

“All Turned on Us Like Beasts”

Legal Negotiation and the Persecution of Lyon and Vienne¹

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At the very beginning of the fifth book of his *Ecclesiastical History*, the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–340 CE) discusses a series of events that, in his view, serves to illustrate the position of Christians in the Roman world at the end of the second century CE (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V pr. 1 and V 2:1).² The author refers to this period in history as one of great turmoil for his community, and compares the “wars for the peace of the soul” he is about to recount to the wars about earthly matters discussed by other historians. Rather than describing these events himself, however, he quotes lengthy passages from a fascinating piece of writing that he believes is “worthy of everlasting remembrance.”³ The document in question is a letter written by the Christian communities of Lyon and nearby Vienne to their brethren in Asia and Phrygia, which contains a harrowing eyewitness account of the persecutions that took place in their region.

The reports from these communities are not only remarkable because the authors are said to have been directly connected to the events they describe, but also because the letter as transmitted to us is generally considered to be largely authentic. While some have suggested

¹ My warmest gratitude goes out to the participants in the colloquium “Early Christian Encounters with Town and Countryside (Leiden, May 2017), and to the members of the Dutch “Stichting Oudchristelijke Studiën” (Society of Early Christian Studies) for their questions and comments regarding earlier versions of this paper. I would like to extend special thanks to Jürgen K. Zangenberg and Jan Bremmer for their respective useful suggestions.

² A number of editions of the relevant passage are available. Musurillo, *Christian Martyrs*, 62-85 provides both the Greek text and an English translation, as does Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives*, 145-73. The latter makes extensive use of the edition in Bastiaensen, *Acti e Passioni*. Another recent edition may be found in Seelinger and Wischmeyer, *Märtyrerliteratur*. For the entirety of the *Ecclesiastical History*, see the translation of Lake and Oulton in the Loeb Classical Library. All translations of the *Ecclesiastical History* contained in this paper have been adapted from the Loeb edition. Translations from Pliny the Younger’s *Epistulae* are my own.

³ It should be emphasized that Eusebius presents only parts of the letter, but that he claims to have had access to the entirety of the document (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V pr. 2), and indicates when passages have been omitted. See Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives*, 145. This seems to suggest a degree of faithfulness to the available sources on Eusebius’ part. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 104-6 has likewise argued against the invention of the letter by Eusebius.

that the events discussed in the letter took place in Galatia, rather than Gaul,⁴ this view has overwhelmingly been dismissed.⁵ In large part, this is due to the fact that no real evidence for an error of this magnitude exists. The argument for relocating the events described by Eusebius to the eastern Mediterranean is primarily based on the fact that Lyon and Vienne were part of different provinces, and therefore different jurisdictions, but are nonetheless described as the joint target of the persecution in Eusebius' introduction to the letter.⁶ However, given the geographical proximity of the two towns – which were connected by both road and river – and the likelihood that close relations existed between their respective Christian communities, we might ask ourselves if such an extreme solution to this curiosity is warranted: it has been suggested that Lyon and Vienne fell under the authority of the same bishop, and that Sanctus, the deacon of Vienne, was arrested while he was visiting Lyon.⁷ If this is indeed true, it seems more probable that the events described in the letter took place in Lyon, and that a number of Christians from Vienne became involved due to their presence in that city.⁸ It has also been suggested that the author of the letter appears to have been familiar with the Latin translation of Biblical texts, which makes a western origin more likely.⁹ The traditional date of 177 CE ascribed to the persecution is likewise widely considered to be at least approximately accurate, despite the fact that this dating is not included in the letter itself, but rather in Eusebius' introduction to it.¹⁰ It is largely the reputation of Marcus Aurelius as a moderate and not particularly anti-Christian emperor that has been used to argue that these events must have taken

⁴ Colin, *Empire des Antonins*, 59.

⁵ Barnes, "Pre-Decian Acta", 517; Keresztes, "Massacre", 75; Musurillo, *Christian Martyrs*, xx.

⁶ Colin, *Empire des Antonins*, 20.

⁷ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 2. While Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 103 has drawn attention to the fact that the cities of Lyon and Vienne were historically at odds with each other, as is stated in Tacitus, *Hist.* 1:65, the same thus need not have held true for the Christian communities of the region.

⁸ It may be tentatively noted that the descriptions of the persecution in the letter seem to refer to a single city, rather than multiple: Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:8 mentions only a single city council, and only a single prison. The emphasis on the role of the mob in the text may likewise suggest a single urban environment.

⁹ Robinson, *Perpetua*, 97-100. The connection between this observation and the origin of the letter in the western empire is made by Barnes, "Pre-Decian Acta", 517.

