.3 (367/369 C.E.); 9.38.4 (368/370 C.E.); 9.16.8 (370 C.E.); and 9.16.10 (371 C.E.).

¹³¹ John Chrysostom, *Hom.* 38.5, in *Act. Ap.* 60.274–5; on the date (372), see Robert E. Carter, "The Chronology of Saint John Chrysostom's Early Life," *Traditio* 18 (1964): 357–64, at 363.

the Orontes River on the way to a nearby martyr's shrine, they saw something white in the water and, thinking it to be a piece of linen, John's companion pulled it from the water. It was a book, which upon brief examination bore unmistakable evidence that it was a book of magic. It appeared to have been cast into the river by its owner during this very period of turmoil in the city. As John explained, a soldier came passing by at that moment and the youth was forced to hide the book underneath his clothing. When the soldier had gone, they quickly threw the book back into the water. Surely, its owner was compelled to dispose of his book out of the same fear of discovery and punishment that motivated the people in Ammianus's account, just as John himself was anxious to be rid of it lest he be accused of practicing magic.¹³²

But this was not the only legal prohibition of magic and occult acts or books in this period. An edict issued by Valentinian II, Theodosios, and Arcadius in 389 ordered that anyone who heard of a person who practiced sorcery should seize him and drag him immediately into public to be tried as an "enemy of the common safety."¹³³ An edict of the emperors Honorius and Theodosius, dated to 409 C.E., mention magical texts specifically and demand that they be handed over to the authorities to be burned.¹³⁴

Within the governmental context, burning the books of magicians and other occult

¹³² In 374, as Chrysostomus Baur observed, the emperor Valens "commanded that all books of magic should be burned and that all magicians and sorcerers, as well as authors of books on magic, should be punished by death." See Chrysostomus Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, trans. Sr. M. Gonzaga. (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1959–60), 1.77.

¹³³ *C. Th.* 9.16.11; trans. Pharr, 238.

¹³⁴ *C. Th.* 9.16.12.

practitioners, the enemies of the state, remained among the repertoire of repression available to the Roman government. The emperor's role continued to be the promotion of stability in the face of chaos and disorder. To this end, the spectacle of bookburning endured as a form of public ritualized destruction and an important means of discourse by which the state asserted its power over forces that were believed to undermine it.

If you want to become a Christian, bring me your book

The context in which magical books were burned in the later Roman world was by this time rooted as much in traditional Graeco-Roman values as it was in developing Christian values, which held somewhat differing views on magic and other occult practices.¹³⁵ Almost universally, Christian writers looked upon the spirits whom magicians and diviners called on or interacted with in their ceremonies as nothing more than spirits of evil. The magicians, already illegitimate and secretive, became with Christianity the loyal allies of wicked demons.¹³⁶ Some fathers of the Church argued, in fact, that knowledge of magic itself and the composition of the earliest magical books was the responsibility of angels who had fallen from grace with God and had subdued the

¹³⁵ All forms of magic and astrology were not entirely banned by all early Christians. The evidence provided by the many magical writings and other material evidence discovered in Egypt that exhibit a clear Christian context indicates that many Christians in the Roman Empire did not object to the ritual techniques or goals behind many occult practices. See *Ancient Christian Magic*, eds. Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

¹³⁶ See Valerie I.J. Flint, "The Demonisation of Magic and Sorcery in Late Antiquity: Christian Redefinitions of Pagan Religions," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, eds. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 315–6.

human race to themselves through the knowledge and use of such books.¹³⁷ The acceptance or assimilation of this perspective, consciously or not, was what may have compelled some former practitioners and adherents to destroy their books in their own symbolic ceremonies, as will be discussed below. As should be noted, the importance of symbols and symbolic acts was as great to Late Antique Christians as it was to the believers in the early Church, where this form of bookburning, burning books as an element of conversion, has its roots.

The bookburning presented in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 19, was perhaps the most seminal record of a bookburning for late Roman Christians.¹³⁸ According to the account, the apostle Paul had been preaching in Ephesos, baptizing and performing many miraculous feats in the name of Jesus, when an individual described at this point in the text as an itinerant Jewish exorcist, and later as a Jewish high priest, a man named Sceva, began to make use of the power of the name of Jesus in his own rites of exorcism.¹³⁹ “Seven sons,” apprentices, learning the master’s craft at his side, assisted Sceva in his

¹³⁷ See, for example, the writings of Justin Martyr, 2 *Apol.* 5, where Justin links not only magic to these fallen angels, but also integral elements of pagan cult, like sacrifice, incense, and libations. See Lact. *Div. Inst.* 2.16.1–2. Astrological knowledge was also frequently ascribed to demons in Christian writings, for example, Tatian’s *Oration to the Greeks* 8-12, and Tertullian, who blames “fallen angels” for the science of astrology. See *The Prescription of Heretics* 43.1; *On Idolatry* 9.8, 9.1; and *Against Marcion* 1.18.

¹³⁸ On the context and importance of the Acts of the Apostles, see Graham Soffe, “Christians, Jews and Pagans in the Acts of the Apostles,” in *Pagan Gods and Shrines of the Roman Empire*, eds. Martin Henig and Anthony King. Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monographs, no. 8. (Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1986), 239–56.

¹³⁹ Acts of the Apostles 19:13: *τινες . . . τῶν περιερχομένων Ἰουδαίων ἐξορκιστῶν*; and 19:14: *τινος Σκευᾶ Ἰουδαίου ἀρχιερέως*.

profession. During one such ceremony, when the exorcist adjured a spirit to depart from its host in the name of Jesus, the spirit responded by saying, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?” whereupon the demoniac set upon the exorcists and overpowered them, causing them to panic and flee.¹⁴⁰ News of this event spread throughout the city of Ephesos quickly, and many people were, according to the account, to some degree spontaneously converted to Christianity in its wake. Among them were counted former practitioners of the magic arts:

Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all; and they counted the value of them and found that it came to fifty thousand silver coins.¹⁴¹

In this episode, the act of burning magical texts was a primary symbolic and ritual element in the conversion of these individuals to the Christian faith. By burning these books, which were, as we have seen, the indispensable tools and chief mode of transmission for their formerly held beliefs and practices, these individuals demonstrated the sincerity of their change of faith. Burning, as mentioned above, was commonly understood to be the most thorough and permanent means of destroying something.¹⁴² As the flames consumed the object, in this instance the books, their connection to this existence was eradicated, so too, the power of the words and ideas contained therein was

¹⁴⁰ Acts of the Apostles 19:15.

¹⁴¹ Acts of the Apostles 19:18–19: πολλοί τε τῶν πεπιστευκότων ἤρχοντο ἐξομολογούμενοι καὶ ἀναγγέλλοντες τὰς πράξεις αὐτῶν. ἱκανοὶ δὲ τῶν τὰ περίεργα πραξάντων συνενέκαντες τὰς βίβλους κατέκαιον ἐνώπιό πάντων, καὶ συνεψήφισαν τὰς τιμὰς αὐτῶν καὶ εὔπον ἀπγυρίου μυριάδας πέντε. [Translation by the author.]

¹⁴² See above, pp. 49–52.

also consumed. That such a ceremony should be conducted “in the sight of all,” as occurred at Ephesos, served to enhance its potency as a force for Christian conversion. Staging such a ceremony in the open and within the sight of a gathered assembly or, perhaps, of anyone passing by, would make it into a spectacle and bring it to wide attention, publicly demonstrating not only their personal sincerity but, more importantly, the potency of their newfound beliefs, so great it was that they could solemnly cast their former gods into the flames. In this manner, bookburning was transformed from a force restraining change into a force for change itself.

So what were the teachings of Jesus concerning the power and use of fire? A few examples provide highly suggestive insight for fire’s symbolism in Christianity. In the Gospel of Matthew, for example, is a well-known parable that Jesus told about a man who planted his fields with good seeds. At night the man’s enemy came and sowed weeds among the grain, so that when the wheat sprouted up, the weeds did too. The man ordered his servants to do nothing and wait until the harvest, at which time they could gather the weeds to be burned and then the grain for the storehouse.¹⁴³ When his disciples later asked him to explain what he had meant, Jesus told them that the story concerned human salvation: the sower was the Son of Man and the field was the world, the good seeds were God’s obedient children, and the weeds were the wicked. At the

¹⁴³ Matthew 13:24–30; and see Johan Goudsblom, *Fire and Civilization*, 122–24.

endtime, like the harvest, the angels of God would, like reapers, “gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and all that do evil, and cast them into the furnace of fire where there will be wailing and the gnashing of teeth.”¹⁴⁴

Perhaps following the model of Ephesos and inspired by Jesus’s own teachings, many similar bookburnings were orchestrated by the Church and, as in the example from Ephesos, grew out of the conversion of a prominent individual or individuals who possessed such books. Whether they were, in fact, actual practicing sorcerers, or, perhaps, collectors or even inheritors of occult books is beside the point. Such books were a part of their collection or library and burning them could figure as important testimony to their faith in the power of their new beliefs. Although it may be a hagiographical romance, the conversion story of a sorcerer known as Cyprian of Antioch, who lived in the mid-third century C.E., is a later instance of this same kind of conversion-cum-bookburning.¹⁴⁵ Cyprian, whom the great Late Antique Christian poet Prudentius (348–c. 408 C.E.) mentions was “pre-eminent among the young men of Antioch for his skill in perverse arts,” became a convert to Christianity after a disastrous attempt to corrupt a Christian virgin through the use of sorcery.¹⁴⁶ Following his failure, Cyprian was reported to have confessed his occult practices and burned his magical books in public:

¹⁴⁴ Matthew 13:39–42.

¹⁴⁵ See Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 24 = *P.G.* 35.1169–93.

¹⁴⁶ Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, 13.21–4. On Prudentius and his work, see Anne-Marie Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

He was changed and gave a visible demonstration of his transformation. He brought his books of sorcery before the people and made a public triumph over the feebleness of this wicked treasure house. He announced his folly and raised up a bright fire before them. The great deceit, which would not be able to keep one flame from the body, was burned in the fire. He cast out the demons and took God to himself. Oh such delight!¹⁴⁷

Bookburnings, like the one described here by Gregory Nazianzen, were characteristic in their careful organization and keen emphasis at making a grand public statement of the power of Christian beliefs. The locus of such bookburnings was frequently in front of a church or in some other highly visible Christian public space, also chosen, no doubt, to enhance its impact.¹⁴⁸

Other burnings of occult religious books within the Christian context were quite different from those generally associated with conversions. Many of these incidents happened during the periods of acute antagonism and violence between Christians and their neighbors that occurred during the late fourth century C.E. and following.¹⁴⁹ For example, in Gaza in 402 C.E., only four years after the forcible demolition of all but nine

¹⁴⁷ Gregory Nazianzen, *Or.* 24 = *P.G.* 35.1184A: μετατίθεται δ' οὖν, καί ἀποδείξει τῆς μεταβολῆς ἐναργῆς. Προτίθησι δημοσίᾳ τὰς γοητικὰς βίβλους· θριαμβεύει τοῦ πονηροῦ θησαυροῦ τὴν ἀσθένειαν· κηρύσσει τὴν ἄνοιαν, λαμπρὰν ἐξ αὐτῶν αἶρει τὴν φλόγα, πυρδαπανᾷ τὴν μακρὰν ἀπάτην, ἣ μὲν φλογὶ σαρκὸς οὐκ ἐπήμυνεν· ἀφίσταται τῶν δαιμόνων, οἰκιοῦται Θεῷ. Ὡ τῆς χάριτος! [Translation by the author.]

¹⁴⁸ For other occult religious bookburnings in the proximity of Christian churches, see below, pp. 88–9, and n. 158 below.

¹⁴⁹ See Garth Fowden, “Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire A.D. 320–435,” *JTS* (n.s.) 29 (1978): 53–78; W.H.C. Frend, “Monks and the End of Graeco-Roman Paganism in Syria and Egypt,” *Cristianesimo storia* 11 (1990): 469–84; and Frank R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization C. 337–529*, vol. 1, particularly 98–186. See also Chapter 5 below.

of the city's temples by the local Bishop Porphyry, another episode of Christian iconoclastic violence occurred, this time directed at Gaza's most famous temple, the temple of Zeus Marnas, or Marneion.¹⁵⁰ It too was destroyed, burned in a fire that was said to have lasted for many days, but in the wake of its destruction, a door-to-door search of the homes of nearby non-Christians was conducted, as pagan statues were visible to those who peered into the courtyards. The search turned up many "idols," which were pulled down and burned in bonfires, the remnants cast into public latrines.

Books were found too:

They also found books filled with magic, which they call holy and from which they perform mysteries and other rites; these books have an importance equal to their gods.¹⁵¹

These were also burned.

This too was a scene of violence involving the burning of what were presumed to be books of sorcery and the occult, or perhaps, even "paganism", since the boundaries between these categories blurred increasingly during the late Roman period, particularly in the eyes of Christians. But here, it was a mob of participants who ransacked the homes of suspects looking for books and burning them. In this sort of bookburning, it becomes evident that burning these books was no longer simply a means of limiting or preventing antisocial or illegitimate congress with supernatural powers, it had become a sacramental activity. Bookburning became a form of "holy violence" that was fitting for Christians

¹⁵⁰ Mark the Deacon, *Vita Porphyrii* 66, 70–84.

¹⁵¹ Mark the Deacon, *Vita Porphyrii* 71.

and pleasing to God.¹⁵² Sometimes the actors were unruly, autonomous crowds, or mobs under the direction of charismatic religious authorities, while more frequently the book burner was an individual—a saint, or a monk, or perhaps the emperor—a person who asserted his or her religious authority by this powerful gesture of negation.¹⁵³

This type of bookburning is evident throughout the fifth and sixth centuries C.E., when owners of magical books were compelled to hand over or burn them by individuals endowed with personal religious authority in dramatic confrontations. Conversions continued to follow in the aftermath to such incidents. The story of the encounter between the monk Hypatios and a sorcerer is just such an example. Hypatios ruled as *hegoumen* of Rufiniana, a monastery in rural Bithynia, from its founding around 400 until his death in about the year 446 C.E. In the course of that time he came to exercise tremendous religious authority throughout the region and in nearby cities like Chalcedon and Constantinople.¹⁵⁴ In his *Vita* of the monk, his disciple Kallinikos recounts a confrontation that occurred between Hypatios and a sorcerer from Antioch, who not only

¹⁵² On religious conflicts in the later Roman Empire and the concept of “holy violence,” see, Michael Gaddis, ““There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ’: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire,” (Ph. D diss., Princeton University, 1999), 143–93; and David Frankfurter, ““Things Unbefitting Christians’: Violence and Christianization in Fifth-Century Panopolis,” *JECS* 8:2 (2000): 273–295.

¹⁵³ The emperor Jovian, who succeeded Julian in 363, professed his Christian belief upon becoming ruler. He was said to have ordered the Library of Antioch, which was founded by his predecessor, a well-known devotee of all manner of occult practices, to be burned down. On this library, see Julian, *Ep.* 23, 38; see also Amm. Marc. 25.10; Them. *Or.* 5; Philostorg. *H.E.* 8.5; Zos. 4.3; and Suda, s.v. Ἰοβιανός.

¹⁵⁴ See Frank R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization C.337–529*, vol. 2, 1–51.

possessed magical texts, but also powerful magical devices (τὰ περὶ ἐργα).¹⁵⁵ The man came to him to convert to Christianity while Hypatios was in the midst of a crowd. Hypatios questioned him and found that he wore a magical, three-tailed belt of Artemis, which the monk and his associates destroyed. He further demanded of him, “If you want to become a Christian, bring me your book and all of your strange things.” meaning his books of magical recipes, which Hypatios would thereafter destroy in a fire.¹⁵⁶

More than a hundred years later, in late fifth century Berytus, investigations after occult religious books by church officials continued. According to Zachariah’s *Life of Severus*, the bishop of Berytus, John, was prompted by members of the *philoponoι*, a group of zealous Christian students from the city’s famed school of law, to investigate the accusation of a conspiracy to commit acts of malevolent sorcery. He commissioned the group to look into the matter with the aid of imperial notaries and they succeeded in uncovering the magical books of two individuals, while others were said to have fled with theirs. John burned the seized books before the church of the Theotokos.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Callinicus, *Vita Hypatii* 43.1–8.

¹⁵⁶ Callinicus, *Vita Hypatii* 43.8: “Εἰ βούλει χριστιανὸς γενέσθαι, φέρε μοι τό βιβλίον σου καὶ πάντα τὰ περὶ ἐργά σου.” [Translation by the author.]

¹⁵⁷ Zachariah, *Vita Severi* 68–71. The Theotokos was magnificently decorated, with a central location near the city’s school of law. The *philoponoι* met nightly at this church to study theological writings together. See Frank R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization C. 370–529*, vol. 2. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 38–40; and Linda Jones Hall, “Berytus, “Mother of Laws:” Studies in the Social History of Beirut from the Third to the Sixth Centuries A.D.” (Ph.D. Diss. Ohio State University, 1996), particularly 145–243.

Similar confrontations were repeated throughout the fifth and sixth century and fit within a context where bookburning served as a highly meaningful symbolic action in a discourse laden with symbols.¹⁵⁸ Bookburnings took a wide range of forms and could have multiple meanings. So too, the participants in bookburnings came from different walks of life and different perspectives. Where the prerogative to burn books had been the preserve of the state in earlier periods, it became in Late Antiquity a forum for public discourse that groups other than the state could utilize to express their strongly held views, and individuals to express their personal religious authority.

¹⁵⁸ To cite one further example, in mid-fifth century Panopolis, Egypt, Shenoute also came to exercise great influence over the region where he was abbot of the White Monastery and beyond. As the leader of a band of fiercely loyal monks, Shenoute furthered the progress of Christianization in the Egyptian countryside by the application of ruthless violence, including vandalizing the domestic shrine of a local notable who owned a library of sacred books, including magical books, according to Shenoute. He also stole and destroyed the books possessed by a group in the nearby village of Pneuith [Plewit], which were “full of abominations” and “of every kind of magic.” See Besa, *Life of Shenoute*, tr. David N. Bell. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982), 83–84, 125–27; and see also Johannes Leipoldt, *Schenute von Atripe und die Entstehung des nationalen ägyptischen Christentums* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1903), 178–82. As is discussed in depth in Chapter 5, Manichaean books were burned by the bishops of Rome in the fifth and sixth centuries on several occasions. The locations for these bookburnings were also in front of prominent churches. See Chapter 5 below.

CHAPTER 3

BOOKBURNING IN RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN ROMAN ASIA MINOR: THE CASE OF THE EPICUREANS

This chapter examines the activities of the little-known cult of the snake-god Glykon, which originated in the town of Abonouteichos on Paphlagonia's Black Sea coast (west of Sinope), as a means of exploring the occurrence of bookburning in intercommunal conflicts within Graeco-Roman religion. Much of what is known about the establishment of this cult and its daily workings is by virtue of the pen of Lucian, the famed *belletrist* of the second century C.E. Lucian provides an account of the foundation of the shrine and oracle of Glykon that is prized for its rich detail and regarded as a witty and clever work of art. His discussion serves as the chief source of evidence and point of departure concerning the religious dispute that arose there; however, other sources of evidence will also be considered.

The establishment of this new cult and oracular center in Abonouteichos thrust the cult and its spokesman, Alexander, onto the main stage of ongoing empire-wide religious discourse.¹ There were known to be other competing interests in the region of

Abonouteichos, in particular, members of the local Epicurean philosophical sect and the Christian community. Conflicts of interests and competing ideologies between these groups were articulated by the use of symbolically charged acts, gestures, and words.

The task of this chapter will be to examine the conflict that arose between the followers of Glykon and their competitors as well as the use of symbolic imagery and ritualized violence in this conflict. As will become clear, the burning of a book of Epicurus was the symbolic centerpiece of a religious campaign by the adherents of the cult of Glykon against their Epicurean opponents. Bookburning was a dramatic expression of their rejection and antagonism towards the antithetical ideology of Epicurus and his followers. By examining Lucian's account and the other sources of evidence relevant to the conflict, we may come to a better understanding of how a specific cult within the pagan Greek East of the Roman Empire expressed itself within an ongoing discourse on religious beliefs and on tradition within the context of a local community. As will become evident, burning books was, in part, dependent on earlier behaviors, but the fact that it came to be utilized in such conflicts also highlights important new developments for this period.

¹ See Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet* 12, in Lucian, Vol. 4, trans. A.M. Harmon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from this author's text.

PART 3.1: LUCIAN'S *ALEXANDER* AND THE CULT OF GLYKON IN ABONOUTEICHOS

The story of Alexander of Abonouteichos, who established the oracle of the latter-day Asklepios, the snake god Glykon, and of its success in the second century C.E. and following is a strange and almost unbelievable tale, and yet it is also emblematic of the vigorous and dynamic religious milieu of the Roman Empire at that time. In this period the oracle and mysteries associated with this god came to be known throughout the Roman Empire. Although Alexander and his cult were well-known during his heyday in the mid-second century, from about 150 to 170 C.E., and his cult was known to have perpetuated itself into the fourth century, his memory was thereafter all but obliterated by the passage of time.² Until religious artifacts associated with a serpent cult were recovered and connected with a well-known document among the writings of Lucian, little was known or understood about this cult and its activities.

Lucian was the most famous son of Samosata, a fortified city that sat on the banks of the Euphrates River in Syria's extreme northeast corner. It had been home to the kings of Commagene until it came under Roman influence in the first century B.C.E. and was

² As one discussion of the modern location of ancient Abonouteichos, the sleepy seaside town of Ineboli (= Ionopolis), almost nothing at all from antiquity or the medieval period has been discovered: "The Kastamonou 1973 Yearbook declares that the town contains no ancient remains whatsoever." See Bilge Umar, *Paphlagonia*, trans. Adair Mill. (Istanbul: Ak Yayinlari, 1988), 52. Of course, the eventual discovery and excavation of the shrine and the town, known to have grown quite large during the Antonine period, will shed additional light on the issues under consideration here.

finally annexed and garrisoned by the Romans for its strategic importance in 72 C.E., only fifty years before Lucian's birth. Lucian was an accomplished writer during the literary period known as the Second Sophistic, when declamation, the composition and presentation of persuasive speeches, was the most honored form of literary activity in the Greek speaking world. Little is known for certain about his person. Almost none of his contemporaries mention Lucian, and therefore his own writings are the best evidence for information about his life. It is generally acknowledged that Lucian was probably a native speaker of Aramaic, rather than Greek. In spite of this, he acquired a considerable mastery of the Greek language and literature. As an adult he practiced as a lawyer, rhetorician, and itinerant lecturer. He traveled widely, to Italy, Gaul, and to Greece, where he lived for a time, and to Egypt, where his talent and education enabled him to obtain a minor administrative post late in his life.³

Among the nearly eighty writings preserved and attributed to Lucian is a scathing account purporting to expose the many frauds of Alexander, entitled *Alexander the False Prophet*.⁴ This work endures as the most important source of information on the foundation of this cult and oracular shrine and its daily workings in second-century Paphlagonia.⁵ Its highly polemic nature compels us to consider whether we can rely on

³ For an excellent overview of Lucian and his historical context, see Christopher P. Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁴ Numerous editions of Lucian's *Alexander* are now available. The most recent is Ulrich Victor, *Lukian von Samosata, Alexandros oder der Lügenprophet* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997).

⁵ Although Lucian's *Alexander* is no longer the only source of evidence for the existence of the cult of Glykon, as will be discussed below, its evidence is now to be considered in relation to other testimony.

Lucian's word about an individual he clearly despises and a cult he regards as an outright sham. We know that Lucian's own avowed Epicurean sympathies made him an opponent of the cult in principle.⁶ Additionally, Lucian notes that he once traveled to Abonouteichos, accompanied by his servant Xenophon and two soldiers provided by the governor of Cappadocia. While he was there he was summoned to Alexander's presence and during their brief meeting Lucian bit Alexander's hand!⁷ Although this particular detail may be merely dramatic exaggeration, some degree of personal enmity must have existed between them. Lucian readily acknowledges it. He even accuses Alexander of attempting to have him killed. Lucian's proximity to his subject, however, also provided him with first-hand knowledge of Alexander and the cult. In addition, he spoke with others who told him about Alexander, including Alexander's associate Rutilianus, and he notes that he consulted other documents, such as recorded oracular responses, for additional information.⁸ Most modern scholars regard Lucian's account to be highly valuable and accurate.⁹ As will be shown below, the existence of the cult is supported by material evidence.

⁶ See Lucian, *Alex.* 1 and 61.

⁷ Lucian, *Alex.* 55–57.

⁸ Lucian, *Alex.* 4, 5, 33–35, 54, 55–57.

⁹ Diskin Clay, "Lucian of Samosata: Four Philosophical Lives (Nigrinus, Demonax, Peregrinus, Alexander Pseudomantis)," *ANRW* 2.36.5 (1992), 3446. On this, see also O. Weinrich, "Alexandros der Lügenprophet und seine Stellung in der Religiosität des II Jahrhunderts nach Christentum," *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum* 47 (1921): 129–151; M. Caster, *Études sur "Alexandre ou le faux prophète" de Lucien* (Paris: Société d'éditions "Les Belles lettres," 1938); James Henry Oliver, "The Actuality of Lucian's Assembly of the Gods," *AJP* 101 (1980): 304–313; Louis Robert, "Lucien en son temps," in *À travers l'Asie Mineure: Poètes et Prostateurs, Monnaies grecques,*

As Lucian explains in the opening remarks to his discussion, he tells the story of Alexander with hesitation, because he does not want to commemorate or preserve for posterity an individual whom he considers to be a complete fraud.¹⁰ His reason for writing is to satisfy the request of a certain Celsus, to whom the work is addressed.¹¹

The question has been raised whether this Celsus addressed by Lucian was the same individual as the identically named writer of an anti-Christian tract, published about 175–180 C.E., to which Origen responded in his *Contra Celsum*, written about 249 C.E.¹² There is evidence to suggest that they were indeed one and the same. Both Lucian and Origen identified Celsus as the writer of a treatise condemning magic.¹³ In Lucian's

Voyageurs et Géographie (Athens: École française d'Athènes, 1980), 393–431; and Christopher P. Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), particularly ch. 12.

¹⁰ Lucian, *Alex.* 2: "I blush for both of us, I confess, both for you and for myself—for you because you want a consummate rascal perpetuated in memory and in writing, and for myself because I am devoting my energy to such an end, to the exploits of a man who does not deserve to have polite people read about him, but rather to have the motley crowd in a vast amphitheater see him be torn to pieces by foxes or apes."

¹¹ The question of the identity of the addressee named here, Celsus, has been an issue of scholarly concern for quite some time. See Diskin Clay, "Lucian of Samosata," 3440–1. See also Henry Chadwick, "Introduction," in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, ed. and trans. Henry Chadwick. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), xxv.

¹² Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.8 and 4.36. Since most of this work was preserved in Origen's *Contra Celsum*, the content of this important early critique of Christianity by a pagan philosopher has survived. See Celsus, *On the True Doctrine. A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). For a discussion of Celsus's anti-Christian treatise, see below, Chapter 4. On the fate of other writings attacking Christianity, including the writings of the philosopher Porphyry, see Chapter 5.

¹³ See Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.68. Here, Origen speculates whether his opponent is the same Celsus who wrote a work condemning the practice of magic. Lucian, recounting Alexander's methods for defrauding oracle seekers, concludes his treatment of the topic

treatise about Alexander, Celsus was acknowledged to be a proponent of Epicurean philosophy and an active exposé of religious fraud.¹⁴ Origen, however, was not certain of Celsus's philosophical affiliation and observed that some of his sources indicated that Celsus was an Epicurean, while others, such as Celsus's own anti-Christian treatise, *On the True Doctrine*, suggested that he was, in fact, a Platonist.¹⁵ Whether they were two separate individuals or the same man is ultimately impossible to determine conclusively, and despite the tantalizing possibility that they were the same person, Lucian's addressee was clearly an individual who was well disposed towards Epicurean philosophy and an opponent of magic, oracles, and all superstitious practices and beliefs. Beyond his actual historical identity, Celsus functions as a literary *persona* in the work of Lucian. He was a like-minded and sympathetic audience for Lucian's work, which aims to present an exposé of Alexander's religious con game.¹⁶

Lucian divulges all of the most shocking and intimate details of Alexander's life in the course of his discussion. He tells us that Alexander had worked as a prostitute when he was a boy and that among his lovers was a man whom Lucian describes as a

by admitting that a more complete analysis of such methods are available within Celsus's own work condemning magic. See Lucian, *Alex.* 22. Although Celsus's treatise attacking magical practices no longer exists, some scholars have suggested that certain passages of the text were used by Hippolytus (about 170–236) in his *Refutatio omnium haeresium*. See Hippol. *Haer.* 4.28–42, esp. 38.

¹⁴ See Lucian, *Alex.* 1 and 21.

¹⁵ Origen in the first half of the *Contra Celsum* brands his opponent an Epicurean, but then later concedes that he might be a different person with the same name. See *C. Cels.* 4.54, 5.3.

¹⁶ On the *persona* of Celsus in Lucian's *Alexander*, see Diskin Clay, "Lucian of Samosata: Four Philosophical Lives," 3441.

sorcerer [γόης].¹⁷ The sorcerer was from Tyana in Cappadocia and was reported to have been a follower of the famous Neopythagorean holy man Apollonios. He took the bright and handsome Alexander under his tutelage and shared with him all of the secrets of his profession.¹⁸ When Alexander's master died, Alexander struck out on his own, traveling about and eventually finding a partner for his schemes, a writer of choral songs from Byzantium named Kokkonas, who aided him in his practice of sorcery.¹⁹ Together, they traveled about Asia Minor and to Macedon, where they happened to see enormous serpents that were, despite their fearsome size, quite docile and accustomed to human interaction. They purchased one of the finest of these reptiles and began to fashion a much larger plot than the small-time deceits they had been responsible for up to this point. Their grand scheme was to found their own prophetic shrine and oracle.²⁰

¹⁷ Lucian, *Alex.* 5: "While he was still a mere boy, and a very handsome one, as could be inferred by the sere and yellow leaf of him, and could also be learned by hearsay from those who recounted his story, he trafficked freely in his attractiveness and sold his company to those who sought it. Among others, he had an admirer who was a magician, one of those who advertise enchantments, miraculous incantations, charms for your love affairs, visitations to your enemies, the discovery of buried treasure, and the succession of estates."

