

**The Evolution of Early Christian Theology of Martyrdom in the Pre-Decian
Period: Collective Memory and Martyrological Interpretation of the New
Testament in Polycarp, Lyon, and Perpetua**

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Abstract

While early Christian martyrdom accounts had a profound impact on the formation, and success, of the primitive Church, it appears that before 250, the persecutions of Christians were ‘local and sporadic’ (Barnes, 1968). Historical approaches failed to explain these disparities between Christian and pagan sources and to answer questions such as ‘what is martyrdom?’, ‘what are the origins of martyrdom?’ and ‘why were the early Christians persecuted?’. As a result, recent studies have been focusing on more theoretical approaches. Following this trend, this thesis explores the origins of early Christian theology of martyrdom as a discursive creation forged in the collective memory of the first martyrdom accounts as well as in the martyrological interpretation of both New Testament texts and pagan narratives such as Socrates’s death. The first two chapters of the thesis are mostly introductory, the first chapter presenting an overview of the debates and challenges surrounding the study of early Christian martyrdom, and the second covering the methodological approach adopted in this thesis, namely discourse analysis and the collective memory theory. The following three chapters examine three early martyrdom accounts (the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Martyrs of Lyon* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*) in order to both highlight the different influences/discourses in the texts and reveal the evolution of the theology of martyrdom. In each case study, both Christian and pagan sources are scrutinised for the rudiments of a concept of martyrdom and its discourse, focusing on possible expressions of collective memory within these martyrdom accounts. This thesis thus contends that the martyrological interpretation of NT texts (Revelation in particular), and assimilation of these interpretations into the communities’ collective memory, provided an eschatological platform in which early Christian authors could inscribe their own experiences, shaping their reality, their narratives and ultimately, their identity.

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Introduction

Saluto cordialmente tutti voi, cari pellegrini [...] che è arrivata all'ultima tappa della staffetta solidale per sensibilizzare l'opinione pubblica sulle persecuzioni dei cristiani nel mondo. Il vostro itinerario sulle strade è finito, ma deve continuare da parte di tutti il cammino spirituale di preghiera intensa, di partecipazione concreta e di aiuto tangibile in difesa e protezione dei nostri fratelli e delle nostre sorelle, perseguitati, esiliati, uccisi per il solo fatto di essere cristiani. Loro sono I nostri martiri di oggi e sono tanti, possiamo dire che siano più numerosi che I primi secoli.

The quotation above is an excerpt from Pope Francis's speech delivered on Easter Monday, 6 April 2015, in reaction to the massacre of 148 people (most of them Christian students) at Garissa University in Kenya that occurred on 2 April 2015. In this powerful speech, the Bishop of Rome refers rather matter-of-factly to the 'persecuzioni dei cristiani' as a widespread and recurrent phenomenon and asserts that Christians around the world are 'perseguitati, esiliati, uccisi **per il solo fatto di essere cristiani**'. Pope Francis also remarks at the end of his message to his congregation that Christian martyrs today 'siano più numerosi che I primi secoli'. Christians throughout history have often drawn parallels between their current situation and that of the early Christians, and always attributed the persecutions they were suffering to their Christian identity. To illustrate this fact, Candida Moss boldly asserts that 'persecution has always been a part of being Christian' and that 'it is the idea that Christians are *always* persecuted that authenticates modern Christian appropriations of martyrdom'.¹ As a matter of fact, Pope Francis's speech about the persecution of Christians very much echoes the discourse of ancient Christian writers such as Eusebius (see *Historia Ecclesiae*, III, 33) or Tertullian.

Indeed, as many scholars writing on the subject of early Christian martyrdom like to point out, Tertullian famously asserted that *semen est sanguis christianorum*.² In the epilogue of his *Apologeticus*, Tertullian declares that it is the very determination of the pagans to annihilate the Christians that will ensure Christianity's victory over paganism. As Paul Keresztes puts it, instead of an appeal for clemency towards the Christians, Tertullian's epilogue is 'a glowing *display* of the triumph of the Christian martyr, coupled with the total fiasco of the persecutions'.³ Interestingly, Tertullian does not use the word 'martyr' here, yet this quote is often mis/overtranslated as 'the blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the Church'. Writing at the

¹ C. Moss, 2013. *The Myth of Persecution, How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 13.

² Tertullian, *Apologeticus pro Christianis*, 50. *plures effimur, quoties metimur a vobis; semen est sanguis christianorum*; 'we multiply whenever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is seed'.

³ P. Keresztes, 1966. 'Tertullian's *Apologeticus*: A Historical and Literary Study'. *Latomus*, 25 (1), pp. 124-133, 129. (italics are author's emphasis).

end of the second century to a pagan audience, Tertullian adapted his vocabulary to his intended recipients,⁴ however, to a modern reader, the word ‘martyr’ would be both familiar and meaningful. As illustrated by Pope Francis’ words, in today’s consciousness, early Christianity, Roman persecutions, and martyrdom are undeniably closely interconnected. The profusion of Martyrs Acts (*Acta Martyrum*), many (if not most) of them fictional, written during both the Roman Empire era and through the Middle Ages no doubt contributed to the idea that the early Church was constantly persecuted and lost countless members to martyrdom, making persecution and martyrdom a focus point in Christian history. However, from a historical point of view, it has been shown that the persecutions of Christians under the Roman Empire were ‘local, sporadic and random’,⁵ at least until ‘Decius’s persecution’ in 250 which, although not directed at Christians, highly affected them.⁶ Early Christian writers like Tertullian or Justin, and authors of the earliest martyrdom accounts, therefore, appear to depict a different reality for their communities, where persecutions were widespread and martyrs were numerous. Very rapidly, a martyrdom discourse praising the martyrs and exhorting early Christians to follow their example arose along with a theology of martyrdom that imbued the martyrs with special powers, to the point that by the end of the fourth/beginning of the fifth century, Augustine had to intervene to moderate the so-called ‘cult of the saints’.⁷ It is easy to understand why these early accounts engendered so much enthusiasm as they often contain vivid descriptions of the martyrs’ ordeals and depicts the martyrs as noble contestants, fighting for Christ and eternal life.

⁴ Keresztes, ‘Tertullian’s *Apologeticus*’, 129-130.

⁵ T. D. Barnes, 1968. ‘Legislation Against the Christians’. *The Journal of Roman Studies*. 58 (1-2), pp. 32-50.

⁶ In 250, Decius ordered all inhabitants of the Roman Empire to perform a sacrifice to the Roman gods (except for the Jews who were exempted as Judaism was a *religio licita*). Those who performed the sacrifice were issued with a ‘*libellus*’, a certificate to prove the sacrifice had been done. It was perceived as a persecution against the Christians, even though there was no requirement to deny Christ in the edict, but opposing the edict was punishable by death; this edict led to the first mass scale executions of Christians throughout the Empire and is considered by many scholars as the beginning of persecutions of Christians by the Romans. This episode in early Christian history posed several problems to the primitive Church as so many lapsed or fled, like Cyprian, to avoid death or apostasy.

⁷ See *Sermon 273* especially: ‘The martyrs hate your flagons, the martyrs hate your roasting pans, the martyrs hate your drunken revel. I am saying this without wishing to insult those who are not that sort; those who do such things can apply what I’m saying to themselves. The martyrs hate these things [...]. But they hate it much more if they are themselves worshiped’ (*Sermon 273,8*; translation by E. Hill). Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430), one of the most influential early Christian theologians, wrote one hundred and twenty-five sermons concerning martyrs and read their stories during mass, attesting that, even though the time of the persecutions was over, the martyrs were not only still seen as heroes of the Christian faith, but their stories were an integral part of the liturgy. However, as Augustine’s *Contra Faustum* (XX,21) shows, the enthusiasm of early Christians for the martyrs was problematic as it engendered a pagan-like worship of the martyrs (sharing meals with the martyrs on their tombs for example, which is reminiscent of the pagan practice called *refrigerium*). E. Rebillard, 2017. *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press, 25-26, see also P. I. Kaufman, 1994. ‘Augustine, Martyrs, and Misery’. *Church History* 63 (1), pp. 1-14, 3.

However, as we shall now see, this martyrdom discourse, born from (and based upon) both Christian and non-Christian traditions have led some scholars (ancient and modern) to doubt the authenticity of the accounts. Until recently, the study of early Christian martyrdom was very much historically led, with little place awarded to the literary analysis of these accounts. The formats of these narratives (letter, diary, trial report) certainly substantiates such a pragmatic approach and anything inconsistent is either awkwardly (and mostly unconvincingly) explained or simply dismissed as a later edition or even forgery. Regrettably, these unsatisfying conclusions, which leave us with no reliable accounts on early Christian martyrdom, seem to overlook the fact that these accounts were written (or so they claim) by people who had just experienced a very traumatic ordeal. The writing process behind early Christian martyrdom narratives was therefore necessarily impacted by what had been witnessed (and/or experienced) by the authors and their communities. In this light, it seems odd to expect a perfectly accurate, objective, and neutral report of the events witnessed by these early Christian authors. Therefore, these narratives cannot be interpreted as historical reports but must be seen as both personal and collective recollections of events, influenced by many factors such as the purpose of the account, the audience targeted but, above all, the context in which it was written.

Indeed, as advanced by the ‘collective memory’ theory, historical narratives do not reflect the reality, but are shaped by the interpretation of past events by a community in a similar situation and influenced by the social environment in which it evolves. In other words, the early martyrdom accounts deemed authentic by scholars reflect the authors’ reality, how they interpreted the persecutions and martyrdoms, both in the light of their understanding of their own circumstances and that of past narratives. Unsurprisingly, in the case of early Christian martyrdom accounts, the interpretation of the persecutions suffered by the communities is mainly based on New Testament (NT) texts. However, as I will demonstrate in this thesis, the martyrological interpretation of NT texts, incorporated within the martyrdom accounts themselves, both allowed a rapid evolution of the theology of martyrdom and substantiated the martyrdom discourse used by early Christian writers and, in turn, integrated the Christian collective memory to this day, as illustrated by Pope Francis’ speech.

Consequently, in this thesis, I look at the process of assimilation of ideas and concepts into the collective consciousness of early Christian communities by investigating three of the earliest Christian martyrdom accounts (Polycarp, Lyon, and Perpetua) -without dismissing the problems of historicity and authenticity- but focusing mainly on the aspect of ‘collective memory’. This thesis thus contends that the martyrological interpretation of NT texts

(Revelation in particular), and assimilation of these interpretations into the communities' collective memory, provided an eschatological platform in which early Christian authors could inscribe their own experiences, shaping their reality, their narratives and ultimately, their identity. The first chapter briefly introduces the origins of martyrdom while the second chapter touches upon the concepts of cultural/collective memory and discourse analysis, which will be used as methodology to analyse and interpret early martyrdom accounts. The third chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the earliest martyrdom account, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. The study of this text will focus on the following points: 1. Source, dating, and authorship of the text, 2. the internal issues/discrepancies within the text and the debates about the issue of authenticity, 3. the vocabulary/imagery used by the author and the message/purpose of the text, 4. the influences, sources and themes of the text. The following chapters will look at the evolution of the theology of martyrdom in the few decades following the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* within two major martyrdom narratives: the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon*, and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, similarly addressing the issues of provenance and authenticity of the texts, as well as focusing on the imagery and influences.

Chapter 1. What is ‘Martyrdom’?

The origins of both the word ‘martyr’ and the concept of martyrdom itself are contentious and must be clarified before digging further into the martyrdom accounts. Therefore, we shall first briefly investigate the origins of early Christian martyrdom.

1.1 Origins of the Word *μάρτυς*

The Oxford English Dictionary⁸ mentions that the modern use of the word ‘martyr’ was first coined by early Christians and gives a succinct (but particularly Christian) definition as follows:

Eccl. The specific designation of honour (connoting the highest degree of saintship) for: one who voluntarily undergoes the penalty of death for refusing to renounce the Christian faith or any article of it, for perseverance in any Christian virtue or for obedience to any law or command of the Church.

While there are examples of people branded as martyrs in recent times, both secular such as Jean Moulin, ‘héros et martyr’ of the French Résistance,⁹ or Matthew Shepard, who became an icon to anti-LGBTQ hate crimes activists,¹⁰ and religious, like for example Cassie Bernall, one of the victims of the Columbine Massacre,¹¹ few of them show the voluntariness (or even intention) so characteristic of the early Christian martyrs, prompting the need for a more modern, wider ranging definition:

One who undergoes death (more loosely one who undergoes great suffering) on behalf of any religious or other belief or cause, or as a consequence of his devotion to some object; one who dies a victim; (hyperbolically) one who suffers tortures comparable to those described in the legends of martyrs, a constant sufferer.

Etymologically, the word ‘martyr’ and its derivative ‘martyrdom’ come from the ancient Greek *μάρτυς, μαρτύριον, μαρτύρια* and *μαρτυρεῖν* which had the meaning of (respectively) ‘witness’,

⁸ J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (eds), 1989. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, volume IX. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁹ Jean Moulin was arrested in Lyon in 1943 by the Gestapo and tortured by Klaus Barbie. He is frequently referred to as ‘héros et martyr’ (Monument Jean Moulin in Chartres). He became the emblem of the French Résistance and its martyrs.

¹⁰ Matthew Shepard was attacked in October 1998 in Wyoming, USA. He was tied to a fence and left for dead by two men after he allegedly made sexual advances to them. P. Middleton, 2020. ‘The Scarecrow Christ: The Murder of Matthew Shepard and the Making of an American Culture Wars Martyr’. I. Saloul and J. W. van Henten (eds), *Martyrdom: Canonisation, Contestation and Afterlives*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 181–202.

¹¹ Cassie Bernall was a student at Columbine High School, Colorado. During the attack perpetrated by two other students in April 1999, one of the shooters allegedly asked Cassie if she believed in God, after reportedly answering ‘yes’, he shot her to death. This story, however, has been called into question because of discrepancies between the different eye-witnesses’ accounts. J. Watson, 2002. *The Martyrs of Columbine: Faith and the Politics of Tragedy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

‘testimony’ (‘proof’), ‘evidence’ and ‘to bear witness’.¹² These terms were used mainly in judicial contexts. *μαρτυρέω*, can also be interpreted as ‘to bear witness in favour of’ or even ‘to bear favourable witness to, give a good report of’. Therefore, unless otherwise stated, *μάρτυς* and its derivatives not only bear positive connotations that reflect on the witness but also imply a sense of truthfulness (proof, evidence). Moreover, *μαρτύρομαι* can sometimes be translated as ‘call to witness or invoke’, especially in relation to the gods,¹³ or ‘to protest, asseverate a statement on oath’. The term then already sometimes had a relation to the divine, although in that case the gods are the witnesses.

Although most scholars agree that the term *μάρτυς* and its derivatives are never used in the New Testament in the meaning of ‘dying or suffering for a cause’,¹⁴ there are some instances which foreshadow its present religious sense. Indeed, the word *μάρτυς* and its cognates are by no means absent from the New Testament. Peter, for example, emphasises the role of those who witnessed Jesus’s death and resurrection and their duty to testify:

not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses (*μάρτυσι*) [...] He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify (*διαμαρτύρασθαι*) that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:41-42).¹⁵

Peter’s use of *μάρτυς* here is in the traditional judicial sense but in a religious, cosmological context: the apostles testify to both Jesus’s acts on earth and to his status in heaven. This passage thus stresses the importance of bearing witness, testifying for God, likening the status of Christian to that of a witness.

The First Letter of John also certainly makes use of the word *μάρτυς* many times in the sense of ‘testimony’ (*μαρτυρία*). Here, John explains that Jesus is God’s testimony for the humans, the proof of his existence and his love for humanity:

If we receive human testimony (*τὴν μαρτυρίαν τῶν ἀνθρώπων*), the testimony of God (*ἡ μαρτυρία τοῦ θεοῦ*) is greater; for this is the testimony (*ἡ μαρτυρία*) of God that he testified to his Son (*μεμαρτύρηκεν περὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ*). Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts (*τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἐν αὐτοῖς*). Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son (*τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν μεμαρτύρηκεν ὁ θεὸς*). And this is the testimony (*ἡ μαρτυρία*): God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:9-11).

John thus asserts that God’s testimony is within the true Christian, that it becomes part of the believer. While there is no question of witnessing in this passage, it still shows that early

¹² T. D. Barnes, 2010. *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 12.

¹³ Liddell and Scott Greek Lexicon, 9th ed. 1996. See Euripides, *Medea*, 620 or *Hippolytus*, 1451 for examples of this usage.

¹⁴ Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 13.

¹⁵ All Bible translations are from Holy Bible, NRSV Anglicized edition, 2008.

Christians did not strictly use *μάρτυς* in a judicial context but rather linking it to being part of their Christian beliefs and duties. Yet these occurrences of *μάρτυς* do not associate the act of witnessing with sufferings and death.

However, in Acts 22:20, Paul, in his defence speech, recalls his implication in Stephen's death, connecting the suffering of Stephen with his status of *μάρτυς*: 'And while the blood (*τὸ αἷμα*) of your witness (*τοῦ μάρτυρός σου*) Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him'.¹⁶ Similarly, Acts 23:11 anticipates Paul's death in Rome and relates his death to the act of witnessing: 'Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me (*διεμαρτύρω περὶ ἐμοῦ*) in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome (*εἰς Ῥώμην μαρτυρήσαι*).'

Revelation also contains a few occurrences of the word which, when associated with the death of the 'witness', can prefigure 'martyrdom' in its later sense. The reference to Antipas' execution in Rev 2:13, as in Acts, relates the killing of Antipas to his witness condition: 'and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one (*Ἀντιπᾶς ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός μου*), who was killed among you'. One striking example of the use of *μάρτυς* in Revelation is in 17:6 where John recounts his vision of Babylon the Great: 'And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints (*ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν ἁγίων*) and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus (*καὶ ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν μαρτύρων Ἰησοῦ*)'. Revelation 6:9 similarly uses the term *μάρτυς* in a context of great suffering and death for the belief in God: 'When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony (*τὴν μαρτυρίαν*) they had given'.¹⁷ Although in this case the act of witnessing is one of the reasons of the followers of Jesus being slain, it is possible that the connection between the two actions and the several occurrences of these connections might have led to the creation of a new meaning for the word *μάρτυς*.¹⁸

However, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c. 155-160) is often considered as the earliest Christian martyrdom account as it is the first text to present 'clear and indubitable attestation of the new

¹⁶ Interestingly, the Liddell & Scott Greek Lexicon cites this passage as an example of the use of *μάρτυς* in the sense of 'martyr'.

¹⁷ See also Rev. 11:1-14 as well as Rev. 2:10, 14:13 and 20:4 for rewards after suffering and dying for the name of God.

¹⁸ Although it has been the general consensus not to translate the term *μάρτυς* as martyr in Revelation, Middleton convincingly shows that the recurring theme of martyrdom and the repeated use of the term in connection to Christians who died for their faith allows such a translation. P. Middleton, 2018. *Violence of the Lamb, Martyrs as Agents of Divine Judgement in the Book of Revelation*. London: T&T Clark, 110.

meaning’ of the word *μάρτυς*.¹⁹ The first words of this account written in the form of a letter to the Church of Smyrna are indeed very clear: ‘We write to you, brothers, of the events concerning the martyrs and the blessed Polycarp, who ended the persecution, having sealed [it], as it were, with his martyrdom.’²⁰ The term ‘martyrdom’ seems to be already known and used as a matter of course in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. The reason for this could be found in the *Letter to the Ephesians*, written by Ignatius of Antioch around 110/140 CE, which contains a sentence (1) much argued by scholars because it might have contained the word ‘martyrdom’.²¹ However, whether Ignatius wrote *ἵνα διὰ τοῦ ἐπιτυχεῖν* or *ἵνα διὰ τοῦ μαρτυρίου ἐπιτυχεῖν*,²² the idea of martyrdom is definitely present in his letters. It is especially explicit in the *Letter to the Romans* (5) where Ignatius fervently expresses his desire to die for Christ: ‘Fire, cross, beast-fighting, hacking and quartering, splintering of bone and mangling of limb, even the pulverizing of my entire body – let every horrid and diabolical torment come upon me, provided only that I can win my way to Jesus Christ’.²³ Ignatius, then, undoubtedly participated in the creation (or at least the spread) of the idea of Christian martyrdom by using this martyrdom discourse, if not the word itself, which means that this notion had already surfaced before 140 CE (at the latest).

1.2 Origins of the concept of martyrdom

This late coining of the term *μάρτυς* by early Christians raises the problem of concept and origins of martyrdom. There are two main views on the subject, quite radically opposed, which dominate this scholarly debate. On the one hand, the most commonly accepted ‘Frend thesis’, as it is sometimes referred to, supports the idea that Christian martyrdom is only a ‘prolongation’ of Jewish martyrdom. Frend states in his famous *Martyrdom and Persecution in*

¹⁹ Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 19.

²⁰ *Ἐγράψαμεν ὑμῖν, ἀδελφοί, τὰ κατὰ τοὺς μαρτυρήσαντας καὶ τὸν μακάριον Πολύκαρπον, ὅστις ὡσπερ ἐπισφραγίσας διὰ τῆς μαρτυρίας αὐτοῦ κατέπαυσεν τὸν διωγμὸν. Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1.1. Translation of the text from P. Hartog, 2013. *Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 241-271. See also 2.1, 13.2, 17.1, 18.3 and 19.1 for occurrences of the word martyr and its derivatives in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

²¹ Frend dates Ignatius’ martyrdom circa 107 following Eusebius’ dating of the letters, while Barnes sees this date as too early since the letters seem to refer to Valentinus and one of his disciples. The letters could not then have been written before c. 140. See Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 194, and Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 15.

²² ‘so that by attaining martyrdom’. See Barnes on the ‘Middle Recension’ debate on the authenticity of the Letters, a debate which seems to have been settled by Zahn and Lightfoot who suppressed *μαρτυρίου* from the text. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 15-18.

²³ *πῶρ καὶ σταυρὸς θηρίων τε συστάσεις, ἀνατομαί, διαιρέσεις, σκρπισμοὶ ὀστέων, συγκοπή μελῶν, ἀλεσμοὶ ὄλου τοῦ σώματος, κακαὶ κολάσεις τοῦ διαβόλου ἐπ’ ἐμὲ ἐρχέσθωσαν, μόνον ἵνα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐπιτύχω* (translated by M. Staniforth).

the Early Church: ‘Without Maccabees and without Daniel, a Christian theology of martyrdom would scarcely have been thinkable’.²⁴ On the other hand, a more controversial point of view is advanced by Bowersock. Bowersock indeed affirms at the beginning of his first lecture on ‘The Making of Martyrdom’:²⁵

Martyrdom was not something that the ancient world had ever seen from the beginning. What we can observe in the second, third, and fourth centuries of our era is something entirely new. [...] Martyrdom, as we understand it, was conceived and devised in response to complex social, religious, and political pressures...²⁶

Bowersock dismisses any assumption of Jewish or Greek roots to martyrdom and argues that the ‘martyrdom episodes’ in 2 and 4 Maccabees (Eleazar and the mother and her seven sons), which are often cited as proof of Jewish martyrdom, are actually passages added retrospectively under the Roman Empire, possibly contemporary to the New Testament texts,²⁷ a period during which, as we have seen earlier, the Christian concept of martyrdom seems to have arisen. As Trumbower notes in his review of *Martyrdom and Rome*, Bowersock’s dating of 2 Maccabees 6-7 at around 50-70 AD seems far reaching, as it is mainly based on the absence of reference to the Second Temple in Jerusalem, and is rejected by most scholars (the commonly accepted date is 2nd century BC).²⁸ Bowersock also discards Daniel and the story of the three youths as a proof of Jewish martyrdom as for him ‘the story of the fiery furnace had a happy ending and hardly constitutes anything like martyrdom, despite claims that it does’.²⁹ Shmuel Shepkaru agrees with Bowersock but argues that ‘their marvellous survival is precisely the book’s central theme: God can marvellously save the righteous from the most precarious situation’ and therefore it is retrospectively and ‘nostalgically’ that later Jews and the first Christians interpreted this text as an example of martyrdom.³⁰ Moreover, even though Daniel can hardly be treated as a ‘martyr text’ in its conventional sense due to its obvious supernatural nature (the three youths are ‘unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth man has the appearance of a god’, Dan. 3:25), its interest resides in its message of hope and courage to those who are actually experiencing religious persecution, and thus represents a

²⁴ W. H. C. Frend, 2008. *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*. (First published in 1965) Cambridge: James Clark & Co. Ltd, 65.

²⁵ First lecture of four given in May 1993 at the Queen’s University in Belfast, published in 1995 under the name *Martyrdom and Rome*.

²⁶ G. W. Bowersock, 1995. *Martyrdom and Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 5.

²⁷ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 7-13.

²⁸ J. A. Trumbower, 1997. ‘Review of *Martyrdom and Rome* by G. W. Bowersock’. *The Journal of Religion*, 77, 1, pp. 128-129, 128.

²⁹ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 7.

³⁰ S. Shepkaru, 2005. *Jewish Martyrs in the Pagan and Christian Worlds*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 9-10.

model of ‘resistance literature’.³¹ In addition, Daniel’s influence on early Christian texts, including the New Testament, and its contribution towards early Christian theology cannot be underestimated. Indeed, Daniel is the first Hebrew Bible book to express explicitly the belief in the Resurrection of the Dead and reward after death, both pivotal doctrines of Christianity.³² Nonetheless, while a pre-Christian concept of martyrdom in Judaism seems difficult to ascertain, martyrdom is by no means alien to later Judaism (especially because of the Jewish revolts against Rome),³³ which, as 4 Maccabees suggests, might be the evidence for a parallel development rather than a direct influence of one on the other.

Regarding the possible Greek origins of the concept of martyrdom, Droge deplors that Bowersock minimised philosophical influence on some of the Church Fathers such as Tertullian or Justin Martyr who were in favour of voluntary death, inspired by Socrates’s death,³⁴ or Clement who held a more moderate view of martyrdom, as did the Platonic tradition itself.³⁵ Conversely, Bowersock highlights the role of Roman thoughts and culture in the emergence of early Christian martyrdom as he asserts that martyrdom can only be a Christian concept induced by the ‘*mores* and structure of the Roman Empire [...] its traditions, its language and its cultural tastes’.³⁶ Rome also played an important inspiring role for early Christians:

Without the glorification of suicide in the Roman tradition, the development of martyrdom in the second and third centuries would have been unthinkable. The hordes of voluntary martyrs would have never existed. Both Greek and Jewish traditions stood against them.³⁷

³¹ Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrs*, 11.

³² ‘Your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt’ (Dan. 12:1-2).

³³ The First Revolt (66-73) saw many casualties on the Jewish side and the destruction of the Temple in 70; the Second Revolt/Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-136) was disastrous to the Jewish communities of Judea (580,000 dead according to Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, book 69, 12.1-14.3).

³⁴ Because of numerous similarities between Socrates’s trial and that of early Christian martyrs (accusations of atheism and corruption of the mind of others, Socrates’s willingness to die rather than recant or go into exile, Socrates’s joyful attitude towards death...), Socrates’s death is often referred to by early Christian apologists as the example of pagan noble death/martyrdom *par excellence*. Justin Martyr even goes as far as calling Socrates a Christian in his *First Apology*, XLVI. (See also Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, V and *Second Apology*, X).

³⁵ A. J. Droge, 1997. ‘Review of Martyrdom and Rome by G. W. Bowersock’. *Classical Philology*, 92, 3, pp. 292-295, 295. Platonism only allowed suicide in specific circumstances such as unavoidable personal misfortune, extreme shame and judicial order, See Plato, *Laws IX*, 873 c-d. In the *Phaedo* (61c-69 e), Socrates discusses the ambiguous relationship philosophers have with death. Indeed, Socrates enigmatically tells his friends that a good philosopher should seek out death but not commit suicide as it is forbidden. Socrates first argues against suicide as humans belong to the gods; unless the gods send a sign to indicate that suicide is the only appropriate course of action, suicide is forbidden (“‘So if you look at it in this way, I suppose it is not unreasonable to say that we must not put an end to ourselves until God sends some compulsion like the one which we are facing now.’” *Phaedo*, 62 c). Socrates then proceeds to explain that, because of the body, the soul of the philosopher cannot access to the truth, it is then reasonable for a good philosopher to seek out death and not be afraid of it. (“‘Then it is a fact [...] that true philosophers make dying their profession, and that to them of all men death is least alarming.’” *Phaedo*, 67e)

³⁶ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 28.

³⁷ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 72-73.

There are, indeed, many examples of Stoic philosophers being executed or ordered to commit suicide in the history of the late Republic/early Roman Empire. Their intransigence towards tyranny and their highly developed idealism of freedom often pushed them to oppose the Roman authority.³⁸ Cicero for instance justifies Cato's suicide by his wisdom, as a rational act *vis-a-vis* his situation after Caesar's triumph. Seneca also considered Cato's suicide as a most noble act regarding the circumstances and saw suicide as the only way to freedom.³⁹ As a matter of fact, the Stoics saw voluntary death as the supreme assertion of freedom and therefore not only respected it but also used it as a means to protest against the Roman Emperors.⁴⁰ Epictetus for instance recounts the words of Helvidius Priscus, who refused to obey the Emperor Vespasian⁴¹ even under threat of death, in this dialogue:

“And I must say what I think right.” “But if you do, I shall put you to death.” “When then did I tell you that I am immortal? You will do your part, and I will do mine: it is your part to kill; it is mine to die, but not in fear: yours to banish me; mine to depart without sorrow.” (Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.2, 20-21).⁴²

He was sentenced to death, like his father-in-law, Thrasea Paetus who opposed Nero and was pushed to commit suicide in 66 CE. Herennius Senecio, who wrote Helvidius's biography, *De Vita Helvidii*, was put to death by Domitian in 93 CE. Many Stoic philosophers opposed the emperors (especially Vespasian), knowing they risked at best exile, but more likely death. They were usually tried under the infamous *maiestas* law, so characteristic of the early principate and are now known as ‘pagan martyrs’.⁴³

Another argument advanced by Bowersock against Jewish and Greek origins of martyrdom is that they predate the use of the word in the sense of martyrdom, which, according to him, seems to be part of the conceptualisation in itself. For this reason, Bowersock claims that both the concept of martyrdom and the word itself are co-dependent and were created by the Christians between around 50 AD and 150 AD, (under the influence of New Testament narratives and vocabulary),⁴⁴ as does Robinson who believes in the process of association between the term

³⁸ C. Wirszubski, 1950. *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 147.

³⁹ Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 70.14 and *De Ira*, III, 15, 4. See Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea*, 146.

⁴⁰ A. J. Droge, and J. D. Tabor, 1992. *A Noble Death, Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 29-39.

⁴¹ We do not know the exact circumstances of the opposition.

⁴² ‘κάμῃ εἰπεῖν τὸ φαινόμενον δίκαιον.’ ‘ἀλλ’ ἐὰν εἴπῃς, ἀποκτενῶ σε.’ ‘πότε οὖν σοι εἶπον, ὅτι ἀθάνατός εἰμι; καὶ σὺ τὸ σὸν ποιήσεις κἀγὼ τὸ ἐμὸν. σὸν ἐστὶν ἀποκτεῖναι, ἐμὸν ἀποθανεῖν μὴ τρέμοντα: σὸν φυγαδεῦσαι, ἐμὸν ἐξελθεῖν μὴ λυπούμενον’. H. Musurillo, 1954. *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs: Acta Alexandrinorum*. London: Oxford University Press, 239-240.

⁴³ Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, 144-145 and 239-242.

⁴⁴ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 13-14.

and the idea over time.⁴⁵ Yet the idea that a concept cannot exist before the word expressing it is rarely accepted by scholars and difficult to defend, as is especially obvious in the case of the ‘pagan martyrs’.

Bowersock’s arguments about the origins of Christian martyrdom are not generally accepted and most scholars, like Frend, cite Socrates and the Maccabees as paradigm of non-Christian martyrs whose stories influenced early Christian writers. While this is certainly true, as we shall see shortly, Bowersock’s insistence on Christian appropriation of the concept of ‘noble death’ and on the uniqueness of Christian martyrdom has the merit of drawing attention to some characteristics of early Christian martyrdom that are both rather particular to it and paramount to its representation in early Christian texts.

Indeed, as Perkins notes: ‘During the early Empire, Christians were particularly recognized for their contempt for death and all the pains associated with it’.⁴⁶ The Romans knew very little about Christianity and Christians are hardly mentioned at all in pagan literature during the early Empire, but their longing for death⁴⁷ and their showiness are traits that are consistently mentioned.⁴⁸ For instance, Marcus Aurelius, who, as a Stoic philosopher, valued noble death, wrote in his *Meditations* (XI, 3): ‘This resolve, too, must arise from a specific decision, not out of sheer opposition like the Christians, but after reflection and with dignity, and so as to convince others, without histrionic display.’ Epictetus only mentions the Christians in passing and describes their attitude towards death as a ‘habit’ (Epictetus, *Discourses*, 5.7, 6).⁴⁹ Lucian’s satirical depiction of Peregrinus shows more knowledge of Christianity but mainly emphasises the Christians’ radical attitude towards death (*Death of Peregrinus*, 11-14):

the poor wretched have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves in custody (Lucian, *The Death of Peregrinus*, 13).⁵⁰

⁴⁵ T. A. Robinson, 2009. *Ignatius of Antioch and the Parting of the Ways, Early Jewish-Christian relations*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 156-7.

⁴⁶ J. Perkins, 1995. *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*. London: Routledge, 22.

⁴⁷ This idea is sometimes referred to as *furor passionis martyrum*.

⁴⁸ Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 20.

⁴⁹ εἶτα ὑπὸ μανίας μὲν δύνатаί τις οὕτως διατεθῆναι πρὸς ταῦτα καὶ ὑπὸ ἔθους οἱ Γαλιλαῖοι (emphasis added).

⁵⁰ Peregrinus was a Cynic philosopher who briefly turned to Christianity and was arrested for preaching the Gospels. The Christians of the community (and beyond) spared no expense to bring him food, comfort, and money. The governor refused to sentence Peregrinus to death and freed him, as not to give Peregrinus what he most desired: a reputation. Peregrinus was later expelled by the Christians and became a Cynic philosopher and eventually immolated himself at the Olympic Games in 165 ‘to put a tip of gold on a golden life’ (*Death of Peregrinus*, 33). Lucian’s depiction of the Christians is that of naïve and easily duped vulnerable people who had complete disregard for life and any property. The *Death of Peregrinus* represents one of the earliest pagan pieces of literature treating the subject of Christianity and provides valuable insight as to how early Christians were perceived by the pagans.

While not all early Christians shared this enthusiasm for death,⁵¹ it still seems to have been a widespread and early phenomenon, as also attested in early Christian literature. Ignatius of Antioch, for example, wrote to the Christian community in Rome to beg them not to intercede in his favour in very unequivocal terms:

For my part, I am writing to all churches and assuring them that I am truly in earnest about dying for God – if only you yourselves put no obstacles in the way. I must implore you to do me no such untimely kindness; pray leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am His wheat, ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread for Christ. (Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans*, 4)

Ignatius's letter is the most well-known and explicit example of some of the early Christians' texts revealing a longing for death but is by no means the only one. Many sources report the joy and relief of the martyrs after the declaration of their death sentence such as Pionius (executed in Smyrna under Decius, c. 250), who rushes to the arena and climbs of his own accord on the stake and rejoices at the sight of the pyre awaiting him (*Martyrdom of Pionius*. XXI, 1, 9), or Carpus and Papyrus who, after refusing to sacrifice to the pagan gods (c. 170?), just like Pionius, hurry to the arena and laugh on the stake before dying peacefully (*Acts of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice*, 36-39). Perpetua and her companions are also said to have shown joy after their sentence: 'Then the procurator sentenced all of us and condemned us to the beasts. With joy, we went back to the prison.' (*Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 6,6).⁵²

1.3 True Martyrdom vs Voluntary Martyrdom

However, as we saw previously, the most perplexing aspect of early Christian martyrdom for the Romans was that of 'voluntary death'. While some martyrs were arrested and officially condemned by the Roman authorities, there are examples of Christians who, indeed, gave themselves up to the Romans, without being persecuted themselves. As Middleton puts it:

We witness within the Church of the first three centuries a very positive attitude towards death and martyrdom, as well as an unmistakable call for others to follow suit [...] perhaps the phenomenon with

⁵¹ Boin convincingly shows that many Christians were living in perfect peace with Rome and adapted their faith to the Roman way of life. Boin argues that although 'they have all largely been written out of history by the voices of their peers', these Christians quietly but surely contributed to Christianity's success by teaching 'their Roman friends and neighbors to see Christians in a less threatening light'. D. Boin, 2015. *Coming out Christian in the Roman World: How the Followers of Jesus Made a Place in Caesar's Empire*. New York, London: Bloomsbury, 22.

⁵² *tunc nos universos pronuntiat et damnat ad bestias; et hilares descendimus ad carcerem* (emphasis added).

which we are dealing may be accurately termed Roman-assisted suicide, or at the very least Christian-assisted execution!⁵³

For instance, in 304, Euplus, Archdeacon of Catania in Sicily, went on his own accord to the prefect's chamber with his copy of the New Testament (which was banned under Diocletian and Maximian) and declared: 'I am a Christian and I want to die for the name of Christ'.⁵⁴ The *Acta Proconsularia Sancti Cypriani* recount a similar situation when in 258, under the 'Valerian persecution', Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, is arrested by the proconsul Galerius Maximus for refusing to sacrifice to the gods. The text tells us that, although Cyprian had forbidden them to denounce themselves (*Acts of Cyprian* 1,5), after hearing Cyprian's sentence to death, the crowd of fellow Christians asked to be executed with their bishop:

Then he read his decision from a tablet: 'Thascius Cyprian is sentenced to die by the sword.' The bishop Cyprian said: 'Thanks be to God.' After the sentence, the crowd of his fellow Christians said: 'Let us also be beheaded with him'.⁵⁵

The account of Agathonike's martyrdom is even more surprising as she is never described as a Christian but might have simply been a pagan woman present in the crowd to watch the martyrdom of Carpus and Papyrus.⁵⁶ After Carpus passed away, Agathonike is said to have seen 'the glory of the Lord, as Carpus said he had seen it; realizing that this was a call from heaven, [...] she threw herself joyfully upon the stake [...] and thus she gave up her spirit and died together with the saints' (*Acts of Carpus*, 42-47 in the Greek Recension).

This behaviour was as intriguing to the Romans as it is to modern scholars who, in an attempt to understand and/or clarify the concept of Christian martyrdom, set out to separate 'true martyrdom' from 'voluntary death/suicide'. For example, Geoffrey de Ste Croix dedicated many articles⁵⁷ to the problem and proposed a three-fold categorisation of martyrs based on Eusebius' lists of martyrs.

The first class of martyrs, according to de Ste Croix, is that of the 'voluntary martyrs' who sought out martyrdom and therefore provoked their own arrest and death; the second class

⁵³ P. Middleton, 2006. *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*. London: T&T Clark, 35-36.

⁵⁴ *Christianus sum, et pro Christi nomine mori desidero* (*Acts of Euplus*, 1.1 in Latin text)

⁵⁵ *Et his dictis* (the proconsul), *decretum ex tabella recitavit: Thascium Cyprianum gladio animadverti placet. Cyprianus Episcopus dixit: Deo gratias. Post hanc vero sententiam turba fratrum dicebat: Et nos cum ipso decollemur* (*Acts of Cyprian*, 4,3-5,1)

⁵⁶ P. Middleton, 2013. 'Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom: A Statement for the Defence'. *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 64, 2, pp. 556-573, 560-61.

⁵⁷ G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, 2006. 'Voluntary Martyrdom in the Early Church'. M. Whitby and J. Streeter (eds) *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.153-200. See also G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, 1954. 'Aspects of the "Great" Persecution'. *Harvard Theological Review*, 47, pp.75-113 101-2, and G. E. M. de Ste Croix, 1963. 'Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?'. *Past and Present*, pp.6-38; both reprinted in *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom and Orthodoxy* (respectively pp. 35-78 and pp. 105-52).

concerns the ‘quasi-volunteers’ who without seeking martyrdom still adopted an attitude that drew attention to themselves; and finally the ‘true martyrs’ who were sought out and executed by the authorities without having actually invited martyrdom in any way.⁵⁸ However, P. Lorraine Buck argues that this categorisation presents several problems, both in the treatment of de Ste. Croix’s sources and with his analysis of them. The class of the ‘quasi-volunteers’ is the most problematic as it includes martyrs who, as Buck puts it, ‘attracted attention to themselves by doing nothing more than was expected of them as Christians’.⁵⁹ Buck cites, for example, Theodosia who was arrested for saluting confessors, or Agapius, who was denounced after visiting his brother in prison. Moss rejects the categorisation of martyrs altogether as being ‘grounded in de Ste Croix’s assessment of the good death and his criteria for reasonable behavior’, and adds that de Ste Croix’s ‘classification system speaks more about the ideals of his own cultural context than that in which the authors found themselves.’⁶⁰ Middleton, while not being opposed to the idea of a category of ‘voluntary martyrs’,⁶¹ asserts that there is ‘a common scholarly ideological predisposition to dismiss voluntary martyrdom from orthodox Christian behaviour’.⁶²

De Ste Croix’s categorisation has indeed led scholars to see only ‘true martyrs’ as orthodox and consider the ‘voluntary martyrs’ as either heretics⁶³ or ‘mentally impaired’: Ignatius, in particular, has been accused of displaying ‘a neurotic death-wish’⁶⁴ and an ‘abnormal mentality’.⁶⁵ Other scholars tried to justify the acts of some voluntary martyrs by rationalising them. This is illustrated, for instance, by Buck’s interpretation of Agathonike’s suicide as being ‘the culmination of a long and arduous period of prayer, devotion, and spiritual readiness’,⁶⁶ even though there is nothing in the text to support this claim. Moss blames the ‘birth of

⁵⁸ P. L. Buck, 2012. ‘Voluntary Martyrdom Revisited’. *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 63, 1, pp. 125-135, 125.

⁵⁹ Buck, ‘Voluntary Martyrdom Revisited’, 127-8.

⁶⁰ C. Moss, 2012. ‘The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern’. *Church History*, 81: 3, pp. 531-551, 537.

⁶¹ Middleton, ‘Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom’, 560-562.

⁶² Middleton, ‘Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom’, 561.

⁶³ Voluntary martyrdom was often associated with the New Prophecy movement (also called Montanism) by scholars but Tabernee has since convincingly disproven this theory, showing that Montanus’ oracles did not preach voluntary martyrdom any more than the Catholics: ‘Notwithstanding Tertullian’s interpretation of them, Montanus’ oracles on the subject [i.e. martyrdom] may never have been intended to convey anything other than that Christians should *desire* martyrdom and accept it with patience and courage when God, through a vision or the circumstance of unprovoked arrest, revealed that martyrdom was his will for a particular individual’. W. Tabernee, 1985. ‘Early Montanism and Voluntary Martyrdom’. *Colloquium* 17, pp. 33-44, 43.

⁶⁴ K. R. Morris, 1994. “‘Pure wheat of God’ or Neurotic Deathwish? A Historical and Theological Analysis of Ignatius of Antioch’s Zeal for Martyrdom”. *Fides et Historia* 26, pp. 24-41.

⁶⁵ Also ‘a pathological yearning for martyrdom’, De Ste Croix, ‘Why were Early Christians Persecuted?’, 24 (133 in reprint).

⁶⁶ Buck, ‘Voluntary Martyrdom’, 133.

psychiatry' for the scholarly attitude towards voluntary martyrdom and concludes that the need to normalise early Christians' behaviour according to modern standards has pushed modern scholars to create unnecessarily categories of martyrs that simply did not exist in ancient times.⁶⁷ Middleton agrees that early Christian martyrs, regardless of how and why they died, were treated the same way by early Christian writers, with the exception of Clement of Alexandria who seems to have been the only one to express criticism regarding the practice of voluntary martyrdom.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, Middleton rightly recognises the usefulness of the term 'voluntary martyr' and warns against dismissing this category of martyrs; voluntary martyrdom certainly played a significant role in early Christianity both historically and in early Christian literature as 'the commitment of these Christians meant more instances of martyrdom that would have otherwise been the case'.⁶⁹

1.4 Martyrdom Accounts

Indeed, as we shall see shortly, many (if not most) important martyrdom accounts contain elements of voluntary martyrdom and their influence, which we shall investigate, should not be underestimated. However, the difficulties in defining martyrdom means that the debate also extended to the texts themselves and many scholars attempted to list the essential criteria that constitute a 'martyrdom account'. For instance, Van Henten defines the martyr text as follows:

A martyr text tells us about a specific kind of violent death, death by torture. In a martyr text it is described how a certain person, in an extreme hostile situation, has preferred a violent death to compliance with a decree or demand of the (usually) pagan authorities.⁷⁰

Yet if we were to accept this rather succinct definition then many of the most revered Christian martyrs would lose their crown as hardly any of the 'voluntary martyrs' actually found themselves in 'extreme hostile situation'.

Droge and Tabor give a more complete definition of martyrdom in their attempt to separate it from suicide by analysing accounts of 'voluntary deaths' in pagan, Jewish and Christian texts:

⁶⁷ Moss, 'Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom', 550-51.

⁶⁸ Middleton, 'Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom', 571. See also Moss, 'Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom', 544, who sees Clement's position on martyrdom as 'constructive rather than descriptive' and states that Clement helped shaping the later (post-Decian) idea of the 'true martyr' (which arose c. 250 because of the number of apostates following the so-called 'Decian persecution').

⁶⁹ Middleton, 'Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom', 573.

⁷⁰ J. W. Van Henten, 1997. *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 & 4 Maccabees*. Leiden: Brill, 7.

1. these accounts reflect situations of opposition and persecution, 2. the choice to die is viewed by the authors as necessary, noble and heroic, 3. these individuals are often eager to die and in several cases they end up directly killing themselves, 4. there is often the idea of vicarious benefit resulting from their suffering and death, 5. the expectation of vindication and reward beyond death [...] is a prime motivation for their choice.⁷¹

The number of texts fitting these criteria, however, is in the thousands, as attested by the famous Bollandists' *Acta Sanctorum*. The first volume (January) of this collection of Acts of the Saints was published in 1643 and stood out from its (few) predecessors for its attention to detail and comprehensiveness.⁷² Indeed, Bolland wanted every piece of information available about a saint to be included, and each version and translation of a text concerning the life and/or death of a saint/martyr to be recorded meticulously and critically analysed. The colossal work, organised by month and according to each saint's feast day (traditionally the day of their death),⁷³ resulted in a collection of 68 volumes, and was only completed in 1940.⁷⁴

While the *Acta Sanctorum* represented a revolution in the hagiographical field for its organisation, inclusiveness, and historical criticism approach, it was also criticised for its lack of selection. Dom Thierry Ruinart, in particular, judged the Bollandist collection to be too difficult to use as there were so many volumes and it was not clear which were deemed authentic and which were dubious or plainly fake. Therefore, the French Maurist⁷⁵ set out to 'collect in one volume the sincere acts of martyrs, apart from the false and dubious ones'.⁷⁶ Ruinart's criteria of selection (or rather exclusion) are not explicit in his *Acta Primorum Martyrum Sincera et Selecta*⁷⁷ but can be deduced from notes and archives and are summarised by Dolbeau as follows:

les arguments invoqués pour rejeter l'authenticité des Passions légendaires sont très variés. Les uns sont d'ordre historique: inexactitude des données relatives aux empereurs, incohérence chronologique, anachronisme de certaines réalités administratives, mensonges démasqués par de meilleures sources, détails fautifs sur le plan judiciaire, liturgique ou géographique. D'autres motifs de rejet sont de type plutôt

⁷¹ Droge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 21.

⁷² In his *Historia Ecclesiae*, Eusebius of Caesarea mentions a collection of martyrdom accounts he had compiled and entitled *Collection of Ancient Martyrdoms*, but it is unfortunately lost to us. Lists of martyrs like the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* (written in the middle of the 5th century) became common but only contained the names of the martyrs. Bede's *Martyrology* contained more details about the death of a martyr (date but also manner and circumstances). It created a template for future passionaries which flourished and became a genre from the 9th century and included the martyrdom accounts. However, the collection of these texts was born from a liturgical need not a historical one, until the 17th century. Rebillard, *Greek and Latin*, 2-9.

⁷³ As recommended by Cyprian (*Epistle* 36.2): 'take note of their days on which they depart, that we may celebrate their commemoration among the memorials of the martyrs.'

⁷⁴ H. Delehaye, (ed.) 1940. Propylaeum Decembris, *Acta Sanctorum*, Brussels.

⁷⁵ The French Benedictine congregation of St Maur, created in 1621, is renowned for the high level of critical scholarship of its monks, particularly in the historical field.

⁷⁶ T. Ruinart, 1859. *Acta Primorum Martyrum Sincera et Selecta*, (5th ed.). Regensburg: Manz, 8.

⁷⁷ Ruinart first published his *Acta Primorum Martyrum* in 1689 with 4 subsequent editions, containing 74 martyrdom accounts.

littéraire, narratif ou linguistique: incohérence des textes, surabondance de citations scripturaires, présence indiscrète de merveilleux, vocabulaire tardif.⁷⁸

In spite of later refinement and categorisation of Ruinar's list by scholars such as Delehay, ⁷⁹ or more recently Musurillo,⁸⁰ modern collections of martyr texts still broadly use the same set of criteria based on the importance of authenticity and historicity.⁸¹ However, of these selected texts (usually between 20 and 30 for texts written up to the end of Diocletian's reign in 305), hardly any are considered wholly authentic or historically accurate. As Moss puts it: 'no early Christian account has been preserved without emendation'.⁸²

In a bold argumentation against the concept of authenticity for selection of martyr narratives, Éric Rebillard asserts that:

The assumption that the authenticity of martyr narratives can be measured against a model that was written at the time of the martyrdom or that relied directly on official records needs to be abandoned in the case of narratives about the ancient martyrs.⁸³

Indeed, as Rebillard convincingly demonstrates, the use of official court records by the author of the account is an invalid criterion when it comes to accounts written before 260 as access to such records was highly restricted (only lawyers in search of a precedent for a case or a person involved in an ongoing trial had access to court records).⁸⁴ While the rejection of the concept of authenticity is somewhat radical, it opens up the prospect of non-historical analysis. Furthermore, as we saw earlier, most studies conducted following traditional historical approaches fail to answer questions satisfactorily such as: 'what is martyrdom?', 'what are the origins of martyrdom?' and 'what was the nature of, and motivations for, the persecutions?'. As a matter of fact, the difficulty in answering these questions resides in understanding the process of 'writing about martyrdom/making martyrs', (i.e., 'why were these accounts written?')

⁷⁸ F. Dolbeau, 2002. 'Le Nain de Tillemont, conseiller de Dom Ruinar, durant la preparation des Acta primorum martyrum (1689)'. *Le Nain de Tillemont et l'historiographie de l'Antiquité romaine*, 79-110. Colloques, congrès et conférences sur le classicisme 3. Paris: Champion, 91-2.

⁷⁹ Delehay was a Bollandist of the beginning of the 20th century who laid out six categories/types of martyrdom accounts: 1. based on official court records; 2. narratives based on eyewitnesses or martyrs themselves; 3. documents relying on either or both of previous categories; 4. historical romance; 5. fictions; 6. forgeries. In his *Légendes hagiographiques* first published in 1905, Delehay takes down to 18 Ruinar's selection of martyr texts, after sorting them into the above categories and selecting only those belonging to the first three. H. Delehay, 1955. *Les légendes hagiographiques*. 4e éd. Subsidia Hagiographica 18. Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 105-9, 118.

⁸⁰ H. Musurillo, 1972. *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs, Volume II*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press.

⁸¹ Musurillo's *Acts of the Martyrs* is the modern reference for the original texts. He explains his selection as follows: 'I have chosen twenty-eight of the texts which I consider the most reliable or indeed, in the case of those with fictional elements [...], extremely important and instructive'. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, xii.

⁸² Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 123.

⁸³ Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives*, 20

⁸⁴ Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives*, 15-17

How were these texts constructed?’), rather than in the analysis of the historical content of relevant sources themselves.

1.5 Martyrdom as a discourse

Consequently, in recent years, some scholars have applied more theoretical approaches to the field of early Christian martyrdom and came to see it as a discourse rather than factual events. Perkins, for example, described the performative power of martyrdom narratives on the formation of the early Church as follows:

the representation in early Christian narratives of a community of sufferers and the persecuted worked not simply to represent a realistic situation so much as to provide a self-definition that enabled the growth of Christianity as an institution.⁸⁵

Based on the literary analysis of the texts and comparison with other ancient texts of different genres, including for example the popular Greek romance novel, Perkins concludes that: ‘Christianity did not produce its suffering subject alone, but [...] this subjectivity was under construction and emanated from a number of different locations in the Greco-Roman cultural world’.⁸⁶ Castelli also contributed to the debate by offering a thorough discourse analysis of early martyrdom narratives and, applying the theory of collective memory to these accounts, reached the conclusion that:

the memory work done by early Christians on the historical experience of persecution and martyrdom was a form of culture making whereby Christian identity was indelibly marked by the collective memory of the religious sufferings of others.⁸⁷

Through the representation of persecuted communities and martyred believers, early Christian writers created an intricate martyrology that contributed to the development of Christian identity and reinforced the power of the Church in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Both Perkins’s and Castelli’s studies emphasise this performative aspect of martyrdom narratives and offer valuable perspectives on the subject. However, they both chose to ignore NT texts and do not engage much with historical evidence, leaving the question of origins of early Christian martyrdom unanswered.

⁸⁵ Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 12.

⁸⁶ Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 214.

⁸⁷ E. A. Castelli, 2004. *Memory and Martyrdom: Early Christian Culture Making*. New York: Columbia University Press, 4.

As a brief conclusion to our first chapter, we can say that the study of early Christian martyrdom accounts is contentious, and many different aspects must be considered while investigating early martyrdom texts. Within the study of the three accounts investigated here, the notions of heresy (mainly Montanism) and voluntary martyrdom will be raised but, as we saw earlier, there is no evidence that the early Christians viewed ‘voluntary martyrdom’ differently from what modern scholars consider ‘true martyrdom’. The question of ‘orthodoxy’ of a martyrdom account cannot therefore warrant the dismissal of a text since its impact and influence would not have been negatively affected by its inclusion of voluntary martyrdom. Similarly, our approach to the problematic notion of authenticity in early Christian martyrdom accounts will be dictated by the literary influence of the text and its perception by its contemporary audience rather than a solely historical and pragmatic analysis.

Moreover, as we have seen earlier, the question of the origins of the concept of martyrdom is as yet unsettled. It is indeed commonly accepted by scholars that Christian martyrdom was influenced by pagan and/or Jewish literature and thoughts, and little credit is given to the Christians themselves. However, as we shall see, it is the Christian appropriation and retrospective interpretation of Greek/Roman/Jewish literature, mediated through both their own experiences and early Christian texts, that allowed them to integrate martyrdom into their life and history, creating the concept as we know it today. Indeed, as we will argue in this thesis, the analysis of early Christian martyrdom accounts and NT texts from a discourse analysis/collective memory perspective will challenge the unilateral view on the origins of early Christian martyrdom and reveal the intricacy of its creation and evolution.

The main argument of this thesis is that, following the martyrological interpretation of NT texts, early Christian martyrdom narratives show the progressive integration of eschatological thoughts in the communities’ reality, inscribing their own experiences in Christian history. In other words, early Christians at first saw the persecutions and executions of their martyrs as part of the prophesised hardships announced by Jesus and followed/copied his example (e.g. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*) but then, through their interpretation of NT texts (such as Revelation) and in the light of the first martyrdoms (and their accounts), they came to see their experiences as the realisation of the eschatological divine plans prophesised in apocalyptic literature (as we shall see with the *Martyrs of Lyon* and the *Passion of Perpetua*). By the end of the second century/beginning of the third, early Christians were not just *living by* the New Testament, they were *living it*, actively participating in the making of History.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Approach

2.1 Collective Memory

2.1.1 History vs Memory

One of the earliest historians, Thucydides (c. 460-400 BC), already observed the difficulties of writing accurate historical accounts, and both recognised and showed the importance of memory in the process of writing about past events. Indeed, he writes: ‘Not that even so the truth was easy to discover: different eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories’ (*Hist.* 1.22.3).⁸⁸ French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) also noticed this ambivalence about historical writings. Halbwachs coined the term ‘collective memory’ and developed this theory in three main studies: *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (1925), *La Topographie Légendaire des Evangiles en Terre Sainte: Etude de Mémoire Collective* (1941) and *La Mémoire Collective* (published posthumously in 1950). In his work, Halbwachs showed how individual memory is influenced by the social framework of the individual and his/her relation to others.⁸⁹ Consequently, memory is reconstructed by individuals under pressure of society, becoming a ‘collective memory’. Moreover, Halbwachs set memory and history in opposition: while history is mainly concerned with dates and sequences of events, memory is the reconstruction of these events and is determined by the social context of the individual or group recollecting this memory.⁹⁰ This approach to collective memory is often referred to as ‘social constructionism’. It states that the past is shaped according to present needs/interests and is therefore fabricated or ‘socially constructed’; this approach emphasises the ‘discontinuity’ between past and present.⁹¹ In his analysis of the evolution of the traditions attached to geographical sites mentioned in the Gospels, Halbwachs declares:

⁸⁸ ἐπιπόνως δὲ ἠύρισκετο, διότι οἱ παρόντες τοῖς ἔργοις ἐκάστοις οὐ ταῦτα περὶ τῶν αὐτῶν ἔλεγον, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἐκατέρων τις εὐνοίας ἢ μνήμης ἔχοι. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (translation by R. Warner).

⁸⁹ M. Halbwachs, 1980. *The Collective Memory*. (First published in 1950) New York: Harper & Row, 22-49.

⁹⁰ Halbwachs, *Collective Memory*, 50-87.

⁹¹ N. Ben-Yehuda, 1995. *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel*. Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 273.

Si, comme nous le croyons, la mémoire collective est essentiellement une reconstruction du passé, si elle adapte l'image des faits anciens aux croyances et aux besoins spirituels du présent, la connaissance de ce qui était à l'origine est secondaire, sinon tout à fait inutile, puisque la réalité du passé n'est plus là.⁹²

Conversely, the American philosopher and sociologist George Herbert Mead developed the opposite view that the present is interpreted and shaped in the light of past events and that consequently there is 'continuity' between past and present. As Mead puts it:

We may in ideation recall the process, but such a past is not a reintegration of the affair as it went on, for it is undertaken from the standpoint of the present emergence, and is frankly hypothetical. It is the past that our present calls for and it is tested by its fitting into that situation. [...] the function of the past [...] is a continual reconstruction as a chronicle to serve the purposes of present interpretation.⁹³

While both views agree that the past is necessarily incomplete (since only certain events are remembered and not others), reconstructed and inaccurate (even sometimes fabricated), Halbwachs's view remained mostly prevalent in the sociological field for decades. Up until the 80s, many scholars of the nascent cultural memory studies field still reasserted the opposition (or even total incompatibility) between history and memory.⁹⁴ However, in the 1990s, a more moderate and conciliatory approach popularised the use of the cultural memory theory among a variety of historians and scholars.⁹⁵ Barry Schwartz convincingly showed that the two views on the relationship between past and present are not incompatible and actually work together: 'Because the present is constituted by the past, the past's retention as well as its reconstruction must be anchored in the present'.⁹⁶ Another approach that focuses on the notion of "modes of remembering" can reconcile history and memory:

Myth, religious memory, political history, trauma, family remembrance, or generational memory are different modes of referring to the past. Seen in this way, history is but yet another mode of cultural memory and historiography, its specific medium.⁹⁷

Moreover, as demonstrated by Jan Assmann, remembering expresses a need to belong, to create an identity and a sense of unity; biographical and historical writings are the materialisation of that need, thus being subject to distortions.⁹⁸

⁹² M. Halbwachs, 1941. *La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre Sainte: Étude de mémoire collective*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 9.