¹⁰ Barnes, "Pre-Decian Acta", 518; Colin, *Empire des Antonins*, 12; Dehandschutter, "Community of Martyrs", 6-8; Keresztes, "Nero to the Severi", 299. Notably, Eusebius presents a date of 166-7 in his *Chronicon*. For the idea that the date in the *Ecclesiastical History* is a correction of an earlier mistake in the *Chronicon*, see Barnes, "Eusebius", 143.

place at a significantly later date.¹¹ The noted increase in apologetic Christian literature in the late second century CE, however, seems to belie this argument.¹²

The time and place of the events described in the letter are thus fairly well established. This is not to say, however, that the text of the letter is to be regarded uncritically: In recent years, more attention has been paid to the literary aims of both Eusebius and the author(s) of the letter,¹³ which has included an exploration of the idea that the original missive was edited at some point during its transmission. It should be noted, however, that the debate on this subject has generally been concerned with the portrayal of the martyrs in the letter, and the possible theological or ideological implications of that portrayal. By contrast, the legal proceedings referred to in the letter do not appear to have been the primary concern of any potential editor, and their description is considered to be largely accurate even by Winrich A. Löhr, whose analysis is still seen as a foundational work by many authors who take a more critical view of the text presented by Eusebius.¹⁴ The overwhelming majority of scholarship thus continues to hold that the core of legal proceedings described in the missive is largely authentic. As such, this letter provides one of the very few examples of interaction between Christians and the Roman authorities in the western provinces of the Roman Empire transmitted to us. Eusebius' work, and reports on early Christianity in general, tend to be strongly focussed on the Greek-speaking east, while being comparatively neglectful towards Latin sources and the west.¹⁵ For this reason, the events in Lyon and Vienne provide valuable insight into an area of the Empire we otherwise rarely get to see.

¹¹ Thompson, "Alleged Persecution", 361. Thompson also argues that Marcus Aurelius would not have tolerated what he refers to as "flagrant violations of Roman law". See *Ibidem*, 379-80 and Thompson, "Certain Criticisms", 252-4. Although this line of thinking is followed by Corke-Webster, "Literary Historian", 200f, the idea that the governor in Lyon acted contrary to Roman administrative procedures is by no means beyond dispute, as we shall see below.

¹² Keresztes, "Nero to the Severi", 301f.

¹³ See, for instance, Corke-Webster, "Literary Historian" and Dehandschutter, "Community of Martyrs", as well as Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom* and Moss, *Other Christs*, 90-4. The latter work provides interesting insights into the various sets of metaphors employed in the letter.

¹⁴ Löhr, "Der Brief", 138 and 143f. Löhr rejects the descriptions in the letter on a number of smaller points, which will be discussed in more detail below.

¹⁵ Barnes, "Eusebius", 138.

It is precisely this uniqueness, combined with the particularly gruesome descriptions of torture and death contained in the letter, that has led scholars to see the persecution in Lyon and Vienne as an extraordinary, or even abnormal, event that warrants an explanation. Various researchers have approached these events with the assumption that they are somehow different from any anti-Christian actions that preceded them, and explanations abound as to why this would have been the case.¹⁶ So far, attention has primarily been directed at centralized imperial legislation that could have contributed to a spike in popular violence against Christians, either in Gaul specifically, or throughout the Empire. The most popular suggestions include a law that allowed for the use of convicts as cheap gladiators,¹⁷ an edict that prescribed universal sacrifice¹⁸ and an edict that was originally aimed at astrologers and other diviners, but was nonetheless used to target Christians.¹⁹ In the latter two cases, however, we might ask ourselves to what extent Gaul would have been affected by these measures in practice. The known measures regarding divination in particular generally only applied to the city of Rome and the immediately surrounding area, and it is very likely that the measure ascribed to Marcus Aurelius (*D.* 48.19.30) was of a similarly limited scope.²⁰ It should also be noted that the text of this imperial rescript only refers to banishment, and thus does not explain the executions that took place in Lyon. Universal sacrifice likewise appears to be without substantial precedent until the time of Decius, and there is little conclusive evidence to suggest that such a measure was ever enforced by law before that time.²¹

¹⁶ Keresztes, "Massacre", 86; Keresztes, "Nero to the Severi", 301. The minutes published in Grégoire, "Procès-verbeaux", 303f even cite a remark by M. Orgels, suggesting that the events in Lyon were part of the first empire-wide persecution.