¹⁸ Lucian, *Alex.* 5: "As the man saw that he was an apt lad, more than ready to assist him in his affairs, and that the boy was quite as much enamored with his trickery as he with the boy's beauty, he gave him a thorough education and constantly made use of him as helper, servant, and acolyte. He himself was professedly a public physician, but as Homer says of the wife of Thon, the Egyptian, he knew 'Many a drug that was good in a compound, and many a bad one,' all of which Alexander inherited and took over. This teacher and admirer of his was a man from Tyana by birth, and one of those who had been followers of the notorious Apollonios, and who knew his whole bag of tricks. You see what sort of school the man I am describing comes from!"

¹⁹ Lucian, *Alex.* 6.

²⁰ Lucian, *Alex.* 7–8.

They decided that Alexander's hometown of Abonouteichos would be the ideal location because of the many wealthy and credulous countryfolk that inhabited surrounding Paphlagonia.²¹ To announce the foundation of the oracle, they proceeded from Pella to Chalcedon, known at that time for its temple of Apollo. Therein, they buried bronze tablets that announced, when they were fortuitously discovered, that soon Asklepios and his father Apollo would be coming to Abonouteichos. News of the miraculous discovery of these concealed texts traveled throughout Bithynia and Pontos, and in particular, to Abonouteichos, where the inhabitants immediately began to construct a temple for the god. While the temple was still under construction, Alexander began to hatch the plot.

Alexander returned to Abonouteichos with the snake. In the temple there had formed a pool of water, and Alexander, coming into the temple after dark, deposited within its murky depths a goose egg that had been emptied and filled with a tiny, newly hatched snake. The following morning, Alexander appeared in the marketplace of Abonouteichos in a loincloth and with his hair disheveled like the devotees of the Magna Mater. He announced to the people in the marketplace that the city was most fortunate because it would soon have the god in its presence.²² The commotion caused by his appearance aroused the interest of a great crowd of onlookers who began to pray, chant,

²¹ See, Lucian, *Alex.* 17. Here, Lucian concedes that he too believes these people to be thick-witted.

²² Lucian, *Alex.* 13.

and make obeisance. The crowd followed Alexander as he proceeded to the temple; all the time he continued to sing hymns to Asklepios and entreat the god to appear in the city.

When he arrived at the temple, Alexander took a libation cup and drew up water from the pool, and with it, the egg. Lucian recounts the moment:

Taking it in his hands, he asserted that at that moment he held Asklepios! They gazed unwaveringly to see what in the world was going to happen; indeed they had already been awed by the discovery of the egg in the water. But when he broke it and took into his hollowed hand a tiny snake, and the crowd saw it moving and twisting around his fingers, straightaway they shouted out and welcomed the god, congratulated their city, and each of them began to fill themselves greedily with prayers, requesting treasures and wealth and health and every other blessing from him.²³

Following the birth of the god, the word of this miraculous event spread about the entire region.

From everywhere people crowded into Abonouteichos to witness the god born among them. Soon the original snake purchased in Pella made its debut in Alexander's elaborate ruse. Alexander allowed visitors to come to him while he was seated on a couch with the serpent coiled about his person. As noted above, this remarkable creature was docile and willing to allow its head to be tucked underneath Alexander's arm while he was talking with visitors. In its place, Alexander substituted a replica made from linen

²³ Lucian, *Alex.* 14: καὶ λαβὼν αὐτὸ εἰς τὰς χεῖρας ἔχειν ἔφασκεν ἤδη τὸν Ἀσκληπιόν. οἱ δὲ ἀτεινὲς ἀπέβλεπον ὅ τι καὶ γίγνοιτο, πολὺ πρότερον θαυμάσαντες τὸ ψὸν ἐν τῷ ὕδατι εὐρημένον. ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ κατὰξας αὐτὸ εἰς κοίλην τὴν χεῖρα ὑπεδέξατο τὸ τοῦ ἔρπετοῦ ἐκείνου ἔμβρυον καὶ οἱ παρόντες εἶδον κινούμενον καὶ περὶ τοῖς δακτύλοις εἰλούμενον, ἀνέκραγον εὐθὺς καὶ ἡσπάζοντο τὸν θεὸν καὶ τὴν πόλιν ἐμακάριζον καὶ χανδὸν ἕκαστος ἐνεπίμπλατο τῶν εὐχῶν, θησαυροὺς καὶ πλοῦτους καὶ ὑγιείας καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ἀγαθὰ αἰτῶν παρ' αὐτοῦ.

and painted to appear lifelike.²⁴ Topped with a shaggy mop of human-looking hair and ears, the puppet's mouth was controlled by means of strings and would thus mimic the movements of opening and closing and speaking. Its speech was supplied by means of the windpipe of a crane or some similar bird, through which an unseen speaker responded from a concealed location, while the voice of the god seemed to issue forth from the snake's own head.²⁵

This was the great god Glykon, grown full size in a short time, to the amazement of the legions of his believers. The reborn Asklepios was a massive serpent who spoke and gave voice to the oracle, replying to most through Alexander, but to a worthy few in responses issued from the mouth of the god himself. Preposterous as the notion may seem, and as we shall see, seemed to some at the time, multitudes embraced the god and sought out the oracle and its shrine. It grew quickly beyond the dreams of its founder in terms of the many valuable dedications that were donated there, as well as the power and influence that the god's prophet Alexander wielded in the town and beyond.

²⁴ Lucian, *Alex.* 12, 26: "He answered the questions through someone else, speaking into a tube from elsewhere, so that the voice issued from his linen Asklepios." ἄλλου τινὸς ἔξωθεν ἐμβοῶντος, ἀπεκρίνετο πρὸς τὰς ἐρωτήσεις, τῆς φωνῆς διὰ τοῦ ὀθονίνου ἐκείνου Ἀσκληπιοῦ προπιπτούσης. See Lucian, *Alex.* 26.

²⁵ The use of such elaborate hoaxes in antiquity is indisputable. See the archaeological evidence and compelling discussion of these αὐτόφωνοι in Frederick Poulsen, "Talking, Weeping, and Bleeding Sculptures," *Acta Archaeologica* 16 (1945): 178–95. Poulsen's discussion of the artifactual evidence for this phenomenon includes a statue, of all persons, of Epicurus, that had been hollowed out to allow the sort of animation discussed here. We can imagine that Epicurus would not have approved of its modification for this purpose!

The oracle was the chief vehicle for the transmission of Glykon's fame and this was carried out in a conscious campaign.²⁶ The prominence of the oracle of Glykon coincides with a renaissance of oracular centers and practices throughout the Roman world, and in Asia Minor in particular. Beginning in the mid-second century, famous oracular shrines, such as Didyma, near Miletos, and Klaros, and many other minor ones, took on a greater prominence and began to actively address issues of cult practices, philosophy, and theology.²⁷ As Lucian describes, many came to consult the god in Abonouteichos for prophecies or to obtain medical treatments. In addition to the words of visitors to the oracle, Alexander sent men abroad to report news of the many correct predictions and miraculous feats ascribed to the god and his prophet.²⁸

They also began to manufacture paintings and statues and other images made from bronze and silver that depicted the great serpent.²⁹ As Lucian indicates, this was part of a conscious effort to advertise the power of the god. In modern times, actual copies of images of Glykon have come to light: one, in stone, was unearthed in Tomis on the Black Sea in modern Romania; another, of uncertain provenance, is now housed in

²⁶ See Lucian, *Alex.* 10, 15, 24, and 36. For Ramsay MacMullen's assessment of Alexander's conscious campaign, see *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 98.

²⁷ H.W. Parke, *The Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 69–92, 142–70; see also Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 200–41, and see also Zsuzsuanna Várhelyi, “Magic, Religion, and Syncretism at the Oracle of Claros,” in Sulochana R. Asirvatham, Corinne Pache, and John Watros, eds., *Between Magic and Religion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 13–31.

²⁸ Lucian, *Alex.* 24, 36–7.

²⁹ Lucian, *Alex.* 18.

Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.³⁰ A third image, which was discovered in a well in the Athenian Agora, is now exhibited in the Agora Museum. Another still unpublished image of Glykon is reported to have been found at Dorylaeum in Phrygia.³¹

In addition to advertising the god through oracles and images that were circulated widely from Abonouteichos, Alexander devised ceremonies and mysteries for the god. There were numerous priests in service of Glykon. Cities in Pontos and Paphlagonia sent young boys for three years to a choir that sang hymns to the god at his shrine, no doubt performing in the torchlit ceremonies and in the mysteries. These mysteries were organized around the figures of Alexander and Glykon, and took place over a three-day festival. Similar mysteries were being organized at other shrines during the course of the second and third centuries, such as at Pergamon (Demeter), Ephesos (Artemis), and Lagina (Hecate).³² In Athens, according to Philostratus, there were also mysteries of Asklepios being celebrated at this time; however, there is no evidence that other mysteries dedicated to Asklepios had any connection to the cult of Glykon.³³

³⁰ That discovered in 1962 at Tomis (modern Constantza), in Romania, is particularly well executed. The coiled serpent was measured to be nearly five meters in length. The archaeologists who uncovered this image found it as part of a cache of cult objects from various Late Roman cults. They seemed to have been interred carefully, suggesting that they were hidden intentionally by persons who intended to return for them, but never did so. The third or fourth century C.E. was suggested for the period of their interment. See the images and discussion of the discovery in V. Canarache, A. Aricescu, V. Barbu, and A. Rădulescu, *Tezaurul de Sculpturi de la Tomis* (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1963).

³¹ Robin Lane Fox reports that this information came to him from Stephen Mitchell. See *Pagans and Christians*, 720.

³² See Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 106 (especially note 54).

Behind Lucian's scathing reportage, we dimly glimpse the reality of Alexander's oracle and cult. Lucian would have us believe that Alexander was a complete and unrepentant fraud, but scholars like Lane Fox suggest otherwise.³⁴ They argue that Lucian's criticisms of Alexander are the result of personal animosity between the two men.³⁵ If we look beyond Lucian's personal attacks, we can discern in Alexander an individual with the proper training and experience to operate the oracle.³⁶ In addition to his training, he appealed to the basic needs of many people in a form and with symbols that had wide appeal. As Ramsay MacMullen has summed up Alexander's synthesis: "By artistic combination of Pythagoreanism, Asklepios myths, superstitious regard for snakes, old hymns, boys' choirs, Homer and Moon worship (or lunacy, our unpersuaded informant Lucian would have said), the religious practices and habits of thought prevailing in the northeast quadrant of the ancient world were formed into a brand new, artificial whole."³⁷

³³ See Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 196 (note 54). MacMullen noted that this particular mystery in Athens is otherwise unattested. See Philostr. *Vita Apollon.* 4.18.

³⁴ See Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 241–9.

³⁵ Lucian, *Alex.* 54–56.

³⁶ Lane Fox hypothesizes that Lucian's reference to Alexander's connections to Apollonios, mentioned in an attempt to discredit him, may in fact hint at his legitimacy. In Cilicia at Aigai, Apollonios was said to have formed a school that operated out of a temple of Asklepios. If this suggestion is correct, then it is possible that Alexander's teacher, or even Alexander himself, was trained there. For more discussion of this temple environment, see below, pp. 27–8. See also Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 248. See, on this point, Lucian, *Alex.* 5; Philostr. *Vita Apollon.* 1.7, and E.L. Bowie, "Apollonios of Tyana: Tradition and Reality," *ANRW* 16.2 (1973): 1652–66.

³⁷ Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 122.

Perhaps MacMullen may even overstate the situation by labeling Alexander's synthesis "artificial." Alexander's innovations, beyond the image that Lucian provides us with, were nothing more than regional variations within a flexible existing system. The presence of the serpent in the cult, outlandish as it seems when lampooned by Lucian, was a regular feature of ancient religion. In fact, the cult of Asklepios was transferred to new shrines physically by an actual living snake in numerous other instances, such as at Sikyon, Athens, and Rome.³⁸ Asklepieia elsewhere also served the dual purpose of healing and prophecy. The existence of the shrine and the veneration of Asklepios in Abonouteichos, although Lucian connects its origins intimately with Alexander himself, may very well have predated Alexander's influence upon the town. As Lucian tells us, upon Alexander's death, the proprietorship of the shrine divulged to a doctor, not another oracular specialist.³⁹ No doubt, the shrine returned to the regular and primary business of Asklepieia, care and healing of the sick and injured.

As Lucian himself acknowledges, this synthesis of Alexander's was so successful that it brought the cult influence that reached into even the very highest echelons of Roman society. Alexander himself married his daughter to an elderly, well-known Roman aristocrat, P. Mummius Sisenna Rutilianus, who had risen through the *cursus*

³⁸ As Walter Burkert states, "When his sanctuary at Sikyon was established in the fifth century, 'the god in the likeness of a serpent was brought from Epidaurus on a carriage drawn by mules.' In the chronicle of the Athenian Asklepieion the same process is described, but with somewhat more reserve: the god 'had the serpent brought from home'—from Epidaurus—on 'a chariot.'" See Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 214. On the translation of Asklepios to Rome in the form of a serpent, see above, pp. 37–8.

³⁹ Lucian, *Alex.* 60. Furthermore, following Alexander's death, the role of prophet was made a separate office.

honorum to attain the consulship and become proconsul of Asia in about 170 C.E.⁴⁰ The oracle of Glykon even determined the fate of a Roman military campaign.⁴¹ As we will see in the next section, however, the meteoric rise of Alexander and the oracle to power and prominence in Paphlagonia also brought criticism, opponents, and conflict.

⁴⁰ Lucian, *Alex.* 4, 30, 33–34, and 59.

⁴¹ See Lucian, *Alex.* 27, where Lucian claims that the Roman general Severianus consulted the oracle prior to the military disaster at Elegeia in 161 C.E., and *Alex.* 48, where he reports that the emperor Marcus Aurelius threw two live lions into the Danube at the instruction of the god.

PART 3.2: A PAGAN “HOLY WAR”

A conflict arose between the followers of Alexander and other groups in the years following his introduction of the cult into Abonouteichos. The content of this struggle is illuminating for our present interests. As Lucian describes, Alexander’s cult eventually acquired opponents in town and throughout the region, particularly among the adherents of Epicurean philosophy and the local Christian community, who both objected to the appeals to the supernatural and spectacle that made up so much of the veneration of the god and his prophet.⁴²

Both parties, the followers of Epicurus and those of Alexander and his cult, could be described, in the interpretive framework of David S. Potter, as ‘active’ cults.⁴³ Membership in these organizations provided enhanced and extraordinary knowledge about the divine in an institutional setting that promoted a sense of intense communal loyalty. In such ‘active’ cults, participants demonstrated their piety through acts that demonstrated their religious beliefs.⁴⁴

⁴² Lucian, *Alex.* 25: καὶ ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἐπεφώρατο ἡρέμα ἢ πᾶσα μαγγανεία καὶ συσκευὴ τοῦ δράματος. “In all the cities slowly they began to discern all the sorcery and contrivance of the spectacle.”

⁴³ See David S. Potter, Review of *Pagans and Christians*, by Robin Lane Fox. *JRA* 1(1988): 207–214, particularly 211–12. Robin Lane Fox labels such individuals in the early Church “overachievers,” see Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 336–40.

⁴⁴ David S. Potter, “Martyrdom as Spectacle,” in *Theater and Society in the Classical World*, ed. Ruth Scodel. (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 54.

The followers of the philosophy of Epicurus maintained a rationalist critique of religion and objected to traditional mythology and popular beliefs. The Epicureans viewed the gods as perfect, harmonious beings that were remote from human existence and had no influence over human destiny. Therefore the sect strongly objected to practices or beliefs that were based on the notion that the gods did affect the affairs of men and women in any way.⁴⁵ The prominence of the oracle and mysteries in the cult at Abonouteichos must have been the ultimate cause of the conflict between these rival parties.

As Alexander exclaimed once indignantly, the region was “filled with atheists [i.e., Epicureans] and Christians.”⁴⁶ The Epicureans, in particular, began to harass Alexander at his public appearances. After the Epicureans had been hounding him for some time, Alexander issued proclamations to his followers ordering them to drive out his opponents. He even ordered them to use stones to do so or else the god might not speak.⁴⁷ Alexander did eventually refuse, in particular, to grant oracles to residents of the town of Amastris, in nearby Pontos, from where many of his Epicurean opponents had come.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Harold W. Attridge, “The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire,” *ANRW* 2.16.1 (1978), 45–78, especially 51–56.

⁴⁶ Lucian, *Alex.* 25: λέγων ἀθέων ἐμπεπλήσθαι καὶ Χριστιανῶν τὸν Πόντον.

⁴⁷ Lucian, *Alex.* 25: Ἐπεὶ δὲ ἤδη πολλοὶ τῶν νοῦν ἐχόντων ὥσπερ ἐκ μέθης βαθείας ἀναφέροντες συνίσταντο ἐπ’ αὐτόν, καὶ μάλιστα ὅσοι Ἐπικούρου ἐταῖροι ἦσαν, καὶ ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἐπεφώρατο ἡρέμα ἢ πᾶσα μαγγανεία καὶ συσκευὴ τοῦ δράματος, ἐκφέρει φόβητρόν τι ἐπ’ αὐτούς, λέγων ἀθέων ἐμπεπλήσθαι καὶ Χριστιανῶν τὸν Πόντον, οἱ περὶ αὐτοῦ τολμῶσι τὰ κάκιστα βλασφημεῖν· οὗς ἐκέλευσε λίθοις ἐλαύνειν, εἴ γε θέλουσιν ἴλεω ἔχειν τὸν θεόν. “When finally many sensible men, recovering from a deep intoxication, united against him, most of all the followers of

As Lucian states, the Epicureans of Amastris were followers of an individual named Tiberius Claudius Lepidus.⁴⁹ Little is known about him except for the fact that he was chief priest of Augustus in Pontos and a supporter of Epicurean philosophy. Later in his work, Lucian recounts an oracle delivered by Alexander to a follower of Lepidus, a man by the name of Sacerdos, who had come to the shrine and consulted the oracle: “and at the conclusion he delivered a response in verse, knowing that he [Sacerdos] was an associate of Lepidus, ‘Put not your faith in Lepidus, for a miserable fate follows.’”⁵⁰ As Lucian explains, Alexander believed Lepidus to be an opponent and critic of his trickery. Lucian indicates that Lepidus was the leader of an Epicurean sect located in Amastris, and he notes that others like him were also numerous in the region.⁵¹

Epicurean sects were known to have maintained intense allegiance to their founder, Epicurus, and his teachings. Their communities were highly organized and utilized epistolary literature to maintain communication with other Epicurean groups

Epicurus, and in all the cities slowly they began to discern all the sorcery and contrivance of the spectacle, he delivered an oracle designed to scare them, saying that Pontos was filled with atheists and Christians, who dared to slander him in the worst ways, and he bid his followers to drive them away with stones, if they wished to have the god in a gracious disposition.”

⁴⁸ Lucian, *Alex.* 25.

⁴⁹ This individual is known from two inscriptions from Amastris, *CIG* 4149 (here, Lepidus is named as chief priest of the Pontos) and *CIG* 4150 (where Lepidus is mentioned in connection with his daughter).

⁵⁰ Lucian, *Alex.* 43: ἐπὶ τέλει δὲ χρησμὸν ἔμμετρον ἐφθέγγετο, εἰδὼς αὐτὸν Λεπίδῳ ἐταῖρον ὄντα· “Μὴ πείθου Λεπίδῳ, ἐπεὶ ἡ λυγρὸς οἶτος ὀπηδεῖ.” πάνυ γὰρ ἐδεδῖει τὸν Ἐπίκουρον, ὥς προεῖπον, ὥς τινα ἀντίτεχνον καὶ ἀτισοφιστὴν τῆς μαγγανείας αὐτοῦ.

⁵¹ Lucian, *Alex.* 25: καὶ ἄλλους ὁμοίους αὐτοῖς πολλοὺς ἐνόοντας ἐν τῇ πόλει.

elsewhere.⁵² As Norman De Witt explains, “Epicurean groups were primarily the cult of the founder and his way of life and only secondarily a system of thought.”⁵³ This means that the emphasis was on the teachings of the founder, Epicurus, and on his method of living. Any devotee of Epicureanism was free to found his own group, but there was an implied understanding that Epicurus himself had discovered the one and only proper way of life and any other leader was but a guide on a path established by the master himself. The doctrines of Epicurus, such as his “Established Principles,” were an important element in Epicurean education, and Epicurus himself produced many tracts, including epitomes of his longer works, to circulate his ideas. Within Epicurean organizations, recruits were led to the knowledge of their doctrines in an atmosphere of mutual respect and honesty, where it was the responsibility of each member to correct one another in their pursuit of happiness. This system of corrective ethics was an important feature of Epicurean interactions with other religious groups with whom they shared their community.⁵⁴

This emphasis on correction must have extended beyond the boundaries of the group, especially when the interests of the community were thought to be at stake. One particular episode, when an unnamed Epicurean sought to expose Alexander’s fraud in the presence of a great crowd of believers, is suggestive in this regard. This Epicurean

⁵² Abraham J. Malherbe, “Self-Definition among Epicureans and Cynics,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition Vol. 3: Self-Definition in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Ben F. Meyer and E.P. Sanders (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982), 46–59.

⁵³ Norman De Witt, “Organization and Procedure in Epicurean Groups,” *CP* 31 (1936): 205–11.

⁵⁴ See Norman W. De Witt, “Epicurean *Contubernium*,” *TAPA* 67 (1936): 55–63.

came up to Alexander and, speaking in a loud voice, claimed that because of a certain oracle of Alexander's, innocent people had been executed. Alexander, indignant about the accusation, ordered those standing by to stone the man or they too would bear the accursed name of Epicureans. The assembled crowd began to throw stones at the man when a prominent citizen stepped in and shielded him with his own body, saving the man from death.⁵⁵

Although the sect's founder Epicurus died around 270 B.C.E., the Epicureans continued to flourish well into the period of the Roman Empire, and indeed into the second century C.E. The widow of the Emperor Trajan, Plotina, was an adherent. During the Antonine period, the Epicurean sect achieved its greatest popularity.⁵⁶ In Oinoanda, one of the smaller towns of Lycia, for example, a prominent citizen named Flavianus Diogenes set up, around 200 C.E., a lengthy inscription that propounded the doctrines of Epicurus. The inscription was erected in a colonnade and ran to over 40 meters in length.⁵⁷ As he explains in the inscription, Diogenes wished to bring the message of salvation to all who passed by in the market place, fellow citizens and strangers, both

⁵⁵ Lucian, *Alex.* 44–45.

⁵⁶ As John Ferguson states, “there is evidence in the Greek world of widespread Epicurean success and missionary activity.” See “Epicureanism under the Roman Empire,” rev. Jackson P. Hershbell. *ANRW* 2.36.4 (1990), 2302.

⁵⁷ “The inscription of Diogenes must have been a wonderful sight when it was first carved—120 or more columns of text stretching for over 40 m., with another parallel range of the same length above that. One wonders how many of his fellow citizens paused to read it from end to end—and what impression it made on them when they did.” See Diogenes of Oenoanda, *The Fragments*, trans. C.W. Chilton (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), xlv.

those already living and those not yet born.⁵⁸ The message was broken into several parts, the largest being the exposition of Epicurean Physics and Ethics. There were also inscribed in a separate band the “Established Principles” of Epicurus, several letters, and other works of the founder of the sect, all presented elegantly for the edification of the pedestrians who passed by. If the original location of the inscription suggested by C.W. Chilton is correct, then it was placed prominently in the center of Oinoanda’s civic space, just off the agora or marketplace. Diogenes and other followers of Epicurus in this period were duty-bound to help spread the message of Epicurus and fight against ignorance and superstition; the colonnade was his personal effort to spread his beliefs in a very public and monumental way. It emphasized his connection to his community and his sense of responsibility for its members and his commitment to their betterment.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Diogenes of Oenoanda, *The Fragments*, xxi. Fr. 2 IV–VI: “Now if only one man or two or three or four or five or six or as many more than that as you wish—but not too many—were in an evil plight I would do all in my power, even calling on them one by one, to give them the best advice. But since, as I have asserted, the great majority are all in common, as in a time of plague, sick with false opinions about things—and their numbers are growing even bigger (for through copying each other one catches the sickness from another like sheep); and since it is right that I should help also those who will come after me (for they too are mine even if they are not yet born) as well as being a kindly act to give assistance to the strangers living amongst us; since then the assistance from my work concerns a greater number I wished by making use of this colonnade to set forth in public the remedies which bring salvation, remedies of which I would say in a word that all kinds have been revealed. The fears that gripped us without reason I have abolished, as to pains some I have utterly eradicated, those that are natural I have reduced to quite small measure, making their severity infinitesimal. . . .”

⁵⁹ On the obligation of philosophers and sophists to improve their communities, see the remarks of G.W. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 27.

The result of many such individuals was that the Epicurean life gained many adherents. Beyond this select group, the appreciation of Epicurean philosophy was widespread throughout Asia Minor and in the Greek East. Glimpses of Epicurean communities can be discerned elsewhere, although little evidence remains. A papyrus fragment, now housed in the Getty Museum, is illuminating in regard to the existence of these communities and, in particular, their books.⁶⁰ The exact provenance of the papyrus letter is not known, but it has been dated to the late second century C.E. and probably came from the Egyptian *chôra*.⁶¹ The letter, which is preserved in fragmentary condition, seems to concern as many as six Epicurean works that the sender of the letter has also sent to his addressee. It is evidence of the continued interest in Epicurean philosophy in the countryside of Egypt in this period and of the important role that Epicurean texts played in transmitting these ideas.

The Epicureans of this period, such as Diogenes of Oinoanda, were active and vigorous. They sought to gain new adherents to their philosophical creed through a variety of methods, including the exchange of books, essential in transmitting their philosophical ideas, and the erection of honorary statues, monuments, and inscriptions, that advertised their austere, rational lifestyle and the philosophical dignity of their communities. This was a particularly fine time to be an Epicurean, and no doubt many were active in their communities and spoke out with the *parrhêsia* that was their right and duty as philosophers.

⁶⁰ James G. Keenan, "A Papyrus Letter about Epicurean Philosophy Books," *Getty Museum Journal* 5 (1977): 91–4.

⁶¹ James G. Keenan, "A Papyrus Letter about Epicurean Philosophy Books," 92.

While the Epicurean sect and its beliefs were characterized by significant long-term continuity, the veneration of Asklepios experienced tremendous change and development during its lengthy existence. Asklepios was both a hero and a healing god. In Homer's *Iliad*, he appears as a mortal man, the 'blameless physician' who learned the art of medicine from the centaur Chiron and passed it onto his sons.⁶² According to many sources, Asklepios was the son of the god Apollo and, like his father, a great healer. Asklepios was even responsible for raising men from the dead, an achievement that, according to the popular legend, provoked Zeus into striking him down with his thunderbolt.

The deified Asklepios was venerated in many places by the late Archaic period, including sanctuaries in Trikka in Thessaly and in Messenia.⁶³ In the Classical period, the sanctuary of Epidauros, established by around 500 B.C.E., grew to become one of the most prominent centers of the cult. Another famous sanctuary center was established in the Classical period on the island of Kos. The Asklepieion on Kos became the center of a school of medicine, whose physicians, organized into a clan called Asklepiadai, were called upon throughout the Greek world in times of crisis, particularly during the Hellenistic period.⁶⁴

⁶² Homer, *Il.* 4.405, 11.518; 4.219.

⁶³ Trikka: Strabo 9.5.17; Messenia: Pausanias 4.31.10.

⁶⁴ Epigraphical evidence for the great demand for their skills is discussed by L. Robert, see, for example, "Inscriptions relatives a des medecins," *Revue de Philologie* (3d ser.) 13 (1939): 163–173, and idem, "Épitaphes métriques de medecins à Nicée at à Tithorée," *Hellenica* 2 (1946): 103–108. See also L. Cohn-Haft, *The Public Physicians of Ancient Greece* (Northampton, MA: Dept. of History of Smith College, 1956), 21–22.

As Alice Walton explains, the earliest form of the cult was the worship of the god and consultation in dreams via incubation in the sanctuary, at first for any purpose, but more and more for issues of health. The existence of this form of temple medicine was widespread from the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. In this early period, there were no medical practitioners attached to the cult, but as the power and fame of the oracle spread, the priests who operated as dream interpreters came to supplement the treatments from their considerable experience. Walton argues that eventually, during the Hellenistic period, the cultic and medical responsibilities were divided up: some priests attending to the performance of rituals, while the other officials devoted themselves to effecting cures through surgical operations, magnetism, drugs, and the application of dogs and serpents.⁶⁵ However, more recent scholars have emphasized that many individuals continued to administer both rituals and medical treatments through the period of the Roman Empire.⁶⁶ It was precisely during the High Empire that the cult enjoyed its greatest fame.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Alice Walton, *Asklepios: The Cult of the Greek God of Medicine* (Chicago: Ares Publications, 1979), 67.

⁶⁶ “Rational healing and spiritual (or psychological) healing existed side by side; the doctors did not castigate the prescriptions of the god or try to attract his patients. What we find easy to forget is that he was their god. Thus, the second century saw a simultaneous resurgence of both rational and irrational healing.” See G.W. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, 70.

⁶⁷ See Emma J. Edelstein and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius; a Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

Lucian does not detail the structure and organization of Alexander's cult, but information known from other cult centers of Asklepios will provide comparanda for the cult of Glykon. The Asklepieion at Pergamon, for example, was similarly popular during the Antonine era, even being honored with inscriptions from emperors and members of the Roman aristocracy. During the reign of the emperor Hadrian the shrine was remodeled and expanded significantly.⁶⁸ It contained all the indispensable elements of any Asklepieion: cult buildings for Asklepios and other gods and heroes, and altars, as well as fountains, sleeping chambers (known as *abaton* or *enkoimeterion*), and rooms for resting and waiting.⁶⁹ Older, Greek sanctuaries also supplied banqueting halls and housing for guests, while Asklepieia from Roman times also featured bath facilities. The sanctuary at Pergamon contained other additional amenities, such as a theater, gymnasium, and library. There was no established order to the architecture or arrangement of these buildings, but rather, significant variation from sanctuary to sanctuary.

Aelius Aristides (117–after 181 C.E.), who visited this shrine of Asklepios in Pergamon for medical treatment in the mid-second century, is the best source of evidence for the activities of these sanctuaries. His *Sacred Discourses* presents a remarkable, unique account of his experiences.⁷⁰ They are, in part, diverse recollections of his life at

⁶⁸ Adolf Hoffmann, "The Roman Remodeling of the Asklepieion," in *Pergamon, Citadel of the Gods: Archaeological Record, Literary Description, and Religious Development*, ed. Helmut Koester (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 41.

⁶⁹ Adolf Hoffmann, "The Roman Remodeling of the Asklepieion," 51–59.