⁹³ G. H. Mead, 1932. *The Philosophy of the Present*, A. E. Murphy (ed.). London: Open Court Company Publishers, 48.

⁹⁴ For example, see P. Nora, (ed.), 1984-92. *Les lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard.

⁹⁵ G. Cubitt, 2007. *History and Memory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

⁹⁶ B. Schwartz, 1991. 'Social Change and Collective Memory: The Democratization of George Washington'. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp. 221-236, 234.

⁹⁷ A. Erll, 2010. 'Cultural Memory Studies: an Introduction'. A. Erll and A. Nünning (eds) *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 7.

⁹⁸ J. Assmann, 2006. *Religion and Cultural Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 81-101.

2.1.2 *Analysing Memories*

Modern New Testament scholars have recently employed these insights and started to analyse the Scriptures differently. Dale Allison for instance tells us that for a ‘sober, honest study of Jesus’, when reading the Gospels, one should take into consideration that:

1. ‘Memory, at least long-term memory, is reconstructive as well as reproductive and so involves imagination’;
2. we tend to construct our memories according to our social environment and under its pressure;
3. we often analyse our own memories in the light of our present self, therefore reshaping them in one way or another to fit our present circumstances;
4. details in memories fade away with time;
5. ‘memories are subject to sequential displacement. We often move remembered events forward and backward in time’;
6. when recalling and telling of a past event in our lives, we tend to adapt the story according to the audience and the impression we want to give to them;
7. whatever does not serve the individual’s or the community’s purposes is forgotten;
8. written accounts of past events (such as the Gospels) are also influenced by literary conventions of storytelling (opening, introduction of characters, plot, and resolution of plot).⁹⁹

Eric Eve also emphasises the importance of memory and its *modus operandi* in his study on the transmission of the Gospels from their oral to written form. Eve, however, focuses on what he calls ‘keying’, that is, the interpretation of present events according to past ones and/or vice versa.¹⁰⁰ As Eve puts it:

A memory is not a photographic record of what actually took place, but a construction based on the original encoding of experience, the relating of that experience to oneself and others according to narrative frameworks and conventions supplied by one’s cultural context, and the need to make sense of the past in the light of the present, and of the present in the light of the past.¹⁰¹

Eve concludes that the stories about Jesus were interpreted with Israel’s messiah prophecies in mind, and that the Gospels reflect these interpretations, which led to distortions (the birth narrative in Luke is one example).

As Castelli notes, collective memory and all its implications also contribute to the myth-making process. Martyrdom accounts are no exception. Castelli indeed declares: ‘one might even go as

⁹⁹ D. C. Allison, 2010. *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History*. London: SPCK, 2-8. Allison here gives a rather detailed summary of academic research on memory and its use in historical studies. He also provides a useful and extensive bibliography but for a good, general introduction to the subject see D. L. Schacter, 1995. ‘Memory Distortion: History and Current Status.’ D. L. Schacter (ed.) *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁰⁰ E. Eve, 2013. *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition*. London: SPCK, 97.

¹⁰¹ Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 181.

far as to argue that they [early Christian historians] did not simply preserve the story of persecution and martyrdom but, in fact, *created* it'.¹⁰² A striking example of this myth-making process is that of Peter's martyrdom.

2.1.3 *The example of St Peter's Martyrdom*

The earliest account describing Peter's death in detail, allegedly crucified upside-down in Rome, comes from the so-called *Acts of Peter* (XXXVII-XL)¹⁰³ an apocryphal form of the Acts of the Apostles written during the second half of the 2nd century that seems to have taken root among early Christian communities quite rapidly. Origen, writing in the first half of the third century mentions Peter's crucifixion at Rome 'where he was crucified, head downwards at his own request',¹⁰⁴ and Tertullian in his *Scorpiace* (15) asserts that: 'At Rome Nero was the first who stained with blood the rising faith. Then is Peter girt by another,¹⁰⁵ when he is made fast to the cross'.¹⁰⁶ Yet, no other text recounts Peter's martyrdom before the *Acts of Peter*. Whereas *1 Clement* clearly refers to the Apostle's death ('Peter, through unrighteous envy, endured not one or two, but numerous labours and when he had at length suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him', *1 Clement* 5:4),¹⁰⁷ there is nothing in the epistle that either places Peter in Rome or describes the method of his ordeal.¹⁰⁸ John's Gospel also cryptically alludes to Peter's death when, in John 21:18, Jesus says to Peter:

¹⁰² Castelli, *Memory and Martyrdom*, 25.

¹⁰³ The *Acts of Peter* is a fictional account in which Peter enters in a contest with Simon Magus (also called Simon the Magician) who was performing sorcery. They both perform miracles (including flying and making dogs speak), Simon using magic and Peter invoking God's power.

¹⁰⁴ Origen, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis III*, quoted in Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, III, 1. Unless otherwise stated and with the exception of the *Martyrs of Lyon*, all quotes of Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiae* are from Eusebius, 1989. *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Translated by G. A. Williamson. London: Penguin Books.

¹⁰⁵ Tertullian's remark about Peter 'being girt by another' also echoes John's prophecy concerning Peter's death (John 21:18).

¹⁰⁶ Translated by Rev. S. Thelwall. The *Scorpiace* is a late work of Tertullian, most likely written during the first quarter of 3rd century.

¹⁰⁷ Translated by Roberts & Donaldson, see also *1 Clement* 5:2: 'the greatest and most righteous pillars [of the Church] have been persecuted and put to death'.

¹⁰⁸ The *First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* is usually dated between 90 and 120. The first sentence of the letter after the address, 'Owing, dear brethren, to the sudden and successive calamitous events which have happened to ourselves' (*1 Clem.* 1:1), is often cited as evidence for the persecution of Christians under Domitian and reciprocally dates the letter to 96 AD, at the end of Domitian's reign. *1 Clement* is often considered the earliest (with the *Didache*) non-canonical Christian text.

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.¹⁰⁹

John then points out that ‘He [Jesus] said this to indicate the kind of death by which he [Peter] would glorify God’, to make the prophecy explicit. This passage has been interpreted throughout history in the light of the story from the *Acts of Peter* and consequently used to support the story, but recent scholarship showed that if analysed independently, the interpretation gives different results. Indeed, the key word here is ζώσει, from the verb ζώννυμι, meaning ‘to gird’, also translated as ‘to fasten/put a belt on’ or even sometimes ‘to put clothes on’. However, as Barnes explains, we not only know that Romans used to strip naked the criminals sentenced to crucifixion, as was the case with Jesus, but also that Christians were not (sarcastically) sentenced to death by crucifixion by Romans for being Christians until the ‘Diocletianic Persecution’.¹¹⁰ In addition, Tacitus describes in detail the kind of tortures Nero reserved for his Christian scapegoats (among whom, according to the tradition and many scholars, Peter might have been):

And, as they perished, mockeries were added, so that, covered in the hides of wild beasts, they expired from mutilation by dogs, or were burned fixed to crosses for use as nocturnal illumination on the dwindling of daylight. (*Annals* 15.44).¹¹¹

As the Romans used flammable tunics as a means of torture, if Peter was indeed a victim of Nero’s ‘persecution’, it would then be more likely that Peter would have been among those who were burnt alive attached to a cross, as hinted by John (hands stretched out, clothed by another), rather than being crucified upside-down. Whether the author of the *Acts of Peter* was recounting an already distorted tradition or invented it himself, the story of Peter’s upside-down crucifixion in Rome was repeated by Origen, Tertullian and later Eusebius; a legend that became history, or rather, became part of the collective memory, since it is still believed by millions of Christians today. An even more daring theory, advanced by Shaw regarding the ‘Neronian persecution’ also discredits the story of Peter’s martyrdom as we know it and supports the idea of social construction of collective memory. According to Shaw, not only is it very unlikely that Peter was ever in Rome, but it is possible that the persecution of 64 never took place at all. Looking at the pagan sources on Christians (Tacitus, Suetonius, Trajan/Pliny), Shaw argues that the Romans only became aware of the existence of the Christians around the beginning of the

¹⁰⁹ ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ὅτε ἤς νεώτερος, ἐζώννυες σεαυτὸν καὶ περιεπάτεις ὅπου ἤθελες: ὅταν δὲ γηράσῃς, ἐκτενεῖς τὰς χεῖράς σου, καὶ ἄλλος ζώσει σε καὶ οἴσει ὅπου οὐ θέλεις.

¹¹⁰ Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 5-9.

¹¹¹ *et pereuntibus addita ludibria, ut ferarum tergis contacti laniatu canum interirent aut crucibus adfixi aut flammandi atque ubi defecisset dies in usum nocturne luminis urerentur.* (Translated by A. J. Church and W. J. Brodrigg.)

second century and that the link between the Christians in Rome, the Great Fire and Nero was made around that time by connections and deductions. As Shaw puts it:

By retrojecting this new information (existence of Christians) and filling out various parts of the known past, they (pagan writers) shared in creating some of the past history of the Christians. Most persons of the time were willing to accept and to believe the new construction because it was both convenient and useful to their current view of the world.¹¹²

We can notice here the circular, performative aspect of collective memory and martyrdom narratives. Taking early Christian martyrdom accounts at face value is therefore impossible and a historical analysis of these accounts would prove unfruitful or inaccurate, even when considering secondary sources and traditions. However, they remain an invaluable source of information about the primitive Church. Consequently, by considering these texts as recollections/description of memories, with all that this implies, we can infer from their analysis what was important for their authors, their situation or interpretation of it, their goal and message, as even more than the events they relate, it is these texts that fashioned early Christian history. As Castelli puts it:

It is precisely because of the power of the figure of the (mythologized, memorialized) martyr that a careful consideration of how that figure comes to be produced and sustained in the collective imaginary is necessary. Regardless of the historicity of the martyr's story, it is a story that can both make an ethical demand and lend legitimacy to other forms of power claims. Hence, an analysis of how that story becomes part of a tradition's collective memory-as usable past, as living tradition, as myth-remains both urgent and significant.¹¹³

Therefore, in this thesis I will analyse martyrdom accounts and New Testament texts in search for collective memory markers that contributed to the creation, and evolution, of early Christian martyrdom.

2.2 Collective Memory and Discourse Analysis in Martyrdom Accounts

2.2.1 Discourse Analysis

Freed from the constrictions of regarding these texts simply as historical accounts, we are in a position to investigate these texts through discourse analysis, a method which pays particular attention to the language. The choice of semantic, recurrent themes, references, and other narrative techniques, which are highly revelatory, can uncover the mind frame of the authors, what was important to them or to the eyewitnesses reporting the events, and what

¹¹² B. D. Shaw, 2015. 'The Myth of the Neronian Persecution'. *The Journal of Roman Studies* 105, pp. 73-100, 97.

¹¹³ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 32.

message the authors tried to convey. These elements can also highlight the tendency to adapt a story according to the audience and the pressure of literary conventions of the time (through anachronisms for example or sequence of events, like the birth narrative in Luke). Perkins, following Foucault's work on discourse analysis, expresses it as follows:

Every representation is by its very nature partial and incomplete. A representation of 'reality' must leave something out, even as it puts something in. A culture's discourse represents not the 'real' world but rather a world mediated through social categories, relations and institutions operating in the specific culture.¹¹⁴

In other words, even though a narrative might not reflect the exact reality, it is still reflective of the author's 'reality' and as we stated previously, reveals important details about the author, his community, and the circumstances in which the account was written. Therefore, how the early Christians chose to represent themselves, how they wanted to be perceived by both fellow Christians and non-Christians can be construed through the discourse analysis of their writings.

In her study of early Christian texts, Perkins notices the focus of the authors on the class she calls the 'sufferer', that is, the poor, the sick, and the elderly. With Jesus's Passion at the centre of Christian teachings, not only did people become aware of their own sufferings but they also sought to experience these sufferings following Jesus's example. This is what scholars call *Imitatio Christi*.¹¹⁵ In order to enhance this notion, early Christian writers very often related martyrdom accounts either by using references to Jesus's Passion, as is the case in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* for example (1.2; 6.2; 7.1), or by adapting the discourse according to the audience the account was destined to and the message they wanted to put forth. As we shall see later on, martyrs were also often depicted in pagan terms as philosophers or as athletes fighting in the arena, and who, by their courage in facing sufferings and death, defeated Evil. Such narratives had four main effects: firstly, they gave courage to fellow Christians who were suffering for their faith (persecution, humiliation, accusations...) and comforted them in the righteousness of their condition; secondly, as they portrayed Rome as the enemy, the representation of Evil on earth, these accounts acted as 'resistance literature', therefore exhorting them to 'fight'/die; thirdly, these accounts were attractive to some pagans as they focused on the bravery of the martyrs, thus appealing to the partisans of 'noble death' and created converts; lastly and perhaps most importantly, these texts became part of the nascent Church liturgy,¹¹⁶ during which the names of the martyrs and/or the texts relating their

¹¹⁴ Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 3.

¹¹⁵ C. Moss, 2010. *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹¹⁶ As attested by Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who often refers to the reading of a martyrdom narrative as part of the celebration of the martyr's feast in his sermons. The practice was officialised by the Council of Hippo in c. 393. See Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives*, 25-6.

martyrdom were read aloud, contributing to the collective memory of the early Church as well as creating an early Christian identity and the cult of saints.

We can observe here that the collective memory theory is indissociable from discourse analysis. Indeed, it is often through repetition, rituals, and liturgy that stories integrate the collective memory of a group and this process is facilitated by the discourse used to tell the story. This is what Judith Butler calls ‘performativity’, which she defines as ‘that power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains’.¹¹⁷ In other words, early Christian expression of memories, in the form of martyrdom accounts, created a discourse that allowed the young Christian communities to define themselves. In Leemans’s words: ‘This discourse did not only keep the martyr’s memory alive but was ‘more than a memory’ in the sense that it contributed to the construction of a Christian identity understood as the *imitatio Christi* through the *imitatio martyris*’.¹¹⁸

2.2.2 *The example of Masada*

Only known through Josephus’s *Wars of the Jews* (written between 75 and 79 AD),¹¹⁹ the episode of the fall of Masada is intriguing and has engendered many debates since its ‘rediscovery’ in the 1920s. We shall not enter these debates here as it is not the purpose of this thesis but, in order to understand thoroughly how collective memory and discourse analysis can work together, and help our own investigation, a little background knowledge on the Masada episode is necessary here.

Masada is the mountain site of a fortress built (or fortified) by Herod the Great between 37 and 31 BC that the Jewish rebels called Sicarii,¹²⁰ led by Menahem Ben-Yehuda, took by force (killing all 700 Roman soldiers posted there) in 66 AD, an event which probably contributed to the beginning of the Great Revolt. After crushing the revolt in Jerusalem, the Romans turned their attention to the last rebel strongholds: Herodium, Macherus and Masada. By 73 AD, only

¹¹⁷ J. Butler, 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. New York: Routledge, xii.

¹¹⁸ J. Leemans, 2005. ‘Introduction’. J. Leemans (ed.), *More Than a Memory: The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity*. Leuven: Peeters Publishers, xv.

¹¹⁹ Josephus Flavius, who was the Jewish commander of Galilee during the Great Revolt (66-73 AD), became a historian in Rome after he surrendered to the Romans following the fall of Jotapata in 67 AD. For this surrender and association with Rome, Josephus was hated by the Jews and considered a traitor, but his extensive work (which survived thanks to the Church who regarded his work as an important source on early Christian history) provides a remarkable (and unique) insight into first century Jewish history.

¹²⁰ The Sicarii are known for their use of a small dagger to assassinate whoever they considered their enemies, Romans, and moderate Jews alike. They were ferociously opposed to Roman rule in Israel and murdered both Romans and Roman sympathizers. Their actions in 66 AD in Jerusalem (i.e. killing of the high priest Ananias) started the Great Revolt.

Masada was still standing, occupied by 967 Sicarii, many of whom were women and children and led, by then, by Eleazar Ben-Yair who, according to Josephus, ‘acted the part of a tyrant at Masada afterward’.¹²¹ Josephus relates an important episode preceding the siege of Masada in which, in search of food supplies, the Sicarii raided a nearby Hebrew settlement called Ein Gedi. The Sicarii drove the men out of the village and murdered all women and children that could not escape (700 of them according to Josephus).¹²² Ein Gedi was not, however, an isolated incident as Josephus emphasises the Sicarii’s practice of raiding nearby villages: ‘And indeed, these men laid all the villages that were about the fortress waste; and made the whole country desolate’.¹²³ After being besieged by the Romans for a few months (between 4 and 8 months at most according to most scholars)¹²⁴ and facing an inevitable defeat, Eleazar had to make a decision: either surrender, fight to the death or commit suicide. Eleazar chose the last of these solutions:

setting before their eyes what the Romans would do to them, their children, and their wives, if they got them into their power, he consulted about having them all slain. [...] he [Eleazar] gathered the most courageous of his companions together, and he encouraged them to take that course.¹²⁵

According to Josephus, Eleazar had to give two subsequent speeches to his men to convince them to first kill their own wives and children and then be killed by the last ten men chosen by lot. Josephus puts in Eleazar’s mouth two lengthy speeches which are centred around their fight for freedom, courage, and honour. Josephus then describes the zeal with which Eleazar’s companions slaughtered their own families and then, lying beside their loved ones, were also executed by the appointed ten remaining men. After casting a lot to decide which one of them would slay the nine others and then himself, the appointed executioner killed his nine companions then made sure that everyone at Masada was dead before setting the palace on fire and killing himself. We learn here that two women and five children escaped the massacre by hiding under ground. Josephus’s account ends with the Romans’ reaction when they breached through the wall and found the dead

but could find no pleasure in the fact, though it were done to their enemies. Nor could they do other than wonder at the courage of their resolution, and the immoveable contempt of death which so great a number of them had shewn, when they went through with such an action as that was.¹²⁶

¹²¹ After the killing of Ananias, his son Eleazar (who became the captain of the temple) and his companions killed Menahem and other rebels, but Ben-Yair escaped and fled to Masada with the remaining rebels. Ben-Yair, a relative of Menahem, became the leader of the Sicarii at Masada. Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 2, 17:9.

¹²² Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 4, 7:2.

¹²³ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 4, 7:2.

¹²⁴ See for example L.H. Feldman, 1984. *Josephus and Modern Scholarship (1937-1980)*. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 789-790.

¹²⁵ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 7, 8:6.

¹²⁶ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 7, 9:2.

Josephus's account of the mass suicide at Masada is the only one and is not mentioned in any other source, whether pagan or Jewish. The *Book of Jossipon*, written anonymously in the tenth century, which drew on Josephus's work, tells the story of Masada but asserts that the men, contrary to Josephus's version, did kill the women and children but went on to fight the Romans and died in battle. As Zerubavel notes, if this Masada narrative had any sort of impact on the medieval communities, it was as an example of Kiddush ha-Shem ('Sanctification of the Name', an act or behaviour that brings honour or glory to God).¹²⁷

It is only in 1923, when a modern Hebrew translation of Josephus's *Wars of the Jews* was published, that the story of Masada captured the imagination of the nascent Zionist movement. Lamdan's poem 'Masada' (written in 1927), which depicted the events at Masada in a way that enabled the audience to relate it to their own situation,¹²⁸ also contributed to the birth of the myth of Masada. Masada quickly became a site of pilgrimage, particularly popular with the Zionist youth. One of them, Schmaria Guttman (1909-1996), developed an interest in the site and started a campaign of 'moral entrepreneurship',¹²⁹ promoting the site to political leaders and organising youth trips to the mountain site. Guttman, in search of a Jewish heroic tale to tell young people at a difficult time (1942, Rommel was getting close to Palestine) and inspired by the dramatic landscape of the site, interpreted Josephus's story in the light of the Zionist movement and created a new narrative of the fall of Masada: the story of the last stand of the brave freedom fighters who fought the Romans to the bitter end. Guttman's narrative, which diverges in very important ways from Josephus's account,¹³⁰ was aimed at inspiring national

¹²⁷ Y. Zerubavel, 1995. *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 62.

¹²⁸ Schwartz, Zerubavel and Barnett's article provides us with a detailed and pertinent analysis of Lamdan's poem and explains how it was interpreted by the Jewish audience in the 1920s/30s who felt trapped in a 'no-choice' situation which stemmed from the rise of Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. The poem itself played an important role in the rise of the Zionist movement and was part of the Israeli curriculum for many years. The phrase 'Never again shall Masada fall!', taken from Lamdan's poem, is still used during national observances and celebrations of the Israeli state. B. Schwartz, Y. Zerubavel, B. M. Barnett, 1986. 'The Recovery of Masada: A Study in Collective Memory'. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 27 (2), pp. 147-164.

¹²⁹ The concept of 'moral entrepreneurship', commonly used in sociological studies, refers to the act of influencing a group or culture by encouraging a belief or a particular behaviour. Ben-Yehuda convincingly associates the concept of 'deviance' or 'deviant belief' with 'mythical memory' and 'moral entrepreneurship' in order to explain the Masada phenomenon, Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 287-292.

¹³⁰ Ben-Yehuda dedicates a whole chapter to Guttman's influence on the creation of the Masada myth. Through his interview with Guttman in 1986, Ben-Yehuda relates the complex process that led to the birth of the Masada myth, highlighting the needs and emotions that pushed Guttman to create his Masada narrative: 'The presence of such a convinced, committed, and fairly knowledgeable moral entrepreneur during a period when there was a real cultural hunger for a heroic narrative such as the Masada mythical narrative, coupled with the truly threatening crisis that existed during 1940-42, provided a situation in which Guttman simply could not fail.' (Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 236). Ben-Yehuda also shows how, in spite of obvious contradictions, Guttman managed to impose his version of the events over that of Josephus. Ben-Yehuda indeed states that even though Guttman based his version on Josephus and always insisted on the reliability of the *Wars of the Jews* (as after all, if Josephus' account

pride and at developing a sense of national identity for young people. Others also contributed to the myth, like Klosner who declared that Eleazar Ben-Yair was a national hero. However, Guttman's realisation of the potential of the Masada narrative, the need for a positive symbol of resistance and the dramatic landscape of the site itself, allowed him to create a myth of patriotic heroism. In the 1950s, the site of Masada itself was exploited by the Israeli army who used the fortress as a place to bring new recruits for the swearing-in ceremony. In time, the ceremony became ritualized and included climbing the mountain up to the site, followed by the reading of (a heavily edited version of) Ben-Yair's speech and some (carefully chosen) passages of Josephus. The story of Masada also appeared in children textbooks throughout the country from the 1930s and, as shown by Ben-Yehuda, all of them contained references or descriptions of intense fighting between the Sicarii and the Romans and omitted the Ein Gedi episode.¹³¹

Yet this version of the events at Masada is based on an original narrative which clearly lacked heroism. As Ben-Yehuda puts it: 'Josephus Flavius's narrative raises the immediate question of how such a horrible and questionable story could become such a positive symbol'.¹³² Ben-Yehuda's answer is straight forward and simple: 'The original narrative does not convey a message of unquestionable heroism. Such heroism was *added* to it'.¹³³ One of the main arguments in favour of Guttman's narrative advanced by many scholars was that the only source for the event was Josephus. Because of his Roman sympathies, Josephus's work was ignored by contemporary Jews who saw him as a traitor. Modern scholars took the same approach towards Josephus's account and were critical of his statements, especially regarding the suicide episode. Josephus is often accused of having fabricated the mass suicide story to appeal to the Romans as it is not a (common) Jewish practice.¹³⁴ Josephus's version of the two speeches allegedly delivered by Ben-Yair is also one of the main points of scrutiny for scholars who argue that Josephus could not have known what the Sicarii leader said in such detail. Guttman asserts that Josephus cannot be trusted on other points like, for example, the episode of Ein Gedi and states that it was the fault of the inhabitants of the village who refused to give away

is false, there is no Masada at all), 'when the description Josephus provided does not "fit" a heroic tale, Shmaria becomes argumentative and develops his own interpretation, always careful not to denounce Josephus Flavius completely.' Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 80.

¹³¹ Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 164.

¹³² Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 43.

¹³³ Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 45. *Italic* in the text.

¹³⁴ There are a few instances of suicide in the Hebrew Bible, like Samson in the Philistines' temple but, with the exception of Kiddush ha-Shem which allows suicide in very particular circumstances (like being forced to convert to a different religion), killing oneself is proscribed in Judaism. Consequently, the suicide story at Masada was sometimes 'written off' by some tour guides or textbooks.

their food willingly to the ‘Masada defenders’.¹³⁵ Moreover, although Josephus consistently refers to the rebels at Masada as Sicarii, the official discourse refers to them as Zealots, thus removing the pejorative connotation the Sicarii term has. Indeed, some scholars question Josephus’s motives and see in the designation Sicarii a message to his audience both warning the Jews against leading rebellions against the Romans and telling the Romans that the Great Revolt was led by (a minority of) extremist Jews.¹³⁶ Most scholars, however, agree that Sicarii is the right term to describe the ‘defenders of Masada’ as Josephus is consistent in his description (except for one instance where he calls Menahem’s followers Zealots) and makes a point to emphasise the differences between the moderate Jews, like himself, and the extremist Sicarii.

More importantly, the modern discourse concerning Masada insists on the fights between the Zealots and the Romans. Guttman states that ‘even though Josephus does not explicitly tell about the Zealots’ war, it is clear to us that they did not sit with arms folded in their lap and wait for the Romans to advance with their siege work’.¹³⁷ In this light, it is easy to see how a few tweaks of Josephus’s account transformed a story of mass suicide (and murder of women and children!) committed by an extremist sect into a narrative of patriotic heroism worth commemorating. Several aspects of the collective memory theory are clearly illustrated here: what does not serve the purpose of the author/narrator is omitted and/or discarded (like the Ein Gedi episode or the mass suicide), what is missing from the original account is added (fights between Romans and Sicarii) and the discourse is adapted to the need of the current situation of the author/narrator (resistance and patriotism).

In order to reinforce his version of the story, Guttman convinced an eminent archaeologist at the Hebrew University (and former chief of staff of the Israeli Defence Forces) to dig up the site of Masada. In 1963, with much enthusiasm, Professor Yigael Yadin (1917-1984) began the excavation of the site and Masada reached international fame. The excavation culminated in 1969 with the state burial of the remains of alleged ‘Masada defenders’ found on the site.¹³⁸

¹³⁵Excerpt from Ben-Yehuda’s interview of Guttman on the Ein Gedi episode: ‘they [the Sicarii] come to Ein Gedi and tell the people there: ‘We ask you to give.’ And then they [the people of Ein Gedi] showed them their finger, so they took it by force. Look, guys, this is not a nice thing to do. But in order to live, people do things that are not nice. But the people of Ein Gedi could show more courtesy and give them something of their own. So they took it by force. So he [Josephus Flavius] turns it into ‘butchered and burnt,’ et cetera. I do not have to take it as absolute truth.’ Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 71-82.

¹³⁶ Josephus’s *Wars of the Jews* is often accused of being predominantly apologetic in nature rather than historical. Magness, *Masada*, 22.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 69.

¹³⁸ Yadin published an edifying book about the excavation at Masada in which he clearly tries to match up his findings with some episodes of Josephus’s account. For example, Yadin identified twelve of the ostraca he found

However, Yadin's findings did not corroborate either Guttman's or Josephus's version of the events as no evidence of a mass suicide were found. There was no clear evidence for a battle either,¹³⁹ and the remains that were hailed as that of the 'defenders of Masada' were found to be more likely of Roman prisoners (only twenty-five sets of remains were found, some of which were buried with pig bones which makes them unlikely to be Jewish). Nevertheless, even though the archaeological findings led scholars to reject (or at least question) the heroic version of the fall of Masada,¹⁴⁰ and despite the fact that the interest in Masada has declined,¹⁴¹ the mythical narrative remains prevalent (as attested by the numerous touristic websites that praise the 'heroes of Masada').¹⁴² Moreover, Josephus' credibility remains highly debated. Some scholars, like Ben-Yehuda, argue that Josephus could not, and had no motive to, lie about the mass-suicide as his contemporaries would have known the truth and question Josephus' version.¹⁴³ Conversely, Magness defends the opposite view and states that:

this objection [that Josephus could not lie to his contemporaries] reflects a modern expectation of "objective" history, a view not shared by the Greeks and the Romans. Instead, ancient histories are more like stories [...] and typically were intended to convey messages or morals to the audience.¹⁴⁴

as the lots used by the last men standing mentioned by Josephus because they had Jewish names written on them (including Ben-Yair). He explained the fact that twelve and not ten, as in Josephus's account, were found, because one was not completed, leaving eleven and because Josephus possibly did not count Ben-Yair among the ten men. These arguments are pure conjecture and far stretched; they show that Yadin was trying to fit his archaeological findings into Josephus's version of the events to give it some ground. See Y. Yadin, 1966. *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand*. New York: Random House.

¹³⁹ Yadin found arrowheads but a lot fewer than expected if a battle had occurred. Josephus mentions that the Romans had brought catapults to the siege, but no iron bolts have been found. Magness explains the lack of catapult bolts by the fact that the Romans could have simply picked them up after the battle to re-use them. J. Magness, 2019. *Masada. From Jewish Revolt to Modern Myth*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 14-15.

¹⁴⁰ Magness recently argued that the archaeological findings at Masada can be interpreted both ways and therefore cannot prove or disprove Josephus's account. She concludes that: 'Whether or not the mass suicide story is true depends on how one evaluates Josephus's reliability as a historian'. Magness, *Masada*, 196.

¹⁴¹ In the 1960s/70s, Israel fought successive wars against its Arab neighbours (the Six-Day War in 1967, the War of Attrition in 1969-70, the Yom-Kippur War in 1973) which provided the state of Israel with new battle narratives and new places to commemorate its victories. Consequently, Masada's popularity declined and is now mainly a touristic site.

¹⁴² Masada also remains a symbol for the Israeli government as their plan for President Trump's first visit to Israel shows. The newly appointed American president was reportedly supposed to give a speech at Masada in May 2017, but the idea was abandoned when he was informed that his helicopter could not land on the mountain top (as it could damage the site) and refused to take the cable car. Nevertheless, the initial choice of Masada is highly significant as Israel clearly still takes pride in the archaeological site and its story. This shows that the Masada myth is still relevant today. Magness, *Masada*, 200.

¹⁴³ Ben-Yehuda vehemently rejects Guttman's view on Josephus: 'I must admit that I find incredible the claim that Josephus's narrative, written only a few years after the events by an important, involved, knowledgeable contemporary figure, is somehow "equal" to an imaginary mythical and fabricated narrative concocted by a variety of moral entrepreneurs some 1,800 years later. It must be stated that no shred of evidence exists supporting the claim that- as some would have us believe- Josephus did create a myth, and that all of his account is false.' N. Ben-Yehuda, 2009. 'The History, Myth, and Science of Masada: the Making of an Historical Ethnography'. A. J. Puddephatt, W. Shaffir and S. W. Kleinknecht (eds.) *Ethnographies Revisited, Constructing Theory in the Field*. Abingdon: Routledge, 340.

¹⁴⁴ Magness, *Masada*, 194.

It is very likely that some elements of Josephus' account have been exaggerated or distorted and we must be cautious in dealing with the *Wars of the Jews*, especially as it is the sole source of information for the fall of Masada. However, it is clear that the Masada myth is based on pure conjectures and has no historical ground that can be ascertained whether by literary sources or by archaeological findings.

In consequence, we can make a few observations concerning our example of Masada regarding discourse analysis and collective memory:

1. While the story was forgotten for almost 2000 years, since its rediscovery it was used successively by two generations of Jews for different purposes; firstly the Zionist movement integrated the Masada narrative into their collective memory in order to link themselves to the past: the Zionist youths saw themselves as the direct descendants of heroic patriots who fought for their freedom and for their country; and secondly, as Zerubavel notes, the Second World War and the Holocaust modified the perception of Masada to which the Jews in Palestine turned 'as a historical model presenting a dignified alternative to the European Jews' response to Nazi persecution'.¹⁴⁵ Masada became a counter-metaphor to the Holocaust, a symbol of active resistance, and suicide, an act of defiance. Consequently, we can remark here that the collective memory of a past event, and the discourse that relates the story, are fluid and can be modified, even in a short period of time;

2. There are various elements that ensure the passage of a story into the collective memory, including the setting (dramatic mountain fortress site) and opportunity to commemorate a particular event (Masada was the unique site the Jews had access to where they could commemorate a past event), the timing and need for a particular narrative (the rise of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe that sparked the Zionist movement, the Holocaust). Moreover, as Ben-Yehuda remarks:

"the past", as we know it, is a selective construction of a particular sequence of events, structured along a time continuum, that "makes sense" within a distinctive culture. The reason that such a sequence is understandable and acceptable [...] in a given culture is that the discourse used in the sequence, the way it is constructed, and the symbols it uses are embedded within a particular cultural matrix.¹⁴⁶

3. The modern narrative is based on an ancient source which gives it credibility, but the new narrative is constructed by omitting key elements from the old account: in our example of Masada, the Ein Gedi episode and the suicide (in certain cases) are simply written off. The

¹⁴⁵ Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 71.

¹⁴⁶ Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 278.

modern narrative also uses ambiguous language (Zealots instead of Sicarii) and inaccurate chronology (the length of the siege is greatly exaggerated), adds important elements that seem plausible (like fighting), and the focus of the narrative is shifted to the heroic episode (here, the alleged battle that preceded the slaughter/suicide. The ending, i.e., the suicide, is relegated to the background as unimportant, only mentioned in passing, if at all);

4. The story of Masada perfectly illustrates how the present and the past are interconnected. Josephus's account was adapted to the present need of the Jews in Palestine in the 20th century but it also helped shape their national identity and Jewish culture. Like Schwartz, we therefore conclude that the present both influences, and is influenced by, past recollections;

5. Zerubavel, through her interviews about the Fall of Masada, noticed the ability people have to 'compartmentalize knowledge' so 'history and memory can coexist without apparent friction'.¹⁴⁷ For Masada, even though people seem aware of the discrepancies between the original account and the mythical narrative (and know that the archaeological findings disproved it), the two versions of the same event seem to cohabit harmoniously in people's memory: Masada is still a lucrative tourism spot and Masada remains a symbol of national pride;

6. Finally, one of the most striking aspects of the Fall of Masada is how collective suicide is seen as victory, how the modern narrative of Masada 'reframe[s] death as leading to rebirth; the loss of individual life contributes to the survival of the collectivity'.¹⁴⁸

All the points above are relevant to our investigation of early Christian martyrdom accounts as this thesis posits that, in some respects, the early martyrdom accounts analysed here acted for Christianity as did the story of Masada for Israel in that it helped Christians develop their own identity. The process by which this was achieved, however, differs in certain ways as we shall now see.

2.2.3 Collective Memory and Discourse Analysis in this Thesis

Although not part of early Christian history, the story of Masada provides a recent and well-documented example of the construction of identity based on collective memory and discourse. Masada is also an 'extreme' example of the process at work in the collective memory

¹⁴⁷ Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 220.

¹⁴⁸ Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 227.

theory since it not only shows the ‘cancelling’ aspect of the theory (Masada was forgotten entirely for over 1800 years) but also the scale and rapidity at which collective memory can develop once a narrative is deemed useful to a community (as we saw, the whole of the Israeli nation rallied around this narrative within a few decades). Early Christian martyrdom accounts played a key role in the construction and success of the Church, they provided a bond between Christians congregations throughout the Empire and gave them a sense of communality, as did Masada for the ailing Israeli nation after WWII. However, the process by which this collective memory of early Christian martyrdom was achieved differs in some aspect with that of Masada. For example, the reaction to the martyrdom accounts was almost instantaneous and more importantly the texts were numerous and varied, and it is their amalgam that constructed the collective memory of early Christian martyrdom, not a single event or text as for Masada.

The collective memory theory is intricate and not easily defined. The terms ‘collective memory’, ‘social memory’, and ‘cultural memory’ are often used interchangeably, and loosely, by scholars to refer to both the process of remembering and constructing the narrative of an event, and the resulting narrative of that event.¹⁴⁹ There are many interconnected factors that intervene in the process of formation of collective memory¹⁵⁰ but only two of them will be tackled in the present thesis: the origins of a story (i.e., the role played by the eyewitnesses and the narrators), and the cultural context that often (consciously or unconsciously) shapes a story.

Firstly, as Eve remarks: ‘in non-literate societies, the acceptability of a tradition more often had to do with authority, which could be that of the speaker or that of the genre.’¹⁵¹ Consequently, both the format and the authorship of the martyrdom account will be investigated. The question of authorship is a particularly interesting one since most accounts claim to be based on reports of eyewitnesses compiled by members of the martyrs’ own congregations. This claim is unsurprising, not only because it would make sense for a community to want to relate the stories of their own martyrs themselves, but also because of narrative conventions and expectations of the time. Indeed, ancient writers (and especially historians) and their audience placed high value on eyewitnesses accounts, particularly if these witnesses had a participatory role in the events they related.¹⁵² Of course, as we saw previously, eyewitnesses accounts have their limits, and

¹⁴⁹ Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 91-101.

¹⁵⁰ For example, as we saw previously, commemoration, liturgy and other acts of remembrance can be a big part of the collective memory of a group. Although it certainly became the case with early Christian martyrdom (especially with the cult of relics), this aspect of the collective memory of early Christian martyrdom will not play an important role in our analysis.

¹⁵¹ Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 99.

¹⁵² Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 135-137.

shortcomings in the case of contradicting recollections, but more importantly, the narrative is always inevitably shaped by the narrator. It is the narrator who decides what detail goes into the story, how the protagonists are represented, and ultimately what message the story bears. In the light of the collective memory theory, the role of the eyewitness is both crucial and irrelevant.

A modern example that illustrates this ambiguity is that of the Martyrs of Columbine. Cassie Bernall was one of the twelve students killed in the Columbine High School Massacre, perpetrated by two fellow-students in April 1999. After the shooting, police interrogated the survivors and one of them related what he believed to be the last moments of Cassie Bernall. According to the witness, one of the killers approached Cassie and asked her if she believed in God. Cassie allegedly answered 'yes' and was shot dead. However, during their investigation, the police came to the conclusion that this scene did not happen as described by the witness. Indeed, according to other witnesses, it was another student, Valeen Schnurr, who had been injured and was repeating the words 'Oh my God don't let me die', who was asked if she believed in God by one of the killers. Valeen said she did and, after being asked why, answered that she 'had been brought up that way'. She was not shot again and survived. Nonetheless, this version of the events, although the most likely, is not the one remembered. Cassie's mother wrote a book entitled *She Said 'Yes': The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* which was a best-seller for weeks after its publication. Cassie's parents, devout evangelical Christians, were told both by police and Cassie's friends that the question of her belief was never asked but they stood by their version of the event. Cassie is still honoured as a martyr in the evangelical church attended by her parents, as is fellow student Rachel Scott who was a member of the same church and a devout Christian herself. In Rachel's case, the claim of eyewitness account is even more spurious since her friend who witnessed her death was in a coma after the attack and does not remember either Rachel being asked about her faith or telling the police (or anyone else) about the alleged exchange between Rachel and the killers in which Rachel supposedly asserted her faith. As Castelli showed, the media and their discourse on the events (based on analogies with early Christian martyrs such as Perpetua) amplified the response to these narratives and ensured both their success and their endurance in collective memory.¹⁵³

It is clear from this example that there are different, consequential stages involved in the formation of collective memory of an event, starting with the eyewitness' account. While the

¹⁵³ See Castelli's analysis of the case in Castelli, *Memory and Martyrdom*, 172-196.

role of the eyewitness is crucial in that it gives the core material for the narrative (although already ‘interpreted’ by the witness), what really creates the collective memory is the way the story is ‘reinterpreted’, framed, and told by the narrator, as well as how it is received, and used, by the audience/community.

The second factor that contributes to the creation of collective memory is one that will receive particular attention in this thesis. As we saw earlier, the cultural context in which a story is created and evolves shapes it in very important ways. This aspect of collective memory, also known as ‘cultural memory’, refers to past ‘narrative frameworks and conventions’¹⁵⁴ and, more generally, to past figures/stories that already belong to the cultural memory of a group, used in the narration of a new event.

The new narrative might, in turn and at the condition that it is accepted by the community, participate in the creation of a new collective/cultural memory. This is certainly the case with early Christian martyrdom accounts, as we shall see, since the earliest texts themselves entered the collective memory of early Christians and engendered the *Acta Martyrum* genre, thus becoming part of Christianity’s cultural memory.

An example of this cultural memory process can be found in the analogy made between Socrates’s trial and early Christian trials. As shown by Rowe, this comparison might even be traced back to the New Testament:

Embedded in the cultural memory of antiquity was the understanding that Socrates was brought to trial and received the death penalty in part for introducing “new”, “strange” gods [...]. Regardless of its accuracy – though it is likely accurate – this memory persisted in undiluted form through the time of the NT and beyond, as Christian, pagan, and Jewish sources attest. We have no evidence that Luke had read Xenophon or Plato, but the remarkable similarity of language [...] suggests nothing less than a conscious attempt on Luke’s part to vivify the memory of Socrates’ trial in the minds of his auditors [...]. Once awakened, the memory of Socrates’ trial reverberates with the text of Acts to create an analogy between Paul’s situation and that of Socrates.¹⁵⁵

As mentioned before, the figure of Socrates inspired later Christian writers such as Justin,¹⁵⁶ and, as will become apparent in our study of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, it is also possible that it influenced the representation of martyrs in the martyrdom accounts. However, to what extent can we assert that the analogy between Socrates’s trial and Paul’s was a fully conscious effort on Luke’s part, and did he expect his readers to understand the allusion? Indeed, speaking of ‘cultural’ context/memory in antiquity raises the question of education and culture of early

¹⁵⁴ See Eve quotation p. 23.

¹⁵⁵ C. K. Rowe, 2009. *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age*. New York: Oxford University Press, 31-32.

¹⁵⁶ See p. 10.

Christians. Apologists of the second century clearly received both pagan and Christian education. Justin himself was a philosopher before his conversion. Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogus* reveals both his erudition in pagan culture (references to Homer and comic poets) and his skills in rhetoric. The fact that this work was aimed at Christians implies that Clement expected his audience to understand at least some of his allusions and follow his arguments.¹⁵⁷ However, it is generally accepted that most early Christians, especially during the first two centuries, were of poor backgrounds, many were slaves and hardly any of them had any education which was costly and only accessible in big cities.¹⁵⁸ It is unlikely, therefore, that Luke, or indeed the authors of the earliest martyrdom accounts, had any first-hand knowledge of pagan literary culture (i.e., reading of pagan texts such as Plato in the case of Socrates's trial). Nonetheless, we must remember that early Christians lived in a very pagan world, surrounded by pagan art and architecture, and through fresco paintings, reliefs, and other every-day objects, they would have been exposed to ancient pagan culture (ranging from Greek heroes stories to the representation of philosophers). As Moss concludes regarding her analysis of the similarities between Socrates and Polycarp in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*:¹⁵⁹

For an audience member familiar with the stories about Socrates and other philosophers from coins, statues, campfire stories, and school, the image of another old man dying unjustly on the charge of atheism was likely to sound familiar. Even if the allusions to the philosophical tradition appear more strained to us, at the time they were likely as obvious as the allusions to Jesus.

Moreover, many (if not most) Christians of the second century were converts (the *Passio Perpetuae* asserts that the martyrs themselves were catechumens when they were arrested). Therefore, those who did receive education would have had some degree of knowledge, however vague, of pagan culture. It is also worth noting here that most of the authentic early Christian martyrdom accounts (see next sub-chapter) were written by communities to which belonged undoubtedly educated Christians (e.g., Irenaeus belonged to the Lyon community, Tertullian lived in Carthage when Perpetua was martyred there) who probably influenced their communities' view and understanding of martyrdom, reflecting their own. Another important point to be made is that nowadays, we have access to many texts from antiquity, and that our reading of the martyrdom accounts is necessarily impacted (biased even) because of that knowledge. For example, when Perpetua asks for a pin for her hair, we might see a direct reference to Polyxena as depicted by Euripides in *Hecuba*.¹⁶⁰ However, there is nothing in the

¹⁵⁷ R. Lane Fox, 1986. *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine*. London: Penguin Books, 306.

¹⁵⁸ Green, B., 2010. *Christianity in Ancient Rome: The First Three Centuries*. London: T&T Clark, 114-115.

¹⁵⁹ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 64-65.

¹⁶⁰ See p. 163.

text, in the form of a direct quotation for instance, that would indicate that the author of Perpetua (or Perpetua herself) was referring specifically to Polyxena. Rather, the gesture should be understood in the wider cultural context of the Greek ideal of womanly honourable behaviour, itself a cultural memory that stemmed from the Greek heroines written about by the poets.

In this light, we can see that cultural memory can be achieved in different ways: through intertextuality, (a term used in this thesis specifically for direct quotations and clear allusions as it reveals a clear intent/ 'instruction' from the author that his text should be understood in the light of the text quoted, as with Justin's explicit mention of Socrates for example), references/influence which imply some kind of (likely conscious) textual or material influence (however an interpretation through the text alluded to is not necessarily expected), or reminiscences which have less specificity and are probably the result of more cultural background than knowledge. Of course, it is often impossible for us to decide to which category a particular case belongs. Nonetheless, these terms will be used throughout this thesis in order to investigate both the use and the creation of cultural memory in early Christian martyrdom accounts.

In brief, the term collective memory as it is used in this thesis refers to both the process by which the memory of an event is created, and the resulting memory of that event. The memory of an event, being subjected to the interpretation and retelling process by both the eyewitness and the narrator is also influenced by social and cultural constraints and influences that shape it into a collective memory that in some cases might, in turn, participate in the creation of a new collective memory, as is the case with martyrdom accounts. The cultural context in which the memory/narrative evolves plays a crucial part in its creation and shape. The question of intent is often asked in the case of expressions of cultural memory in early Christian martyrdom accounts and, as we shall see shortly, is sometimes used to deny authenticity to a text. Following the collective memory theory, we can see here that cultural memory, whether conscious or not, is a natural part of the process of remembering and narrating. Narrative frameworks and cultural references are used by eyewitnesses and narrators to both express and explain their experiences. The analysis of these early texts should not become naïve and must remain critical, but this aspect of the collective memory process should be kept in mind for a fair approach to these texts. These considerations will guide our study of three of the earliest Christian martyrdom accounts and enable us to shed light on the formation of one of the most critical phenomena of early Christianity, the theology of martyrdom.

2.3 Choice of Texts and Approach

As we have seen previously, martyrdom played a dominant role in the spread of Christianity during the first centuries. The earliest Christian martyrs were hailed as heroes and their stories were so popular in early Christian communities that they engendered both a new literary genre, the *Acta Martyrum*, and a cult of the martyrs/saints. Champions of Christianity at first, the martyrs were gradually ascribed special powers and venerated as saints, bringing with them power and wealth to any place that owned relics of martyrs. However, the historicity of the story or even of the characters mattered little. For instance, as Moss shows, even though the story of Chrysanthus and Daria is very unlikely to have much truth to it,¹⁶¹

In Reggio Emilia in Italy, where the relics of Chrysanthus and Daria are said to be housed, people had and still have strong connections to these saints. If a woman was infertile, profits were low, a family member sick, or an individual was unlucky, then the local saints were the first port of call.¹⁶²

The highly supernatural and romantic content of these texts made them very attractive to early Christians as a source of inspiration and hope, but they are often considered as pure fiction by most NT and Classics scholars.

By contrast, some earlier accounts of martyrdom which were written in the form of either letters or trial transcripts were given more historical value and used as proof of the persecution of the Christians by the Roman authorities by many academics until recently. It is commonly accepted that only six martyrdom accounts, written before the ‘Decian persecution’ (250 AD),¹⁶³ ‘preserve as accurate a report of what happened as may be expected from a contemporary’,¹⁶⁴ these are: the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Martyrdom of Ptolemaeus and Lucius*, the *Acts of Justin and his Companions*, the *Martyrs of Lyon*, the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* and the *Passion of Perpetua*. Of these six ‘historical’ accounts, two texts, or *Acta* (*Acts of Justin* and *Acts of Scillitan Martyrs*) reproduce, sometimes inaccurately, the format of Roman trials,

¹⁶¹ The *Martyrdom of Chrysanthus and Daria* is a 5th century text found in the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*. The story is set in the third century, under Numerian, and relates the incredible adventures of Chrysanthus, a young Roman citizen who converted to Christianity, and Daria, a young vestal virgin who becomes a Christian after falling in love with Chrysanthus. After being separated, persecuted, going through all kinds of ordeals and, finally reunited, the couple is sentenced to death by being buried alive for ‘refusing to have sex’. Although this account is highly romanticized, the couple are still considered as saints in several churches, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

¹⁶² Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 87.

¹⁶³ Because the *Acta Martyrum* became a literary genre around 300 AD, later *Acta* are less relevant for our purposes as by then the concept of martyrdom was already (mostly) developed to its modern condition. The martyrdom narratives discussed in this thesis will therefore be pre-Decian, non-fictional accounts. Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives*, 21.

¹⁶⁴ T. D. Barnes, 1968. ‘Pre-Decian *Acta Martyrum*’. *Journal of Theological Studies*, 19 (2), pp. 509-531, 528.

probably from eye-witnesses' recollections.¹⁶⁵ They are rather succinct texts and consist of the interrogation of Christians by the Roman governor in charge. While they provided a platform for early Christians to profess their faith and make the apology for Christianity, these *Acta* do not contain as much detail as the accounts written in the letter or *passiones* forms and will, therefore, not be analysed in this thesis. In addition, as noted by Barnes, 'the *Martyrdom of Ptolemaeus and Lucius* is an edifying tale told by the apologist Justin'. It is found in Justin's *Second Apology* and is the rather short story of Ptolemaeus, a 'teacher in the Christian doctrine' who, accused of the 'crime of Christianity' (after being denounced by the pagan husband of a Christian matron for corrupting his wife), is executed along with Lucius, a bystander who took on Ptolemaeus's defence. The story does not provide much detail about early Christian martyrdom, besides the unfairness and arbitrariness of the accusation and the nobility of character of Ptolemaeus.¹⁶⁶ This leaves us with three of the earliest and most influential martyrdom accounts in early Christian history: the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*.

The choice to analyse these three texts is a natural and rather common one. Most scholars commend these accounts for their authenticity, for the invaluable source of information they represent and for their emotionally charged and literary content. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*¹⁶⁷ is chosen here as a case study because, as the earliest known martyrdom account, it is the first formal and conscious expression of the concept of martyrdom. In that respect, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, through the author's choice of imagery, focus and vocabulary, reflects some of the earliest Christian ideologies and influences, as well as early Christian collective memory, and is therefore the perfect starting-point for the observation of the evolution of the theology of martyrdom. The *Martyrs of Lyon*¹⁶⁸ and the *Passion of Perpetua*¹⁶⁹ are both important texts that cannot be shunned. Frend, who decided to begin his main work on martyrdom with an analysis of the *Martyrs of Lyon*, states that 'For simplicity, sincerity and the sheer horror of the events it describes it is unmatched in the annals of Christian antiquity'.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, the *Martyrs of*

¹⁶⁵ J. E. Salisbury, 2004. *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence*. New York, London: Routledge, 4.

¹⁶⁶ Justin, *Second Apology*, II.

¹⁶⁷ As mentioned before, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (*Mart. Pol.*) is one of the most important texts concerning early Christian martyrdom as it is often considered the first martyrdom account. Written in an epistolary form around 157, *Mart. Pol.* describes the last days of the aged bishop of Smyrna Polycarp.

¹⁶⁸ The *Martyrs of Lyon* (*Mart. Lyon*), like the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is written in the letter form and recounts the martyrdoms of many Christians that occurred in 177 in Lugdunum (now Lyon in France).

¹⁶⁹ The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (*PPerp*) is written as a diary of the young mother Perpetua and relates her martyrdom and that of her companions in Carthage in 203.

¹⁷⁰ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 1.

Lyon, building upon the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*'s imagery and collective memory, contributed to the enrichment and evolution of the theology of martyrdom. Finally, the *Passion of Perpetua*, a diary of Perpetua's visions and last days written by the young martyr herself, reflects different traditions and influences but reveals a more complex theology of martyrdom. In addition, these texts are among the most treasured narratives of early Christian history and are still both relevant and inspiring today. For example, a French play, written to celebrate the Millennium, ingeniously gives a modern voice to the martyrs of Lyon as they suddenly come to life on the mosaic which depicts them in the St Nizier church and tell their story to inquisitive visitors. This witty and pedagogic text, which includes parts of the *Martyrs of Lyon*, both highlights the main themes of the Gallican letter and integrates the lessons from the ancient martyrdom account into modern Christian life and thoughts.¹⁷¹

Similarly, Perpetua's story has become an inescapable element of gender studies and is often used to illustrate women empowerment in the ancient world. Perpetua's diary was even chosen to be part of the Graphic History Series (by OUP) where she is inspiringly portrayed as a beautiful and proud young woman in charge of her destiny and defiant of the establishment.¹⁷² The modern medium used to recount Perpetua's story (graphic novel) as well as the focus on the concepts of gender and power show that Perpetua's story conveys messages that are still relevant so many centuries later. Indeed, the messages and representation of these martyrs, in these modern versions, have been adapted and reinterpreted according to modern concerns and literary standards, but their stories are still relevant because, behind the religious aspect of these narratives, the martyrs' preoccupations and sufferings resonate with modern realities, whether of conflicts and persecution, or simply in a social context of discrimination and intolerance. Additionally, these three texts present the advantage of being close to each other in time but geographically diverse (Smyrna in Asia Minor in 158, Lugdunum in Gaul in 177, and Carthage in North Africa in 203), thus giving a good idea of the evolution of the theology of martyrdom within a short period of time but throughout the Empire.

Regarding the treatment of these texts in this thesis, the focus will be on the martyrdom discourse, with special attention to influences and references, or rather, reminiscences, within the text. However, in order to show this evolution of martyrdom, we must extract the martyrdom and persecution discourse from the texts, thus sometimes requiring the confrontation of pagan

¹⁷¹ H. Quantin, 2001. *Blandine et les martyrs de Lyon (La Mosaique)*. Paray-le-Monial: Éditions de l'Emmanuel.

¹⁷² J. A. Rea & L. Clarke, 2018. *Perpetua's Journey: Faith, Gender, & Power in the Roman Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press.

and Christian sources. Therefore, along with the analysis of the martyrdom accounts, and when the text prompts it, I will look at some historical issues, such as the charges brought against the Christians and their legal status, but without going into much detail. Indeed, as we saw in chapter one, most aspects of martyrdom have been, and still are, subject to controversies but it is not the aim of this thesis to settle the long-standing debates on these matters.

We will, however, pay more attention to the problem of authenticity of the accounts since both the early dating and the historicity (as representative of collective memories) of the accounts are important for the sake of the present thesis. It is worth noting here that the notion of authenticity is often associated with historicity and veracity by many scholars.¹⁷³ Indeed, the Merriam-Webster dictionary gives the definition of ‘authentic’ (and ‘authenticity’) as: ‘worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact; something true or genuine’. However, as we saw in the previous chapters, recollections of events are not always accurate, and the author’s reality might be different from ‘hard facts’, but it does not necessarily imply that the text is either a forgery/fictional or wrongly dated/heavily edited. On the contrary, what the author chooses to mention and/or ignore (and the way it is expressed) is particularly revelatory of the communities’ concerns, influences, beliefs, and mind frame. In this light, the authenticity of an early Christian martyrdom account should not be dismissed because of problems of historicity which, in some cases, could simply be the reflection of either a genuine belief in something inaccurate/not true/supernatural, or as part of a discourse. Consequently, the question of authenticity of each account will be thoroughly investigated before turning to the literary part of our analysis.

As mentioned before, we will focus our investigation on both the memory of the events related in the accounts (i.e., what the author chose to mention) and the discourse in the texts (themes, vocabulary, etc...) and then compare them to each other to highlight the evolution of the representation of the martyrs/martyrdom and by extension, the theology of martyrdom. As we shall see, from Polycarp’s rudimentary martyrology to Perpetua’s intricate theology of martyrdom that foreshadows the cult of the martyrs, these texts drew their inspiration from different sources, both Christian and non-Christian. In most cases, it will be difficult to pinpoint a particular source of inspiration or even a direct use of a particular text. However, through an attentive analysis of the martyrdom accounts, distinctive reminiscences of older texts, oral traditions and ancient concepts and ideas, which both constitute, and contribute to, the collective

¹⁷³ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 91-125.

memory of early Christians, will become apparent. Indeed, as I will argue in this thesis, early Christian authors of martyrdom accounts created and developed the theology of martyrdom we are familiar with today through the creative appropriation of other cultures' imagery and traditions and, through the integration of a martyrological interpretation of the New Testament and other early Christian texts into their collective memory.

Chapter 3. Polycarp, Exemplary Disciple and Ultimate Martyr

As mentioned previously, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is the earliest Christian text to use the term *μάρτυς* in the modern sense of martyr and is therefore considered by many as the first Christian martyrdom account. For this reason, *Mart. Pol.* is highly significant in the study of early Christian collective memory and identity as this text undoubtedly impacted both. Our investigation into the evolution of the theology of martyrdom must therefore begin with this account of Polycarp's death, written in the letter form by his Smyranean congregation to another Christian community (Philomelium in Turkey), some time in the third quarter of the second century.