¹⁷ Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius", 114f; Grégoire, "Procès-verbeaux", 300f; Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 5; Keresztes, "Nero to the Severi", 303; Moeller, "Trinci"; Oliver/Palmer, "Minutes", 324-7.

¹⁸ Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius", 114f; Keresztes, "Nero to the Severi", 300.

¹⁹ Benko, *Pagan Rome*, 43.

²⁰ It is particularly interesting that this measure is described as a rescript –an imperial response to a particular legal question posed by one of his subjects. Such responses could be used as precedent, but were primarily intended as a resolution to a specific case. As such, this passage is unlikely to have had significant influence on the events in Lyon.

²¹ Rives, "Decree of Decius", 144-7.

Despite this wide range of suggestions for centralized causes of the persecution, however, little attention has been paid to the actual procedures described by the survivors of the persecutions. For the most part, it has been suggested that this was simply a case of officials "yielding to popular feeling"²² and possibly even acting unlawfully in order to do so.²³ However, a more thorough analysis of the legal procedures is generally omitted. In what follows, I would like to provide a re-examination of the events in Lyon and Vienne in the context of Roman provincial administration. Such an analysis may not only help us to determine to what extent this particular persecution was indeed unique, but also to see more clearly what factors played a part in the Roman administration's treatment of the early Christian movement. I will begin by briefly introducing the framework of Roman government at the time of the persecutions, before turning to the particulars of the situation in Lyon: what were the origins of the persecution, what complaints against the Christian community were brought forward, and who played a part in determining the course of events? Throughout this discussion, I will adhere to the chronology provided by the text as much as possible, since this makes it easier to determine at which points in time the various actors became involved.

I. Rome and the Provinces

When discussing matters of Roman provincial administration, it is essential to first consider which institutions and individuals played a part in the creation and enforcement of policy. Of

²² Musurillo, "Christian Martyrs", xx.

²³ Coleman-Norton, *Roman State*, 1180; Colin, *Empire des Antonins*, 20; Keresztes, "Massacre", 75 and 80. As mentioned above, Thompson and Corke-Webster see the perceived illegality of the governor's action as a reason to reject the authenticity of the letter. See Thompson, "Alleged Persecution", 379f and "Certain Criticisms", 252-4, as well as Corke-Webster, "Literary Historian", 200f.

course, it goes without saying that the emperor stood at the very top of the political pyramid, but he could hardly be in two places at once – as tends to be the case in a system of government that is quite literally monarchical. For this reason, the emperor had to rely strongly on his provincial governors, who not only had to keep him informed of what was going on in the various corners of the Empire, but were also responsible for executing the emperor's wishes.²⁴

That is not to say, however, that the Empire was a straight-forward top-down organization, in which the governors were simply intermediaries between emperor and subjects. In fact, it has been argued that such a system, in which the emperor had full and complete control, would have been unsustainable to say the least: we know the number of demands made of emperors could at times become overwhelming, and that not only the enforcement but also the making of decisions were therefore delegated to governors or other officials with some frequency.²⁵

The governor was the primary legal and administrative authority in the province under his control, and could to a certain extent do what he considered to be best. This did not mean that a governor's freedom to act was unlimited: imperial approval for one's actions could be necessary, and even politically advantageous, in case trouble ever arose. In such cases, it was undoubtedly better to have asked for permission than to be forced to ask for forgiveness. In addition, asking for the emperor's advice or permission was an excellent way of showing loyalty and humility, both of which were essential for a governor's political career. For this reason, emperors tended to receive frequent messages from their representatives. Nevertheless, delegating remained an essential part of the Roman administrative process. Even when governors asked their superior for help in specific matters, it was not unusual for the emperor

²⁴ Fuhrmann, *Policing*, 148-50.

²⁵ Eck, "Provincial Administration", 271; Fuhrmann, *Policing*, 148f; Galsterer, "Administration", 407. See also Aelius Aristides, *Or.* 26:31f for the assertion that governors contributed significantly to the imperial workload by consulting their superiors about even the smallest of matters.

to tell him to judge matters 'on the ground', as we know happened repeatedly when Pliny the Younger was governor of the province Bithynia et Pontus:

It would be harsh to compel the provincials to go to the college of priests if they wish to transfer the remains of their relatives from one place to the other for a just reason. You should therefore follow the example of those who held this province before you, and grant or deny each request as the case demands. (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 69)

Trajan here emphasizes the long-standing tradition of governors making their own decisions based on the facts presented to them by the inhabitants of their province. Both here and throughout the rest of their correspondence he repeatedly encourages Pliny to do the same,²⁶ often with a reference to practicality. After all, the governor was present in the province itself, and could thus more easily judge what was needed – and what was wanted.