⁷⁰ Aristides, *Orationes*. See also Charles A. Behr, *Aelius Aristides and the Sacred Tales* (Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert, 1968).

various places, including his stays at the Asklepieion at Pergamon in about 145 and thereafter. They also record revelations made to him in dreams by the god Asklepios in the course of his medical treatments. This work is acknowledged to be the most extensive first-hand account of personal religious experiences that survives from any pagan author.⁷¹ For that reason, it provides valuable insight into the visitors to the shrine as well as its cult and medical personnel. As Aristides relates, the individuals found in these sanctuaries were diverse. Many visitors to the sanctuaries and festivals were simply seeking relief for their afflictions. They came to receive treatment from the priests and attendants [οἱ τάξεις ἔχοντες] that inhabited the sanctuaries.⁷² There were also others who visited the shrine with special devotion to Asklepios, or “worshippers” of the god [θεραπευταί]. As Howard C. Kee has demonstrated, Asklepios was the central focus of existence and meaning for individuals and for a stratum of society that consciously and willingly identified itself with the god.⁷³ Individuals like Aristides felt a very personal relationship with the god, to whom he believed he owed his prosperity and well-being. This veneration of Asklepios, however, was never taken to the extreme of excluding other gods in a monotheistic sense. Aristides himself relates in his *Sacred Discourses*

⁷¹ Christopher Jones, “Aelius Aristides and the Asklepieion,” in *Pergamon, Citadel of the Gods: Archaeological Record, Literary Description, and Religious Development*, ed. Helmut Koester (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 66–7.

⁷² Christopher Jones, “Aelius Aristides and the Asklepieion,” 75. See Aristid. *Or.* 48.47; see also 47.13, 55; 47.58, 76; 51.22.

⁷³ Howard C. Kee, “Self-Definition in the Asclepius Cult,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition Vol. 3: Self-Definition in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Ben F. Meyer and E.P. Sanders (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982), 119.

that he received visitations from several other deities to whom he was particularly attached, such as Sarapis, and Zeus, whose local shrine was also prominent in this period, and the child-god Telesphoros, who appeared to Aristides in the form of a muleteer.⁷⁴

The followers of Glykon probably felt a similar sense of personal attachment and commitment to their own Asklepios. This sense of devotion was likely intensified by the presence of a charismatic leader, in this case, the prophet Alexander. Although Asklepieia and cult shrines to Asklepios were not conspicuous for the sense of identification with the group held by its members or visitors, the shrine at Abonouteichos was such a sanctuary and much more—it was also an oracular center and home to a mystery cult. Charismatic leaders of mystery cults commanded great personal loyalty and devotion from their followers.⁷⁵ The existence of these charismatics, who are most common in earlier periods as the itinerant leaders of the *teletai* of Dionysus and the Magna Mater, is not disputed for the period under examination here. In fact, scholars have pointed to such individuals as Apollonios of Tyana and Alexander as evidence of their continued existence and to their importance in the period of the High Empire.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Aristid. *Or.* 51.22.

⁷⁵ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 48–53; and see Chapter 2 above, pp. 41–5 and 61–3.

⁷⁶ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 31–3.

Apollonios, as previously mentioned, established a school and meeting place in the temple of Asklepios at Aigai in Cilicia.⁷⁷ As Philostratos explains, Apollonios had begun his education with the rhetor Euthydemos in Tarsus, but due to the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city, they transferred themselves to Aigai.⁷⁸ The halls of this temple resounded with the philosophy of Plato and others; even Epicurus was discussed in this atmosphere congenial to learning and philosophical contemplation.⁷⁹ As Philostratos explains, however, the teachings of Pythagoras were the central focus.⁸⁰ As such, much of the training given to students must have focused on mystical practices, such as healing rites, initiations, and other rituals.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Philostr. *Vita Apollon.* 1.7. See above, note 36. On the historicity of Philostratos's account and the chronology of Apollonios's stay in Aigai, see Fritz Graf, "Maximos von Aigai. Ein Beitrag zur Überlieferung über Apollonios von Tyana," *JAC* 27/28 (1984–85): 65–73.

⁷⁸ Philostr. *Vita Apollon.* 1.7 (trans. F.C. Conybeare): "Now Euthydemos was a good rhetor and taught him, but although he was fond of his teacher he found the city's atmosphere to be strange and not conducive to philosophy, for nowhere are the people more affected by wantonness, they mock and mistreat everything, and they have more concern for their fine linens than the Athenians did for wisdom. . . . Therefore he transferred his teacher, with the consent of his father, to the town of Aigai, which was nearby and in which he found the serenity favorable to philosophy, a more serious school, and a temple of Asklepios, where the god reveals himself to men. There he discussed philosophy with followers of Plato, Chrysippos, and the peripatetic philosophers. He also attended the discourses of Epicurus, for he did not avoid these either, although it was to those of Pythagoras that he attached himself with inexpressible wisdom."

⁷⁹ Philostr. *Vita Apollon.* 1.7 and 1.13 (trans. F.C. Conybeare): "Therefore he spent time again in Aigai and turned the temple into a lyceum and academy for it resounded with all manner of philosophical discussions."

⁸⁰ On Pythagoreans and Pythagoreanism, see Chapter 2 above, pp. 46–7 and 63–5.

⁸¹ See Peter Kingsley's remarks in *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and the Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), particularly 217–391. He argues, in opposition to Walter Burkert and others, that the Pythagorean tradition not

This same temple to Asklepios is mentioned by Philostratus (170 to 244–9 C.E.) in his *Lives of the Sophists*. He tells us that a certain sophist by the name of Antiochus, from the town of Aigai, was accustomed to spending much time in that temple both because of the dreams visited upon him while incubating there, and because its atmosphere was conducive to philosophical contemplation and discussion.⁸² As mentioned above, it is even possible that Alexander himself and his teacher, “the sorcerer,” as Lucian disparagingly labels him, received training at Aigai. As such, not only would they have learned philosophy but also skills more pertinent to the practical aspects of their vocation: healing, divination, initiation, and the performance of other rites.

If we are to believe that the cult of Glykon was similar to its contemporaries, then the shrine at Abonouteichos was a center for healing and prophecy.⁸³ The veneration of Glykon was an intelligible variation of the Asklepios cult, since the serpent was understood to be an earthly embodiment of the god Asklepios. The cult’s founder, Alexander, had a considerable background in the performance of cult rituals. As the discussion of the cult’s foundation has already indicated, Alexander was quite willing to fashion them to suit his own purposes.

only continued to thrive during the period between the Classical age and its resurgence in the first century B.C.E., but also that in all periods its practitioners were involved with divination, cult practices, and magic.

⁸² Philostr. *Vitae Sophistarum* 568.

⁸³ As Lucian acknowledges, Alexander was often consulted by individuals with medical concerns and did exhibit skill in healing patients, even prescribing his own concoction of bear’s grease. See Lucian, *Alex.* 22.

Alexander himself devised the mysteries of the god Glykon, and therefore they provide a unique window into Alexander's perspective on his own movement as well as on his opponents, the local Epicurean sect. The mysteries were a uniquely important moment in the calendar of the cult, and were an opportunity for the ideology of the cult to be expressed openly for the enlightenment of the initiates. As mentioned above, the mysteries of Glykon and Alexander were held annually during a three-day festival. When the faithful had assembled, the first day began with a public proclamation uttered by Alexander in the role of hierophant:⁸⁴ "If any atheist or Christian or Epicurean has come to spy on our rites, let him leave and let those who believe in the god perform the mysteries properly."⁸⁵ Here again the Epicureans are singled out for exile from the community, in this case, the one created in the mysteries. This time they are reviled in conjunction with other nonbelievers: the Christians and atheists.

⁸⁴ For the cult of Demeter at Eleusis, the hierophant was the high priest who revealed the *hiera* to the initiates at the climax of the rite of initiation into the mysteries. This individual was invested with a tremendous amount of personal religious power, and alone possessed the right to enter the *Anaktoron*, where the holy objects were housed, and to proclaim the holy truce and send out the *spondophoroi*, messengers bearing the announcement of the truce. He was the interpreter of the unwritten, ancestral laws and may have presided over cases concerned with violations of these laws. He had the sole authority to dispense a final and complete initiation to the initiates and to refuse initiation to those he considered unworthy. See George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 229–30.

⁸⁵ Lucian, *Alex.* 38: καὶ ἐν μὲν τῇ πρώτῃ πρόρρησις ἦν ὥσπερ Ἀθήνησι τοιαύτη· "Εἰ τις ἄθεος ἢ Χριστιανὸς ἢ Ἐπικούρειος ἤκει κατάσκοπος τῶν ὀργίων, φευγέτο· οἱ δὲ πιστεύοντες τῷ θεῷ τελείσθωσαν τύχῃ τῇ ἀγαθῇ."

Following this proclamation, there followed immediately a rite of expulsion, as Lucian reports.⁸⁶ Alexander cried out: “Out with the Christians!” The assembled multitude responded: “Out with the Epicureans!”⁸⁷ These rites established the limits of the community of believers and exiled from their presence the nonbelievers, those who did not believe in Glykon and his prophet. The first day established Glykon’s divine pedigree. In dramatic fashion, the god Apollo was born from Leto and Zeus, and then Apollo married the ill-fated mortal Coronis and fathered Asklepios. These dramas cemented the relation between Glykon and his oracular and healing predecessors, Apollo and Asklepios. On the second day, the manifestation of Glykon was dramatized, recalling the events with which Lucian himself was all too familiar and recounts in his own discussion.⁸⁸ As Lucian states, on the third day the dramatic spectacles continued with the presentation of Podaleirios, a son of Asklepios, who joined with Alexander’s mother to sire the prophet himself. Lucian also suggests that this day presented other unions, such as the joining of Alexander with the moon goddess Selene and the union of their daughter with the Roman proconsul Rutilianus. This seems suspiciously like an element of Lucian’s literary license; it seems unlikely that it could have been part of the mysteries as they were performed from their inception. This final day was known as the Day of Torches. A torchlit procession was led by Alexander. Lucian provides no other

⁸⁶ Lucian, *Alex.* 38. The Greek word here, ἐξέλασις, means “a driving out, expulsion.”

⁸⁷ Lucian, *Alex.* 38: εἴτ’ εὐθὺς ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐξέλασις ἐγίνετο· καὶ ὁ μὲν ἡγεῖτο λέγων, “Ἐξω Χριστιανούς,” τὸ δὲ πλῆθος ἅπαν ἐπεφθέγγετο “Ἐξω Ἐπικουρείους.”

⁸⁸ See Lucian, *Alex.* 13–14. See above, pp. 98–102.

details of the meaning of the procession or of the torches. Perhaps it served to assert the god's claim as protector of the city, or perhaps the fire played some greater role that has been left unrecorded.

As Arnold van Gennep, the first anthropologist to explore the rituals accompanying life's transitional stages, has explained, "rites of initiation" into a community are frequently found in the presence of antithetical rites of expulsion.⁸⁹ These rites, as explained by van Gennep, dramatize the passages of life and the cycles of the calendar. They are often accomplished in a three-part process whereby initiates are separated from the group and remain for a time in a liminal state, during which they are 'betwixt and between.' Following this period of liminality, they are incorporated into the group in a new condition or state. In this instance, the ritual of initiation is, in fact, the initiation into a mystery cult. The structure of the rite of passage is modified to accommodate the circumstances: initiation into the mystery cult is the integration into a select group of believers who share special communion with the god.

The message of the initiation is clear: Glykon was a powerful god, the reborn Asklepios and child of Apollo, the great god of healing and prophecy. Alexander was his prophet and a powerful figure in his own right. Their sanctuary was a center of prophecy and a place where the power of the pagan gods was made real for believers. With their believers, they constituted a sacred community. Its enemies, the Epicureans, Christians,

⁸⁹ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 113–4.

and other atheists, were an unwelcome presence in their midst as they could upset the communion established between Glykon and his followers. Therefore they were to be expelled.

Individuals could also be subjected to a kind of personal expulsion from the community established by Alexander's cult.⁹⁰ As Lucian explains, on days when oracles were being dispensed, those who had submitted questions were called up in the order of their submission. As each came forward, the herald would ask if the god had a prophecy for them. If the response came: "To the ravens," then the person was summarily banned from receiving oracles.⁹¹ They had, through their question to the god or some other act or word, secured for themselves his eternal anger.⁹² Moreover, they were expelled from the community. As Lucian explains, "no one would ever receive such a person under their

⁹⁰ As Matthew Dickie has argued recently, like Christianity which was well known to have excluded persons from entry into the catechumenate (and thus into the Church) for a variety of sexual and moral offenses, and for making one's living from a number of entertainment professions, as well as magic-working and astrology, some pagan cults and sanctuaries excluded those whom they considered morally unfit from at least the fourth century B.C.E. See "Exclusion from the Catechumenate: Continuity or Discontinuity with Pagan Cult," *Numen* 48.4 (October 2001): 417–43.

⁹¹ Lucian, *Alex.* 46: εἰ δέ τιτι, προσκαλουμένων κατὰ τάξιν τῶν χρησμῶν - πρὸ μιᾶς δὲ τοῦτο τοῦ θεσπίζειν ἐγίγνετο - καὶ ἐρομένου τοῦ κήρυκος εἰ θεσπίζει τῷδε, ἀνείπεν ἔνδοθεν · “Ἐς κόρακας,” οὐκέτι τὸν τοιοῦτον οὔτο στέγη τις ἐδέχετο οὔτε πυρὸς ἢ ὕδατος ἐκοινώνει, ἀλλ' ἔδει γῆν πρὸ γῆς ἐλαύνεσθαι ὡς ἀσεβῆ καὶ ἄθεον καὶ Ἐπικούπειον, ἥπερ ἦν ἡ μεγίστη λοιδορία.

⁹² Lucian was this very sort of person, if we can take him at his word. He discusses in detail a number of oracular responses that were delivered his questions by the god. The content of his questions left no doubt that he put no credence in the god or his oracle. In one he asked if Alexander—who was famous for his long, flowing locks—was bald. In another, he asked when Alexander would be caught in his deceptions. These disrespectful submissions were, as Lucian explains, the cause of the confrontation that erupted when Lucian went to Abonouteichos. Moreover, Lucian also mentions that there

roof or provide him with fire or water, rather, he was to be driven from place to place as an impious person, an atheist, and an Epicurean—which was their greatest term of abuse.”

were other such individuals who had been harassing the oracle in similar fashion, submitting them under fictitious names. See Lucian, *Alex.* 53–57.

PART 3.3: “I COMMAND THIS: BURN THE TEACHINGS OF THIS BLIND FOOL!”

As we have seen in the preceding section, the conflict that arose between these two groups is understandable in light of their differing ideologies. Alexander’s cult and oracle at Abonouteichos offered the promise of divine guidance to visitors to the sanctuary and divine protection and assistance to all his followers. The sanctuary grew in prominence and power following Alexander’s introduction of Glykon to the shrine. The cult came to exert influence over the sacred landscape of the region and its sacred calendar by means of images of the god and a consciously conducted campaign of propaganda. The cult utilized spectacle, and in particular its high-profile moments, to express their beliefs and their relationships with the other groups with whom they shared the community. These spectacles served to negotiate power relationships between these communities. The Epicureans, hostile to the cult’s claim that the god Glykon offered help to those in need and to the oracle that boasted it foretold future events, attacked the founder and leader of the cult at his public appearances. They also used these highly public events as a forum for expressing their own ideology. They ridiculed and harassed Alexander in public, attempting to reveal the chicanery they saw in the cult and oracle.

As Lucian explains, this conflict between the Epicureans and the followers of Alexander’s cult escalated into sporadic open violence in the town of Abonouteichos, as if an undeclared war was going on between these groups. “In general, the war that

[Alexander] waged war without truce or messengers.”⁹³ This terminology alludes to the traditions associated with sanctuaries and festivals. In Greek culture heralds announced periods of truce during which all hostilities were to temporarily cease. During the sacred truce, pilgrims enjoyed safe passage to and from important festivals and religious centers. Although sacred truces were not always accepted by warring states, they were generally observed and history records only isolated incidents when a truce was violated or refused.⁹⁴ Furthermore, the safety of heralds and pilgrims was always an important concern. Such individuals were regarded as inviolable and it was considered a grave impiety to interfere or attack them. Given this tendency, the state of affairs between the Epicureans and the followers of Alexander was highly volatile; they were not on friendly terms and violence could, and did, erupt between members of these communities. On several occasions Epicurean declaimers were almost killed by Alexander’s followers.⁹⁵

Eventually the conflict between these two groups led to Alexander’s own act of retaliation against his persistent opponents. He burned an Epicurean book, the “Established Beliefs,” in a public act of destruction. For Lucian, this burning of the Epicurean book was the culmination of Alexander’s acts of aggression against the followers of Epicurus. As he states, the hostilities had even developed into open conflict,

⁹³ As Lucian states: “Ὡς δὲ ἄσπονδος καὶ ἀκήρυκτος αὐτῷ ὁ πόλεμος πρὸς Ἐπίκουρον ἦν. The term ἀκήρυκτος describes a condition of enmity between parties in which heralds were not admitted, while the term ἄσπονδος refers literally to a state of affairs between parties in which they were “without regular truce.” See Lucian, *Alex.* 25.

⁹⁴ See Matthew Dillon, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1997), particularly 27–59.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Lucian, *Alex.* 44–45.

but this act was the most worthy of scorn and ridicule of all of Alexander's high-handed deeds.⁹⁶ Lucian recounts the events:

Discovering the "Established Beliefs" of Epicurus, which is, as you know, the finest of his books and contains the precepts of the man's philosophy in summary, he brought it into the middle of the marketplace and he burned it on a figwood pyre, just as if he were burning the man himself, and threw the ashes into the sea.⁹⁷

As he did this Alexander was reported to have spoken saying "I command this: throw the teachings of this blind fool into the fire!"

A close examination of Lucian's description of this bookburning highlights its symbolic aspects. As Lucian tells us, Alexander brought the doctrines of Epicurus into the center of public life in Abonouteichos: the agora.⁹⁸ Here, the actions of Alexander would have the greatest possible audience and impact. He took the book and burned it in a bonfire of figwood, a wood whose use as a burning material carried special connotations. As the *Saturnalia* of Macrobius, written about 400 C.E., states, fig trees were under special protection from the gods, and could signify good or ill omen depending on the circumstances. The black fig, in particular, was a wood that was to be used to destroy materials that were considered polluted or an abomination.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Lucian, *Alex.* 47: "Ἐν γοῦν καὶ γελοιότατον ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἀλεξανδρος·

⁹⁷ Lucian, *Alex.* 47: εὐρῶν γὰρ τὰς Ἐπικούρου κυρίας δόξας, τὸ κάλλιστον, ὡς οἶσθα, τῶν βιβλίων καὶ κεφαλαιώδη περιέχον τῆς τάνδρὸς σοφίας τὰ δόγματα, κομίσας εἰς τὴν ἀγορὰν μέσῃν ἔκαυσεν ἐπὶ ξύλων συκίνων ὡς δῆθεν αὐτὸν καταφλέγων, καὶ τὴν σπινδὸν εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν ἐξέβαλεν, ἔτι καὶ χρησμὸν ἐπιφθεγξάμενος· "Πυρπολέειν κέλομαι δόξας ἀλαοῖο γέροντος."

⁹⁸ Lucian, *Alex.* 47: κομίσας εἰς τὴν ἀγορὰν μέσῃν ἔκαυσεν.

⁹⁹ Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 3.20.2: "Trees which are under the protection of the gods below and of the Averting Deities are called trees of ill omen: they are buckthorn, the red

The use of this special wood in the burning of the Epicurean doctrines should lead us to consider where else such care was taken in the destruction of materials. As Jan Bremmer has explained, scapegoat rituals were a widespread phenomenon in the Greek and Roman worlds.¹⁰⁰ Although there are differences, many features of these rites bear a striking resemblance to the event under discussion here.¹⁰¹ As Bremmer and others have shown, in these rituals the community sacrificed one of its own members who had been marginalized.¹⁰² From among the community, this person was selected and set apart for special treatment. For a time, the chosen individual was treated as a person of great dignity and provided for lavishly at the expense of the state. When the appointed time for the ceremony arrived, the faults and vices of the community were ritually transferred over

cornel, the fern, the black fig, and all that bear a black berry or black fruit, the whitebeam too, the wild pear, the holly, and the thorn and briar; and it is proper that the order be given to burn with these anything monstrous or of ill omen.”

¹⁰⁰ The concept of the scapegoat is known primarily to scholars of religion due its appearance as a rite of purification practiced by the ancient Hebrews. The details of this ritual are discussed in the Hebrew Bible at *Leviticus* 16. See the discussion of this rite by Baruch A. Levine, ed. *Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), especially 99–110 and 250–53.

¹⁰¹ Jan Bremmer, “Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece,” *HSCP* 87 (1983): 299–320. See also Walter Burkert’s comments in *Greek Religion*, 82–84: “To expel a trouble-maker is an elementary group reflex.”

¹⁰² Robert Parker has noted that in Athens, where our evidence is most abundant, the principal form of public purification was the dispatch of scapegoats, and, Parker adds, it was a practice that, although in mentality and symbolism might seem at first to be out of step with our expectations of the classical world, it was likely still taking place in metropolitan Athens (and many other places) in the late fifth century B.C.E. See Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 24.

onto this specially selected individual who thereby became the community's scapegoat. Afterwards, the individual was ritually expelled, sometimes violently, and was to depart, taking with him all of the pollution heaped upon him, never to return.

Many Greek cities were known to have performed this ritual on a regular basis, while the pressure of extenuating circumstances, such as famine, plague, or war, could also become a cause for this rite. The best known was held in Athens annually during the Thargelia. On the sixth and seventh of the month *Thargelion* (May–June), the Athenians honored Demeter and Apollo in this festival. On the first day the Athenians cleansed the Akropolis. Two specially chosen men, perhaps criminals or some other unfortunates, were chosen to be the *pharmakoi*, or scapegoats. The *pharmakoi* were led in a procession out from the city. According to Helladios (third century C.E.), it was the custom in Athens that one of the individuals wore about his neck a wreath of black figs while the other wore white figs. Outside the city the rite of expulsion commenced: the *pharmakoi* were ritually abused. Some sources suggest that the victims were beaten about their genitals with squills or some other wild plants. Finally, the crowd stoned the men to death, their bodies burned on a pyre of wild wood. Sometimes the ashes were scattered into the sea. Similar rites were held in some Ionian cities.

The elimination from the community in scapegoat rituals, as Bremmer explains, started from the very heart of the community. The rite began with a procession that was conducted to the music of a special melody called the 'melody of the wild fig.'¹⁰³ Eventually the procession of the scapegoat led out of the city; sometimes the victim

¹⁰³ Jan Bremmer, "Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece," 313.

would be chased across the border, while in other cases, the scapegoat was stoned to death. In some instances, the person may have been burned on a pyre of “wild” wood, just as Alexander burned the Epicurean doctrines.¹⁰⁴ As Lucian tells us, the ashes of the books were then taken and scattered into the sea, thereby obliterating any trace of their existence. As we have seen, this act, scattering the ashes into water, can be found also in the performance of scapegoat rituals.

An incident reported by Philostratos that concerns Alexander’s famed predecessor Apollonios of Tyana is also worthy of consideration, as it records an incident when the sage himself prescribed a similar rite. As Philostratos recounts in his *Life of Apollonios*, when Apollonios once visited the region of the city of Ephesos, he warned its residents that a plague was taking root in the city.¹⁰⁵ When the inhabitants ignored his predictions and did nothing to prevent its spread, Apollonios departed from the city and traveled about Ionia, coming to stay temporarily in Smyrna. There, he was visited by a delegation from Ephesos who requested that he return to heal their sufferings.¹⁰⁶ When he arrived

¹⁰⁴ Jan Bremmer, “Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece,” 300, 308–13. As Bremmer explains, such woods were later, among the Romans, grouped among the category of unproductive plants: “It was on an *arbor infelix* that the traitor was hung and scourged to death; monstrosities and prodigies were burned on its wood. The idea seems clear. Trees useful for the community could not be used for persons and animals which had situated themselves outside of the community. For the modern city dweller such a distinction has probably lost most of its significance, but in the Middle Ages it was still of great importance, since the unproductive trees, called *mort-bois*, were free to be taken away from the woods.” On this point, see also Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Greek Religion*, 231.

¹⁰⁵ Philostr. *Vita Apollon.* 4.4.

¹⁰⁶ Philostr. *Vita Apollon.* 4.10: Τοιούτοις μὲν δὴ λόγοις ξυνεῖχε τὴν Σμύρναν, ἐπεὶ δὲ ἡ νόσος τοῖς Ἐφεσίοις ἐνέπεσε καὶ οὐδὲν ἦν πρὸς αὐτὴν αὐτάρκες, ἐπρεσβεύοντο παρὰ τὸν Ἀπολλώνιον, ἱατρὸν ποιοῦμενοι αὐτὸν τοῦ πάθους.

again in their city, he called the citizens together and said: “Have courage, because this very day I will put a stop to the illness.”¹⁰⁷ He led the crowd that had gathered to the theater. Nearby, an old beggar, dressed in tattered rags, sat blinking his eyes like a blind man. Apollonios brought the Ephesians around the man and said: “Pick up as many stones as you can and throw them at this enemy of the gods.”¹⁰⁸ As Philostratos reports, the people of Ephesos were astonished at his instructions, for the man was a miserable sight, and began entreating him to have mercy on the old man. Apollonios harangued the crowd, insisting that they stone him and that this act would relieve their sufferings. Finally, some of those who had gathered began to pelt him with stones and, immediately, the old beggar who had seemed to be blind, glared at them with malice and eyes full of fire. The crowd now recognized that he was not an old beggar at all, but a demon, and they proceeded to stone him so thoroughly that the stones were heaped up into a great cairn. When it was done, Apollonios directed them to remove the stones and expose the source of their miseries. Underneath the pile of stones, they found that the form of the man had, in fact, disappeared and in its place was the now slain body of a creature resembling a fierce dog, but equal in size to the largest lion. Having purged the plague, Apollonios departed from the city. Later, a statue of the Averting God, Herakles, was set up above this spot where the creature was slain.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Philostr. *Vita Apollon.* 4.10: “Θαρσείτε,” ἔφη, “τήμερον γὰρ παύσω τὴν νόσον.”

¹⁰⁸ Philostr. *Vita Apollon.* 4.10: “βάλλετε τὸν θεοῖς ἐχθρόν,” εἶπε, “ξυλλεξάμενοι τῶν λίθων ὡς πλείστους.”

¹⁰⁹ On statues of the Averting Gods, see Christopher A. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

As this passage from Philostratos indicates, rituals of purification, expulsion, and destruction were a recognized tool in the repertoire of Apollonios. Here, the old ritual was modified to meet the particular circumstances, but its purpose and spirit remained unchanged. The pollution was removed violently from the community and the natural order restored. Moreover, individuals like Apollonios and Alexander exercised their greatest influence over crowds of believers at critical moments in the life of their communities, when threats like plague, famine, and conflict were poised to rupture their well being.¹¹⁰ As Philostratos explains, it was the role of such individuals to restore order in society when conflict or crisis had arisen.¹¹¹

It would seem, then, that Alexander's burning of the Epicurean book was an attempt to perform a ritual of expulsion by which he might overcome his opponents and demonstrate the impotence of their teachings. The effect of the scapegoat ritual, purging

¹¹⁰ Another, similar, incident is recorded by Philostratos in Book 1 of his *Life of Apollonios*. When Apollonios once came to the city of Aspendos in Pamphylia, he found that there was nothing but vetch for sale in the agora. The inhabitants, in their hunger, had been forced to eat it because rich men had stored away all of the grain for export. A mob had set upon the governor, although he was clinging to statues of the emperor, and were lighting a fire to burn him alive when Apollonios entered into the controversy and saved him. See *Vita Apollon*. 1.15.

¹¹¹ Philostr. *Vita Apollon*. 1.15 (trans. F.C. Conybeare): "Whenever, however, he came upon a city that happened to be in a state of disorder (and many were broken into factions over insignificant spectacles), he would come forward and make his presence known, and by the gesture of his hand or the look on his face he would indicate part of his intended reprimand, he would put an end to all disorder, and the people would hush their voices as if they were performing the mysteries. Well, it is not so difficult to restrain those who have started to argue over dances or horses, for those who are rioting about such matters, should they turn their eyes to a true man, they will blush and restrain themselves and easily come again to their senses; but a city hard-pressed by famine is not so tractable, nor so easily brought to a better disposition by persuasive words. But in the case of Apollonios, mere silence on his part was enough for those so affected."

pollution from the community, was replicated in a new ritual in which the book, the repository of Epicurean wisdom and the symbol of the permanence, power, and impact of their teachings, was purged from the community as pollution or an abomination. Indeed, as Lucian indicates, this act was the greatest of all his deeds against his opponents.

Given the well-known importance of books and writings to the Epicureans of this period, we should not be surprised that Alexander decided to attack this particular aspect of their culture. The care with which they studied and preserved the writings of their founder and the pains to which practitioners, like Diogenes of Oinoanda and many unknown others, put special effort into sharing his writings asserted their relevance and authority to all people. To attack them was to attack the Epicureans directly, in the form of a recognizable but defenseless opponent.

PART 3.4: BOOKBURNING AND EPICUREANISM

Nothing more is known about the conflict between the followers of Alexander and the local Epicurean sect. Lucian provides no further information about the conflict, but Alexander's cult continued to thrive in the East during the third and fourth centuries C.E. Perhaps other episodes of inter-communal violence pitted the proponents of oracles, like Alexander's followers, against the opponents of such superstitions, like the Epicureans and Christians. No specific evidence remains to testify that the Epicureans were engaged in similar confrontations elsewhere, although there is much to suggest that they were. The Christians appear to have been subjected to persecution locally in this same region during the same time.¹¹² Eusebios notes that "very great persecutions again disturbed Asia" during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Indeed, he acknowledges that these were episodes of local violence that enjoyed great popular support.¹¹³ If the Christians could

¹¹² See W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church. A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 268–302.