3.1 The Letter to the Church of Philomelium concerning the Martyrdom of Polycarp (*Mart. Pol.*)

3.1.1 Sources and Composition

The text of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is known to us through a collection of six manuscripts that date from the 10th century to the 13th century and are mostly similar in form and content. They form what is called the 'menologia' (also referred to as g) which constitutes the basis for the reconstitution of the ancient Greek text. One of them, *Codex Mosquensis* 390 (also called Moscow or M) offers an alternative ending to the other 5 manuscripts and includes passages from Irenaeus' writings about Polycarp and the Apostle John. Dehandschutter adds two manuscripts to this collection: the *Codex Atheniensis* 989 (A) and the *Codex Kosinitza* 28/60 (K), which both seem to contain similarities mainly with the Moscow manuscript but also include important differences that are difficult to trace back to any source and are not, therefore, part of the menologia (Dehandschutter incorporates A to the menologia but this is not common practice).¹⁷⁴

As noted previously, *Mart. Pol.* is a letter sent by the Church of Smyrna to the church of Philomelium that relates the last days of Polycarp and his martyrdom. Early *Acta Martyrum* were not commonly written as letters and it has been argued that *Mart. Pol.* was not originally

¹⁷⁴ B. Dehandschutter, 2007. *Polycarpiana: Studies on Martyrdom and Persecution in Early Christianity*. J. Leemans (ed.), BETL 205. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 4, 27, 37-40.

in the epistolary form but rather written as a (more common) trial report.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, while the letter's opening and ending seem to point to a 'real letter', its epideictic and paraenetic content cast doubts on its original genre. However, Hartog concedes that *Mart. Pol.* may be 'a real letter' as it contains much of the expected structure of a letter, but that the main purpose of this form is to frame the narrative. In Lieu's words, *Mart. Pol.* is

a genuine letter, although written in a developing tradition of Christian epistolography with a wider audience and with a clear didactic and kerygmatic purpose in view, but also decisively shaped by the events it describes and by the embryonic "veneration" of Christian martyrs.¹⁷⁶

Lieu's remark regarding the form in which the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was transmitted throughout the early Christian world highlights the role played by this letter in early Christian collective memory and the process which engendered both the *acta martyrum* genre and the cult of the saints.

Its importance in early Christian history is attested in Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiae* (book IV). However, Eusebius's version of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* differs in many ways from the original text. Eusebius summarises the first seven chapters of the letter (*HE* IV, 15, 3-14) and quotes the letter from chapter 8 and ends the account unexpectedly, in the middle of a sentence, in chapter 19, omitting the encomium of Polycarp and the epilogues containing the dating of the martyrdom and the colophons (*HE* IV, 15, 15-45). The absence of the last chapters is not the only notable difference from the original text. As a matter of fact, Eusebius's version does not contain most of the 'Gospel parallels' that, as we shall see, are so central to this text.

These omissions prompted some scholars to see subsequent redactions of the texts, with interpolations added after Eusebius. As Moss remarks, von Campenhausen's theory of interpolations in *Mart. Pol.* 'has been the most influential' and was either fully or partially adopted by eminent scholars such as Frend and Bisbee.¹⁷⁷ Von Campenhausen, by comparing Eusebius's version of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* with the menologia, drew four conclusions about *Mart. Pol.*: 1. the absence of Gospel parallels in Eusebius suggests a 'Gospel-redactor' who added them in the fourth century, after Eusebius's time;¹⁷⁸ 2. the so-called Quintus

¹⁷⁵ J. W. van Henten and F. Avemarie, 2002. *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity*. London: Routledge, 94-96, 114-116.

¹⁷⁶ J. M. Lieu, 1996. *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 58.

¹⁷⁷ C. Moss, 2010. 'On the Dating of Polycarp: Rethinking the Place of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* in the History of Christianity'. *Early Christianity* 1, pp. 539-574, 541-42.

¹⁷⁸ This 'Gospel-redactor' could be the same redactor/editor of *Mart. Pol.* 22.1 as the language in this passage is consistent with the Gospel parallels in the main text ('as you walk by the word of Jesus Christ **according to the Gospel** [...] for the salvation of **the holy elect**', emphasis added). However, it is more likely that the redactor (who also added *Mart. Pol.* 21) picked up the general theme and language from *Mart. Pol.* and used it in his doxology

pericope (*Mart. Pol.* 4), a problematic passage which we will investigate later on, was added before Eusebius's time as an anti-Montanist stance, along with the (also controversial) passage in *Mart. Pol.* 17-18 which relates to the cult of relics; 3. the miracles were pre-Eusebian additions but were omitted by Eusebius (*Mart. Pol.* 5.2, 9.1, 15.2); and finally, 4. chapters 21 and 22.2-3 were post-Eusebian additions.¹⁷⁹

Parvis, on the other hand, explains the differences between *Mart. Pol.* and Eusebius's version by the fact that Eusebius is at first paraphrasing the original account, and therefore, concentrates on what interests him, the facts, rather than the theology within the text. Parvis adds that the omissions and differences in the text quoted verbatim by Eusebius are nothing surprising in Eusebius's work. Parvis indeed asserts that 'these details are, surely, more likely to have been present in Eusebius's exemplar and censored by him on grounds of implausibility than to have been the only significant additions to this section (nearly half the work) by a putative post-Eusebian redactor'.¹⁸⁰ Because of the nature of the rendition by Eusebius in the *Historia Ecclesiae*, most scholars abandoned his version as evidence for the content of *Mart. Pol.* However, the problem of the unity of the text remains. Most scholars who argue for the unity of *Mart. Pol.* tend to date it to the third century to explain the discrepancies and/or (apparent) anachronisms within the text as a whole. Some scholars such as Parvis or Dehandschutter defend both the unity of the text in spite of the controversial passages, and a second century dating, claiming that, even though the author is giving a theological portrayal of Polycarp, the martyrdom account is still of historical value at its core.¹⁸¹ Hartog's approach in his commentary of *Mart. Pol.* is more cautious as he rightly warns us: 'Scholars should [...] speak in terms of possibilities and probabilities [...]. This commentary tentatively opts for an enhanced composition [...] which could have been somewhat redacted during the subsequent transmission process'.¹⁸² As we shall see shortly, it is highly possible that some passages were added to the main original text retrospectively, such as the Quintus pericope.

to 'round off the letter'. W. R. Schoedel, 1967. *Polycarp, Martyrdom of Polycarp, Fragments of Papias, The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary*, 5. New York: Nelson, 80.

¹⁷⁹ H. F. von Campenhausen, 1957. *Bearbeitungen und Interpolationen des Polykarp Martyriums*. Heidelberg: Winter, pp. 1-48.

¹⁸⁰ S. Parvis, 2006. 'The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*.' *The Expository Times*, 118 (3), pp. 105-112, 107.

¹⁸¹ See Parvis, '*Martyrdom of Polycarp*' (2006), 107-108, and Dehandschutter, *Polycarpiana*, 43-83.

¹⁸² Hartog refers here to the succession of copyists mentioned in the colophons 22.2, 22.3 and the Moscow epilogues (Gaius, Irenaeus, Socrates and Pionius). Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 186.

3.1.2 Dating(s)

The dating of *Mart. Pol.* is one of the most controversial aspects of this work and has been debated for decades. It is best to approach the question by distinguishing the dating of the execution from the dating of the text itself.

Execution of Polycarp

Eusebius, in his *Chronicon*, dates the execution of Polycarp at 166/167 (236th Olympiad, 2183 from Abraham and 7th year of Marcus Aurelius' reign). This dating has been accepted by some eminent scholars, including Frend,¹⁸³ but is disputed by others who are more suspicious of Eusebius' datings (Eusebius dates the *Martyrdom of Pionius* at the same time as Polycarp's while it is commonly accepted that Pionius was martyred under Decius in 250). A few scholars placed the death of Polycarp around 176/77, as to accommodate the Montanist theory advanced in some studies.¹⁸⁴ This dating, however, is considered too late by many as it makes 'Irenaeus' references to Polycarp unexplainable' and the association between Polycarp and John virtually impossible.¹⁸⁵ As shown by Hartog, 'the vast majority of scholars date *Mart. Pol.* between 155 and 168'.¹⁸⁶ Indeed, anything before 155 is impossible as Polycarp is said, by Eusebius and Irenaeus, to have gone to Rome to defend his Quartodeciman¹⁸⁷ view on Passover in front of Anicetus who became bishop of Rome in 154.

Mart. Pol. 21 gives a precise dating for the death of Polycarp but there are several aspects of this passage that need to be treated with caution. The text reads:

The blessed Polycarp was martyred on the second [day] of the emerging month of Xanthicus, seven [days] before the calends of March, on a great Sabbath, in [the] eighth hour. He was arrested by Herod in [the] high priesthood of Philip [the] Trallian, Statius Quadratus being proconsul.

While the colophon is more likely to be a later addition to the text than from the original account,¹⁸⁸ most scholars believe that it still belongs to the second century and that it contains

¹⁸³ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 268 and footnote 1, 295.

¹⁸⁴ *Mart. Pol.* is seen as an anti-Montanist text by some academics as we shall see in more detail shortly.

¹⁸⁵ Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 191.

¹⁸⁶ Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 192.

¹⁸⁷ Polycarp defended the view (shared by Asia Minor churches) that the Christian Passover should be celebrated on the 14th of Nisan as the Lord's Supper, regardless of the day it fell upon as opposed to the Western churches who were celebrating Easter, the day of Jesus's resurrection, on the first Sunday after the 14th of Nisan. The latter practice became the orthodox way to celebrate Easter after the matter was resolved in the 4th century by Constantine.

¹⁸⁸ *Mart. Pol.* 21 comes after the 'concluding' doxology and therefore comes across as an appendix rather than part of the main text. Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 328.

some authentic information as it reflects early traditions.¹⁸⁹ Originally, Barnes saw the references to Philip the Asiarch and Quadratus the proconsul as mutually exclusive or contradictory. Indeed, there is epigraphic evidence for Philip of Tralles as Asiarch during the 232th Olympiad (between 149 and 152) but Quadratus, who was attested as having been consul ordinarius in 142, could not have been proconsul at the same time as Philip was high-priest, since the usual gap between consulship and pro-consulship was 14 to 16 years.¹⁹⁰ As Barnes puts it: ‘Philippus was high-priest of Asia no later than 149/50, while no conceivable argument could put Quadratus’s pro-consulate earlier than 153/4’.¹⁹¹ Parvis echoes these doubts regarding the veracity of this colophon and declares:

It is possible that the claim in chap. 21 that Philip was high priest at the time Polycarp died is merely a false extrapolation on the basis of the title Asiarch in the text of the letter by whoever composed the coda (caused, presumably, by the irresistible pull of the Gospel parallel), but the two dates cannot otherwise be reconciled.¹⁹²

However, Barnes has since advanced the idea that the status of high-priest of Asia is different from the status of Asiarch, and purports that Philip was Asiarch around 149 but became high-priest of Asia later. Barnes concludes that:

the author of the chronological appendix to the *Martyrdom* was correct when he stated that Philippus was high-priest of Asia in the proconsulate of Statius Quadratus. The convergence of the two independent calculations indicates that Polycarp was martyred on 23 February 157.¹⁹³

The day of the martyrdom of Polycarp is also problematic. While the dating elements in the colophon (second day of Xanthicus, seven days before the calends of March) seem, indeed, to indicate the 23rd of February, the addition of the phrase ‘on a great Sabbath’¹⁹⁴ has puzzled scholars since it does not correspond to any possible date within the years usually accepted for *Mart. Pol.* The main confusion comes from the fact that, in this instance, ‘a great sabbath’ cannot refer to either the Jewish Passover or the Christian Easter as 23 February would be too early in the year (Easter and Passover are celebrated after the Spring equinox so at the earliest

¹⁸⁹ Especially the phrase ‘but while Jesus Christ reigns throughout the ages’ and the reference to the great Sabbath, which are typical of the second century. W. H. C. Frend, 1964. ‘Note on the Chronology of Polycarp and the Outbreak of Montanism’. J. Courcelle et al. (eds), *Oikoumene*. Catania: Università di Catania, pp. 499-506, 501.

¹⁹⁰ Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 368-78.

¹⁹¹ Barnes, ‘Pre-Decian *Acta Martyrum*’, 512.

¹⁹² S. Parvis, 2007. ‘The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*’. P. Foster (ed.), *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*. London: T. & T. Clark, 126-46, 130.

¹⁹³ Barnes convincingly shows that the elements given in this colophon point towards a dating ranging from 155 to 159. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 373.

¹⁹⁴ In Judaism, the weekly day of rest is observed from Friday evening until Saturday evening and is referred to as shabbat or sabbath. The term ‘great sabbath’, however, usually refers to the Saturday that immediately precedes Passover.

at the end of March but usually in April).¹⁹⁵ Lightfoot's dating of 155 for the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was based on the 23rd of February falling on a Saturday that year which he interpreted as a sabbath 'made great' by Polycarp's martyrdom.¹⁹⁶ Barnes argues that the phrase 'great sabbath' is a later interpolation inspired by the *Martyrdom of Pionius*. Indeed, *Mart. Pionius* specifies that Pionius and his companions were arrested 'on the second day of the sixth month (Xanthicus), **on the occasion of a great Sabbath**,¹⁹⁷ and on the anniversary of the blessed martyr Polycarp' (*Mart. Pionius*, 2). In *Mart. Pionius* 3, the author also informs his readers that it was a Saturday and that 'the porches were crowded with Greeks, Jews, and women. They were on holiday because it was a great Sabbath.' The implication here is that it was a holiday for both the Jews and the pagans: on 23 February the pagans celebrated the festival of Terminalia and in the year 250, 23 February was a Saturday. Barnes, therefore, (very cautiously) suggests that the phrase 'great sabbath' in *Mart. Pol.* might have been 'interpolated after 250 in the light of the fact that in 250 the anniversary of the death of Polycarp on which Pionius was arrested did indeed coincide with 'a great sabbath''.¹⁹⁸ Other theories have been advanced to explain the 'great Sabbath' phrase, such as the idea that it could refer to the Jewish feast of Purim or that it designates a local celebration, unique to Smyrna, but none have settled the debate.¹⁹⁹ Like Hartog, we must conclude that 'perhaps the only *terra firma* that remains is a general placement between 155 and 161'.²⁰⁰

Composition of the letter

The text itself gives little information regarding the date of its composition and, as we saw earlier, it is very likely that *Mart. Pol.* underwent several redactions by different editors, making it difficult to pinpoint a date. In *Mart. Pol.* 18.3, the author states: 'Gathering there together with gladness and joy, so far as possible, the Lord will permit [παρέξει] us to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom [τοῦ μαρτυρίου αὐτοῦ ἡμέραν γενέθλιον].' The use of the future tense in παρέξει has led many scholars to believe the letter was written within a year of the

¹⁹⁵ Lieu sees a definite allusion to the Jewish Passover in the first instance of the phrase and argues that Polycarp being arrested on 'a great sabbath' adds to the Gospel parallels. However, she recognises that the second instance of the phrase demands 'that the dating be taken seriously and that the 'great sabbath' be given more than a 'theological' explanation.' Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 72.

¹⁹⁶ J.B. Lightfoot, 1889. *Apostolic Fathers*, II.1, 2nd ed. London: Macmillan & Co., 677-722.

¹⁹⁷ Emphasis added.

¹⁹⁸ Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 377.

¹⁹⁹ See Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 196-99.

²⁰⁰ Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 200.

events it describes.²⁰¹ However, as Hartog remarks: ‘On a grammatical level, the future tense of *παρέξει* does not necessarily say anything about the past, whether some annual celebrations already occurred, or whether an interval separated the execution and the first celebration’.²⁰² Jefford concurs with the inability to affirm that the text was written within a year of Polycarp’s death but infers that the author of the account probably belonged to the community of Smyrna and was himself a witness of the events and concludes: ‘it seems reasonable to assume that the account of Polycarp’s martyrdom was recorded during the years immediately after the bishop’s death’.²⁰³ This is contested by Moss who categorically rejects the possibility of an eyewitness report as she states that ‘the use of the first person and eye-witness testimony in MPol is selective and strategic. It authenticates unsubstantiated miracles -voices and visions indiscernible by the other witnesses- and accounts for the paucity of relics’.²⁰⁴ Moss bluntly concludes: ‘If MPol is not an eyewitness account then the author is purporting to be someone he is not. In other words, the account is a forgery and the author is a fraud’.²⁰⁵ This idea seems substantiated by two passages within the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* considered anachronistic which led scholars to date the text to around the second half of the third century.

Firstly, after the heroic death in the arena of a member of the Smyranean congregation called Germanicus, the text goes on to tell the reader about a certain Quintus as follows (*Mart. Pol.*, 4):

But one, Quintus by name, a Phrygian recently having come from Phrygia, grew cowardly when he saw the beasts. But this was the one who had urged himself and others also to come forward voluntarily. The proconsul, having made many appeals, persuaded him to swear and to offer sacrifice. Therefore, on account of this, brothers, we do not praise those who hand themselves over, because the gospel does not so teach.

The mention of Quintus as a Phrygian (and Polycarp’s opposite attitude) led Ronchey to conclude that the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was written in the late third century as an anti-Montanist²⁰⁶ text.²⁰⁷ Barnes judges this argument tenuous and concludes that ‘there is no necessity to imagine an allusion whatever to Montanism’.²⁰⁸ Conversely, Moss argues that ‘the contrast between Quintus and Polycarp is an integral part of the narrative and cannot be easily

²⁰¹ See for example, Parvis, ‘*Martyrdom of Polycarp*’, (2007) 127 or Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, II.1, 609.

²⁰² Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 182.

²⁰³ C. N. Jefford, 1996. *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 87-88.

²⁰⁴ Moss, ‘Dating of Polycarp’, 547.

²⁰⁵ Moss, ‘Dating of Polycarp’, 557.

²⁰⁶ Montanus started prophesising in the Phrygia region, in Asia Minor, around 168 but the New Prophecy Movement became more popular in the third century.

²⁰⁷ S. Ronchey 1990. *Indagine sul martirio di san Policarpo*. Rome: Istituto storico per il medio evo, 79.

²⁰⁸ Barnes, ‘Pre-Decian *Acta Martyrum*’, 512.

excised'.²⁰⁹ Moss rightly remarks that the author does not criticise apostasy in this passage but is clearly emphasising the 'voluntary' aspect of Quintus's arrest. This prompts Moss to declare: 'It is remarkable to suppose that the first text to construct an ideology of martyrdom accurately anticipates later 'enthusiasm' for an as-yet-undefined practice',²¹⁰ namely 'voluntary martyrdom'.

As a matter of fact, voluntary martyrdom was a relatively early phenomenon, possibly influenced or inspired by Ignatius's *Letter to the Romans*.²¹¹ Moreover, as we saw earlier in the introduction, it is unlikely that Montanists were more prone to voluntary martyrdom than other groups of early Christians.²¹² In addition, the mention of the Phrygian origins of Quintus does not necessarily imply he was a Montanist, especially if the account was written around the time Montanism arose. Indeed, the association between the birthplace of Montanism and its members would not have yet been made. If we were to accept the Quintus pericope as part of the original account, a late date of third century is not warranted by any of the arguments advanced by Moss or Ronchey. However, as Middleton points out, the letter reads better without the Quintus pericope,²¹³ which then might have been inserted at the end of the second century, when Montanism was starting to spread and become an issue.²¹⁴

Secondly, *Mart. Pol.* 17-18 contains another controversial passage in which the text seems to suggest an already established cult of the saints, a religious practice which is considered by many scholars to have arisen in the third century.²¹⁵ The passage in question reads as follows (*Mart. Pol.*, 17-18):

17.1 But the jealous and envious and evil one, the adversary of the race of the righteous, having seen both the greatness of his [Polycarp's] martyrdom and his blameless conduct from the beginning- and that he had been crowned with the crown of immortality and had captured the indisputable prize-took care that not even his body should be taken away by us, although many were desiring to do this and **to fellowship with his holy flesh**.²¹⁶ 17.2 So he incited Nicetas, the father of Herod and brother of Alce, to appeal to the ruler not to hand over his body, 'lest', he said, 'forsaking the crucified one, they should worship this one.' And the Jews were inciting and urging these things, and they kept guard as we were about to take him from the fire, **not knowing that we will never be able to abandon the Messiah (who suffered for the salvation of the whole world of the saved, the blameless on behalf of sinners) or worship someone**

²⁰⁹ Moss, 'Dating of Polycarp', 561.

²¹⁰ Moss, 'Dating of Polycarp', 562.

²¹¹ According to Barnes, the letter was written circa 140 (could be as early as 110) and is the first explicit account using the discourse of martyrdom, even though the word itself is not present in the letter. Ignatius was an influential Apostolic Father and is said to have been acquainted with John the Apostle, like Polycarp. Ignatius wrote many letters, including one to Polycarp. Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 224-225. See chapter 1, discussion on true martyrdom vs voluntary martyrdom.

²¹² See p.15, footnote 63.

²¹³ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 26-27.

²¹⁴ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 288-90.

²¹⁵ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 102-104.

²¹⁶ *Καίπερ πολλῶν ἐπιθυμούντων τοῦτο ποιῆσαι καὶ κοινωνῆσαι τῷ ἁγίῳ αὐτοῦσαρκίῳ.*

else. 17.3 For we worship this one, who is the Son of God. But we love the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord, worthily because of their unsurpassed good will toward their own King and Teacher. May we also become both [their] partners and fellow disciples! 18.1 Therefore, when the centurion saw the opposition having arisen from the Jews, having put him [Polycarp's body] in the middle, as [is] their custom, he burned [it]. 18.2 So we later took up his bones-**more valuable than precious stones and finer than gold-** [and] laid them even where it was fitting. 18.3 Gathering there together with gladness and joy, so far as possible, the Lord will permit us to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, both for the commemoration of those previous contestants and for the training and preparation of ones to come.

There are different elements to be considered here. Moss's analysis of this passage starts with a remark on the Romans' and the Jews' concerns about the remains of Polycarp and she states that 'it's a peculiar concern for non-Christians to have'.²¹⁷ While it is true that the pagans and the Jews would not have been concerned about such matters, we must consider the purpose of this episode in the text rather than seek some historical explanation for it. Indeed, the passage is actually consistent with the Passion narrative and presents similarities with the Gospels. For instance, in Matthew 27: 62-64, the Jews are worried about Jesus's remains being stolen, which would fuel a belief in his resurrection, and ask Pilate for a guard to watch over the tomb; in John 19: 38, Joseph of Arimathea requests permission from Pilate to take Jesus's body with him 'for fear of the Jews'. *Mart. Pol.* 17.2, therefore, is consistent with the rest of the text which, as we shall see shortly, contains many Gospel parallels. Moreover, Moss sees an anachronistic practice in the anxiousness of the Christians to retrieve their bishop's remains. Indeed, the passages highlighted in bold in the quotation above seem to indicate an already established practice of veneration of the holy relics. The phrase 'lest, forsaking the crucified one, they should worship this one' (*Mart. Pol.* 17.2) sounds like a warning/criticism of the practice, a concern which arose in the third/fourth century.²¹⁸ Moss adds that *Mart. Pol.* 18 seems to act as '*apologia* for the absence of relics', a common concern for some communities in the fourth century.²¹⁹ Moreover, in *Mart. Pol.* 18.3, there is a mention of 'the celebration of the birthday of his [Polycarp's] martyrdom'. This sentence reinforces the case for a late redaction of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* as the notion of the anniversary of a martyr's death being referred to as 'birthday' is well-known and attested as *dies natalis* in the third century. Moss concludes:

It is easy to imagine that a community long accustomed to venerating a saint would compose a martyr act merely in order to conform to a growing hagiographical literary trend in late antiquity, to authorize cultic activities, or to document oral traditions. The rhetorical power of the first-person passages would certainly bolster the importance and influence of the account.

²¹⁷ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 102.

²¹⁸ For example, as attested by Saint Augustine, Ambrose condemned the practice of 'sharing food' with the martyrs on the anniversary of their death because it 'bore so close a resemblance to the superstitious rites which the pagans held in honour of their dead', Augustine, *Confessiones*, 6, 2.

²¹⁹ Moss, 'Dating of Polycarp', 567.

However, this point of view regarding the origins of the cult of the dead and the possible allusion to it in *Mart. Pol.* has been rejected by other scholars. As Lightfoot notes, there is nothing unnatural or anachronistic in the fact that the Smyranean community would have wanted to retrieve their bishop's remains, nor is it an isolated case as the community of Lyon and Vienne faced the same problem with their own martyrs, only a few years after Polycarp's death (*Mart. Lyon*, 1,61).²²⁰ In addition, there is a possibility that a cult of Polycarp's remains sprung shortly after his death. Indeed, as Barnes shows, 'within a few years of the death of Polycarp there began a cult of Peter as a martyr in Rome, which can be documented from literary, liturgical, epigraphical and archaeological evidence'.²²¹ In addition, as convincingly shown by Hartog, it is very likely that the cult of the martyrs started earlier than previously assumed as there is new archaeological evidence that seems to indicate that pagan and Jewish practices of ceremonial meals with the dead and visits to tombs and burial sites were common in the first century.²²²

In the light of the above, it is difficult to assert with certainty that *Mart. Pol.* 17-18 is anachronistic and there is therefore no indubitable evidence for a third century redaction of the text. However, as argued by other scholars, it is possible that these chapters are later interpolations. Indeed, as with the Quintus pericope, the text reads better, and the narrative feels less disrupted, if we simply suppress these chapters. As Middleton reminds us: 'it is entirely possible that a good deal of redactional activity took place in its [*Mart. Pol.*'s] transmission'.²²³ We can therefore surmise that these elements could have been added by later Christians to temper the cult of the saints. As we saw in the case of Masada, the practice of modifying a text to serve the current purposes of a community is part of the collective memory formation. In this case, the addition of these passages shows the importance and weight of *Mart. Pol.* for later communities and highlights the evolution of the theology of martyrdom *Mart. Pol.* helped creating, especially in the case of the cult of the relics.

To conclude, a precise dating for *Mart. Pol.* remains difficult to reach, but, even if the problematic passages are indeed later interpolations (although unlikely to be later than the end of second/beginning of third century), nothing prevents the dating of the original letter to, if not shortly after, at the most, a few years within the events it depicts.

²²⁰ Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 618.

²²¹ Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 23.

²²² Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 180-181.

²²³ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 27.

Hartog, arguing for a dating of third quarter of the second century, tentatively, but rightly, concludes:

If the narration was written several years after the events, such distance might explain the theologizing of the martyrdom as well as adaptations and enhancements, as ‘social memory’ and the retelling of events glossed the accounts. Liturgical influences may also have modified the narration. The final composition may have been based upon refurbished reports of witnesses (15.1), thus explaining the first-person language (yet also the strategic and selective use of such materials).²²⁴

Moreover, even if the writing of *Mart. Pol.* took place years after the events, the story of Polycarp’s death surely was shared orally shortly after the bishop’s execution, thus entering the ‘collective memory’, as well as being subjected to it, within a short period of time after the martyrdom. Polycarp’s martyrdom then remains the earliest Christian martyrdom known to us to be described in detail and later put down in writing and must therefore be our starting point for the analysis of the evolution of early Christian theology of martyrdom.

3.1.3 *Authorship(s)*

There are a few hints in the text as to who might be the author of the letter, but scholars have not reached a consensus regarding the authenticity of some of the colophons, which leaves the question of authorship unresolved. Nonetheless, we can gather some information from the text. For example, in *Mart. Pol.* 20.1, the author states: ‘But we, for the present, have reported in summary through (*διὰ*) our brother Marcion.’ The status of Marcion is debated as the phrasing is vague: Dehandschutter sees Marcion as the ‘authoritative witness’,²²⁵ while others argue for primary authorship (Eusebius, for example, uses the preposition *διὰ* to refer to Clement as the author in *1 Clement*).²²⁶ Hartog also suggests that *διὰ* could point to a ‘letter-carrier interpretation’.²²⁷ After enjoining the church at Philomelium to ‘send the letter to the brothers further on’, and a full (concluding?) doxology, the author states: ‘Those with us salute you. Likewise Evarestus, the one having written [*Εὐάρεστος ὁ γράψας*] with his whole household’ (*Mart. Pol.* 20.2). Evarestus is usually considered by scholars as the scribe rather than the author, but Jefford sees Evarestus as a member of the Smyranean church who edited the letter after its composition and added the Gospel parallels.²²⁸ This point of view, however, is mostly conjectural and is not accepted by most scholars. Yet as mentioned before, there is

²²⁴ Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 183-184.

²²⁵ B. Dehandschutter, 1979. *Martyrium Polycarpi: Een literair-kritische studie*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 187-189.

²²⁶ J.B. Lightfoot, 1889. *Apostolic Fathers*, II.3, 2nd ed. London: Macmillan & Co., 389.

²²⁷ Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 165, 326.

²²⁸ C. N. Jefford, 2006. *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 24.

evidence in the text for possible interpolations and subsequent redactions, as attested by chapter 21 and 22.1,²²⁹ but also by the colophons in chapter 22.2-3 (also present in the Moscow epilogues):

Gaius transcribed these [materials] from those of Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp; he also resided as a fellow citizen with Irenaeus. And I, Socrates, wrote it out in Corinth from the copy-material of Gaius. Grace be with [you] all. And again I, Pionius, copied from the aforementioned [material], having searched for it- when the blessed Polycarp disclosed it to me in a revelation, just as I will make clear in the follow-up. I gathered it together, now nearly worn away by time...

It is therefore impossible to affirm that the text was the work of only one author.

Nonetheless, Hartog makes a few important remarks regarding the authorship of the letter: 1. the author uses the first person plural throughout the letter, therefore ‘the character of the letter remains communal’; 2. the letter ‘would have been formed by ‘social and collective memory’, a shared response to circumstances and past events’ since it is based on eye-witnesses’ recollections and written several years after Polycarp’s death which allowed the members of the community to reflect on the meaning and impact of the events; 3. the letter does not only relate the martyrdom of the bishop of Smyrna, ‘it also seeks to form the community’ as it ends with communal practices (gathering of the remains, celebration of the anniversary of Polycarp’s death...) rather than the execution of Polycarp alone; 4. ‘*Mart. Pol.* mirrors the traditions, religious experiences, and ‘demands and challenges’ of the community’ as well as the liturgy and language of the Smyrnan congregation. The liturgical aspect of the account allows the further transmission and interpretation of the text by other communities.

By consequence, we can surmise that, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* being a communal text written for the early Christian communities, intended to play a formative role in early Christianity, and probably participated in the formation of an early Christian identity based on a narrative of persecution and martyrdom.

3.2 Authenticity of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

The authenticity of this letter is often disputed because of reservations regarding the historicity of the events it depicts. Indeed, some elements in the text seem so incongruous that they led some scholars to cast doubts on the authenticity of the whole account.

²²⁹ See pp. 49-50.

3.2.1 *Practical Discrepancies in Mart. Pol.*

Firstly, there is a number of ‘practical’ inconsistencies in *Mart. Pol.* For example, the episode relating Germanicus’s death is unlikely to have occurred in the way the author describes it but, rather, serves the purpose of the author by showing the courage and determination of the martyrs. Indeed, the author tells us that ‘for when the proconsul wished to persuade him [Germanicus] and told him to have pity on his age, he, using force, pulled the beast upon himself, wishing to be released quickly from their unrighteous and lawless life’ (*Mart. Pol.*, 3.1). From this passage, it seems that not only is Germanicus (and the others who are not named) being tried in the stadium, an unusual place for a trial, but also that the wild beasts were either unrestrained or at reaching distance from the prisoners. As Moss sarcastically remarks: ‘Imagine the disappointment for everyone, both the crowd and the wild beast, if Germanicus had recanted’.²³⁰ However, this statement is certainly exaggerated as we can surmise that the author simply wished to emphasise the nobility and courage of Germanicus or that, in order to make the story more fluid, decided to merge certain details, omitting the proper proceedings. This episode is also a good example of the use of cultural memory in a martyrdom narrative since it brings to mind the image of the (pagan) hero battling with wild beasts (Hercules perhaps), therefore assimilating the Christian martyrs to heroes.

Another passage that causes problems is that of the ‘gathering of wood’ for the pyre. Indeed, the author tells us that ‘more quickly than can be told -the crowds in a moment gathering up wood and kindling from both the workshops and baths, especially [the] Jews assisting in these matters- as [is] their custom.’ (*Mart. Pol.*, 13.1). While the author clearly wanted to show the zeal of the pagan crowd and of the Jews to destroy Polycarp after his confession, this scene presents difficulties as to how it was done. As Moss again notes, it seems quite improbable for the whole crowd present in the stadium to exit all at once and go pillaging the shops nearby for wood. However, according to Lieu, this passage should not be taken literally as it contradicts other parts of the text, like the presence of the Jews in the stadium or the fact that, as it is a ‘Great Sabbath’, the Jews could not have participated in the gathering of wood as the Torah forbids to kindle fires and gather firewood on the sabbath (Exod. 35.3; Num. 15.32-6.). Lieu argues that many of the passages mentioning the Jews actually illustrates the agenda of the author who uses the text to address issues encountered by the Smyranean community at the time. For example, the Jews’ concerns about the possibility that Christians might start worshipping

²³⁰ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 97.

Polycarp instead of Jesus in *Mart. Pol.* 17.2 does not make sense as there is no reason why the Jews would have been upset about such a shift in the Christian belief. It is more likely that this passage reflects a Christian concern projected onto the Jews for rhetorical purposes.²³¹ Similarly, *Mart. Pol.* 13.1 serves two purposes. Firstly, the phrase ‘as is their custom’ is used several times by the author to show off Polycarp’s exemplary behaviour as opposed to that of his opponents, both pagan and Jews. Secondly, as Lieu remarks:

It is unlikely that the Christians of Smyrna and those of Philomelium were already well aware of regular Jewish enthusiastic participation in building fires for the burning of Christians but rather they are being warned that even at this point of crisis, or especially at this point of witness, the fiercest competitors will be the Jews.²³²

By consequence, even though these passages cannot be considered historically accurate, they do reflect actual concerns and situations encountered by the Smyrnan community and have historical value. They should not be dismissed, nor should they be used to discredit the whole account. These discrepancies actually reflect the process of remembering and writing about past events using eye-witnesses’ accounts; the exaggerations and inconsistencies reveal what the witnesses found shocking or worth remembering and communicated them in familiar terms that best expressed their experience or interpretation of the event. Consequently, while we cannot accept the literal interpretation of the account here, we can nonetheless construe from the text that Germanicus acted bravely and that there were existing tensions between the Smyrnan Christian community and the Jewish one, which are both probable and consistent with the rest of the text.

3.2.2 *The Miracles*

Secondly, there are four ‘miracle episodes’ in *Mart. Pol.* that have sparked controversy among scholars, dividing them between those who try to ‘rationalise’ the miracles and those who claim that the whole account cannot be historical because of the supernatural characteristics of these passages.

In the first passage, Polycarp prophesies his own death (*Mart. Pol.* 5.2): ‘And [while] praying, he fell into a trance three days before he was arrested. And having turned he said prophetically to those who were with him, ‘It is necessary for me to be burned alive’’. Parvis, to whom ‘none

²³¹ Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 67.

²³² Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 63-64.

of these things [i.e. the miracles] is inherently implausible’, argues that it was not impossible for Polycarp to ‘predict’ his own death and the manner of it as ‘his arrest was not unexpected, fire was a common means of execution, and it is not unheard of for people to predict their own deaths in times of war or persecution’.²³³ Lightfoot went as far as calling the prediction ‘a natural presentiment’.²³⁴ While this might be the case, it is more likely to be reminiscent of the several occurrences of Jesus’s predictions of his own death in the Gospels. For example, in Matthew 20:18, Jesus foretells the manner of his death, after taking his twelve companions aside, he declares to them that ‘the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests [...] to be mocked and flogged and crucified’. These prophecies were part of the oral tradition about Jesus’s ministry and would have been believed/taken seriously by most Christians, thus belonging to their collective memory. As a matter of fact, as a follower of Christ who lived a saintly life, Polycarp would probably have been expected to experience such a vision by the audience.

The second miracle, which sees a voice coming from heaven telling the bishop: ‘Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man!’ (*Mart. Pol.* 9.1), is again dismissed as nothing exceptional by Parvis and Lightfoot as to them it can be explained by the fact that the author simply did not see the speaker. Jackson concurs and states: ‘The voice in the text is hardly miraculous. The words were such as might naturally have been used by any brave Christian present, and in the deafening disturbance kept up by the crowd might easily be thought to come “from heaven”’.²³⁵ Again, this is a plausible explanation but as Hartog remarks,²³⁶ the author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* clearly intended this ‘voice coming from Heaven’ to be taken as a supernatural sign for ‘those of our people being present’, since, according to him, only the Christians heard the voice. There are a few occurrences of ‘a voice from heaven’ in the Gospels which this passage has been compared to, such as the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:17), the transfiguration of Jesus in Mark 9:7 and to a certain extent John 12:28 (although as Jesus tells the crowd that the voice spoke for their sake not his). Moreover, the notion of *vox de caelis* was also found in Jewish and pagan literature. As a common occurrence in the Gospels and non-Christian literature, the idea of a ‘voice from heaven’ would not have appeared out of place in the context of the martyrdom of such a holy personage as Polycarp. We can therefore infer from the familiarity of the audience with the idea of a ‘voice coming from heaven’ that it was an element of the

²³³ Parvis, ‘*Martyrdom of Polycarp*’ (2006), 108.

²³⁴ Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 615.

²³⁵ B. Jackson, 1898. *St Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna*. London: SPCK, 59.

²³⁶ Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 296.

collective memory created from New Testament occurrences as well as non-Christian sources, used by the author of *Mart. Pol.* in order to bring the figure of Jesus to his audiences' mind.

The third miracle episode contains intricate metaphorical elements and reads as follows:

And when a great flame blazed forth, we-to whom it was granted to see-saw a miracle. And we were preserved in order to announce to the rest the things that happened. For the fire made the form of a vault, a ship's sail filled by the wind, walling around the body of the martyr. And it was in the middle not as flesh burning but as bread baking, or as gold and silver refined in a furnace. For we also experienced such a strong fragrance, like a waft of incense or some other of the precious spices' (*Mart. Pol.* 15.1-2).

For the scholars arguing for the historical accuracy of *Mart. Pol.*, this passage presents a challenge as to explain both the shape of the fire and the fragrant smell the audience experienced, and most explanations seem rather far-fetched. Parvis, for example, affirms that 'the strong and swirling wind that would be needed to produce the fire's described behaviour seems plausible enough in a coastal city on a late afternoon in February in the middle of a U-shaped stadium which was open at the west (seaward) end'.²³⁷ With such a detailed description, one might wonder if Parvis recreated the exact conditions of Polycarp's execution herself. Lightfoot is more pragmatic and simply dismisses the arching fire as 'a strictly natural occurrence'.²³⁸ Regarding the fragrant smell that appeared during the execution, it has often been explained as being created by the burning wood of the pyre or by the imagination of the by-standers,²³⁹ but this is also rather unconvincing. Hence a focus on the text itself is necessary in order to comprehend fully the role of this passage within the account. Firstly, we can notice here that the author emphasises the idea that, even though Polycarp died, what happened was a miracle and must be interpreted as such. Secondly, the description of the fire is full of imagery that both serves to give meaning to Polycarp's (no doubt painful) death and participates in the creation of martyrological literary elements such as the reference to the 'strong fragrance' coming from the burning body. As a matter of fact, the notion of 'odor of sanctity' became a recurrent theme in the genre of *Acta Martyrum*. In *Mart. Pol.*, the reference to the 'waft of incense' and 'precious spices' is reminiscent of the burial of Jesus (see for example John 19:39-40) and more broadly of burial rites which used these ingredients. As we shall see later on, it could also be a reference to Isaac's sacrifice. In addition, the aroma of baking bread could be an allusion to the Eucharistic bread. In the text, the smells are pleasant and are presented as positive elements coming from the burning body of the bishop, therefore associating the smell of death (incense and spices) and the Eucharist with the martyrs.

²³⁷ Parvis, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (2006), 108.

²³⁸ Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 614.

²³⁹ Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 615.

The last miracle in *Mart. Pol.* (16.1) comes after Polycarp's death:

Eventually, when the lawless ones saw that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they ordered an executioner who had approached him to plunge a dagger. And when he [the executioner] had done this, a dove came out and an abundance of blood, so that it quenched the fire. And the whole crowd marvelled at such a great distinction between the unbelievers and the elect.

This passage has perplexed scholars for several reasons. Firstly, the author states that the fire did not burn Polycarp's body but does not offer any reason for this. Jackson suggests that the direction of the wind could explain the phenomenon,²⁴⁰ and Parvis argues that, because the execution was not planned, the fire had not been properly constructed, resulting in an arching fire.²⁴¹ As before, the naturalistic explanations fail to convince. As Hartog rightly remarks, 'the narrative world of *Mart. Pol.* intentionally portrays a supernatural act preserving Polycarp'.²⁴² Secondly, there is the problem of the *κομφέκτωρ*²⁴³ using a dagger to pierce Polycarp while the fire is supposedly still raging since it is said that the 'abundance of blood' coming out of Polycarp's body quenched the fire. Parvis proposes that the fire was already almost out which allowed the executioner to go close enough to Polycarp to stab him,²⁴⁴ but fails to address (like most scholars) the second part of the sentence in which we are told that so much blood came out of Polycarp's wound that it extinguished the fire. Surely the author intended this passage as proof of Polycarp's special status as a martyr, providing the bishop with supernatural abilities, even beyond death. Lastly, the most obvious supernatural occurrence in the text that has baffled scholars is the reference to a dove coming out of Polycarp's wound. Some scholars have argued that it was just an optical illusion,²⁴⁵ or 'a previously unnoticed bird flying up from the direction of the fire',²⁴⁶ or perhaps a bird brought by a member of the audience and set free at this crucial moment.²⁴⁷ Other attempts at accounting for the dove episode include changing the text from *περιστερὰ καὶ* (a dove and) to *περι στύρακα* (around the hilt) and other variants from which could have originated 'the dove', but this theory has not convinced the majority of scholars.²⁴⁸ Another way around the dove problem is to ascribe it to a later editor as an interpolation, as von Campenhausen does, arguing that the mention of the dove is not present in Eusebius.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁰ Jackson, *St Polycarp*, 66.

²⁴¹ Parvis, 'Martyrdom of Polycarp' (2006), 108.

²⁴² Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 313.

²⁴³ The *confector* was charged to give the *coup de grace* to the wounded gladiators or the wild animals.

²⁴⁴ It is interesting to notice here that Eusebius changed the word dagger (*ξίφιδιον*) into the word sword (*ξίφος*), probably for plausibility.

²⁴⁵ Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 614.

²⁴⁶ Parvis, 'Martyrdom of Polycarp' (2006), 109.

²⁴⁷ Parvis, 'Martyrdom of Polycarp' (2007), 138.

²⁴⁸ Jackson, *St Polycarp*, 68 n.2.

²⁴⁹ Campenhausen, *Bearbeitungen*, 1-48.

None of these theories is particularly convincing and it seems more reasonable simply to read a reference to Jesus's baptism, as this episode clearly is supernatural in nature and was intended to be by the author. It participates in the theologizing of martyrdom, associating death and martyrdom to the life and rebirth symbols of baptism. The miracles in this account are not random extraordinary episodes added for entertainment or to impress its audience like, for example, the seals being struck by lightning in their large pit full of water in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (II, 34).²⁵⁰ The miracles in *Mart. Pol.* are all reminiscences of the Gospels or have significance for the early Christian communities (like the sweet smell of sanctity) and serve the purpose of emphasising the similarities between Jesus and Polycarp, reinforcing the claim of the author that Polycarp died 'in accordance with the Gospels'. These miracles are theological interpretations/references, part of a nascent martyrdom discourse and narrative framework added by the author and do not necessarily undermine the historical claim of the text as they could easily be erased from the account and not change the flow of the narrative. Consequently, we must abandon the naturalistic explanations in our attempt to authenticate this text. Indeed, as argued previously, the author is appealing to the collective memory of early Christians who integrated the New Testament stories, including the miracles elements, into their memory and thus, into their reality. Seeking a rational explanation for the miracles in *Mart. Pol.* is therefore fruitless and is not required to attest to the truthfulness of the account since the miracles are simply reflections of the author/witnesses' belief.

3.2.3 *The Trial*

According to Parvis, however, 'the most difficult part of the narrative to explain is not any of the miraculous details, but the Roman legal proceedings'.²⁵¹ Indeed, the trial in early Christian *acta martyrum* is an important part of the account and usually follows the Roman procedure closely. Even clearly fictional accounts such as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* follow

²⁵⁰ The *Acts of Paul* is a romanticised fictional account of Paul's ministry, written in honour of Paul by a presbyter in Asia who lost his position after admitting to the forgery as we learn from Tertullian (*On Baptism*, 17,5). Tertullian's mention of the text allows us to date it to around the last quarter of the second century. The episode of the Acts of Paul that deals with his encounter with Thecla became a standalone piece and is known as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (*ATh*). This episode recounts the 'adventures' of Thecla, a young aristocratic Christian convert who suffers a succession of 'martyrdoms' as she is sentenced to death several times because of her Christianity but is always saved. She becomes an evangelist and preaches the Gospel. *ATh* is indebted to the Greek Romance genre, especially to *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, as argued by McLarty, but a possible influence of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* cannot be excluded. J. D. McLarty, 2018. *Thecla's Devotion: Narrative, Emotion and Identity in the Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co.

²⁵¹ Parvis, 'Martyrdom of Polycarp' (2006), 109.

the set pattern. It commonly includes a trial before the *βῆμα* (the magistrate's tribunal) in the forum and a *κρίσις* (formal sentence often reached after consulting with a *consilium*). In *Mart. Pol.*, however, Germanicus, his companions, and Polycarp, are all tried and executed in the stadium (*τό στάδιον*), with no clear formal charges brought against them²⁵² and no sentence passed. As summed up by Parvis:

It is astonishing to find Polycarp apparently on trial for his life before one of the leading magistrates of the Empire on a public holiday in the middle of a sports stadium, with no use of the tribunal, no formal accusation, and, strangest of all, no sentence. The narrative itself, it should be noted, telegraphs the strangeness of the proceedings.²⁵³

Parvis sees in the choice of the proconsul to try Polycarp in the stadium a mark of contempt and asserts that the Roman governor is playing games with Polycarp who is then 'represented as

²⁵² After Germanicus's death, the angered mob shouts 'Away with the atheists! Search for Polycarp!'. The proconsul later asks Polycarp to 'Swear by the genius of Caesar. Repent! Say, "Away with the atheists!"'. There is no clear mention of why Polycarp was arrested and there are no formal charges brought against the bishop of Smyrna. The question of the charges against the Christians, debated at length by Ste Croix and Sherwin-White in the 1960s, has still not been answered satisfactorily. Indeed, several theories have been advanced to explain either the legal basis on which Christians were tried by the Roman authorities, or, at least, why they were persecuted/prosecuted: 1. the first Christian communities might have been seen as unsanctioned cultic sects and been accused of being *collegia illicita*, illegal associations, like the Bacchanalia who were suppressed in BC 186. This theory is not very popular as there are very few specific examples of *collegia illicita* and there is no evidence for it in the case of early Christianity; 2. as argued by Sherwin-White, early Christians might have been accused of *contumacia* (disobedience or defiance of authority). However, no Christian or pagan source mentions *contumacia* as the reason for the arrest of Christians. Pliny, the governor of Bythania under Trajan, mentions in one of his letters to the Emperor the '*pertinacia...et inflexibilis obstinatio*' (Pliny, *Letters* X, 96,4) of the Christians which the Romans found very irritating and probably aggravated the Christians' situation but as Ste Croix notices, *obstinatio* is not *contumacia*, and cannot be considered a legal basis for the execution of the Christians; 3. the accusation of *flagitia* is more common and is present in both pagan and Christian literature. For example, Tacitus refers to the Christians as 'a class hated for their abominations (*per flagitia invisos*)' (*Annals*, xv.44.3-5), and the martyrs of Lyon are accused of 'Thyestian feasts and Oedipian couplings and of many things that is not right for us to speak or think about' (*Mart. Lyon*, 1,14). Pliny mentions the accusations of *flagitia* but informs Trajan that they are not founded. Moreover, as Pliny gave the Christians a chance to be freed if they recanted, it is unlikely that the accusation of *flagitia* was the reason for the execution of the Christians. However, it seems to have played an important role, at least at first, since the pagan populace appeared to believe the Christians were committing atrocities and it probably agitated the mobs, leading to localised persecutions. 4. considering all earliest pagan and Christian sources on the subject, Barnes argued that the origins for the persecution of early Christians was religious in nature. According to him, the threat of Christianity taking over the traditional cult of the pagan gods led to the fear of the new cult and to the prosecution of its members. Barnes concludes: 'A provincial governor was predisposed to punish those who attacked the established religions, and would do so without waiting for a legal enactment by the Senate or the emperor.' (p. 50). The cries of the mob and the request of the proconsul in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* seem to corroborate Barnes's point of view; 5. many scholars believe that the Christians were condemned because of their being Christians or because of 'the Name' (*nomen Christianum*). However, there is no evidence for Christianity having been outlawed by any of the emperors until, at least, 250 AD (the first persecution targeting the Christians specifically was under Diocletian and Galerius at the end of the third century). To explain the legal basis of the prosecution of early Christians, the theory of *cognitio extra ordinem* seems to be the most favoured among scholars. It refers to the power the proconsul had to judge and sentence people brought before him as he saw fit. In other words, the proconsul had the power to condemn without an official charge. For an extensive discussion of the issue, see G. E. M. de Ste Croix, 1963. 'Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?'. *Past and Present*, 26, pp. 6-38; A. N. Sherwin-White, 1964. 'Why were the Early Christians Persecuted? - An Amendment'. *Past and Present*, 27, pp. 23-27; G.E.M. de Ste Croix, 1964. 'Why were the Early Christians Persecuted? - A Rejoinder'. *Past and Present*, 27, pp. 28-33; Barnes, 'Legislation Against the Christians', pp. 32-50.

²⁵³ Parvis, '*Martyrdom of Polycarp*' (2006), 109.

being more on the side of Roman justice than the Proconsul is'.²⁵⁴ On another level, Bisbee questions the stadium as the place of both trial and execution of the martyrs as *τό στάδιον* 'would most properly denote a race-track',²⁵⁵ a place therefore unlikely to be used for executions, especially if they involved wild beasts. Yet according to Thompson, there is nothing unusual in the use of the stadium for the execution of the martyrs as he declares: 'In the eastern provinces, few amphitheaters were built, perhaps no more than twenty, for in these provinces Roman games -just as popular there as in the West- were held in stadiums and theaters remodelled for the blood sports'.²⁵⁶ This explanation would certainly make sense and be consistent with other parts of the account where, as we saw earlier, the author tweaked the sequence of events in order to facilitate the flow of the narrative. It is possible then that the author simply omitted the 'expected' or 'boring' parts of the story as the audience would probably have been familiar with the Roman legal proceedings.

Subsequently, Parvis interprets Polycarp's answers to the proconsul as allusions to the injustice the governor is committing by not following the correct procedures. For instance, she cites the passage where the governor asks Polycarp to curse Christ as an argument for her interpretation since the bishop of Smyrna replies 'for eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no injustice' (*Mart. Pol.* 9.3), clearly setting Jesus in opposition to the governor. Thompson, however, defends the behaviour of the proconsul and his lack of diligence about not following the proper procedures as he argues that 'by the middle of the second Christian century, a governor (proconsul) had considerable latitude in how he handled criminal cases within his own province'.²⁵⁷

After analysing all the inconsistencies of the legal proceedings in *Mart. Pol.*, Parvis reaches the conclusion that:

The strangeness of the legal proceedings [...] are subtly presented, both by Polycarp and by the narrator, as out of step with normal Roman legal practice, but within a system which, from a Christian point of view, is fairly arbitrary anyway. Paradoxically, their strangeness probably makes them more likely to be historically accurate.²⁵⁸

Parvis's interpretation of the trial of Polycarp is rather unusual and seems far-fetched at times. For example, she argues that the gesture of the hand made by Polycarp when the governor asks

²⁵⁴ Parvis, 'Martyrdom of Polycarp' (2006), 110.

²⁵⁵ G. A. Bisbee, 1988. *Pre-Decian Acts of Martyrs and Commentarii*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 121-122.

²⁵⁶ L. L. Thompson, 2002. 'The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*: Death in the Roman Games'. *The Journal of Religion* 82, 1, pp. 27-52, 30.

²⁵⁷ Thompson, 'Martyrdom of Polycarp', 36.

²⁵⁸ Parvis, 'Martyrdom of Polycarp' (2006), 111.

the bishop to say ‘Away with the atheists!’, ‘may be taken to mean ‘Do you really intend to try me *here?*’²⁵⁹ Here, it seems that Parvis is slightly over-reading the text. Nonetheless, it is indeed argued by many scholars that ‘a fabricator with free rein in narration would have followed more regular legal proceedings’²⁶⁰ and that, therefore, it seems more likely that the depiction of the trial in *Mart. Pol.* is genuine. Moss rejects this argument as she asserts that there would be ‘no great disadvantage to the Christian audience if the trial is conducted publicly in an inappropriate location’.²⁶¹ To Moss, these discrepancies in the legal proceedings, especially the stadium as location of both trial and execution, are proof that the author was not an eyewitness and that the depiction of the trial is theological rather than historical, casting doubts on the veracity of the whole account.²⁶² Moss’s analysis, however, is based on the expectation that the eyewitness account is relating the exact truth, which, as we saw in chapter 2, is rarely the case.²⁶³

Bisbee offers some alternative, plausible theories to explain the inconsistencies:

If there is a historical kernel to the account of Polycarp’s execution in public, perhaps it is best to simply understand ‘amphitheater’ for ‘stadium’. As for the trial itself, it seems most probable that the proconsul actually did try Polycarp *pro tribunalis* but afterward held the perfunctory public affair that is described in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which was designed to appease the angry crowd and thereby save his own neck.²⁶⁴

This idea is reinforced by the author’s confession in *Mart. Pol.* 20.1 that even though the Church of Philomelium requested that the story of Polycarp’s death be told to them at length, the Smyranean community, on this occasion, only sent a summary of the event, therefore probably omitting the ‘boring’ formalities. In addition, as *Mart. Pol.* was the first martyrdom account, it is also possible to infer that the pattern seen in later accounts containing the detailed trials would not have yet been established at this time. Consequently, it seems reasonable to conclude that the account in its present form is unlikely to reflect the way in which Polycarp’s trial occurred with complete accuracy but must contain some historical elements as nothing appears to categorically refute the version given in the narrative.

That Polycarp was tried by the governor is a certainty, the authenticity of the account, in that respect, should not be doubted. However, while there seems to be reasonable and plausible explanations for the inconsistencies in the trial of Polycarp, we cannot exclude the

²⁵⁹ Parvis, ‘*Martyrdom of Polycarp*’ (2006), 109.

²⁶⁰ Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 188.

²⁶¹ Moss, ‘Dating of Polycarp’, 549-550.

²⁶² Moss, ‘Dating of Polycarp’, 548.

²⁶³ See pp. 36-38.

²⁶⁴ Bisbee, *Pre-Decian Acts*, 121.

possibility that the author, in line with the main theme of his narrative (i.e., ‘a martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel’), depicted Polycarp’s trial with Jesus’s own trial in mind, as Luke had done with Paul’s trial.²⁶⁵ As Moss rightly notes, ‘the chaotic, disjointed feel of the trial underscores the injustice of the event and emphasizes the parallels between the Roman prosecutor’s ‘trial’ of Polycarp and Pilate’s address to the crowd’.²⁶⁶ The ‘trial episode’ in the Gospel is indeed an important one and one that can be (and must be) reproduced by the martyrs in order to follow truly in Jesus’s footsteps. Polycarp’s trial therefore had to take place in public, like Jesus’s, Polycarp had to be interrogated by the governor, as Jesus was by Pilate, and, in both cases, there were no clear charges and the sentence is, from a Christian point of view, evidently unfair. The trial episode is then a blatant use of NT collective memory (Jesus’s trial) adapted to the purpose of the Smyrnan community in the event of their bishop’s death. The author of *Mart. Pol.* wanted to link Polycarp’s trial to Jesus’s in order to highlight his main message that martyrs, by experiencing the same ordeals and sufferings as Jesus are true disciples and true witnesses/martyrs. This message is, as we shall now see, emphasised throughout the account.

3.2.4 *The Gospel Parallels*

Indeed, as mentioned before on several occasions, there is a distinctive theme that runs throughout the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, that of Jesus’s Passion. As a matter of fact, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* does not simply relate the death of the bishop of Smyrna in detail, it is a treatise on ‘how to die a good Christian death’ *par excellence*: no other early Christian martyrdom account is as obvious in its analogy to Jesus’s Passion as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. In Moss’s words: ‘There’s no doubt that the author of this account wants to portray Polycarp as being just like Jesus or, to use religious terminology, an “imitator of Christ”’ (i.e., *Imitatio Christi*).²⁶⁷ The author even makes the connection clear in his opening and states that Polycarp followed Jesus’s example ‘in order that we also might become imitators of him’ (*Mart. Pol.* 1.2). However, the abundance of parallels within the text has led many generations of scholars to either see a later ‘Gospel-redactor’, like Von Campenhausen, or doubt the authenticity of the account as a whole.

²⁶⁵ See p. 38.

²⁶⁶ Moss, ‘Dating of Polycarp’, 550.

²⁶⁷ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 64.

There are twenty most often cited Gospel parallels in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* which are as follows: both Jesus and Polycarp predict their own deaths (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; *Mart. Pol.* 5.2); both Jesus and Polycarp entered into town riding on a donkey (Matt. 21:1-11; *Mart. Pol.* 8.1); Jesus waited to be betrayed (Luke 22:20-23, 39-54), so did Polycarp (*Mart. Pol.* 1.2); Jesus and Polycarp both prayed with their companions for all believers (John 17:1-26; *Mart. Pol.* 5.1); Jesus hosted a final meal (Matt. 26: 17-29), as did Polycarp (*Mart. Pol.* 7.2-3); both Jesus and Polycarp prayed before their arrest (Matt. 26: 36-46; *Mart. Pol.* 7. 2-3); Jesus and Polycarp used the same phrase ‘God’s will be done’ (Mark:14:36; *Mart. Pol.* 7.1); Jesus heard a voice from heaven (John 12:27-28), like Polycarp (*Mart. Pol.* 9.1); both are betrayed by someone in their entourage at night (Matt. 26:47-49; *Mart. Pol.* 6.1-2); Jesus and Polycarp are both treated like criminals during their arrest (Matt. 26:55; Mark 14:48; Luke 22:52; *Mart. Pol.* 7.1); neither Jesus nor Polycarp turned themselves in but did not resist their arrest (Matt. 26: 47-54; *Mart. Pol.* 1.2, 7.2); they are both arrested outside of the city (John 18:1, *Mart. Pol.* 5.1); they both encountered someone called Herod (Luke 23:6-12; *Mart. Pol.* 8.2-3); both Jesus and Polycarp were interrogated by the proconsul, who was reluctant to condemn them but offered the possibility to be freed (John 18:28, 19:11; *Mart. Pol.* 9.2, 11.2); Jesus remained silent at first when he was being questioned by the proconsul (Mark 14:61), as did Polycarp (*Mart. Pol.* 8.2); both Jesus and Polycarp prayed before their execution (Matt. 27:46, Mark 15:34, *Mart. Pol.* 14.1, 15.1); their bodies are both pierced (John 19:34; *Mart. Pol.* 16.1); in both cases, the Jewish leaders agitated the crowd and demanded the deaths of Jesus and Polycarp (John 19: 12-16; *Mart. Pol.* 12.2, 13.1); the day of preparation is mentioned in both the Gospels (Luke 23:54, John 19:31) and in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (7.1); and finally, the people who betrayed Polycarp ‘received the punishment of Judas himself (*Mart. Pol.* 6.2).