In addition to the emperor, the governor invariably had to contend with the inhabitants of his province. A good relationship with the local elites was particularly important, since the governor could be strongly dependent on their cooperation in upholding public order.²⁷ Furthermore, it was not unusual for locals to contact the emperor directly in the context of a system that has become known as 'petition and response'.²⁸ While emperors often asked the governor to resolve such matters, as discussed above,²⁹ it is important to remember that direct contact between emperors and the population of the Empire was indeed possible. This would have been especially relevant when the locals were dissatisfied with their governor. Uprisings,

²⁶ See Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 40; X 62; X 84 and X 117 for additional examples.

²⁷ Ando, "Administration", 181; Fuhrmann, *Policing*, 174; Roselaar, "Local Administration", 127-9. See Fuhrmann, *Policing*, 45-87 for the importance of local self-help.

²⁸ Fuhrmann, *Policing*, 148-50; Galsterer, "Administration", 407f; Millar, *Emperor*. For some critical remarks on this model of provincial administration, see Ando, "Petition and Response" who does not dismiss the importance of bottom-up initiative entirely, but cautions against diminishing the role of the emperor.

²⁹ See Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 76 and X 84 for examples.

or indeed complaints made to the emperor by the local elites, could be disastrous for a governor's career, and he would therefore have been eager to avoid such situations.³⁰

It is best, therefore, to see the administration of the Roman provinces as a continuous cycle of negotiations in which the governor was, in a sense, trapped in the middle: he had to take both the wishes of his emperor and those of the population of his province into account if he wanted to be considered successful, and maintain his position. The emperor depended on his governors for both information and the execution of policy, while both officials depended on the local elites to maintain peace and quiet, which was, it may well be argued, the primary goal of any Roman governor operating in the provinces. On the other hand, the locals depended on the goodwill of both governor and emperor to provide policy that suited their needs, and possibly even political privileges. In practice, therefore, none of the actors could simply impose his will on the others, but instead had to convince them to follow the course of action he saw as most beneficial.

II. The Origin of the Persecution

Let us now turn back to the situation in Lyon in the late second century CE. At the very beginning of the letter cited by Eusebius, we find what may well be seen as a description of the social position of Christians in the city on the eve of the persecutions. The author mentions that Christians were excluded from all public places, including "houses, baths and the marketplace", before being banned from "being seen in any place whatsoever" (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:5).

³⁰ A fascinating example may be found in Philo of Alexandria, *Legatio ad Gaium*. For the difficult position of the Roman governor see Kokkinia, "Ruling, Inducing, Arguing", *passim*.

While it is easy to assume that this is an official policy, possibly instituted by the local authorities to isolate the local Christians as a precursor to more violent actions, this suggestion does not, in the end, hold up:³¹ it is simply unlikely that any official would have the authority to ban Christians from other people's houses.³² In addition, this paragraph is not yet part of the persecution-narrative proper, but rather of a passage describing the persecutions as a struggle of the saints with the great adversary of the Christians and his servants. While the author of the letter uses this passage to briefly introduce the hostilities faced by the Christians of the city, and to predict a final struggle between the forces of good and evil, he does not yet make mention of physical violence. Therefore, this phrase is more likely to suggest a wide-spread sense of unease and hostility towards Lyon's Christians, thus providing the setting for what was to follow.

That is not to say, however, that these opening paragraphs are without significance for later events. In fact, from the very beginning of the disturbances onwards, we find that the initiative rested with Lyon's city council, and in particular with the general population of the town:

First, they (*i.e.*, the Christians) nobly bore what the mob heaped on them, shouts and blows and dragging and robberies and stonings and imprisonment, and all those things an angry mob is wont to do to foes and enemies. (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:7)

In this passage, and throughout the text of the letter, the author repeatedly refers to the perpetrators of the violence as "the mob" (using the terms ὄχλος and πλῆθος alternately), and remarks that the actions of this mob were not at all uncommon for a population that was

³¹ Keresztes, "Massacre", 81.

³² While a number of authors, including Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 106; Musurillo, *Christian Martyrs*, 63; and Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives*, 153 translate the term οἰκία as "our houses" (that is: the houses of the Christians themselves), the possessive pronoun is not present in the original Greek, and there is little basis for this qualification. It is thus more likely that the author of the letter is making a more sweeping statement, and is instead referring to the social isolation of Christians in Lyon.

confronted with a perceived enemy, as is indicated by the phrase ὡς πρὸς ἐχθροὺς καὶ πολεμίους φιλεῖ γίνεσθαι. The behaviour of the crowd towards the Christians of Lyon, then, is initially characterized as mass violence towards people seen as hostile outsiders.