¹¹³ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.1: ἐν ᾧ κατὰ τινα μέρη τῆς γῆς σφροδρότερον ἀναρριπισθέντος τοῦ καθ' ἡμῶν διωγμοῦ, ἐξ ἐπιθέσεως τῶν κατὰ πόλεις δήμων μυριάδας μαρτύρων διαπρέψαι στοχασμῷ λαβεῖν ἔνεστιν ἀπὸ τῶν καθ' ἐν ἔθνος συμβεβηκότων, ἃ καὶ γραφῇ τοῖς μετέπειτα παραδοθῆναι, ἀλήστου μνήμης ὡς ἀληθῶς ἐπάξια ὄντα, συμβέβηκεν.

be harassed as enemies of the community on religious grounds, it may be possible that the like-minded Epicureans also came to be regarded with a degree of hostility and suspicion due to their so-called atheism.¹¹⁴

The following testimonial, which was recorded in the early third century and purports to give an account of a miraculous healing credited to the god Asklepios, is also suggestive in regard to the continuation of the practice of destroying Epicurean texts by means of fire:

The man Euphronius, a wretched creature, took pleasure in the silly talk of Epicurus and acquired two evils from this: being impious and intemperate.

He did not forget, when in such a wicked state, that shameless and impious treatise which the Gargettian [*sc.*, Epicurus], like an offspring of the Titan brood, inflicted as a blot upon the life of men.

Being grievously afflicted with a disease (the sons of the Asclepiads call it pneumonia), he first besought the healing aid of mortals and clung to them.

The illness was stronger than the knowledge of the physicians.

When he was already tottering close to the brink of death, his friends brought him to the temple of Asclepius. And as he fell asleep one of the priests seemed to say to him that there was one road of safety for the man, and only one remedy for the evils upon him, namely, if he burned the books of Epicurus, moistened the ashes of the impious, unholy, and effeminate books with melted wax and, spreading the plaster all over his stomach and chest, bound bandages around them.

What he had heard he communicated to his friends and they were straightaway filled with excessive joy because he did not come out, disdained and dishonored by the god.¹¹⁵

Although Alexander's immolation of Epicurean books was the first recorded instance of their conscious symbolic destruction, it was certainly not the last. Another priest of Asklepios apparently prescribed it in the century following their first incineration at the

¹¹⁴ On the persecution of the Christians in this period, see Chapter 4 below.

¹¹⁵ Aelian, Fragment 89. See Emma J. Edelstein and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), T 399 (= pp. 200–1).

hands of Alexander. Perhaps his injunction to burn the books was followed after all. As the rest of this testimonial implies, Euphronios followed the instructions and burned his Epicurean books. In this manner he was saved from his illness and lived on as proof of the god's power. As Aelian explains here, a well-known sympathizer or proponent of Epicureanism, who was desperate for a miraculous cure, was advised by the priest of Asklepios that his only possible salvation would come through rejecting Epicurus and burning the books of that man which he possessed. Other desperate patients may have been advised to do the same.

The priest's recommendation prescribed that, having burned his Epicurean books, he was to concoct a plaster from the ashes and melted wax and apply this to his body. By its application, the patient would be relieved of his suffering and return to good health. This technique, utilizing a written text that has been applied to the body as part of a magical/medical treatment, is also known from the Greek Magical Papyri.¹¹⁶ Several magical/medical treatments from the corpus, such as prescriptions for coughs, fevers, headaches, and the sting of scorpions, instruct magicians to inscribe magical formulas on parchment to be worn in bandages on the person.¹¹⁷ In most of these spells, the inscription is preserved within the bandages or worn in a phylactery as permanent evidence of the spell's activation and continued potency. However, one magical procedure that purports to treat migraine headaches instructs the magician to write the magical name of the solar deity ABRASAX (sometimes spelled ABRAXAS) on a scarlet

¹¹⁶ See Hans Dieter Betz, trans., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, including the Demotic Spells, Vol. 1, Texts*. 2d ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹¹⁷ See *PGM* VII.218–21 and VII.579–90 for examples.

parchment followed by a magical symbol and further instructions to “add the usual.”¹¹⁸

The maker of this magical inscription was then directed to render the inscribed parchment into a plaster (by some undefined method, perhaps by burning) and then to apply it to the side of the patient’s head. The same technique was employed in other locations throughout the Roman world; its direct link to the practice of magic is significant. The evidence of the magical papyri corroborates Lucian’s accusations regarding the ultimate background of Alexander’s techniques. As the spell itself indicates, a certain amount of improvisation was left up to the individual operator, just as seems to have been the rule with Apollonios and Alexander. Apollonios of Tyana, in fact, is specifically mentioned in another spell from this corpus.¹¹⁹

In addition to priests of Asklepios who urged that Epicurean texts be destroyed, Aelian himself is known to have recommended that Epicurean books be burned. In a fragment, Aelian suggested that this be done as punishment for a group of Epicureans who had profaned the mysteries at Eleusis.¹²⁰ Aelian (165/70–230/5 C.E.) was another representative of the Second Sophistic who flourished in the generation after Lucian.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ *PGM* VII.201–2; and see Hans Dieter Betz, trans., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, including the Demotic Spells*, Vol. 1, Texts, 331, “ABRASAX”.

¹¹⁹ *PGM* I.262–347.

¹²⁰ Aelian, *Varia Historia Epistolae Fragmenta*. vol. 2, ed. Rudolph Hercher (Graz: B.G. Teubner, 1971), Fr. 39. See also, Aelian, *Epistulae et Fragmenta* ed. Douglas Domingo-Forasté (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1994), Fr. 42a.

¹²¹ Aelian was a declaimer and writer whose mannered style was highly admired in Late Antiquity and who was widely read by Christian writers. His works address a wide range of topics, from a posthumous attack on the emperor Elegabalus, to works investigating the extraordinary in the world of the High Empire.

During the third century C.E., Epicurean works continued to be in free circulation. Literary assaults against the Epicureans, from both pagan and Christian authors, continued to refute their doctrines. As John Ferguson has stated, during the third century, “Epicureanism was still offering a viable alternative and a challenge that was not negligible.”¹²²

However, the symbolic destruction of Epicurean texts that could have begun with Alexander and continued with other similarly inclined persons was also perpetuated in other forms elsewhere. As C.W. Chilton has explained, “about a century and a half after it was set up, the message of Diogenes, which he put up with such feelings of benevolence towards citizens and strangers alike, came to be regarded as both useless and sacrilegious, and before long, it would appear, the very wall on which it was inscribed was destroyed.”¹²³ This grand monumental inscription, which Diogenes erected for the benefit of his hometown of Oinoanda, was torn down around the middle of the fourth century C.E. Christian violence has been suggested as a potential culprit for its destruction. However, the possibility that it had crumbled naturally or that some other group destroyed it should not to be ruled out. “When its fragments were discovered in the nineteenth century it was noticed with surprise that so few turned up in the area where the stoa must have stood, and that most of the blocks were found to have been built into

¹²² John Ferguson, “Epicureanism under the Roman Empire,” 2311.

¹²³ Diogenes of Oenoanda, *The Fragments*, xxvii–xxviii. See above, pp. 110–11.

other structures in different parts of the city.”¹²⁴ Clearly, it was dismantled and its building materials reused in other structures. Its presence in the landscape was obliterated and the memory of its message gradually faded away.

The evidence suggests that it was the triumph of Christianity that brought the Epicurean sect to its final end. Although he attributed it to another cause closer to his own sympathies, the Emperor Julian suggested that they had declined. By the middle of the fourth century he could say in his *Letter to a Priest* (written about 362 C.E.), “Let us not admit Epicurean or Sceptic talk, for by now the gods have deservedly destroyed them so that most of their works have disappeared.”¹²⁵

Conclusions

Although the actual impact of bookburning on the circulation of Epicurean books cannot be assessed from the meager surviving evidence, it is certain that some were burned. Alexander of Abonouteichos was a well-known religious figure of the later second century who was known to have performed this very sort of ritualized purge of the Epicureans and their books. He commanded others to do the same. A priest of Asklepios prescribed their burning for a critically ill patient who had been well disposed towards Epicureanism and possessed copies of Epicurean books. Although the number

¹²⁴ Diogenes of Oenoanda, *The Fragments*, xxvii–xxviii.

¹²⁵ Julian, *Letter to a Priest* 301c (trans. Wilmer Cave Wright).

of texts that were immolated or otherwise destroyed may have been few, the public, ritualized destruction of their texts, such as at the hands of Alexander or as at Oinoanda, must have also contributed to the decline of the prestige of the sect.

Interestingly, the cult of Glykon also seems to have come under siege in this same period. The skillfully executed stone image of Glykon, mentioned above, which was unearthed in Romania at the site of ancient Tomis, appeared to the excavators to have been buried with great care and suggested, perhaps, that the collection had been hidden under duress during an outbreak of intercommunal violence by persons who intended to return for them but never returned.¹²⁶ Their interment has been dated to the third or fourth century C.E. The Christians were also suggested as the reason the owners of these religious sculptures decided to conceal them so carefully. Here too, violence, or at least the perceived threat of violence, worked to drive the group underground and out of view, and eventually, out of existence.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ The authors offered several hypotheses for the collection's interment. The exclusively religious character of the 24 items in the deposit clearly suggested that they were not part of a private collection of artwork, but rather must have derived from a religious context. Many of the sculptures show signs of damage, perhaps inflicted during the siege of Tomis in 269 C.E. by the Goths. They may have been buried in order to protect them from further damage or profanation following the destruction of some local temple or temples where they were housed. It is also possible, as the authors suggested, that local pagans deposited the collection later, perhaps during the fourth century C.E., during a period of "acute antagonism" between pagans and Christians. See V. Canarache, A. Aricescu, V. Barbu, and A. Rădulescu, *Tezaurul de Sculpturi de la Tomis* (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1963), 154.

¹²⁷ As the article by Marjeta Šašel Kos argues, while other snake cults continued to exist in the Balkans region for centuries, they do not appear to be connected to the cult of Glykon, which seems to disappear at some time during the fourth century. See Marjeta Šašel Kos, "Draco and the Survival of the Serpent Cult in the Central Balkans," *Tyche* 6 (1991): 184–92.

As this chapter has indicated, bookburning came to be employed by the period of the High Empire as a form of symbolic destruction for at least some pagans in the Roman Empire. Epicurean books were burned and priests associated with the cult of Asklepios prescribed their immolation. The intention of their destruction seems to have been to discredit Epicurean doctrines and hamper the circulation of their texts. Within this context, bookburning came to be employed as an instrument in a much broader ideological conflict between the followers of Alexander and the local Epicurean community.

CHAPTER 4

PERSECUTION AND BOOKBURNING IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

As discussed in the previous chapter, one particularly vigorous group within the Graeco-Roman religious milieu came to employ bookburning as a method of ritualized destruction in a local conflict by the late second century. Why this occurred is reasonably clear: the deep-seated notion that the victim's ideas enshrined in his writings, just as the presence of his followers within the community, represented a danger, a contagion, whose ultimate effect would be to disrupt the *pax deorum*, made it necessary that they be destroyed. The method, public immolation, was rooted in traditional Greek and Roman conceptions of pollution and expiation. As scapegoats had been driven in times past from cities to renew the good will of the gods, followers of cults or philosophies that were regarded as antisocial or atheistic, and thus a danger to the community, were attacked, expelled, and murdered. The books of these groups came to be burned in such spectacles as awareness of the role of texts in the diffusion of religious and philosophical ideas developed. This phenomenon is also evident in episodes of religiously inspired violence against Christians in the Roman world, which will be explored in the following pages.

This chapter begins with an examination of a local persecution of Christians nearly contemporary with the episode of religious violence discussed in Chapter 3. The martyrdoms that occurred at Lugdunum in 177 highlight the general circumstances in

which the Christians came to be victims of religious persecution in this same period.

Almost all of the episodes of violence that occurred from the early first century through the mid-third century originated in the context of intercommunal conflicts between rival religious communities. Such purges were often brought on by epidemic, war, or other disasters that directly affected the community or the empire at large. As at

Abonouteichos, the groups involved in these conflicts were ‘active’ in the sense that they were assertive in advertising their religious beliefs, eager to make an impact on their community, and concerned that religious issues could adversely affect relations with the gods and society at large.¹ Moreover, the symbolic vocabulary employed by the aggressors in their treatment of the Christians, living and dead, exhibits important similarities to the pattern of ritualized destruction already under consideration.

Thereafter, our discussion turns to the institutional developments and the evolution of a textual culture within the Church through the mid-third century. In this period, as the Church grew and spread throughout the empire, sacred texts came to play many roles for Christians in their religious practices and in their efforts to account for their faith. However, at first these books were not a concern to the local persecuting authorities. By the mid-third century, however, the impetus for persecuting the Christians had passed from the parties who urged local officials to take action to the imperial government itself. During the late third century, some emperors attempted to enact more severe and thorough measures against the Church in order to force Christians

¹ On ‘active’ cults see Chapter 3 above, p. 106. See also David Potter’s review of *Pagans and Christians* in *JRA* 1 (1988): 207–14, and *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

into compliance with Roman religious practices and eliminate the teachers and places of worship that sustained ordinary Christian believers, but Christian books were never burned in this period.

An examination of the Great Persecution follows. This was the final period during which the Roman imperial government took an active part in suppressing Christianity, which it did as part of a policy aimed at restoring traditional religious practices. Nevertheless, the role played by others, particularly philosophers, other intellectuals, and oracles in pushing for these further measures will be considered. As in previous episodes of persecution, numerous persons died at the hands of mobs and magistrates, but it was only during this persecution that Christian books were targeted by authorities and destroyed in public conflagrations. Here, bookburning became an important element of an empire-wide effort to purge Roman society of Christianity, especially during the first phase, which lasted from 303 to 305. Since the surrender of Scriptures, or *traditio*, came to be regarded by Christians as a grievous offense in the aftermath and helped to germinate the Donatist schism in North Africa, detailed records of many cases of bookburning were preserved for posterity. These sources, as well as other sources of evidence for the burning of the Christian Scriptures, reveal that the authorities had come to recognize the importance of these texts to Christianity and viewed their public destruction by fire as a suitable and traditional method by which to remove them.

PART 4.1: THE MARTYRS OF LUGDUNUM AND VIENNA

While in Asia Minor the cult of the serpent-god Glykon was achieving its greatest renown and impact, in the West, in Gaul, Romano-Gallic paganism was also in ascendancy. Lugdunum (modern Lyons) was, “provincial boundaries notwithstanding, the virtual capital of the Three Gauls under the High Empire.”² It was a busy commercial center and the location for many important Graeco-Roman religious observances. An altar of Rome and Augustus had been established by Claudius Drusus, brother of the future emperor Tiberius, on 1 August 12 B.C.E. at Condate, northwest of the original settlement overlooking the confluence of the Saône and Rhône Rivers.³ Over the following centuries the sacred precinct at Condate grew to become a “magnificent showplace of Mediterranean-style art and architecture,” including a monumental, marble-faced altar adorned in gilt letters with the names of the Gallic states, numerous statues, a temple to the deified emperors constructed during the reign of Hadrian, and an amphitheater.⁴ Each year, representatives of perhaps as many as sixty *civitates* throughout Gaul and Germany gathered together there to select the high priest, the

² J.F. Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul: The Three Provinces, 58 BC–AD 260* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 21.

³ J.F. Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 111.

⁴ J.F. Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 113.

sacerdos Romae et Augustorum, who officiated at the ceremonies demonstrating pan-Gallic loyalty to the empire and the Roman gods.⁵ The gathering was a time of heightened religious enthusiasm; great crowds were known to have come together to witness the religious spectacles and participate in the general mirth making and merriment accompanying this festive occasion in honor of the imperial cult.

The reign of Marcus Aurelius (161–180 C.E.), was a difficult one for the Roman Empire. After nearly two centuries of tremendous prosperity and peace, known as the *pax Romana*, the empire was beset by serious problems. The Romans were engaged in expensive, protracted, and largely inconclusive wars on their frontiers, including the Marcomannic Wars of 166/7–175 and 177–180, fought along the entire length of the Danube River.⁶ A terrible epidemic, the ‘Antonine plague,’ broke out in 165 among the eastern army led by then co-emperor Lucius Verus and continued to rage all over the empire throughout Marcus’s reign.⁷ Authorities took practical steps to curb its spread, but religious rites played important roles in confronting the plague as well.⁸ The actions

⁵ J.F. Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 111.

⁶ Of the Marcomannic Wars, Theodor Mommsen stated: “The war was more significant and rich in repercussions than perhaps any other. It was in fact here that the die was cast—from then on the Roman Empire was in decline. Although the Empire was already old after Trajan, it was still not decrepit. But the war marked the beginning of the end.” See Theodor Mommsen, *A History of Rome under the Emperors*, ed. Thomas Wiedemann, trans. Clare Krojzl. (London: Routledge, 1996), 316.

⁷ According to many scholars, the plague was yet another serious blow to the stability and prosperity of the empire during Marcus’s reign. See the comments of J.F. Gilliam, “The Plague under Marcus Aurelius,” *AJP* 82 (1961): 225–51.

⁸ The ‘service providers’ were under pressure to be seen to act when an epidemic struck, enacting practical measures to reduce its effects and to identify its source and seek to end

of the emperor suggest that, just as had been the practice during earlier outbreaks of epidemic in the Roman world, authorities sought to mitigate the plague, in some cases by the use of traditional ceremonies and appeals for a communal return to ancient customs, while in other cases by the introduction of religious innovations or the importation of foreign cults or rites. In 167 or early 168 the emperor revived the *lectisternium*, a sacrificial feast in honor of the gods, and held this traditional rite during a festival lasting seven days.⁹ As the plague persisted, Marcus Aurelius also endeavored to revive traditional worship of the gods, but our sources provide no further information about how he attempted to do this.¹⁰

it through religious rituals. See J.E. Atkinson, "Turning Crises into Drama: The Management of Epidemics in Classical Antiquity," *Acta Classica* 44 (2001), 37.

⁹ See *Hist. Aug., Vita Marci Antonini* 13.1–4: "So great was the dread of the Marcomannic war, that Antoninus summoned priests from all sides, performed foreign religious ceremonies, and purified the city in every way, and he was delayed thereby from setting out to the seat of war. The Roman ceremony of the feast of the gods was celebrated for seven days. And there was such a pestilence, besides, that the dead were removed in carts and wagons." Excerpted from *Scriptores historiae Augustae*, trans. David Magie. Loeb Classical Library. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921–1932, repr. 1967–1968). The author of the biography of Marcus Aurelius attributed the revival of this ceremony at this time to the war. However, most scholars believe that the application of this rite was more likely a response to the epidemic. See, for example, Paul Keresztes, *Imperial Rome and the Christians from Herod the Great to about 200 A.D.* (New York: University Press of America, 1989), 149–50. As J.E. Atkinson explains of this rite, the *lectisternium* was introduced into Rome as a "desperate measure" to stop the epidemic that struck the city in 399 B.C.E., and was employed again for the same purpose in 364. Ritual dramas, like the *lectisternium*, served to bind the community together in a collective response to major epidemics: "When practical measures did not avail, religious ritual offered a form of collective response to the manifestation of divine displeasure or ill-temper." See J.E. Atkinson, "Turning Crises into Drama," 45. See also H.H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 20–1.

¹⁰ *Hist. Aug., Vita Marci Antonini* 21.6.

Imperial measures against the plague were paralleled by efforts taken locally. “Even when a plague [was] widely spread or pandemic, it [was] responded to at the local level as a series of discrete incidents.”¹¹ Some cities consulted oracular centers. As noted in Chapter 3, the period of the mid-second century witnessed a flowering of activity at these shrines throughout the Roman world, but particularly in Asia Minor. Many of the responses surviving in literature and from inscriptions indicate that religious solutions were given to many queries, and that in this period they were keen to address questions of cult, philosophy, and theology.¹² Residents of Caesarea Troketta in Lydia, Hierapolis in Phrygia, and other cities in Asia Minor consulted oracles, such as that of Apollo at Klaros, which prescribed lustrations, fumigations, and holocaust sacrifices be performed, and that citizens erect statues of Apollo to avert the plague.¹³ To the Hieropolitans, as to other cities, the oracle urged the citizens to placate the enraged gods.¹⁴ Although the oracle did not identify the exact reason for the anger of the gods, its

¹¹ J.E. Atkinson, “Turning Crises into Drama,” 51.

¹² See Chapter 3 above, p. 101.

¹³ See J.E. Atkinson, “Turning Crises into Drama,” 50–1. Five examples of oracular responses connected to the Antonine plague are presented in H.W. Parke, *The Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 150–7. See also Zsuzsuanna Várhelyi, “Magic, Religion, and Syncretism at the Oracle of Claros,” in Sulochana R. Asirvatham, Corinne Pache, and John Watros, eds., *Between Magic and Religion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 13–31.

¹⁴ As Parke records the oracle delivered to the delegation from Hierapolis, the incomplete text begins: “. . . But you are not alone in being injured by the destructive miseries of a deadly plague, but many are the cities and peoples which are grieved at the wrathful displeasures of the gods. The painful anger of the deities I bid you avoid by libations and feasts and fully accomplished sacrifices.” See H.W. Parke, *The Oracles of Apollo*, 153.

response indicated that the epidemic had come about as a consequence of divine anger and it was necessary to renew the *pax deorum*. Measures taken by the imperial government and by local officials indicate that religious rituals provided an important outlet to the emotional hysteria brought on by the plague's destruction.

By the second century C.E., Lugdunum had come to be home to many emigrants from the eastern parts of the empire. They brought with them their own cults, such as Cybele, the 'Mother of the Gods,' and Christianity. Thus, like many large population centers throughout the Roman Empire, the city hosted a wide spectrum of religious communities and associations. It had become a plural society.¹⁵

Among its many residents, the Christian community had, in this period, grown to numbers significant enough to draw the attention of the local populace and civil officials. The incidents under discussion below are the first glimpse of the community; its foundation and earlier development are a matter of speculation. In the account of Eusebios the Christians appear to have established small communities in some of the

¹⁵ On the Roman Empire as a plural or pluralist society, see the Introduction, pp. 18–9, and see also John A. North, "The Development of Religious Pluralism," in *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, eds. Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak, 174–93. (London: Routledge, 1992); and Jan Platvoet, "Ritual in Plural and Pluralist Societies: Instruments for Analysis," in *Pluralism and Identity. Studies in Ritual Behaviour*, eds. Jan Platvoet and Karel van der Toorn, 187–226. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995).

cities and towns along the banks of the Rhône River, such as at Lugdunum and Vienna. However, these communities were, as yet, loosely organized and had not established a monarchic episcopate.¹⁶

Eusebios, whose record provides much of the known details, based his account on copies of letters sent to the churches of Asia and Phrygia by the churches of Vienna and Lugdunum describing the episode. There is no mention of the events that led up to the moment when the persecution of Christians erupted. However, it is likely that the persecution took place around the time of the Gallic council, when the city was filled with the crowds described in the account.¹⁷ The difficulties of the times may have contributed to the rise in tensions between the Christians and their neighbors that precipitated this purge.

As W.H.C. Frend observed, the conflict between the general population and the Christian community began with the Christians being “subjected to a series of social and semi-religious sanctions as though they were polluted persons.”¹⁸ Among these

¹⁶ Although often erroneously identified as the first bishop of Lugdunum, Ponthius was not a bishop. Rather, he was leader of the community in the time before it had come under the direction of a titled, monarchic bishop and was entrusted with “the ministry of the superintendence” (τὴν διακονίαν τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς). Irenaeus was the city’s first bishop. On the historical development of the Gallic churches, see the discussion of Frank D. Gilliard, “The Apostolicity of the Gallic Churches,” *HTR* 68 (1975), 24.

¹⁷ See below, p. 156, n. 34.

¹⁸ W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church. A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 6. The exact date of the incident has been a matter of contention among scholars. The traditional date of 177 is derived from Eusebios, who dates the persecution to the seventeenth year of the reign of Marcus Aurelius. However, it is not impossible that these events could have occurred at a slightly earlier or later date during the emperor’s reign. See T.D. Barnes, “Eusebios

sanctions, the Christians were prohibited from entering and using public spaces such as the baths and marketplaces.¹⁹ Some Christians were harassed and attacked in public by zealous antagonists, and others were even stoned to death in the streets. Eventually, as the violence continued to escalate, a number of Christians were dragged into the marketplace to be interrogated by city officials. Many readily confessed their belief and were imprisoned pending the arrival of the governor.

When they were brought before the governor and were undergoing their public interrogations, a local aristocrat, identified as Vettius Epagathus, intervened and asked to speak in defense of the Christians. He was immediately questioned and, when he too confessed, was placed with the other avowed Christians. Among the rest, many were ready to confess their beliefs and did so, while about ten among them did not. Although they had denied Christ they were imprisoned with the others. These individuals who had not made their confessions were a cause of great distress to the Christians, who feared that they might ultimately be freed as examples to others. They also feared that their

and the Date of the Martyrdoms,” in *Les Martyrs de Lyon (177)*. Colloques Internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, no. 575. (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1978), 137–43.

¹⁹ Eusebios, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.4: “The greatness of the tribulation in this region, and the fury of the heathen against the saints, and the sufferings of the blessed witnesses, we cannot recount accurately, nor indeed could they possibly be recorded. For with all his might the adversary fell upon us, giving us a foretaste of his unbridled activity at his future coming. He endeavored in every manner to practice and exercise his servants against the servants of God, not only shutting us out from houses and baths and markets, but forbidding any of us to be seen in any place whatever.” Unless noted, excerpts from this source are taken from Eusebios’s *Church History*, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2d ser., vol. 1. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, repr. 1997).

apostasy would inhibit other would-be martyrs from being eager to make their own professions of faith. In the days that followed many other Christians were arrested on the orders of the governor. All those who confessed were also imprisoned so that, as Eusebios notes, all the most zealous Christians from Lugdunum and Vienna were taken into custody. The grand total of those arrested has traditionally been numbered to forty-eight persons.

Civil authorities also arrested some number of non-Christian slaves from these households. These individuals, under threat of torture, accused their masters of engaging in “Thyestean banquets and Oedipodean intercourse,” that is, they charged that the Christians engaged in acts of ritual cannibalism and incest during their secret rites.²⁰ Although the magistrates may not have given much credence to these charges, the reaction of the general populace was altogether different.²¹ When the charge was made

²⁰ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.14–16: “And some of our heathen servants were also seized, as the governor had commanded that all of us should all be examined publicly. These, being ensnared by Satan, and fearing for themselves the tortures which they beheld the saints endure, and being also urged on by the soldiers, accused us falsely of Thyestean banquets and Oedipodean intercourse, and of deeds which are not only unlawful for us to speak of or to think, but which we cannot believe were ever done by men. When these accusations were reported, all the people raged like wild beasts against us, so that even if any had before been moderate on account of friendship, they were now exceedingly furious and gnashed their teeth against us. And that which was spoken by our Lord was fulfilled: ‘The time will come when whoever kills you will think that he is doing a service to God.’ Then finally the holy witnesses endured sufferings beyond description, Satan striving earnestly that some of the slanders might be uttered by them also.”

²¹ Like many issues of the persecutions, this is still a matter of scholarly debate. L.F. Janssen insisted that it seemed “utterly improbable that Roman magistrates took this charge seriously,” see “‘Superstitio’ and the Persecution of the Christians,” *VC* 33 (1979), 154. See also A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 696–7.

known throughout the vicinity, the suspicion that the Christians endangered the community by their impious rites was confirmed and the people turned against their Christian neighbors and kinsmen with increasing violence and hatred. The fate of Ponthius, the feeble, ninety-year-old leader of the Christian community of Lugdunum, who was dragged before the tribunal from his prison cell, is illustrative of the hardening sentiments of the local inhabitants.²² When he was brought before the governor and civil officials to be interrogated, the whole populace of the city also attended, jeering and shouting at the man. When the governor asked him “Who is the God of the Christians?” Ponthius responded defiantly, “If you are worthy, you will know.”²³ Thereupon, the crowd seized him and “he was dragged away harshly, and received blows of every kind. Those near him struck him with their hands and feet, regardless of his age; and those at a distance hurled at him whatever they could seize; and all thinking that they would be guilty of a great wickedness and impiety if any possible abuse were omitted. For thus they thought to avenge their own deities.”²⁴ Beaten and barely breathing, he was imprisoned, where he died two days later, becoming one of the first casualties of this persecution.

Many of the Christians were tortured during their imprisonment in an attempt to elicit confessions from them, as Eusebios describes in detail. Sanctus, a deacon of the church of Vienna, was one of many who were tortured repeatedly. As Eusebios explains,

²² Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.

²³ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.30–1.

²⁴ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.31.

. . . wicked men hoped, by the continuance and severity of his tortures to wring something from him which he ought not to say, he girded himself against them with such firmness that he would not even tell his name, or the nation or city to which he belonged, or whether he was a slave or free, but answered in the Roman tongue to all their questions, ‘I am a Christian.’²⁵

When the governor and his torturers could devise no other instruments by which to assail him, they heated copper plates in a fire and pressed them “to the most tender parts of his body.”²⁶ This was only one of the many forms of torture and other brutalities the Christians suffered, according to the account of Eusebios, so that, like Sanctus, they were “one complete wound and bruise, drawn out of shape, and altogether unlike a human form.”²⁷ As he describes, those who had denied Christ were also tortured during their imprisonment.²⁸ These torments were so ferocious that many of the apostates, like a woman named Biblis, recanted their denials *in medias res* and asserted that they were truly Christians before they died.²⁹ Many of those who had been imprisoned perished there not only because of the tortures they endured, but also due to the inhumane conditions within the prison.³⁰

²⁵ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.20.

²⁶ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.22.

²⁷ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.23: τὸ δὲ σωματίον μάρτυς ἦν τῶν συμβεβηκότων, ὅλον τραῦμα καὶ μώλωψ καὶ συνεσπασμένον καὶ ἀποβεβληκὸς τὴν ἀνθρώπειον ἔξωθεν μορφήν.

²⁸ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.11–12, 5.1.25–6, 5.1.33–4.

²⁹ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.46.

³⁰ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.27–8.

The interrogations and tortures that the Christians were subjected to were not merely judicial formalities, but were the first of a whole series of spectacles in which the authority and power of the Roman government was made manifest.³¹ These trials were commonly conducted in a public setting. The presence of the Roman governor and other civil and military officials, who orchestrated the proceedings and pronounced the sentences, affirmed the state's role in dispensing justice and restoring public and social order. At the trials, crowds of citizens attended to witness the proceedings and to take part in their own way.

The survivors were eventually delivered to the amphitheater where their deaths became a second spectacle, this one performing religious and social functions for the community. The Christians who possessed Roman citizenship were presented to the governor at the beginning of the proceedings. After again being examined they were beheaded, a form of capital punishment regarded as humane and reserved for Roman citizens.³² Many of the Christians, however, were non-citizens, probably recent transplants from the eastern part of the empire, as evidence suggests.³³ As non-citizens, their fate was to be tortured and killed in the arena to the horror and delight of the multitudes that assembled daily to witness the spectacles. These special exhibitions were

³¹ See David Potter, "Martyrdom as Spectacle," in *Theater and Society in the Classical World*, edited by Ruth Scodel. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 53–4.

³² Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.47.

³³ Among the individuals described in Eusebios' account is a man named Attalus, described as a "pillar" of the church in his native Pergamon, and Alexander, a physician from Phrygia. Attalus: Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.17; Alexander: Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.49.

arranged to occur during the *concilium Galliarum* at which their torture and execution substituted for various regular gladiatorial spectacles provided by the priests.³⁴ When they were brought into the arena, the Christians were met by shouts of curses from the crowd.³⁵ At these trials, their sentiments played a decisive role in the proceedings, the crowd demanding individual Christians by name be brought forth to undergo tortures, while sending others back to their cells to await later torments.³⁶ Some were compelled to pass through a gauntlet of whip-wielding gladiators according to local custom; others were forced to sit in a red-hot iron chair upon which they were roasted alive. Of course, following these other torments, the Christians were ultimately driven before the wild beasts. Each morning several from among the condemned were brought from the prison to appear within the amphitheater or witness the proceedings; each evening some of them returned to the prison, while others did not, having met their ends within its walls. Last among the victims were a Christian woman, Blandina, and a boy of fifteen years named Ponticus, who had been held over for the final day of the games.³⁷ On each day, they,

³⁴ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.40. See also James H. Oliver and Robert E.A. Palmer, “Minutes of an Act of the Roman Senate,” *Hesperia* 24 (1955): 320–49. The authors analyze the epigraphical evidence of a senatorial decree, the *senatus consultum de pretiis gladiatorum minuendis*, which has survived in two inscriptions. It clarifies the circumstances under which criminals sentenced to death, like the Christians, could be used as substitutes for gladiators in this period. As the authors state, by this *senatus consultum*, the upper classes were provided with “cheap victims for spectacles which they as priests of the *consilium Galliarum* had to give at Lyons.” See p. 324.

³⁵ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.3–61. See also Paulus, *Sententiae* 5.23.16.

³⁶ See, for example, Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.43, where the spectators demand Attalus by name.

³⁷ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.53–6. On Blandina’s role as the culminating scene in the theatricalized executions of the Christians, see Brent D. Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” *P&P* 139

like others, had been brought in to witness the torture of those in the arena and every effort was made to compel them to renounce their faith. As they had held firm in the face of repeated castigation, the crowd had little pity for them when they finally made their appearance. They, like their predecessors, were subjected to a series of torments in the arena before the crowd. Following the death of Ponticus, Blandina was put in a net and thrown to a bull, which tossed her about and gored her until she too succumbed to her wounds.

The abuse undergone by the Christians in the process of their imprisonment and executions, shocking and gratuitous as it may have been, was only a prelude to the mistreatment endured by their corpses as the spectacles continued. The remains of those who had died in prison had been thrown to dogs.³⁸ With these mangled remains, they cast the bodies of those victims who had perished at the hands of the executioner and in the arena, so that the heads and torsos and other parts lay jumbled all together.³⁹ Night and day, a watch was placed over them so that they could not be buried by their families. These bodies were left unburied for six days as their persecutors came out to see them, to mock their fates, and to glorify their own gods, as Eusebios relates.⁴⁰ At last they were

(May 1993): 3–45. This article highlights the fact that women were generally reserved for the finale of the games. For Shaw's comments on the martyrdom of Blandina, see particularly pp. 17–9.

³⁸ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.59.

³⁹ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.59–63.

⁴⁰ Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.59–60.

burned and the ashes were scattered into the Rhône River.⁴¹ As Eusebios' account notes, it was the intention of the pagans to deny the Christians their hope of a resurrection by the mistreatment of their corpses.⁴² It was meant to convey the explicit message that the pagan religion had triumphed over Christianity.

The persecutors followed a now-familiar pattern in the course of destroying the Christians. The trials and executions of the Christians served as events that affirmed the power of the gods and the authority of the state to dispense justice and punishment, therefore they were held in public settings and during events where they might be witnessed by the greatest number of people. As the fury of the torturers, executioners, and wild beasts was unleashed upon the bodies of the convicted, the power of the Roman state to impose and maintain order was visibly and unequivocally demonstrated to the masses. These torments continued even after death. The remains of the dead were mistreated and exposed to public humiliation. Ultimately, their bodies were burned and the ashes were dumped into the river. The incineration destroyed the last remnants of their bodies and, by depositing them in the Rhône, any evidence of their existence was washed away in its running waters.

⁴¹ See Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.62–3.

⁴² Eus. *H.E.* 5.1.63. “Treatment of corpses remained one of the means by which men could hurt, humiliate, or honor one another, express contempt or respect.” See Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 46. On the official prevention of burial for the martyrs at Lugdunum, see John Helgeland, “Time and Space: Christian and Roman,” *ANRW* 2.23.3 (1980), 1285–1305, at 1293–4. The author suggests that, although it is clear that, at least in part, this act was intended to inflict additional torments on the victims, this act was probably also aimed at preventing the Christian community from developing sacred space in the form of a cemetery.

Because they had refused to acknowledge the power of the Roman gods, the Christians were understood by the pagan community to be atheists whose presence threatened the stability of the *pax deorum*. Additionally, many local pagans were convinced that Christians performed prohibited rites in their secret meetings, such as acts of ritual cannibalism and sexual debauchery. Therefore, the Christians were regarded as a polluting and corrupting influence. Their deaths served to expiate and purge the community from the threat of contamination they represented. Moreover, the spectacle served to affirm the potency of the Roman gods and state in a dramatic and symbolic fashion.

Beyond the evidence presented by Eusebios indicating that the Christians were considered a threat to the *pax deorum* by those who persecuted them, Celsus's *True Doctrine*, written during the 170s, provides contemporary evidence for the critical opinion many Romans had of Christianity at this time. This work was a notable part of a growing body of literature that attacked Christian beliefs, which included a treatise by Fronto, who had been tutor to Marcus Aurelius, and later, other works by the philosopher Porphyry of Tyre and the emperor Julian.⁴³

Celsus's treatise no longer exists, but can be reconstructed from the refutation composed by Origen, which contains extensive quotation from his composition.⁴⁴ Celsus was a philosopher who lived during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and was "a defender of

⁴³ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). On Porphyry's anti-Christian writings, see below, pp. 191–97.

⁴⁴ See Origen. *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

the old order and its religious values.”⁴⁵ He was among the first to recognize that Christian writings were missionary texts, religious propaganda whose goal was to spread Christian beliefs, and consequently he attempted to point out the inconsistencies and contradictions in them. He argued that they were filled with fabrications and scurrilous stories that were fit only for children and simpletons.⁴⁶ At the heart of his opposition to Christianity was his belief, shared by many at this time, that each people should adhere to the religious practices of their ancestors and should not embrace innovations or foreign superstitions.⁴⁷ For Celsus and many other Romans, Christianity was exactly that, a barbaric novelty whose followers had rejected reason and tradition.⁴⁸ To do so jeopardized society itself.⁴⁹ By choosing to worship only the Christian God, they had

⁴⁵ R. Joseph Hoffmann, “Introduction,” in Celsus, *On the True Doctrine. A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 33. See also Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 94–5, 115–25; and Marcel Borret, “Celsus: A Pagan Perspective on Scripture,” in *The Bible in Christian Roman Antiquity*, ed. and trans. Paul M. Blowers. The Bible Through the Ages, vol. 1. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 259–88.

⁴⁶ *c. Cels.* 6.34.

⁴⁷ Celsus was also the first anti-Christian writer to call Jesus a magician, see *c. Cels.* 1.68. He also indicated that some Christian sects used books containing magical formulas, see *c. Cels.* 6.40.

⁴⁸ *c. Cels.* 5.25, 8.2.

⁴⁹ *c. Cels.* 8.68.

“cut themselves off from the rest of civilization.”⁵⁰ Celsus believed that those who were unwilling to acknowledge the gods who were the source of the stability and prosperity of society should not be allowed to live.⁵¹

Although he carefully refuted Christian doctrines (about which he demonstrates a considerable knowledge) and advocated capital punishment for those unwilling to renounce them, Celsus made no suggestion that Christian books be destroyed. Nor, in fact, do books appear to have been of any interest to the authorities that prosecuted the Christians at Lugdunum. Punishment was inflicted on the bodies of the offenders. By their torture, humiliation, and death, the sentiments of the community and the power of the Roman state were asserted forcefully. By their exposure after death, further humiliation and profanation occurred, advertising their crimes and punishment. With the burning of their remains and their dispersal into water, the pollution and the threat of contamination were purged and harmony restored.

As we have seen in this section, in the second century Christians were periodically subjected to acts of persecution that attacked their person, subjecting them to public humiliation and violence, which was frequently ritualized and could include the use of fire. However, so far as our evidence permits, there does not seem to have been any incidents where books came to be destroyed as a part of this violence. The following section assesses the intervening years between the late second century and the early

⁵⁰ Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*; trans. Hoffmann, 115. See also *c. Cels.* 5.25.

⁵¹ Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, 122.

fourth century, when Christian books finally came to be burned. The developments in this period, both in respect to the Church and to the persecutions unleashed upon it at this time, will be central to the discussion.

PART 4.2: CHRISTIANITY AND THE PERSECUTIONS

The Christian Church endured numerous persecutions during its first three centuries of existence. The forms of punishment employed in their persecution reflect the understanding that many of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire held about this religion in this period. As with sorcery, divination, astrology, and the other practices discussed in Chapter 1, Christianity came to be regarded as a pernicious superstition whose adherents had rejected religious tradition. By doing so, they had threatened the efficacy of the rites and ceremonies that all members of society were obliged to honor, which cemented the bonds between humankind and the gods, and upon which the stability and prosperity of society was believed to be based. For this reason, Christians who came to the attention of persecuting authorities were arrested and tortured in an effort to compel them to renounce their faith. Those who refused were publicly executed.

Christianity was more than a disparate and diverse collection of adepts, however, it was a dynamic religious movement whose practitioners were keen to spread to others and to gain acceptance in the Roman Empire. The Christian movement was evolving, from a small, persecuted offshoot of Judaism, scattered and divergent in beliefs and practices from community to community, to a network of growing congregations that were well organized and administered by a hierarchy of priestly officials under the direction of a bishop, who was often a well-educated member of the upper classes.

Christians were also beginning to compose the writings that would eventually grow to become a vast body of literature that preached and defended the Christian religion. These developments are important for understanding how, when, and why the Romans came to burn Christian books.

In the formative period of early Christianity (ca. 30–180 C.E.), the Roman government had yet to recognize the role of sacred texts in the Christian religion. Indeed, the Romans do not appear to have perceived Christianity to be a religion distinct from Judaism before the late first century or early second century C.E.⁵² However, sacred texts were even then the most essential elements of the Christian religious life. Although not all Christians were literate, scriptures were prominent in nearly every Christian activity: they were displayed in processions and read aloud to the congregation during worship services, interpreted in preaching and in the instruction of catechumens, and deployed in apologies and for settling internal theological disputes.⁵³ Indeed, the Christian mission was, from its beginnings, “substantially invested in texts.”⁵⁴

⁵² Ralph Martin Novak Jr. *Christianity and the Roman Empire: Background Texts* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 42.

⁵³ Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 99.

⁵⁴ Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 104.

For more than the first hundred years, Christians primarily used the same books as the Jews used in synagogues.⁵⁵ Indeed, for Justin Martyr, a Christian apologist writing in the mid-second century, “the Scriptures” still referred to the Jewish holy books. The difference was that the Christians interpreted the books of the Law and the Prophets in light of Christology and Christian eschatology taught as oral tradition by the apostles and their successors throughout the Roman world.⁵⁶ The transition from oral to written teachings, however, began as early as the mid-first century. By the end of the first century, most of the writings of the canonical New Testament were known to Christians, but there was, as yet, no “New Testament.” In this formative period, a variety of gospel traditions concerning the life and teachings of Jesus were written down and circulated, often independently from each other, and these came to be used along with the Jewish Scriptures. Gradually two or more of these writings began to be used simultaneously by many congregations. There was still a great deal of flexibility in this period with regard to the books used by each community, some rejecting one or more of the gospels that would eventually come to be regarded as canonical, others adding some book or other that would later be excluded.⁵⁷ By the end of the second century, however, the primacy

⁵⁵ Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J.A. Baker. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 63; see also Julio C. Trebolle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible: An Introduction to the History of the Bible*, trans. Wilfred G.E. Watson. (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 236–57.

⁵⁶ Julio C. Trebolle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible*, 237. See also Rowan A. Greer, “The Christian Bible and Its Interpretation,” in James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1986), 110–17.

⁵⁷ Julio C. Trebolle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible*, 238.

of the four gospels had been established. Likewise, Paul's letters, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Apocalypse of John were circulating in various compilations by the end of the first century; by the end of the second, they too were being used in most Christian communities.⁵⁸ Many of these communities even had their own libraries, and production centers began to develop to oversee the manufacture and distribution of Christian texts.⁵⁹

The Roman state's recognition of the many roles played by books in the transmission and practice of Christianity must have developed over time. Most of this process is irrecoverable; however, glimpses are visible, for example, here and there, in the *Acta* and *Passiones* of martyrs.⁶⁰ Some Christians brought their Holy Scriptures to hearings before government officials. A Numidian Christian named Speratus, for example, brought a *capsa* (a box for carrying books) to his arraignment before the proconsul of Africa in the late-second century.⁶¹ When asked what it contained, he

⁵⁸ Julio C. Treballe Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible*, 239.

⁵⁹ See C.C. McCown, "The Earliest Christian Books," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 6.2 (May 1943): 21–31; and more recently, Robin Lane Fox, "Literacy and Power in Early Christianity," in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, ed. Alan K. Bowman and Greg Woolf. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 126–48.

⁶⁰ Although the historicity of many *acta*, *passiones*, and hagiographies have been called into question, their value as social documents for the period in which they were written is considerable. See *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, trans. Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 2–3; Stephen Mitchell, "The Life of Saint Theodotus of Ancyra," *Anatolian Studies* 32 (1982): 92–113; and Frank R. Trombley, *Monastic Foundations in Sixth-century Anatolia and Their Role in the Social and Economic Life of the Countryside*, *GOTR* 30 (1985): 45–59.

⁶¹ See "The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs," in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, trans. Herbert J. Musurillo. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 86–9.

explained, “books and epistles of Paul, a just man.”⁶² It is likely that he intended to make use of them in his defense, although it is certain from the account that this did not occur.⁶³ What happened to these texts after he and his companions were led off to execution is not recorded, but it is possible that, like all of the other possessions of those convicted of Christianity, they became the property of the state, which may have retained them. Roman emperors are known to have maintained archives for important documents, like official correspondences and edicts, and these books may have found their way there, perhaps for future consultation.⁶⁴ Conversely, they may have been destroyed. The implications of both possibilities are tantalizing, but unverifiable.

In addition to actual sacred writings, a growing body of literature was developing that was directed at non-Christians. By the time of the executions at Lugdunum in about 177, several Christians had already taken upon themselves the task of composing a defense of their beliefs, and many others wrote in the following century. These Christian apologists of the second and early third centuries addressed their works to the emperors and, more generally, to non-Christians. Some of them may have even presented

⁶² *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 12. Excerpted from *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, trans. Herbert J. Musurillo, 86–9.

⁶³ More than a century later during the Great Persecution another Christian, Euplus, was granted the opportunity to read from the book he brought before the *corrector Siciliae*. See below, pp. 207–8.

⁶⁴ See Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World (31 BC – AD 337)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 259–72.

emperors with copies of their apologies and petitions on behalf of their co-religionists.⁶⁵ Their works refer frequently to sacred books to make their defense.⁶⁶ Like the other Christian writings already mentioned, the works of the apologists also served as missionary texts. Although it is not necessary to discuss them all, some of the apologists also provide insight into the Christians' use of holy books and what the Roman authorities could have known about them and when.

Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165 C.E.) was born in Samaria of pagan parents. As he explained in his writings, Justin was converted to Christianity from Platonism by reading the prophets in a Christian manner.⁶⁷ He eventually came to Rome and started a school, where Tatian became a student. After the outbreak of the Antonine plague (see above, pp. 141–44), a rival teacher, a Cynic philosopher by the name of Crescens, denounced Justin to the authorities in Rome and he was sentenced to be executed by the urban prefect Q. Iunius Rusticus.⁶⁸ Justin wrote his first *Apology* in Greek about 156–60 C.E., and a second following the death of the martyr-bishop Polycarp of Smyrna. In these writings, Justin not only identified the Scriptures as the means of his own conversion, he

⁶⁵ For example, as early as about 124, when Hadrian was in Greece attending the mysteries at Eleusis, two apologists, Quadratus, a disciple of the apostles, and Aristides of Athens presented the emperor with writings defending Christianity. See Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1988), 35.

⁶⁶ For a thorough discussion of the apologists who wrote in Greek, see Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, *passim*.

⁶⁷ See Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, 57–8.

⁶⁸ Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 19.

also explained that “reminiscences of the apostles” and “Gospels” were read during Christian ceremonies.⁶⁹ Readers of these works would understand that sacred texts were fundamentally important to Christian religious practices and responsible for the conversion of intellectuals schooled in Graeco-Roman philosophy and culture.

Born in Mesopotamia, Tatian received a traditional Greek education in rhetoric before he moved to Rome and became a student of Justin.⁷⁰ Like Justin, Tatian claimed he was led to conversion by reading the Scriptures, which he obliquely referred to as “some barbarian writings, older by comparison with the doctrines of the Greeks, and more divine by comparison with their errors.”⁷¹ His best-known works were his *Oratio ad Graecos* and the *Diatessaron*, a harmony of the gospels. The *Oratio* was a highly polemical address “to the Greeks,” that is, adherents of traditional Hellenic religion, which attacked many commonly held Graeco-Roman religious beliefs, philosophy, astrology, sorcery, and other aspects of Roman culture. In place of traditional religion, he offered Christianity as a philosophically minded way of life (he never mentions Jesus or Christianity by name) better than any among the Greeks. Although he claimed he was converted by reading the prophets, he made little use of the Hebrew Scriptures. Instead, he made numerous allusions and specific quotations from Christian writings, including

⁶⁹ Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.66.3, 1.67.3.

⁷⁰ Eus. *H.E.* 4.29.1.

⁷¹ Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 29–30.3, 35.

the gospels, many of Paul's letters, and the Acts of the Apostles in his address to non-Christians, calling attention to these writings which were becoming an important part of the Christian liturgy and missionary effort.

Not only were apologies being written in Greek in the second century, Latin authors were also beginning to compose defenses of Christianity too, like Tertullian. Writing from Roman Carthage, Tertullian's first works appeared in 197. Many others followed during the next two decades. Although nothing is known about his youth, conversion, or even his death, Tertullian came to be a staunch defender of the emerging Catholic Church early in his career. His *Apology*, which was appropriately constructed like a trial, attempted to defend Christianity from the rumors and charges leveled against the Church. Responding to the argument that the Church was an illegal association, he explained:

We form one body because of our religious convictions, and because of the divine origin of our way of life and the bond of common hope. We come together for a meeting and a congregation. . . . We pray, also, for the emperors. . . . *We assemble for the consideration of our Holy Scriptures. . . . We nourish our faith with holy conversation. . . .*⁷²

No matter what their opinion of Christianity, any reader of the works of this apologist would also be left with little doubt that sacred texts were a source of tremendous authority and inspiration for Christians.

⁷² Tertullian, *Apology* 39. [Emphasis added.] Excerpted from Tertullian, *Apologetical Works*, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, et al. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1950), 98. For such an argument, see *c. Cels.* 8.17.

In spite of the explicit information they contained, it is not possible to determine whether any emperor or other Roman official actually read any apologetic work. Moreover, the fact that some early apologists, like Justin Martyr and Tertullian, appealed to the Jewish Scriptures rather than actual Christian writings to substantiate their claims may account somewhat for the fact that the authorities had not taken notice of specifically Christian writings for such a long time.⁷³ However, even a cursory examination of many of these apologetic works would indicate that holy books were important for Christian practices. A more careful reader, perhaps a well-informed opponent, would come to realize from them just how important they really were for Christians and, therefore, how dangerous they were to preserving traditional practices and beliefs.

Other developments were occurring within the Church that also merit special mention. The apologists of the second and third centuries were writing in a time that was already far removed from that of Jesus and his earliest followers. Whereas Paul and other early missionaries had preached that Christ's Second Coming was imminent, the passage of time and the repeated assaults on the Church in places throughout the empire made it evident that Jesus's return might be further off than anyone had imagined. In light of this realization and the growth of the Church in many parts of the empire, there began to develop a more clearly established institutional hierarchy of officials to deal with the

⁷³ See, for example, Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.30–52. By contrast, Judaism was a tolerated religion (*religio licita*) and was respected for the care its members took in upholding their ancestral traditions. Its Scriptures were known to Romans and never widely destroyed by them in this period.

problems that arose.⁷⁴ Already in the work of Ignatius of Antioch, who wrote a series of letters to prominent churches while en route to Rome for judgment in about 110, the unity of the Church under the leadership of the bishops was being asserted:

Nobody must do anything that has to do with the Church without the bishop's approval. You should regard that Eucharist as valid which is celebrated either by the bishop or by someone he authorizes. Where the bishop is present, there let the congregation gather, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.⁷⁵

Irenaeus, who became the first bishop of Lugdunum shortly after the massacre there (c. 178 C.E.), also held up the bishops as the heirs to the authority possessed by the apostles.⁷⁶

Although bishops like Ignatius and Irenaeus came to represent the so-called institutional Church, or Catholic Church, divisions had already come to be evident within the body of Christian believers. Among the most serious threats to the unity of the Catholic Church was Gnosticism, and many early Christians also produced writings that attacked gnostic teachings. Although the history of this religious movement is still being unraveled, it is now clear that Gnosticism was originally a non-Christian phenomenon on the fringes of Judaism, but over the course of the later first and second century C.E. it

⁷⁴ On this development, see Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, trans. J.A. Baker. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969).

⁷⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Smyrnaeans* 8.1–2. Excerpted from *Early Christian Fathers*, trans and ed. Cyril C. Richardson. (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 115.

⁷⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.1–9.

developed into Christian “heresy.”⁷⁷ Originating in the East, in the regions of Palestine, Samaria, and Syria, the gnostic movement was actually composed of a variety of schools, led by charismatic teachers, which spread about the Roman Empire and came to pose a substantial threat to developing Christian communities.⁷⁸ As with the institutional Church, gnostic groups and their founders were assiduous producers of texts, and recent discoveries of gnostic books are beginning to yield illuminating insights into the complex theological opinions they held.⁷⁹ Although there was no such thing as a normative theology or dogma to which all gnostic groups adhered, one certain characteristic recurs repeatedly: a central myth that within each person is a divine spark “which has proceeded

⁷⁷ Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. Robert MacLachlan Wilson, P.W. Coxon, and K.H. Kuhn. (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 1987), 276; and R.M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 1–38. The very nature of Gnosticism is still a matter of great scholarly debate. For a thorough analysis of the problems of understanding Gnosticism and the attempts by modern scholars to overcome them, see Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁷⁸ Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, 296. As Alan B. Scott explained, these groups may very well have spanned a wide range of levels of structural organization, from what he terms “audience cults” with little or no formal organization and whose means of disseminating their ideas was primarily through books rather than personal interaction, to highly structured organizations, like Valentinian gnostic groups, and later Manichaeism, as well as the Catholic Church itself. See “Churches or Books? Sethian Social Organization,” *J ECS* 3.2 (1995): 109–22.

⁷⁹ Since their discovery in Upper Egypt in 1945, the Nag Hammadi texts have offered scholars a previously unavailable glimpse into the writings of gnostic thinkers. Their first publication in English in 1978 virtually launched the modern study of this movement. See James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). See also Robert McL. Wilson, “Twenty Years After,” in *Colloque International les Textes de Nag Hammadi*, ed. Bernard Barc. (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 1981), 59–67. On their interment in the fifth century, see Dwight W. Young, “The Milieu of Nag Hammadi: Some Historical Considerations,” *VC* 24 (1970): 127–37.

from the divine world and has fallen into this world of destiny, birth and death, and which must be reawakened through its own divine counterpart in order to be finally restored.”⁸⁰ This was explained and elaborated in the cosmological and soteriological systems of each sect.

Among the founders and originators of gnostic sects, Marcion presented a particularly significant challenge to the Church in this period.⁸¹ Born in Sinope along Asia Minor’s Black Sea coast, Marcion was the son of a wealthy ship owner who also happened to be bishop of the local Christian community. In about 139/40, Marcion traveled to Rome and attached himself to the Christian community there. Marcion developed a view of Christianity that not only differed from the emerging Catholic Church, but also from other gnostic thinkers. Whereas most other gnostic teachers employed allegory to interpret the Scriptures, Marcion insisted on a strictly literal interpretation. When he finally presented his teachings publicly and attempted to gain recognition for them at a synod held in Rome in July 144, he was rebuffed and consequently proceeded to found his own rival church.⁸² Among his accomplishments, Marcion was the first Christian thinker to propose a “canon” of New Testament books, which was purified of Jewish elements, and against which the Church would respond by

⁸⁰ Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, 57.

⁸¹ Of Marcion’s church, Rudolph stated, “It was, without a doubt, the greatest danger encountered by the Catholic Church in the second century.” See Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, 317.

⁸² Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, 314.

setting up its own canon of books, which included the Old Testament.⁸³ His church would continue to exist in Italy and in the East into the fourth century and probably longer.

Other gnostic groups did too. Manichaeism, a gnostic world religion, was founded in the mid-third century in southern Mesopotamia, but quickly spread westward into the Roman Empire and to the East into central Asia. Its founder, Mani, had been a member of an ascetic Jewish Christian baptismal sect known as the Elkasaites, but disputed with its elders and was expelled. His new religious movement combined elements of his own Jewish Christian upbringing with aspects of Zoroastrian and Buddhist doctrines to create a religion of radical dualism, light and darkness, in which believers strove to free the particles of light that were imprisoned within all living things, and thus return them to the heavenly realm of light. This was accomplished by the ascetic practices of the elect, who devoted their lives to this struggle between light and darkness, as well as to the preaching, study, and production of Manichaean texts, which were known for their great beauty.⁸⁴ Mani himself composed a number of early Manichaean treatises. He found supporters even among the members of the Persian royal

⁸³ This was chiefly accomplished by the end of the second century. See Willy Rodorf, "The Bible in the Teaching and Liturgy of Early Christian Communities," in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity*, ed. Paul M. Blowers. *The Bible Through the Ages*, vol. 1. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 69–102.

⁸⁴ Manichaean ascetic practices: Jason BeDuhn, *The Manichaean Body: In Discipline and Ritual* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Manichaean texts: see the comments of Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 88–9.

court before Kartir, a Zoroastrian priest, initiated a persecution of Mani and his followers that led to his death in 276. Although this persecution nearly eradicated Manichaeism in Persia, Mani's movement flourished in the Roman Empire in late-third century and would continue to exist there despite numerous proscriptions beginning under the emperor Diocletian at the end of the century.⁸⁵

Gnostic groups or sects were not the only threat from within facing the Church in the second and third centuries. In the 170s, an apocalyptic movement, the Montanists, began among the Christians of rural Phrygia in Asia Minor. Inspired, as they claimed, by the spirit of prophecy, founders Montanus, Maximilla, and Priscilla foretold that a New Jerusalem would descend from heaven at Phrygian Pepouza. This and many other prophecies were written down and circulated among their followers as divinely revealed.⁸⁶ They also encouraged voluntary martyrdom. In a sense, their movement, which asserted that direct revelation from God continued and added to the message of Jesus and the prophets, was a challenge to the authority of the sacred scriptures and to the institutional hierarchy of the Church, which produced, taught, and defended these writings, and upon which their own growing power was based. Although many Christian

⁸⁵ For the suppression of Manichaeism under Diocletian, see below, pp. 189–90, and for later persecutions of Manichaeism, see Chapter 5 below.

⁸⁶ Evidence relating to the Montanists have been collected and translated in the very useful Patristic Monograph Series. See Ronald E. Heine, *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia*, Patristic Monograph Series, no. 14. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989); and William Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism*, Patristic Monograph Series, no. 16. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997). See also Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Nicola Denzey, "What Did the Montanists Read?" *HTR* 94.4 (2001): 427–48.

writers began to attack this movement, which came to be known as the New Prophecy, or, more commonly, as Montanism, it would spread from its homeland in Asia Minor and persist for nearly four centuries.⁸⁷ In North Africa, for example, the Latin apologist Tertullian, discussed above, was even heavily influenced by ideas espoused by this sect late in his life.

During its first two centuries of existence, Christianity had come to settle in many cities and regions of the Roman Empire and it had taken many forms. Many of these developing communities came to hold the doctrines of the institutional Church, while among them in some places and in their own communities in others, many other Christian groups held differing opinions on issues fundamental to the very nature of Christianity. In this period, these many parties began to produce voluminous writings as a chief means of spreading Christian beliefs. Although Christians had been persecuted on numerous occasions in this period, it had been as individuals, and no attempt was made to attack the Church as an organization or institution and Christian books were never destroyed. Despite the horrific deaths of many Christians that had occurred, the formative period of Christianity, which approximately corresponded to the pax Romana, had been ultimately a period of tremendous growth for the Church.

The stability, prosperity, and military expansion that had been such important aspects of the pax Romana had been dependent, in large part, on the empire's capable rulers, and it is to their third century successors and to the political developments of that

⁸⁷ See Chapter 5 below, for a discussion of the suppression of Montanism and the destruction of their books.

period that our discussion now turns. The practice of the emperor adopting and grooming a successor, which had been established by Nerva (ruled 96–98) at the end of the first century, was abandoned by Marcus Aurelius. His son Commodus, who ruled from 180 to 192, was an unpopular ruler, and his assassination led to a civil war. The victor, Septimius Severus (ruled 193–211), established the Severan dynasty, which ruled until 235. When assassination again precipitated civil war in that year, the Roman world descended into a fifty-year period of nearly constant warfare and violence among would-be successors.

The assassination of Severus Alexander in 235 not only brought an end to the Severan dynasty, but has also been seen as a major turning point politically for the Roman Empire.⁸⁸ The rapid turnover of rulers during the period following his death was certainly a blow to the stability of the Roman Empire, preventing the establishment of consistent, constructive imperial policies by later emperors who were forced to deal with the pressing problems of usurpers, rebellions, civil unrest, migrations, invasions, and fiscal and economic difficulties during their brief and contested reigns. Despite these difficulties, recent scholars of the period have been less willing to label the period a “crisis.”⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Modern scholars have looked upon the third century as a period of severe crisis for the Roman Empire since Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J.B. Bury. (New York: Heritage Press, 1946), 1:186–220, at 217 and passim. See also, for example, A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602. A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey, Vol. I* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), 23.