The passion narrative theme in *Mart. Pol.* is therefore unmissable with so many parallels and attracted criticisms of academics from the nineteenth century onwards. As Moss puts it: ‘The sustained representation of Polycarp as *alter Christus* shrouds the text with [...] suspicion’.²⁶⁸ However, in response to criticisms regarding the *imitatio Christi* nature of the text, Lightfoot states that ‘a fabricator would have secured better parallels. We may say generally that *the violence of the parallelism is a guarantee of the accuracy of the facts*’.²⁶⁹ For example, Lightfoot sees the fact that the captain who arrests Polycarp is named Herod as coincidental and argues that the character can hardly be compared to the king Herod of the Gospels due to

²⁶⁸ Moss, ‘Dating of Polycarp’, 553.

²⁶⁹ Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 614, italics in the original text.

different social positions. As Moss notes, this is rather unconvincing as it would have been difficult for the author to ‘invent a king Herod’ just for his purpose.²⁷⁰ Lightfoot’s argument about the slave-boy who betrayed Polycarp, however, is more convincing: a tortured boy is indeed a poor parallel to Judas,²⁷¹ so much so that the author even felt like he had to point out the similarity with the betrayal of Jesus. Nonetheless, Lightfoot’s exclusively historical reading of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* has failed to convince most scholars fully since it leaves no room for the possibility of theological interpretation or biblical allusion.²⁷²

While Dehandschutter and Hartog admit that some parallels do indeed seem either weak or forced and must have some historical truth to them (as do others like Lieu),²⁷³ they do not deny the *imitatio Christi* theme of the narrative.²⁷⁴ Conversely, according to Moss, ‘the use of the passion narratives as a structuring device in the account calls into question the historical authenticity of the events the text purports to describe and cannot be easily dismissed as vague or violent’.²⁷⁵ Indeed, there are so many parallels in the narrative that it is undeniable that the author included at least some elements of *imitatio Christi* to fit the purpose of his narrative and put across his message. Yet we must also concede that the events might have taken place in the way they are described in *Mart. Pol.*, to a certain extent, as after all, Polycarp lived his whole life according to the Gospels and it is not impossible to imagine that he would follow Jesus’s example at this point of his life too. Some elements seem plausible, like the final meal, the prayers, the donkey, or Polycarp’s attitude during his interrogation. However, while these are in Polycarp’s control, other Gospel parallels are not, such as the name of the Captain (Herod) or the day of his arrest which can only be either extraordinary coincidences and/or conscious ‘tweaks’ of the author, taken from the collective/cultural memory of his community to emphasise the links between Polycarp and Jesus. Moreover, if indeed Polycarp behaved as the ‘perfect disciple’, it is no surprise that the image of Jesus would naturally come to the author’s mind as he recounts Polycarp’s demise. This, as before, would probably have been expected by early Christian communities imbued in NT literature who lived, as it were, in the ‘reality’ of the Gospel.

²⁷⁰ Moss, ‘Dating of Polycarp’, 553.

²⁷¹ Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 613.

²⁷² Moss, ‘Nailing Down and Tying Up’, 122.

²⁷³ Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 61.

²⁷⁴ Dehandschutter, *Polycarpiana*, 96; Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 206.

²⁷⁵ Moss, ‘Dating of Polycarp’, 557.

As a matter of fact, Dehandschutter's study on the Gospel parallels in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* showed that biblical 'allusions' or 'reminiscences' were common practice in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers and were not surprising in a text like *Mart. Pol.*²⁷⁶ Interestingly, this argument has led many scholars to see an early redaction of *Mart. Pol.* as the lack of direct quotations from the Gospels seems to indicate that there was no New Testament canon already established at the time *Mart. Pol.* was written. Moreover, the Gospel parallels in *Mart. Pol.* have been employed by some scholars in the debate regarding the authority of certain Gospels over others before the establishment of the NT canon.²⁷⁷ However, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* has not proved useful in this case as it is difficult to pinpoint a dependence on a particular gospel or NT text within the account.

On the one hand, some elements are clearly specific to John's Gospel and reveal a certain degree of intertextuality in *Mart. Pol.* For instance, the comment 'especially [the] Jews assisting in these matters, as [is] their custom' (*Mart. Pol.* 13.1) and their 'uncontrollable rage' (*Mart. Pol.* 12.2) at Polycarp's refusal to deny Christ echoes John's depiction of the Jews' behaviour towards Jesus in the Johannine Gospel (see for example the Jews' attempt to stone Jesus (John, 10. 31-39), an episode not found in any of the other Gospels).²⁷⁸ Additionally, Polycarp's body is pierced by the sword (*Mart. Pol.* 16.1), as is Jesus's by the soldier's spear in John 19.34. On the other hand, many of the remaining parallels belong to the Double or Triple Tradition²⁷⁹ and cannot be ascribed with certainty to any gospel in particular as they could simply reflect oral traditions as well. However, as Moss showed, the practice of adding biblical reminiscences was prevalent in early Christian literature 'long after the formation of the canon', making it difficult to use the presence of so many Gospel parallels in *Mart. Pol.* to date this text.²⁸⁰

It is worth noting here that Hartog recently offered an attractive interpretation of the *imitatio Christi* theme in *Mart. Pol.*, adding another dimension to the text as he argues that the depiction

²⁷⁶ Dehandschutter, *Martyrium Polycarpi*, 233-258.

²⁷⁷ Some argue for a dependence on John and Matthew but other find similarities with the Passion narrative in Mark. See Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 210 (n. 440), and also Moss, 'Nailing Down and Tying Up', 121.

²⁷⁸ The theme of Jewish-Christian tensions is a common one in early Christian literature and originates from the NT. For example, Stephen's death is ascribed to the Jews in the Acts of the Apostles and Paul unambiguously warns the recipients of his letter about the hostility of the Jews towards the Christians in 1 Thess. 2:14-16. However, as we saw earlier, scholars are suspicious of anti-Jewish sentiments in *Mart. Pol.* because of the circumstances surrounding the three interventions of the Jews within the text as they do not make sense historically or even factually (See Practical Discrepancies in *Mart. Pol.* pp. 52-54). It is possible that the tensions between the Jews and the Christians in *Mart. Pol.* reflect a rivalry between the two communities in Smyrna at the time. It could also be the interpretation of NT texts, mirrored in *Mart. Pol.* as part of the Gospel analogies running throughout the text. See Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 226-231 and Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 57-102.

²⁷⁹ Elements present in two or three of the Synoptic Gospels.

²⁸⁰ Moss, 'Dating of Polycarp', 556.

of Polycarp's death 'in accordance with the gospel' (*Mart. Pol.* 1.1) not only serves a theological purpose but also a political one. Indeed, following an analysis of the numerous Christological titles used in *Mart. Pol.*, Hartog concludes:

Within the context of *Mart. Pol.*, Christological kingship plays a political, anti-imperial role. [...] As the sovereign king, Jesus Christ is more than a model object for imitation. He is an active agent in the unfolding narrative itself, directing the drama even as he wills and chooses. Within *Mart. Pol.*, Jesus Christ is more than a historical exemplar to be followed in suffering, but a living and active priest, shepherd, and king.²⁸¹

This interpretation is in line with our methodological approach since it shows that the author of *Mart. Pol.* used the narrative and the discourse within it to foster his views on Roman authorities, both accentuating the continuity between the NT times and those his community lived in as well as contributing to the martyrdom discourse of resistance against Roman oppression.

In brief, it is impossible to consider *Mart. Pol.* as a historical text without considering the theological side of it. As noted by Weinrich, it is 'highly improbable that the Smyranean church would have written of its bishop's martyrdom without any attempt to express its significance and meaning'.²⁸² As we shall see shortly, Polycarp's status as an apostolic father was very important to the early Christian communities and it would have been particularly tempting for the author of *Mart. Pol.* to emphasise that status through the Gospel parallels and *imitatio Christi* details, especially if some of the events really happened in the way they are described in the text. Moreover, as Hartog puts it: 'Socio-communal pressure may have been placed upon the eyewitnesses in the retelling of their accounts, as they were asked to 'fill in the details' and as they provided subjective interpretations of their testimonies'.²⁸³ Furthermore, we can surmise that following the events, the Smyranean community read the NT texts in the light of what had happened to their martyrs and, in turn, recounted Polycarp's martyrdom in the light of their new understanding of the Gospels, thus merging the Gospel narratives and theirs. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* therefore reveals an intricate process of both historical and theological writing based on the collective memory of the eyewitnesses who expressed their situation through a martyrdom discourse inspired by their interpretation of their oral traditions/ sacred texts. As Lieu puts it:

²⁸¹ P. Hartog, 2014. 'The Christology of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*: Martyrdom as both Imitation of Christ and Election by Christ'. *Perichoresis*, 12 (2), pp. 137-151, 147.

²⁸² W. C. Weinrich, 1981. *Spirit and Martyrdom: A Study of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Contexts of Persecution and Martyrdom in the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*. Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 165.

²⁸³ Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 190.

The world of the document is not identical with the world of the events it purports to describe; yet in seeking to recover the latter we are continually drawn back into the former. This is both inevitable and important; the text is in the end all to which we have direct access, but it itself created a reality or 'universe of meaning' for its readers, while also being itself the product of another reality.²⁸⁴

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, therefore, is an exemplary case of the performative power of the martyrdom discourse used in the primitive Church, both drawing from NT collective memory and martyrological interpretation of Jesus's message, as well as inscribing the NT in its reality. *Mart. Pol.* created a continuity between the NT texts and itself: Polycarp did not just live, and die, according to the Gospel, but by following and imitating Jesus's Passion till the bitter end, Polycarp became part of the story/history in the Smyranean community's reality.

3.3 Polycarp, Apostolic Father

3.3.1 *Who was Polycarp?*

As we saw in the first chapter, early Christians from the NT times onwards suffered martyrdom, even if the word did not yet exist. Ignatius certainly expressed in detail what could be expected for a Christian sentenced to death by Roman authorities. However, there is no account of Ignatius's martyrdom or any other Christian prior to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. One might ask why that is? What was so special about Polycarp? Why was the memory of the death of Polycarp so important that it deserved to be preserved? To answer these questions, we must first look at who Polycarp was and what he represented for his congregation and the other Christian communities across the empire.

Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna from around 110 until his death at the age of 86.²⁸⁵ Mostly famous for his association with Ignatius of Antioch and for his martyrdom, Polycarp is considered one of the most important Apostolic Fathers and was regarded as a protector of the true faith.²⁸⁶ Indeed, the only writing by Polycarp known to us (*Letter to the Philippians*, written circa 110-140), which contains countless quotations of the Scriptures and is therefore a good

²⁸⁴ Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 94.

²⁸⁵ *Mart. Pol.* 9.3 'For eighty-six years I have been serving him (Christ)'. It is unclear whether Polycarp means eighty-six years from his birth or from his baptism, but this sentence is usually interpreted as meaning that Polycarp was eighty-six years of age on his martyrdom.

²⁸⁶ See for example: 'And Polycarp himself replied to Marcion, who met him on one occasion, and [Marcion] said, "Dost thou know me?""I do know thee, the first-born of Satan." Such was the horror which the apostles and their disciples had against holding even verbal communication with any corrupters of the truth.' (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III, 3.4).

representation of the oral/NT tradition of the early second century church (when the NT canon was not yet formed),²⁸⁷ seems to deal primarily with heresies and righteousness. Moreover, we know from other early Christian texts that Polycarp was highly respected by his fellow Christians. Indeed, on his way to his own martyrdom in Rome, Ignatius²⁸⁸ met Polycarp and subsequently wrote to the bishop of Smyrna in these terms:

Since I had been impressed by the godly qualities of your mind – anchored, as it seemed, to an unshakable rock – it gave me much pleasure to set eyes on your sainted countenance (may God give me joy of it) (*Letter to Polycarp*, I.1).

The faith and orthodoxy of Polycarp are also praised by Irenaeus of Lyon who not only claims to have met the bishop in his youth but also insists on Polycarp's relationship with the apostles and asserts that Polycarp was appointed bishop of Smyrna by them (*Adv. Haer.*, III, 3.4):²⁸⁹

But Polycarp also was not only **instructed by apostles**, and conversed with **many who had seen Christ**, but was also, **by apostles** in Asia, **appointed bishop** of the Church in Smyrna, whom [Polycarp] I also saw in my early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true.

In his letter to Florinus, Irenaeus fondly recalls Polycarp and his teachings, insisting again on Polycarp's close acquaintance with the apostles and John in particular (Eusebius, *HE*, 20):

I can describe the place where blessed Polycarp sat and talked [...] I remember how he spoke of **his intercourse with John**, and with the **others who had seen the Lord**; how he repeated their words from memory; and how the things that he had heard them say about the Lord [...], things that he had heard direct from the **eye-witnesses of the Word of Life**, were proclaimed by Polycarp in complete harmony with Scripture.

Tertullian, in his *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* (32.2), claims that Polycarp was appointed bishop of Smyrna by John the Apostle: *Hoc enim modo ecclesiae apostolicae census suos deferunt, sicut Smyrnaeorum ecclesia Polycarpum ab Iohanne conlocatum refert.*²⁹⁰

The author of the letter also emphasised Polycarp's life and death according to the Gospel throughout the text: in the opening of the letter, the author tells us that Polycarp suffered 'martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel' (*Mart. Pol.* 1.1), and that 'he alone is remembered

²⁸⁷ For a discussion of Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* and its use of NT material, see P. N. Harrison, 1936. *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and more recently, P. Hartog, 2002. *Polycarp and the New Testament: The Occasion, Rhetoric, Theme, and Unity of the Epistle to the Philippians and Its Allusions to New Testament Literature*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. See also Hartog's extensive commentary of the text in Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 23-161.

²⁸⁸ Ignatius of Antioch was the third Bishop of Antioch, also revered as an Apostolic Father, and was like Polycarp a disciple of John. We know of at least one letter written by Ignatius to Polycarp.

²⁸⁹ John's death is traditionally said to have occurred around 100 (at a very old age, possibly above 90 years old), and Polycarp was appointed bishop in 110. This tradition of Polycarp's appointment by John is therefore unlikely to have much truth to it.

²⁹⁰ 'For in this way Apostolic Churches declare their origin: as, for instance, the Church of the Smyrnaeans records that Polycarp was placed there by John.' (Translated by T. H. Bindley).

by all [...] not only having become a distinguished teacher, but also an eminent martyr whose martyrdom all desire to imitate because it occurred according to the gospel of Christ' (*Mart. Pol.* 19). In addition, the text also refers to Polycarp as an 'apostolic (and prophetic) teacher' (*Mart. Pol.*, 16.2).

The figure of Polycarp remained important and was also exploited in the fourth century²⁹¹ by an anonymous author in the famous (and fictional) *Vita Polycarpi* (*Life of Polycarp* or *LPol*)²⁹² to attempt to prove that Paul opposed Quartodecimanism.²⁹³ In this text, Polycarp is chosen by God to be raised in the Christian faith and is consistently depicted as most pious, constantly striving to perfect himself in living according to the Gospel and accomplishing miracles. Polycarp is here attributed the highest Christian virtues of nobility, humility, patience, and chastity, and is portrayed as a relentless preacher and teacher of the Scriptures. Although *LPol* is a fictional and late account of Polycarp's life, we can infer from the text that the main traits ascribed to Polycarp in *Mart. Pol.* and the theme of 'living and dying in accordance with the Gospel' rapidly became part of the collective memory of early Christians and was used to foster ideas and beliefs of later communities through the same discourse used in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

3.3.2 Polycarp and John the Apostle

Another later text developed the more specific association of Polycarp with John, which was well-known to early Christians.²⁹⁴ The relationship between Polycarp and John bore

²⁹¹ The *terminus ante quem* of around 400 is attested by Macarius of Magnesia's knowledge of *LPol*, but a third century date is possible if section 2 of the text is treated as a later interpolation as this passage suggests a post-Nicene composition (it relates to Quartodeciman debates discussed at the first council of Nicaea in 325).

²⁹² Also referred to as Pseudo-Pionius. Although this work is anonymous, it has been associated with the Pionius of *Mart. Pol.*'s colophon in 22.3. Indeed, in the colophon, the last copyist of *Mart. Pol.* promises explanations on revelations he received from Polycarp himself ('as I will explain later'). In addition, the beginning of *LPol* has sometimes been understood to refer to a previous work as the text reads as follows: 'Going back earlier in time and starting from the arrival of the blessed Paul in Smyrna, just as I have found it in ancient documents, I will compose the narrative in order, and then arrive at the story of the blessed Polycarp'. The link between *Mart. Pol.* and *LPol*, which was accepted by most scholars until recently, has been successfully refuted in turn by Dehandschutter and Hoover, and is no longer accepted by many academics. See Dehandschutter, *Martyrium Polycarpi*, 62-71; J. Hoover, 2013. 'False Lives, False Martyrs: "Pseudo-Pionius" and the Redating of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*'. *Vigiliae Christianae*, 67 (5), pp. 471-498, and Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives*, 85.

²⁹³ Some scholars saw an attempt by the author to redeem Polycarp of his Quartodeciman views but as Hoover notices, 'If so, it is a rather brazen attempt, since Irenaeus relates that Polycarp travelled to Rome specifically in order to defend Quartodecimanism before Anicetus'. Hoover, 'False Lives, False Martyrs', 473.

²⁹⁴ Irenaeus of Lyon mentions it three times, putting the emphasis on Polycarp's personal acquaintance with the apostle (*Adv. Haer.* III, 3.4; Eusebius, *HE*, V, XX; *Letter to Pope Victor*). See also Jerome, *Illustrious Men*, 17 and Eusebius, *HE*, III, 36.1.

enough weight to be exploited in a partially reconstructed text now known as the Harris Fragments or *Frg. Pol.* (the dating ranges from the third to the sixth century). According to Weidmann, who was the first scholar to offer a thorough analysis and translation of the text, the focus of the text is the apostle-disciple relationship: ‘Drawing on particular traditions regarding John’s activity in Asia Minor and John’s lack of a martyr death, *Frg. Pol.* develops the association of Polycarp and John to a degree unwitnessed, so far as we know, either before or since’.²⁹⁵ For instance, in *Frg. Pol.* 55r, lines 15-20, the young Polycarp learns that he is to die a martyr death as John prophesies: ‘Since the Lord granted to me that I [John] die on my bed, it is necessary that you [Polycarp] die by the law-court’.²⁹⁶ To Weidmann, the main purpose of the text is to assert Smyrna’s superiority over that of the rival church of Ephesus, with whom John supposedly had strong connections. The author of *Frg. Pol.*, by having John ‘transfer’ his glorious martyr’s death to Polycarp, also transfers authority and glory to Polycarp and his Smyrnan Church.²⁹⁷ The author, therefore, understood the importance of Polycarp’s martyrdom and his relationship with John, and used them here for political purposes. In order to do so, the author relied on the collective memory according to which Polycarp and John were well-acquainted and used it to promote his political motivations.

In *Mart. Pol.*, the allusion to Polycarp’s acquaintance with John is subtler; the author sprinkles references to John’s Gospel throughout the text, thus accentuating the link between John and Polycarp. For example, to Lieu, Polycarp’s prayer in *Mart. Pol.* 14 is not reminiscent of Jesus’s prayer at Gethsemane (as thought by other scholars) but is an allusion to the so-called ‘high priestly’ prayer in John: ‘Here too Johannine echoes are hard to avoid, particularly the words with which Jesus opens that prayer, ‘Father, the hour has come, glorify your son’ (John 17:1), but also the theme which runs throughout the Fourth Gospel that Jesus’s hour is only fully come’.²⁹⁸ As we saw earlier with Irenaeus’s mentions of Polycarp, the Polycarp/John relationship was well-known so the audience of the text would probably have been familiar with the tradition and would have understood the author’s hints. The purpose of these allusions in *Mart. Pol.* is primarily to single out Polycarp and highlight the significance of his martyrdom, therefore giving more weight to the message of the text. This is emphasised by the author as he

²⁹⁵ F. W. Weidmann, 1999. *Polycarp and John: the Harris Fragments and their Challenge to the Literary Tradition*. Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 12. Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 133.

²⁹⁶ In *Mart. Pol.*, Polycarp has a vision of his death by fire as he is fleeing the city.

²⁹⁷ Weidmann, *Polycarp and John*, 125-47.

²⁹⁸ Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 71.

states that ‘the blessed Polycarp who, with those from Philadelphia, [was] the twelfth [person] martyred in Smyrna. He alone is remembered by all’ (*Mart. Pol.*,19.1).

Consequently, we can surmise that, as Polycarp, who was the last of the Apostolic Fathers, had died and the end of the world had not occurred, and Christ’s Church was still being persecuted, Polycarp’s martyrdom was certainly susceptible to have a high impact on early Christian communities and needed to be reported. The blameless reputation of Polycarp and his close relationship with John (or at least the tradition/collective memory of this relationship) added plausibility and weight to the martyrdom narrative which also explained the current events in the light of the teachings of the Gospels, thus consolidating the faith and hopes of these communities and providing them with guidance.

3.4 Collective Memory in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

The question of intertextuality in *Mart. Pol.* has been argued mainly on the ground of the Gospel parallels, but various reminiscences from other texts and/or historical figures have also been detected and debated.

3.4.1 *Maccabees* in *Mart. Pol.*

A likely source of inspiration in *Mart. Pol.*, besides the Passion narrative, is the story of the Maccabees.²⁹⁹ As Frend remarks:

If one looks for details, Polycarp’s “bright and gentle countenance”, his miraculous survival of torture despite his great age, his power of prophecy, his purchase of immortality, and even the cessation of persecution on his death, are points which would occur to writers who were steeped in the story of either the scribe Eleazar or the Maccabean youths.³⁰⁰

Indeed, the similarities between Polycarp and the figure of Eleazar are numerous, not only in their representation, but also in the storytelling of their deaths. In 2 Maccabees 6, 18-31, the author relates the first known example of Jewish martyrdom as Eleazar is asked to eat swine’s flesh as ordered by the king. Eleazar, a noble man advanced in age (like Polycarp), refuses to obey the king’s command, and goes to the rack of his own accord (2 Macc. 6, 18-19). The people in charge try to convince him to eat the sacrificial meat and offer a subterfuge but change their attitude towards Eleazar after his speech (2 Macc. 6, 21-26, as did Herod and his father

²⁹⁹ There are four books of the Maccabees in the Apocryphal, 2 Maccabees (2nd century BC) and 4 Maccabees (first century AD) are the most cited as sources for early Christian martyrdom accounts.

³⁰⁰ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 20.

towards Polycarp in *Mart. Pol.* 8.2). Eleazar recognises that he could have been saved from death but accepts his fate (2 Macc. 6, 30), and his death is interpreted as a sacrifice and example of courage and nobility to the young and the whole nation (2 Macc. 6, 31). Moreover, Eleazar's words and composure recall Polycarp's attitude while facing the authorities:

many of the young might suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year had gone over to an alien religion and through my pretence, for the sake of living a brief moment longer, they would be led astray because of me, while I defile and disgrace my old age. Even if for the present I would avoid the punishments of mortals, yet whether I live or die I will not escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws. (2 Macc. 6:24-28)

Another passage in 2 Maccabees often cited as an example of Jewish martyrdom³⁰¹ that seems to have echoes in *Mart. Pol.*, is that of the anonymous mother and her seven sons (2 Macc. 7). In the presence of King Antiochus, these seven brothers and their mother refused to eat swine's flesh as they were ordered. The king then decided to punish them first by horrible torture and finally death. One by one they are brought forward and asked to obey the king; one after the other, the brothers refused and before dying gave a justification for their choice to the king. While the first brother asserted his trust in God's compassion on his servants, the second, third and fourth brothers claimed their faith in the resurrection. The fifth son promised torture and punishment to the king and his descendants, statement echoed by the sixth son who also added an explanation for their present suffering: 'we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God' (2 Macc. 7:18). The seventh son, after being asked by his own mother to accept death, repeated his faith in God's mercy, in 'ever-flowing life' in heaven and the assurance of punishments for Antiochus and Israel's enemies. The mother, who watched her sons die one by one and encouraged them, died last. While the premises of the story are quite different from *Mart. Pol.*, some parallels are often noted by scholars. As Lieu remarks: 'the echoes in *M. Poly.* of Jewish martyrological traditions, and in particular 2 and especially 4 Maccabees, although rarely if ever implying direct quotation or allusion, are stronger than their common biblical roots might explain'.³⁰²

The list of parallels provided by Lieu is quite extensive: the deaths of the martyrs in both *Mart. Pol.* and 4 Maccabees 'brings an end to the persecution' (*Mart. Pol.* 1.1; 4 Macc. 18.4); 'the

³⁰¹ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 44-45. Shepkaru disagrees and sees in the 'martyrdom literature' denomination a later interpretation influenced by the Christian concept of martyrdom. See Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrs*, 6-7. There is also the possibility that these two 'martyrdom' episodes (Eleazar and the mother and her seven sons) are later interpolations in 2 Maccabees as neither Josephus nor Philo knew of these stories. See Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 12-13 and Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrs*, 25, 31, 34-35. 4 Maccabees is usually dated to the end of the first century. See p. 9.

³⁰² Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 79.

endurance of the martyrs is expressed in their refusal even to groan and in their apparent freedom from pain (*Mart. Pol.* 2.2; 13.3; 4 Macc. 6.9; 9.21; 11.26), in their joy (*Mart. Pol.* 12.1; 2 Macc. 7.10; 4 Macc. 9.31; 11.12) and in their despising of death since their eyes were fixed rather on the hope to follow' (*Mart. Pol.* 2.3; 4 Macc. 9.5-9; 13.1; 2 Macc. 7.36); for the martyrs the fire is cool (*Mart. Pol.* 2.3; 4 Macc. 11.26); the authorities ask the martyrs to have pity on their age (*Mart. Pol.* 3.1; 9.2; 4 Macc. 5.12, 33; 8.10, 20); they refuse to recant and save their lives in order to remain true to their life-long faith (*Mart. Pol.* 9.3, 2 Macc. 6.24-28; 4 Macc. 5.31; 6.17-23). We can also notice common themes between the Christian and Jewish texts. For example, the authors emphasise the nobility of the martyrs, using the imagery of the athlete showing endurance in a cosmological combat between God (and the martyrs who are victorious, thus winning the crown) and the Devil (*Mart. Pol.* 3.1; 17.1; 18.3; 4 Macc. 11.20; 16.14, 16; 17.12-15).³⁰³

As we saw in the introduction, the question of Jewish influence on the concept of martyrdom in early Christianity is debated and has not been determined with certainty but it seems likely that they actually developed alongside each other, possibly influencing each other on a literary level as well as theological. However, as Lieu remarks, both Jewish and early Christian literature were influenced by 'ideals of voluntary death in Cynic-Stoic philosophy and possibly by Roman ideas of devotion and of death for the fatherland',³⁰⁴ providing common ground for both concept and inspiration/literary representation. Indeed, many scholars see in both Polycarp's and Eleazar's deaths the influence of *mors philosophi*, and in particular, references to the death of Socrates.

3.4.2 *Philosophical or Sacrificial Death: Imitatio Socratis in Mart. Pol.*

The depiction of martyrs as philosophers was rather common in early Christian literature and mostly revolved around their attitude to death. As we have seen before with comments from Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus and Lucian, the Christians' contempt for death was one of the main Christian characteristics known to the pagans.³⁰⁵ Galen, the famous second century physician, wrote in slightly more flattering terms of the Christians in a now lost summary of Plato's *Republic*:

³⁰³ Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 79-80.

³⁰⁴ Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 82.

³⁰⁵ See pp. 12-13.

Most people are unable to follow any demonstrative argument consecutively; hence they need parables, and benefit from them...just as we see the people called Christians drawing their faith from parables [and miracles], and yet sometimes acting in the same way [as those who philosophize]. For their contempt of death [and its sequel] is patent to us every day.³⁰⁶

In many early Christian martyrdom accounts, the martyrs are described as indifferent or even joyful at the idea of their death like, for example, the martyrs of Lyon who ‘despise every suffering, going to death readily and with joy’ (*Mart. Lyon* 1, 63),³⁰⁷ or the martyrs in *Mart. Pol.* who ‘reached such great nobility that some of them neither grumbled nor groaned’ while being tortured (*Mart. Pol.* 2.2). As Kozlowski puts it:

This attitude of the Christians in the face of death became an essential element of the concept of the martyr. In the Ante-Nicene martyrological literature, all martyrs inherently share supernatural resistance to suffering and courage that allows them to go to death with their head always held high [...] We can therefore observe that Christians aimed to depict the martyr as a kind of “hyperthanatic” philosopher whose behaviour in the face of death showed it had no power over him.³⁰⁸

This portrayal of the martyrs as philosophers also included the traits of nobility, wisdom, and restraint typical of the image of ancient Greek philosophers.³⁰⁹ Polycarp in particular is presented as having striking similarities with Socrates. Moss lists the similarities as follows: their old age (*Apol.* 17D, *Crito* 52E; *Mart. Pol.* 9.3); their nobility (*Phaedo* 58D; *Mart. Pol.* 2.1; 2.2; 2.3; 3.1; 3.2); they both refuse to flee to escape prosecution (*Phaedo* 98E-99A; *Mart. Pol.* 7.1); they are charged/accused of atheism (*Euth.* 3B; *Mart. Pol.* 3.2, 12.2); they both refused to defend their views to others (*Apol.* 35D, *Mart. Pol.* 10.2); Polycarp and Socrates prayed before dying (*Phaedo* 117C; *Mart. Pol.* 14.1-3); their deaths are described as sacrificial (*Phaedo* 118A; *Mart. Pol.* 14.1); and their death is set as an example to others (*Phaedo* 115C; *Mart. Pol.* 1.2, 19.1).³¹⁰ In addition, Moss interprets Polycarp’s refusal of the nails as a reference to Stoics such as Zeno, showing the ‘self-controlled confidence of the philosophers’, and goes as far as stating that the fact that ‘Polycarp does not need nails in some respect “one-ups” Jesus’.³¹¹ Moss concludes: ‘By portraying Polycarp as stoic and using ideas from philosophical

³⁰⁶ Quotation found in an Arabic work of Ali Isa ibn Ishaq ibn Zura (died 1008 AD), *On the Main Questions between Christians and Jews*, translation by R. Walzer, 1949. *Galen on Jews and Christians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 15.

³⁰⁷ *Mart. Lyon* translations are quoted from Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives*. They correspond to Eusebius’s *Historia Ecclesiae* Book V, I-IV.

³⁰⁸ J. M., Kozlowski, 2018. ‘The Christian Martyr as a Hyperthanatic Philosopher and *Mystes*, and the Success of Christianity’. *Vox Patrum*, 38, pp. 377-391, 383-384.

³⁰⁹ Early Christian writers appropriated Socrates’s death for apologetic reasons starting from Luke, in his depiction of Jesus’s death, and later by apologists like Justin (see p. 10, footnote 34), Clement of Alexandria in his *Stromateis* (5.2.14.1; 5.14.97.1) or Origen in his *Contra Celsum* (2.17; 2.41). They used Socrates as a model of virtue and dignity in death and compared the injustice of his death with Jesus’s.

³¹⁰ Moss, ‘Nailing Down and Tying Up’, 129. Interestingly, Justin Martyr, one of the early Church Fathers, used Platonism and especially Socrates’s teachings extensively, justifying the credibility of this philosopher by the similarities in his teachings with those of Jesus as well as the similar circumstances of Socrates’s trial and death with those of the Christian martyrs. See p. 10 footnote 34.

³¹¹ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 65.

martyrdom, the author has run the risk of making Polycarp better than Jesus. Mixing cultural allusions inadvertently improves on and endangers the status of the model'.³¹² However, the symbolic in the episode of Polycarp refusing the nails and going to the stake of his own accord is complex and a philosophical interpretation of this passage is problematic. Indeed, this conclusion raises the questions of the audience and purpose of the text. While it is possible that the audience would have been familiar with the stories of Socrates and other philosophers, was it the intention of the author to bring these figures to the minds of his readers? The author tells us in *Mart. Pol.* 20,1 that he wrote this letter at the request of the church of Philomelium and asks it to be sent to 'the brethren further on'; there is no indication in the text that the author is writing apologetically or to convert pagans.

Therefore, some scholars prefer simply to interpret Polycarp's demand as an act of faith/trust in God, rather than as a Stoic gesture, as Polycarp's own declaration suggests: "Leave me thus, for the one having enabled [me] to endure the fire will also enable [me] to remain unmoved on the pyre without the security of the nails" (*Mart. Pol.* 13.3). This idea is also found in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, an early fictional narrative. Thecla is also condemned to burn at the stake, but after showing the strength of her faith in Christ (and love for Paul) by going unto the pyre of her own accord, she is miraculously preserved from the fire (*Acts of Paul*, II, 22), as is Polycarp. In this episode, Thecla is nowhere depicted as better than Christ. Conversely the ordeals the young and impulsive virgin repeatedly goes through are tests/rites of initiation that lead her to her baptism (*Acts of Paul*, II, 33-35).

However, another reading of this passage often advanced by scholars is that of Polycarp's death as a sacrifice to God as the text itself suggests:

So they did not nail [him], but they tied him instead. And he, having put his hands behind [him] and having been bound, was prepared for sacrifice as an outstanding ram out of a great flock, a whole burnt offering, acceptable to God (*Mart. Pol.*, 14).

This imagery recalls the Lamb of God (i.e., Jesus) in John 1: 29, 36, but also the story of Isaac. The analogy of sacrifice is reinforced by the mention of the 'strong fragrance, like a waft of incense or some other of the precious spices' (*Mart. Pol.*, 15.2) emanating from Polycarp's burning flesh. Interestingly, as Lieu notes: 'the story of Isaac in Genesis 22 had been developed by the beginning of the second century to portray him as going willingly to his death, the prototype of the martyr; at what point his offering was also seen as effecting atonement is a

³¹² Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 65.

matter of intense debate'.³¹³ It is therefore possible that the story of Isaac influenced the author of *Mart. Pol.* in his depiction of Polycarp.

This interpretation is challenging as it raises the question of the purpose of the sacrifice of the martyrs. Jesus's death, in the Gospels, is presented as soteriological: Jesus died to save humanity from its sins; if the martyrs are sacrifices to God, what is the purpose of their sacrifice? For this reason, Dehandschutter categorically rejects the idea of sacrifice, and asserts that there is no soteriological aspect to Polycarp's death as Polycarp is nowhere depicted as dying 'in advantage of' others or 'on behalf' of others and even less for the sins of others (although Polycarp expresses concern for others, and his death is presented as an example, it does not offer salvation on a theological level). Furthermore, Dehandschutter argues that the sacrificial language in 2 and 4 Maccabees, to which *Mart. Pol.* has often been compared, is coincidental as only the last son mentions in passing that they are dying because of their own sins (2 Macc. 7.32).³¹⁴ To Dehandschutter, Polycarp's prayer in *Mart. Pol.* 14 is biblical and contains liturgical reminiscences that simply aim at emphasising 'Polycarp's *worthiness* as a martyr'³¹⁵ and does not present a direct comparison, on the soteriological level, between Jesus and Polycarp. Dehandschutter concludes: 'If Polycarp's martyrdom has a meaning, it is to serve as a model for proper behaviour in times of persecution (20,1), when Christianity must be defended as a religion. This has nothing to do with any kind of a concept of sacrificial death'.³¹⁶

It appears at this point that both interpretations of this passage, whether as sacrificial or as philosophical, are problematic as they suggest that Polycarp is usurping Jesus's role as saviour and model. Cobb's analysis of imagery in Polycarp offers a seductive alternative reading of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* as she 'posits that *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio Socratis* function together apologetically to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christian worship of Jesus'.³¹⁷ Arguing that, along with the similarities between Polycarp and Socrates noted above, the phrase pronounced by Polycarp during his last prayer is meant to bring the image of Socrates to the readers' mind rather than that of Jesus. Indeed, Polycarp says: 'I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour, to receive a portion in [the] number of the martyrs in the cup (*ἐν τῷ ποτηρίῳ*) of your Christ' (*Mart. Pol.* 14.2). While the word 'cup' could be

³¹³ Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 78.

³¹⁴B. Dehandschutter, 2008. 'Sacrifice and Martyrdom: Some Notes on *Martyrium Polycarpi* 14 and *Vita Polycarpi* 6.' *Archivio di Filosofia*, 76 (1/2), pp. 309-315, 310-311.

³¹⁵ Dehandschutter, 'Sacrifice and Martyrdom', 311. Italics in original text.

³¹⁶ Dehandschutter, 'Sacrifice and Martyrdom', 312.

³¹⁷ S. L. Cobb, 2014. 'Polycarp's Cup: *Imitatio* in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*'. *Journal of Religious History*, 38 (2), pp. 224-240, 224.

seen as a reminiscence of John 18:11 (“Am I not to drink in the cup that has been given to me by the Father?”), it is more likely to refer to the Synoptic Gospels passages where Jesus asks God to remove this cup from him.³¹⁸ However, Polycarp’s willingness to accept his fate differs from the Jesus of the Gospels and is an example of ‘negative comparison’. As Cobb explains: ‘Since Polycarp’s cup comes immediately after the emphatic statement that he does not want to be nailed, this may be another instance of the author distancing Polycarp from a problematic Jesus tradition’.³¹⁹ Consequently, Cobb sees here a reference to Socrates’s cup of hemlock which he took ‘without dread, without changing colour, or his countenance’ (*Phaedo* 117B).

Following Holmes’s list of elements denoting a ‘martyrdom according to the Gospel’,³²⁰ Cobb compares the depiction of Polycarp’s death to that of Socrates on three levels: the endurance, the benefit to others and the divine will. These three elements are central to Polycarp’s portrayal but are also pillars in the representation of pagan noble death. For example, the overcoming of bodily/physical limitations are paramount to philosophical teachings, and Socrates is described as showing endurance by refusing to follow the executioner’s advice to keep quiet (as it might undermine the poison effects) in order to keep teaching his companions until the end (*Phaedo* 63D-E). Similarly, Polycarp is shown to overcome his old age by keeping his composure and does not seem concerned by physical suffering (*Mart. Pol.* 9.3; 11.2). Regarding the ‘benefit to others’, both Socrates’s and Polycarp’s death are described as example to other philosophers (*Phaedo* 61C) or believers (*Mart. Pol.* 1.2). Moreover, Socrates’s death sentence is due to his teachings which he said he had to share in order to help his fellow-citizens to live better ways of life (*Apol.* 30E); his death is therefore the consequence of his beneficial behaviour and is exemplary in the way it happens. Polycarp’s death is said to have put an end to the persecution (*Mart. Pol.* 1.1) and to be remembered to help others who might face the same hardship (*Mart. Pol.* 18.3; 19.1). Lastly, as we saw earlier in the introduction, Socrates taught his followers that it was reasonable to commit suicide after receiving a divine sign, as was his case (*Phaedo* 62C).³²¹ In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the author states: ‘Blessed and noble, therefore, [are] all the martyrdoms that have happened according to the will of God’ (*Mart. Pol.* 2.1). Incidentally, Cobb also solves the problem of the sacrificial imagery in *Mart. Pol.* as she notes that Socrates’s death is also associated with the idea of sacrifice, especially as the philosopher’s

³¹⁸ Matt. 26:39, 42; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42.

³¹⁹ That is, Jesus’s reluctance to accept his death. Cobb, ‘Polycarp’s Cup’, 226.

³²⁰ M. W. Holmes, 2005. ‘The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and the New Testament Passion Narratives’. A. Gregory and C. Tuckett (eds) *Trajectories Through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 407-32, 421.

³²¹ See p. 10, footnote 35.

last words are: ‘Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Pay it and do not neglect it’. As Polycarp’s death is assimilated to that of Socrates and not Jesus’s, the soteriological connotation is absent from this reading.³²²

Cobb offers an interesting and very convincing explanation as to why the author of *Mart. Pol.*, who emphatically compared Polycarp to Jesus throughout the text, chose to switch to an analogy with Socrates at this particularly crucial point in his story. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’s death is problematic as it depicts Jesus as being in agony and begging God to be saved on three instances. To many pagans, not only Jesus was a criminal, but his behaviour was perceived as despicable as he expressed fear and pain. For example, Celsus expressed his disgust at Jesus’s laments: “‘Why does he cry aloud, and lament, and pray to escape the fear of death, expressing himself in terms like these: ‘O Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me?’”” (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 2.24). According to Cobb, the response of the author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was to first create an analogy between Polycarp and Jesus, and then assimilate Polycarp’s death to that of Socrates, a process which meant that, by extension, Jesus died like Socrates. In Cobb’s words:

Imitatio Socratis in this text, in other words, creates the appearance of nobility in death not only for Polycarp but also for his model, Jesus. [...] By using Polycarp as an example of noble death, and at the same time bringing Jesus traditions to the audience’s mind, the author successfully erases problematic Gospel narratives, replacing them with a more socially acceptable narrative. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* functions, then, to correct or rewrite certain elements of the Gospel traditions.³²³

Cobb’s theory perfectly illustrates how the use of a ‘positive image’ belonging to collective memory (like Socrates) can be used to create a new collective memory of a ‘former negative figure’ (such as Jesus), by juxtaposing them in the mind of the audience. While the primary audience of *Mart. Pol.* was undoubtedly Christian, the text provided Christians with a tool to help defend their faith when confronted to pagan criticisms of Jesus. As in the example of Masada, the audience is led to believe in the new story through assimilation of past events into present ones. In conclusion, we can infer that the author of *Mart. Pol.* used traditions from pagan, Jewish, and Christian literature to construct his narrative, shaping both the collective memory of Polycarp the bishop of Smyrna, and the discourse of martyrdom in the second century.

³²² Cobb, ‘Polycarp’s Cup’, 230.

³²³ Cobb, ‘Polycarp’s Cup’, 237-238.

To conclude our chapter on the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* we can say that, although, *Mart. Pol.* is undeniably an important text in early Christian martyrdom history, as Middleton remarks: ‘The Polycarp narrative does not spring upon us any surprises in its presentation of the martyrs’ deaths, nor in its theology of death for God’.³²⁴ Indeed, in *Mart. Pol.*, the martyr is first and foremost an ‘imitator of Christ’, a true disciple and follower ‘who takes up his cross’. In the light of some of Jesus’s sayings, like in Matthew 16:24-25,³²⁵ there is nothing surprising in the description of martyrs as imitators of Christ as it was what was expected of them. However, *Mart. Pol.* is the first text to express the reality of what *imitatio Christi* entails. It is true that Stephen’s death in Acts 6:12-7:60, is depicted in *imitatio Christi* terms and that, as we saw previously, Ignatius’s *Letter to the Romans* contains much of both the concept and vocabulary of martyrdom, but the author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* made use of all the tools he had at his disposal to create the most elaborate narrative, thereby setting the example of the perfect martyrdom account.

As a matter of fact, we can even consider that this text created a ‘template’ in the narration of martyrdoms with its sequence of events (arrest, trial, execution), and offered an unprecedented opportunity for Christians to find their place in the Roman world. Indeed, as Thompson shows, the representation in the text of Polycarp’s trial and death in the arena allowed the early Christians to appropriate what was so far ‘a Roman social rite of criminality’ (i.e., the Roman games) by making it their own public Christian rite.³²⁶ Moreover, by imbuing his narrative with evangelical references and drawing upon Jewish, Christian and pagan collective memory of wisdom figures such as Isaac, John the Apostle and Socrates, the author of *Mart. Pol.* ‘reconfigured’ the criminal aspect of Roman executions of Christians into a noble and unavoidable act, thus defining, and framing, the basics of both the concept and the discourse of early Christian martyrdom.

Moreover, the author of *Mart. Pol.*, by recognising the power of such a narrative and sharing it with his fellow-Christians, provided early Christian communities with a liturgical tool that would allow early Christian audiences to define their identity as Christians. Most importantly, the author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, by inscribing Polycarp’s martyrdom in NT settings, allowed early Christians to integrate the Jesus story into their reality and, therefore, their

³²⁴ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 126.

³²⁵ ‘Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”’

³²⁶ Thompson, ‘The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*’, 41.

collective memory, providing future generations of martyrs and writers with the basis for both martyrdom discourse and theology. Indeed, as we shall now see with the story of the *Martyrs of Lyon*, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* contained elements that would soon after develop into a more sophisticated theology of martyrdom.

Chapter 4. The Martyrs of Lyon, Christ's Soldiers in the Cosmic Battle against Satan

4.1 The Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon to the Churches in Asia and Phrygia (*Mart. Lyon*)

Book V of Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiae* begins with a story 'worthy of enduring memory' (*Mart. Lyon*, preface 1),³²⁷ which contains 'not only a historical narrative' of the events that took place in the Gallic city of Lyon, but also the 'lessons to be drawn from it' (*Mart. Lyon*, pr. 2). Eusebius's introduction to the letter sets up the story of the communities of Lyon and Vienne in a context of war by contrasting his account of 'peaceful wars [fought] for the peace of the soul [...] and for the sake of truth and piety', with the wars led by the pagans 'for their homeland and their loved ones' (*Mart. Lyon*, pr. 4). As Grant remarks: 'It is clear that Eusebius has composed this section carefully. The structure is chiasmic; the account of Christian martyrs exactly reverses the description of non-Christian wars'.³²⁸ Eusebius is therefore 'warning' his readers that the account he is relating here is not just the report of a gruesome massacre of Christians by the Romans, but should rather be seen as a triumphal victory over 'demons and invisible opponents' (*Mart. Lyon*, pr. 4), as well as a milestone in the history of the Christian Church.³²⁹ *Mart. Lyon* also contains a wealth of information, as much regarding martyrdom and the spread and organisation of early Christian communities in the Western world, as regarding the treatment of Christians by local pagan communities and Roman authorities. However, as with *Mart. Pol.*, the authenticity of the text has not gone unchallenged. Briefly starting our analysis of *Mart. Lyon* with some practical considerations regarding its dating, authorship, and context, we shall then therefore turn our attention to the issue of authenticity, before delving deeper into the origins and influences of this Gallican letter.

³²⁷ The story of the martyrs of Lyon only exists in Eusebius's text but, for clarity, the references to the martyrdom account will be given as *Mart. Lyon* rather than *HE*.

³²⁸ The language of war and peace recalls Thucydides's *Peloponnesian War* (the Funeral Speech by Pericles in particular, II, 35-46). According to Grant, it is unlikely that Eusebius had read Thucydides but certainly knew of him and of Thucydides's historical writings. R. M. Grant, 1978. 'Eusebius and the Martyrs of Gaul'. J. Rougé and R. Turcan (eds). *Les Martyrs de Lyon, 177* (Colloques Internationaux du CNRS- no. 575). Paris: Editions du CNRS, 133, 136.

³²⁹ Eusebius's semantics emphasises this point in his short introduction (*HE*, V, pr.1-4): 'posterity', 'permanent place in history', 'historical narrative', 'others who have written historical narratives', 'everlasting memory' and 'famous for all time'.

4.1.1 Dating

The letter is anonymous and only partially reproduced by Eusebius in the *Historia Ecclesiae* (*HE*, V, 1, 1-63) as he refers the reader to his *Collection of Ancient Martyrs* (unfortunately lost to us)³³⁰ for the full letter (*Mart. Lyon*, pr. 2) and the list of the martyrs (*Mart. Lyon*, 4,3). In his *Chronicles*, Eusebius dates both *Mart. Pol.* and *Mart. Lyon* around 166/7. Grant argues that Eusebius, by placing the events under the co-reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, attempts to exonerate Marcus Aurelius from the persecution and execution of Christians. Indeed, Eusebius had read Tertullian, who presented Marcus Aurelius as a ‘good emperor’.³³¹ However, in *HE*, Eusebius gives the date of the persecution of the congregations of Lyon and Vienne as happening during ‘the seventeenth year of the Emperor Antoninus Verus’³³² (*Mart. Lyon*, pr. 1), i.e., AD 177. Grant posits that Eusebius must have found the letter of recommendation to the newly appointed bishop of Rome, Eleutherus (circa 175), after he wrote the *Chronicles* and therefore had no choice but to change the date to AD 177.³³³ The inclusion of the so-called ‘rain miracle’ episode at the end of the Gallic digression in book V,5 seems to indicate that Eusebius nonetheless tried to defend Marcus Aurelius from the accusation of persecution.³³⁴

Conversely, Barnes argues that Eusebius, even though it was not the habit of the early Christian historian to give precise dates of events, in the case of the Gallican martyrs, gave the information regarding Eleutherus and the year of the reign of the emperor precisely because he was convinced that Marcus Aurelius was a persecutor of Christians.³³⁵ However, Barnes rejects the idea that Eusebius knew, or even could have known, the exact date of the letter, arguing it is very unlikely that the original document contained a consular date, and concludes that ‘we

³³⁰ Eusebius also mentions the Gallic martyrs in his *Chronicles* but does not detail the event.

³³¹ According to early Christian tradition, ‘good emperors’ protected the Christians while ‘bad emperors’ were persecutors. Melito of Sardis is the first to use these denominations for the emperors (*HE* IV, 26.9). Tertullian soon accepts and uses this categorisation too. For example, Nero and Domitian are represented as the archetype of bad emperors in Tertullian’s *Apologeticus* (5.3, 5.4). Eusebius follows this tradition as well. Grant, ‘Eusebius and the Martyrs of Gaul’, 129.

³³² Eusebius usually uses this denomination to refer to Marcus Aurelius.

³³³ Grant, ‘Eusebius and the Martyrs of Gaul’, 134-135.

³³⁴ Eusebius relates here the story of the Christian soldiers who served under Marcus Aurelius Caesar against the Germans. According to Eusebius, on the brink of defeat caused by thirst, the Christian soldiers fell to their knees and prayed. God replied to these prayers by sending lightning and rain, giving the Roman troops victory. Eusebius cites Apollinaris of Hierapolis and Tertullian as his sources and mentions that pagan writers do refer to the event but do not credit the Christians with the miracle. Apollinaris even (wrongly) asserts that the legion received the title ‘Thundering Legion’ following this episode.

³³⁵ T. D. Barnes, 1978. ‘Eusebius and the date of the Martyrdoms’. J. Rougé and R. Turcan (eds). *Les Martyrs de Lyon, 177* (Colloques Internationaux du CNRS- no. 575). Paris: Editions du CNRS, pp. 137-141, 141.

should leave open the possibility that the correct date might be several years later than 177'.³³⁶

In Sage's view, Eusebius, who usually refers to Marcus Aurelius as Antoninus Verus,

purposefully adopted the nomenclature of Marcus Aurelius Caesar for the emperor of the Rain Miracle to distinguish him from Antoninus whose reign he considered to be one of persecution. He has created a Marcus Aurelius who is friendly to and impressed by the Christians and an Antoninus who is to bear the responsibility for their persecution.³³⁷

While this explanation seems rather far-fetched, it is important to notice that Eusebius did choose to add the 'rain miracle' episode after the letter relating the martyrdoms of the Lyonnais. If Eusebius had indeed not had any evidence to date *Mart. Lyon* under Marcus Aurelius, it seems unlikely that he would have included the episode at this stage. A precise dating for *Mart. Lyon* is difficult to reach but it seems reasonable to situate it between 175 (when Eleutherus becomes bishop of Rome) and 180 (death of Marcus Aurelius). The dating of 177 A.D. remains the most commonly accepted among scholars and is, therefore, the date we use for *Mart. Lyon* in this thesis.

4.1.2 Authorship

As mentioned previously, the letter is anonymous and there is no indication in the text as to who might be the author. According to Dehandschutter, the theme of the 'struggle against the devil' that runs throughout the account is evidence of the editorial unity of the text, although there is the possibility that the author collected material for his account from different sources, which could explain some discrepancies within the text.³³⁸ As Bowersock puts it: 'On se met à supposer que l'ensemble de la lettre chez Eusèbe n'est pas une unité mais un assemblage de récits divers sur les martyrs, un recueil de témoignage authentiques mais pas tout à fait cohérents'.³³⁹ However, based on a literary analysis of *Mart. Lyon*, French scholar Nautin goes even further and argues that Irenaeus could be the author.³⁴⁰ Indeed, Nautin notes that an appendix to the text reveals that Irenaeus was sent to Rome by the martyrs when they were in

³³⁶ Barnes, 'Eusebius', 141.

³³⁷ M. M. Sage, 1987. 'Eusebius and the Rain Miracle: Some Observations'. *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 36 (1), pp. 96-113, 108.

³³⁸ B. Dehandschutter, 2005. 'A Community of Martyrs: Religious Identity and the Case of the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne'. J. Leemans (ed.), *More Than a Memory: The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity*. Leuven: Peeters Publishers, pp. 3-22, 9-10.

³³⁹ G. W. Bowersock, 1978. 'Les églises de Lyon et Vienne: relations avec l'Asie'. J. Rougé and R. Turcan (eds). *Les Martyrs de Lyon, 177* (Colloques Internationaux du CNRS- no. 575). Paris: Editions du CNRS, 252.

³⁴⁰ P. Nautin, 1961. *Lettres et écrivains chrétiens des IIe et IIIe siècles*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 54-59.

prison (*Mart. Lyon* 4,2) and was therefore absent when they were martyred, hence his need to rely on different eyewitnesses for his account (it also accounts for Irenaeus's own survival).³⁴¹ Moreover, Nautin remarks that in a *Letter to Pope Victor* (known to us through Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, V, 24, 11-18), Irenaeus uses the word 'peace' (*εἰρήνη*) and its cognitives eight times. Nautin, after comparing the Gallican letter to Irenaeus's writings, found that one passage in *Mart. Lyon*, in particular, recalled Irenaeus's style. It reads as follows: 'They always loved *peace* and they always commanded *peace*. They went to God with *peace*, leaving behind neither toil nor discord or conflict for their brothers, but joy, *peace*, concord, and love' (*Mart. Lyon*, 2,7).³⁴² Grant even sees a possible influence of the Gallican letter on Eusebius' language of 'war and peace' in the preface as he notes that 'it would not be unnatural [...] to find Eusebius echoing his sources'.³⁴³ The similarities in style, Irenaeus's involvement with the Lyonnaise church and his close ties with the churches of Asia Minor (to whom the letter is addressed) give Nautin's theory some plausibility, but it has generally failed to convince most scholars.³⁴⁴ Nonetheless, some academics, like Grant, seem to adhere to the possibility of Irenaeus as the author, without entirely committing to it.³⁴⁵ Moss also gives some credit to this theory and remarks that Irenaeus's writing style and favoured theme of *Christus Victor* soteriology, which transpires throughout the text, could explain the fact that, although an apocalyptic theme is unusual in the West, as Irenaeus was from the East where this theme was prevalent, it is possible that he might be the author or might have supervised the writing of the letter.³⁴⁶ Unfortunately, there is nothing in the text that could prove or disprove this theory with any degree of certainty and we must therefore remain neutral in that matter.

4.1.3 *Who were the Lyonnais Martyrs?*

Very little is known about the origins of the Churches of Lyon and Vienne or about the members of the congregations themselves, but some elements present in the text seem to point at young churches, somehow linked to each other and with strong connections to churches of Asia Minor. Frend indeed tentatively writes: 'The two Churches were founded perhaps only

³⁴¹ In *Mart. Lyon* 4,1-2, Eusebius transcribes a letter from the martyrs recommending Irenaeus to the bishop of Rome. This letter is often cited as evidence that Irenaeus was made the bishop of Lyon after Pothinus died in the persecutions.

³⁴² Emphasis added.

³⁴³ Grant, 'Eusebius and the Martyrs', 132.

³⁴⁴ Dehandschutter, 'Community of Martyrs', 9.

³⁴⁵ Grant, 'Eusebius and the Martyrs', 132.

³⁴⁶ Moss, *The Other Christs*, 91, 189.

shortly beforehand, and their founders may have been among those arrested [...] On the whole, the balance of probability is that at this period there was one organization which included both Churches'.³⁴⁷ The reason for such cautious wording regarding the Gallic Churches is twofold. Firstly, the evidence for Christian settlement in Gaul in the second century is extremely scarce, both archaeologically and literarily. Indeed, the earliest Christian inscriptions found in the Lyonnaise region dates to the fourth century.³⁴⁸ Yet we do know that Irenaeus was preaching the Gospel in Gaul circa 185 and was a prominent member of the congregation in Lyon (tradition has Irenaeus as the bishop of Lyon).³⁴⁹ This seems to confirm the idea of a nascent and as yet unorganised Lyonnaise Church.³⁵⁰ The second issue relates to the mention of both churches. Indeed, as Moss remarks, Lyon and Vienne were at the time in different Roman provinces and the governor of a province only had jurisdiction in his own province and therefore could not arrest anyone beyond his borders.³⁵¹ However, like Frend, we can surmise that all the arrests occurred in Lyon, or within the *provincia Lugdunensis*, including those of members of the Vienne congregation who were visiting their brothers in Lyon. In this case the governor of Lyon could have proceeded to any criminal arrest, regardless of the provenance of the accused.³⁵² Moreover, the Lyonnaise church seems to have been the more important of the two as the persecution is said to have taken place in Lyon and only one martyr is explicitly linked to Vienne (Sanctus). Pietri suggests that the church of Vienne is mentioned first in the address of *Mart. Lyon* out of politeness and sympathy on behalf of the Lyonnaise community (who wrote the letter) because some martyrs were from Vienne,³⁵³ but there is no indication in the text that the search for the Christians was extended to Vienne or that many martyrs were from there.

Regarding the question of the origins of the members of the congregations the text is often vague and little information can be inferred from it. Although it is possible that the number of martyrs amounted to forty-eight people,³⁵⁴ only ten martyrs are mentioned by name in the

³⁴⁷ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 1-2.

³⁴⁸ J. W. Thompson, 1912. 'The Alleged Persecution of Christians at Lyons in 177'. *American Journal of Theology* 16 (3), pp. 359-384, 368.

³⁴⁹ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III. 4.2; IV. 24.2.

³⁵⁰ This is supported by *Mart. Lyon* 1,13: 'Those who were worthy were arrested every day [...] especially those through whom our churches had been established'.

³⁵¹ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 113, and also Thompson, 'Alleged Persecution', 368.

³⁵² Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 6.

³⁵³ C. Pietri, 1978. 'Les origines de la mission lyonnaise: remarques critiques'. J. Rougé and R. Turcan (eds). *Les Martyrs de Lyon, 177* (Colloques Internationaux du CNRS- no. 575). Paris: Editions du CNRS, 218.