It is not, in itself, remarkable that the population of Lyon held hostile feelings towards the Christians in their midst. Since the early days of the Principate, Lyon had been closely connected to Rome and the imperial family. In 12 BCE, the city became home to the sanctuary of the so-called *Tres Galliae*, which was the regional centre of the cult of the goddess Roma and emperor Augustus.³³ Originally, the cult was centred around an altar, but in the time of Hadrian a temple dedicated to the deified Roman emperors was erected, and the focus of the cult changed from the person of Augustus to a number of the new emperor's predecessors.³⁴ Every year, on the first of August, a festival to honour these former emperors was celebrated, and it seems likely that great importance was attached to the occasion.³⁵ The priesthood of this cult was considered to be an office of significant status for members of the regional elite,³⁶ who likely would have been drawn to Lyon by its administrative and religious importance.³⁷ As such, the cult was not only religiously, but also socially, economically, and politically significant for the city, as is demonstrated by Hadrian's investments in its infrastructure. Since the Christian inhabitants of Lyon could not in good conscience participate in this prominent aspect of city life, it is no wonder that they stood out, and that they were regarded as potential enemies whose loyalty was in question.

³³ Fishwick, "Federal Cult", 33f.

³⁴ Fishwick, "Temple", 50f. Under Septimius Severus, the focus of the cult would shift once again, this time to worship of the living emperor. In this period, the altar was for a time once again the primary focus of the cult. See Fishwick, "Severi", passim.

³⁵ Glay, "Culte Impérial", 20-9.

³⁶ Drinkwater, "Local Careers", 94f.

³⁷ Rougé, "Aspects économiques", 48.

The first steps towards persecution, then, were almost certainly made by the locals. There is no indication in the letter that any external factors, whether laws or administrators, contributed to inflaming anti-Christian sentiments. If such a thing had happened, it is likely that the letter would mention it. After all, any imperial command that may have formed the basis of the persecution would have to have been publicly proclaimed, as was part of the standard legislative procedure.³⁸ As such, any connection between an imperial missive and the following persecution would almost certainly have drawn the attention of the local Christians.³⁹

Another remarkable aspect of the events in Lyon that suggests that the origins of the persecution lay with the local population, rather than the Roman authorities, is the fact that the letter explicitly reports that the governor was not in Lyon when hostilities broke out:

And after they (*i.e.*, the Christians) had been led to the marketplace by the tribune and the preeminent authorities of the city, and had been questioned and confessed in front of the entire mob, they were locked in prison until the arrival of the governor. (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:8)

In itself, this was not unusual: governors often travelled throughout their province, so it is very well possible that this unnamed governor's itinerary had taken him elsewhere at the time.⁴⁰ Despite the absence of the emperor's primary representative in the city, however, matters progressed according to what may well be described as a judicial procedure: those who were accused of being Christians were led to the marketplace by the tribune, who was the governor's

³⁸ For the mechanisms that played a part in the proclamation of a law, see Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, 96-117.

³⁹ In the case of Diocletian's 'Great Persecution', Eusebius does explicitly mention the connection between the proclamation of new legislation and the outbreak of violence – see *Hist. eccl.* VIII 2:4. This difference in procedure tentatively seems to speak against the suggestion that Eusebius composed or edited the letter in order to create parallels between the martyrs of his own time and those of the past presented in Corke-Webster, "Literary Historian", 195-7.

⁴⁰ Burton, "Assizes"; Fuhrmann, *Policing*, 173.

second in command, and the local magistrates. Once they had arrived at their destination, the Christians were publicly questioned. After a confession had been extracted, the arrested Christians were incarcerated to await the return of the governor, and a second trial under his jurisdiction.

While we are thus certainly dealing with a degree of mob justice, this procedure was not, in itself, unlawful. It was common for trials in the ancient world to be instigated by a complaint made by a private individual, since a public prosecutor did not exist. We also know that local courts continued to exist in many cities even after their incorporation in the Roman Empire, and that governors could even delegate cases to them if they wished to do so.⁴¹ However, criminal cases generally fell under the jurisdiction of the governor, at least in legal sources from the Severan period transmitted to us, which meant that in all likelihood no concrete punishment for these people could be established without Roman involvement.⁴² The presence of the local magistrates, however, did lend a degree of authority to this part of the proceedings: this public trial, combined with the confessions of the accused, would have been a clear signal to the governor that this was not an incident he could simply ignore. Lyon demanded his involvement, and the city was very clear about the direction his actions should take.⁴³

This pressure in no way relented when the governor returned to the city. We do not know how long the accused Christians were imprisoned, only that they were at some point brought before the governor and questioned again in public. This public setting is central to what follows:

⁴¹ Bowman, "Provincial Administration", 366; Fuhrmann, *Policing*, 174; Roselaar, "Local Administration", 130f.