⁸⁹ See, for example, David S. Potter, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Later Roman Empire: A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 3–69.

In Rome in 248 Emperor Philip celebrated the Secular Games marking the first millennium of the city of Rome. This ancient celebration commemorated the end of one *saeculum* and the beginning of another. A *saeculum* was understood to be the maximum span of a human life, or one hundred years during the Republican period. As early as the mid-second century B.C.E., the Romans commemorated the passing of the *saeculum* with religious ceremonies, festivals, and games. The celebrations included not only sacrifices, but also events in the circus and amphitheater, such as theatrical, musical, literary, and other artistic presentations. However, its importance as a civic ritual of purification is notable, and must have seemed appropriate given the turmoil which had preceded it.⁹⁰ By the public sacrifices and other ceremonies associated with the Secular Games, the Romans affirmed their connection to the gods as they began a new era.

Decius came to imperial power in late 249, only one year after Emperor Philip celebrated the thousandth anniversary of the foundation of Rome.⁹¹ The millennium had been a testament to the greatness and the long-term stability of Rome, which Philip had been keen to advertise in spectacular celebrations and spectacles. However, rebellions broke out in the East and along the Danube. A high official who had held the consulship and other offices, Decius appears to have come from a prominent family from Sirmium in Pannonia that had old senatorial connections in Rome. Philip sent him to put down a revolt on the Danube and, according to the Greek sources, when the rebellion was

⁹⁰ Pat Southern, *The Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine* (London: Routledge, 2001), 72.

⁹¹ See Jean Gagé, “Recherches sur les Jeux Séculaires, III, Jeux Séculaires et jubilés de la fondation de Rome,” *Revue des études latines* 11 (1933): 400–35, especially 412–17.

suppressed, his troops hailed him as emperor and induced him to overthrow his patron.⁹²

Decius was a deeply conservative individual and a pious traditionalist in matters of religion.⁹³ One of his first acts upon assuming imperial power was to take for himself the name of the emperor Trajan, which recalled the stability and prosperity of earlier times. In about the month of June in 250, Decius issued an edict bidding all the inhabitants of the empire to sacrifice in the presence of their city magistrates to the ancestral gods for the safety of the state. As some scholars have argued, Decius' intention may have been to mark the passing of the *saeculum* himself and thereby reaffirm the *pax deorum*, reassuring all that the empire was still secure after the passing of the millennium.⁹⁴ Although it was probably not the purpose of this edict, it led to the first general persecution of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire.⁹⁵

⁹² Exactly how and when this occurred is uncertain. See Zos. 1.22.1–2; Zonaras, *Ann.* 12.19; but earlier, Latin evidence contradicts the assumption that Decius was responsible. See Hans A. Pohlsander, “Did Decius Kill the Philippi?” *Historia* 31.1 (1982): 214–22.

⁹³ See Hans A. Pohlsander, “The Religious Policy of Decius,” *ANRW* 2.16.3 (1986): 1826–42; and J.B. Rives, “The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire,” *JRS* 89 (1999): 135–54.

⁹⁴ See, for example, David S. Potter, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Later Roman Empire*, 41–3; and J.B. Rives, “The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire,” 147–8.

⁹⁵ The precondition for the persecution of Decius may have been established as early as 212 C.E, when the emperor Caracalla granted citizenship to all free men within the Roman Empire. Ulpian, *Digest* 1.5.17; Cassius Dio 77.9. Its effect, in the long term, was to promote a lasting sense of shared identity among all of the peoples of the Roman Empire and to establish uniformity of legal procedures throughout the provinces. Dio suggested that the motivation for this edict, known as the Antonine constitution (*constitutio Antoniniana*), was to increase the numbers of those who were obliged to pay the taxes imposed on citizens, such as on inheritances. However, religious motives may also have played a part. By this edict all inhabitants of the empire would be liable to all

Although the date varied from place to place, all were required to comply by the appointed day by sacrificing in the presence of their city officials and thereby obtain a certificate (*libellus*) documenting that they had done so. More than forty *libelli* have surfaced in Egypt. Their existence attests to the well-known fact that some numbers of Christians had capitulated and offered sacrifice, or at least attempted to obtain documentation to that effect. Many Christians, even bishops, chose instead to flee the authorities and take refuge in the wilderness. Trials and executions occurred throughout the empire. The emperor Decius, it appears, even personally presided over the judgment of some Christians.⁹⁶ The impact of the persecution of Decius was severe; however, it quickly ceased when the emperor was killed while fighting the invading Goths in 251. Although many died as a result of the imperial edict, which sought to enforce a universal religious obligation on all Roman subjects, Christian dissenters were treated as individuals just as they had in previous persecutions.

Almost six years of peace for the Church followed the death of Decius, during which its leaders, like Cyprian, who was bishop of Carthage from 248 until his own execution in 258, attempted to deal with the problems caused by the persecution, especially the issue of the *lapsi*, those who had capitulated during the persecution, and how they were to be readmitted to communion. For the empire, however, this brief

of the other obligations placed on all citizens, including religious ones. See Ernst Kornemann and Paul M. Meyer, eds. *Griechische Papyri im Museum des oberhessischen Geschichtsvereins zu Giessen* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1910–12), no. 40 (= Drei Erlasse Caracallas aus den Jahren 212 und 215).

⁹⁶ Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World (31 BC – AD 337)*, 566.

period witnessed new calamities. In about 252, another devastating epidemic began to sweep across the Roman Empire, lasting for many years. Following the short-lived reigns of several predecessors, Valerian, a former high official under Decius, became emperor in 253. During the first years of his reign the emperor seemed to be favorably disposed toward the Christians; however, in the summer of 257 he began to take direct action against the Church.⁹⁷ The first edict specifically ordered all members of the Christian hierarchy to acknowledge the Roman gods by taking part in traditional rites.⁹⁸ A second edict issued the following summer sentenced bishops and other clergy to immediate death.⁹⁹ Senators and other persons of wealth and position lost their property and privileges and, should they continue to profess Christianity, they were to be executed as well. By these actions, Valerian's persecution became the earliest known occasion on which the Roman government attacked Christianity as an institution, executing clergy as leaders and propagators of the faith, and closing churches.

The surrender of Valerian during a disastrous attempt to meet with the invading Persian king Sapor I (ruled 240–72) in 260 brought about the end of the persecution and initiated four decades of relative peace for the Christians, during which the Church endeavored to repair the damage wrought again by persecution. Although like Decius's persecution that of Valerian took no notice of the Christian books, the importance of the

⁹⁷ For Eusebios's account of Valerian's persecution, see Eus. *H.E.* 7.10.3–19.

⁹⁸ Eus. *H.E.* 7.10.3–9. Paul Keresztes, "Two Edicts of the Emperor Valerian," *VC* 29 (1975), 84.

⁹⁹ Cyprian of Carthage, *Ep.* 81.1.

scriptures, both real and symbolic, continued to be tremendous for Christians in the third century. This can be inferred from an episode from the mid-third century reported by Eusebios.¹⁰⁰ During the reign of Valerian's son, the emperor Gallienus (ruled 253–68), a Christian in the Roman army at Caesarea in Palestine named Marinus was ordered to sacrifice in order to gain a promotion. Sent away to consider his situation, the local bishop, Theoteknos, spirited him off to a nearby church. There, the bishop offered him the same choice, pointing first to the sword at his side, and then to the Gospels on the altar. His fateful decision made, Marinus returned to the emperor and declared that he was indeed a Christian, for which he was later beheaded. The book had become a symbol for Christian belief. To pick it up, as did Marinus, was to choose Christianity, even in the face of torture and death. To reject it, therefore, or to surrender it to non-believers (*traditio*), was to reject Christianity itself. It would soon come to be among the most severe crimes a Christian could commit against his or her chosen religion.

Over the course of the second and third centuries the Christian movement had become an identifiable institution in spite of occasional persecution, with growing congregations served by a hierarchy of priestly officials and buildings for conducting services, as well as other property, such as books. Opponents of Christianity in the government came to recognize that to check the spread of this religion, a more thorough eradication of its leadership and property would be necessary. During the brief persecutions of Decius and Valerian, elements of a more comprehensive strategy had

¹⁰⁰ Eus. *H.E.* 7.15.1–5; and see “The Martyrdom of Saint Marinus,” in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, trans. Herbert J. Musurillo, 240–43. See also Gregory Allen Robbins,

been implemented in attempting to check the spread of Christianity, but their success was limited by their brief durations and the sudden demise of both Decius and Valerian brought premature ends to their actions against the Church. However, their respective attempts to widen the scope of the persecutions would be important examples for a later, like-minded emperor, Diocletian, whose long and stable reign would allow for the most deliberate and systematic persecution of Christianity yet.

““Fifty Copies of the Sacred Writings” (VC 4.36): Entire Bibles or Gospel Books?”
Studia Patristica 19 (1989): 91–8.

PART 4.3: “ZEUS’S GLORY”: THE GREAT PERSECUTION AND THE BURNING OF CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

Following the murder of Gallienus in 268, a series of Illyrian generals, the soldier-emperors Claudius, Aurelian, Probus, and Carus, ruled the Roman Empire and spent the entirety of their brief reigns engaged in continuous warfare against invaders and would-be usurpers. Diocles, who would become emperor himself in 285, served as a soldier in the Roman army during this period. Hailing from Dalmatia, where he was born in about 234, Diocles rose through the ranks of the army under Aurelian and Probus to become an intimate adviser of the emperor Carus (ruled 282–283) and commander of the elite cavalry force, the *Protectores domestici*, which guarded the person of the emperor and accompanied him on military campaigns. As such, Diocles served with Carus during his ambitious invasion of the Persian Empire, a venture that met with remarkable success before Carus died mysteriously on campaign in 283. Following his death, Carus’s two adult sons, Numerian and Carinus, became respective emperors of the eastern and western portions of the empire and Numerian quickly abandoned the invasion of Persia. During the 1,200 mile journey back to Nicomedia, Numerian also turned up dead and the eastern troops proclaimed Diocles as emperor in 284. Shortly afterward he took the more regal imperial name Diocletian.

Confronted by the same problems that had plagued his predecessors, namely renewed military emergencies along virtually the entire frontier of the Roman Empire as well as the other pressing problems of maintaining internal unity, Diocletian made the bold, but not entirely new, maneuver of sharing imperial power. He chose a fellow general, Maximian, adopting him as his son and heir and making him co-ruler in 286, first as his Caesar, or junior partner, and shortly later, as Augustus, fully sharing in imperial power and dignity with Diocletian. To Maximian, he assigned control over the western half of the empire, while he retained the East for himself. By 293 Diocletian further increased the joint rulership of the empire by adding two additional members as junior partners in imperial power, Constantius and Galerius, who were promoted to the rank of Caesar. The creation of this political system, known as the Tetrarchy, was ingenious. It virtually prevented the usurpations that had been the downfall of so many of Diocletian's predecessors and established a system for succession, whereby the two senior emperors would eventually retire, elevating their junior partners to the rank of Augustus, who in turn would appoint two younger men to be their own Caesars. At the same time, it allowed for four emperors who could be trusted to meet with invasions, rebellions, and other crises that arose within their respective regions and to the empire at large. Nevertheless, as the founder of this new order, Diocletian retained a preeminent status among the Tetrarchs and was the chief author of imperial policies. As a result of this administrative change and other improvements to the government, economy, and defense of the empire, Diocletian and his partners successfully settled the major military emergencies looming on the Roman frontiers during the 290s, reestablishing control over

regions of the empire, like northern Gaul and Britain, that had fallen to usurpers and civil unrest and checking the advance of invaders along the Rhine-Danube border regions. By 298, a treaty favorable to Rome had even been secured from the Persian Empire following the successful invasion of Armenia by Galerius.

Like other emperors of provincial origin whose path to the throne lay through military service, Diocletian adopted the conservative manners that many associated with old Rome, especially in regard to religion, where he deemed traditional expressions of piety to the Roman gods as beneficial for himself and the state.¹⁰¹ In his imperial theology, the emperor took Jupiter as his divine patron and styled himself as the god's son, Jovius. Jupiter, the wise ruler of the universe who overthrew the Titans and fathered a new race of gods and a new age, became the author and preserver of the new Diocletianic order.¹⁰² Likewise, Maximian, who was originally Diocletian's junior partner, took Hercules, Jupiter's heroic son, as his own patron and became, as it were, that god's son, Herculus. This was part of a conscious effort by Diocletian to restore aspects of traditional religious observance that had fallen on hard times during the disruption of the previous century. As such, he revived the cults of the gods everywhere, building temples, altars, holding sacrifices and festivals, and advertising their special

¹⁰¹ For Diocletian's religious beliefs, see Stephen Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery* (London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1985), 35, 41–60, 161–62.

¹⁰² J. Rufus Fears, *Princeps a diis electus: The Divine Election of the Emperor as a Political Concept at Rome*, Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome, vol. 26. (Rome: American Academy in Rome, 1977), 297. See also J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 235–52; and J. Rufus Fears, "The Cult of Jupiter and Roman Imperial Ideology," *ANRW* 2.17.1 (1981): 3–141, at 114–22.

connection on their coinage. The emperors honored not only Jupiter and Hercules, but all of the Olympian deities and as well as local gods throughout the empire as they traveled. In this way, they sought to encourage all inhabitants to do likewise and “once again to pay full honors both to their own traditional gods and those of the state.”¹⁰³ Thus, peace and prosperity would be assured.

It was among his primary obligations to preserve the empire from any threats and, in accordance with this obligation, Diocletian had acted aggressively to defend the empire from assault. He also attempted to strengthen its tangible boundaries. This massive program of fortification not only promoted security and internal stability, it too, like all of Diocletian’s measures, had clear religious overtones. In the summer of 298, for example, when the emperor traveled up the Nile River to make a lasting settlement with the desert nomads of Numidia, the Blemmyes and Nobatae, the boundary of Roman dominion moved down river to the island of Philae. The Romans stationed a garrison there, and, equally important, erected religious shrines that marked the boundaries of the Roman world. At Palmyra, only recently retaken by the emperor Aurelian, Diocletian constructed a temple complex known as the *Principia* between 293 and 305. Its high point was dominated by the ‘temple of the standards,’ which boldly advertised the tetrarchs in Latin inscription as “the repairers of the world and propagators of the human race.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, with Diocletian, the Roman Empire became itself a sort of sacred space in

¹⁰³ Stephen Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery*, 58.

¹⁰⁴ See the discussion of Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC – AD 337* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 174–207, particularly 176–90.

which the earth reflected the heavenly order. Within its boundaries, Jupiter's rightly appointed son ruled in harmony with his celestial father, guaranteeing order and prosperity to all inhabitants. Likewise, each person was expected to play their own part for society and for the gods who watched over it.

The first Roman persecution of Manichaeism is intelligible in relation to Diocletian's restoration of traditional religion. As noted above, Manichaeism was a gnostic religion that began to filter into the Roman Empire from the East during the mid-third century and was already well established in many parts of the empire by the death of its founder in 276. By the late third century, both Christians and Neoplatonists had written works opposing Manichaean teachings, attesting to their presence.¹⁰⁵ In 302, Diocletian received a report from the proconsul of Egypt, Amnius Anicius Julianus, concerning the activities of Manichaeans there. The emperor's rescript, which has been preserved, makes plain Diocletian's concern for the security and moral well-being of the empire:

We have heard that the Manichaeans, . . . have set up new and hitherto unheard of sects in opposition to the older creeds so that they might cast out the doctrines vouchsafed to us in the past by divine favour for the benefit of their own depraved doctrine. They have sprung forth very recently like new and unexpected monstrosities among the race of the Persians – a nation hostile to us – and have made their way into our empire, where they are committing many outrages, disturbing the tranquility of the people and even inflicting grave damage to the civic communities: our fear is that with the passage of time, they will endeavour, as usually happens, to infect the modest and tranquil Roman people of an innocent

¹⁰⁵ Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the later Roman Empire and medieval China*, 85–8.

nature with the damnable customs and perverse laws of the Persians as with the poison of a malignant snake.¹⁰⁶

Therefore, Diocletian ordered the sect's leaders to be burned along with copies of their scriptures as "suitable and effective punishment."¹⁰⁷ Other members of the sect were executed or condemned to mines and quarries, depending upon their social status; all property was confiscated by the state. As Samuel Lieu and others have explained, the emperor's rescript indicates that he regarded Manichaeism as a dangerous presence in the Roman Empire because it was foreign, from Persia, and because the sect sought to sway Romans from the proper religious customs that had been handed down to them by their forebears. For these reasons, Diocletian ordered burning as the proper punishment for individuals who taught this religion and the proper method for destroying their religious texts. No other information is preserved concerning the events of Diocletian's persecution of Manichaeism, nor about the manner in which their books were destroyed, but its very occurrence surely indicates that the emperor had resolved to take even more severe measures against another group of religious dissenters here at the beginning of the fourth century. Similarly, sorcery was also proscribed by the emperor, and practitioners and their books were likewise ordered to be cast into the flames.¹⁰⁸ With regard to the Christians and their books, the signs were pointing toward more dark days.

¹⁰⁶ *Lex Dei sive Mosaicarum et Romanarum legum collatio* 15.3.4, ed. J. Baviera, *FIRA* II, 4, pp. 580–81. Excerpted from Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the later Roman Empire and medieval China*, 91–2.

¹⁰⁷ Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the later Roman Empire and medieval China*, 92.

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter 2 above, p. 78, n. 129; and see also *Lex Dei sive Mosaicarum et Romanarum legum collatio* 15,2,1, p. 579.

The period leading up to the outbreak of the general persecution of the Christian Church (ca. 270–303 C.E.) had witnessed also the development by Rome’s pagan intelligentsia of “the most formidable assault on Christianity in its brief history.”¹⁰⁹ Following Fronto, Celsus, and others, philosophers and other writers continued to produce works that were critical of Christian beliefs and called on the rulers to take further aggressive measures to combat the spread of this religious movement. Moreover, certain representatives of this party came to play an active part in the decision to persecute the Christian once again and, perhaps, the manner in which it would happen. For these reasons, their writings and actions merit close examination.

Porphyry of Tyre (232/3–after 310) was arguably the greatest anti-Christian writer of the ancient world and the most famous representative of these late-third-century intellectuals. Indeed, Christian writers like Eusebios and Augustine expressed tremendous respect for Porphyry’s intellect; Augustine even described him as “the most learned philosopher of all.” In his youth, Porphyry studied with Origen in Caesarea, where he learned the prophetic books and other writings of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament.¹¹⁰ It is even possible that Porphyry had been a Christian as a young man; however, he ultimately rejected it in favor of Greek

¹⁰⁹ Michael Bland Simmons, *Arnobius of Sicca: Religious Conflict and Competition in the Age of Diocletian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 22.

¹¹⁰ Michael Bland Simmons, “Porphyry of Tyre’s Biblical Criticism. A Historical and Theological Appraisal,” in *Reading in Christian Communities: Essays on Interpretation in the Early Church*, ed. Charles A. Bobertz and David Brakke. Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity Series, vol. 14. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 99.

philosophy.¹¹¹ After later studying under Longinus in Athens, Porphyry moved to Rome to become a disciple of Plotinus in 262/3. He became a close friend to his master and, following his death in around 270, Porphyry took over his school and set about editing Plotinus's works. Over the course of his life, Porphyry also produced more than seventy of his own writings on a remarkably wide range of philosophical subjects. One important aspect of his life's work was to present Neoplatonic philosophy, theurgy, and revelatory oracles as a *via salutis* for the common masses.¹¹² Recent studies of Porphyry's works, particularly his *Life and Books of Plotinus*, have indicated that Porphyry's work was devised to function as a spiritual guide in place of the traditional master-student relationship.¹¹³ The texts became the basis for spiritual formation.¹¹⁴ "In the reading of the books, the seeker will find the wisdom and guidance of the master. It is not found in

¹¹¹ Sokrates Scholastikos, *H.E.* 3.23–37.

¹¹² Michael Bland Simmons, *Arnobius of Sicca: Religious Conflict and Competition in the Age of Diocletian*, 23; and idem, "Porphyry of Tyre's Biblical Criticism," 97–101. See also Pierre Hadot, "Neoplatonic Spirituality: Plotinus and Porphyry," in A.H. Armstrong, ed., *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad Press, 1986): 230–49.

¹¹³ Richard Valantasis, *Spiritual Guides of the Third Century: A Semiotic Study of the Guide-Disciple Relationship in Christianity, Neoplatonism, Hermetism, and Gnosticism*. Harvard Dissertations in Religion, no. 27. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 35–62.

¹¹⁴ Richard Valantasis, *Spiritual Guides of the Third Century*, 37. See also Hadot, I. "The Spiritual Guide." In *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, and Roman*, edited by A.H. Armstrong, 436–59. New York: Crossroad Press, 1986.

relationship with the master, or in the biography of the master, but in the books.”¹¹⁵ This bears a striking likeness to the manner in which books functioned in Christianity according to the apologists, who were discussed above.¹¹⁶

Another aspect that must be considered in relation to this philosophical project of Porphyry’s is his anti-Christian writings. Much of Porphyry’s attack on Christianity was in the form of literary and historical criticisms of the Christian Scriptures, pointing out the contradictions and inconsistencies within and among the various books, as well as embarrassing details that careful study of the Scriptures had made plain to Porphyry. His work, *Against the Christians*, as far as it can be reconstructed from quotations preserved in later refutations of his anti-Christian writings, was mostly this sort of attack. Although his exegetical and historical critique of Christianity was so significant as to require several careful refutations and imperial proscriptions in later years, as Michael Bland Simmons has argued, the theological and philosophical presuppositions forming the basis of his polemic are fundamental for understanding the power of his attack.¹¹⁷ For insight into this aspect of his writings, another treatise of Porphyry’s, *Philosophy from Oracles*,

¹¹⁵ Richard Valantasis, *Spiritual Guides of the Third Century*, 60.

¹¹⁶ As Philip Merlan has shown, philosophers since at least Plato claimed that philosophy was the true religion offering the expectation of salvation to the initiate. The Chaldaean Oracles, which circulated from the second century C.E., imparted philosophical doctrines that were supposed to derive from oracles of Apollo, and showed how to become immortal. As Merlan explains, the Chaldaean Oracles “became a sort of bible” for Platonists. See Philip Merlan, “Religion and Philosophy from Plato’s *Phaedo* to the Chaldaean Oracles,” *JHP* 1.2 (December 1963): 163–76.

¹¹⁷ Michael Bland Simmons, “Porphyry of Tyre’s Biblical Criticism,” 93. For the destruction of Porphyry’s anti-Christian writings in the period beginning with Constantine, see Chapter 5 below.

which has also been roughly reconstructed from fragments and quotes preserved in refutations, is most illuminating.¹¹⁸ “The *Philosophy from Oracles* is not a work on Christianity as such, but a positive statement of the traditional religion of the Roman world.”¹¹⁹ In this treatise in three books, Porphyry attempted to demonstrate the similarity between the religious beliefs of many ancient peoples, such as the Egyptians, Chaldaeans, Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans, and the philosophical religion espoused by third-century intellectuals. In doing so, the oracles of traditional religion became the source of true knowledge about the one Supreme Being. As previously indicated, oracular shrines, such as Didyma and Klaros, had become important authorities concerning religious and theological issues in the Graeco-Roman world from about the mid-second century.¹²⁰ The general tone of these pronouncements, as recorded by Porphyry and other writers, as well as in epigraphical evidence, was an expressed concern to uphold the traditional rites and beliefs that were the source of the *pax deorum*, the state of harmony between gods and men. The responses also reveal a tendency towards monotheism in agreement with the theological ideas held by Porphyry and other philosophers during the later Roman Empire.

¹¹⁸ See John J. O’Meara, *Porphyry’s Philosophy from Oracles in Augustine* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1959), and idem, *Porphyry’s Philosophy from Oracles in Eusebius’s Preparatio Evangelica and Augustine’s Dialogues of Cassiciacum* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1969).

¹¹⁹ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 136.

¹²⁰ See above, pp. 146–8.

Porphyry also attempted to make a place for Christianity within traditional beliefs. As Robert L. Wilken explained, the power of Porphyry's indictment of Christianity lay in his treatment of Jesus. For more than a century apologists had been defending their faith by explaining that pagans and Christians worshipped the same Supreme Being, each in their own way. Porphyry argued that Jesus, like other pious men before him, worshipped this God and taught his disciples and others to do the same. However, the followers of Jesus fell into error and put their teacher in the place of God, teaching men to give the reverence due only to God to a mere mortal.¹²¹ Thus, Porphyry argued, Christianity was not the religion preached by Jesus, but a new system of beliefs created by his disciples: "The new religion focused on Jesus, whereas the religion of Jesus centered on the supreme God of all."¹²² Nevertheless, within the spectrum of traditional beliefs Jesus was accorded high honors by Porphyry. He was viewed as a wise teacher who ascended following his death to a lofty, divine status equal to the great heroes and benefactors of humanity in ancient times, like Herakles and Asklepios. Thus Porphyry's works radically undercut the foundations of Christian belief by calling the validity of Christian Scriptures into question and challenging the notion that they represented the true teachings of Jesus. He offered, instead, the timeless traditional beliefs and practices by which humanity had always honored the gods, which promised security and prosperity in this world and were, he argued, the sure source of salvation and assimilation with God in the world to come.

¹²¹ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 136.

¹²² Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 154.

The timing of both of these writings is a critical, but still unresolved, issue. Many have viewed all of Porphyry's anti-Christian writings as the product of his youth, penned in the years before he set about more serious philosophical endeavors, but recent scholars have challenged this assessment and have offered a more nuanced interpretation of the time and circumstances behind these writings.¹²³ As Wilken has argued, to look at the *Philosophy from Oracles*, in particular, as a product of Porphyry's youth is to oversimplify his philosophical development.¹²⁴ Throughout his life Porphyry advocated traditional worship, so it is not necessarily true that this work must have been written before he came under the influence of Plotinus. Moreover, it fits in well with Diocletian's own effort to restore traditional religion occurring in the years leading up to the persecution. It is even possible that Porphyry was commissioned to write this treatise or some other unknown work that attacked Christianity by the emperor himself just prior to the beginning of the Great Persecution itself.¹²⁵

¹²³ For the early dating of Porphyry's anti-Christian works (ca. 270 C.E.), see Brian Croke, "Porphyry's Anti-Christian Chronology," *JTS* (n.s.) 34.1 (April 1983): 168–85; and idem, "The Era of Porphyry's Anti-Christian Polemic," *JRH* 13.1 (June 1984): 1–14. For the later date (early fourth century), see T.D. Barnes, "Porphyry Against the Christians: Date and Attribution of the Fragments," *JTS* 24 (1973), 442; Robert L. Wilken, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity: Greek Religion and Christian Faith," in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition. In honorem Robert M. Grant*, ed. William R. Schodel and Robert L. Wilken. *Théologie Historique* 54. (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1979), 131–4.

¹²⁴ Robert L. Wilken, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity," 132.

¹²⁵ See Robert L. Wilken, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity," 117–18; R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Porphyry's Against the Christians: The Literary Remains* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), 164; and Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 593–94, 671–72.

Porphyry, however, was certainly not the only intellectual attacking Christianity at this time. Sossianus Hierokles, who was a consular governor at the beginning of the Great Persecution, played a clear role in fomenting anti-Christian sentiments and in the decision to suppress Christianity yet again. He wrote his *Lover of Truth* to Christians, seeking to prove the falsehood of the Christian scriptures, in part, by arguing that its claims to Christ's divinity were false because his miracles were the result of sorcery, and, moreover, were inferior to the feats of another first-century miracle-worker, Apollonios of Tyana, whom he discussed at great length.¹²⁶ The writings of Porphyry and Hierokles articulated the arguments against Christianity as no writer had done previously and urged Christians to return to their ancestral customs; they also provided ample justification for further measures to suppress the Church.

Although the question of Christianity had been sidestepped through nearly twenty years of his reign, it was the accusations of a priest that finally compelled the emperor to begin to take action. The purported reason was that Christians had interfered with a sacrifice and prevented the omens from being taken.¹²⁷ Our chief source on this, as well as much of Diocletian's persecution, is Lactantius (ca. 245–323), a recent convert to Christianity who had been summoned by Diocletian from his native North Africa to teach

¹²⁶ See Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 5.3.23, and Eus. *Contra Hieroclem*, in Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F.C. Conybeare. Loeb Classical Library. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), 482–605. See also Timothy D. Barnes, "Sossianus Hierocles and the Antecedents of the Great Persecution," *HSCP* 80 (1976): 239–52.

¹²⁷ Lactant. *De mortibus persecutorum* 10.1–5. Unless noted, excerpts from this source are taken from Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, ed. and trans. J.L. Creed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). See also Eus. *H.E.* 8.4.3.

rhetoric in Nicomedia. He reported that in 299 Diocletian and Galerius held a sacrifice, but found no marks on the livers of the animals. The chief *haruspex*, a man named Tages, explained that the presence of Christians at the sacrifice had prevented the receipt of the desired omens. Diocletian, enraged, ordered all who resided in the palace and all military personnel to sacrifice to the gods. The reason the emperor took this action at this time deserves some explanation. As Richard Gordon and others have shown, public sacrifice by the emperor was an event where religion and the social order came together, thus it was a crucial means of social integration.¹²⁸ The emperor was the person most responsible for safeguarding the integrity and continuity of Rome's traditional public rituals, and imperial sacrifices, which came more and more during the empire to be offered by the emperor on behalf of all its inhabitants, became a paradigm for public sacrifice through the empire, "ideal and grandiloquent versions of the proper means of communicating with the other world."¹²⁹ By interfering with this rite, the Christians again presented themselves as a danger to the traditional rituals that were believed to safeguard the state. As Lactantius explained, those who refused were dismissed from military service, but no further measures were taken at this time.

Other priests were also making accusations regarding the Christians at this time. Another teacher of rhetoric and recent convert to Christianity, Arnobius of Sicca, writing about the year 300, explained:

¹²⁸ See Richard Gordon, "The Veil of Power: emperors, sacrificers and benefactors," in Mary Beard and John North, eds., *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 199–231.

¹²⁹ Richard Gordon, "The Veil of Power: emperors, sacrificers and benefactors," 208.