³⁵⁴ There are forty-eight names given by Grégoire de Tours (died 594; *Historia Francorum* I, 29; *In Gloria Martyrum*, 48) and in the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* (2nd of June) but, as remarked by Thomas, some scholars took the number in the list down to thirty-eight because of the *duo* or *tria nomina* theory. However, this is not a

Historia Ecclesiae and very little is known about each of them: Alcibiades was probably of Greek origins and a free man (he is only mentioned in one of the appendices); Alexander was also Greek and a high status physician; Attalus, a rich Roman citizen from Pergamum was killed on the iron chair in spite of his Roman citizenship as the governor wished to please the crowd; Blandina, the slave of an unnamed mistress, might have been from Lyon (could have Armenian origins); Sanctus, who was the deacon of Vienne, ‘would not tell them [the authorities] his own name, his race, or the city he was from, nor whether he was a slave or free’ (*Mart. Lyon*, 1,20); of Maturus only his name is known; Ponticus, who was fifteen when he died, was probably a slave from Asia Minor (some argue he was Blandina’s brother); Vettius Epagathus, a free man and a Roman citizen, offered to defend the Christians during their trial as he was a lawyer, but he was instead arrested and decapitated, becoming the first martyr in Lyon; nothing is known of Biblis except that she recanted at first but then, under torture, confessed her faith again and died; and finally, Pothinus, ‘who had been entrusted with the ministry of the episcopate in Lyon’ (*Mart. Lyon* 1,29), was the bishop of Lyon but probably came from Asia Minor and might have been a founder of the Lyonnaise community.³⁵⁵

The analysis of the names of the martyrs cited in Eusebius as well as those referenced in the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* seems to indicate a prevalence of martyrs of Asian/Greek origin,³⁵⁶ which accentuates the link between the communities of Lyon and those of Asia Minor.³⁵⁷ As a matter of fact, the link with Asia Minor is an often-emphasised, and much discussed, feature of *Mart. Lyon*. Besides the well-documented relationship of Irenaeus with

widely accepted theory. G. Thomas, 1978. ‘La condition sociale de l’église de Lyon en 177’. J. Rougé and R. Turcan (eds). *Les Martyrs de Lyon, 177* (Colloques Internationaux du CNRS- no. 575). Paris: Editions du CNRS, 94, 97.

³⁵⁵ Thomas, ‘Condition sociale de l’église de Lyon’, 98-106.

³⁵⁶ Thomas sees in Jerome’s list of names seventeen of Asiatic or Hellenic origins but, as Bowersock remarks, this list is dubious and should not be trusted. Out of the ten martyrs mentioned by Eusebius, two are undoubtedly Asiatic (Attalus and Alexander), Sanctus, Maturus and Blandina might have been of Romano-Gallic/Celtic origins (Frend) but most of them speak Greek (the author specifies whenever a martyr speaks in Latin, which occurs in two instances only: Sanctus in 1,20 and Alexander in 1,52). Thomas, ‘Condition sociale de l’église de Lyon’, 96-97; Bowersock, ‘Les églises de Lyon et Vienne’, 255; Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 3.

³⁵⁷ As a matter of fact, there is nothing specific in the text that ‘anchors’ the martyrs to the city of Lyon. This led some scholars to argue, unfruitfully, that the events related in *Mart. Lyon* originally occurred in Asia Minor but that the story was later wrongly situated in Gaul. For example, Colin maintained in his article ‘L’Empire des Antonins et les martyrs gaulois de 177’ (published in *Antiquitas* in 1964), that the martyrs mentioned in *Mart. Lyon* were not martyred in Lyon but in Neoclaudiopolis in Pontus. However, most scholars accept that the martyrdoms happened in Lyon, to people who had settled in the city (not visitors) and justify the Greek/Asian names of the martyrs by the fact that Lyon was an important trade city that attracted numerous merchants and immigrants. Colin cited in Thomas, ‘Condition sociale de l’église de Lyon’, 94, 96.

Asian churches³⁵⁸ and the Hellenic/Asiatic names of the martyrs, the letter is also addressed to the churches of Asia and Phrygia.

This particular point has been subject to debates as the specific mention of Phrygia is seen as an oddity by some scholars. Indeed, as Bowersock remarked in his contribution to the *Martyrs of Lyon* colloquium held in 1977, Phrygia was at the time part of the Asian province, and not a separate province as the address suggests.³⁵⁹ Bowersock thus argued that the address of the letter was added by Eusebius who had based it on the only two geographical mentions in *Mart. Lyon* (Attalus from Pergamum in Asia and Alexander from Phrygia).³⁶⁰ It is entirely possible that Eusebius, as before, simply inferred the address from the context of the letter itself or added 'Phrygia' according to his own knowledge of the provinces (Phrygia was a separate province during Eusebius's time). The Asiatic influence in *Mart. Lyon* is, however, more obvious in the content of the text itself. Indeed, as we shall see shortly, one of the main themes of *Mart. Lyon*, the struggle against the devil, depicted in very apocalyptic terms, was a characteristic feature of early Christian Eastern literature, and so was the attitude towards martyrdom displayed in *Mart. Lyon*.

As a matter of fact, the martyrs of Lyon have been branded as Montanists because of some of these Eastern references. For example, at the beginning of the letter, we learn that Vettius Epagathus, a renowned lawyer, attempted to defend the Christian prisoners and was executed as a result of his confession. He was thereafter 'called the "Paraclete" of the Christians, as he had within himself the Paraclete, the Spirit of Zechariah' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,10). The notion of Holy Spirit/Paraclete was a pillar of the Montanist faith, and many scholars see allusions to the Holy Spirit in early Christian texts as signs of Montanism. In *Mart. Lyon*, the idea that some of the martyrs were influenced by the nascent Montanist movement is further fuelled by the joyful attitude of certain martyrs (Pothinus and Blandina mainly), which is an attitude often associated with followers of the New Prophecy.³⁶¹ Some scholars even argue that, because of their Asian origins, the emphasis on the Holy Spirit, the martyrs' enthusiasm for martyrdom, and their forgiving attitude towards the lapsed,³⁶² it is possible to imagine that the Lyonaise community

³⁵⁸ See Polycarp chapter, p. 73.

³⁵⁹ Bowersock, 'Les églises de Lyon et Vienne', 250-251.

³⁶⁰ Bowersock later changed his mind and claimed that Marcus Aurelius had anticipated that Phrygia would become an individual province and 'gave it a trial', precisely at the time of the persecutions in Lyon, which would explain why the author of the letter addressed his summary of the events to both provinces. This is rather unconvincing and there is little evidence to support this theory. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 98.

³⁶¹ As we saw previously this was successfully debunked by Tabernee, see p. 15 footnote 63.

³⁶² The lapsed are forgiven and received back in the community by the martyrs/confessors, 1,45-47 and see also 'they freed all and bound none', 2,5.

might have been created by Montanists.³⁶³ This theory, however, seems to be contradicted by the text itself in a succession of appendices added by Eusebius at the end of the main text. Indeed, Eusebius first includes (what he asserts to be) quotations from the main letter which highlight the humbleness and nobility of the martyrs/confessors (*Mart. Lyon* 2,2-6), and then chooses to include a short text relating Attalus's dream concerning Alcibiades. Otherwise unknown, Alcibiades is said here to have decided to live an ascetic life, 'consuming only bread and water and trying to live like this even in prison'. Attalus received a revelation, after his first ordeal in the arena, that Alcibiades 'was not acting well [...] and was giving to others an example of scandal. Alcibiades was persuaded. He ate everything freely and he gave thanks to God' (*Mart. Lyon* 3,2-3). An ascetic way of life (and/or extreme behaviour) was often attributed to heretics and criticised, and so this allusion to Alcibiades's ascetism sends a clear message to the communities in Asia: there is no need for ostentatious demonstrations of faith. Eusebius reinforces this message by directly mentioning Montanism just after this episode and informs us that:

At that very time the followers of Montanus, Alcibiades, and Theodotus were starting to spread their belief about prophesy among many people in Phrygia. [...] As a disagreement arose concerning the revelations, the brothers in Gaul in turn offered their own pious and most orthodox judgment concerning these matters. [...] They were acting as ambassadors for the peace of the churches (*Mart. Lyon* 3,4).

It is not clear here whether Eusebius implies that the martyrs of Lyon were indeed Montanists or not, but he puts the emphasis on their 'orthodoxy' and moderation. The authenticity of these passages is disputed as it is possible that Eusebius added these appendices to promote his anti-Montanist views. As a matter of fact, as we shall see shortly, the Alcibiades/Attalus episode along with the martyrs/confessors' passage seem out of context and might not be entirely trustworthy. In this light, it is difficult to assert that the martyrs of Lyon were not Montanists but as Frend rightly puts it:

The problem would, however, appear to be more one of parallel religious development rather than allegiances. As we have seen, there were many links between the Churches in Gaul and those of Asia Minor in those years. Movements among the one might be expected to find an echo in the other.³⁶⁴

Therefore, we can surmise that Eusebius, disturbed by the (apparent) Montanist influence on the Gallican martyrs, decided to add the appendices to clarify the text and make clear that the martyrs had, in fact, adopted an orthodox stance against Montanism. Alternatively, Eusebius

³⁶³ However, it is clear from Irenaeus's writings that under his ministry and through his catholic approach, which focused on apostolic succession, the Lyonnaise congregation did not follow the Montanist faith. Kraft, H., 1978. 'Die Lyoner Märtyrer und der Montanismus'. J. Rougé and R. Turcan (eds). *Les Martyrs de Lyon, 177* (Colloques Internationaux du CNRS- no. 575). Paris: Editions du CNRS, 233-247.

³⁶⁴ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 16.

might have simply added the appendices to deny straightforwardly this link with the New Prophecy and oppose this movement. Therefore, like Dehandschutter, we conclude that nothing in the text itself indicates that the author of *Mart. Lyon* was writing in reaction to the rise of Montanism.³⁶⁵ This suggests that Eusebius, similarly to Guttman with Masada, used an ‘ancient’ text, and by extension the martyrs, to further his arguments against movements he saw as heresies, hereby altering and shaping the martyrs’ collective memory for his needs.

The question of the origins of the persecution that occurred in Lyon in 177 remain obscure and contested. According to Keretsztes, there was an ‘unusually busy *apologetic* activity of Christian writers around the year 177 A.D.’.³⁶⁶ Keretsztes explains this phenomenon by the eruption of violent persecutions against the Christians possibly resulting from an imperial decree passed in 177 by Marcus Aurelius (reluctantly as he despised the games) and Commodus: the *senatus consultum de pretiis gladiatorum minuendis*.³⁶⁷ This law, which aimed primarily at limiting the prices of gladiators and the expenses spent on games,³⁶⁸ also gave the opportunity to priests in the Three Gauls to acquire, at a very cheap price, prisoners condemned to death to be used as gladiators. Following Oliver and Palmer’s theory on the *senatus consultum*,³⁶⁹ many scholars argue that the persecution in Lyon in 177 is an unintended consequence of this law as, even though this *senatus consultum* does not target the Christians, the mob saw in the despised sect members the perfect *trinquii*³⁷⁰ for the coming festival (held every year in honour of the Three Gauls).³⁷¹ In Keretsztes’s words: ‘The benefit granted to these provinces of Gaul, then, was a likely psychological explanation for the sudden outbreak of mob violence against the Christians. The idea of having cheap gladiators for spectacles probably influenced the non-Christian mob’.³⁷² However, out of the forty-eight alleged martyrs, the letter only mentions a handful who died in the arena, as most of them were either executed by

³⁶⁵ Dehandschutter, ‘Community of Martyrs’, 13.

³⁶⁶ Melito of Sardis, Apollinaris, Miltiades, and Bardasanes all wrote apologies to Marcus Aurelius (and Commodus for those written between 177 and 180), Athenagoras also addressed his *Embassy* to both emperors around 177. Keretsztes, ‘Marcus Aurelius a Persecutor?’, 333. Author’s emphasis.

³⁶⁷ Keretsztes, ‘Marcus Aurelius a Persecutor?’, 337.

³⁶⁸ The prices of gladiators were getting out of control and the games were becoming a financial burden on the priests in particular. M. Carter, 2003. ‘Gladiatorial Ranking and the “*SC de Pretiis Gladiatorum Minuendis*” (CIL II 6278 = ILS 5163)’. *Phoenix*, 57 (1/2), pp. 83-114, 84.

³⁶⁹ Oliver and Palmer were the first scholars to see a correlation between the *senatus consultum* of 177 and the persecution in Lyon of the same year. J. H. Oliver and R. E. A. Palmer, 1955. ‘Minutes of an Act of the Roman Senate’. *Hesperia* 24, pp. 320-349, 325.

³⁷⁰ The *trinquii* were human sacrificial victims of sacred rituals peculiar to Gaul. On human sacrifices in early antiquity, see J. Rives, 1995. ‘Human Sacrifice among Pagans and Christians’. *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 85, pp. 65-85.

³⁷¹ Keretsztes, ‘Marcus Aurelius a Persecutor?’, 337-339; D. G. Kyle, 1998. *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*. London and New York: Routledge, 250.

³⁷² Keretsztes, ‘Marcus Aurelius a Persecutor?’, 337.

decapitation (Roman citizens) or died in prison (like Pothinus and the unprepared youth). As convincingly shown by Taberne, it is more likely that the authorities took advantage of the newly passed law after the Christians had been arrested, which was therefore not the original cause for the persecution in Lyon.³⁷³

Even though no particular reason for the persecution is given in the letter, the text informs us that the Christians ‘nobly endured what was heaped against them by the crowd: shouts, blows, shovings, plunderings, stonings, and imprisonments - everything that commonly occurs to the mind of an enraged populace to do against enemies and foes’ (*Mart. Lyon* 1,7). Thus, according to the author of *Mart. Lyon*, it is the mob who instigated the persecutions. As mentioned before, the author makes a reference to accusations of incest and cannibalism (*Mart. Lyon* 1,14),³⁷⁴ but they are made after the arrests by slaves and could not have been at the origin of the persecutions since the author remarks: ‘when these accusations spread around, everyone became enraged, like wild beasts against us. Thus, even those who were at first moderate on account of their relationship with us now became extremely angry and infuriated against us’ (*Mart. Lyon* 1,15). Moreover, while the text seems to indicate that the Christians were condemned because of ‘the name of the Christians’ (the confession ‘I am a Christian’ is repeated several times), it is not mentioned as being the cause of the persecutions. As demonstrated by Le Glay, the imperial cult was highly developed in the province of Lyon (along with other cults, especially that of Cybele) in the second century.³⁷⁵ Le Glay adds that the Christian community in Lyon would not only have refused to sacrifice to the gods and to the emperor, but also would have been quite conspicuous in the city as they were still living within the pagan communities. This is attested in *Mart. Lyon*, 1,5: ‘not only were we barred from our houses, the baths, and the forum, but they even forbade any of us to appear at all, in any place’. Le Glay concludes that: ‘par leur comportement ils mettaient en péril le *status* de la colonie; ils méritaient donc la mort’.³⁷⁶ We can therefore surmise that, as was the case with Polycarp, the discontent of the mob arose from religious concerns and fear that the Christians displeased the gods, leading to the persecutions related in *Mart. Lyon*.³⁷⁷

³⁷³ W. Taberne, 2007. *Fake Prophecy and Polluted Sacraments: Ecclesiastical and Imperial Reactions to Montanism*. Leiden: Brill, 178-181.

³⁷⁴ See p. 64, footnote 252.

³⁷⁵ M., Le Glay, 1978. ‘Le culte impérial à Lyon au II^e siècle après J.C.’. J. Rougé and R. Turcan (eds). *Les Martyrs de Lyon, 177* (Colloques Internationaux du CNRS- no. 575). Paris: Editions du CNRS, pp. 20-29.

³⁷⁶ Le Glay, ‘Culte Impérial’, 29. Author’s emphasis.

³⁷⁷ Taberne and Barnes reach the same conclusion. Taberne, *Fake Prophecy*, 181; Barnes, ‘Legislation Against the Christians’, 50.

In brief, we can state that *Mart. Lyon* is an anonymous letter sent to the churches of Asia by a young Gallic church relating the persecutions and martyrdoms of many members of the churches of Lyon and Vienne. The letter was probably sent by the Lyonnais to provide their brothers in Asia with comfort and set an example to follow in case of persecutions. Many of the members of the Gallic congregation indeed seem to have had a continuing relationship with Asia Minor (maybe were even from Asia Minor) and might have been influenced by (but were not necessarily part of) the nascent movement of the New Prophecy. The persecutions seem primarily to have been instigated by the pagan mobs who had religious concerns because of the Christians' refusal to participate in the city's cults.

4.2 Authenticity of the *Martyrs of Lyon*

The fact that what happened in Lyon in 177 is not related, or even alluded to, in any document before Eusebius has puzzled some scholars and led them to question the authenticity of the Gallican letter. Indeed, in a much-debated article published in 1912, Thompson argued for a third century dating of *Mart. Lyon*, setting out several points that contradicted, in his view, both the second century dating and the authenticity of *Mart. Lyon*.³⁷⁸ According to Thompson, the silence from both Christian and pagan sources about the events related in *Mart. Lyon* is a most compelling proof that the document as we know it cannot be authentic. Indeed, in his article, Thompson asserts several times that 'the argument from silence is very impressive',³⁷⁹ he even goes as far as affirming that 'there is no evidence to indicate that there was any bishopric in Gaul before the middle of the third century'. Thompson adds that the first mention of the persecution of the Christians in Lyon is found in Sulpicius Severus (died 410) but should be attributed to his reading of Eusebius.³⁸⁰ Following a lengthy analysis of what Thompson purports to be 'anomalies and anachronisms' in *Mart. Lyon*,³⁸¹ he boldly, and rather radically, concludes:

The whole account in Eusebius *may* be a Christian fabrication composed during the Valerian or Diocletian persecution in order to encourage the faithful and to prevent recantation. [...] This form of pious forgery was not uncommon in the third century. If the other alternative—the historical veritability of the account—

³⁷⁸ Thompson, 'Alleged Persecution', pp. 359-384.

³⁷⁹ Thompson lists the early Christian writers (as well as pagans) who, according to him, could have been expected to mention the persecutions in Lyon, but, as far as we know, did not: Tertullian, Cyprian, Sextus Julius Africanus, Sextus Rufus, Arnobius, Lactantius, Salvian, Sidonius Apollinaris, Hilarius, and of course Irenaeus. Thompson, 'Alleged Persecution', 362-365.

³⁸⁰ *Sub Aurelio deinde, Antonini filio, persecutio quinta agitata; ac tunc primum intra Gallias martyria visa, serius trans Alpes Dei religione suscepta (Historia Sacra, II, 32)*. Quoted in Thompson, 'Alleged Persecution', 362-363.

³⁸¹ Thompson, 'Alleged Persecution', 368.

must be insisted upon, *Marcus Aurelius must be acquitted and the martyrdom of Lyons put a century later, in the reign of Aurelian (270-275)*.³⁸²

Eminent scholars Allard and Harnack vehemently rejected Thompson's doubts regarding the authenticity of *Mart. Lyon* and successfully refuted these arguments by firstly, cautioning against the argument from silence,³⁸³ and secondly, by asserting that the fact that Irenaeus was bishop of Lyon³⁸⁴ in the last quarter of the second century attests of the presence of Christians in the Gallic city at this time.³⁸⁵

While these arguments have convinced most scholars of the authenticity of *Mart. Lyon*, Moss has recently reopened the debate by reiterating Thompson's other arguments regarding the content of the account itself. As was the case with *Mart. Pol.*, some details in the text seem inconsistent with historical facts or reflect practical discrepancies: *Mart. Lyon*, indeed, presents challenges, mostly consisting of anachronistic references and legal incongruities.

4.2.1 *Anachronisms*

Moss's arguments regarding anachronisms in *Mart. Lyon* are twofold: firstly, there is the mention of 'Virgin Mother' in *Mart. Lyon* 1,45, an expression used to refer to the Church as an 'entity', which appears to pose a problem as it belongs to a later Christian tradition.³⁸⁶ As Moss notes: 'This is a distinctive concept that does not appear anywhere else until the late third

³⁸² Thompson, 'Alleged Persecution', 380-381. Author's emphasis.

³⁸³ Allard warns: 'l' argument négatif [...] doit être manié avec beaucoup de réserve et de finesse', considering the limited number of sources that reached us as well as the limitations on the circulation of information at the time. P. Allard, 1913. 'Une nouvelle théorie sur le martyre des Chrétiens de Lyon en 177 A. D.'. *Revue des questions historiques*, pp. 53-67.

³⁸⁴ Gilliard showed that second century ecclesiastical terminology is not yet settled and, while Ignatius's strict and defined use of the words bishop, priest and deacon was sometimes echoed in later writings, the term *ἐπίσκοπος* was not necessarily applied to the person in charge of a church. This is further complicated by the lack of evidence for a titled, monarchic episcopate in Lyon at the time. Irenaeus is called a *πρεσβύτερον ἐκκλησίας* in the letter of recommendation and Pothinus is described as *ὁ τὴν διακονίαν τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς*. Moreover, in his own writings, Irenaeus does not refer to himself as bishop (neither is he by contemporaneous Christian writers), but it is a word that Irenaeus uses very scarcely, only twice in total, in *Adversus Haereses*: once for Polycarp (3.3.4) and once for Hyginus of Rome (3.4.2). However, even though Eusebius does not include the headings of Irenaeus's letters which could have provided more information on his title, it seems clear from some of Eusebius's references to Irenaeus (*HE*, 5.23.4) and from Irenaeus's own writings about his role within the church of Lyon that he acted as the titled bishop of the Lyonnaise church. F.D., Gilliard, 1975. 'The Apostolicity of Gallic Churches'. *The Harvard Theological Review*, 68 (1), pp. 17-33, 30.

³⁸⁵ See Allard, 'Nouvelle théorie' and A. von Harnack, 1913. 'Review of "The Alleged Persecution of the Christians at Lyons in 177".' *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, pp. 74-77, and also J. W. Thompson, 1913. 'The Alleged Persecution of the Christians at Lyons in 177: A Reply to Certain Criticisms'. *The American Journal of Theology*, 17 (2), pp. 249-258.

³⁸⁶ Thompson very confusingly contrasts the expression Virgin Mother with Blandina's 'earthly mistress' and takes the word Virgin here as a reference to Mary, the mother of Jesus. This is clearly wrong as the cult of Mary and designation as Mother of God is a fifth century development. Thompson, 'Alleged Persecution', 379.

century’, in Methodius of Olympus’s *Symposium* (3.8).³⁸⁷ However, this problematic reference to the Church seems to have been widely ignored by most scholars, possibly because it actually does not need to be problematic. Indeed, we can offer reasonably convincing explanations for the presence of the expression ‘Virgin Mother’ in *Mart. Lyon* that do not necessarily imply that the whole text is a forgery. For example, *Mart. Lyon* could be the first instance of the expression known to us and Methodius, who could have read *Mart. Lyon* and could have taken the expression from the martyrdom narrative (as conceded but not believed by Moss). It is also possible that Eusebius, while redacting his *HE*, changed the original words, the Church, into Virgin Mother either consciously (because he liked the expression), or unconsciously (by habit). This is the explanation favoured by Moss, but she takes it as evidence for a heavily editing of *Mart. Lyon* by Eusebius. This is not convincing at all, however, as the one-off use of an expression that was popularised in the late third century should not, and cannot, substantiate claims of forgery/editing of a whole text.

The second anachronism cited by Moss concerns one of the appendices Eusebius adds at the end of the *Mart. Lyon* (2,2-4). The text is as follows:

Though they were in such a state of glory after testifying not once, not twice, but many times [...], **neither did they proclaim themselves martyrs, nor indeed did they allow us to address them with this name.** Rather, if any of us, either in letter or in speech referred to them as “martyrs”, they rebuked him harshly. For they were glad to give over the title of “martyr” to Christ alone, the faithful and true martyr, the first born of the dead, and the prince of the life of God. They reminded us of the martyrs who have already departed, saying: “Those men are now **martyrs**, whom Christ thought worthy to be taken up in their confession, setting the seal on their testimony through their departure, but **we are modest and humble confessors**”. [...] And by their actions they demonstrated **the power of martyrdom**, speaking with full boldness before all the pagans, and they made manifest their nobility through their endurance, fearlessness, and calm, but they **rejected the title of “martyr”** among their brothers because they were filled with the fear of God.

The question of the difference between martyrs and confessors preoccupied early Christians in times of persecution, especially in the middle of the third century. Indeed, during the ‘Decian persecution’ in 250, many Christians either sacrificed to the gods, as ordered by Decius, or somehow obtained the *libellus*³⁸⁸ that proved they had done their duty to the gods. These Christians are often referred to as ‘the lapsed’ or ‘apostates’. After the ‘persecution’, many returned to Christianity and were either received without conditions back into the Church by Novatus of Carthage or asked to perform public penance by the more conservative Christians, like Cyprian bishop of Carthage.³⁸⁹ However, in Carthage in particular, those who confessed

³⁸⁷ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 113.

³⁸⁸ On the Decian persecution, see p. 2, footnote 6.

³⁸⁹ In Rome, even though Pope Cornelius was still in power, rigorists elected Novatian as pope (anti-pope) because of his firm stance on the lapsed that refused to accept them back in the Church. He was deposed in 258, following

their Christianity (and suffered or were in danger because of their confession) but did not become martyrs, the so-called ‘confessors’, took upon themselves to forgive the lapsed after the end of the persecution. Cyprian, himself a confessor (and eventually a martyr), even wrote to the churches in North Africa to both warn against extreme laxism (as preached by Novatus) and rebuke the ‘confessors’ who, according to him, were usurping the martyrs’ privileges (*De Lapsis*, 19-21).

The passage quoted above seems to address this issue by emphasising the humbleness of the Lyonais who did not count themselves as martyrs yet, even though they had already suffered for their faith, as they were still alive. The message here is clear and echoes Cyprian’s arguments: a full confession and attainment of martyrdom can only be sealed by death. For Moss, this passage is out of place as the question of martyrs versus confessors is a third century concern.³⁹⁰ This is an appealing argument: from the writings of Cyprian, it seems clear that the Church did not encounter such a controversy regarding the lapsed in the past. However, the scale of the ‘persecution’ under Decius (which was Empire-wide) means that the number of lapsed was very high (as attested by Cyprian who talks about ‘the greatest number of brethren who betrayed their faith’)³⁹¹ and was therefore a problem for the whole church, as an organisation, which would not have been the case in Lyon where the number of martyrs was limited.

Therefore, this begs the question why this passage was included in the letter. To Ruyschaert, the problem resides in the modern (mis)understanding of the terms ‘martyr’ and ‘confessor’. According to Ruyschaert, *μάρτυς* should be translated as ‘witness’ throughout the text, not as ‘martyr’, and this title is the consequence of their being confessors (confessor here is a verbal noun, not a title). As Ruyschaert remarks, the author of the letter does not make the distinction and uses the term ‘martyr’ for both those who are dead and those who confessed but are still alive. Of course, this can simply be due to the fact that the author knows that they became martyrs, even if they were not at a certain point of time in the story. Yet the martyrs do not include themselves in the rank (*κληρικός*) of the martyrs in the passage above. Ruyschaert offers two explanations for this: firstly, as the text says, the martyrs in their great modesty and humility, fearful of their own weaknesses, grant the title of martyr to Christ first, and then to those who died for him; secondly, the Greek word for confessor used in *Mart. Lyon*, *ὁμολογός*,

Cyprian’s letters that argued that the lapsed should be forgiven and welcomed back in the Church should they perform proper public penance.

³⁹⁰ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 113-114.

³⁹¹ *De Lapsis*, 7. Translation by R. E. Wallis.

is different from the word *ὁμολογητής* that was used as a title in the third century when the controversy of the lapsed arose.³⁹² Ruyschaert rightly concludes:

L' apparition du titre de "confesseur" était inscrite dans la logique interne même du "témoignage". Elle était annoncée dans la Lettre lyonnaise par les protestations des "témoins" et particulièrement par le mot *ὁμολογος*, qui fera place par la suite au mot *ὁμολογητής*.

These are convincing arguments: there is no reason to doubt the martyrs' humbleness as it is consistent with their characterisation throughout the text. It therefore seems logical they would refuse the title martyr while they were still alive. Moreover, the fact that the word for 'confessor' in *Mart. Lyon* is not the word commonly associated with the 'title of confessor' used in the third century certainly appears to indicate that the more common, basic, meaning was intended in *Mart. Lyon*. However, it is worth noting here that Eusebius, at the end of the main text, compiles a few passages of the letter that all seem to deal with the humbleness of the Lyonnais martyrs in opposition to 'the followers of Montanus [...] who were starting to spread their belief [...] in Phrygia' (*Mart. Lyon* 3,4), which is a subject Eusebius deals with soon after his Gallic digression (*HE* V, 14-19). Moreover, as Moss notes:

There's a sudden shift in the tone and style of this section of the letter [...] this section (5.2) and the heresiological letters produced by the martyrs of Lyons and referenced by Eusebius (5.3) are disjointed and quite different in content from the narrative of their trials and execution.³⁹³

Indeed, while some of the passage reads fine as it is in line with the style of *Mart. Lyon*,³⁹⁴ the quote as a whole (*Mart. Lyon*, 2,2-4) is difficult to place in the general context of the letter. We can surmise that the original material provided Eusebius with a platform to announce the danger of Montanism and he saw an opportunity to use the prestigious martyrs as example of proper behaviour and foster his view on the heretics in Phrygia. It is possible then that Eusebius edited this part and added a few sentences to make his point clearer. Consequently, we can agree with Moss on the fact that Eusebius possibly edited the martyrdom account but to a much lesser extent than she infers. Eusebius, while reading *Mart. Lyon* was reminded of issues of his time or known to him to have happened in the recent past (like the lapsed controversy) and decided to 'elaborate' on the original material. As was the case with the expression 'Virgin Mother', it does not seem reasonable, however, to reject the authenticity of the whole text because of a few

³⁹² Eusebius also uses the term confessor in relation to the events in Lyon in the later sense in *Mart. Lyon* 4,3, when he refers the reader to his *Collections of Martyrdom* for the full list of martyrs and 'the number of confessors still surviving at the time' (*τὸν τε ἀριθμὸν τῶν εἰς ἔτι τότε περιόντων ὁμολογητῶν*).

³⁹³ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 225-226.

³⁹⁴ 'Though they were in such a state of glory after testifying not once, not twice, but many times [...], neither did they proclaim themselves martyrs, nor indeed did they allow us to address them with this name. For they were glad to give over the title of "martyr" to Christ alone, the faithful and true martyr, the first born of the dead, and the prince of the life of God.'

sentences added later by Eusebius, especially since, despite a change in style and tone, the characterisation of the martyrs is consistent with that of the main text.

On the subject of anachronisms, Thompson adds two points that, according to him, place the writing of *Mart. Lyon* in the third century. Firstly, Thompson interprets Sanctus's miraculous recovery as a literal miracle and asserts that the 'miraculous additions are of third-century embellishment',³⁹⁵ citing the lack of miracles in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* as evidence of the authenticity of the document. These are very feeble arguments as not only are there very few miraculous elements in *Mart. Lyon*, but they seem to be part of the discourse rather than the historical narrative. They participate in the construction of the message about suffering and the presence of Christ in the sufferer (Sanctus's recovery, Blandina on the stake), but are not presented as miracles *per se*. Moreover, there are other examples of miracles in second century martyrdom accounts such as the dove and the fire in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and numerous instances in the fictional *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and *Acts of Peter*.³⁹⁶

Secondly, Thompson sees in *Mart. Lyon* elements of *furor passionis martyrum*³⁹⁷ and quotes three passages to support his argument: 1. 'they completed the confession of their martyrdom with full eagerness' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,11); 2. 'the first ones were relieved by the joy of testimony' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,34); 3. 'the blessed Pothinus [...] was strengthened by the eagerness of his spirit because of his pressing desire for martyrdom' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,29). Yet these passages hardly express the uncontrollable longing for death that *furor passionis* entails. As Dehandschutter rightly remarks: 'It is difficult to say that *MLugd* propagates any enthusiasm for martyrdom, "Martyriumssucht" [...] If there is a *choice* for martyrdom, it is as a matter of fact connected with the Christian confession, not with enthusiasm or prophetic ecstasy'.³⁹⁸ Indeed, the author of *Mart. Lyon* never encourages his audience to give themselves up to the authorities, but his message should rather be interpreted as advocating both the acceptance of martyrdom (when/if it comes) as part of their Christian life and duty, and showing courage in the face of death and joy in their participation in the cosmic battle against Satan. As a matter of fact, we could infer from the later martyrdom accounts, where the *furor passionis* is a characteristic behaviour of the martyrs, that this said behaviour stems from the more moderate instances present in *Mart. Pol.*, *Mart. Lyon* and the *Passion of Perpetua* since one of their primary purposes was to serve

³⁹⁵ Thompson, 'Alleged Persecution', 378-379.

³⁹⁶ See p. 24, footnote 103 (*Acts of Peter*) and p. 62, footnote 250 (*Acts of Paul and Thecla*).

³⁹⁷ See pp. 12-13.

³⁹⁸ Dehandschutter, 'Community of Martyrs', 19. Author's italics.

as an example to other communities who might be facing the same circumstances.³⁹⁹ Moreover, we can cite *Mart. Pol.* and Ignatius's *Letter to the Romans* as earlier examples of this behaviour.⁴⁰⁰ Perpetua and her companions also most certainly express joy at the idea of their martyrdom⁴⁰¹ at the turn of the third century (203). There is therefore nothing anachronistic in the display of courage and joy in the martyrs of Lyon's behaviour.

4.2.2 Legal Issues

There are a few points of contention in *Mart. Lyon* regarding the legal aspect of the procedure against the Christians that have divided scholars. Indeed, as Keresztes puts it: 'The entire procedure against the Christians of Lugdunum and Vienna appears to be full of what may be called irregularities or rather arbitrary actions'.⁴⁰² These 'irregularities' have certainly not eluded Moss who chose to interpret these discrepancies as proof of the forgery/heavy editing/late dating of *Mart. Lyon*. However, most scholars tried to reconcile the text with what we know of Roman law or offer alternative explanations for these incongruities. For example, as previously mentioned, one of the main arguments Moss uses against the authenticity of *Mart. Lyon* relates to the fact that Lyon and Vienne are in different provinces. However, as we saw before, this is not a strong point as the Viennois martyr could simply have been visiting their brothers in Lyon.⁴⁰³

Another legal sticky point of the proceedings occurs when Attalus is sent to the beasts even though he is a Roman citizen and should have been beheaded. The author here offers the (credible) explanation that the governor, willing to please the crowds, disregarded the command from Marcus Aurelius⁴⁰⁴ and decided to give the people what they wanted. Ste Croix asserts that the governor, should he be asked by the emperor why he disobeyed (which he was not), 'could plead political necessity',⁴⁰⁵ that is, in order to keep the peace in his province and avoid

³⁹⁹ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 86.

⁴⁰⁰ See pp. 8, 13, 15-16.

⁴⁰¹ *Passio Perpetuae*, VI,6.

⁴⁰² P. Keresztes, 1967. 'The Massacre at Lugdunum in 177 A.D.'. *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 16 (1), pp. 75-86, 80.

⁴⁰³ See p. 90.

⁴⁰⁴ Although not explicitly mentioned, from the text we can infer that Marcus Aurelius simply reiterated the command that Roman citizens were to be beheaded as it is what the governor is said to do after we are told that the emperor had written back. The only clear mention of Marcus Aurelius's rescript says that the emperor preconised to put the Christians on the rack but to free those who recant (*Mart. Lyon* 1,47).

⁴⁰⁵ Ste Croix, 'Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?', 15.

riots, he had to please the agitated populace.⁴⁰⁶ The idea of an angry mob taking control of the proceedings is quite present in *Mart. Lyon*⁴⁰⁷ and it is certainly not impossible to imagine that the events really happened the way they are described here. Another point of debate concerns the testimony given by slaves who, out of fear,⁴⁰⁸ accused the Christians of incest and cannibalism. As Moss points out, however, for the testimony to be valid, the slaves should have been tortured (according to Roman law practices), which is not the case in *Mart. Lyon*. However, in the light of our previous point, we could infer that the soldiers did not feel that they had to proceed with the torture of the slaves since they (as well as the crowd) were happy with their testimony. We could also surmise that the author omitted the torture proceeding from his account as he either lacked concern for historical detail or, he might simply have wished to emphasise the ‘weakness’ of these pagan slaves ‘who were in Satan’s trap’ (*Mart. Lyon* 1,14) and not give them the ‘excuse’ of having been tortured. As seen before, omission is also part of the collective memory process and is revelatory of the author’s intent/needs.

The problems regarding the legal process in *Mart. Lyon* do not end here. Critics of *Mart. Lyon* remind us that according to Trajan’s rescript (Pliny, *Epistles* X, 97),⁴⁰⁹ ‘these people [the Christians] must not be hunted out’ (*conquirendi non sunt*). However, the author of *Mart. Lyon* makes it very explicit that this order, although not a law *per se*,⁴¹⁰ was ignored by the authorities in Lyon (*Mart. Lyon* 1,14). This situation has precedents: in *Mart. Pol.*, after Germanicus and the others are executed in the stadium, the crowd demands the arrest of Polycarp too (*Mart. Pol.*, 3,2) and, even though Polycarp keeps moving location to avoid arrest (at his companions’ request), ‘the ones searching for him [i.e., the police, captain Herod] persisted’ and eventually arrested Polycarp (after his location was betrayed by his slave, *Mart. Pol.*, 6,1). In addition, Melito, in a letter to Marcus Aurelius, regrets a persecution in Asia that ignored Hadrian’s rescript (which basically reiterated Trajan’s command)⁴¹¹ and mentions that Antoninus Pius

⁴⁰⁶ This is reminiscent of Pontius Pilate’s behaviour who, against his will, condemned Jesus and released Barabbas. (‘So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying “I am innocent of this man’s blood, see to it yourselves”’, Matthew 27:24).

⁴⁰⁷ See for example: ‘But the people around the tribunal shouted against him (for he [Vettius Epagathus] was in fact a man of note) and the governor rejected the request that he so justly made’ (*Mart. Lyon*, 1,10), and also ‘For in truth, the governor gave Attalus to the beasts again in an effort to please the crowd’ (*Mart. Lyon*, 1,50).

⁴⁰⁸ ‘Even some of our pagan slaves were arrested, since the governor had publicly ordered that we all be searched out. These slaves, who were in Satan’s trap, feared the tortures that they had seen the saints suffer and, at the instigation of the soldiers, falsely accused us of Thyestian feasts and Oedipean couplings’ (*Mart. Lyon*, 1,14.).

⁴⁰⁹ Pliny the Younger, 1969. *Letters, Volume II: Books 8-10. Panegyricus*. Translated by B. Radice. Loeb Classical Library 59. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁴¹⁰ After all, Trajan was simply replying to Pliny’s concerns and did not set his recommendation not to seek out the Christians as an official law.

⁴¹¹ Although Hadrian’s rescript has been interpreted differently by modern scholars, it was shown by both Barnes and Keresztes that Hadrian mostly followed Trajan’s rescript in that it forbids condemnations of Christians solely

also had to intervene by letter in several provinces to remind the governors not to persecute the Christians (*HE IV*, 26, 10). Keresztes concludes that the behaviour of both the mob and the governor in *Mart. Lyon* seems to have been common in Asia and was facilitated by the governor's 'almost unlimited power over their subjects'.⁴¹²

This is not the only recommendation from Trajan's and Hadrian's rescripts that the governor in Lyon decided to ignore. Trajan's rescript is clear on the attitude to adopt regarding the Christians brought in front of the governor:

[...] if the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian, and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance however suspect his past conduct may be.⁴¹³

However, in *Mart. Lyon*, not only are the Christians never offered the option to sacrifice to the emperor,⁴¹⁴ but more importantly, the apostates are kept in prison and tortured. As a matter of fact, the attitude of the governor towards the apostates is quite ambiguous and confusing. In *Mart. Lyon* 1,47, we are told that 'the emperor wrote that they were to be put on the plank for torture, but that if some denied they were to be released'. As the author was talking about the apostates prior to this statement, it is unclear whether he means the Christians should be tortured or the lapsed, as they already had denied Christ. In addition, since the soldiers had previously obtained the testimony from the slaves about the 'impieties' committed by the Christians and they had already recanted, the torture seems superfluous and rather gratuitous. Therefore, not only are the lapsed not released, contrary to Roman common practice, but torture seems to be used as punishment (e.g., Attalus even roasts on an iron chair instead of being decapitated), rather than a means to obtain information or recantation, as was its common use in the second century. It is possible that the accusations of cannibalism and incest made by the slaves angered the crowd and the soldiers so much that they decided to punish the Christians and those associated with them, even if they had recanted. Consequently, even though it is unlikely that the governor, like Pliny before him,⁴¹⁵ believed any of the allegations made by the slaves, his decision to keep the apostates in prison can only be explained by his anxiousness to please the

based on people's demand. Instead, the accuser must put forth a formal case against the Christians and prove they have broken the law. If the accuser fails to prove the veracity of his accusations, he is the one to be punished. Barnes, 'Legislation against the Christians', 37; P. Keresztes, 1967. 'The Emperor Hadrian's Rescript to Minicius Fundanus'. *Phoenix*, 21 (2), pp. 120-129.

⁴¹² Keresztes, 'Massacre at Lugdunum', 82.

⁴¹³ Pliny, *Letters* X, 97.

⁴¹⁴ The author only mentions that 'attempts were made to compel them (Blandina and Ponticus) to swear by their [the pagans'] idols' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,53), but nothing is said of the others or at an earlier stage of the legal proceedings, as is the case in the other Martyrs Acts (e.g., *Mart. Pol.* 10.1; *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 5).

⁴¹⁵ 'I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths' (*Nihil aliud inveni quam superstitionem pravam et immodicam*, Pliny, *Letters* X, 96).

crowd (who probably did believe the accusations). It is only after receiving Marcus Aurelius's reply, which instructs him to free the lapsed, that the governor decides to release them after putting them to the test again, this time publicly. However, by this time, the number of lapsed had greatly diminished since, strengthened by the example of the martyrs, they had decided to confess their Christian belief, and most were executed with the others.

Nonetheless, the torture of the apostates remains difficult to explain from a historical point of view, hence the necessity of a literary approach for a full understanding of the text. As Middleton remarks:

The sociological effects of both successful martyrdom and denial were not lost on the early Church. [...] Successful martyrs brought the new religion to the attention of the pagan society and, significantly, won many converts. [...] Deniers, by contrast, brought scorn upon the Christian communities, weakening their group cohesion, as loyalty to the group was undermined.⁴¹⁶

There was, therefore, a very practical need for the early Christian to address the issue of apostasy, which is done at length in *Mart. Lyon*. Indeed, one of the main recurrent themes of *Mart. Lyon* concerns the effect of torture on the Christians and the lapsed:

For those who had denied when they were first arrested were **also imprisoned with the others and shared their sufferings**. Indeed, at this time **denial was of no advantage to them**. Instead, while those who had confessed to being Christians were **imprisoned as Christians** with no further charge brought against them, those who had denied were **detained as murderers and reprobates**, being **punished twice** as much as the others. Indeed, while the first ones were relieved by **the joy** of testimony, **the hope** for what has been promised, **their love** for Christ, and the spirit of the Father, the others were **greatly punished** by their conscience so that their faces distinguished them among the others as soon as they appeared. For the first ones came forth **joyfully, with great glory and grace** blended on their faces [...] but the others were **miserable, dejected, and hideous, full of every disgrace**. [...] On seeing this, the other Christians were steadied and they confessed unhesitatingly when they were arrested, without a thought for diabolical arguments. (*Mart. Lyon* 1,33-35)⁴¹⁷

The author clearly emphasises the difference between those who confessed Christ and those who recanted. This idea is further developed in *Mart. Lyon* 1,45-46 when the author relates an episode in which the apostates changed their minds and confessed again. The choice of word is particularly interesting as it reveals a more sophisticated theology of martyrdom than in *Mart. Pol.*:

For **the dead** were brought **back to life** through **the living**, the martyrs bestowed grace on those who were not martyrs, and great joy was brought to the Virgin Mother as she received alive those whom she **miscarried as dead**. For through them most of those **who had denied were all over again conceived**, grown in the womb, and **brought to life**, and they learned to confess.

This passage has multiple implications: firstly, as Middleton notes, the martyrs have a clear soteriological role as they save themselves as well as others: the example of the martyrs saves

⁴¹⁶ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 21.

⁴¹⁷ Emphasis added.

those who had lapsed;⁴¹⁸ secondly, we can notice a language reversal where life means death and death means life. It is linked to the idea of martyrdom as rebirth, like baptism;⁴¹⁹ thirdly, the martyrs, those who are already dead and those who are awaiting death, seem to already enjoy a special status where they can intervene for others ('the martyrs bestowed grace on those who were not martyrs'); finally, the lapsed can be forgiven by God and saved again by their testimony. As we shall see shortly, the first three points seem to be reminiscent of apocalyptic literature and recall the Book of Revelation in particular. Although only at an embryonic stage in *Mart. Lyon*, these points will become characteristic features of the cult of the saints, as will become apparent in the next chapter with the *Passion of Perpetua*.

In brief, we can infer here that the emphasis of the author on the torture of both martyrs and lapsed serves the purpose to send a message to the other Christian communities: recantation has no benefits in the present or in the future, but salvation is still possible after apostasy if a true confession is made again. As we have seen in the case of Masada, the need to protect or shape the identity of a nation (in Masada's instance) or a community (like in Lyon) can sometimes lead to the 'rewriting' or 'tweaking' of historical events. It is possible that, for the author of *Mart. Lyon*, the need to address the issue of the lapsed which, presumably, posed a threat to the Lyonnaise community during the persecution,⁴²⁰ justified the alteration of the truth in the case of the apostates.

Another theme, also inspired by apocalyptic literature, that runs throughout *Mart. Lyon* and that can explain the legal inconsistencies within the text is the contrast between the barbaric (satanic) behaviour of the pagans and the exemplary (godly) endurance of the Christians. Indeed, the author highlights the opposition, often related in war terms, between the Christians and the Devil:

For the **adversary fell on us** with all his might [...], he did everything to prepare his people in advance against the servants of God [...] but the grace of **God counter-attacked** [...] and **arrayed in battle** steadfast pillars, whose endurance enabled them to draw upon themselves every assault of the wicked one. They came **face to face with him in battle**, holding up against every form of insult and punishment (*Mart. Lyon* 1,5-6).

⁴¹⁸ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 90.

⁴¹⁹ The association of martyrdom and baptism is also present in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (II, 33-35) and *Mart. Pol.*, to a lesser extent, with the dove coming out of Polycarp's flank (see p.62). Baptism is often considered a second birth in Christianity. As Moss notes: 'It seems possible that martyrdom accounts were read in the context of baptismal liturgies. [...] A number of patristic authors describe martyrdom as a form of baptism, endowing martyrdom with a kind of sacramental quality and baptism with a martyrological significance'. Here the imagery of rebirth (through death) is clear and reflects 'a cycle' of the Christian life: becoming a Christian is being conceived, confessing is being grown in the womb, being martyred is being born, while recanting is associated to miscarriage. Moss, *Other Christs*, 14; and also, Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 90-1, 95.

⁴²⁰ *Mart. Lyon* 1,11-12.

As a matter of fact, from the very beginning of the letter, the tone and message of the author to the churches of Asia is clear: the Christians are not victims of senseless persecutions, and their sufferings and death are not in vain: this is war!

An unmissable feature of *Mart. Lyon* is the description in gruesome details of the tortures endured by the Christians and the insistence of the author upon the unfair and barbaric treatment of the prisoners at the hands of the Roman soldiers and the mob. Unsurprisingly, the pagan mob and the soldiers torturing the martyrs are often said to act under Satan's influence. Yet, from the Christians' point of view, the horrible and sustained torture they endure amount to nothing as they are supported by Christ himself. Indeed, the author asserts that the martyrs are not alone, Christ is actively participating in the war against Satan. For example, in *Mart. Lyon* 1,24, it is said that 'suffering in him [Sanctus], Christ accomplished great glory, foiling the adversary and presenting him to the others as an example showing that nothing is fearful where the love of the Father is, nothing is painful where the glory of Christ is'.⁴²¹ Moreover, the discourse associated with the sordid descriptions of their sufferings is of victory, healing, strength and immortality. Sanctus, who refused to say anything but answered every question with the confession 'I am a Christian', angered the crowd and the soldiers so much that he was tortured to the point that his body 'had lost its human shape' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,23). Yet 'contrary to all human expectation his poor body rose up and stood upright in the subsequent tortures [...] so that, by the grace of Christ, the second torture was not for him a punishment, but a **healing**' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,24).

Blandina, the 'small, weak, and insignificant' slave, was tortured from dawn till dusk, to the point that her torturers, exhausted,

gave up, confessing that they were defeated and had nothing left to do to her. They were astonished that she continued to breathe, since her entire body was torn and laid open [...] but like a noble champion the blessed woman was restored by her confession, and it was for her **recovery**, **repose**, and **relief** to say: "I am a Christian and among us nothing vile happens" (*Mart. Lyon* 1,18-19).

The author explains the torture of the martyrs both by the fulfilment of Jesus's words: "The time will come when anyone who kills you will think that he offers a service to God" (John 16:2), and by the influence of Satan on the pagans:

From this time on the holy martyrs endured punishments beyond telling, as Satan eagerly sought to have them too utter some blasphemies. The whole anger of the crowd, the governor, and the soldiers fell beyond all measure on Sanctus, the deacon of Vienne, on Maturus [...], on Attalus [...], and on Blandina (*Mart. Lyon*, 1,16-17).

⁴²¹ This idea is echoed by Augustine in his sermon about the death of the martyr Vincent (Vincent of Saragossa, martyred under Diocletian in 304), where Augustine states: 'The devil suffered greater torments from Vincent not being vanquished, than Vincent did from the devil persecuting him' (*Sermon* 275,2).

However, the Devil is not just content with the torture of the martyrs. As shown in this passage, recanting is not enough, Satan wants more and attempts to make the prisoners blaspheme. Indeed, even those who have recanted are sent back to the rack, as illustrated by Biblis's case. The motivation behind Biblis's torture is unclear at first as she was one of the apostates, but the author explains the soldiers' insistence to torture the lapsed woman as follows: 'The Devil thought he had already devoured her. As he wanted, however, to damn her for blasphemy, he led her to punishment, trying to force her -as she was now frail and weak- to utter the impieties about us' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,25). However, as was the case with Sanctus and Blandina, Biblis had an unexpected reaction to torture: 'she recovered her senses in the midst of the torture and, so to speak, awoke from a deep sleep, as her temporary punishment reminded her of the eternal one in Gehenna. [...] she confessed herself Christian and she was added to the rank of the martyrs' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,26). Therefore, in his greed, the Devil gives the means for the apostates to save themselves and is defeated by his own schemes.

While many 'legal irregularities' can simply be explained by a rather common behaviour of the mob, soldiers and the governor, the torture of the martyrs and the lapsed alike is the real problem here. However, if we look at it from a discourse point of view rather than seeking a historical/factual explanation, we are able to see past the discrepancy and get to the purpose of the text. As a consequence, we can make several points here regarding the main messages of the text: 1. the pagans are Satan's people and the Christians are God's people, waging war against each other; 2. dying for God is gaining eternal life, while recanting is damnation, both in the present and after death; 3. during torture and other punishment, confessing Christ brings relief and strength; 4. God is forgiving and the ('dead') apostates can be brought back to life by confessing and suffering martyrdom.

These messages can be seen as immensely powerful interpretations by the young Christian communities of Lyon and Vienne of the situation of extreme stress and grief they experienced. These interpretations make sense of their sufferings and losses in a context of war where they are the victors. Therefore, within a context of war between God and Satan, we can remark that the scenes of torture act here as scenes of battle. To that effect, the author depicted the scenes eyewitnesses reported to him in terms he was familiar with, namely apocalyptic imagery from Revelation, and inscribed his message of strength and hope in the description of war battles and 'victories' of his brothers. We can therefore surmise that in order to achieve this, the author might have exaggerated the amount of torture, included gruesome details to enhance his

narrative, and possibly added some elements, like the torture of the lapsed, to further his messages.

Mart. Lyon is a complex text that both relates historical events and personal thoughts and experiences that shaped the way the story was told. *Mart. Lyon*, after all, is, or at least purports to be, a letter sent by Christians who had suffered great losses to their brothers who might suffer the same fate. The situation the author/eyewitnesses were in influenced their memory of the events as well as the message they wanted to put forth to their brethren in Asia. As mentioned before, the language here is apocalyptic and betrays the influence of Revelation. In such circumstances it is understandable that the Christian community of Lyon would be reminded of a book that describes persecutions by pagan rulers of Christ's followers and integrate it in their narrative. Not only does it help them make sense of the horror they experienced, but it also provides them with a sentiment of belonging and purpose: they are part of the war between God and Satan that was foretold in Revelation. This idea was probably also reinforced by the similarities they saw between their situation and that of Polycarp before them. Therefore, even though the text cannot be read historically in its entirety, the main events described here do not need to be doubted: *Mart. Lyon* represents the interpretation of the events by the eyewitnesses in the light of texts they were familiar with (i.e., *Mart. Pol.* and Revelation), and that resonated with them while faced with the hardship they experienced in 177. We cannot exclude the possibility that Eusebius (or another editor) modified the text in some small ways (like changing Church into Virgin Mother). However, we must disagree with Moss who concludes that 'the most likely and simplest explanation [...], is that Eusebius has edited the letter himself. The *Martyrs of Lyons*, therefore, is a theological early church letter edited by a strong-minded church historian. [...] All we know for sure is what Eusebius or other unseen editors think about the martyrs'.⁴²² Moreover, if Eusebius had indeed edited *Mart. Lyon* so heavily, would he not have corrected the legal issues we encountered in the text, rather than 'created' them, as Moss suggests? After all, as we saw with *Mart. Pol.*, Eusebius did not restrain from editing ancient texts to add plausibility to them.⁴²³ Consequently, while the historicity of some detail of the text might be contested, the veracity of the events, in more general terms (the persecution and execution of a number of Christians in Lyon), and the authenticity of *Mart. Lyon* need not be doubted. Most of the text must be considered authentic, if not entirely

⁴²² Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 114.

⁴²³ See p. 48.

historical in the ‘scientific’ sense of the term, at least in its representation of the events that occurred in Lyon in 177.

4.3 Collective Memory in the *Martyrs of Lyon*

As we saw previously (and as was the case with the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*), *Mart. Lyon* not only reveals the political and social context of its time, but also reflects cultural and religious influences that help to frame, shape, and develop the Gallicans’ theology of martyrdom. In *Mart. Lyon* we can discern three main sources of inspiration: Maccabees, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and the New Testament. As we shall see now, these sources participate in the process of creating a Christian identity and collective memory that revolve around suffering and martyrdom, based on shared experiences and common goals.

4.3.1 *Maccabees in Mart. Lyon*

According to Frend, ‘it would be difficult to deny that the writer of the Lyons letter was saturated in Maccabean literature’.⁴²⁴ As previously discussed in the introduction, the story of the Maccabees was indeed absorbed into early Christian literature, especially the ‘martyrdom episodes’ of Eleazar and the mother and her seven sons who were considered as proto-martyrs by many early Christian writers, such as Origen and Cyprian.⁴²⁵ It is no surprise then that, as we did in *Mart. Pol.*, we also find reminiscences of the Jewish texts in *Mart. Lyon*. There are three possible points of contact between the Maccabean books (especially 4 Maccabees) and the Gallican letter.

Firstly, Pothinus and Eleazar are described in a similar way, particularly regarding their old age (‘Eleazar in his ninetieth year’, 2 Macc. 6.24; Pothinus ‘was over ninety years old’, *Mart. Lyon* 1,29), their important social status (Pothinus ‘had been entrusted with the ministry of the episcopate in Lyon’, *Mart. Lyon* 1,29, and Eleazar was ‘the leader of the flock’, 4 Macc. 5),⁴²⁶ and their revival at the prospect of death for God (Eleazar ‘welcoming death with honor [...] went up to the rack of his own accord’, 2 Macc. 6-19; Pothinus ‘was dragged to the tribunal, his body exhausted by age and illness, but his soul holding on in him so that Christ might triumph through it’, *Mart. Lyon* 1,29). However, whereas Eleazar is simply ‘glad to suffer these

⁴²⁴ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 21.

⁴²⁵ Origen *De Principiis*, II, 1.5; Cyprian, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, XI.

⁴²⁶ Or ‘one of the scribes in high position’ in 2 Macc. 6.18.

things' (2 Macc. 6.30), Pothinus is 'strengthened by the eagerness of his spirit because of his desire for martyrdom' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,29). As Moss remarks, it is likely that 'the author of the *Martyrs of Lyons* had Eleazar in mind when he sketched the contours of Pothinus's martyrdom. If anything, there is a touch of one-upmanship at work'.⁴²⁷

This might be true for the description the authors make of their respective protagonist but, with regards to their role within the accounts, Eleazar plays a clearly more prominent part in the Maccabean stories than Pothinus does in the Lyonnaise account. Indeed, while Pothinus does suffer greatly when, as he is led to the tribunal, the enraged mob 'abused him in every way with their hands and feet' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,31), his contribution to the story is limited. Very little is said of him, except that he was very weak, or said by him as, when questioned by the governor about God, the bishop of Lyon only answers: "If you are worthy, you will know".⁴²⁸ He is then said to have died in prison two days later (*Mart. Lyon* 1,31). Therefore, the mention of Pothinus is evidently due to his bishop status and serves mainly to show the cruelty of the mob and authorities towards the Christians as they showed 'no respect for his age' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,31). By contrast, Eleazar is very eloquent (especially in 4 Macc. 5.16-38) and set himself as an example for the younger generations, exposing the reasons for his sacrifice at length. As Bowersock remarks: 'Eleazar is presented as a shining example of death with glory (ὁ μετὰ εὐκλείας θάνατος, II Macc. 6.19), a death as old as the *Iliad*'.⁴²⁹ This is clearly not the case for Pothinus, making it difficult to ascertain the influence of Maccabean literature on *Mart. Lyon* with respect to Pothinus as the similarities seem rather fortuitous.

It seems more likely that the commonality in the description of Pothinus and Eleazar (as was the case with Polycarp too) as old and weak but wise and strengthened by their belief comes from the image of Socrates, which, as we saw earlier, would appeal to any audience in the Roman empire, whether consciously (for educated people) or as part of their collective/cultural memory (possibly more generally as a philosopher image rather than Socrates specifically in the case of less educated people).

The second point often cited by scholars as showing dependence of *Mart. Lyon* on 2 and 4 Maccabees is found in *Mart. Lyon* 1,55, in the description of Blandina's final moments:

⁴²⁷ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 70.

⁴²⁸ This reply from Pothinus, although more defiant, echoes Polycarp's when he too was interrogated by the proconsul ("I consider you at least worthy of response", *Mart. Pol.* 10.2).

⁴²⁹ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 11.

For Ponticus, encouraged by his sister⁴³⁰ (so that even the pagans saw that she was urging him on and steadying him), nobly endured every punishment and gave up his spirit. And last of all the blessed Blandina, just like a noble mother who encouraged her children and sent them ahead in victory to the king, undergoing herself through all the contests of her children, hastened to them, rejoicing and exulting in her departure.