⁴² Galsterer, "Local and provincial", 351. Galsterer also cites the earlier *Lex Irnitana*, which dates from the Flavian period and excludes the local *duoviri* from criminal jurisdiction.

⁴³ For the role the local elites of this region could play in connecting the various levels of Roman administration, see Dondin-Payre, "Notables et Élités", 369-70.

He (*i.e.*, Vettius Epagathus) asked to be heard himself on behalf of his brothers, saying that there was nothing godless or impious about us. Those around the tribunal shouted him down, since he was a distinguished man, and the governor would not allow the just request he put forward, and only asked if he was a Christian himself. (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:9f)

Although the author of the letters insists that the governor "used all his cruelty against us" (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:9), it becomes obvious soon after that his hand may well have been forced by the pagan inhabitants of the city. During the public trial, a certain Vettius Epagathus asked to speak in defence of the Christians, but was quickly shouted down by those who had gathered around the governor's tribunal before the governor himself had even had a chance to speak. The fact that, after such a reception, the governor only asked if Epagathus was himself a Christian may well show that he was influenced by the profound hostility of the general population, and thus saw no other option but to make an example of those who had been accused.⁴⁴ In this sense, what transpired in Lyon was not so very different from the events described by Pliny the Younger in his famous letter about the Christians in his province:

In the meantime, I have followed this procedure regarding those who were denounced to me as Christians. (...) Over the course of the same enquiry, as commonly happens, there were more different cases as the accusation spread. An anonymous pamphlet was presented to me, containing the names of many. (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 96:2-5)

⁴⁴ For the idea that Epagathus was especially hated because of his significant status, which allowed his defence of the Christians to be perceived as betrayal of his city and his community, see Boeft/Bremmer, "Notiunculae", 154f.

In this case, too, a governor saw himself compelled to respond to a number of hostile accusations made by the general population. Unlike in Lyon, some of these complaints were made anonymously, but whatever the method of accusation, Pliny clearly felt that they could not remain unanswered. The fact that Trajan responded to his governor's letter by objecting only to anonymous accusations, while still believing that Christians should be tried if an accuser appeared before the courts in person (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 97:2), even suggests that a degree of public pressure was not considered to be particularly unusual.

III. Charges and Accusations

The description of these two trials, one by the city council of Lyon and one by its governor, also gives some hints about the nature of the charges made against the Christians. As previously mentioned, no indication is given that any 'new decree' was responsible for the outburst of hostility, as was apparently the case during a number of earlier persecutions in the province of Asia.⁴⁵ Even if, as some have suggested, a law allowing convicts to be used as cheap gladiators was to blame, this still does not explain why Christians would be convicted in the first place, as has been astutely remarked by T.D. Barnes.⁴⁶

The letter cited by Eusebius does, however, give us some indication of what the legal foundations for the trials of 177 CE were. In the first trial, it is made clear that the arrested

⁴⁵ This claim is made by Melito of Sardis, who is cited in *Hist. Eccl.* IV 26:5. The persecutions in Asia are linked to the events in Lyon by a number of authors, including Keresztes, "Marcus Aurelius", 335f, on the basis that the "new edicts" mentioned by Melito may have been empire-wide proclamations. It is notable, however, that Melito specifically limits the extent of the persecution to Asia, and that he initially focusses on Christians being robbed and extorted by false accusers. The possibility of execution is only evoked later, and since Eusebius cites only selected passages of Melito's letter to the emperor, the context of this statement is unclear. It is thus far from certain that the events in Lyon and those in Asia were connected.

⁴⁶ Barnes, "Legislation", 44.

Christians confessed after being questioned. This indicates that the formal charge was that of 'being Christian', or what is referred to by Pliny the Younger as the *nomen ipsum* (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 96:2). It is unlikely that these Christians would be described as confessing to a crime in any other sense of the word, especially because Epagathus later tells the governor that there was "nothing godless or impious" about them (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:9). The governor, in turn, responds by asking Epagathus if he is a Christian himself, and his confession on this point results in his immediate arrest. This suggests that an admission of Christianity was, in itself, sufficient to be "taken into the ranks of the martyrs", as the author of the letter calls it (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:10). In this sense, then, nothing seems to have changed since the days of Pliny the Younger: being a Christian was still enough to be treated as a criminal, and no other charges needed to be brought forward.