The augurs, the dream interpreters, the soothsayers, the prophets, and the priestlings, ever vain, . . . fearing that their own arts be brought to nought, and that they may extort but scanty contributions from the devotees, now few and infrequent, . . . cry aloud, The gods are neglected, in the temples there is now a very thin attendance. Former ceremonies are exposed to derision, and the time-honored rites of institutions once sacred have sunk before the superstitions of new religions. Justly is the human race afflicted by so many pressing calamities, justly is it racked by the hardship of so many toils.¹³⁰

Their anxiety is evident. These rites were crucial to the well being of the state and, by undermining them, the Christians jeopardized continued good relations with the gods.

According to a letter Porphyry wrote to his wife Marcella, before the general persecution began he undertook an extended journey from Rome to the East because of a “need of the Greeks and the gods.”¹³¹ Some scholars have seen in this indication that Porphyry was living in Nicomedia at this time.¹³² None of the Christian sources clearly indicate he was there. In fact, they seem to deliberately obscure the identity of some intellectual who did advise the emperor at about this time, perhaps suggesting he was a person of considerable standing. However, Lactantius states that an unnamed individual whom he refers to as a “priest of philosophy” frequently dined with the emperor during

¹³⁰ Arnobius, *Adv. Nat.* 1.24. Excerpted from *The Seven Books of Arnobius Adversus Gentes*, trans. Archibald Hamilton Bryce and Hugh Campbell. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1871), 18.

¹³¹ Porphyry, *Ad Marcellam* 4.

¹³² Although the idea is quite old, most scholars have rejected it. However, recent research by Henry Chadwick, Robert L. Wilken, and Michael Bland Simmons has revived this thesis compellingly. See Henry Chadwick, *The Sentences of Sextus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 66; Robert L. Wilken, “Pagan Criticism of Christianity,” 131; Michael Bland Simmons, “Porphyry of Tyre’s Biblical Criticism,” 92.

this period and was responsible for a work against the Christians in three books.¹³³ This may, in fact, be the *Philosophy from Oracles*, a work in three books calling on Christians to return to traditional practices. If this suggestion is correct, then both Porphyry and Hierokles, whom sources clearly indicate was in Nicomedia at the time, were participants at a fateful meeting.¹³⁴

In the winter of 302–303, Diocletian and Galerius held a meeting in Nicomedia concerning the Christians. It was here that the decision to begin the general persecution was made. According to Lactantius, Diocletian sought the counsel of these individuals as well as a few civic officials and military commanders, who all agreed that the Christians were enemies of the gods and threatened the emperor's reestablishment of traditional religion. Recognizing Porphyry's writings concerning the Christians, we should consider what part he may have played in the proceedings. Porphyry had an intimate understanding of Christianity. His anti-Christian writings make plain the importance he placed on refuting the claims of Christian books to spiritual authority and religious truth, and other works, like the *Life and Books of Plotinus*, demonstrate the need he saw to offer writings in place of them. Therefore, not only did he see Christianity to be a threat to society, he saw their books to be a special danger that needed to be confronted directly. Of course, it cannot be substantiated that Porphyry suggested that bookburning play a role in the government's suppression of Christianity, or that he was even there, but a sympathetic reader of his work could have drawn such a conclusion from his arguments.

¹³³ Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 5.2.

¹³⁴ Hierokles: Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 16.4; *Div. Inst.* 5.2.

Lactantius places the blame for the manner of the persecution on Diocletian's Caesar, Galerius, who was also a strong supporter of the emperor's religious restoration and an opponent of Christianity.¹³⁵ Since his victory over the Persians and the onset of Diocletian's illness, Galerius had taken a more active role in directing imperial policies, so he may have influenced the decision. Nevertheless, Diocletian seems to have left the issue ultimately in the hands of the gods. Having taken counsel of his most esteemed advisors, he turned finally to oracle of Apollo at Didyma to confirm their suggestions.¹³⁶ When the response corroborated them, Diocletian decided at last to follow their advice and begin a general suppression of Christianity. Like no previous persecuting emperor, he began by burning the Christians' books.

The opening phase of the persecution is most important for our purposes. Before it began, careful deliberation concerning the timing and the manner of the persecution could occur, and did, so that an effective assault could be planned out and implemented. However, once the persecution was under way, the political circumstances and personalities changed. Diocletian continued to rule until 305, at which point he and Maximian stepped down as emperors and raised their junior partners to the rank of Augustus according to the plan of succession. Thenceforth, Constantius and his Caesar, Severus, ruled in the East, while Galerius and his Caesar, Maximin Daia, ruled in the West. This change altered the circumstances of the persecution from region to region, shifting its momentum. In the West, relative non-enforcement would be the general rule;

¹³⁵ Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 10.6–11.4.

¹³⁶ Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 117–8; and see Eus. *Vita Const.* 2.50.

in the East, the rulers continued and even enacted more severe and thorough measures. These would be responses or reactions to later conditions. In the first phase, however, the authorities could attempt to put their convictions into action in a manner that would fittingly convey their sentiments and accomplish their intentions.

On a “suitable and auspicious day,” 23 February 303, the day of the ancient Roman festival of the Terminalia, Diocletian began his assault on the Church.¹³⁷ His selection of this particular festival is notable for its religious conservatism and for the unambiguous ideological message it conveyed. According to tradition, this festival had been established by King Numa.¹³⁸ The rite was connected with the stones that marked boundaries between fields and sought to offer sacrifices to the spirits presiding over them. To disturb these stones was forbidden and an individual who removed one was considered accursed by the community.¹³⁹ On the same day, a public sacrifice and celebration commemorated the symbolic boundary of Roman territory separating the realm of peace and order from that of chaos and warfare.¹⁴⁰ During the Republic,

¹³⁷ Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 12.1: *Inquiritur peragenda rei dies aptus et felix ac potissimum Terminalia deliguntur, quae sunt a.d. septimum kalendas martias, ut quasi terminus imponeretur huic religioni.*

¹³⁸ H.H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 79–80. As discussed in Chapter 2, Numa was Rome’s semi-legendary second king and was believed to have founded much of Rome’s public religion. He was also believed to have written books that prescribed some of the earliest Roman ceremonies. See Chapter 2 above, pp. 34–5.

¹³⁹ H.H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic*, 80.

¹⁴⁰ See Ray Laurence, “Ritual, Landscape, and the Destruction of Place in the Roman Imagination,” in *Approaches to the Study of Ritual: Italy and the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. John B. Wilkins. Accordia Specialist Studies on the Mediterranean, no. 2. (London:

Terminus, god of boundaries, became associated with Jupiter, Diocletian's patron deity.¹⁴¹ In keeping with its original purpose, which was the maintenance of the boundaries of the community, this day was chosen deliberately by the emperor, Lactantius states, "as best, so that a termination so to speak could be imposed on this religion."¹⁴² He considered it a threat to the survival of the Roman community.¹⁴³ As persons who had breached the sacred boundaries of the community by their refusal to honor the gods, the Christians were to be punished in an appropriate traditional manner.

Lactantius recounts the events:

When this day dawned . . . suddenly while it was still twilight the prefect came to the church with military leaders, tribunes, and accountants; they forced open the doors and searched for the image of God; they found the scriptures and burned them; all were granted booty; the scene was one of plunder, panic, and confusion.¹⁴⁴

Accordia Research Centre, 1996), 111–21; and idem, "Emperors, Nature, and the City: Rome's Ritual Landscape," *Accordia Research Papers* 4 (1994): 79–88. See also, Clifford Ando, "The Palladium and the Pentateuch: Towards a Sacred Topography of the Later Roman Empire," *Phoenix* 55.3–4 (2001): 369–85.

¹⁴¹ On Jupiter, see above, pp. 187–8.

¹⁴² Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 12.1.

¹⁴³ Scullard argues that the purpose of the rite was to foster feelings of neighborliness and restrain territorialism, but this is clearly inconsistent with its original purpose, which served to emphasize the importance of these boundaries for the well being of the community and to maintain the proper relationship with their guardian spirits. See the comments of H.H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic*, 80.

¹⁴⁴ Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 12.2; Eus. *H.E.* 8.2.4.

As Lactantius noted, Diocletian and Galerius deliberated for a long time over whether to burn the church as well.¹⁴⁵ To do so would have continued the pattern of ritualized profanation acted out in the bookburning and the pillaging of the building. But the church, situated on a high ground within view of Diocletian's palace, could not be burned because many large buildings surrounded it, so the emperor ordered it to be dismantled. "[T]he praetorians came in formation, bringing axes and other iron tools, and after being ordered in from every direction they leveled the lofty edifice to the ground."¹⁴⁶

The whole course of events that occurred there—the burning of the Scriptures, the desecration of the furniture and other objects found within the church, and its complete removal within the same day—functioned as a spectacular rite of purification. It purged the objects and place used by the Christians in Nicomedia and thereby purified the community of their irreligious contamination. It was mandated and presided over by the emperor himself and carried out by his legates. With its promulgation on the following day and thereafter throughout the empire, this ritual purge was to be replicated in cities and towns everywhere.

¹⁴⁵ Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 12.3–4.

¹⁴⁶ Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 12.5. The fact that the church was dismantled in the span of a single day may seem, at first glance, like dramatic hyperbole on the part of Lactantius. However, it is very likely to be the truth. To cite a recent example, on 6 December 1992 devotees of the Hindu god Ram destroyed the sixteenth-century Babri mosque in Ayodhya, which they claimed stood on the site of an earlier Hindu temple honoring Ram's birthplace. The event was the culmination of more than a decade of religious agitation and conflict between Hindus and Muslims throughout India. The participants accomplished the demolition of the large three-domed structure in less than six hours, armed only with simple hand tools. See Jan Platvoet, "Ritual as Confrontation: The Ayodhya Conflict," in *Pluralism and Identity. Studies in Ritual Behaviour*, ed. Jan Platvoet and Karel van der Toorn. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 187–226.

As noted above, the evidence for the bookburnings is particularly rich for Rome's African provinces, where Optatus, the Catholic bishop of Milevis, wrote a book detailing the origins of the Donatist schism during the Great Persecution and attacking the Donatist party more than sixty years after the persecution. To his work was later appended a dossier of documents that was assembled late in the reign of Constantine by the Catholic party, which pertained to the origins of the schism.¹⁴⁷ These writings make clear that the pattern acted out at Nicomedia was much the same in North Africa. On 19 May 303, the edict ordering the burning of Christian scriptures reached the province of Numidia.¹⁴⁸ On that day, the curator of the colony of Cirta, Munatius Felix, came to the private residence where the Christians were accustomed to meet. He ordered the bishop, Paulus, to surrender copies of the Scriptures. The bishop and other church officials who were present tried to evade the order, but eventually gave up one very large codex, as well as liturgical equipment (chalices, lamps, and other objects) and shoes and clothing for the poor, which were inventoried by the authorities. When empty chests were found in the bookroom, Felix pressed them for the whereabouts of other books. They claimed that others were in the possession of the lectors. These were also sought out one by one by the curator and, among the seven, they surrendered a total of thirty-five more books. The books were doubtlessly burned in compliance with the first edict, although this is not recorded. The bishop apparently died soon afterwards of natural causes. Other similar

¹⁴⁷ See Optatus of Milevis, *Against the Donatists*, trans. Mark Edwards. Translated Texts for Historians, vol. 27. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997).

¹⁴⁸ W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church. A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 4.

incidents must have occurred throughout Numidia. According to the Acts of the Council of Cirta, cited at the Council of Carthage in 411, four of the twelve bishops who attended this council, which was called to elect a successor to Paulus, admitted at this meeting to handing over copies of the Bible to authorities; one had actually thrown the Gospels into the fire, while another pretended to be blind in order to evade the order.¹⁴⁹ Elsewhere in Cirta, a man named Victor was compelled by the magistrate Valentianus to throw the gospels into a fire with his own hands.¹⁵⁰ By 5 June 303 the edict was also being enforced in Africa Proconsularis.¹⁵¹ Bishops of Furni, Zama, and Abitinae surrendered their Scriptures.¹⁵²

The bookburnings were not limited to the North African provinces. Elsewhere in 304, three Christian women, Agape, Irene, and Chione were brought to Thessaloniki with four others during the persecution in the East under Maximian. They had refused to eat sacrificial meat. Dulcitius, the Roman prefect, inquired, “Do you have in your possession any writings, parchments, or books of the impious Christians?”¹⁵³ When they refused to cooperate, Dulcitius sentenced them to be burned alive. Agape and Chione were, in fact,

¹⁴⁹ Aug. *Contra Cres.* 3.27.30 (= *P.L.* 43.510–11).

¹⁵⁰ Aug. *Cont. Cresc.* 3.27.30 (= *CSEL* 52), quoting the *Gesta concilii Cirtensis*. See also 3.29.33, the *Gesta apud Zenophilum consularem*, for additional details about the search for proscribed books in Cirta. See Opt. *App.* 1.17b–19a.

¹⁵¹ Date: W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 4.

¹⁵² Bishop of Zama: *Gesta Proconsularia*, p. 199.

¹⁵³ *The Martyrdoms of Saints Agapê, Irenê, and Chionê at Saloniki* 4. Unless noted, excerpts from this source are taken from *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, trans. Herbert J. Musurillo, 280–93.

executed in this manner, while Irene and the others were remanded because of their youth and one, who was pregnant. Irene was recalled and interrogated again the following day. Dulcitius spoke with her at length concerning the group's books, which had been uncovered: "It is clear from what we have seen that you are determined in your folly, for you have deliberately kept even till now so many tablets, books, parchments, codices, and pages of the writings of the former Christians of unholy name; even now, though you denied each time that you possessed such writings, you did not show a sign of recognition when they were mentioned."¹⁵⁴ He threatened her with being condemned to a brothel, but she maintained her defiance and was ultimately sentenced to die like the others. The writings, and the cabinets and chests in which they were found, were burned publicly. Irene was brought to the "high place" where her sisters had died before her and burned upon a huge pyre.¹⁵⁵

The centrality of the scriptures is evident at this time even in incidents where they were not burned. In 304, for example, at Catania in Sicily, an individual named Euplus, who was eager for martyrdom, walked to the entrance of the council chambers where the *corrector Siciliae*, Calvisianus, was in the midst of a hearing.¹⁵⁶ He presented himself to authorities as a Christian. His proof—personal possession of the Christian Gospels, which he carried before himself as he shouted aloud, "I am a Christian and I want to die

¹⁵⁴ *The Martyrdoms of Saints Agapê, Irenê, and Chionê* 5.

¹⁵⁵ *The Martyrdoms of Saints Agapê, Irenê, and Chionê* 6–7.

¹⁵⁶ *The Acts of Euplus* 1.1. Unless noted, excerpts from this source are taken from *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, trans. Herbert J. Musurillo, 310–19.

in the name of Christ.” Calvisianus ordered him to enter the council chambers and the governor immediately began to question Euplus at length about the book he held in his hands. The governor ordered Euplus to read from his book. “Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice’s sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “Whoever wishes to come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me.” Having read these and other words, Calvisianus asked Euplus what they meant. He explained that they were the laws handed down “by Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God.” Calvisianus promptly ordered him tortured. During the lengthy torture, the governor asked him, “Why did you retain these writings which the emperors have forbidden, and why did you not give them up?” He replied, “Because I am a Christian and it [is] forbidden to give them up. . . . Whoever gives them up loses eternal life.”¹⁵⁷ When he refused to relent under torture, the governor ordered Euplus to die by the sword. Led off to execution, his copy of the Gospels was hung about his neck in mute, but unmistakable, testimony. The herald proclaimed, “Behold Euplus, the Christian, an enemy of our emperors and our gods!”¹⁵⁸ Thus, the Bible had become a universal symbol of Christian belief, even for non-Christians. Hanging from his person, the book designated Euplus as a social outcast to be reviled and destroyed.

Although the literary evidence is not as thorough for some provinces as for others, the above accounts provide a sample of the sort of incidents which must have occurred throughout the empire during the first years of the persecution. Archaeological evidence

¹⁵⁷ *The Acts of Euplus* 2.1–2.

¹⁵⁸ *The Acts of Euplus* 3.2–3.

also attests to its impact. French archaeologists working in 1889 at Koptos (modern Quft) in Upper Egypt made the unusual discovery of a codex that had been hidden within the wall of a house there. The manuscript contained two treatises by the early first-century Graeco-Jewish philosopher Philo. Though Jewish, Philo was thoroughly Hellenized in outlook and was consequently rejected by later generations of Jews. The Christians, however, continued to consult his works, suggesting a Christian origin for the text. Further examination of the manuscript supported this supposition, including the use of abbreviations by the copyist that were purely Christian conventions at this time. Moreover, the cartonnage within the simple leather bindings of the codex was made from fragments of the Gospel of Luke, which had been torn into strips to be used as padding. Its manufacture led scholars to the conclusion that the text was made in the third or fourth century and that it derived from an archetype once in the library of Caesarea in Palestine. It was either copied in Caesarea in the third century C.E. or made in Egypt from a roll or codex from the Caesarean library. The reason for its concealment within the wall of the house must have been that the text, “[carrying] the undeniable stigma of the proscribed religion,” was hidden during the Great Persecution by an individual who feared prosecution for possessing the book and obviously never returned to reclaim it.¹⁵⁹

In the first two years of Diocletian’s persecution, while he still held imperial power, four edicts of increasing severity were handed down against the Christians. The first edict appears to have been the only edict of the persecution that was enforced

¹⁵⁹ Colin H. Roberts, *Buried Books in Antiquity*, Arundell Esdaille Memorial Lecture 1962 (London: The Library Association, 1963), 14.

everywhere.¹⁶⁰ The second, issued in the spring or summer of 303, imprisoned higher clergy.¹⁶¹ A third, offering release to those who sacrificed, was issued about the time Diocletian and Maximian celebrated the *vincennalia*, or twentieth anniversary of Diocletian's accession, the following autumn.¹⁶² Diocletian and Maximian celebrated the *vincennalia* in Rome beginning on 20 November 303, but Diocletian departed early from the festivities there and by winter had contracted an illness, which he was unable to overcome throughout much of 304. In the winter or spring of 304 a fourth edict, promulgated by Galerius, required all inhabitants of the Roman Empire to sacrifice or be punished with execution or forced labor.¹⁶³ In December 304, Diocletian briefly fell into a coma, but recovered sufficiently to appear in public by the following spring. On 1 May 305, Diocletian and Maximian simultaneously abdicated imperial power at their capitals of Nicomedia and Milan, bringing an end to the first Tetrarchy. Outside Nicomedia, on the hill where he had made Galerius his Caesar ten years earlier, before his assembled army and in the presence of a statue of his patron, Jupiter, Diocletian took off the mantle of purple and passed it on to Galerius and Maximin. Resuming his original name from private life, Diocles, he retired to his palace near Salona on the Adriatic coast. For Diocletian, the persecution and all the other difficulties of rulership were over; for the new Tetrarchs, the persecution would continue, in some regions as late as through the

¹⁶⁰ Stephen Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery*, 179.

¹⁶¹ Eus. *H.E.* 8.6.8–9. On the edicts of the Great Persecution, see G.E.M. de Sainte Croix, “Aspects of the “Great” Persecution,” *HTR* 47 (1954): 75–113.

¹⁶² Eus. *H.E.* 8.2.5; 8.6.9–10.

year 311, by which time the proponents of persecution had passed away and toleration was granted by Constantine and Licinius.

Although the bookburnings of the Great Persecution are just a part of the story of the Church's tragedy and triumph in this period, the evidence for this phenomenon in the persecution of Christianity sheds some light on its development in the Roman Empire. As with the suppression of occult practices such as sorcery, divination, and astrology discussed in Chapter 2, Christianity came to be regarded by many Romans as a barbaric novelty that endangered Roman society by leading people away from traditional practices and thereby jeopardizing the security and prosperity of the state. For this reason, Christians had come to be victims of local purges periodically throughout the period from the mid-first to the mid-third century, especially when crises or calamities seemed to suggest divine anger. Beginning in the later third century, the imperial government took on the role of promoting such purges of Roman society, and these attacks came to be more directly intended to eliminate the people and places that helped to sustain the Christian religion. However, books, which had come to play a central role in Christian worship, were never targeted by these persecuting authorities, despite the visible roles they played in the conversion of intellectuals and in all of the religious practices of Christians. With Diocletian, however, persecution came to include bookburning as a public demonstration of condemnation that struck at the very objects that seemed to facilitate the spread of Christian beliefs. It may be that the suggestion or inspiration to do so came from an intellectual, perhaps Porphyry, who had been a Christian and understood

¹⁶³ Eus. *Mart. Pal.* 3.1; *Vita Const.* 2.34.

the importance of texts to Christianity. This was, in fact, a very traditional form of public destruction that conformed to the emperor's own efforts to restore traditional religious practices.

CHAPTER 5

BURNING BOOKS IN THE CHRISTIAN ROMAN EMPIRE

This chapter assesses the use of bookburning in the period from Constantine to Justinian I. By not only tolerating Christianity but also supporting this religion with favorable legislation and financial and material assistance, Constantine and later emperors helped to transform the Church from a persecuted and illegal sect into a vibrant and powerful world religion. Bookburnings continued to be performed, now in support of Christianity rather than traditional Roman religion, and government officials came to use it against a wide range of rival religious beliefs. Ecclesiastical officials, monks, and even lay persons joined Roman authorities in burning books.

Part 5.1 examines acts of religious repression enacted by the emperor Constantine. In supporting the institutional Church, imperial legislation came to be enacted against many of the existing Christian groups that had opposed the claims to authority by the ecclesiastical hierarchy and held themselves aloof from the developing dogmas and canon of writings it authorized. Bookburning, and other methods of suppression that had been used by previous emperors against Christianity, came to feature prominently in actions against Christian groups now seen as a danger to the incipient Roman Christian establishment.

In Part 5.2, the discussion turns to the developing institutional Church and the use of bookburning in conflicts over internal theological issues, as well as personal vendettas among Christian clergy, during the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. The final section, Part 5.3, examines the continued use of bookburning during the fifth and sixth centuries C.E. and, in particular, by the emperor Justinian I.

PART 5.1: FORGING THE NEW ESTABLISHMENT

Bishop Eusebios of Caesarea (ca. 260–339 C.E.), our most important source for the reign of the emperor Constantine I, reports in his *Life of Constantine* that he received the following letter from the emperor in about 331 C.E.:

Victor Constantinus Maximus Augustus to Eusebios.

In the City which bears our name by the sustaining providence of the Savior God a great mass of people has attached itself to the most holy Church, so that with everything there enjoying great growth it is particularly fitting that more churches be established. Be ready therefore to act urgently on the decision that we have reached. It appeared proper to indicate to your Intelligence that you should order fifty volumes with ornamental bindings, easily legible and convenient for portable use, to be copied by skilled calligraphists well trained in the art, copies that is of the Divine Scriptures, the provision and use of which you well know to be necessary for reading in the church. Written instructions have been sent by our Clemency to the man who is in charge of the diocese that he see to the supply of all materials needed to produce them. The preparation of the written volumes with utmost speed shall be the task of your Diligence. You are entitled by the authority of this letter to the use of two public vehicles for transportation. The fine copies may thus most readily be transported to us for inspection; one of the deacons of your own congregation will presumably carry out this task, and when he reaches us he will experience our generosity.¹

According to Eusebios, these instructions were carried out and fifty well-made copies of the Christian scriptures in richly wrought bindings were produced and conducted to the emperor.

¹ Eus. *Vita Const.* 4.36. Unless otherwise noted, translations from this source are taken from Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

The difference of a few years is remarkable, and must have appeared no less so to many Romans, Christian or otherwise, during the reign of Constantine. Whereas Diocletian, as discussed above in Chapter 4, enacted a program to eradicate Christianity by seizing Church property, burning Christian books and writings, denying members legal rights, and executing them during the Great Persecution, all in the name of protecting proper religious observances, Constantine (ruled 306–337 C.E.) provided the Church with political tolerance and imperial benefaction. This change was to have monumental repercussions for the later course of Roman history as well as Western civilization. However, in a very real sense there remained tremendous continuity with the Roman past. As J. Rufus Fears explained, with Constantine, Christianity began to become absorbed into and transformed by the traditional framework of Roman imperial religion.² The emperor continued to be the earthly embodiment of the cosmic order, the chief mediator between the community and the divine, and the caretaker of the *pax deorum*, but with Constantine, Christ came to replace Jupiter as ruler of the universe.

How this great change occurred is fairly certain, but why it happened is still matter of speculation. Constantine first came to power as emperor in the regions of Spain, Gaul, and Britain on the death of his father, Constantius I, a member of Diocletian's tetrarchy, in 306 C.E. When Constantius died, he had been the senior emperor in the West for little more than a year. In the East, Galerius continued to rule as

² See J. Rufus Fears, "*Optimus princeps – Salus generis humani*: The Origins of Christian Political Theology," in *Studien zur Geschichte der römischen Spätantike: Festgabe für Professor Johannes Straub*, ed. Evangelos Chrysos. (Athens: Pelasgos Verlag, 1989), 88–105.

senior emperor until 311. On his deathbed, Galerius issued the edict that finally ended the Great Persecution.³ His territories were divided between Maximin Daia and Licinius, with whom Constantine became allied. In 312 C.E., Constantine invaded Italy and defeated his rival Maxentius, thereby acquiring rulership over Italy and Africa as well. The following year, Licinius defeated Maximin Daia and, thereafter, he and Constantine were the only claimants to imperial rulership. On 15 June 313, Licinius promulgated an edict (the so-called Edict of Milan) on behalf of the emperors granting toleration to all religions, including Christianity, and restoring Church property that had been confiscated during the persecution. During the next ten years an uneasy peace existed between Constantine and Licinius, but by 323 war had broken out. By 324, Licinius was forced to abdicate and Constantine was undisputed master of the Roman world.

During the nearly twenty years between his acclamation as emperor by his father's troops at Eburacum (modern York) in Britain in 306 and the defeat and death of Licinius, Constantine had come to hold a special relationship with the Christian God. This change seems to have begun following his victory over Maxentius and, in later years, it was reported that prior to the battle Constantine had a vision of a cross, which he ordered his troops to paint onto their shields.⁴ By the following year, Constantine

³ See Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 34. However, Maximin Daia and Licinius both continued to persecute Christians within their respective spheres of influence at later moments: Maximin between late 311 and 313 C.E. in his eastern territories; Licinius beginning in late 316 throughout the East. Licinius: T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 70–72 and 209–10; Maximin Daia: Oliver Nicholson, “The ‘Pagan Churches’ of Maximinus Daia and Julian the Apostate,” *JEH* 45.1 (January 1994): 1–10.

⁴ See Eus. *Vita Const.* 1.28.

convened a council of western bishops at Arles concerning the dispute that had been developing between the Catholic and Donatist parties in North Africa. Although this attempt to mediate a growing rift in Christian unity was a failure, Constantine continued to promote the welfare and unity of the Christian church, since he came to believe that a unified Christian faith was essential for preserving a unified empire. Christians received preferential treatment for official posts, and Constantine subsidized the repair of many churches damaged during the persecution and the building of others with funds from the imperial fisc.⁵

In the years during which Constantine was consolidating his power, another controversy erupted among Christians in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire. Whereas the Donatist schism grew out of the Great Persecution in North Africa, where many came to challenge the validity of sacraments performed by clergy who had cooperated with the authorities by sacrificing or surrendering Christian books, the Arian controversy arose out of a long line of speculations concerning one of the most basic theological questions confronting Christianity: how does one hold to the unity of God in a monotheistic sense while also recognizing the divinity of Jesus? Many answers had been offered previously, but no solution had universal appeal among Christians. While Alexander was bishop of Alexandria (ca. 312 to 338 C.E.), a popular Libyan priest by the name of Arius began to advocate doctrines concerning the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God the Father, namely that Jesus was a being created by God. Other clerics reported the substance of Arius's teachings to Alexander, who summoned him to a

⁵ See T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 210.

meeting and urged him to modify his teachings. Arius refused. Alexander convened a synod of bishops from Egypt and Libya, and they ultimately condemned Arius and others and expelled them from Alexandria. Both Arius and Alexander sought support from churchmen outside Egypt through letters and other writings. A council held later at Nicomedia overturned the previous verdict, and Arius returned to Alexandria and began to organize his followers. By 324, the congregations of Alexandria and many eastern cities had come to be divided into two parties over this issue and again Constantine attempted to intervene in the affairs of the Church for the sake of unity and order. The emperor called on his chief Christian advisor, Bishop Ossius of Cordoba in Spain, to go to Alexandria and present both parties with letters from the emperor urging them to put an end to their bickering, but the mission was a failure. Constantine himself called for a council of all the bishops to meet to decide the matter.

More than two hundred bishops from throughout the Roman Empire and beyond attended this first ecumenical council. Even before the proceedings were under way, numerous participants came to the emperor with written accusations and denunciations against one another. It was said that Constantine burned these documents without opening them.⁶ Rufinus of Aquileia, recounting the incident in his *Church History* (the first history of the Church to be written in Latin, in the early fifth century), called the emperor's actions a marvelous thing:

... seeing that these quarrels were hindering the most important business at hand, [he] set a certain day on which any bishop who thought he had a complaint to

⁶ See Sokrates Scholastikos, *H.E.* 1.8; Sozomen, *H.E.* 1.17; and Rufinus of Aquileia, *H.E.* 10.2.

make might submit it. And when he had taken his seat, he accepted the petitions of each. Holding the petitions together in his lap, and not opening them to see what they contained, he said to the bishops, “God has appointed you priests and given you power to judge even concerning us, and therefore we are rightly judged by you, while you cannot be judged by men. For this reason, wait for God alone to judge among you, and whatever your quarrels may be, let them be saved for that divine scrutiny. . . . Having spoken thus, he ordered that all the petitions containing complaints to be burned together, lest the dissension between the priests become known to anyone.⁷

In the hands of Constantine, fire would become a tool to promote Christian unity.

When the Council convened on 20 May 325, it set about the task of deciding on a new creed to resolve the troubling theological issue raised by Arius’s teachings, and within a month the delegates had created a creedal statement that excluded the Arian position. Arius and two Libyan bishops refused to sign and were promptly sent into exile. During the remainder of the synod, various other issues of administration and discipline were discussed and a list of canons, or declarations, were drawn up. The status of schismatics and heretics was one important issue. Groups who did not diverge on matters of doctrine, such as the Donatists and Novatianists, were treated with restraint, while those who advocated positions that deviated from that of the Council’s were condemned, their baptisms and clerical ordinations considered invalid.

After the Council, Constantine took steps to promote its decisions, including sanctioning the forcible suppression of heretical assemblies, such as gnostic and Montanist communities.⁸ Eusebios, in his *Life of Constantine*, recounts the emperor’s

⁷ Rufinus of Aquileia, *H.E.* 10.2; trans. Philip R. Amidon, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia, Books 10 and 11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 9–10.