For Frend, the connection between Blandina and the Maccabean mother is obvious and undeniable.⁴³¹ As we saw previously, 2 Macc. 7 depicts a mother nobly and uncompromisingly urging her sons to resist a cruel tyrant and to die for the Judaic laws. This indeed vaguely recalls Blandina's martyrdom and there might be an allusion to the Maccabean episode in the description of Blandina's ordeal, yet it feels like an afterthought or a remark made by the author who was possibly reminded of the Maccabean mother while describing Blandina's behaviour in the arena.⁴³² Moreover, as was the case with Pothinus and Eleazar, there are important differences in the way the mother of the Maccabean youth and Blandina die. In *Mart. Lyon*, Blandina, who had been arrested by the authorities, is tortured, and sentenced to death, her sufferings are described at length and in gruesome detail. By contrast, the Maccabean mother is brought into the palace by the Seleucid king Antiochus who tasks her to convince her children to obey him; the manner of her death is kept silent in 2 Macc.,⁴³³ but she is briefly said to have thrown herself into the flames in 4 Macc.⁴³⁴ While 4 Macc. dedicates a lengthy encomium to the mother, the emphasis is on her duties towards God and her sufferings at her noble sacrifice of her sons (2 Macc. does not add anything after the mention of her death).

Therefore, rather than an influence or a source of inspiration, it seems more likely that the description of Blandina's ordeal and the phrase 'noble mother who encouraged her children', was a conscious and brief allusion to the Jewish martyrs, an appeal to the audience's cultural memory.

The last point concerns similarities in vocabulary, style, and themes between *Mart. Lyon* and 4 Maccabees. Indeed, as Frend notices, both texts are characterised by the gruesome description of tortures endured by the protagonists. It is true that, in *Mart. Lyon*, ghastly descriptions are not shunned from but, in many cases, the author emphasises the aftermath of the torture, rather

⁴³⁰ The author refers here to Blandina as Ponticus's sister but, as she is also called sister of the martyrs in the arena in 1,41, it should be interpreted in the Christian way rather than as a familial connection between the two martyrs.

⁴³¹ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 19.

⁴³² A behaviour which is by no means out of place in the context and therefore does not need to be doubted or attributed to the author's attempt at portraying Blandina as the Maccabean mother. Indeed, Ponticus is said to be 'a boy about 15 years old' (1,53) so it is very plausible that Blandina, feeling protective of the child, would want to comfort and encourage him.

⁴³³ 'Last of all, the mother died after her sons' (2 Macc. 7.41).

⁴³⁴ 'Some of the guards said that when she also was about to be seized and put to death, she threw herself into the flames so that no one might touch her body' (4 Macc. 17.1).

than giving specific details. For example, most of the tortures endured by Sanctus are kept silent but we are then told that: ‘When they had nothing left to do to him, they finally stuck red-hot bronze plates to the tenderest parts of his body. And these were burnt’ (*Mart. Lyon* 1,21-22). This short description is horrific enough in itself, but we imagine that Sanctus probably suffered a lot more beforehand as the author says: ‘His poor body was a witness of what had happened to him: entirely wound and bruise, shrivelled, it had lost its human shape’ (*Mart. Lyon* 1,23). However, in 4 Maccabees, nothing is left to the imagination and the torture and death of each brother is recounted in lengthy detail. For example, 4 Macc. describes the torture of the third brother as follows:

They disjointed his hands and feet with their instruments, dismembering him by prying his limbs from their sockets, and breaking his fingers and arms and legs and elbows. Since they were not able in any way to break his spirit, they abandoned their instruments and scalped him with their fingernails in a Scythian fashion. They immediately brought him to the wheel, and while his vertebrae were being dislocated by this, he saw his own flesh torn all around and drops of blood flowing from his entrails. (4 Macc. 10.5-9)

While some passages of *Mart. Lyon* are, at times, quite graphic, 4 Maccabees is gorged with descriptions of the most refined tortures, making the narrative feel unrealistic and clearly fictional, unlike *Mart. Lyon*. Moreover, as we saw in previous chapters, Ignatius’s *Letter to the Romans* also used explicit vocabulary to describe tortures and was certainly a source of inspiration of early Christian martyrdom accounts. There is the possibility that 4 Maccabees influenced Ignatius in both his vocabulary and behaviour towards death (*furor passionis*), as suggested by Perler who sees 4 Maccabees as the origins of early Christian enthusiasm for martyrdom.⁴³⁵ However, the question of dependence of Ignatius on 4 Maccabees has been settled by Bowersock who convincingly argued that: ‘What the language of Ignatius and IV Macc. seems clearly to reflect is a common origin for both in the imperial Greek of Asia Minor’.⁴³⁶ Moreover, as van Henten showed, it is possible that 4 Maccabees was written in the early second century,⁴³⁷ around or shortly after Ignatius’s time (if we place Ignatius’s martyrdom around 110), and was itself influenced by the earliest Christian martyrdom narratives.

⁴³⁵ O. Perler, 1949. ‘Das vierte Makkabäerbuch, Ignatius von Antiochien und die ältesten Martyrerberichte’. *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* 25, pp. 47-72, 64.

⁴³⁶ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 79.

⁴³⁷ Bickerman’s dating of between 18 and 54 CE was commonly accepted but is now being contested by scholars, such as Bowersock (after 70 CE) and van Henten (turn of second century), who argue for a later date. E. J. Bickerman, 2007 (1st published in 1945), ‘The Date of Fourth Maccabees’. A. Tropper (ed.) *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (2 Vols), Leiden: Brill, 266-271; Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 10-13; Van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours*, 77-78.

The comparisons of the protagonists of both *Mart. Lyon* and 4 Macc. with athletes competing in games who overcome pain through faith is also cited by Perler and Frend as evidence that *Mart. Lyon* was influenced by the Maccabean account.⁴³⁸ However, Bowersock's argument that the similarities in language come from a common source can also be applied in this case, undermining Perler's thesis further.

In addition, while some themes like resistance to pagan authorities and faith overcoming pain are indeed common to both texts, 4 Maccabees has a highly philosophical overtone and is, as Bickerman puts it, 'a lecture on the power of Reason'.⁴³⁹ And unapologetically so, as the author begins his work as follows: 'The subject I am about to discuss is most philosophical, that is, whether devout reason is sovereign over the emotions' (4 Macc. 1.1). Surprisingly for a work of this nature, its main purpose (and that of the martyrdom stories) seems to be in praise of self-control:

I could prove to you from many and various examples that reason is dominant over the emotions, but I can demonstrate it best from the noble bravery of those who died for the sake of virtue, Eleazar and the seven brothers and their mother. All of these, by despising sufferings that bring death, demonstrated that reason controls the emotions (4 Macc. 1.7).

This is a significant difference with *Mart. Lyon* which is a document that, in spite of praising the courage and steadfastness of the martyrs under torture and setting the example for others, as does 4 Macc., diverges from the Hebrew work in its purpose and undertone. Indeed, whereas *Mart. Lyon* is an emotional letter written by the Christians in Lyon to comfort other communities, inform them on their brothers' fate, and add their story to the common 'early Christian history', 4 Maccabees is only using the martyrdom stories of Eleazar and the mother and her sons to illustrate a philosophical point.

Consequently, while there are elements in *Mart. Lyon* that betray a knowledge of the Maccabean martyrdom stories, it is impossible to assert that 2 and 4 Maccabees influenced the Lyonnais author in any way regarding either his perception, or his rendering, of the events. Therefore, like Middleton, we can conclude that: 'the evidence for this [Maccabean] tradition constituting the primary source for the theology of those Christian martyrs is less impressive than Perler and Frend maintain',⁴⁴⁰ and we should look for influences in *Mart. Lyon* in a text with closer links to the Gallic martyrs, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

⁴³⁸ Perler, 'vierte Makkabäerbuch', 49-51, and Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 20.

⁴³⁹ Bickerman, 'Date of Fourth Maccabees', 266.

⁴⁴⁰ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 110.

4.3.2 *The Martyrdom of Polycarp in Mart. Lyon*

Indeed, the parallels between *Mart. Pol.* and *Mart. Lyon* are too numerous to ignore and are noticeable in both form and content. Some scholars, like Barnes, suppose that this might be due to the fact that Irenaeus, who knew Polycarp personally and knew of his martyrdom, was in charge of the church of Lyon when *Mart. Lyon* was written. Indeed, as Barnes advances, Irenaeus might have had a copy of *Mart. Pol.* with him when he arrived in Lyon. Therefore, it is possible that *Mart. Pol.* influenced, or inspired, the author of *Mart. Lyon* when came their turn to relate their own stories of martyrdom.⁴⁴¹ As noticed before, the epistolary format is unusual for the time and *Mart. Pol.* and *Mart. Lyon* are the only two examples before 250. The letter format reveals the will of early Christian communities to share their experiences which, at the time, were isolated events, with other congregations not only to make sense of their ordeal, but also to warn others and provide them with an example of appropriate behaviour in a persecution context. In this light, *Mart. Lyon* can be seen as the product of *Mart. Pol.*'s example.

As a matter of fact, the letters, both addressed to churches in Asia, follow the same sequence of events that also includes remarkably similar, peculiar elements. For example, the arrests in both texts are instigated by angry mobs (*Mart. Pol.* 3.2; *Mart. Lyon* 1,7) who play an active role in the public proceedings (*Mart. Pol.* 12. 2-3; *Mart. Lyon* 1,31). The officials' behaviour is also mirrored in the texts as both governors are eager to please the crowds (Polycarp is sent for by the governor after the crowd requested him, *Mart. Pol.* 3.2; Attalus is sent back to the beasts and executed on the iron chair in spite of his Roman citizenship 'in an effort to please the crowd', *Mart. Lyon* 1,50). The soldiers act roughly with both bishops, Polycarp and Pothinus, (*Mart. Pol.* 8.3; *Mart. Lyon* 1,31), who are depicted in the same way, as old and weak but noble and strengthened in their confessions and martyrdoms (*Mart. Pol.* 7.2, 8.3 and 12.1; *Mart. Lyon* 1,29).⁴⁴² In both texts, the bodies of the martyrs are denied burial, and are guarded by soldiers

⁴⁴¹ Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 61-63.

⁴⁴² *Mart. Pol.*: 'The ones present marvelled at his age and composure and why the arrest of such an elderly man happened with such great haste' (7,2); 'And not [even] turning around, as if having suffered nothing, he proceeded eagerly with haste, being led to the stadium' (8,3), and 'As he was saying these and many other things, he was filled with courage and joy. And his face was filled with grace' (12,1). *Mart. Lyon*: 'He [Pothinus] was strengthened by the eagerness of his spirit because of his pressing desire for martyrdom. He too was dragged to the tribunal, his body exhausted by age and illness, but his soul holding on him so that Christ might triumph through it' (7,2). Pothinus's reply to the governor is another similarity between the two bishops, see p. 111 footnote 428.

to prevent the Christians from retrieving their dead; Polycarp and the martyrs of Lyon alike are burnt to ashes (*Mart. Pol.* 17.1-18.1; *Mart. Lyon* 1,57-62).

Moreover, the language of *Mart. Pol.* is often echoed in *Mart. Lyon* in several aspects. For instance, as we saw before, in *Mart. Lyon*, the author often refers to the persecutions, tortures and executions as a ‘contest’, and compares the martyrs to athletes (1,36): ‘It was right that the noble champions, who had endured manifold contests and won magnificent victories, should receive the great crown of immortality’. Similarly, in *Mart. Pol.*, the author depicts Polycarp as a noble athlete competing in a contest and concludes his narrative by stating: ‘Through his endurance he overcame the unrighteous ruler and thus received the crown of immortality’ (*Mart. Pol.* 19.2). Both the analogy of the Christian as an athlete and the idea of immortality as a prize are found in Ignatius (‘So be strict with yourself, like a good athlete of God. The prize, as you well know, is immortality and eternal life’, *Letter to Polycarp* II,3), but might have originated from Paul (1 Cor. 9:24-25): ‘Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath but we an imperishable one’. The image of the wreath as crowning a victor was a common one in antiquity, however, the expression ‘crown of immortality’ (ὁ τῆς ἀφθαρσίας στέφανος, used twice in each text)⁴⁴³ is first attested in *Mart. Pol.*, suggesting that *Mart. Lyon* could have borrowed the expression from the Smyranean account. The similarities between the two texts are also present in the main theme of the struggle against the devil which is expressed in strikingly similar terms: ‘For the devil was devising many things against them [the Smyranean martyrs]. But thanks [be] to God, for he did not prevail against all’ (*Mart. Pol.* 3.1), and ‘For the adversary fell on us with all his might [...] But the grace of God counter-attacked’ (*Mart. Lyon* 1,5-6).

In addition, as noticed by Lightfoot, some passages in *Mart. Lyon* contain remarkable resemblances with *Mart. Pol.*⁴⁴⁴ Compare, for instance, these passages from *Mart. Pol.*⁴⁴⁵ and *Mart. Lyon*:

For those [the martyrs in Smyrna] who were torn by whips endured, so that the structure of their flesh was exposed as far as the inner veins and arteries, so that even the bystanders had pity and lamented. But they reached also unto such great nobility that some of them neither grumbled nor groaned, demonstrating to

⁴⁴³ *Mart. Pol.* 17.1 and 19.2; *Mart. Lyon* 1,36 and 1,42.

⁴⁴⁴ Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers* II.1, 605-606.

⁴⁴⁵ And also *Mart. Pol.* 2.3: ‘They [the Smyranean martyrs] despised the earthly torments, redeeming [exemption from] eternal punishment through one hour’, and *Mart. Lyon* 1,26: ‘But she [Biblis] recovered her senses in the midst of the torture [...] as her temporary punishment reminded her of the eternal one in Gehenna’.

us all that in that very hour when they were being tortured, the noble martyrs of Christ were absent from the body, or rather that the Lord was beside them, conversing with them (*Mart. Pol.* 2.2);

And after the whips, after the beasts, after the griddle she [Blandina] was finally thrown into a net and exposed to a bull. And although she was thoroughly tossed around by the animal, she had no sensation anymore of what was happening to her, because of her hope, her firm hold on what she believed, and her conversation with Christ. She too was sacrificed, and even the pagans confessed that never had a woman among them suffered so many and so great tortures. (*Mart. Lyon* 1,56).

There are several elements here belonging to *Mart. Pol.* that the author of *Mart. Lyon* used in his description of Blandina's ordeal: 1. the gruesome depiction of the torture endured by the martyrs; 2. in both texts, the martyrs are said not to feel the pain, as if 'absent from their body'; 3. the Smyranean martyrs and Blandina alike are said to be insensitive to the pain because they are in conversation with Christ; 4. in both cases the pagans acknowledge, and pity, the martyrs' sufferings.

Some scholars underplay the similarities between the two accounts. Hartog, for example, asserts that: 'Similarities between *Mart. Pol.* and *Mart. Lyons* at least exhibit the plausibility of general contemporaneity'.⁴⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the abundance of similarities between the two martyrdom accounts have led many scholars to see a clear dependence of *Mart. Lyon* on *Mart. Pol.*⁴⁴⁷ Indeed, some elements seem too specific, especially the terms 'conversation with Christ' and 'crown of immortality', and too numerous, to be coincidental or simply due to parallel development.

However, as we shall see shortly, while the author of *Mart. Lyon* might have used *Mart. Pol.* as a template and inspiration for his own narrative, many of the martyrological aspects of *Mart. Pol.* are developed further in *Mart. Lyon*. Indeed, one of the main characteristics of *Mart. Pol.*, as we have seen previously, was the notion of 'martyrdom according to the Gospel' and *imitatio Christi*. This theme, also present in *Mart. Lyon*, is here embedded in a more eschatological framework that allows the author not only to present his martyrs as examples, like Polycarp before them, but also to inscribe the persecutions and martyrdoms into a more universal context which includes all Christians of the Empire. Therefore, even though the similarities between *Mart. Pol.* and *Mart. Lyon* are textual in nature, they actually go beyond cultural context or intertextuality since the theological points made here by the author of *Mart. Lyon* are anchored in reality for the community. The use of *Mart. Pol.* by the Gallican community illustrates the process of collective memory since the author of *Mart. Lyon* interprets the events of 177 in the

⁴⁴⁶ Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 238.

⁴⁴⁷ Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers* II.1, 605-606, 625; Dehandschutter, *Polycarpiana*, 60; Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 61.

light of what happened in Smyrna two decades prior and his martyrs, by sharing the same martyrological experience as Polycarp, participate in a common ‘historical’ fight led against the devil.

4.3.3 *Imitatio Christi and Revelation in Mart. Lyon*

Imitatio Christi in *Mart. Lyon* differs in form from the Gospel parallels found in *Mart. Pol.* but is still a central element of the account. While the author of *Mart. Pol.* was focused on drawing a parallel between Jesus’s Passion and Polycarp’s martyrdom, the author of *Mart. Lyon* has a more symbolic approach and his allusions to NT texts serve a different purpose. As Moss puts it: ‘the biblical allusions in the *Martyrs of Lyons* are unambiguous, constructive, and theologically significant’.⁴⁴⁸ The NT references in *Mart. Lyon* are found on different levels, comparative but also intertextual (quotations), and have more profound implications than in *Mart. Pol.*, thus participating in the development of early Christian theology of martyrdom. On the most obvious level, some of the protagonists of *Mart. Lyon* are directly compared to Christ. Pothinus, for example is said to suffer mockery and beatings at the hands of the mob ‘as if he were Christ himself’ (*Mart. Lyon* 1,30). Whereas Pothinus’s sufferings are simply compared to those of Christ, Blandina’s ‘cruciform pose is almost mystical in its ability to transform the martyr into Christ’.⁴⁴⁹

As for Blandina, she was hung on a stake and exposed as bait for the beasts that were thrown upon her. She looked like she was hung on a cross, and through her fervent prayer, she instilled a great zeal in the combatants. For in their contest they saw through their sister, even with their bodily eyes, the one who was crucified for them in order to persuade those who believe in him that all who suffer for Christ’s glory will have communion with the living God (*Mart. Lyon* 1,41).

The implication of this passage goes beyond the simple analogy. As Dehandschutter argues, suffering for God (and martyrdom), as well as the fervent prayers, brought Blandina to a state of complete communion with Christ, not only allowing her to ‘become Christ’ in the other martyrs’ eyes, but by this illusion, also to *persuade* her Christian brothers that they will be saved.⁴⁵⁰ As we saw previously, the soteriological aspect of martyrdom is an important theme in *Mart. Lyon*, and is emphasised here by the effect of Blandina’s transformation.

Similarly, the imagery of the ‘living water’ healing and strengthening Sanctus during his torture is a direct allusion to the Gospels: ‘but he endured, unmoved and unyielding, firm in his

⁴⁴⁸ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 72.

⁴⁴⁹ Moss, *Other Christs*, 62.

⁴⁵⁰ Dehandschutter, ‘Community of Martyrs’, 18.

confession, refreshed and empowered by the heavenly stream of living water that flows from the side of Christ' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,22). There are several elements here borrowed from both John and Revelation: 1. the 'heavenly stream' comes from Rev. 21:6,⁴⁵¹ and as Moss argues, it acts as a link between heaven and earth;⁴⁵² 2. the imagery of the 'living water' is taken from John 4:10 and is a metaphor Jesus uses for 'eternal life';⁴⁵³ 3. the water coming out of the side of Christ is an allusion to John 19:34 where Jesus's side is pierced by the soldier in charge of ensuring that Jesus was indeed dead. This imagery participates in the development of the important notion of healing through faith⁴⁵⁴ and, as Moss concludes, 'collapse the boundaries between heaven and earth, between the life of Jesus and the life of the church, and between scripture and acta'.⁴⁵⁵

On a textual level, there are two main direct quotations⁴⁵⁶ from the New Testament in *Mart. Lyon* that reveal a clear pattern of martyrological interpretation of the scriptures by the Lyonnaise community. Firstly, we notice that the Gallic account begins with a Pauline quote from Romans: 'Thinking little of their many sufferings, they hastened to Christ, truly showing that the sufferings of the present are not comparable to the glory that will be revealed to us' (*Mart. Lyon* 1,6).⁴⁵⁷ As Dehandschutter remarks, the quotation, which comes directly after the description of the persecutions suffered by the martyrs, announces the 'end game' here: the martyrs, by sharing in Christ's sufferings, also share in his glory, martyrdom is not just about defending the Christian faith, it also comes with a reward.⁴⁵⁸ The theme of glory (*δόξα*), a Johannine motif,⁴⁵⁹ runs throughout the Gallican letter and is associated with the great suffering and martyrdom of the Christians. The use of this term in *Mart. Lyon* comes from the martyrological interpretation of passages from John's Gospel (John 13:31-32 for example),⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵¹ 'To the thirsty I (the one who was seated on the throne) will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life'. See also Rev. 7:17 and 22:1.

⁴⁵² Moss, *Other Christs*, 68.

⁴⁵³ "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you "give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water"; and John 4:14: 'The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life'.

⁴⁵⁴ See p.107-108.

⁴⁵⁵ Moss, *Other Christs*, 68.

⁴⁵⁶ There is another possible quote (or rather reference) from 1 Tim. 6:13 ('Christ Jesus [...] made the good confession'), which has been interpreted martyrologically by some scholars, in *Mart. Lyon* 1,30: 'and he [Pothinus] gave a good testimony'. Dehandschutter, 'Community of Martyrs', 17.

⁴⁵⁷ Romans 8:18: 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us'.

⁴⁵⁸ Dehandschutter, 'Community of Martyrs', 16.

⁴⁵⁹ See for example: John 1:14; 8:50, 54; 11:4; 12:28; 13:31-32; 15:8; 17:1, 4-5.

⁴⁶⁰ R. Bauckham, 2015. *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.

as well as Revelation (where glory is associated with ‘the Lamb who was slaughtered’, Rev. 5:12).

The influence of Revelation is also made explicit by the second NT quotation, found in *Mart. Lyon* 1,10. In a short encomium of Vettius Epagathus, the lawyer who offered to defend the Christians during their audit thus revealing his own faith and resulting in his execution, the author says: ‘For he was and is a genuine disciple of Christ, following the Lamb wherever he goes’. This is a clear echo of Rev. 14:4: ‘It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes’. The martyrological interpretation of this passage is not particularly obvious at first glance,⁴⁶¹ but becomes clearer when interpreted in the light of earlier passages in Revelation. Those who ‘follow the Lamb wherever he goes’ are also said to be the ‘one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth’ (Rev. 14:3), a number we also find in Rev. 7:3-4, which denotes ‘the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads’.⁴⁶² The mention of the 144,000 servants of God comes after the episode in Revelation (6:9-11) that sees the fifth seal being opened, a passage that has highly martyrological overtones:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given: they cried out with a loud voice: “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

Most scholars therefore understand the number 144,000 to refer to the number of martyrs⁴⁶³ of the Christian faith (past, present, and future) that are needed to trigger the final battle. Much

⁴⁶¹ The text is not to be taken literally here and does indeed refer to the martyrs who, of course, also include women and children. As Bauckham argues, the imagery of pure, undefiled men is a reference to ‘the ancient demand for ritual purity in the Lord’s army (cf. Deut 23:9-14), which required David’s troops to abstain from all sexual relations while on campaign’, thus being consistent with, and participating in, John’s war theme. R. Bauckham, 1993. *The Climax of Prophecy, Studies on the Book of Revelation*. London, New York: T&T Clark, 230-231; see also Middleton who argues that the number of the martyrs constitutes the whole church and by remaining virgins, the church can then become the ‘Bride of Christ’, a figure contrasting in Revelation with the Whore which represents Rome, P. Middleton, 2015. ‘Male Virgins, Male Martyrs, Male Brides: A Reconsideration of the 144,000 who Have Not Dirtied Themselves with Women (Rev. 14.4)’. G. V. Allen, I. Paul, and S. P. Woodman (eds) *The Book of Revelation: Currents in British Scholarship on the Apocalypse*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 193-208.

⁴⁶² Both occurrences of the number in Revelation should be taken as referring to the same group, a group also alluded to in Rev. 7:9: ‘the great multitude that no one could count’. All attempts at distinguishing one group from the others have failed to convince: the servants of God have been ‘marked with a seal on their foreheads’ (Rev. 7:4), the 144,000 redeemed from earth ‘had his [the Lamb’s] name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads’ (Rev. 14:1), and the great multitude are the ones ‘who have come out of the great ordeal’ and ‘made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb’ (Rev. 7:14). Middleton, *Violence of the Lamb*, 215-217.

⁴⁶³ Or sometimes to a more general number of Christians. John refers to both the servants and those who are to be killed which could be interpreted in different ways: either all Christians (alive or martyred) or all martyrs, those

can be said of the martyrological aspect of Revelation, but for our purposes, we shall restrict ourselves to a couple of points, both emerging from the remarks above, and pointing at a common theme in *Mart. Lyon*, namely the ‘struggle against the devil’.

Firstly, it should be noted that the allusion to the Lamb in *Mart. Lyon*, as one of the most important figures in Revelation, has particular connotations here. Indeed, in Revelation, the Lamb (who represents Jesus) has several functions, mostly soteriological and eschatological in nature, as are the roles of the martyrs in *Mart. Lyon*. For example, in Rev. 12:10-11, after the devil is defeated in heaven and thrown down to earth, it is proclaimed:

Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of the Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.⁴⁶⁴

Here it is clear that those who take part in the sacrifice of the Lamb, that is through martyrdom, are saved by God. As we saw earlier, the soteriological aspect of martyrdom is particularly important in *Mart. Lyon* as it is a central argument of the author (especially in the case of apostasy). Additionally, some of the martyrs’ deaths are assimilated to sacrifices, an imagery evidently associated with the Lamb.⁴⁶⁵ This notion of salvation, which was absent from *Mart. Pol.*,⁴⁶⁶ is prominent in both Revelation and *Mart. Lyon*. We can therefore surmise that the author of *Mart. Lyon* was inspired by his reading of Revelation, and through a process of assimilation of the martyrs in Lyon with the ‘martyr figures’ in Revelation, developed the soteriological concept found in *Mart. Lyon*, where death means life and life means death.⁴⁶⁷

Another remark that can be made about the image of the Lamb concerns its eschatological role in Revelation, as the chief of an army made up of martyrs. As Bauckham argues, the enumeration of the twelve thousand men from each tribe of Israel recalls the military census of David’s army in Numbers 1, reinforcing the association of martyrdom with the ‘war theme’ that runs throughout Revelation.⁴⁶⁸ Interestingly, as Middleton remarks: ‘Christians must fight alongside the Lamb [...]. In the Apocalypse, the martyrs do not endure through non-violent

from the past and those to come. Middleton resolves the problem by arguing that in Revelation, all Christians are martyrs. Middleton, *Violence of the Lamb*, 212.

⁴⁶⁴ And also in Rev. 5:9, the song sung by the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, introduces the Lamb as follows: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation’, and Rev. 7:14-15.

⁴⁶⁵ *Mart. Lyon* 1, 40 (Maturus and Sanctus ‘were finally sacrificed’) and 1,56 (Blandina ‘too was sacrificed’).

⁴⁶⁶ Polycarp offers himself as an ‘acceptable sacrifice’ to God (*Mart. Pol.* 14.2) but there is no soteriological aspect associated with the martyr’s death. See p. 80-82.

⁴⁶⁷ See pp. 105-106.

⁴⁶⁸ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 215-229.

resistance; they engage in bloody warfare'.⁴⁶⁹ Indeed, the Lamb always appears accompanied by the faithful martyrs who not only start the war with their deaths (when the number is filled) but are his army. This is further asserted by the Lion/Lamb dichotomy in Rev. 5:5-6. John is told: 'See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and the seven seals', however, instead of a Lion, John sees a Lamb. Both the Lion and the Lamb are evidently representing the same figure, Jesus, but also both aspects of martyrdom: pacifist/sacrificial in action but 'military/violent' in purpose. Bauckham rightly argues: 'Precisely by juxtaposing these contrasting images, John forges a symbol of conquest by sacrificial death, which is essentially a new symbol'.⁴⁷⁰ We can therefore surmise that, in the light of the introduction which, as we saw previously, is saturated with war connotations, the direct quotation in *Mart. Lyon* from Revelation reveals the use/inclusion of the author's martyrological interpretation of John's imagery in the telling of his story, revealing the Lyonnaise community's point of view regarding their situation during the persecutions: they are at war.⁴⁷¹

The second important point that highlights the Gallican martyrs' mind frame is found in the concept of 'number of the martyrs'. As Middleton showed in his *Violence of the Lamb*, this concept is particular to John in its eschatological goal.⁴⁷² Indeed, as we saw above, John reveals that 144,000 martyrs are necessary to trigger the final battle against the devil.⁴⁷³ Similarly, in *Mart. Lyon*, the idea of a number to fill up is expressed by the author in 1,13: 'those who were worthy were arrested every day, completing the number of the martyrs (τὸν ἐκείνων ἀναπληροῦντες ἀριθμὸν).⁴⁷⁴ This notion is recurrent in the Gallican letter as we are twice told that one of the Christian prisoners 'was added to the rank of the martyrs' (καὶ τῷ κλήρῳ τῶν μαρτύρων προσετέθη: Biblis in 1,26, and Maturus and Sanctus in 1,48).⁴⁷⁵ Read in connection

⁴⁶⁹ Middleton, *Violence of the Lamb*, 228.

⁴⁷⁰ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 183.

⁴⁷¹ This is accentuated by the several connections the author makes between Satan and the pagans in *Mart. Lyon* (1,16-17, 27, 57). As in Revelation, the beast/Satan is represented by the pagans and Roman authorities, and the martyrs fight and defeat the beast/Rome with their sacrifice. As Middleton demonstrated, the character of Satan (almost inexistent in the OT and mostly subordinated to God's will) as enemy of both God and the Christians is prefigured in Revelation but was expanded in early Christian martyrdom accounts such as *Mart. Lyon* and the *Passion of Perpetua*. Middleton, 2016. 'Overcoming the Devil in the Acts of the Martyrs'. C. Keith and L. T. Stuckenbruck (eds) *Evil in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 357-374.

⁴⁷² Middleton, *Violence of the Lamb*, 202-203.

⁴⁷³ The souls under the altars (past martyrs) are 'told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete' (Rev. 6:11); in Rev. 7:2-3, the four angels are told not to damage the earth 'until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads. And [John] heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand'.

⁴⁷⁴ Literally: 'filling up those numbers'.

⁴⁷⁵ Here Rebillard chooses to translate κλήρος by 'rank' (which adds to the military theme) but it usually means 'an allotment or portion' and can therefore be taken in the sense of 'number'.

with the eschatological passages that announce the coming of the final battle brought about by the martyrs' actions,⁴⁷⁶ it is clear that, unlike Polycarp,⁴⁷⁷ the martyrs of Lyon saw themselves, or at least the author of the letter saw them, as actively participating in the cosmic battle foretold in Revelation.

Maier offers an alternative perspective on this role of the martyrs in Revelation as he argues that, as a show put up for God to watch, early Christian apocalyptic literature, in its paraenetic characteristic in particular, functions as a self-defining way to create purpose and identity for early communities. As Maier puts it: 'Early Christian apocalyptic eschatology, though certainly future-oriented, is nevertheless Apocalypse Now. It offers its audiences scripts for performing the self in the world'.⁴⁷⁸ In *Mart. Lyon*, the eschatological aspect of the battle the Christians are waging is certainly very prominent and very much anchored in the present. However, the level of interpretation of Revelation in the Gallican letter seems to go even deeper than that proposed by Maier. The martyrs in Lyon do play a role, but not simply 'for show' as performers for an audience as Maier suggests, they are, in their own reality, the martyrs Revelation talks about, they are the soldiers of the Lamb's army, contributing to the war effort. This interpretation could explain the resilience of the martyrs in the face of death, in spite of the torture, as they found courage, strength, and comfort in knowing they were actively participating in the defeat of the devil.

It is difficult of course to know what perspective the martyrs had of their own situation, whether they really went to their death believing they were waging war against Satan besides Christ is impossible to know, but the influence of Revelation on the author of *Mart. Lyon*, and therefore its theology of martyrdom, is clearly visible in the text. However, *Mart. Lyon* seems to stop short of a full eschatological interpretation of Revelation when it comes to their after-death reward. Indeed, in *Mart. Lyon* the martyrs, as we saw, share in the victory and the glory of Christ and win the crown of immortality but in Revelation, they are avenged⁴⁷⁹ and vindicated: 'Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgement was given; the souls

⁴⁷⁶ See for example *Mart. Lyon* 1,5: 'For the adversary fell on us with all his might, foreshadowing then his advent which is inevitably coming' and also 1,42: 'She [Blandina] was preserved for another contest, so that by emerging victorious through more competitions she might render inexorable the judgement against the crooked serpent'.

⁴⁷⁷ There is an allusion to the number of the martyrs in *Mart. Pol.*, when Polycarp gives thanks to God, in his final prayer, for receiving him 'among the number of your martyrs (*ἐν ἀριθμῷ τῶν μαρτύρων*), a share in the cup of your Christ for the resurrection of eternal life' (*Mart. Pol.* 14.2). However, there is no eschatological allusion here and there is little evidence that the author of *Mart. Pol.* had read Revelation.

⁴⁷⁸ H. O. Maier, 1997. 'Staging the Gaze: Early Christian Apocalypses and Narrative Self-Representation'. *The Harvard Theological Review*, 90 (2), pp. 131-154, 133.

⁴⁷⁹ God 'has judged the great Whore [Rome] who corrupted the earth with her fornication, he has avenged on her the blood of his servants' (Rev. 19:2).

of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God [...] They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years' (Rev. 20:4).⁴⁸⁰ While the absence of complete vindication of the martyrs in *Mart. Lyon* could be due to their humbleness (as suggested by the appendix to the letter in 2,2-4), a more likely explanation could be that, as the author/community saw the battle as ongoing, the martyrs were not yet at this stage since their reign besides Jesus comes after Satan's defeat, which is, in the martyrs' minds and reality, set in the future.

Where Polycarp was depicted as the perfect example of Christian martyr, *Mart. Lyon* inscribes itself within the eschatological framework of the New Testament, Revelation in particular, and emphasises the active participation of the martyrs in the realisation of the prophetic scriptures. Indeed, as Middleton puts it: 'Martyrdom is not simply the inevitable result of witnessing faithfully to Christ, it is active engagement in the eschatological war'.⁴⁸¹ Similarly, the martyrs of Lyon did not just defend their religion from oppression or repeated Jesus's story, they were *part* of that story and, through their actions, made history. In this light, we can suggest that, although possibly to a lesser extent, Revelation acted for the martyrs in Lyon as Josephus's text about Masada did for the Zionists at the beginning of the 20th century. We can therefore conclude that the martyrs of Lyon both integrated Revelation (and previous martyrdom accounts such as *Mart. Pol.*) into their collective memory, making it historical and, because of Revelation's eschatological nature, ongoing, and assimilated some of its rich theology of martyrdom while adapting it to their own situation (with the apostates in particular). Consequently, there is a clear evolution in the discourse and theology of martyrdom from *Mart. Pol.* to *Mart. Lyon* as, without the inclusion of Revelation's theology of martyrdom, the martyrdom discourse of *Mart. Lyon* would possibly be quite similar to *Mart. Pol.* and mostly reliant on the *imitatio Christi* motif. However, as we shall now see with the *Passio Perpetuae*, eschatological ideologies will become even more prominent in the early third century martyrdom accounts, thus developing a more intricate theology of martyrdom that will lead to the cult of the martyrs.

⁴⁸⁰ Middleton's translation, in Middleton, *Violence of the Lamb*, 229.

⁴⁸¹ Middleton, *Violence of the Lamb*, 206.

Chapter 5. Perpetua, Prophetess of the Lord

Written at the turn of the third century, the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (hereafter *PPerp*) quickly became a paradigm for martyrdom accounts and inspired later influential narratives such as the *Passion of Marian and James* or the *Acts of Montanus, Lucius and Companions*. The interest and significance of *PPerp* reside both in its contents and in its format. Written in part in the first person singular, the text alleges to have been written by the martyrs themselves. If it is indeed the case, this text would then provide us with first-hand insights into the life and beliefs of early Christian communities and represent an invaluable source of information for our study into both the early collective memory of North African Christians and their personal interpretation of martyrdom.

5.1 The *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*⁴⁸²

5.1.1 Sources and Composition

The main version of the story of the martyrdom of Perpetua and her companions (*PPerp*) has come down to us through nine Latin, and one Greek, manuscripts. Our earliest extant (St Gall 577),⁴⁸³ which (according to a palaeographic analysis) cannot be dated earlier than the last quarter of the 9th/first quarter of the 10th century, is incomplete as it does not contain the prologue written by the narrator and ends abruptly. Many of the other manuscripts exhibit the same defects and the text as we know it is mostly based on a manuscript discovered by 17th century Vatican librarian Lucas Holstenius in Monte Cassino, *codex Casinensis* (MS C). First published in 1663 (and again a year later, alongside the *Acta Perpetuae* (*APerp*), a shorter version of *PPerp*, by Henri de Valois), MS C is usually dated to the last third of the 11th century and is considered the most accurate and complete version of *PPerp* as it includes the prologue and ending.

In 1889, the original language of *PPerp* was questioned by Harris after he found a Greek manuscript (*codex Hierosolymitanus*, MS H) in the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The Greek manuscript contains many details (including location, names, and dates) that are not found in

⁴⁸² Translations of *PPerp* and *APerp* and Latin texts from Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives*, 304-349.

⁴⁸³ For a full codology of *PPerp*., see T. J. Heffernan, 2012. *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 370-417.

the Latin manuscripts. This prompted Harris to argue for the precedence of the Greek manuscript over the Latin ones.⁴⁸⁴ This conclusion was vehemently rejected by most scholars, especially by Robinson who, in 1891, published the Greek and Latin versions alongside each other.⁴⁸⁵ Robinson successfully showed in this publication that MS H was most probably a (rather loose) translation of a non-extant, early Latin version. Indeed, one of the most compelling arguments against the Greek manuscript being prior to the Latin one is that the main feature of *PPerp*, the three different voices (that is the narrator, Perpetua, and Saturus), was not preserved in the Greek, which ‘entirely obliterated’ the different sections of *PPerp*.⁴⁸⁶ Another reason to doubt the Greek antecedence, according to Robinson and many scholars after him, is the idea that the Greek translator probably added some details (mainly relating to the gladiatorial fights scenes) to the original Latin text he was using in order to provide explanations about the fights his audience would not have been familiar with, which the original narrator might not have seen as necessary to include in his narrative as some of his audience was present at the events (*PPerp* 1,6).⁴⁸⁷ These convincing arguments thus led scholars to see the Greek manuscript as based on an early Latin version, which was better than MS C and which they posit might have been as early as 260.⁴⁸⁸ Like the *Acta Perpetuae*, the Greek version wrongly places Perpetua’s martyrdom under Valerian and Gallienus (253-260), in direct opposition to elements of the text itself. This error can be attributed to the popularity of *PPerp*, as Perpetua’s story seemed quite popular under Valerian,⁴⁸⁹ and it probably appeared particularly relevant to the redactor and his post-Decian period audience. Additionally, it illustrates the use of past narratives for the current purposes of Christian communities who had themselves recently suffered/were suffering from Roman persecution.

⁴⁸⁴ J. R. Harris and S. K. Gifford, 1890. *The Acts of the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas: The Original Greek Text*. London: C. J. Clay and Sons.

⁴⁸⁵ J. A. Robinson, 1891. *The Passion of S. Perpetua*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁸⁶ Robinson, *Passion of S. Perpetua*, 46-47. Barnes also argues for the original language used by the narrator and Perpetua as being Latin but believes that there are reasonable grounds (no alteration between the Greek manuscript and the Latin recension) to argue that Saturus was writing in Greek. Conversely, Bowersock argues that the comparison between the Greek manuscript and the Latin ones shows that Perpetua was writing in Greek (but no indication that Saturus did). In MS H, Perpetua’s words are more descriptive and vivid, which according to Bowersock, ‘provides powerful support for the view that Perpetua wrote her account in Greek’. However, the original language the martyrs wrote in cannot convincingly be asserted either way and the general consensus is that they used Latin rather than Greek as we shall see shortly. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 69-71; Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 33-34.

⁴⁸⁷ For a comprehensive discussion on the Latin priority over the Greek, see Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 79-101.

⁴⁸⁸ B. K. Gold, 2018. *Perpetua: Athlete of God*. New York: Oxford University Press, 20.

⁴⁸⁹ J. N. Bremmer and M. Formisano, 2012. ‘Perpetua’s Passions: A Brief Introduction’. J. N. Bremmer and M. Formisano (eds.). *Perpetua’s Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 1-14, 4.

The transmission of *PPerp* and the use of its tradition are also attested by the *Acta Perpetuae*. *APerp* is shorter than the *Passio* and presents significant differences with *PPerp*. Known to us from two independent versions (A and B, also referred to as I and II), these *Acta*, which consist mainly of the judicial transcripts (question/answer format) and brief description of the martyrdoms, circulated as early as Augustine's time and were possibly used in the Carthaginian liturgy.⁴⁹⁰ *APerp* I and II are of great interest here since they are considered to have derived from the *Passio*, but the differences reveal a need to 'correct' the original text, in particular Perpetua's behaviour, in order for it to fit the mind frame of the late antiquity audience.⁴⁹¹ Indeed, the most notable differences between *PPerp* and *APerp* are the fact that Perpetua is not the central character in *APerp* (especially *APerp* II), and her behaviour is less subversive, the account is univocal, in the third person voice, and the husbands of Perpetua and Felicity are mentioned, which is not the case in *PPerp*. The *Acta* seem to have been an attempt at both answering issues in the original account (which we will look at shortly), and make Perpetua's behaviour more respectable and acceptable to 5th century North African congregations.⁴⁹² However, *APerp* reflect an early tradition as they contain similar details as MS H and were, therefore, also used in the reconstruction of *PPerp* as we know it: the text of *PPerp* used by scholars today is indeed a composite of MS C, MS H, and *APerp*.

As mentioned before, *PPerp* comprises different sections, allegedly written by three people: the narrator, Perpetua, and Saturus. While the passages written by the narrator (sections 1-2 and 14-21) were clearly composed after the events, Perpetua (sections 3-10), as well as Saturus (sections 11-13), are said to have recorded their experiences and thoughts in their own hands

⁴⁹⁰ Augustine mentions Perpetua's martyrdom in three of his sermons (*Sermons* 280-282). Until 2007, it was thought that Augustine only had access to the *Passio Perpetuae*, but the discovery of a fuller version of sermon 282 shows that Augustine probably also knew *Acta Perpetuae II*, making the *Acta* earlier than previously thought. Bremmer and Formisano, 'Perpetua's Passion', 5. Because they mention the reign of co-emperors Valerian and Gallienus, the *Acta* could be contemporary to the Greek manuscript but most scholars date them later. Amat, for example, situates them around the beginning of the fifth century, J. Amat (ed.). 1996. *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité; suivi des Actes*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 271. However, Shaw convincingly argues for a mid-fourth century composition as the re-use/re-writing of older material was typical of the time. Perpetua's character is also adapted to the criteria of a good Roman *matrona* of this period. B D. Shaw, 1993. 'The *Passion of Perpetua*'. *Past and Present* 139, pp. 3-45, 34.

⁴⁹¹ *APerp* I is closer to *PPerp* than *APerp* II in both content and theological view. For example, *APerp* I mentions the first encounter between Perpetua and her father (where she asks him if a vase can be named by any other name), but they both present significant differences with *PPerp*. In both *Acta*, the husbands of Perpetua and Felicity are mentioned (Perpetua's husband is present while Felicity says she despises her husband and when asked where her husband is, she simply replies 'he is not here' *APerp* I 5,4). Both *APerp* I and II omit Secundulus (the only martyr of the group who died in prison in *PPerp*), and Perpetua's visions of her brother Dinocrates and Saturus' vision are completely absent. Nothing is said of Perpetua nursing her son herself or having him in prison with her like in *PPerp*, and men and women are separated from each other when they are interrogated by the governor. Finally, the narration of the martyrdoms is short, no comments about the deaths or behaviour of the martyrs are made and the authors do not add the anecdote of Perpetua guiding the sword to her neck as she does in *PPerp*.

⁴⁹² Gold, *Perpetua: Athlete of God*, 21.

(*PPerp.* 2,3; 11,1; 14,1). The implication of this assertion, repeated three times in the text, is that Perpetua and Saturus wrote in prison, an element of the account that many scholars find problematic. Scholarly opinion is divided on the question of how, if at all possible, Perpetua and Saturus managed to compose such elaborate prose in what one can only assume were very harsh carceral conditions. Indeed, as Heffernan puts it: ‘It surely is pertinent to ask where Perpetua got the necessary materials, time, and space, both psychic and physical, to write these lines? Her own anxious words tell us that the prison was crowded, raucous, hot, and dirty’.⁴⁹³ Heffernan then posits that Perpetua might have talked to the redactor of *PPerp*, who could also be the narrator,⁴⁹⁴ or someone close to the redactor. Heffernan’s thorough analysis of *PPerp* led him to conclude that Perpetua’s account is most likely based on ‘a verbal report, very possibly provided by Perpetua herself during the time of her imprisonment’.⁴⁹⁵ Gold argues that Perpetua, as was common practice, might have simply dictated her story, thoughts and visions to the redactor or another member of their community.⁴⁹⁶ Conversely, according to Bremmer and Formisano, it is possible that the sympathising soldier named Pudens (‘the *optio* in charge of the prison’, *PPerp* 9,1) who allowed visitors (who could have brought writing material) to meet the Christian prisoners, might have facilitated the writing process by making the prisoners more comfortable.⁴⁹⁷ Moss concurs and adds that prisons at the time were more open than they are now, making it easy to bring food and other items to inmates. Moreover, as Moss notices, there were precedents for (even possibly the beginning of a tradition) early Christians writing from prison, like Paul and Ignatius.⁴⁹⁸

Consequently, while it is impossible to know if Perpetua indeed physically wrote the words attributed to her, we can nonetheless posit that (at least part of) the account originated in some form (verbal, notes...) from her at the time of her incarceration. The question of authorship in *PPerp* will be looked at in further detail shortly.

⁴⁹³ T. J. Heffernan, 1995. ‘Philology and Authorship in the *Passio Sanctorum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*’. *Traditio* 50, pp. 315-325, 322.

⁴⁹⁴ Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 76.

⁴⁹⁵ Heffernan, ‘Philology and Authorship’, 324.

⁴⁹⁶ Gold, *Perpetua: Athlete of God*, 15.

⁴⁹⁷ Bremmer and Formisano, ‘Perpetua’s Passion’, 6.

⁴⁹⁸ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 118.

5.1.2 Dating(s)

As was the case with the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, it is necessary to distinguish the date of the execution of the martyrs from the date of the composition of the text. While some of the *Passio* might have been written before the execution, as asserted by the narrator, *PPerp* was undoubtedly redacted and put together as a whole account after the events.

Date of execution

Unlike our previous accounts, the date of the execution is well documented in (relatively) early records and all seem to indicate 7 March 203. The *Depositio Martyrum*, in the *Philocalian Calendar*⁴⁹⁹ composed in 354, has an entry reading: *Mense Martio. Non. Martias. Perpetuae et Felicitatis, Africae*. The year of the martyrdom is not present in this entry, however, in his *Epitoma Chronicon* (written circa 445) Prosper both asserts that *Perpetua et Felicitas pro Christo passae sunt non. Mart. Apud Carthaginem Africae*, and then briefly mentions Leonidas's death as having taken place in Alexandria shortly before Perpetua's martyrdom.⁵⁰⁰ Eusebius mentions that Leonidas, Origen's father, died in persecutions that broke out in Egypt in the tenth year of Septimius Severus's reign (193-211),⁵⁰¹ thus giving us the year 203. Prosper does not seem to have been relying on the *Depositio Martyrum* but both give the same date of the Nones of March. This date, which corresponds to the 7th of March, is also attested at the end of the *Acta Perpetuae* even though the authors of *APerp* wrongly place Perpetua's martyrdom under Valerian and Gallienus (*APerp* 9,5 in both versions). This date is further corroborated by a 4th century inscription found in Carthage. Consequently, the dating of the martyrdoms on 7 March seems to represent an early tradition and is the date generally adopted by scholars.⁵⁰²

In addition, the text itself provides detail that could also indicate an early third-century date. Indeed, the text mentions that the procurator, Hilarianus, had just taken over his position from the previous proconsul who had just died. The passage which mentions the name of the

⁴⁹⁹ The *Philocalian Calendar* was part of a 'Chronography' commissioned by Valentinus, a wealthy Roman Christian, to calligrapher Philocalus, which contained a collection of texts and lists of Popes and martyrs (*Depositio Martyrum*) among others. The *Philocalian Calendar* is believed to be the first Christian calendar to mention the 25th of December as an annual commemoration date for Jesus's birth.

⁵⁰⁰ Quotations from the *Depositio Martyrum* and Prosper's *Epitoma Chronicon* from Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 65.

⁵⁰¹ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, VI, 2, 2.

⁵⁰² Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 305.

proconsul is probably an interpolation by the narrator (as we shall see shortly) to provide context and is as follows: ‘And Hilarianus the procurator, who had received the right of the sword in place of the deceased proconsul Minucius Timianus’⁵⁰³ (*PPerp* 6,3).⁵⁰⁴ According to Heffernan, the narrator likely used the word ‘deceased’ (*defuncti*) to emphasise the fact that Minucius’s death was very recent. This idea is reinforced by the phrase ‘*qui tunc [...] ius gladii acceperat*’ (‘who at the time, [...] had received the right of sword’), which, as Heffernan remarks, denotes ‘an acknowledgment on the writer’s part that Hilarianus now possessed the legal basis for his authority and the power to sentence an individual to death’.⁵⁰⁵ In the redactor’s mind this needed to be mentioned because it was probably a recent development or a right that Hilarianus had not had to exercise yet. As showed by Barnes, Minucius Timianus (Opimianus) was proconsul of Africa in either 202-203 or 203-204.⁵⁰⁶ The traditional year of 203 seem therefore perfectly plausible and is the one accepted in this thesis.

Date of composition

Although the exact date of the composition of *PPerp* is not stated in the text, a few details mentioned in the *Passio* have helped scholars to pinpoint a *terminus ante quem* around late 209. Indeed, a line in *PPerp* itself seems to indicate that the text was composed soon after the events as the narrator appears to address eyewitnesses of the persecution (*PPerp* 1,6): *fratres et filioli, uti... uos qui interfuistis rememoremini gloriae domini*. As Heffernan remarks, such a personal address suggests that those who personally witnessed the execution of the martyrs must still be alive and are probably still members of the congregation in Carthage.⁵⁰⁷ This sentence, therefore, points at a composition of the text within a few years of the events.

Moreover, as noted before, MS H (the Greek manuscript) seems to rely on an early Latin text which contained a mention to Geta’s birthday. In *PPerp* 7,9, Perpetua says: ‘For we were going to fight in the military games: it would then be the birthday of Geta Caesar’. This simple and seemingly trivial sentence actually contains two important pieces of information. Firstly, the mention of Geta, the second son of Septimius Severus, who was murdered in 211 and subjected to *damnatio memoriae* in 212 by his brother Caracalla, indicates that *PPerp* was written before

⁵⁰³ Barnes argues that the proconsul named here is actually Minucius Opimianus, a man belonging to a well-known senatorial family that can be traced back to Trajan’s reign. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 305.

⁵⁰⁴ *Et Hilarianus procurator, qui tunc loco proconsulis Minici Timiani defuncti ius gladii acceperat...*

⁵⁰⁵ Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 63-64.

⁵⁰⁶ Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, 305-306.

⁵⁰⁷ Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 67.

212 since any mention of him was prohibited after that time. The absence of the remark concerning the emperor's son in later versions of *PPerp*, like MS C, seems to corroborate the fact that MS H must have been using an early, and unspoiled, Latin version. The second relevant piece of information is found in the title given to Geta: Caesar. Geta was made Caesar by his father in 198 and Augustus in 209. Any mention of Geta between 209 and 212 would have therefore used the title Augustus, not Caesar. Most scholars, like Heffernan, argue that the word Caesar in this sentence provides a high certainty of a *terminus ante quem* of 209 for the *Passio*. However, it is possible that *PPerp* was written even before this date.

Indeed, in his *De Anima* (55,4), written between 206 and 208,⁵⁰⁸ Tertullian writes: *Quomodo Perpetua, fortissima martyr, sub die passionis in reuelatione paradisi solos illic martyras uidit, nisi quia nullis romphaea paradisi ianitrix cedit nisi qui in Christo decesserint, non in Adam?*⁵⁰⁹ According to Gold, this allusion to the Carthaginian martyr in Tertullian's work, as the earliest known external reference to Perpetua, would move the *terminus ante quem* to 208,⁵¹⁰ even possibly 206 if we accept Barnes's dating of *De Anima*. Heffernan adds that Tertullian probably would not have mentioned Perpetua if his audience had not already been familiar with the martyr's story. However, Heffernan cautions against using *De Anima* for the dating of *PPerp*.⁵¹¹ Indeed, Tertullian's allusion seems somewhat erroneous (as we shall see shortly, he appears to attribute Saturus's vision to Perpetua), and he does not quote *PPerp* directly. Therefore, we cannot know for certain which text, if any, Tertullian was relying upon.⁵¹² While both the text and Tertullian's allusion to Perpetua hint at a composition of the text soon after the events, we must remain cautious and accept the safer *terminus ante quem* of 209.

⁵⁰⁸ *De Anima* is dated around 206/207 by both Barnes and Heffernan as it shows some Montanist undertones, but they are not as pronounced as in Tertullian's later works. Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 66-67; T. D. Barnes, 1971. *Tertullian: a Historical and Literary Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 55. On Tertullian's conversion to Montanism see also E. F. Osborn, 1996. *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 175-176, 212.

⁵⁰⁹ 'How is it that the most heroic martyr Perpetua on the day of her passion saw only her fellow-martyrs there, in the revelation which she received of Paradise, if it were not that the sword which guarded the entrance permitted none to go in thereat, except those who had died in Christ and not in Adam?', translated by P. Holmes.

⁵¹⁰ Gold, *Perpetua: Athlete of God*, 13.

⁵¹¹ Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 66.

⁵¹² Since Tertullian was from Carthage, he might have been relying on oral tradition rather than a text.

5.2 Authenticity of the *Passio Perpetuae*

5.2.1 *Authorship*

The question of authorship in the *Passion of Perpetua* is, unsurprisingly, often linked to the problem of authenticity of the text. Indeed, as we saw with the previous martyrdom accounts we studied, the intervention of a third-party narrator/redactor/editor inevitably engenders doubts regarding the integrity of the text. While most scholars agree, as we saw previously, that some of the text is indeed from Perpetua, the question of which are the original words of the martyr, and what has been added or edited, remains.

Even though the narrator gives the names of Perpetua and Saturus as the authors of the visions he is reporting in *PPerp*, his own identity is unknown. The narrator, who might also be the editor, seems to have been an eyewitness of the martyrdoms (*PPerp* 1,6): ‘For this reason we too proclaim to you, brothers and young sons, what we have heard and touched (*audiuimus et contrectauimus*)’. The passionate introduction by the narrator, where he argues that new martyrdoms are just as worthy of praise as the old ones, is crammed with references to the Holy Spirit and prophecies.⁵¹³ These, of course, are often seen as the hallmarks of Montanism, and the influence of the New Prophecy movement on *PPerp* has therefore long been a subject of scholarly debate. Heffernan, for example, understands the argument that the *vetera fidei exempla* are as valuable as the *nova documenta* (*PPerp* 1,1), as being a defence of Montanism.⁵¹⁴ This idea is reinforced further in the text (*PPerp* 1,2-3):

Indeed, these examples will eventually be ancient and indispensable for those who come after us, if they are reckoned of a lesser authority in the present time because of a prejudiced reverence for antiquity. But let them see, those who judge the one power of the one Holy Spirit according to the passing of time: the newer deeds, by their very newness, must be held in higher regard, because by decree grace abounds in the end of time.

The Montanist undertones in the introduction of *PPerp* led some scholars to argue that Tertullian was the author of *PPerp*. As we have seen before, Tertullian converted to Montanism around 207, which is also the approximative date for the redaction of *PPerp*. It has been advanced that Tertullian could have seen in the story of Perpetua an opportunity to further his new Montanist sympathies. Robinson, followed by van Beek, argued that similarities in style

⁵¹³ For example, see *PPerp* 1,5: ‘We too both acknowledge and honor the prophecies and likewise the new visions that have been similarly promised’.

⁵¹⁴ Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 77.

and rhetoric⁵¹⁵ between Tertullian's work and *PPerp* supported the claim that Tertullian was the author of *PPerp*.⁵¹⁶

However, it has since been pointed out by many scholars that Tertullian only mentions Perpetua once in his work (*De Anima*, 55,4),⁵¹⁷ seemingly mistaking Saturus's vision for Perpetua's. Tertullian indeed asserts that Perpetua saw only martyrs in heaven in a vision she had the *day before her martyrdom*, which is not the case as Perpetua's last vision is that of her fight with the Egyptian. It is possible, of course, that, as argued by Bastiaensen, Tertullian meant *sub die passionis* in the sense that Perpetua's death, by then, was imminent (so not literally as 'the day before her passion').⁵¹⁸ However, Perpetua does not say that she sees *only* martyrs in heaven: 'And I saw a great expanse of grass and in the middle sat an old man, dressed as a shepherd, tall, milking sheep. Around him stood thousands dressed in white' (*PPerp* 4,8). While the allusion to the 'thousands dressed in white' is an unmistakable reference to martyrs,⁵¹⁹ Perpetua does not specify (in any of her visions) whether she sees other people in heaven. By contrast, Saturus's vision is slightly more precise⁵²⁰ as he first says in *PPerp* 12,1: 'And we came near a place, whose walls seemed to have been built out of light. And before the door of that place stood four angels, who clothed those who entered in white robes',⁵²¹ and then in *PPerp* 13,8: 'We began to recognize many of our brothers there, who were also martyrs' (*Et coepimus illic multos fratres cognoscere, sed et martyras*). The last clause in the sentence, *sed et martyras*, has been the subject of different interpretations. Some scholars like Bremmer, Heffernan, and Gonzalez translate this phrase (like Rebillard here) as 'and also martyrs'.⁵²² This is the most commonly accepted interpretation of this passage which entails that both martyrs, and all the other righteous Christians, enter heaven after their death. Other scholars, especially Amat,

⁵¹⁵ The use of the word *refrigero* and its cognates (to rest, refresh, relieve or comfort) in particular has been of interest in this debate. This word is used by Perpetua four times (*PPerp* 3,4; 3,7; 8,1; 9,1), Saturus once (*PPerp* 13,5) and twice by the narrator (*PPerp* 16,3 and 4) and is also found in Tertullian's *Apologeticus* 1.6.3 and in *De Anima* 43 and 51.

⁵¹⁶ Robinson, *Passion of S. Perpetua*, 47-58; C. I. M. I. van Beek (ed.), 1936. *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis: Textum Graecum et Latinum ad Fidem Codicum Mss.* Nijmegen: Dkher and Van de Vegt, 92-96.

⁵¹⁷ See p. 131.