After the first wave of arrests and the trials, matters escalated rapidly. The governor publicly issued a command that all Christians were to be brought to trial (δημοσίᾳ ἐκέλευσεν ὁ ἡγεμὼν ἀναζητεῖσθαι πάντας ἡμᾶς; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:14). This seems to have been a notable departure from the course of action Trajan had prescribed for Pliny: In that case, the emperor was insistent that Roman officials should not devote resources to seeking Christians out, as he expressed with a concise *conquirendi non sunt* (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 97:2).⁴⁷ This difference is not fully unexpected, however, given the fact that, where Pliny was dealing at least in part with anonymous accusations, the governor in Lyon was faced with a screaming mob. With or without the governor's command, the masses continued their quest to remove the Christians from their city:

⁴⁷ A similar observation is made by Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius", 56f and Keresztes "Massacre", 81.

However, day by day those who were worthy were arrested, filling up their number, in order to collect all preeminent members of the two churches and those by whom matters in that region were most brought together. Some pagan slaves of members of our community were also arrested, since the governor publicly ordered that we should all be brought to trial. (...) When the soldiers urged [the slaves], they falsely accused us of Thyestean feasts and Oedipodean intercourse. (...) When this rumour spread, all turned on us like beasts, so that even if they had formerly been moderate due to friendship, they became extremely angry and raged against us. (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:13-15)

The author of the letter states that new arrests were made every day. It is notable, however, that these events seem to have taken place at least partially before the governor's order was issued, and that his command is only explicitly connected to the arrest of a number of pagan servants. Although the overall effect of this order seems to have indeed been the large-scale arrest of Christians, the primary goal of this particular action was to acquire more information their beliefs and practices – a parallel to the torture of two *ancillae* described by Pliny (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 96:8).⁴⁸ The arrested slaves in turn contributed significantly to a final stage of escalation by accusing their Christian masters of "Thyestean feasts and Oedipodean intercourse", that is: cannibalism and incest (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:14).⁴⁹ The accusations were obviously extreme, but they were taken seriously nonetheless. Even those who had formerly supported or at the very least pitied the Christians now "turned on [them] like beasts" (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:15). Above all, this passage presents an image of continuous

⁴⁸ For the suggestion that these accusations were made not by pagan slaves, but by arrested Christians, see Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 107.

⁴⁹ For the suggestion that those who had previously disavowed their Christianity were now re-arrested, see Löhr, "Der Brief", 143. Similar accusations are among the scandalous rumours about Christians referenced in Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 9:1-10:2. An attempt to refute them is made in 28:1-31:8 of the same text. For a more elaborate discussion, see Schubert, *Minucius Felix, ad loc.*

escalation, in which the governor's soldiers and the people of the city cooperated in arresting as many Christians as possible.⁵⁰

IV. Punishment and Imperial Involvement

The letter indicates that the Christians were taken to prison after their arrest, where they were tortured to obtain further information about their identities and the nature of their crimes. According to the author, many remained steadfast in their beliefs and refused to either recant or admit to the accusations of cannibalism and incest (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:19f, 26 and 30). As a result, a great number of the accused were either strangled, or died as a result of torture:

Thus, most were strangled in prison, as many as the Lord wanted to depart in such a way, demonstrating his glory. Others were tortured cruelly, so that it seemed impossible for them to live, even if they had received every care in the world, yet they stayed in prison, deprived of human attention but strengthened by the Lord (...). But the young ones, who had recently been arrested, whose bodies had not yet become used to it, could not bear the burden of imprisonment, but died in prison. (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:27f)

A select number of Christians, notably those who are described by the author of the letter as being subject of "all the fury of the mob, the governor and the soldiers" during an earlier stage

⁵⁰ For the use of Roman soldiers as a police force, see Fuhrmann, "Police Functions", 303-5.

of the persecution (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:17 and 43), are said to have been instead thrown to the wild animals during a public spectacle (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:36).⁵¹

While it is almost impossible to ignore the particularly gruesome descriptions of violence and death that are present throughout the narrative, it must be noted that the governor was well within his rights to execute Christians who refused to recant: he held what is generally referred to as the *ius gladii*, the right to exert capital punishment over non-Roman citizens,⁵² and there is no reason to suspect that he was compelled to consult the emperor before exercising this right in the case of the Christians. Even Pliny the Younger mentions that he had unrepentant Christians executed before sending a message to Trajan to consult him about the rest of the procedure he had followed (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 96:3).⁵³ That governors could act on their own authority in matters of crime and punishment was clearly not in doubt even in this earlier period.