⁸ Eus. *Vita Const.* 3.63–65. According to Eusebios, Constantine made a ban on all heresies at this point and ordered, in particular, that their meeting places were to be

repressive measures; he notes the special care taken to search out and seize writings belonging to these sects:

By the emperor's command, the haunts of the heretics were broken up and the savage beasts they harbored (namely, the chief authors of their impious teachings) driven to flight. . . . Since *the law instructed that their books should be searched out*, those among them practicing evil and forbidden arts were uncovered. . . .⁹

By these measures and others, it was clear that the conditions for Christians had changed dramatically—for some, a new age had dawned that was beyond their wildest dreams, for others, their worst nightmares.¹⁰ Whereas Christianity had existed, and even proliferated, as a despised and, at times, persecuted set of subcultures within the Roman Empire during the first through the early fourth centuries C.E., Constantine's toleration and support of the institutional Church allowed the ecclesiastical hierarchy to begin to take steps to eliminate forms of Christian belief and practice to which they had long been opposed, such as gnostic sects, like the Marcionites and Valentinians, and the Montanists.¹¹ With these thoroughly nonconformist Christians, there would be no

turned over to the Catholic Church immediately. They were henceforth forbidden from meeting either in public or private.

⁹ Eus. *Vita Const.* 3.64–66. [Emphasis added.]

¹⁰ Eusebios, who attended a banquet for the bishops held by Constantine at the close of the Council, which coincided with the emperor's *vincennalia*, stated that, walking amid the splendor of the palace and in light of the change of circumstances, it seemed as if “a picture of Christ's kingdom had thus been revealed, a dream rather than a reality.” Eus. *Vita Const.* 3.15.

¹¹ See Chapter 4 above, pp. 172–7.

reconciliation.¹² An edict of the emperor concerning these changes makes plain the emperor's intentions: "The privileges that have been granted in consideration of religion must benefit only the adherents of the Catholic faith [*Catholica lex*]. It is Our will, moreover, that heretics and schismatics shall not only be alien from these privileges but shall be bound and subjected to various compulsory public services."¹³ Of course, the application of this edict, or any edict, must have varied greatly from region to region and according to the inclination of the Roman official charged with carrying it out as well as that of the emperor himself.

This was not an isolated case. Within two years a council of bishops met at Antioch and reversed the decision of the Council of Nicaea regarding Arius's teachings. Shortly afterward, Arius and his followers met with the emperor and they were readmitted into the Church by a synod held at Nicomedia in late 327. Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, refused to reinstate Arius in his see, despite Constantine's urging. When he died in 328, his successor, Alexander's secretary and close advisor Athanasius, also declined to readmit Arius on the grounds that he had been declared a heretic by the

¹² As Stuart G. Hall explained, "What had begun as a voluntary association of individuals committed to God in Christ, bound by a common faith and the pooling of goods and led by mixtures of teachers, prophets and senior members, had evolved into a system which could pursue individuals with its sanctions across the length and breadth of the Empire, and was ready to become an instrument of that Empire as well as its new soul." See Stuart G. Hall, "The Sects under Constantine," in *Voluntary Religion: Papers Read at the 1985 Summer Meeting and the 1986 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, eds. W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood. (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 1–13, at 3.

¹³ *C.Th.* 16.5.1 (326 C.E.) [trans. Clyde Pharr, 450]. At about this same time, Constantine commissioned his principal eastern deputy, the praetorian prefect Strategius Musonianus, to make a search for Manichaeans in the East. See *Amm. Marc.* 15.13.

ecumenical council. Five years of mutual accusations and intrigues followed between them and their followers, but Athanasius remained unmoved. By 332, Arius became impatient and sent a petition to the emperor complaining about his situation. He gave Constantine an ultimatum: restore him to communion or he would found his own separate church.¹⁴

The emperor, enraged by Arius's threat, dispatched two imperial officials to Alexandria with letters for the bishops and people of Egypt and for Arius himself. Both were read publicly by the prefect Paterius in the governor's palace and their substance disseminated thenceforth throughout the region.¹⁵ The emperor proscribed the works of Arius, likening the Alexandrian presbyter to Porphyry of Tyre, that eloquent opponent of Christianity whose anti-Christian treatise had already been ordered burned, although that edict does not survive. Furthermore, he decreed: ". . . if anyone shall be detected in concealing a book compiled by Arius, and shall not instantly bring it forward and burn it, the penalty for this offense shall be death; for immediately after conviction the criminal shall suffer capital punishment. May God preserve you!"¹⁶ Although the imperially

¹⁴ T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 232.

¹⁵ T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 233.

¹⁶ The original edict proscribing the anti-Christian writings of Porphyry has not survived. However, the emperor's *Letter to the Bishops and the People*, recorded by Sokrates Scholastikos, alludes to its earlier promulgation: "Since Arius has imitated wicked and impious persons, it is just that he should undergo the like ignominy. Wherefore Porphyry, that enemy of piety, for having composed licentious treatises against religion, found a suitable recompense, as such as thenceforth branded him with infamy, overwhelming him with deserved reproach, *his impious writings also having been destroyed*; so now it seems fit both that Arius and such as hold his sentiments should be denominated Porphyrians, that they may take their appellations from those whose

legislated effort to burn Arian texts would soon cease for nearly fifty years with the shift of imperial favor from the theological position spelled out at the Council of Nicaea to the Arian party, Constantine's example would have far-reaching consequences for the use of bookburning in Late Antiquity. From his death in 337 C.E. until Justinian's in 565, his successors would explicitly order or otherwise act to destroy prohibited texts with fire on more than one dozen other occasions.

As discussed in this section, the bookburnings authorized and performed by the emperor Constantine during his reign occurred following his achieving supreme imperial power in 324. At that point he began take a more active role in issues related to the Christian Church. In all cases, Constantine used bookburning for reasons that were very similar to that of the ancient Roman magistrates and emperors, like Augustus and Diocletian, who sought by the burning of religious texts and other writings of a religious nature to preserve good relations with the divine and thereby insure the stability and prosperity of the Roman Empire. Constantine burned the writings of groups and individuals who threatened the unity of his chosen religion of empire, as these writings undermined the authority of its own sacred texts. However, the performative aspect of these burnings—where and how they occurred—lies beyond the evidence of the historical record. We cannot even say to what degree the emperor's wishes were carried out.

conduct they have imitated.” [Emphasis added.] Sokrates Scholastikos, *H.E.* 1.9.30–31; trans. A.C. Zenos, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second series, vol. 2. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 14; cf. Gelasius, *H.E.* 11.36.

By way of comparison, however, police actions against certain Graeco-Roman sanctuaries and temples were carried out during the same general period and are recorded in significant detail.¹⁷ The temple of Asklepios at Aigai in Cilicia, which as noted previously had been associated with Apollonius of Tyana, the Neopythagorean holy man whom Sossianus Hierokles and others had held up as a rival to Jesus during the recent persecution, was closed and partially demolished, its exterior colonnade carted away to adorn a church then under construction.¹⁸ Two temples to Aphrodite, one at Aphaca and the other at Heliopolis in Phoenicia, which were well known for their temple prostitution, were also destroyed about this same time (ca. 326 C.E.).¹⁹ At Mamre in Judaea, near Hebron, at the site of the famed Oak of Mamre, where tradition held that angels had appeared to the ancient Israelite patriarch Abraham, Constantine ordered Acacius, the *comes* of Palestine, to accomplish the demolition of an altar located there down to its foundations, stripping it from the land, and to consign to the flames every idol at the place.²⁰ It is certainly possible that the bookburnings occurring during Constantine's reign were likewise made into fiery spectacles for their propagandistic and religious impact. Nevertheless, in Christianity bookburning had found a new home.

¹⁷ See the thorough discussion of the evidence by Scott Bradbury, "Constantine and Anti-Pagan Legislation in the Fourth Century," *CP* 89 (1994): 120-139; and see John Curran, "Constantine and the Ancient Cults of Rome: The Legal Evidence," *G&R* 43.1 (April 1996): 68-80.

¹⁸ On the Asklepieion of Aigai, see above, pp. 117-9. See Eus. *Vita Const.* 3.55-6, 58; Sokrates Scholastikos, *H.E.* 1.18; and Zonaras, *H.E.* 13.12.30-34.

¹⁹ Sokrates Scholastikos, *H.E.* 1.18; Sozomen, *H.E.* 2.5.

²⁰ Eus. *Vita Const.* 3.53; Sokrates Scholastikos, *H.E.* 1.18; Sozomen, *H.E.* 2.5.

PART 5.2: HERESY, SCHISM, AND BOOKBURNING

Although the emperors and their agents after Constantine continued to authorize or even oversee bookburning personally as they had done in earlier times, members of the Christian ecclesiastical hierarchy soon joined them in burning books, first in cases of clerical discipline.

According to the synodal epistle of the eastern bishops from the Council of Serdica (modern Sofia) in 343 C.E., a Dacian bishop by the name of Paulinus was accused of practicing sorcery and incriminating texts were produced as evidence at this council.²¹ The bishop of Mopsuestia, Macedonius, was said to have burned them personally. This incident arose out of the Arian controversy, and it is impossible to determine whether the charge of sorcery was trumped up by Paulinus's Arian opponents. The epistle's purpose was to justify the Council's condemnation of the primary anti-Arian antagonists, including Ossius of Cordoba and Paulinus. However, the existence of the texts and their burning suggests that clergy were quite willing to police their own ranks and to destroy abhorrent texts by fire.

²¹ Hilarion, *Quindecim Fragmenta ex Opere Historico*, Fr. 3.27 [= *P.L.* 10.674C]; J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Paris: H. Welter, 1903), 3.137A.

Other, more systematic investigations for prohibited texts abounded in the following years. Alexandrian bishops, such as Athanasius and Dioscorus, are known to have inquired for condemned books in monastery libraries. In about 367, Athanasius wrote his thirty-ninth Festal letter condemning schismatics and heretics and their books. In the Pachomian monasteries, Theodore had the letter translated into Coptic to serve as a rule.²² Between 444 and 449 C.E., Bishop Dioscorus of Alexandria addressed a letter to Shenoute of Atripe and three bishops concerning a heretical former priest. The patriarch also commissioned the bishops to undertake a general round-up of heretical writings.²³

With the death of Valens at the battle of Adrainople and the accession of Theodosios I (ruled 379–395 C.E.), Nicene Christianity came to be the virtually exclusive legitimate religion of the Roman Empire. In the following years schismatic and heretical sects were proscribed repeatedly.²⁴ After his triumphal entry into Constantinople, Theodosios turned over the properties of the Arians to the Catholic Christians living in the city.²⁵ Other measures against the Arians there followed, and after an unsuccessful general conference of the sects in 383 C.E., the emperor, it was said, cast the declarations of faith by which they were to reconcile themselves to the Church into the flames.²⁶

²² See David Brakke, “Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria’s Thirty-Ninth *Festal Letter*,” *HTR* 87.4 (1994): 395–419.

²³ See Janet Timbie, “The State of Research on the Career of Shenoute of Atripe,” in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring, eds. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 269–70.

²⁴ *C.Th.* 16.5.6 (381 C.E.); 16.5.12 (383 C.E.).

²⁵ Sokrates Scholastikos, *H.E.* 5.7.4–8; Sozomen, *H.E.* 7.5.5–7.

The fate of other “Arian” books would be the same in the following years. In 398 C.E. Arcadius and Honorius ordered that the writings of Eunomios (as well as the Montanists), “be sought out and produced, with the greatest astuteness and with the exercise of due authority, and . . . be consumed with fire immediately. . . .”²⁷ By 428 C.E., when Nestorius became patriarch of Constantinople, Arianism had become a shadow of its former self. When the new bishop set about dismantling an oratory belonging to the Arians in the city, they were left with little to do but burn it themselves in stubborn defiance.²⁸ Other Christian groups faced similarly harsh persecution at his hands.

Although Nestorius was active in purging Constantinople of heretics from the very first days following his consecration, he soon brought himself under suspicion and censure when he came out in support of his private chaplain, Anastasios, who had condemned publicly the use of the term *Theotokos* (“Mother of God”) for Mary the mother of Jesus. Mary had already become a popular figure in Christian devotion and the term was widely used. One of his most vocal critics, Bishop Cyril of Alexandria (bishop 412–444 C.E.), charged Nestorius with denying the true divinity of Christ on this account. Both patriarchs began to marshal their supporters. Finally, the emperor called for an

²⁶ Sokrates Scholastikos, *H.E.* 5.10; and see W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Philadelphia, PA: SCM Press, 1982), 175. On the conference, see Thomas A. Kopecek, *The History of Neo-Arianism, Volume 2* (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979), especially 516–19.

²⁷ *C.Th.* 16.5.34.1, [trans. Clyde Pharr, 456]; cf. Philostorgius, *H.E.* 11.5.

²⁸ Sokrates Scholastikos, *H.E.* 7.29. “The ‘Arianism’ which had been so prominent and so powerful a feature of the Eastern empire throughout the fourth century had by the early years of the fifth century virtually disappeared from view.” Maurice Wiles,

ecumenical council to meet at Ephesos in June 431 to settle the matter. At the first session of the Council, which was packed with the supporters of Cyril, including Shenoute of Atripe, the delegates condemned and deposed Nestorius as a heretic.

Following his deposition at the Council of Ephesos, Nestorius was exiled, first to Petra in the Arabian Desert, and then later to the very frontier of the Roman Empire, to the Great Oasis in Egypt's western desert. Although banished from the theological life of the Church, Nestorius continued to defend his position in writing, publishing the *Tome of Heracleides* under a pseudonym. It was forbidden upon pain of death for anyone to read or recopy this book, which was to be sought out and burned.²⁹ Other related bookburnings followed. After the Council, Bishop Rabbula, who had supported Nestorius in opposition to Bishop Cyril of Alexandria, returned to his see, Edessa, in late 431 or 432 C.E. He convened a local synod that condemned Nestorius, John of Antioch, and Theodore of Mopsuestia, expelled the catechetical school from Edessa, and burned the writings of the theological associates of Nestorius—Theodoret of Cyrrhus and Andrew of Samosata. In 435 C.E., Theodosios II and Valentinian III commanded the public burning of the books of Nestorius and others.³⁰ The compounded effect of these actions and presumably others left unrecorded would be that many of these books ceased

Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 34.

²⁹ See Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325–787)* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1987), 163.

³⁰ See C.J. 1.1.3; J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Paris: H. Welter, 1903), 5.417.

to exist in Greek and Latin, while on the fringes of the Empire and beyond, copies of these writings continued to circulate in Syriac and other languages among Christians who were beyond reach by the Church and State.³¹

³¹ On the disappearance of many of the original Greek writings of Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and Nestorius, see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology, Volume 3: The Golden Age of Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicaea to the Council of Chalcedon* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960), passim.

PART 5.3: BROKEN TEMPLES, “FOUL BONES,” AND BURNING BOOKS

By the fifth century bookburning had come to be more and more closely associated with the concerns of the Christian Church, and had also come to be performed by its officials, even against the writings of non-Christians. Bookburning was one of a number of strategies of ritualized violence used in efforts of Christianization by both religious and secular authorities. Many incidents are well documented. We have already mentioned Porphyry, the bishop of Gaza, who received imperial approval for his campaign to eradicate traditional religion in his still primarily pagan see in 402 C.E.³² Many took part eagerly. The capstone of this program was the violent destruction of the fabulous Marneion and its desecration was a propagandistic triumph. As a church was erected there, the victors could not resist the temptation to replicate the impact of its destruction forevermore by paving the roadway before the newly holy site with the cella wall of its predecessor. Bookburning had also played a part. In the aftermath of the

³² See above, Chapter 2 above, p. 85–7; and see Gerard Mussies, “Marnas God of Gaza,” *ANRW* 2.18.4 (1986), 2412–57, at 2414–18. It is well known that bishops increased in terms of their temporal power in the 380s C.E. and following. See Garth Fowden, “Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire A.D. 320–435,” *JTS* (n.s.) 29 (1978): 53–78. Recent studies have indicated that bishops appropriated a broad range of ceremonies from civil and imperial contexts. See Raymond Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985); and more recently, Geoffrey Nathan, “The Rogation Ceremonies of Late Antique Gaul: Creation, Transmission, and the Role of the Bishop,” *C&M* 49 (1998): 275–303.

temple's destruction, Porphyry's enthusiastic partisans conducted door-to-door searches of nearby homes, producing numerous images and books. These were burned in bonfires, according to our source, Mark the Deacon, or thrown into public latrines.³³

Other examples illustrate the widespread use of forms of ritualized violence in the Late Antique period, and the part bookburning may have played in these actions. In 388 C.E., monks, under the instigation of a local bishop, destroyed a Jewish synagogue and a Valentinian gnostic chapel at Callinicum in Mesopotamia. They may have burned books, which both groups no doubt possessed, but Ambrose makes no reference to this.³⁴ John of Ephesos recounts in his *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, that a monk named Sergius of Kalesh (a village in the *territorium* of Amida, the metropolis of Roman Mesopotamia) led a band of twenty monks to burn down a Jewish synagogue there. John specifically mentions that Jewish sacred texts and other religious objects were destroyed in the fire.³⁵

Laws against heresy from the period, like one of 407 C.E. issued in the name of Honorius, stressed that measures against Manichaeans, Montanists, and other heretics be brought to the “fullest execution and effect,” and furthermore specifically granted

³³ Mark the Deacon, *Vita Porphyrii* 70–84.

³⁴ See Gregory Figueroa, *The Church and the Synagogue in St. Ambrose* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949).

³⁵ See John of Ephesos, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, ed. and trans. E.W. Brooks. (*Patrologia Orientalis* 17–19, Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1923–1926), 91.

Catholic bishops power to carry out these instructions.³⁶ An edict of 409 C.E. took much the same action against astrologers, ordering them to suffer deportation, “unless . . . the books of their false doctrine [be] consumed in flames under the eyes of the bishop. . . .”³⁷

The later persecution of heretical groups like the Manichaeans and the Montanists illustrates the widespread use of bookburning. The Manichaeans had been a feature of the Roman religious landscape since the end of the third century and, despite repeated assaults by Roman authorities and churchmen, Manichaean communities continued to exist. In Rome, a series of bishops took action to eliminate the continued presence of Manichaeans there during the fifth and sixth centuries C.E., beginning with Pope Leo I (*sedes* 440–61 C.E.), who seized and burned a large number of Manichaean books.³⁸ Pope Gelasius burned Manichaean books before the doors of the Basilica of Saint Mary [Santa Maria Maggiore]. Symmachus and Hormisdas followed suit in front of the Lateran (Constantinian) Basilica.³⁹ The personal connection that these bishops had with the place they chose to burn these books is interesting. Symmachus (*sedes* 498–514 C.E.) had been ordained Bishop of Rome at the Lateran Basilica on the same day that a rival, Laurentius, was ordained at Saint Mary’s. The resulting schism in the Roman see broke into a protracted and sometimes violent conflict, but by 506 Symmachus had prevailed. After

³⁶ *C.Th.* 16.5.43; *Const. Sirmond.* 12 [trans. Clyde Pharr, 458, 482–3]

³⁷ *C.Th.* 9.16.12 [trans. Clyde Pharr, 238]

³⁸ See Samuel N.C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 165.

³⁹ Gelasius: *Liber pontificalis* 51; Symmachus: *L. pont.* 53.5; Hormisdas: *L. pont.* 54.9.

his vindication, he burned Manichaean books and images before the church of his ordination and exiled members of the sect.⁴⁰ Symmachus and other bishops chose to burn these books in the vicinity of churches, which highlighted the connection between the place and the action of burning prohibited books. The bookburning no doubt served to enhance the holiness of the site, just as it served to proclaim the sanctity and authority of the bishop in whose name it was carried out.

The case of the Montanists also illustrates the sustained efforts of the Church and State to eradicate prohibited beliefs and the role bookburning played in this undertaking. Earlier laws and efforts had attempted to suppress the sect.⁴¹ Constantine had prohibited adherents of the New Prophecy from assembling in public or private, and had ordered their books burned.⁴² However, Montanist groups continued to exist and maintain contact with the Montanist mother church in Pepouza.⁴³ In the fourth century, the Montanists seem to have had a well-established ecclesiastical order, with at least one patriarch residing in Pepouza, bishops and other high clergy, as well as priests and deacons. Women continued to assume powerful positions within their ecclesiastical

⁴⁰ See *L. pont.* 53.1–6.

⁴¹ For a discussion of these incidents, see F.E. Volkes, “The Opposition to Montanism from the Church and State in the Christian Empire,” *Studia Patristica* 4 (1961): 518–26.

⁴² Eus. *Vita Const.* 3.65.

⁴³ Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 201. Trevett indicates that the evidence suggests that Pepouza was a sort of Montanist Mecca, from which paschal offerings were distributed to other Montanist communities elsewhere, and to which the sick came for healing purposes and for pilgrimage.

hierarchy. Montanist writings continued to play a part in the sect's religious practices along with other Christian books.⁴⁴ Although there is no good evidence to suggest that the sect continued to exist in the West (except at Rome) by the end of the fourth century, it certainly persisted in the East. However, its existence in the fifth and sixth centuries is limited largely to known efforts to eradicate it.⁴⁵

By the sixth century the assault had moved into the base of the sect's power in rural Phrygia. During the reign of Justin I (ruled 519–527 C.E.) an attempt was made to destroy the relics of the sect's founders, Montanus, Maximilla, and Priscilla, however, it was apparently unsuccessful.⁴⁶ A further, more decisive assault was made during the reign of Justinian, whose active persecution of a variety of religious creeds and beliefs is well known.⁴⁷ The emperor commissioned the Monophysite bishop John of Ephesos to carry out a series of campaigns in western Asia Minor aimed at forcibly converting the remaining non-Christians, Jews, and heretics during the 540s. According to his *Ecclesiastical History*, in the vicinity of Tralles alone he accomplished more than 70,000 conversions and erected ninety-nine churches.⁴⁸ In about 550 C.E., John proceeded to

⁴⁴ See Nicola Denzey, "What Did the Montanists Read?" *HTR* 94.4 (2001): 427–48.

⁴⁵ Christine Trevett, *Montanism*, 215: "The history of Montanism after the mid fourth century is largely the history of attempts to wipe it out as a heresy."

⁴⁶ See William Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 41.

⁴⁷ See J.A.S. Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power* (London: Routledge, 1996), 183–252.

⁴⁸ John of Ephesos, *H.E.* 3.36–37.

Pepouza, the sacred center of the Montanists, and there “put to shame and uprooted” the sect.⁴⁹ He took the relics of its founders from a marble tomb that, according to Michael the Syrian (whose long account of the incident was written much later, in the twelfth century), was sealed with lead and girded with iron plates, its detailed construction attesting to the sect’s continued presence and power in the region.⁵⁰ He revealed their remains to be nothing more than “foul bones” and burned them before the sect’s dismayed adherents. His associates also burned the Montanist books found there and purified one of the pre-existing structures, which became a church. Michael’s account suggests that it was purified by destroying part of the sanctuary by fire.⁵¹ According to Prokopios, who wrote his *Secret History* shortly after 550 C.E., some Montanist communities later resisted attempts to confiscate their churches, “incarcerating themselves in their sanctuaries, and immediately setting these temples on fire, so that they perished along with the buildings.”⁵² Nevertheless, at future synods, the town of Pepouza would eventually come to be represented by a bishop.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ps.-Dionysius of Tel Mahrē, *Chron.* 861; trans. R.A. Taylor; in William Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia*, 28–29.

⁵⁰ Michael the Syrian, *Chron.* 9.33.20–5.

⁵¹ “Presumably only a part of the sanctuary was burned, perhaps by “symbolic,” “ritualistic” burning: a purification by fire rather than total destruction. The most offensive elements within the sanctuary, such as Montanist relics and books, would have been destroyed totally.” William Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia*, 46.

⁵² Prokopios, *Hist Arc.* 11.14–23, at 23; see also Theophanes, *Chron.* A.M. 6214, for an alleged, but late, parallel incident.

⁵³ William Tabbernee, “Portals of the Montanist New Jerusalem: The Discovery of Peopuza and Timyon,” *J ECS* 11.1 (2003), 90.

Justinian, as sources note, also directed the general Amantius to search out and punish pagans, astrologers, Manichaeans, and heretics remaining in the city of Antioch in the late 550s. Here too, the punishment became a fiery spectacle. The guilty were paraded through the streets of the city; their books were burned in the *kyneqion* together with images of their gods.⁵⁴ The *kyneqion* was “a place for shows and spectacles” built by the emperor Valens, which has been tentatively located within the city itself, near the Forum of Valens.⁵⁵

Although a significant number of texts banned on religious grounds have disappeared, like authentic Montanist scriptures, bookburning does not appear to have been a particularly effective method for eradicating prohibited writings. The censure of the works of Porphyry, banned and burned under the emperor Constantine, as discussed above, was not sufficiently thorough to preclude an additional order to burn them issued by Theodosios II and Valentinian III in 448 C.E., more than one hundred years later.⁵⁶ Similarly, Origen’s writings, condemned in the third and fourth centuries and following

⁵⁴ John Malalas, *Chronographia* 491.

⁵⁵ See Glanville Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 407–10.

⁵⁶ The edict of 448 C.E., which condemned not only Porphyry’s writings but also any others that were in opposition to the Christian religion, was preceded by refutations by Apollonarius of Laodicea (ca. 370 C.E.) and Philostorgius (ca. 425 C.E.). The generality of this edict, like the earlier one of 435, could have allowed it to be used to destroy any number of an extraordinarily wide range of books. Its impact is unclear due to the paucity of the evidence. Edict of 435 C.E.: *C. J.* 1.1.3; Edict of 448 C.E.: *C. J.* 1.1.3; see also *C. Th.* 16.5.66.

by Church councils and imperial edicts, continued to be read and discussed.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, bookburning may have worked to drive many forbidden texts out of open circulation and, ironically, to preserve them for rediscovery and republication in the recent past. This is potentially the situation in which some of the most sensational modern textual discoveries were originally concealed for safekeeping, such as the Nag Hammadi codices and the texts of the Greek Magical Papyri.⁵⁸

Conclusions

As this discussion has indicated, bookburning became a prominent form of religious violence in the late Roman period. Forms of sacralized violence, like burning a forbidden book, became acts that were thought to be fundamentally pleasing to God and thus spiritually beneficial for their performers. Bookburning, because it was pleasing to God, came to be frequently performed by persons acting as representatives of Christianity and in the vicinity of churches, that is, on Christian sacred ground. In doing so, bishops, monks, and even committed laypersons accommodated an ancient rite that had always served the dual purpose of annihilation and purification. Much like the installation of a holy saint or martyr's relic, bookburning sanctified a place by providing an aura of

⁵⁷ In Gaul, Sidonius Apollinaris (ca. 430–480 C.E.) visited two villas near Nîmes. In one, he found an ample library of pagan and Christian works; in the other, he found educated persons discussing Augustine, Varro, Horace, and Origen, among others. *Sid. Apoll. Ep.* 2.9.4–5.

⁵⁸ See David Brakke, "Canon Formation and Social Conflict," 418; James E. Goehring, "Monastic Diversity and Ideological Boundaries in Fourth-Century Christian Egypt," *JECS* 5.1 (1997), particularly 79–84; Hans Dieter Betz, "Introduction to the Greek

Christian victory. So too, for individuals, bookburning heightened a Christian's holiness and helped to establish authority within the community of believers by providing a real demonstration of their commitment to the victory of Christianity over other beliefs.

Bookburning was a form of religious violence in Late Antiquity that was significant for its persuasive force, which even brought about conversions, and for its spectacular ability to redefine the world in the vision of its perpetrators. Although apparently more common in Late Antiquity than in earlier periods, this rite continued to be employed primarily in circumstances of crisis and conflict, sometimes empire-wide, at other times within a particular region or community, and at others still as a result of deeply personal religious convictions. The wealth of incidents from this period has allowed a gradual process of transformation to come into view, notable both for its continuity with the Roman past as well as change, reflecting the altered circumstances of the period.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation has investigated the ancient Roman practice of bookburning. The public destruction of religious writings by fire was a development of the Hellenistic period. It was in this period that strictly religious associations began to develop and writing was first becoming important for religious practices of many kinds, and for the dissemination of religious ideas. The earliest incidents of bookburning suggest that this action was taken from time to time against religious activities and practitioners that were outside of the supervision and control of Roman officials, who saw these novel and foreign practices as a threat to the proper religious observances that were believed to ensure the harmony with the gods upon which the security and stability of Roman society was dependent. To burn a forbidden book was, therefore, an act of piety on the part of the destroyer, who in this early period was invariably a representative of the state. It was commonly performed as a religious ritual and spectacle and care was taken to make certain that it was seen by the greatest number of witnesses.

During the period of the Roman Empire, further developments to the practice of bookburning occurred as this ritual came to be used by religious officials in intercommunal conflicts within the Graeco-Roman religious milieu. They were not

strictly representatives of the state. Bookburning became a method by which religious communities and authorities could express their power and opinions regarding their rivals and their beliefs. However, Roman emperors continued to authorize and even oversee bookburning for the same reasons as their predecessors.

With the rise of Christianity to the status of Roman state religion during the fourth century C.E., bookburning came to be an activity performed by a wide range of individuals, from imperial officials, to bishops and other Christian religious authorities, and even pious laypersons. The purpose of bookburning remained the protection of the harmony with the divine, but the locations and performers of these destructions came to associate this activity more and more with the interests of the Christian Church.

This is not to suggest that all Christians were comfortable with the appropriation of this pagan rite and spectacle, which, indeed, had consumed their own holy books during the Great Persecution. Of course, many did. Augustine, commenting on the destruction of the books of Numa in his work *The City of God*, argued that the Senate had rightfully destroyed these forbidden texts since they were not fit to become known by the people, the members of the Senate, or even the priests.¹ By destroying them they had ultimately prevented the state from being thrown into chaos. However, not all Christians would have agreed. Lactantius, also commenting on the destruction of the books of Numa, criticized bookburning as a suitable method for resolving religious problems, explaining:

That was done foolishly indeed, for to what advantage were the books burned when this very action, namely that they were burned because they were

¹ Aug. *De civ. D.* 7.34.

derogatory to religion, was memorialized? There was no one who was not very foolish, however; because the books could be destroyed, yet the affair itself could not be erased from memory. So while they wished to prove to posterity with what great piety they defended religion, they lessened the authority of that religion by their testimony.²

Such then is the ambiguous legacy of a very unambiguous ritual.

² Lactant. *Div. inst.* 1.22.5–8; trans. Mary Francis McDonald, in *The Divine Institutes, Books I–VII* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 89.

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