⁵¹⁸ A. A. R., Bastiaensen, 1982. 'Tertullian's Reference to the *Passio Perpetuae* in *De Anima* 55,4'. *Studia Patristica*, 17 (2), pp. 790-5, 794 note 14.

⁵¹⁹ An image taken from Revelation as we saw in our study of the *Martyrs of Lyon*, see p. 120.

⁵²⁰ Gonzalez explains the fact that Saturus's description of heaven (including the idea that all good Christians go to heaven after their death) is more detailed and assertive than Perpetua's because Saturus was a catechist and Perpetua was only a catechumen. E. Gonzalez, 2014. *The Fate of the Dead in Early Third Century North African Christianity: The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas and Tertullian*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 112.

⁵²¹ *Qui introeuntes uestierunt stolas candidas*. As before, allusion to martyrs and reminiscent of Revelation 6:11.

⁵²² J. N. Bremmer, 2003. 'The Vision of Saturus in the "*Passio Perpetuae*"'. F. G. Martínez and G. P. Luttikhuisen (eds). *Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome: Studies in Ancient Cultural Interaction in Honour of A. Hilhorst*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 55-73, 69-71.; Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 131, 297-298, and Gonzalez, *Fate of the Dead*, 111-112.

translate it as ‘but all martyrs’,⁵²³ following Tertullian’s interpretation that only martyrs go to heaven after their death, while the other believers must wait for Judgement Day. While the translation of *sed et martyras* as ‘but also martyrs’ is certainly warranted, this phrase, in association with the passage mentioned previously (*PPerp* 12,1) and also *PPerp* 11,9, seems ambiguous enough, nonetheless, to substantiate Tertullian’s understanding of the special status of martyrs, at least in Saturus’s vision. It then appears that Tertullian made a mistake by attributing this vision or, should we say, his interpretation of this vision, to Perpetua instead of Saturus. Moreover, as shown by Gonzalez, the depiction of the afterlife in *PPerp* appears to be in contradiction with Tertullian’s teachings, especially regarding the concepts of ascension of the soul and bodily resurrection,⁵²⁴ indicating further that Tertullian is unlikely to be the author/redactor of *PPerp*.

In addition, the question of whether *PPerp* is indeed a Montanist document has not been settled with certainty. According to Salisbury, this question is actually anachronistic since even if there were already, by 203 or 207, some Montanist influence on the Carthaginian communities, the North African church had not yet split into two distinct movements (‘orthodox’ and Montanist).⁵²⁵ Both Kitzler and Gonzalez concur and add that *PPerp* simply exhibits characteristics of North African Christianity typical of the third century, rather than a definite Montanist influence.⁵²⁶ As Gonzalez puts it: ‘Rather than pointing towards Montanistic redaction, the preface should be properly understood as indicating an apocalyptic mindset and community’.⁵²⁷ Interestingly, Taberneer does not deny the similitudes between Montanist thoughts and the preface of *PPerp* and shows that, to the pro-Montanist Christians in Carthage at the beginning of the third century, the New Prophecy movement was not necessarily in contradiction with the teachings of the wider ‘orthodox’ church.⁵²⁸ In a way, Taberneer reaches the same conclusion as Kitzler and Gonzalez that what we see in *PPerp*’s preface reflects the typical thoughts of the North African church of Tertullian’s time, but he does attribute it to a redactor with pro-Montanist sympathies, if not entirely converted to the New Prophecy movement yet. However, as Taberneer concedes, there is little indication in the text that the martyrs themselves were pro-Montanist. Consequently, the similarities in style between

⁵²³ Amat, *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité*, 152.

⁵²⁴ Gonzalez, *Fate of the Dead*, 164-169.

⁵²⁵ J. E. Salisbury, 1997. *Perpetua’s Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman*. New York: Routledge, 158.

⁵²⁶ P. Kitzler, 2015. *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae: Recontextualizing a Martyr Story in the Literature of the Early Church*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 29-34; Gonzalez, *Fate of the Dead*, 24-25.

⁵²⁷ Gonzalez, *Fate of the Dead*, 25.

⁵²⁸ Taberneer, *Fake Prophecy*, 63-4.

Tertullian's work and *PPerp*, alongside the differences in thoughts regarding the afterlife and the nascent pro-Montanist feelings found in the preface, but not in Perpetua's own words, all seem to point to a redactor close to Tertullian's circle,⁵²⁹ writing when the Montanist movement became more prominent in the Carthaginian church.

While the narrator remains anonymous, we are told in clear terms that Perpetua wrote her own story in her own hand: 'She [Perpetua] herself has related in full her course towards martyrdom, and from this point it is as she left it written in her own hand and according to her own understanding'.⁵³⁰ After Perpetua finishes her section and entrusts the telling of the end of her story to 'whoever wishes to write it' (*PPerp* 10,15), the narrator briefly announces the transition to Saturus's vision in similar terms: 'But the blessed Saturus too divulged this vision of his, which he himself recorded'.⁵³¹ The claim that the martyrs wrote their story/visions in their own hands is reiterated once more in *PPerp* 14,1: 'These were the very remarkable visions of the most blessed martyrs Saturus and Perpetua, which they themselves recorded'.⁵³² This is a bold claim, with heavy implications: as the prologue shows, the narrator certainly understood the power of martyrdom stories (*PPerp* 1,1-5). The narrator's insistence on the martyrs' authorship, as well as on the idea of contrasting old and new examples, indicates that he knew/expected that the martyrs' own words would bear more weight than a simple recollection of the events. As seen previously,⁵³³ this is consistent with literary expectations/conventions relating to historical accounts and the importance of eyewitnesses in such works. In short, by emphasising both the contrast between old and new accounts and the martyrs' authorship, the narrator conveys the idea that although his account of the Carthaginian martyrdoms is recent, it is *historical* and better than previous martyrdom accounts because it was written by the martyrs themselves.

It is not surprising then that this claim about the martyrs' authorship, especially that of Perpetua, came under intense scrutiny in recent time. Augustine seems to have been the only writer in antiquity (and throughout the middle ages) who questioned the authenticity of Perpetua's authorship: ... *nec illa [Perpetua] sic scripsit vel quicumque illud scripsit ... (De Natura et Origine Animae, book I, X)*.⁵³⁴ However, as we saw previously, Augustine found the cult of the

⁵²⁹ Gold, *Perpetua: Athlete of God*, 14.

⁵³⁰ *PPerp* 2,3. *Haec ordinem totum martyrii sui iam hinc ipsa narrauit sicut conscriptum manu sua et suo sensu reliquit.*

⁵³¹ *PPerp* 11,1. *Sed et Saturus benedictus hanc uisionem suam edidit, quam ipse conscripsit.*

⁵³² *Hae uisiones insigniores ipsorum martyrum beatissimorum Saturi et Perpetuae, quas ipsi conscripserunt.*

⁵³³ See chapter 2, pp. 36-38.

⁵³⁴ 'nor does the saint herself, or whoever it was that wrote the account'. Translated by P. Holmes.

martyrs quite problematic and often sought to depict ‘ancient martyrs’ as examples of devotion rather than subjects of devotion. As Heffernan puts it: ‘His [Augustine’s] intent is to moderate the idea of independent agency in the actions of the martyrs and privilege the active role of faith and the power of the Holy Spirit’.⁵³⁵ It is possible, therefore, that Augustine simply tried to undermine Perpetua’s influence a little by (very casually) mentioning in passing that she might not be the author of the *Passio*. There are, however, issues in the text that indeed cast doubts on the narrator’s claims of the martyrs’ authorship.

As with our previous martyrdom accounts, the possibility of interpolations in the text has been the subject of debates among scholars. There are two sentences in the *Passio* that, like the Quintus pericope in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, feel out of place and seem to have been added by the narrator. The first one, in *PPerp* 6,3, is the mention of ‘Hilarius the procurator, who had received the right of sword in place of the deceased proconsul Minicius Timinianus’. It seems to have been included in Perpetua’s transcription of the trial for context,⁵³⁶ as it feels intrusive in the middle of the plea of Perpetua’s father to save herself. The second interpolation is even more disruptive as it follows Perpetua’s very personal and emotional vision of her brother Dinocrates who died as a child. The passage is as follows (*PPerp* 7,9-10):

But I trusted that I could lighten his [Dinocrates] pain. And I prayed for him every day until we moved into the military prison. For we were going to fight in the military games: it would then be the birthday of Geta Caesar. And I prayed day and night for my brother, groaning and crying, that this might be granted me.

Here, the mention of the military games and Geta’s birthday is baffling. However, in the light of the redactor’s prologue, which is clearly concerned with emphasising the historical importance of the Carthaginian martyrdoms, we can surmise, like Heffernan, that these two sentences were added by the narrator/redactor to provide context and historicity to the *Passio*.⁵³⁷ The narrator, as an eyewitness writing shortly after the events, would have remembered these details and probably thought they needed to be added to Perpetua’s narrative to inscribe the martyrdoms within both the history of the Church and of the Roman Empire.

Besides these interpolations, the question of a possible posterior redaction, from notes or verbal reports, by the narrator/redactor was raised by scholars who found it difficult to attribute a specific genre to *PPerp*. Indeed, the *Passion of Perpetua* is often referred to as ‘Perpetua’s diary’ since the young martyr recounts intimate thoughts and feelings (about her relationship

⁵³⁵ Heffernan, ‘Philology and Authorship’, 316.

⁵³⁶ See pp. 129-130.

⁵³⁷ Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 76.

with her infant son in particular) that would suggest she was keeping a diary in prison. However, some expressions of periodicity (such as ‘after a few days...’) challenge this view. While a diary generally consists of daily entries reflecting on the events of the day, in *PPerp* we often find that Perpetua tells of events that happened days before and over a certain period of time. For example, in *PPerp* 3,5, Perpetua says: ‘In these same few days we were baptized, and the Spirit told me that nothing should be sought from the water but the endurance of the body. After a few days we were admitted in prison...’. It is generally accepted, therefore, that the *Passio* is closer to an autobiography than that to a diary since it appears that Perpetua reflects on past events, more characteristic of the autobiographical genre.⁵³⁸ Yet Heffernan believes that the simplicity of Perpetua’s sections suits a more ‘hybrid’ type of literature called hypomnema. As Heffernan remarks, hypomnema was not considered a genre in antiquity so was not subject to rules and could contain memoirs, comments, notes, and commentaries.⁵³⁹ The *Passio* seems to match this description: as a ‘self-conscious *journal intime*’, Perpetua’s account is not as elaborate as an autobiography, but instead, is a collection of intimate thoughts as well as events and, most importantly, visions. The hypomnema ‘genre’ then suggests that the martyr herself wrote the sections which are attributed to her. The philological analysis of Perpetua’s accounts supports this view as it reveals a distinctive style which clearly differs from that of the narrator. Indeed, the intricacy of the narrator’s rhetoric and theology contrast sharply with Perpetua’s simple Latin and down-to-earth account.⁵⁴⁰ As Auerbach puts it:

There is no rhetorical art in Perpetua’s narrative. The careful education she had received is hardly reflected in her style. Her vocabulary is limited; her sentence structure is clumsy, the connectives (frequent use of *tunc*) are not always clear. A specialist cannot help noting the many vulgarisms (such as *mittit se* for *ruit*) and typically Christian locutions (such as *refrigerare*). The language in general is brittle, quite unliterary, naïve, almost childlike. And yet Perpetua is expressive. She speaks of things that do not occur elsewhere in ancient literature.⁵⁴¹

This assessment of Perpetua’s rhetoric is rather harsh but reflects the general consensus that Perpetua expresses herself in simple terms, without flourishes or literary aspiration, but not simplistically. This style, called *sermo humilis*, is also evident in Perpetua’s choice of certain

⁵³⁸ Some scholars, like van den Eynde, treat Perpetua’s section as both a diary and an autobiography interchangeably. S. van den Eynde, 2005. “‘A Testimony to the Non-Believers, A Blessing to the Believers’” *The Passio Perpetuae* and the Construction of a Christian Identity’. J. Leemans (ed.), *More Than a Memory: The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity*. Leuven: Peeters Publishers, pp. 23-44.

⁵³⁹ Heffernan, ‘Philology and Authorship’, 320.

⁵⁴⁰ The lack of theological reflection or biblical quotation in Perpetua’s account is also consistent with her status as a catechumen.

⁵⁴¹ E. Auerbach, 1965. *Literary Language and its Public in Late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*. New York, USA: Princeton University Press, 63.

words which reveal the colloquial Latin of the ‘second church’, the church of the people.⁵⁴² As Gold remarks, Perpetua’s repetitive, linear, and simple style clearly reflects everyday speech of third century African Latin. According to Shaw, this denotes a typical feminine style found in other documents written by women during the late antiquity/early middle ages.⁵⁴³ By contrast, some scholars have argued that there is no such ‘feminine style’ and that therefore Perpetua’s sections were a forgery created by a male writer.⁵⁴⁴ This theory is not commonly accepted, and most scholars recognise, to a greater or lesser extent, that *PPerp* contains the authentic voice of the martyr. Another theory, advanced by Ronsse, is that Perpetua, who was probably trained in the art of rhetoric (as catechumens in third century North Africa were),⁵⁴⁵ addressed the congregation to reveal her visions, which were then compiled.⁵⁴⁶ As Ronsse puts it:

Among her Christian community, Perpetua was regarded as both martyr and prophet and would have delivered most of her messages orally. [...] what we have in the Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas now attributed to Perpetua is much more along the lines of revised early Christian lecture notes than polished literary document.⁵⁴⁷

However, as before, Moss contests the authenticity of the whole account by arguing that, if we accept that the narrator/redactor edited some parts of Perpetua’s sections, then we cannot know what words truly are Perpetua’s, and what has been added (or removed) by the editor.⁵⁴⁸ Bremmer and Formisano concur: ‘Though Perpetua’s diary seems basically authentic, the editor did somewhat edit her text. In the end we cannot be wholly sure to what extent we have access to the *ipsissima verba* of this remarkable woman’.⁵⁴⁹ Nonetheless, apart from the two sentences possibly added by the redactor for context, Perpetua’s account has integrity and is consistent with a narrative either written by the martyr or redacted from notes or perhaps dictated. Perpetua’s style is clearly distinguishable from that of the narrator (and of Saturus) and her

⁵⁴² For example, Perpetua uses the word *fiala*, which is a transliteration of the Greek *φιάλη* and the first instance of this spelling with an ‘f’ (instead of ‘ph’). As the Vulgate uses *phiala* throughout, Heffernan surmises that there might have been another, non-extant, version of the *Vetus Latina* (a collection of Latin translation of the Septuagint and NT texts that Jerome used for his Vulgate) containing the transliteration *fiala*. Heffernan, ‘Philology and Authorship’, 318.

⁵⁴³ Shaw, ‘Passion of Perpetua’, 20.

⁵⁴⁴ R. S. Kraemer and S. L. Lander, 2000. ‘Perpetua and Felicitas’. P. F. Esler (ed.). *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2. London: Routledge, pp. 1048-1068, 1055-1058.

⁵⁴⁵ E. Ronsse, 2006. ‘Rhetoric of Martyrs: Listening to Saints Perpetua and Felicitas’. *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14 (3), pp. 283-327, 295-296.

⁵⁴⁶ Ronsse does not discuss the style of Perpetua’s Latin but rather argues that a long-standing misinterpretation/mistranslation of the text has led scholars to see Perpetua’s visions as dreams and therefore to misunderstand Perpetua’s words. Ronsse advances the idea that Perpetua had lucid visions (e.g., use of *video* instead of *vidi*) and that Perpetua’s account in *PPerp* conveys the orality of her original message. Ronsse, ‘Rhetoric of Martyrs’, pp. 283-327.

⁵⁴⁷ Ronsse, ‘Rhetoric of Martyrs’, 322.

⁵⁴⁸ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 124.

⁵⁴⁹ Bremmer and Formisano, ‘Perpetua’s Passion’, 6.

words convey intimate thoughts and concrete concerns, thus contrasting with the blatantly theological agenda of the narrator.

Therefore, we can assume that Perpetua's account, and Satorus's,⁵⁵⁰ are authentic, at least in the sense that they were indeed written at the time they purport to belong to, and contain, for the most part, the words of the people whom the text claims were the authors. Of course, the question of the authenticity of the text goes beyond the problem of the authorship and is an understandable concern since the stakes are so high in this case. Indeed, having access to the martyrs' own thoughts and beliefs would be invaluable for historians of early Christianity, and even more so in our investigation into the collective memory of these martyrs. Knowing the thoughts of Perpetua as she embarks on her last journey, how she both interprets her death sentence and chooses to present herself, in her own words, offers a rare opportunity that we were denied in the previous martyrdom accounts. Moreover, if Ronsse is indeed right in her assertion that Perpetua's visions are representative of the catechumenal teaching the young Christians had to go through before their baptism,⁵⁵¹ *PPerp* is therefore particularly informative regarding the theology of martyrdom held by the whole North African community at the time. We must therefore now turn our attention to Perpetua's words themselves to determine the degree of authenticity of the account.

5.2.2 *Who was Vibia Perpetua?*

As Moss shows, there are a few historical and legal problems and incongruities in the *Passio*.⁵⁵² The discrepancies in *PPerp* mostly reside in contradictions between Perpetua's account and the narrator's description of Perpetua. Even though the text mentions six Christian martyrs, the narrator only gives details about Perpetua and provides the reader with hardly any information on the five other martyrs (Felicity, Revocatus, Saturninus, Secundulus, and Satorus).⁵⁵³ While of the other martyrs we are only told that Revocatus and Felicity were slaves,

⁵⁵⁰ Regarding Satorus's section, the language is clearly different from that of Perpetua and is different from that of the narrator as well, thus considered as having been written by a third person. Nonetheless, some scholars have expressed doubts about Satorus's authorship since the theological emphasis differs from Perpetua's. Shaw, for example, who argues that Perpetua's account fell victim to sexist discrimination because of male interpretation, believes that the narrator/editor might have added this passage to further his claim that men also had visions. However, this is inconsistent with the Montanist overtones of the narrator's sections since Montanism advocated female leadership. Shaw, 'Passion of Perpetua', 32, 45.

⁵⁵¹ Ronsse, 'Rhetoric of Martyrs', 312-318.

⁵⁵² Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 118-123.

⁵⁵³ Ronsse expresses doubts about the names of the martyrs, including those of Perpetua and Felicity. Ronsse argues that, because the martyrs' names seem to match their behaviour or demeanour too well, they cannot be the real names of the martyrs. For example, Perpetua is steadfast in her determination to die a martyr, Satorus, which

and all but Saturus⁵⁵⁴ were catechumens, the narrator introduces Perpetua as follows: ‘Among them also was Vibia Perpetua,⁵⁵⁵ a woman of noble birth (*honeste nata*),⁵⁵⁶ proper upbringing (*liberaliter instituta*), and honorable marriage (*matronaliter nupta*). She had a father and mother and two brothers, one of whom was also a catechumen, as well as an infant boy still nursing. She was about 22 years old’ (*PPerp* 2,1-3). It is, of course, not so surprising that the narrator focuses on Perpetua since almost half of the account is the young martyr’s own narrative. However, the depiction of Perpetua as a noble, young Roman *matrona* seems to be at odds with Perpetua’s own words and description of her circumstances.

For example, even though the narrator says that Perpetua was *matronaliter nupta*, Perpetua never mentions her husband, nor does he appear at any stage of the narrative. Even more puzzling, from a legal point of view, is the fact that Perpetua entrusts her young son to her mother and brother (*PPerp* 3,8), and her father takes charge of the infant later in the narrative (*PPerp* 6).⁵⁵⁷ According to Roman law, the father’s family should have had custody of the child, even in case of a divorce or death of the father. Several hypotheses on the subject of Perpetua’s husband and child exist. The first theory, advanced by Shaw, is that Perpetua was married to a man belonging to her father’s line, who ‘was frankly hostile to her decision to become a Christian’.⁵⁵⁸ Shaw’s argument is built upon a remark Perpetua makes after their second encounter (*PPerp* 5,6): ‘And I was so sad to see my father so reduced, because only he among all my family (*toto genere meo*) would not take joy in my suffering (*passione*)’. Shaw takes this statement as meaning that her husband and his family are rejoicing at Perpetua’s suffering because they disapprove of her conversion to Christianity. Additionally, according to Shaw, this is a natural deduction since in *PPerp* 6,7-8, Perpetua’s father refuses to give her back her son: as a member of the family of Perpetua’s husband, this would have been possible. As Gold

means ‘sower, begetter’ is the alleged catechist, Revocatus, meaning ‘recall, revival’, is sent back to the arena multiple times. However, rather than the intervention of the narrator in changing the names of the martyrs, as suggested by Ronsse, it is possible that either the martyrs chose these names at their baptism, as is common practice, and tried to live up to their names or, as is more likely, the narrator might have tweaked his account slightly to make their last actions fit their names. This would make it easier for the audience to remember the protagonists of the *Passio*. Ronsse, ‘Rhetoric of Martyrs’, 303-305.

⁵⁵⁴ Saturus was absent when the five martyrs were arrested (*PPerp* 4,5): ‘The first to climb was Saturus, who gave himself up later for our sakes, because he had instructed us and had not been there when we were taken’. Saturus is therefore sometimes considered as the martyrs’ catechist.

⁵⁵⁵ Three proconsuls named Vibius are attested in North Africa, the latest one during Vespasian’s reign. It is thought, then, that Perpetua’s family received their Roman citizenship from one of these proconsuls, many generations before the events.

⁵⁵⁶ As Heffernan remarks, the narrator uses this phrase to distinguish Perpetua from the other prisoners by assimilating her to the *honestiores* class (of high rank), possibly belonging to the *decuriones*. However, as we shall see shortly, this is inconsistent with many elements of the text. Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 150.

⁵⁵⁷ *sollicita pro eo adloquebar matrem et confortabam fratrem, commendabam filium*.

⁵⁵⁸ Shaw, ‘Passion of Perpetua’, 25.

notes, Shaw's reading of Perpetua's remark about her family rejoicing for her is unconvincing and is more likely simply to mean that her mother and brothers were Christians, or at least had Christian sympathies (one of Perpetua's brother was also a catechumen) and were happy at the prospect of her coming martyrdom.⁵⁵⁹

According to Osiek, Perpetua's husband was Saturus, whose vision is also reported in *PPerp*.⁵⁶⁰ Saturus and Perpetua both appear in each other's visions, and even though Saturus is one of the main characters, the narrator does not introduce him. For Osiek, this suggests that Perpetua and Saturus's relationship was well-known to the intended audience and was, therefore, deemed unnecessary to be mentioned by the narrator or Perpetua herself. Moreover, if Perpetua's mother was indeed a Christian and Saturus's family was not, this might explain why Perpetua was able to entrust her son to her own family. As interesting as this theory might be, it has not garnered much support from scholars. The most commonly held view on the subject is that Perpetua repudiated her husband on her conversion to Christianity, as many Christian women did at the beginning of Christianity, and therefore chose not to mention her husband in her story. However, as Gold concedes, 'this still leaves the question of the disposition of her baby up in the air'.⁵⁶¹ For Moss, the omission of Perpetua's husband could be theological: Perpetua is presented as the bride of Christ and her husband must therefore disappear from the picture.⁵⁶² As we saw with the *Martyrs of Lyon*, the depiction of female martyrs as brides of Christ is an image borrowed from Revelation,⁵⁶³ which, as we shall see shortly, is also an influential text in *PPerp*. Moreover, the text makes this explicit in *PPerp* 18,2: 'Perpetua followed, her face shining and her step sure, as a wife of Christ, as a beloved of God'.

Nevertheless, Cooper's theory presents the most attractive and comprehensive explanation for the discrepancies within *PPerp*. Indeed, for Cooper, Perpetua was, in fact, not a married woman but a concubine.⁵⁶⁴ As Cooper explains, concubinage was a common Roman practice whereby a noble male Roman citizen, without the need of an heir, could enter a sexual relationship with a lower-class woman who, in return, would enjoy certain financial and social benefits and possibly protection. If this is the case for Perpetua, it would then elucidate the problem of the baby and the absence of the father, since a noble man would not have associated himself with

⁵⁵⁹ Gold, *Perpetua: Athlete of God*, 110.

⁵⁶⁰ C. Osiek, 2002. "Perpetua's Husband." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2), pp. 287–90.

⁵⁶¹ Gold, *Perpetua: Athlete of God*, 111.

⁵⁶² Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 118.

⁵⁶³ See p. 120, footnote 461.

⁵⁶⁴ K. Cooper, 2011. 'A Father, a Daughter, and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage'. *Gender and History* 23 (3), pp. 685–702, 688–690.

a Christian/criminal, nor would he have felt the need to lay claim to the infant. Although clearly at odds with the narrator's description of Perpetua, the idea of the young martyr as a concubine actually resolves most of the other inconsistencies within the text. For instance, Perpetua mentions that she breast-feeds her son in prison. However, it would have been very unusual for a high status *matrona* to nurse her infant herself, as the common practice was to hire a wet-nurse. Salisbury, citing Tacitus,⁵⁶⁵ argues that some old families might have still followed the ancient tradition of the mother nursing her children herself, but this is unconvincing. Tacitus quotes the nostalgically inclined Messalla who praises a tradition that was observed two hundred years before Perpetua's time and does not seem to have still been in practice during Tacitus's lifetime. Moreover, rather enigmatically, Perpetua's father says to her: 'look at your son, who cannot live without you' (*aspice filium tuum, qui post te uiuere non poterit, PPerp* 5,3). Perpetua's father seems to imply here that they would not be able to feed the baby. This appears to show that Perpetua was indeed not married and of low-class birth since Perpetua's father implies that the baby would not be taken care of by the father and that they did not have the financial means to hire a wet-nurse.

The idea of Perpetua as belonging to the *humiliores* class (as opposed to the *honestiores* suggested by the narrator, *honeste nata*) is further hinted at in the text when Perpetua is condemned *ad bestias*. As we saw in the *Martyrs of Lyon*, Roman citizens, as a privileged class, were to be beheaded if sentenced to death rather than having to fight in the arena. Admittedly, Attalus in *Mart. Lyon* is sent to the beasts in spite of his citizenship but, in *Mart. Lyon*, the governor makes the conscious decision, to please the crowd, to go against the tradition (and the emperor's orders).⁵⁶⁶ The author of *Mart. Lyon* uses the governor's decision to prove his case against the pagans and show their cruelty. In the *Passio*, nothing is said, either by Perpetua or, more importantly, by the narrator, about Perpetua's rights as a citizen to die by the sword. Yet the narrator's description of the martyrdoms is punctuated by remarks on the cruelty of the crowd who 'demanded that [Saturninus, Revocatus and Satorus] be whipped by a row of beast-hunters' (*PPerp* 18,9) and 'demanded [the martyrs] be brought to the middle of the arena, so that their [the crowd's] eyes might be accomplices of the murder as the sword sliced their [the martyrs'] bodies' (*PPerp* 21,7). It is possible that Perpetua herself requested to be executed with her companions but, again, would this not have been mentioned by the narrator in his

⁵⁶⁵ *A Dialogue on Oratory*, 28. Tacitus reports the praise of Messalla for the mothers of the Gracchi, of Caesar, of Augustus for educating and nursing their sons themselves: 'Every citizen's son, the child of a chaste mother, was from the beginning reared, not in the chamber of a purchased nurse, but in that mother's bosom and embrace'.

⁵⁶⁶ See p. 104.

encomiastic depiction of Perpetua? In *PPerp* 16,2-4, the narrator relates the story of Perpetua confronting the tribune and demanding better treatment of the prisoners, which she obtains. This would have been construed as subversive behaviour, highly unexpected of a well-educated *matrona*. Why would the narrator mention this anecdote and ignore Perpetua's request to die with her companions which would have also shown her subversive, anti-establishment character?⁵⁶⁷

As a matter of fact, Perpetua's subversive behaviour in this scene is consistent with the theme of breaking ties with her roots (the authorities) and family (mainly her father) that runs throughout the *Passio*. Perpetua's troubled relationship with her father also supports the view that they are from a low-class family. As Cobb remarks, the behaviour of Perpetua's father during all four of their encounters is uncharacteristic of a noble Roman father.⁵⁶⁸ Indeed, he shows little self-control, at first, by attacking Perpetua (*PPerp* 3,3),⁵⁶⁹ and then by throwing himself at her feet to beg her to reconsider her confession (*PPerp* 5,5).⁵⁷⁰ To Cobb, Perpetua's father is demasculinized as Perpetua's narrative moves forward and she becomes the empowered male figure. Cobb concludes:⁵⁷¹

The demasculization of Perpetua's father-reflected in his emotionality, his abandonment of paternal authority, his use of deceptive persuasion and his old age-is important because it is by juxtaposing Perpetua with her father that the editor reveals Perpetua's masculinity, and, through that, the superiority of Christianity.

While this is an interesting theory for gender studies, Cobb is at danger of over-reading the text here. However, her analysis of the behaviour of Perpetua's father highlights the oddity of it, it is clearly problematic and inconsistent with his alleged high status.

By contrast, Ronsse argues that Perpetua's father belongs to the decurial class (because of the phrase *honeste nata*) and offers an unusual reading of the first encounter between Perpetua and her father. Indeed, Ronsse contends that the discussion between father and daughter that occurs at the very beginning of Perpetua's account is a rhetorical contest between the two, thus setting

⁵⁶⁷ Perpetua's attitude is provocative when she is taken to the amphitheatre as she is 'turning aside everyone's gaze with the force of her stare' (*PPerp* 18,2). She also opposes the request of the governor for the martyrs to fight the beasts dressed as priests of Saturn for the men and priestesses of Ceres for the women (*PPerp* 18,5-6): "We have come here of our own free will, that our freedom not be compromised. We have pledged our lives: we do not have to do this; we had this contract with you". Injustice acknowledged justice: the tribune conceded that they be led in simply as they were'.

⁵⁶⁸ L. S. Cobb, 2008. *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 98.

⁵⁶⁹ 'Then my father, excited by the name [Christian], jumped at me as if to tear out my eyes. But he only shook me and, defeated he left with the devil and his arguments'.

⁵⁷⁰ 'He was saying these things the way a father does out of sense of duty, kissing my hands and throwing himself at my feet, crying and calling me not "daughter" but "my lady"'.
⁵⁷¹ Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 102.

the tone of the whole account and proving the rhetorical sophistication of both Perpetua and her father.⁵⁷² Consequently, Ronsse translates the phrase *pro sua affectione* (*PPerp* 3,1) as ‘in his frenzied agitation’.⁵⁷³ Most scholars ignore the anomaly of *sua* and translate the phrase as ‘out of love for me’, as could be expected in this context.⁵⁷⁴ However, Ronsse argues that *sua*, here, is in reference to rhetoric itself and that ‘rhetorical persuasion was thought to demand *affectio* and *intentio*, the deliberate emotional coloring of arguments’.⁵⁷⁵ In this case, the erratic behaviour that Perpetua’s father exhibits all along the narrative would actually be a sign of his rhetorical sophistication. Ronsse even goes as far as suggesting that if her father was not trying to save Perpetua but was, instead, arguing with her out of dedication to rhetoric, he might actually have been among the accusers of the Christians.⁵⁷⁶ There seems to be, again, an overreading of the text here. Moreover, Ronsse’s theory is undoubtedly inconsistent with the episode of Perpetua’s father being beaten up at the procurator’s order in *PPerp* 6,5: ‘And as my father was standing there trying to change my mind, Hilarianus ordered that he be thrown down, and he was whipped with a rod’. This passage certainly casts doubts on Perpetua’s father as a high-status Roman citizen and, conversely, supports the idea of Perpetua as a concubine. Furthermore, Perpetua’s father is presented as a ‘demonic figure’ who tries to tempt Perpetua on several occasions with ‘arguments of the devil’ (*argumentis diaboli*, *PPerp* 3,3) as he attempts to trick her into denying Christ by invoking her duties (and affection) as a daughter and as a mother in each of their encounters. The erratic behaviour of Perpetua’s father is thus emphasised by the martyr herself to show the influence of the devil on pagans and the temptations Christians will face on their path to martyrdom. Therefore, if we choose to believe Perpetua’s account, as we should, rather than the narrator’s encomiastic description of Perpetua, her father’s behaviour (and his beating) becomes less problematic. What, then, should we make of the narrator’s words *honeste nata, liberaliter instituta, matronaliter nupta*?

As we have seen before, the *Passio*’s narrator had an obvious agenda: making sure that ‘his’ martyrs did not go forgotten and acted as models for generations to come, like the other martyrs before them.⁵⁷⁷ Therefore, the narrator’s aim was clearly to place Perpetua on the same pedestal

⁵⁷² In this famous scene, Perpetua philosophises that, just like a vase cannot be named by any other name, she cannot be called by any other name than Christian.

⁵⁷³ Ronsse, ‘Rhetoric of Martyrs’, 321.

⁵⁷⁴ ‘As we were still with those who arrested us, she [Perpetua] says, and as my father, *pro sua affectione*, desired to overthrow my resolve with his words and kept trying to change my mind, I said...’. These are the very first words of Perpetua’s section and it appears that the narrator got confused over the pronouns here (also added *inquit*, ‘she says’, for clarity). This supports the idea of later redaction from notes.

⁵⁷⁵ Ronsse, ‘Rhetoric of Martyrs’, 321.

⁵⁷⁶ Ronsse, ‘Rhetoric of Martyrs’, 320.

⁵⁷⁷ *PPerp* 1,2: ‘Indeed, these examples will eventually be ancient and indispensable for those who come after us’.

as previous, more ‘ancient’, martyrs. It is difficult to say with certainty which martyrdom accounts the narrator, Perpetua, and the rest of their North African community had access to, but it is possible that they knew of Polycarp and the Scillitan Martyrs,⁵⁷⁸ and also of fictional accounts such as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Consequently, we can surmise that through his carefully phrased introduction and description of Perpetua’s attitude and martyrdom, the narrator sought to provide his audience with a martyr just as good as the old ones, if not better.

However, Perpetua’s female gender might have been seen as an obstacle to this goal. Indeed, Perpetua is a rather lone, female figure among the majority of male martyrs of the second and third centuries.⁵⁷⁹ As we have seen in the *Martyrs of Lyon* with Blandina, there were female martyrs, but they were always part of a group and were not singled out by believers.⁵⁸⁰ Of the martyrs of the primitive church, Perpetua is quite the exception and her ‘success’ was immediate and long lasting (as shown by Augustine and the *Acta*). To what then did Perpetua owe this success? Perpetua was not a renowned bishop who associated with the apostles, as was Polycarp, and she was not a famous teacher like Justin. The narrator knew that, to stand out, his martyr could not be ‘virtually anonymous’, lost in a succession of names mentioned at the end of the account like the Scillitan Martyrs,⁵⁸¹ and Perpetua, the heroine of the account, could not be a slave or a low-class woman, like Blandina or Agathonike. To make up for her gender,

⁵⁷⁸ As we saw in chapter 2 (p. 41), the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* is considered one of the earliest and most authentic martyrdom accounts. In Carthage on July 17, 180, twelve Christians (Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Secunda and Vestia are cited at the beginning, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Januaria and Generosa are added to the list at the end of the account) were sentenced to death by proconsul Saturninus. The account is very short and consists mainly of the interrogation of the Christians and their confessions; there is no description of their martyrdoms or who they were. Augustine is the first to mention the martyrs and it is unclear whether Tertullian knew of them (he only mentions that Saturninus was the first proconsul to have executed Christians, *Ad Scapulam*, 3.4). The trial episode in *PPerp* recalls the Scillitan martyrs’ interrogation by the proconsul and Perpetua’s short but determined answers (“*Christiana sum*”, *PPerp* 6,4) echo Speratus’s “I am Christian” (“*Christianus sum*”, *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 10).

⁵⁷⁹ Before Perpetua, only Agathonike (from the *Acts of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonike*) who might not even have been a Christian (see p. 14), Blandina (of the *Martyrs of Lyon*), and the five female figures in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, who in spite of being cited by name play no part in the account, are attested. Shaw, ‘Passion of Perpetua’, 16-20.

⁵⁸⁰ Until the Middle Ages when female saints became more popular. Blandina remains the most well-known martyr of Lyon today.

⁵⁸¹ Like the *Martyrs of Lyon*, the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* is not attested in contemporary literature. The first mention of these North African martyrs is actually quite late since it is first found in Augustine’s Sermons. One might wonder if the fact that both accounts related the martyrdoms of so many martyrs without focusing on one or two in particular (like *Mart. Pol.* and *PPerp*) and that the protagonists were otherwise unknown, might explain why these accounts were not so popular. One of the main features of *PPerp* is that it is relatable in a way that the ‘group accounts’ were not. Moreover, *PPerp*, like *Mart. Pol.*, gives a glimpse of who the martyr was in her life, which is not the case in *Mart. Lyon* (the only hints we get in *Mart. Lyon* regarding the martyrs’ characters come in the appendices provided by Eusebius, which would not have been part of the original account), or the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*. Considering the depiction of Perpetua by the narrator both in his introduction and his account of her martyrdom, it seems possible that the narrator recognised that to be successful, a martyrdom account needed to focus on one person and provide detail the audience could identify with.

Perpetua had to inspire admiration and, for her behaviour to be accepted by the audience, she had to be noble and respectable.⁵⁸² Perpetua had to be special to be loved and remembered.

Thus, according to the narrator's vision of Perpetua -since she was of high birth, well-married and mother of a young male heir- her life was important; she had a lot to lose and, for Christ, she gave up more than the other famous martyrs, who were in their old age or slaves, making her a better martyr. As we shall see shortly, it is possible that Perpetua presented herself, or even behaved, as a noble woman in order to emulate heroes and heroines of Greek literature popular at the time. In this light, it might have come naturally to the narrator to describe Perpetua as a noble woman. Moreover, a common accusation against Christians was that they took advantage of (i.e., brainwashed) the weak and simple people. Celsus, for example, regrets the conversion by Christians of 'persons of the most uninstructed and rustic character [...] children and women as ignorant as themselves'.⁵⁸³ Depicting Perpetua as a well-educated Roman *matrona* would have broken this image and provided other Christians with the example of a fellow-Christian they could be proud of (and cite as a counter-example in their encounters with pagans). In doing so, the narrator ensured that Perpetua would be remembered exactly as he described her, rather than as a concubine, whom history might have forgotten. If that was indeed the narrator's goal, he certainly succeeded. Most scholars describe Perpetua as a noble Roman mother who tragically died for her convictions in the prime of her age.⁵⁸⁴ Many scholars, like Heffernan, also see Perpetua as the primal character that forged the image of the sacred woman of the Middle-Ages and beyond.⁵⁸⁵ She became a classical icon of feminism and gender studies and is still cited as an ancient example of female defiance towards patriarchal authorities.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸² Perpetua's noble character is emphasised throughout the narrator's account of the martyrdoms and the last sentence of the narrative is a summary of Perpetua's personality: 'Perhaps so great a woman, who was feared by the unclean spirit, could not otherwise be killed unless she herself willed it' (*PPerp* 21,10).

⁵⁸³ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III, 55.

⁵⁸⁴ For instance, Salisbury describes Perpetua as follows: 'Perpetua represented much of what was valued in Roman family and social life. She was a favored daughter, who already had borne an infant son to carry on the family name'. Salisbury, *Blood of Martyrs*, 118.

⁵⁸⁵ T. J. Heffernan, 1992. *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle-Ages*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press, 193-194.

⁵⁸⁶ Several aspects of Perpetua's character are usually central to academic studies like Perpetua as a mother, her attitude as a woman in ancient Rome, her transformation into a man in her last vision. See for example studies such as: Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 94-113; J. Perkins, 2009. 'The Rhetoric of the Maternal Body'. Perkins (ed.) *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era*. London: Routledge, pp. 159-171; and A. R. Solevåg, 2013. *Birthing Salvation: Gender and Class in Early Christian Childbearing Discourse*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 199-248. Perpetua's character is also a common subject of psychoanalytic studies, see for example H. Böhme, 2012. 'The Conquest of the Real by the Imaginary'. (translated by J. Riou) J. N. Bremmer and M. Formisano (eds.). *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 221-243.

Therefore, we can see that in the case of the *Passion of Perpetua*, the narrator relied on the process of collective memory to construct his martyrdom narrative. As was the case with the examples of St Peter's martyrdom or the fall of Masada, the audience, past and present, is able to ignore the discrepancies within the text because, in the *Passio*, Perpetua's description by the narrator is appealing, purposeful, and makes the heroine worthy of remembrance; it allows the audience to rally and bond over the story of the martyrdom of a beloved character. Just like for the Masada story,⁵⁸⁷ the audience probably 'compartmentalised' the contradictions. They saw Perpetua as the narrator wanted them to see her, a noble Roman woman, even though they knew that, as such, she probably would not have breast-fed her son and her father would not have been beaten up in public by the authorities. Members of Perpetua's congregation would probably have been happy to see their friend/sister elevated to such a noble rank and would not have attempted to discredit the account since it also benefitted the community to count such a noble martyr among them.

Conversely, as mentioned before, the *Acta Perpetuae* attempted to smooth these contradictions by adding the husbands of Perpetua and Felicity to the narrative and by omitting certain 'controversial' elements, like Perpetua nursing her son and the beating of her father by the authorities. As a matter of fact, Perpetua's noble origins are reiterated in the *Acta*,⁵⁸⁸ and in *APerp* II, the behaviour of Perpetua's father is more respectable and in line with his alleged rank. Perpetua's behaviour is also 'toned down': she does not stare back at the crowd, she makes no request to the tribune for better treatment, and there is no mention of her prayers saving her brother Dinocrates from eternal damnation as in *PPerp*.⁵⁸⁹ As Kitzler remarks, women in the primitive church enjoyed more freedom and authority than they did shortly after and onwards.⁵⁹⁰ This allowed Perpetua to express herself and to find a place of honour within her community (possibly also aided by the influence of Montanism in North Africa at the time). However, by the fourth century, when the *Acta* were written,⁵⁹¹ Perpetua's behaviour would have appeared odd and subversive to a Christian audience as women were expected to be modest, submissive, almost 'invisible'. Therefore, the collective memory process is evident in the *Acta*. Perpetua is here seen as a noble woman as described in the original account, but she

⁵⁸⁷ See Zerubavel's study, p. 35.

⁵⁸⁸ *APerp* I 1,1 ('Perpetua, a woman of noble birth'); 6,1 ('all [Perpetua's family] came forward, since they were of a noble family'); *APerp* II 1,1 ('Perpetua, by her father born noble in this world').

⁵⁸⁹ See p. 143, footnote 567.

⁵⁹⁰ Thanks to prominent female figures in the Gospels such as Mary (Jesus's mother), Mary Magdalene and Lazarus's sisters Mary and Martha. P. Kitzler, 2007. '*Passio Perpetuae* and *Acta Perpetuae*: Between Tradition and Innovation'. *Listy filologické* 130, pp. 1-19, 2.

⁵⁹¹ See p. 127, footnote 490.

must behave as such, according to the fourth century idea of woman nobility. While the narrator of *PPerp* did not modify Perpetua's original words, probably because some among his audience would have heard them (or some version of them) themselves, the authors of the *Acta Perpetuae* did not have this constraint. The authors of the *Acta*, therefore, used the popular text to further their own theological (and sociological) views, and like the narrator/editor of *PPerp*, they modified the subversive elements of Perpetua's character and words that did not fit their criteria of appropriateness: the martyrs are models to be followed and must therefore be irreproachable. The manipulation of Perpetua's account is very clear in this instance while in the original text, Perpetua's character is modified more subtly by the narrator, not by changing her words but by 'framing' them. As Shaw puts it: 'the editor brackets or surrounds the original work in such a way that the reader enters it, and exits from it, through his interpretations, through his words'.⁵⁹²

We therefore reach the conclusion, like Shaw, that Perpetua's account was mainly untouched by the narrator since he had to make up a new persona for her, both in his introduction and in his description of the martyrdom, to modify her origins and justify her 'subversive behaviour'.⁵⁹³ This 'framing' of Perpetua's account did not simply make Perpetua's story and behaviour more acceptable to the reader, but also ensured that the *Passion of Perpetua* would become popular and be preserved for posterity. While this means that *PPerp* is authentic, since Perpetua's words are for the most part her own, and that the narrator's section is also clearly his own, we can wonder to what extent the events related in *PPerp*, both by Perpetua and the narrator, are true. If the narrator indeed framed his narrative to give a better impression of Perpetua to further his theological views, what else did he misrepresent? Was Perpetua truthful in her depiction of herself and her circumstances? Let us now turn our attention towards the content of *PPerp* in order to answer these questions.

5.3 Collective Memory in the *Passio Perpetuae*

5.3.1 *Visions and Prophecies in the Passio Perpetuae*

While Perpetua's description of her life in prison and her encounters with her father have been of much interest to modern scholars, Perpetua's visions are nonetheless the main feature of the text and undoubtedly instrumental to *PPerp*'s success, past and present. Every

⁵⁹² Shaw, 'Passion of Perpetua', 31.

⁵⁹³ Shaw, 'Passion of Perpetua', 31.

aspect of these visions has been subjected to debates, beginning from their very nature. According to Salisbury, for instance, there is no doubt that Perpetua's dreams belong to the long tradition of early Christians experiencing dreams that predicted their own martyrdoms and who saw these dreams as sent by God to comfort and strengthen them in a time of great suffering.⁵⁹⁴ As Salisbury points out, dream interpretation as a means of divination was a common and popular pagan practice, and although Christian thinkers warned against them (as most dreams were believed to be sent by demons), they also believed that a chosen few, like martyrs, received prophetic dreams directly from God.⁵⁹⁵ Heffernan also refers to Perpetua's visions as dreams but has a more psychological approach as he writes:

The original dreams (of which we only have these records) were a way of giving some structure and coherence to these traumatizing experiences. The dreams as she has written them are literary memoirs, after-the-fact records and hence-despite what we think about their authenticity-are another attempt at coherence, at translating from the primal experience in light of her present situation.⁵⁹⁶

These two approaches to Perpetua's visions are right to emphasise their dual aspect: Perpetua indeed offers an interpretation of what has been revealed to her in each case. However, as Ronsse notices, nowhere in the text is it said that Perpetua was asleep when she received the visions.⁵⁹⁷ Admittedly, the first two instances are ambiguous. The first vision occurs after Perpetua's brother asks her to request a vision to learn whether she will be spared or if she will face martyrdom and Perpetua replies to him: 'I will let you know tomorrow' (*PPerp* 4,2). This has been invariably understood as meaning that Perpetua experienced her first vision in a dream, including by the authors of both *Acta Perpetuae* (*APerp* I 3,1 'one night, holy Perpetua saw a vision', and *APerp* II 3,1 'this was revealed to the holy Perpetua as she was sleeping'). The second vision occurs after Perpetua prayed day and night for her dead brother Dinocrates and, she asserts, 'at once, that very night, this was shown to me' (*PPerp* 7,3). However, Perpetua does not seem to be asleep during the other two visions which are introduced as follows: 'the day on which we were kept in the stocks, this was shown to me' (*PPerp* 8,1), and 'the day before we were to fight, I see this in a vision' (*PPerp* 10,1).

The last two visions, therefore, did not seem to happen in dreams, and it is not clear whether Perpetua was asleep during the first ones. The confusion mainly stems from the way Perpetua frames the narration of her visions: each 'episode' ends with the words *et experrecta sum* ('and

⁵⁹⁴ Salisbury, *Blood of Martyrs*, 81-89.

⁵⁹⁵ See for example, Tertullian, *De Anima*, 45-49.

⁵⁹⁶ Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 202.

⁵⁹⁷ Ronsse, 'Rhetoric of Martyrs', 308.

I awoke', 'then I woke up'),⁵⁹⁸ which suggests a sleeping state in its English translation.⁵⁹⁹ However, as Ronsse notices, it could also be translated as 'come to', 'rouse' (oneself) or 'keep vigil'. This reading is reinforced by the narrator's report of Perpetua's trance-like state in the arena when she is mauled by the cow but does not remember the incident: *et quasi a somno expergita (adeo in spiritu et in extasi fuerat)*⁶⁰⁰ *circumspicere coepit, et stupentibus omnibus ait: "quando", inquit, "producimur ad uaccam illam nescio quam?"* (PPerp 20,8). Perpetua is 'as if in a sleeping-state' (*quasi a somno*) but is not asleep, she is most definitely conscious since, during her ordeal, she arranges her tunic torn by the cow to cover her leg, pins her dishevelled hair, and helps Felicity to stand up (PPerp 20,4-6).

Although Perpetua herself never describes the process by which her visions occur, Tertullian, in his *De Anima* (9), describes how a member of his Carthaginian community experienced similar visions. As a matter of fact, had these words not been written years after Perpetua's death, they could have been a description of Perpetua herself:

We have now amongst us a sister whose lot it has been to be favoured with sundry gifts of revelation, which she experiences in the Spirit by ecstatic vision amidst the sacred rites of the Lord's day in the church: she converses with angels, and sometimes even with the Lord; she both sees and hears mysterious communications; some men's hearts she understands, and to them who are in need she distributes remedies. Whether it be in the reading of Scriptures, or in the chanting of psalms, or in the preaching of sermons, or in the offering up of prayers, in all these religious services matter and opportunity are afforded to her of seeing visions. It may possibly have happened to us, whilst this sister of ours was rapt in the Spirit, that we had discoursed in some ineffable way about the soul. After the people are dismissed at the conclusion of the sacred services, she is in the regular habit of reporting to us whatever things she may have seen in vision (for all her communications are examined with the most scrupulous care, in order that their truth may be probed).

Ronsse concludes that Perpetua's visions were probably deliberate, or, as she puts it: 'actively sought and consciously received'.⁶⁰¹ This notion is supported by Perpetua's own assertiveness

⁵⁹⁸ PPerp 4,10; 7,9; 8,4; and 10,14. Saturus also uses this phrase: *tunc gaudens experrectus sum*, PPerp 13,8.

⁵⁹⁹ Two manuscripts contain the words *experrecta sum* or *expergefata sum*, seven manuscripts contain the words *experta sum*, and one manuscript contain both *experrecta sum* and *experta sum*. Ronsse, 'Rhetoric of Martyrs', 308.

⁶⁰⁰ Perpetua never describes herself as in a state of ecstasy. According to Waldner, this is because Perpetua knew of the controversy on the 'ecstasy of folly' and 'ecstasy of sleep' prompted by Montanist and anti-Montanist interpretations of the story of the creation of the first woman in Genesis 2:21 'So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man [Septuagint: *ἐπέβαλεν ὁ θεὸς ἕκστασιν ἐπὶ τὸν Ἀδὰμ*], and he slept [...] Then the man said, "this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of man this one was taken"'. According to early Christian thinkers (Tertullian, *De Anima* 11,4), Adam is here prophesying, because of the deep sleep (ecstasy) he was put under by God, about Christ (Adam) and the Church (bone and flesh). Anti-Montanists criticised the Phrygian sect members for misunderstanding the word 'ecstasy' and practising 'out of control' prophesying, an 'ecstasy of folly' (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48.4.5-6 and 48.5.8). For the narrator, using the term 'ecstasy' is therefore in line with his Montanist tendencies. K. Waldner, 2012. 'Visions, Prophecy, and Authority in the *Passio Perpetuae*'. J. N. Bremmer and M. Formisano (eds.) *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 201-220, 211-212.

⁶⁰¹ Ronsse, 'Rhetoric of Martyrs', 293.

regarding her ability to receive a vision and also to intervene in favour of her brother to heal him in the afterlife.⁶⁰²

Moreover, as we saw in Heffernan's remarks about the nature of Perpetua's visions, the record we have of them is only a recollection of the original vision and is therefore an interpretation of the vision rather than an objective report of the vision itself. Ronsse offers an attractive and convincing theory regarding Perpetua's visions: they are 'oratory performances'. Indeed, Perpetua invariably introduces her visions with the word *video*, 'I see', in the present tense. Yet most translations into English render it as 'I saw', using the past tense, supposedly for coherence with the rest of the text. 'However,' as Ronsse argues, 'if we refuse to smooth over the strangeness of present action, Perpetua's visions become less historical and more literary, more prophetic, performative even, and more participatory'.⁶⁰³ As a matter of fact, Perpetua's visionary experiences are inscribed in the Christian martyr tradition of having visions and predicting the future in public,⁶⁰⁴ a tradition that arose from the image of the persecuted prophet, a recurrent motif in the New Testament.⁶⁰⁵ This portrayal of the martyr as prophet is also found in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, when Polycarp sees his pillow on fire and predicts the manner of his death to his companions.⁶⁰⁶ Perpetua certainly knew of this motif as it was a common image by the end of the second century as shown in Tertullian's *Ad Martyras* (2):⁶⁰⁷ 'The prison does the same service to the Christian which the desert did to the prophet.' Therefore, receiving visions and prophesying was almost expected from soon-to-be martyrs since, as Ronsse explains, 'such sophisticated and physically demonstrative practices were woven into the very fabric of Christianity and emphasised in catechetical training'.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰² *PPerp* 4,1-2, Perpetua's brother asks her to request a vision to know her fate, Perpetua then says: 'And I who knew that I speak with the Lord, whose many benefits I had experienced, gave him [her brother] my promise, saying: "I will let you know tomorrow." I did ask, and this was shown to me.'; *PPerp* 7,2-3, Perpetua shouts her dead brother's name during prayer and says: 'And I knew immediately that I was deemed worthy to request a favor for him too, and that I ought to do it. And I began to pray for him a great deal and to groan out to the Lord. At once that very night, this was shown to me.'; after seeing her brother in pain in the underworld, Perpetua asserts (*PPerp* 7,9): 'But I trusted that I could lighten his pain. And I prayed for him everyday until we moved into the military prison.'

⁶⁰³ Ronsse, 'Rhetoric of Martyrs', 311.

⁶⁰⁴ See Tertullian's quotation above. Visions were to be had in public and be shared with the congregation for interpretation.

⁶⁰⁵ For example, see Matt. 5:11-12, 23:29-31; Luke 21:15, and especially the episode of Stephen's stoning. Waldner, 'Visions, Prophecy, and Authority', 204-205. On Stephen's stoning, see Matthews, S., 2010. *Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press.

⁶⁰⁶ See pp. 59-60.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ad Martyras* was written around 202 so Perpetua would have heard this kind of discourse in her congregation before her arrest. Translated by Rev. S. Thelwall.

⁶⁰⁸ Ronsse, 'Rhetoric of Martyrs', 317.

Consequently, even though we cannot know with certainty if Perpetua indeed experienced visions, it seems reasonable to conclude that Perpetua's original retelling of them, along with their interpretation, happened in front of members of her congregation. They might have been part of a '*mise en scène*', as it were, that saw Perpetua assume the role of a prophet. This theory would be coherent with the idea of Perpetua's sections being written from lecture notes and would explain Perpetua's colloquial Latin as well as the inconsistent use of present and past tenses. Perpetua's visions are, therefore, highly representative of catechumenal teachings and show the young martyr's interpretation and understanding of that teaching, especially regarding the eschatological beliefs and theology of martyrdom of the North African congregation. However, and most importantly, they also reveal their collective memory and the will of young catechumens like Perpetua to belong to this collective memory. Perpetua, by posing as a martyr and prophet, inscribes herself in this tradition, and therefore participates in the history of Christianity.

5.3.2 *Influences/Reminiscences in the visions of Perpetua and Saturus*

As Gonzalez demonstrates in his brief analytical section on the imagery of the ladder and the dragon in *PPerp* 4,3-7, analysing and identifying sources in Perpetua's visions is not a simple task.⁶⁰⁹ The reminiscences in these visions are multiple and complex, and have engendered never-ending, multi-disciplinary academic debates. Since it would be impossible to tackle the *Passio*'s visions from every angle in this thesis, we will concentrate our analysis on the imagery that reveals Perpetua's (and her companions') theology of martyrdom, and, more generally, her representation of the Christian martyr. For clarity and simplicity, the 'prophetic' visions (Perpetua's first and fourth visions and Saturus's) will be analysed together first, and the 'Dinocrates' visions (visions two and three) will then be briefly looked at in the second part of this section.

The 'prophetic' visions

In her first vision (*PPerp* 4,3-10), Perpetua sees an incredibly long and narrow bronze ladder (*scalam aeream mirae magnitudinis*) that reaches to the sky, and weapons of all sorts are attached to its sides (*in lateribus scalae omne genus ferramentorum infixum*). Under the

⁶⁰⁹ Gonzalez, *Fate of the Dead*, 84.

ladder lies a giant serpent (*draco cubans mirae magnitudinis*) guarding it. Saturus is the first to climb and when he reaches the top, he exhorts Perpetua to follow him and not to fear the serpent. Perpetua invokes the name of Christ (*dixi ego: "Non me nocebit, in nomine Iesu Christi."*), scaring the serpent (*quasi timens me*) which then offers its head as a step (*lente eiecit caput; et quasi primum gradum calcarem, calcaui illi caput*), and she is able to climb the ladder. As mentioned above, this passage has been written about extensively. For many scholars, starting with Robinson,⁶¹⁰ the imagery here is undoubtedly borrowed from the Old Testament. Indeed, even though the ladder is a common symbol in antiquity, representing the bridge between earth and heaven,⁶¹¹ Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:12),⁶¹² which is the only mention of a ladder in the Bible, was commonly referred to by early Christian writers in their discussion of the ascent of the soul to heaven.⁶¹³ Perpetua, adding that the ladder is made of bronze, a symbolic material in the Old Testament, reinforces the link with the Hebrew Scriptures. Moreover, the serpent lying and curling at the bottom of the ladder could also be reminiscent of the snake of Genesis 3 who led Adam and Eve to commit the first sin.⁶¹⁴ To Moss, Perpetua stepping on the head of the serpent could be interpreted as a 'reversal of the "Fall of Man"' since Perpetua is 're-entering' the garden of Eden, thus defeating the devil.⁶¹⁵ The Jewish influence is also noticeable further along in Perpetua's vision when she sees the white-haired shepherd, reminiscent of Daniel's 'Ancient One' whose hair was 'like pure wool' (i.e. God, Daniel 7:9).⁶¹⁶ These connections between the Old Testament and Perpetua's visions would have been obvious to her audience, as they are to us today. These images indeed belong to our Judeo-Christian collective memory and instantly spring to mind when reading *PPerp*. It seems reasonable, therefore, to

⁶¹⁰ Robinson, *Passion of S. Perpetua*, 26-27.

⁶¹¹ For example, Amat cites 'l'échelle de Mithra, celle du Livre des Morts égyptien ou l'échelle des chamans.' From a psychological point of view, the steps of pyramids also represented the ascension of the dead to the afterlife and might have been on Perpetua's mind. Amat, J., 1994. 'Images du martyr dans les passions africaines du IIIe siècle'. J. Thomas (ed.) *L'imaginaire religieux Gréco-Romain*. Perpignan: Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, pp. 273-281, 277.

⁶¹² 'And he [Jacob] dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it'.

⁶¹³ Tertullian refers to Jacob's ladder several times in his work, see for example *Adversus Marcionem* (3,25: *scalis his iter ad caelum demonstrari, quo alii perveniant, unde alii decidant*) and with respect to martyrs in particular in *De Fuga in Persecutione* (1,4: *haec etiam scalae, quas somniat Iacob, aliis ascensum in superiora, aliis descensum ad inferiora demonstrantes*).

⁶¹⁴ Bremmer sees the reference to Perpetua stepping on the head of the snake as close to a direct quotation of the prophecy of Genesis 3:15 *ipsa (illa) tibi calcabit caput* (*Vetus Latina* version, 2.68-69). J. N. Bremmer, 2002. 'Perpetua and her Diary: Authenticity, Family and Visions.' W. Ameling (ed.). *Märtyrer und Märtyrerakten*. Stuttgart: Steiner, pp. 77-120, 101.

⁶¹⁵ Moss, *Other Christs*, 99.

⁶¹⁶ For examples of representation of God as the 'Good Shepherd', see Isaiah 40.11 ('He [God] will feed his flock like a shepherd'), Ezekiel 34.6-31 ('I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep [...] says the Lord God'), or Psalm 23.1 ('The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want').

believe that Perpetua, thanks to her catechumenal education, knew of these OT passages and used this imagery consciously. It is also consistent with her depiction as a prophet. By recalling these images in her audience's mind, Perpetua creates a place for herself in Judeo-Christian history and likens her visions to those of the ancient prophets.

However, Perpetua's visions present another level of depth as they appear to combine different influences and metaphors. Consequently, more recent scholarship has been focusing on deeper, and more psychologically oriented, meaning of the imagery in Perpetua's visions. Indeed, Perpetua's ladder is surrounded by 'swords, lances, hooks, daggers, and darts, so that if anyone climbed carelessly or without looking upwards, they would be mangled and their flesh stuck with iron' (*PPerp* 4,3). According to Heffernan, the weapons are symbolic of Perpetua's fears to be sexually assaulted in prison.⁶¹⁷ It is possible that Perpetua felt her chastity was under threat. In her last vision, when she is about to be stripped naked and oiled by young, handsome men, Perpetua becomes male, undoubtedly, to make the preparation and the fight acceptable.⁶¹⁸ The snake lying at the bottom of the ladder could also hold a sexual connotation, as it does in Genesis 3. Nevertheless, Bremmer's interpretation of Perpetua's ladder seems closer to what might have been on the young martyr's mind when she recounted her vision. For Bremmer, the steps of the ladder represent the steps leading to the tribunal (*gradus*) where Perpetua will be judged (and sentenced to death) and the weapons represent the gladiatorial games, in which she expects to die.⁶¹⁹ Perpetua might not have had this exact interpretation in mind, but she would certainly have envisaged her looming martyrdom in terms of a dangerous path to follow, eventually leading to heaven: in other words, a hazardous ladder to climb. As Middleton rightly summarises it: 'Suspended between heaven and 'hell', the ladder represents both the challenge and the final destination of the combatants who pass or fail the impending test.'⁶²⁰ This is the most likely explanation since it seems to be Perpetua's interpretation of it as well when she declares that she understood from this vision that her death was imminent (*PPerp* 4,10). In either case, Perpetua used the Hebrew symbol of Jacob's ladder to signify her ascension to heaven, but appropriated it, and adapted it, to her own situation as a soon-to-be martyr.

⁶¹⁷ Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 175-176.

⁶¹⁸ For a psychoanalysis focusing on sexual symbols in the *Passion of Perpetua*, see M. Bal, 2012. 'Perpetual Contest'. J. N. Bremmer and M. Formisano (eds.). *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 134-149. Perpetua's transformation into a man also recalls Thecla's disguise as a man which she adopts in order to be able to follow Paul without being arrested (*ATh* 40).

⁶¹⁹ Bremmer, 'Perpetua and her Diary', 97-100.

⁶²⁰ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 99.

Bremmer's theory about the gladiatorial meaning of Perpetua's first vision is further corroborated by Perpetua's last vision about her final contest.⁶²¹ In this vision, Perpetua becomes an athlete, and under the attentive gaze of her *lanista*/referee/God, she wrestles an Egyptian,⁶²² whom she identifies with Satan in her interpretation. The motif of the martyr as athlete of God is recurrent in martyrdom accounts as we saw with *Mart. Pol.* and *Mart. Lyon* and goes as far back as Paul's writings.⁶²³ Moreover, as was the case in *Mart. Lyon*, Perpetua's fight with the Egyptian has eschatological implications, since it is against Satan that she is fighting. When she is declared the victor by the *lanista* and she receives the twig, she is able to walk through the Gate of Life/heaven. Contrary to *Mart. Lyon* however, Perpetua's vision does not hold a universal meaning, she is fighting for *her* eternal life. Perpetua's journey is a solitary one and the reward is for her only (and others who go through the same ordeal, like Saturus). Perpetua's eschatological interpretation of martyrdom therefore differs from that of the author of *Mart. Lyon*, and, as we shall see shortly, from that of the *Passio*'s narrator/editor as well.

Nonetheless, *PPerp* is imbued with eschatological and apocalyptic influences; whether it is from Revelation or other Jewish-Christian apocalyptic literature, the connection is difficult to miss. Indeed, the snake lying at the bottom of the ladder is undoubtedly a reference to the 'great dragon' of Revelation 12:9 ('The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called Devil and Satan') and echoes Perpetua's last vision with the Egyptian figure, on both of whose heads she treads to claim victory and reach heaven. Moreover, as mentioned before, both Perpetua and Saturus see fellow-Christians (martyrs) dressed in white, or receiving the white robe as they enter heaven, an image recalling the souls of the martyrs of John's vision

⁶²¹ The last vision (*PPerp* 10, 1-14) is the most complex. In this vision, Pomponius (the deacon, also mentioned in 2,7 and 6,7) comes to the prison to escort Perpetua to the arena. They walk for a long time through rough terrain and reach the amphitheatre out of breath. Perpetua looks at the crowd around the arena and is surprised when the beasts are not sent at her, even though she knew she was condemned to fight them. Instead, she sees an Egyptian, whom she describes as 'foul of face', and whom she is meant to fight. Her attendants join her in the arena to help prepare her for the fight by stripping her naked and oiling her, and she becomes a man. A giant man arrives, dressed in purple and carrying a rod like a *lanista* as well as a branch with golden apples on it, her prize for defeating the Egyptian. Perpetua describes the fight in detail, and she claims victory by putting her foot on the Egyptian's head. The giant man kisses her, gives her the branch, and sends her to the Gate of Life. Perpetua's interpretation is as follows: 'I understood that I would not go to the beasts but would fight against the devil. But I knew that victory would be mine.'

⁶²² The 'foul of face' Egyptian representing the devil in Perpetua's second prophetic vision (*PPerp* 10,6) also belongs to the biblical symbolic according to which Egypt, Egyptians, and Pharaoh in particular are evil and enemies of the Jewish people (in the Old Testament, the Jewish people are enslaved by the Egyptians and Pharaoh orders all sons of Israel to be killed at birth, Exodus 1). Ezekiel, for example, characterises Pharaoh as 'the great dragon', an image for the devil for Christians (Ezekiel 29:3). See Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 261.

⁶²³ See p. 116.

(Revelation 6:9-11, 7:14).⁶²⁴ In Satorius's vision,⁶²⁵ he and Perpetua hear 'voices saying in unison: "Holy, holy, holy" ["*agios, agios, agios*"],⁶²⁶ without ceasing' (*PPerp* 12,2), a clear echo of Revelation 4:8: 'Day and night, without ceasing, they sing: "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God almighty"'.⁶²⁷

In addition, Perpetua's visions seem also to contain reminiscences of other apocryphal texts, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*⁶²⁸ or the *Shepherd of Hermas*.⁶²⁹ For instance, the episode of Perpetua's transformation into a man recalls Jesus's words in the *Gospel of Thomas* (Coptic version, 114,3): 'For every woman who shall make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven', which is what Perpetua does by turning into a man before the fight, resulting in her victory over the devil and her ascension to heaven.⁶³⁰ Regarding the *Shepherd of Hermas*, this early Christian text also contains mentions of a beast (*Vision* 4.1.6) and of a shepherd (*Vision* 5.1), but the most striking resemblance between the two texts is found in the depiction of the difficult paths both Perpetua and Hermas need to walk to reach their destinations (in their visions).⁶³¹ Satorius's appropriation of the *Shepherd* is more elaborate and theological; it also

⁶²⁴ See p. 133. Consider also, Revelation 5:11, the 'four living creatures', elders and angels are surrounding the throne on which the Lamb is sitting; in Satorius's vision, the martyrs, accompanied by four angels, are presented to God who is sitting on a throne, surrounded by four elders and many other elders behind him (*PPerp* 12,3-5).

⁶²⁵ Satorius begins his section (*PPerp* 11,2-13,8) with the words 'we had suffered and departed from the flesh', placing this vision firmly in the future and in reality. Satorius says he and Perpetua, after their martyrdom, are carried to heaven by four angels. When they arrive, they see a beautiful garden, in which four 'brighter' angels welcome them. They walk around the garden and meet others from their congregation who had been martyred 'in the same persecution' (they are not mentioned anywhere else in *PPerp*). The angels take them (Satorius and Perpetua only) to meet God. Satorius sees bright walls and a gate where four angels dress people who enter in white robes. Inside, they hear voices saying 'holy, holy, holy' incessantly and sees a man with white hair. The man, who looks old but has a young countenance, is surrounded by elders. Outside the gate, Perpetua and Satorius meet Optatus the bishop and Aspasius the priest who are arguing. They ask the martyrs to help settle their argument and Perpetua talks to them in Greek. The angels intervene, telling the bishop and the priest to let the martyrs refresh themselves and to stop fighting. Satorius sees more brothers who were also martyrs, and his vision ends with these words: 'we were all fed by an indescribable odor that sated us.' Satorius's vision is more mystical than Perpetua's and reveals a more advanced theology.

⁶²⁶ The use of the Greek language here is not surprising and reflects the liturgical aspect of the chant, see below.

⁶²⁷ Probably inspired by Isaiah 6:3. As Heffernan notes, this instance could be one of the earliest (abbreviated) attestations of the use of the *Trisagion* (prayer: 'Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, Have mercy on us') in the liturgy. See Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 286-287.

⁶²⁸ The *Gospel of Thomas* was among the manuscripts discovered in Nag-Hammadi in 1945 and its dating ranges from 60 to 140. This non-canonical work is made up of 114 sayings (in the Coptic version) attributed to Jesus.

⁶²⁹ Written around 140-150, the *Shepherd of Hermas* (also known as the *Shepherd*) comprises five visions received by Hermas (possibly the brother of Pius, bishop of Rome in the middle of the second century), alongside Commandments (or Mandates) and Parables (also referred to as Similitudes). The format is apocalyptic and consists of a series of revelations concerning repentance.

⁶³⁰ W. H. C. Frend, 1978. 'Blandina and Perpetua: Two Early Christian Heroines.' J. Rougé and R. Turcan (eds), *Les Martyrs de Lyon, 177* (Colloques Internationaux du CNRS- no. 575). Paris: Editions du CNRS, 173.

⁶³¹ Compare *PPerp* 10,3: 'he [Pomponius the deacon] held my hand and we began to pass through rough and tortuous places. At last, with difficulty we came to the amphitheater gasping for breath', and *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Vision* 1.1.3: 'a Spirit took me, and bore me away through a pathless tract, through which no man could pass: for the place was precipitous' (translated by Lightfoot, retrieved online: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/shepherd-lightfoot.html>).

interlocks with another apocryphal work known as the *Ascension of Isaiah*,⁶³² and is closely connected to the apocalyptic theme of ascension of the soul. For example, both the *Shepherd* (vision 1,4,3) and the *Ascension of Isaiah* (7,9-13) mention the departing of the soul assisted by angels towards the East, which is how Saturus describes his and Perpetua's ascent to heaven: 'We had suffered, and departed from the flesh and began to be carried eastward by four angels, whose hands did not touch us' (*PPerp* 11,2). Other similarities with the *Ascension of Isaiah* can be found in some of Saturus's words, such as 'and once we passed the first world, we saw a great light' (*PPerp* 11,4), reminiscent of Isaiah's vision of the 'first heaven' (earth) and the great light he sees, getting brighter at each stage of his ascent (*Ascension of Isaiah* 7,13; 8,21; 9,6). *I Enoch*⁶³³ and the *Apocalypse of Peter*⁶³⁴ are also considered as direct sources of inspiration of Perpetua's and Saturus's visions, especially in its description of heaven.⁶³⁵

The tone in both Perpetua's and Saturus's visions is therefore decidedly prophetic and apocalyptic.⁶³⁶ Their visions of heaven, the angels, the Good Shepherd and the souls of martyrs in heaven are all images borrowed from Judeo-Christian apocalyptic literature; a literature that no doubt was part of the catechumens' education as it was very influential in North African communities at the time.⁶³⁷ It is worth noting here that Perpetua, by appropriating these images and prophetic tradition, again depicts herself as a prophet of the Lord and therefore inscribes herself in this Judeo-Christian collective memory/history. However, as Gonzalez argues, one of *PPerp*'s main concerns is also 'the fate of the dead' and it can be read as a treatise on the ascension of the soul.⁶³⁸ By focusing on their martyr status in these visions, they reveal their own martyrological and eschatological understanding of these apocalypses. Where apocalypses offer glimpses into an otherworldly realm only attained in an eschatological future (i.e., after

⁶³² The *Ascension of Isaiah* (also the *Martyrdom of Isaiah*) is a Jewish-Christian apocalypse written around the middle of the second century. It relates the death and ascent of Isaiah to heaven from a Christian perspective since one of its main topics is the second coming of Christ.

⁶³³ *I Enoch* (also the *Book of Enoch*), a third to first century BC apocryphal Jewish apocalypse, which was popular with early Christians (cited in NT texts like Jude 1:14-15, Tertullian even calls the book Scripture, *De Cultu Feminarum* I,3), contains visions and prophecies also pertaining to the ascent of the soul to heaven.

⁶³⁴ The *Apocalypse of Peter* is a short text dated to the second century that recounts the visions of heaven and hell given to Peter during prayer.

⁶³⁵ *I Enoch* describes heaven as situated in the East and full of fragrant trees (I,28-32). The emphasis on 'the smell of Paradise' recalls Saturus's remark at the end of his vision: *Vniuersi odore inenarrabili alebamur, qui nos satiabat* (*PPerp* 13,8). Saturus's detail that 'the height of the trees was like that of the cypress' (*PPerp* 11,6) also precisely recalls Enoch's remark that the tree in heaven 'is in height like the fir' (*I Enoch* I,32,4). The *Apocalypse of Peter* shares these details; Peter is shown a bright and airy garden, full of blooming flowers and 'so great was the perfume that it was borne thence even unto us' (15-18). See Salisbury, *Death and Memory*, 102.

⁶³⁶ Gonzalez, interestingly, argues that the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* should be classified as an apocalypse rather than solely as a martyrological text. E. Gonzalez, 2013. 'The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas as an adapted apocalypse'. *Plura, Revista de Estudos de Religião* 4 (1), pp. 34-61.

⁶³⁷ Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 216.

⁶³⁸ Gonzalez, *Adapted Apocalypse*, 40.

Judgement Day), the martyrs see what will become of them after their martyrdoms. Upon reaching heaven, Saturus tells Perpetua: ‘This is what the Lord promised us: we have obtained his promise’ (*PPerp* 11,4). In *Mart. Lyon*, as in Revelation, martyrs go to heaven upon their death but must wait until the number of the martyrs is filled and fight the last battle to fully enjoy their glorious reward in the form of bodily resurrection.⁶³⁹ Perpetua’s and Saturus’s visions, by contrast, have no eschatological implications, there is no mention of cosmic battle or bodily resurrection after Judgement Day.⁶⁴⁰ The message of the visions is nonetheless soteriological: by vanquishing Satan, Christian martyrs go to heaven (and possibly all Christians if we accept they not only see martyrs but all the righteous ones). This notion is starkly contrasted with Perpetua’s visions of her pagan brother, as we shall now see.

‘Dinocrates’ visions (*PPerp* 7,4-8 and 8,1-4):

In her second and third visions, recounted one after the other by Perpetua, the young martyr describes her encounter in a ‘purgatory-like’ place with her brother Dinocrates, who died aged seven of a cancer that affected his face. In the first vision, Dinocrates is in a dark place, wearing dirty clothes, hot, thirsty, and pale, his face still affected by the cancer that killed him. Between him and Perpetua is a big chasm, and they are unable to reach each other. In this underworld, Perpetua sees a pool of water, but it is too high for the boy to reach. For Perpetua, this vision signifies that her dead, pagan brother is still suffering and needs her help. The next vision is the resolution of Dinocrates’s ordeal brought about by Perpetua’s incessant prayers. She now sees her brother clean and refreshed, with a scar instead of a wound on his face. The rim of the pool is now much lower and the boy drinks from it continuously. Perpetua sees a golden cup filled with water next to the pool, and when Dinocrates drinks from it, the cup never empties.⁶⁴¹ The child then proceeds to play with the water, ‘as children do’, and Perpetua knows ‘that he had been released from his punishment’ (*PPerp* 8,4).

⁶³⁹ See pp. 120-123.

⁶⁴⁰ This is also the case in the *Apocalypse of Peter* when Jesus’s disciples ask to see where the righteous ones go after death and Peter sees a multitude of righteous ones in heaven.

⁶⁴¹ According to Heffernan ‘the image of the ever-full golden bowl [...] appears here to represent to the beleaguered Christian community at Carthage a symbol of Christ’s ever present grace and the promise of redemption for those who suffered for faith.’ Heffernan also notes, more convincingly, that the Carthaginian community would have associated Dinocrates’s ever-full cup as ‘the limitless drink of salvation extended to all believers’ from Revelation 21:6 and 22:17. Heffernan, ‘Philology and Authorship’, 318. The image of the golden cup is also an important one in pagan literature. Interestingly, in Euripides’ *Hecuba*, as we shall see a work of possible influence in *PPerp*, Neoptolemus uses a golden cup to make his offering to his father Achilles (Polyxena’s blood whom he sacrificed, *Hecuba*, 525-540), the golden cup acting as a medium between the world of the living and the underworld.

Perpetua's description of this place as a dark, gloomy, and oppressive subterranean place where souls go after their death is very reminiscent of Hades (or even Tartarus, where souls are punished) as depicted by Homer (*Odysseus* 11.13), Virgil (*Aeneid* 6.237-243) and, in general, pagan literature. In addition, Dinocrates's inability to reach the pool of water and suffer from eternal thirst is evocative of Tantalus's punishment.⁶⁴² At first glance, it might seem incongruous for such a Judeo-Christian account to affirm a belief in such a pagan place.⁶⁴³ It could be that, despite the fact that Perpetua had recently converted to Christianity, her education (or upbringing at least) being rooted in pagan literature/culture, she would instinctively associate her pagan dead brother with the pagan underworld.⁶⁴⁴ Even though these visions are not prophetic or in direct relation to Perpetua's martyrdom, they nonetheless contain noteworthy information on Perpetua's beliefs.

Firstly, we notice that Perpetua's vision of pagan afterlife is in stark contrast with the beautiful garden of Christian heaven. Christianity is therefore the only path to salvation and eternal blissful life. In spite of her appeal in her brother's favour, Dinocrates remains in the same dark place.⁶⁴⁵ Secondly, Christian martyrs have the power to alleviate the suffering of pagan loved ones in their afterlife. Indeed, Perpetua affirms that she knew she 'was deemed worthy to request a favor for him [Dinocrates]' (*PPerp* 7,2) and that she 'trusted [she] could lighten his pain' (*PPerp* 7,9). Thirdly, we remark that, while Perpetua is intransigent in her encounters with her father and her separation from her son, she nevertheless does not entirely let go of her roots as she intercedes for her pagan brother in the afterlife. These messages might have been

Moreover, in the *Iliad*, another influential Greek work in *PPerp*, Machaon (son of Asclepius) is said to be healed after drinking from Nestor's formidable golden cup (Homer, *Iliad* 11.632-637).

⁶⁴² Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 108-109. As Moss also remarks, the motif of the thirsty dead is not uncommon in antiquity (*Odysseus* 11.36-37; *Aeneid* 5.75-78...), Moss, *Other Christs*, 134.

⁶⁴³ There are Judeo-Christian traditions of an underworld (Sheol in the Hebrew Bible, Gehenna, and Hades in the New Testament). Sheol is at first a dark place underground where all dead go (Ezekiel 31:15-18). In *1 Enoch* (22:9-13), Sheol is where the dead awaited the Resurrection of the Dead, the righteous awaiting in a heaven like garden, separated from the sinners who are punished until Judgement Day. Hades in the New Testament is a place of active punishment, characterised by the presence of fire (Matthew 5:22, 18:8-9; Hebrews 10:27; Revelation 20:10). In the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the author gives a vivid description of hell as a place where the punishment suffered by each individual is dependent on their sin, for example blasphemers are hung by their tongue and adulteresses by their hair (*Apocalypse of Peter*, 21,23). Perpetua's depiction of the underworld where she sees her brother is nonetheless much closer to the pagan Hades than the Judeo-Christian Hell.

⁶⁴⁴ This is emphasised by the use of the word *refrigerantem* to describe Dinocrates's state after Perpetua's intervention could also be a reference to the pagan practice of *refrigerium* (sharing meals with the dead), which was also, controversially, practiced by early Christians and appears to be a theme in *PPerp*. See Gonzalez, *Fate of the Dead*, 129-161. See p. 2 footnote 7.

⁶⁴⁵ Perpetua says Dinocrates is released from 'his punishment' after her intercession. As Gonzalez points out, Dinocrates is not punished for sins he might have committed but, as a child, according to Graeco-Roman tradition, he could not have fully entered the underworld and reached a better place. Gonzalez, *Fate of the Dead*, 191.

quite attractive to pagans who hesitated to cut ties with their families, and Perpetua might have thus tried to reach out to a pagan audience here.⁶⁴⁶

However, scholars have pointed out the fact that Thecla, in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, also prays for a dead pagan person (Queen Tryphaena's daughter Falconilla).⁶⁴⁷ For Moss, this 'striking parallel between Thecla and Perpetua' means that Dinocrates's story is probably simply a literary artifice inspired by Thecla's acts.⁶⁴⁸ It is possible that Perpetua created these visions to emulate Thecla. However, the level of detail in Perpetua's visions and their theological implications point at a deeper purpose in Perpetua's mind. Indeed, we can imagine that Perpetua, possibly inspired by Thecla to pray for her brother, reflected on what the non-Christian afterlife could be and, through these visions, gave her audience a glimpse of what would happen to those who do not commit to the Christian faith, in effect, prophesising about their destination after their death.

Therefore, as was the case with the apocalyptic Judeo-Christian images mentioned before, Perpetua also appropriated the collective memory of the pagan underworld and integrated it to her understanding of afterlife theology (hereby even possibly influencing the later notion of 'purgatory').⁶⁴⁹ Moreover, the 'Dinocrates' visions are consistent with Perpetua's 'prophetic' visions and participate in the portrayal of the Carthaginian martyr as a prophet. However, as we shall now see, despite the visions being a predominant feature of the *Passio*, and by consequence, Perpetua's prophetess status being emphasised, Perpetua's portrayal goes beyond that status and reveals more about the intricate and multi-cultural collective memory that shaped the theology of martyrdom of the North African community.

5.3.3 Influences/Reminiscences in Perpetua's and the Narrator's Accounts of the Events

Perpetua's description of herself, and her behaviour as depicted by the narrator, mediated through her catechumenal teaching, reveal a cultural mix of both pagan and Christian

⁶⁴⁶ A psychological analysis of this episode, which occurs a few days after Perpetua's father refuses to give her back her son, could suggest that Perpetua was indeed saddened at the idea of both upsetting her father and leaving her infant son motherless. Her response to these feelings is to give herself the power to act in their favour beyond death.

⁶⁴⁷ Queen Tryphaena, in a dream, sees her dead daughter who tells her to take Thecla as a daughter and to ask Thecla to pray for her, so she 'may be translated into the place of the righteous' (*Acts of Thecla*, 1,28). Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 207.

⁶⁴⁸ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 123.

⁶⁴⁹ Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua*, 222, 236.

influences. Indeed, Perpetua's very first words recounting⁶⁵⁰ her rhetorical argument with her father portrays her as a philosopher, with Christian intents (*PPerp* 3,1-3):

I said: "Father, do you see, for example, this vase lying here, this small jug or whatever it is?"⁶⁵¹ And he said: "I see it." And I said to him: "Can it be called by any name but what it is?" And he answered: "No." "So it is the same with me. I cannot be called anything but what I am, a Christian." Then my father, excited by this name, jumped at me as if to tear out my eyes. But he only shook me and, defeated, he left with the devil and his arguments.

Perpetua's philosophical propensities are further attested in two other instances recounted by the narrator where Perpetua directly argues with authority figures. In *PPerp* 16,2-4, Perpetua reacts to the harsh treatment of the prisoners:

Perpetua answered him [the tribune] face to face: "Why do you not allow us to refresh ourselves, as we are the most noble of the condemned belonging to Caesar and will fight on his birthday? Or is it not to your glory, if we are led out rather well fed?" The tribune was horrified and blushed; thus he ordered that they be handled more gently

In *PPerp* 18,4-6, Perpetua again confronts the tribune, who had ordered the martyrs to dress up as priests of Saturn and priestesses of Ceres:

[...] noble boldness resisted until the end. For she [Perpetua] said: "We have come here of our own free will, that our freedom not be compromised. We have pledged our lives: we do not have to do this; we had this contract with you." Injustice acknowledged justice: the tribune conceded that they be led in simply as they were.

According to Mckechnie, Perpetua's ability to use rhetoric and dialectic to argue with figures of authority cannot solely be the result of a typical Roman education. Even if Perpetua did indeed receive education as a child, it is very unlikely that her teachings included rhetoric since it was taught to adolescent boys in secondary education which usually was the point at which girls stopped their education. On the other hand, Perpetua would have studied Greek and Latin literature, starting with the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, which, as we shall see shortly, both appear to have inspired the young martyr. It is more likely then that Perpetua's rhetorical abilities came from her catechumenal teachings. Indeed, as Mckechnie demonstrates, Origen's catechumens had to go 'through a rigorous program of secular teaching before they even began on the Bible'.⁶⁵² Interestingly, Mckechnie also argues that Perpetua's father (or at least the rest of her family) agreed to Perpetua receiving catechism because of the Church's emphasis on secular

⁶⁵⁰ A significant place in the account as it carries a strong message: Perpetua is not a simple-minded, low-class woman who was persuaded to join the Christian sect, as some pagans might have objected, she is a Roman woman capable of forming rhetorical arguments and prove her point. Her testimony and words are therefore worthy of attention and praise. See also p. 146.

⁶⁵¹ "*Pater*", *inquam*, "*uides uerbi gratia uas hoc iacens, urceolum siue aliud?*" Many scholars agree that Perpetua's apparent imprecision regarding the name of the vase/jug is not due to poor vocabulary but is part of her rhetorical point. See Mckechnie, P., 1994. 'St Perpetua and Roman Education in A.D. 200'. *L'Antiquité Classique* 63, pp. 279-291, 282; and also Ronsse, 'Rhetoric of Martyrs', 319-320.

⁶⁵² Mckechnie, 'Perpetua and Roman Education', 28-281; 290-291.

teachings. If Perpetua were not of a rich background, as we saw previously, this emphasis on secular teachings could explain her apparent familiarity with Homer's and Virgil's works (and others), although, as we saw, this could also simply be due to the cultural environment present in Carthaginian every-day life. We can therefore imagine that this technique of rhetoric and argumentation was taught to catechumens so they could argue for Christianity as a reasonable and sensible religion, which would have served to counterbalance the intransigence (obstinacy) of Christians that pagans so despised.

Perpetua is indeed represented here as being in control while her interlocutors get angry and are defeated by her arguments. Many scholars have noticed similarities with Socrates, mainly residing in Perpetua's argumentations as we saw above, but also in the dichotomic way Perpetua perceives martyrdom. In the *Passio*, the martyrs, even though they are imprisoned, are free (*PPerp* 18,4), they rejoice at their own suffering (*PPerp* 18,9), Saturus's blood bath is salvation (and by extension death is life, *PPerp* 21,2-3), and death in the arena (i.e., defeat) is victory (*PPerp* 18,1). Additionally, the martyrs' insistence that they should not be mourned (*PPerp* 5,6; 20,10; 21,3) is reminiscent of Socrates's rebuke of his disciples for mourning him (*Phaedo* 117D-E). Even Perpetua's last gesture conveys an impression of self-control and determination in death, as she guides the sword to her own throat, prompting the narrator to remark that 'perhaps so great a woman, who was feared by the unclean spirit, could not otherwise be killed unless she herself willed it' (*PPerp* 21,10). As Sissa puts it: 'the way she [Perpetua] projects herself in those final hours resonates strikingly [...] with the Platonic construction of the perfect martyrdom.'⁶⁵³ As we saw in our study of *Mart. Pol.*, the motif of the philosopher and his noble death (epitomised by Socrates in collective memory) was a popular one which attracted admiration on both pagan and Christian sides. Although in the *Passio*'s case there is no obvious parallel made between Jesus and the martyrs as philosophers (as with Polycarp), it can be surmised that the allusions to Socrates and the rhetoric used by Perpetua have nonetheless the same goal as they did in *Mart. Pol.*⁶⁵⁴ Indeed, Perpetua, representing her Christian community, appears as a sensible and respectable yet determined young woman worthy of praise for her noble conduct, thus associating the Christian religion with these values. In McLarty's words: 'Christians in one part of the eastern Empire constructed an identity for themselves, presenting

⁶⁵³ Sissa, G., 2012. 'Socrates' Passion'. J. N. Bremmer and M. Formisano (eds.). *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 244-253, 253.

⁶⁵⁴ See p. 83.

their faith as intellectually and philosophically credible and comprehensible within their Graeco-Roman *milieu*.⁶⁵⁵

In this light, *PPerp* is also indebted to the *Acts of Thecla*.⁶⁵⁶ As McLarty shows, in the Thecla episode of the *Acts of Paul*, analogies with philosophies (Stoicism and Cynicism), like those with the Greek romance novel genre (*Callirhoe* in particular) serve to locate Christianity within Graeco-Roman cultural life. However, *ATH*'s message concerning the control of emotions, which is central to the text (rejection of marriage and restraint are recurrent themes, like in *PPerp*), is rendered through a rejection of pagan inspirations. Indeed, the author shows that Thecla, through the succession of her ordeals, learns that it is through her faith in Jesus that she can control her emotions (as opposed to philosophy). Therefore, while Christians can situate themselves within their pagan surroundings through the use of pagan literary genre and motifs, they also adapt them and use them to foster their own precepts. In that respect, even though *ATH* is fictional, it is a good example of the use of collective (*Mart. Pol.* possibly) and cultural (Greek romance) memory since it shows how a text uses previous narratives to further a current purpose.⁶⁵⁷

Another motif reinforcing this idea of nobility and respectability of Christians is found in the assimilation of Perpetua's behaviour to that of famous classical figures of Greek literature. For example, as Moss remarks, Perpetua's concern with her modesty in the arena is reminiscent of Polyxena in Euripides's *Hecuba*, yet Perpetua 'one-ups' Polyxena.⁶⁵⁸ Indeed, where in the Greek tragedy Polyxena only 'took good heed to fall with grace, hiding from the gaze of men what must be hidden',⁶⁵⁹ Perpetua 'reattached [her] tunic [...] to cover her thighs, more mindful of her modesty than her pain. Then looking for a pin, she pinned her dishevelled hair. For it was not proper to suffer martyrdom with her hair unpinned, lest in her glory she seem to be mourning' (*PPerp* 20,4-5).⁶⁶⁰ A specific allusion to Polyxena is difficult to ascertain from this sole anecdote, however, Perpetua's characterisation by the narrator as noble by birth,

⁶⁵⁵ McLarty, *Thecla's Devotion*, 232.

⁶⁵⁶ As we saw previously, *ATH* seems to have been of influence on Perpetua (intercession for dead pagan person, transformation into male...).

⁶⁵⁷ McLarty, *Thecla's Devotion*, 226-232.

⁶⁵⁸ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 73-74.

⁶⁵⁹ Euripides, *Hecuba* 568-570, translated by E. P. Coleridge.

⁶⁶⁰ Polyxena's character might have been of influence on Perpetua since her refusal to wear the priestess of Ceres costume in the arena and her mention of free will and freedom in death could have been inspired by Polyxena's demand that the Argive soldiers not hold her while she is sacrificed (*Hecuba* 545-550). A more convincing similarity could be found in the fact that Polyxena offers her neck to Achilles's son Neoptolemus (*Hecuba* 560-565), since Perpetua guides the dagger of the novice soldier to her own neck in *PPerp* 21,10. See also p. 158-159 footnote 641.

respectable wife and mother embodies the Greek female ideal found in Greek novels such as Chariton's *Chaireas and Callirhoe*⁶⁶¹ or Xenophon's *Ephesiaca*.⁶⁶²

Additionally, from Perpetua's words concerning her confrontation with her father, we can surmise that Greek literature did indeed have some influence on her behaviour and thoughts, thus impacting on her behaviour in the arena. Indeed, as Warwick argues, the plea of Perpetua's father to his daughter to save herself is suggestive of the *Iliad* and of Priam's words to his son Hector prior to his departure for battle. According to Warwick, 'the scenes between Perpetua and her father may have been deliberately written so as to call to mind scenes from the *Iliad*.'⁶⁶³ The parallels between the two texts are striking and numerous. For example, both Perpetua's father and Priam invoke a list of family members whom the death of the protagonist will affect (*Iliad* 22.62-65 and *PPerp* 5,3).⁶⁶⁴ Some of the words of Perpetua's father that appear strange at first glance find a parallel in Priam's or Andromache's own words to Hector and therefore seem to be part of the portrayal of Perpetua as a Greek heroine, rather than as reflecting the actual interaction between the martyr and her father. For instance, the assertion by Perpetua's father that her son would not survive without her seems incongruous,⁶⁶⁵ but in the light of the *Iliad*, we are reminded of Astyanax's fate, who, indeed, did not survive the death of his father (*Iliad* 6.407-8, 22.63-64).⁶⁶⁶ In addition, Perpetua and Hector both also share a common sadness both at the pain they cause to their loved ones (*PPerp* 3,6-8; 5,6; 6,5 and *Iliad* 6.450-455), and in their common expectation of glory in death (*Iliad* 22.304-305; *PPerp* 10,13). The assimilation of Perpetua, a young (possibly low-class) woman, to a royal Greek hero such as Hector is both unusual and unexpected in early Christian literature. However, as Warwick shows: 'the use of Hector as a literary parallel for Perpetua in the *Passio* can be seen as a strategic justification of her actions, perhaps directed against non-Christian readers who might disapprove of her decision to abandon her family, especially her infant son.'⁶⁶⁷ In that respect,

⁶⁶¹ McLarty, *Thecla's Devotion*, 144-145.

⁶⁶² Konstan, D., 2012. 'Perpetua's Martyrdom and the Metamorphosis of Narrative'. J. N. Bremmer and M. Formisano (eds.) *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 291-300.

⁶⁶³ Warwick, C., 2018. 'Christian Martyr as Homeric Hero: A Literary Allusion in Perpetua's *Passio*'. *The Classical Journal* 114 (1), pp. 86-109, 92.

⁶⁶⁴ The Trojan king and Perpetua's father also share some characteristics, both physical and behavioural, since they are both said to be old men with grey hair who repeatedly beg their children to pity their old age and their own sons (*PPerp* 5,2-3; *Iliad* 22.59-64).

⁶⁶⁵ See p. 142.

⁶⁶⁶ Perpetua's father also asserts that he has preferred her to all her brothers (*PPerp* 5,2), a very unusual thing to say for an alleged high-status Roman citizen. However, Hector's parents name him the dearest of their sons (*Iliad* 22.424-425; 24.748).

⁶⁶⁷ Warwick, 'Christian Martyr as Homeric Hero', 100.

the analogy between Perpetua and Hector serves the same purpose as that of her portrayal as a philosopher. Consequently, as was the case with the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, collective memory of admired pagan figures is invoked in the mind of the audience of the martyrdom accounts in order to either attract a pagan audience or defend Christianity.

It is difficult to tell whether Perpetua and/or the narrator of the *Passio* knew *Mart. Pol.* and might have been influenced by it. It is generally accepted that no definite connection can be established between the two accounts but according to Kozłowski, this is a possibility that cannot be excluded. To Kozłowski, the episode which sees Saturus first asserting that he predicted the manner and timing of his death and then suffering this same death (bite of a leopard) in a profusion of blood (*tanto perfusus est sanguine*) which prompts the crowd to shout “*saluum lotum, saluum lotum*” (*PPerp* 21,1-2) is reminiscent of Polycarp’s death prediction (and realisation, *Mart. Pol.* 5,2; 14,2) and fatal wound that also caused an abundant flow of blood (*πλήθος αἵματος*, *Mart. Pol.* 16,1).⁶⁶⁸ The evidence that the North African community was familiar with our version of *Mart. Pol.* itself is tenuous at best, thus we must remain cautious in ascribing any influence of *Mart. Pol.* on *PPerp*. Therefore, it seems reasonable here to only note the possibility of parallel use of pagan collective memory for the purpose of converting or defending Christianity in these two martyrdom accounts.

The same is true with *Mart. Lyon*, which, as we saw, is not attested before Eusebius’s *Historia Ecclesiae*, even though there are commonalities between *PPerp* and the Gallican letter. The most striking parallel between both accounts is found in the communities’ common belief that, in martyrdom, their suffering is shared by Christ. Although both accounts might simply be reflecting a similar understanding of a common source, like Galatians 2:19-20,⁶⁶⁹ the terminology is arresting. Indeed, the theology of martyrdom in the case of suffering for Christ as asserted in *Mart. Lyon* particularly resonates with Felicity’s words as she is about to give birth.

Compare: ‘**Suffering in him** [Sanctus], Christ accomplished great glory, foiling the adversary and presenting him to the others as an example showing that nothing is fearful where the love of the Father is, nothing painful where the glory of Christ is.’ (*Mart. Lyon* 1,23), with (*PPerp* 15,5-6):

⁶⁶⁸ In both *PPerp* and *Mart. Pol.*, the gushing out of blood from the martyr is associated with the idea of baptism. As we saw before, martyrdom is often assimilated to baptism, as in *ATH*, see p.80 and p. 106 footnote 419.

⁶⁶⁹ ‘I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.’

And as she [Felicity] was in pain, laboring with natural difficulty for a delivery at eight months, a servant of the *cataractarii* said to her: “You who are in so much pain now, what will you do when tossed to the beasts that you despised when you refused to sacrifice?” And she responded: “Now I suffer what I suffer, **but there another will be in me, who will suffer for me**, because I am to suffer for him”.

This passage is echoed by the martyrs’ fearless attitude at their entrance in the arena (the martyrs ‘tremble of joy, not of fear’, *PPerp* 18,1) and Perpetua’s lack of pain after her violent encounter with the cow (*PPerp* 20,8-9). As we saw with the martyrs of Lyon, Christian belief and martyrdom also guaranteed a pain-free death for those who confessed their faith.⁶⁷⁰ Interestingly, many scholars believe that the figure of Felicity, or at least her pregnant state, was probably created by the narrator to promote a theological point. For instance, according to Ronsse, Felicity’s words pertain to her interpretation of *Imitatio Christi* (or rather that of the narrator) in which not only does she become Christ, but Christ becomes her. As Ronsse puts it, ‘It is not just that Felicitas identifies with Christ, but that Christ identifies with her: she becomes a contemporary figure of authority because Christ is both her model and her legacy, past and future. Hers is a radical claim to divinization’; this is made possible by her being in the process of giving birth where her child can be assimilated to Christ.⁶⁷¹ Moreover, Ronsse argues that Felicity’s daughter should be seen as a rhetorical figure, representative of the catechumens who hear the story of the martyrs and will become their living testimony.⁶⁷² Perkins also expresses doubts regarding the historicity of Felicity (and possibly even Perpetua, at least as a mother). Perkins argues that the character of Felicity was created by the narrator to valorise the feminine body. In Perkins’s words:⁶⁷³

With its physical and redundant portrayal of [...] these two maternal martyrs, the *Passion* reflects issues central to the contemporary debates around Christ’s real flesh and his real birth. This correlation raises suspicions that the representation of one or both of the women has been constructed in order to valorize the maternal body featured in these debates.

There does seem to be a lot of emphasis on the body of mothers in *PPerp*. Perpetua herself makes remarks that could be qualified as rather intimate: ‘my baby did not desire my breasts any longer, nor did these become engorged, so that I was not tormented by anxiety for him nor by pain in my breasts’ (*PPerp* 6,8). The narrator also attracts the attention of the reader to the young women’s bodies (*PPerp* 20,1-2).⁶⁷⁴

But for the young women the devil had prepared the most savage of cows, an animal not customarily provided for the games, in order to match their sex with that of the beast. They were led out having been

⁶⁷⁰ See pp. 107-108.

⁶⁷¹ Ronsse, ‘Rhetoric of Martyrs’, 324.

⁶⁷² Ronsse, ‘Rhetoric of Martyrs’, 325.

⁶⁷³ Perkins, ‘Rhetoric of Maternal Body’, 167.

⁶⁷⁴ According to Kitzler, the vividness of this description in a ‘voyeur-like fashion’ both serves to involve the reader to the point they might feel like they become eyewitnesses and also to attract compassion for the martyrs. Kitzler, (2007) ‘*Passio Perpetuae* and *Acta Perpetuae*’, 13.

stripped down and clothed in nets. The crowd was horrified to see that one was a lovely young woman and the other had just given birth, her breasts still wet with milk.

However, while Perkins rightly points at the importance of the maternal body in *PPerp*, it seems to be emphasised in order to highlight the rejection of their gender, maternal status and family ties in general than simply ‘to valorize the maternal body’. Moreover, the narrator is keen to emphasise the fearlessness of the martyrs and their absence of pain whereas Perpetua clearly expresses both in her own account especially with regards to her son (*PPerp* 3,6; 3,9). By contrast the narrator says nothing of Felicity’s feelings when she leaves her new-born daughter in the care of a fellow-Christian (*PPerp* 15,7). Therefore, it is possible that the narrator added either the character of Felicity or the detail of her pregnancy to foster his theological idea of Christ suffering in the martyr that was also present in *Mart. Lyon*. This ‘advanced notion of *Imitatio Christi*’⁶⁷⁵ is a clear evidence of parallel development of a martyrological interpretation of Jesus’s injunction to follow him.⁶⁷⁶

Naturally, such emphasis on motherhood in *PPerp* caused scholars to look for Maccabean influence in *PPerp*, as was the case with *Mart. Pol.* and *Mart. Lyon*. Some similarities between 2 and 4 Maccabees and the *Passio* can be noted but a possible influence of the Maccabean story on the *Passio Perpetuae* remains impossible to assert. As a matter of fact, as van Henten points out, beyond co-incidental use of vocabulary,⁶⁷⁷ and the absence of husbands in both Perpetua’s and Felicity’s cases and for the mother of the seven sons,⁶⁷⁸ the idea of motherhood and motherly love, so central in the Maccabean story, is turned around in *PPerp*.⁶⁷⁹ Indeed, while the Maccabean mother encouraged her sons to suffer for God and watched them die one by one in the faith that she would see them in the afterlife, Perpetua and Felicity completely reject their children. As Middleton remarks, while martyrdom is encouraged by family in Jewish accounts like Maccabees, in early Christianity, family is either a ‘potential *cause*’ of martyrdom (in the New Testament),⁶⁸⁰ or a threat to it, as is the case in *PPerp*.⁶⁸¹ In *PPerp*, mothers cannot be

⁶⁷⁵ As opposed to the more straight-forward and literal interpretation found in *Mart. Pol.*

⁶⁷⁶ Matthew 16:24-25: ‘Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it”’.

⁶⁷⁷ In both stories the martyrs are asked to have pity on members of their families because of their old or young age. See for example *PPerp* 5,2-3 and 2 Macc. 7,27 and 4 Macc. 5,12.

⁶⁷⁸ See p. 77 for the full story of the mother and her seven sons.

⁶⁷⁹ J. W. van Henten, 2012. ‘The *Passio Perpetuae* and Jewish Martyrdom’. J. N. Bremmer and M. Formisano (eds.) *Perpetua’s Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 118-134, 133.

⁶⁸⁰ ‘Brother will betray brother to death. And a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death’ (Mark 13:12, also Matt. 10:21 and Luke 21:16).

⁶⁸¹ P. Middleton, 2016. “‘Suffer Little Children’: Child Sacrifice, Martyrdom, and Identity Formation in Judaism and Christianity’. *Journal of Religion and Violence* 4 (3), pp. 337-356, 348.

martyrs, and they have to break the ties between them and their families, including their babies, in order to become martyrs.⁶⁸² In that respect, Perpetua and Felicity are in direct opposition with Blandina who, as we saw, was not a mother but assumed this role as she encouraged her fellow-Christians, and especially the young Ponticus, in the arena.⁶⁸³

However, there is a possible hint in *PPerp* that at least the narrator knew of the Maccabean narrative. Indeed, Saturus's words of threat against the pagan onlookers ("take a close look at our faces, that you might recognize us when the day comes", *PPerp* 17,2)⁶⁸⁴ bring to mind the sons' threats towards king Antiochus (2 Macc.7,14-19). Of course, these words of threats also resonate with an influential text in *PPerp*, Revelation. As we saw in Perpetua's visions, Perpetua's understanding of heaven, and martyrdom in general, owes much to the imagery of Revelation. However, Perpetua's eschatology is inexistent in the sense that after her death, she expects to go to heaven immediately, without further cosmic battle or bodily resurrection. The narrator, on the other hand, expresses his eschatological expectations first in his introduction and then through the martyrs themselves. In *PPerp* 1,4, the narrator quotes Acts directly (Acts 2:17-18): 'For, in the last days, says the Lord, I will pour out of my spirit over all flesh, and their sons and daughters will prophesy; and I will pour out of my spirit over slaves of both sexes; young men will see visions and old men will dream dreams'. This quotation sets the tone of the account, as according to the narrator, Perpetua's and Saturus's prophecies indicate that they are living in the last days. Saturus, by asking the non-believers to remember his face for when Judgement Day comes is an allusion to Revelation 20:3, which stipulates that martyrs will have the authority to judge. However, Saturus, in his vision, does not put himself in this position of authority, nor does Perpetua. By consequence, although the narrator mainly follows Perpetua's lead on the description of herself,⁶⁸⁵ it seems, nonetheless, that the narrator is also attempting here to 'rectify' Perpetua's and Saturus's eschatology and theology of martyrdom. Did Perpetua and Saturus believe in the same eschatology but simply omitted it in their visions or was it not part of the catechumenal training? This difference in eschatological belief between the martyrs and the narrator is difficult to reconcile but it could simply be due to the fact that

⁶⁸² This is also reflected in the crowd's reaction to seeing the naked bodies of Perpetua and Felicity in the arena (*PPerp* 20,2-3): 'The crowd was horrified to see that one was a lovely young woman and the other had just given birth, her breasts still wet with milk. So they were taken back and clad in girdled tunics.' As Salisbury remarks, the crowd had then just discovered that motherhood and martyrdom are incompatible and had to ask for them to be covered to be able to dissociate them. Salisbury, *Blood of Martyrs*, 122.

⁶⁸³ See pp. 111-112.

⁶⁸⁴ And also, *PPerp* 18,8: "You judge us but God judges you".

⁶⁸⁵ The narrator indeed refers to Perpetua's account several times in his narrative: 'Perpetua sang, already treading on the head of the Egyptian' (*PPerp* 18,7); 'Saturus especially, who was the first to climb the ladder, was likewise the first to give up the spirit. For he was expecting Perpetua as well.' (*PPerp* 21,8).

the martyrs, faced with their imminent deaths, described the immediate results of their martyrdom, the first stage as it were, which is their entrance into heaven. It therefore fell to the narrator to explain to the audience what the whole implications of martyrdom were. Alternatively, the narrator might have been inspired by the martyrdoms of members of his own community to look deeper into the meaning of these events. In his research, the narrator might have come across other texts, such as *Mart. Pol.* (maybe even *Mart. Lyon* although this claim cannot be substantiated) and Judeo-Christian apocalyptic literature and decided to inscribe the martyrs' accounts into this larger context.

We can therefore argue that this discrepancy within the *Passio* shows us the process by which the authors of other martyrdom accounts came to shape their theology of martyrdom, how it came to be taught through catechumenal teachings and liturgical use, and how it evolved depending on how the martyrs themselves behaved and on what they believed. The mix of Jewish and pagan noble death collective and cultural memory, assimilated to the Christian understanding of martyrdom found in previous martyrdom accounts resulted in one of the most cherished and most influential martyrdom accounts which quickly became a model for the genre and inspired many later theological themes like the cult of the saints, sacred women, and purgatory. Hardly fifty years separate the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* from the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, but there is a clear evolution in the representation of martyrs, who went from being simple imitators of Christ to heroes engaged in a cosmic battle against Satan who were capable of seeing heaven and hell and interceding for the dead.

Conclusion

Early Christian theology of martyrdom evolved rapidly in the first two centuries after Jesus's death. With remarkable consistency throughout the Roman Empire, the Christian concept of martyrdom was both developed and shaped by the earliest martyrdom accounts. The role these texts came to play in the creation of the nascent Christian identity is evident in the study of the history of early Christianity.

However, as we saw in chapter one, the historical analysis of early Christian martyrdom accounts often proves frustrating and unsatisfying. The confrontation of pagan sources and early Christian writings, whether from apologists, historians, or martyrdom accounts, tends to reveal a mismatch between Christian claims of persecution by the Roman authorities and the general attitude of the Romans towards Christians.⁶⁸⁶ This led some scholars to doubt the authenticity of the account, as well as the historicity and veracity of the events they describe. In an attempt to reconcile the literary and historical evidence for early Christian martyrdom, extensive academic research on all aspects of this phenomenon has been conducted for decades, somewhat unfruitfully. The debates on the origins and nature of the concept of martyrdom remain unsettled, the discrepancies between the texts and our historical knowledge of early Christianity in its Roman settings remain unexplained. The present thesis, therefore, sought to offer an alternative approach to the question of authenticity and historicity in pre-Decian martyrdom accounts.

Consequently, in chapter two we explored the notion of collective memory. This approach, when applied to martyrdom accounts, is, in effect, rather simple. In essence, it posits that the earliest accounts should neither be solely seen as accurate historical reports of events witnessed by early Christians (i.e., persecution and martyrdom), nor simply as pieces of early Christian propaganda, a view defended by some scholars, but rather as expression of memories, with all the processes and implications involved in the mechanism of remembering. Memories are imperfect and subject to distortion from varied pressures like the audience, literary conventions, interpretation, interests, and motivations. Moreover, memories, recollections, and their expression in literary form are necessarily shaped by the past and the present as well as the

⁶⁸⁶ At the governmental level at least. The emperors' edicts (Trajan followed by Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius) do not advocate active persecution of the Christians even though they do validate the execution of Christians. The charges under which the Christians were tried remain unclear. See p. 64, footnote 252 and pp. 102-105.

cultural and historical context in which both the eyewitnesses relating the events and the authors writing the stories lived.

As we saw with the example of Masada and the Columbine Massacre, a story is often shaped and modified according to the specific needs or interpretation of a community regardless of accuracy.⁶⁸⁷ The testimony of a witness is only relevant in that it provides a concrete starting-point for a story, a ‘historical fact’ to back up the narrative the author eventually elaborates upon. While some scholars like Candida Moss see this as conscious manipulation (either forgery or propaganda),⁶⁸⁸ approaching early Christian martyrdom accounts from the collective memory theory point of view allows for a more moderate conclusion to the problem of discrepancies and historical inconsistencies in these texts. Indeed, the process of collective memory is a natural one, often unconscious. People interpret their present situation in the light of their past and are influenced by recognisable patterns or ‘reminiscences’ that help them express new experiences in known, familiar terms and references.⁶⁸⁹

This is particularly obvious in early Christian martyrdom accounts with the image of noble death and especially *mors philosophi* with the figure of Socrates being brought to the mind of the audience through reminiscences and allusions. As we saw in chapter three, the image of Socrates plays an important role in the earliest Christian martyrdom account the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. In this narrative, Polycarp’s death is depicted as noble and exemplary, like that of Socrates, an image alluded to by referencing well-known aspects of Socrates’s death such as the composure of the Greek philosopher and his willingness to die for the benefit of others (as a role model). The use of pagan figures is also noticeable in the *Passion of Perpetua* where Greek heroes are emulated by Perpetua (such as Hector). These allusions to pagan historical and literary tradition should however not be construed as early Christian propaganda used for either apologetic or proselytist purposes. The author of *Mart. Pol.*, by portraying Polycarp’s death in the light of Socrates’s noble death offers a more respectable and dignified death to an old man executed as a criminal. In *PPerp*, the editor/narrator does seem to have an agenda (possibly defending Montanism), but Perpetua’s words betray the young woman’s concerns, fears, and hope. Portraying herself as a Greek heroine brings some dignity and comfort to the Carthaginian martyr in her last days. In these cases, the pagan cultural allusions simply reveal

⁶⁸⁷ See pp. 36-38.

⁶⁸⁸ See especially Moss, *Myth of Persecution*.

⁶⁸⁹ As seen in chapter two, this is the cultural aspect of the collective memory theory, often referred to as cultural memory. See pp. 38-40.

the cultural context in which the martyrs, eyewitnesses, and authors lived and how they made use of their cultural memory to understand/interpret and explain/express their present situation.

Regarding influences, reminiscences, and even in some cases, intertextuality of the New Testament and other early Christian (and Jewish) texts in early Christian martyrdom accounts, it seems more accurate to treat these references as collective memory rather than simply attribute them to the cultural context. Indeed, as we saw in our case studies, the authors of the martyrdom accounts inscribed the events they witnessed within the historical settings of the New Testament. However, the interpretation of these texts by the various communities we studied differed from one text to the other. In *Mart. Pol.*, the Gospels (the Passion narrative in particular) provide the example to follow, a way to imitate Christ and answer Jesus's call to take up the cross. In the *Martyrs of Lyon* however, the martyrs actively participate in the fight against the devil and play an important role in bringing about the End of Days. Here, Revelation is a reality, a part of these Christians' history. In *Mart. Lyon* we can see emerging the interpretation of earlier martyrdom accounts (*Mart. Pol.* principally) in the light of NT texts. The natural and logical interpretation of *Mart. Pol.* from the point of view of the author of *Mart. Lyon* is that the souls dressed in white resting under the altar in Heaven mentioned in Revelation are martyrs such as Polycarp.⁶⁹⁰ The process of collective memory is therefore blatant in this instance since the use of *Mart. Pol.* in *Mart. Lyon* perfectly illustrates how an older text is interpreted by a community according to their present situation. *Mart. Pol.*'s influence is also visible in the format of the account and the vocabulary used by the author of *Mart. Lyon* (e.g., 'crown of immortality') but the more sophisticated eschatology found in *Mart. Lyon* based on Revelation reveals the adaptation and evolution of the theology of martyrdom which was emergent in *Mart. Pol.* with the notion of *Imitatio Christi*.

By contrast, in *PPerp*, Perpetua inscribes herself in early Christian history by assuming the traditional role of the prophet, capable to communicate with angelic beings and seeing the realms of the dead both pagan and Christian. Although there is a clear influence of Revelation in *PPerp*, Perpetua's role is more apocalyptic than eschatological. In *PPerp* there is no mention of End of Days, the battle against Satan is individual and does not occur at a predetermined time, the reward for a martyr's death is immediate. Therefore, in Perpetua's congregation, Revelation was interpreted differently than in Lyon twenty-five years prior, probably because by the end of the second century the second coming of Christ seemed less

⁶⁹⁰ See p. 120.

likely to occur during their lifetime. Moreover, whereas the martyrs of Lyon's rewards and powers were to be given to them after the final victory over Satan, Perpetua and Saturus both enter Heaven upon their martyrdom and Perpetua even has the power to intercede for her dead pagan brother before her own death. The theology of martyrdom in *PPerp* therefore clearly differs from that of *Mart. Lyon*, even though both texts inscribe themselves in the history of the NT and Revelation in particular. In addition, *PPerp*'s importance in early Christian collective memory cannot be understated since Perpetua's ability to intercede for the dead (possibly inspired by the fictional account the *Acts of Thecla*) prefigures the cult of the saints and especially that of the sacred woman central to medieval Christianity. Because of the nature of Revelation and its use by early Christian authors in martyrdom accounts, the reality these texts express is distorted; history, memory, past, present, and future are fluid, and the (historical) 'truth' becomes irrelevant. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Martyrs of Lyon*, and the *Passion of Perpetua* are, at their core, authentic texts that relate the collective memory of their authors and protagonists according to their interpretation of their own reality.

In brief, we can conclude that early Christian martyrdom is a polarising subject, even to the point that its very definition and origins are still debated. In a historian's 'ideal world', martyrdom accounts would faithfully report the events of the past. However, history's 'hard facts' are elusive in early Christian accounts and many scholars came to doubt both the historicity and, by consequence, the authenticity of these martyrdom narratives. Should we then abandon all hope to discover the truth and classify all early Christian martyrdom accounts as unreliable fictional narratives of little historical merit, as Moss suggests? Certainly, focusing on either a solely historical or discourse analysis of early Christian martyrdom accounts mostly leads to overreading or overinterpreting details in the account, and, ultimately, reinforces the argument for the lack of authenticity. Martyrdom as a discourse has successfully been studied before and it is now accepted that the authors (and subsequent editors) of early martyrdom accounts followed various agendas. However, if used as sole methodology of inquiry, discourse analysis tends to see these accounts as early Christian propaganda, denying them any possible historicity, authenticity, and even, to a certain extent, humanity. In this thesis, I therefore attempted to reclaim these values for three of the earliest martyrdom accounts by exposing them for what they are: reports based on memories of highly traumatic events in which the authors tried to make sense of events they had witnessed (or heard of), expressed in terms that were familiar to them, most often a mix of collective cultural images such as those of Jesus, Socrates,

the Maccabean martyrs, or Greek heroes. By doing so, the authors (and in *PPerp*'s case, the martyrs themselves) both integrated in their accounts their interpretation of martyrdom from the New Testament and previous martyrdom narratives, and developed their own theology of martyrdom, according to their situation, their cultural milieu, and their motivation to write. The analysis of these three early martyrdom stories revealed that, from the collective memory point of view, discrepancies and inconsistencies within early Christian texts need not be construed as signs of forgery or heavy posterior editing, but in fact demonstrate a rather natural writing process based on both 'imperfect memories' and cultural reminiscences. Therefore, in the case of early Christian martyrdom accounts, reality should be understood as subjective and dependent on the beliefs of the community of the martyrs. The martyrs' battle against Satan, their victory in martyrdom, the eternal life awaiting them in heaven are all part of *their* reality, *their* history.

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