Like Pliny, however, the governor in Lyon did proceed with a degree of caution:

Attalus himself was loudly called for by the mob, for he was well known. (...) He was led around the amphitheatre, and a sign was carried in front of him, on which was written in Latin: "This is Attalus the Christian", and the people were very bitter towards him, but when the governor learned that he was a Roman citizen, he ordered him to be taken back to the others who were in prison, about whom he had written to the emperor and was awaiting a reply. (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:43f)

⁵¹ Lyon's amphitheatre was built under Tiberius, but was significantly enlarged during the reign of Hadrian. It appears to have been part of the sanctuary of the *Tres Galliae*. For more information, see Audin, "Amphitheatre", 85 and 89.

⁵² Fuhrmann, *Policing*, 171.

⁵³ See Sherwin-White, *Letters of Pliny*, 698 for the idea that the use of the verb *duci* for executions is not at all uncommon.

While some see the interruption of Attalus' execution as a literary fabrication,⁵⁴ it nonetheless remains telling that the governor had refrained from executing specific groups of prisoners in order to consult the emperor about their proper treatment. Among those who remained in captivity were very likely Roman citizens like Attalus, who are once again referenced as a separate class later in the letter (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:47). As such, the governor appears to have complied with one of the most important regulations of Roman provincial administration, namely that Roman citizens had the right to be judged by the emperor himself.⁵⁵ This shows that there were in fact limits to the amount of local pressure the governor was willing to comply with: despite what the inhabitants of Lyon may have wanted, he apparently thought it necessary to consult the emperor in certain less straightforward cases, in order to ensure that his actions corresponded with his superior's wishes.

The emperor's answer, as it appears in the letter at least, was short: if the imprisoned Christians recanted, they would be free to go. If not, he authorized the governor to execute them (ἐπιστείλαντος γὰρ τοῦ Καίσαρος τοὺς μὲν ἀποτυμπανισθῆναι, εἰ δὲ τινες ἀρνοῖντο, τοῦτους ἀπολῦθῆναι; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:47). No method of execution is specified, but the governor seems to have made his own decisions on the matter:

And at the beginning of the local festival (which is very crowded since all the pagans go to it) the governor led them to the tribunal, showing and displaying these blessed men to the mob. He questioned them again, and all who appeared to have Roman

⁵⁴ Löhr, "Der Brief", 143 believes this passage to have been subjected to later editing, finding it unlikely that only some Christians were publicly executed, while all others remained in prison to await the emperor's missive. This argument not only overlooks the earlier execution of other Christians in captivity (*Hist. eccl.* V 1:27), to which Löhr makes no objection, but also Pliny the Younger's reference to the execution of a number of steadfast Christians in his letter to Trajan. Notably, Pliny still enquired with the emperor about the procedure that was to be followed in other cases after these executions had taken place (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 96:3). Both points contradict Löhr's suggestion that only one round of executions actually took place.

⁵⁵ For the parallel passage, see Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 96:4.

citizenship were beheaded, but the rest he sent to the beasts. (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:47)

As was traditional, the governor made a distinction between various groups of Christians by beheading those who were Roman citizens, and sending those who were not to the arena – very likely as a part of the festival connected to the cult of the *Tres Galliae*.⁵⁶ According to the letter as it has been transmitted to us, an exception was made for the aforementioned Attalus, who was once again sent to the wild animals “to please the mob” (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:50). While it has been argued that it was illegal to condemn Roman citizens to the arena, and that the governor therefore broke the law,⁵⁷ multiple references to Roman citizens being involved in a *damnatio ad bestias* may in fact be found from the early Principate onwards, although this was generally considered to be a punishment reserved for those of low social status.⁵⁸ Whether Attalus himself was indeed sent to the arena or not, the governor’s choice for this particular, highly public, method of execution may well be seen as an attempt to placate the inhabitants of Lyon: in this way, at least some of the hated Christians were forced to participate in the local cult, albeit in a particularly gruesome way.

The other less straightforward case about which the governor felt the need to defer judgement was that of the Christians who chose to recant, and it is therefore no surprise that the effect of the emperor’s missive is also clearly visible in their treatment. We know that at least some of them were originally re-arrested and imprisoned alongside Christians who refused to abandon

⁵⁶ It should be noted that the governor once again questioned these Christians, which shows a degree of due diligence on his part.

⁵⁷ Colin, *Empire des Antonins*, 20; Croteau, “Marcus Aurelius”, 57.

⁵⁸ Bauman, *Crime and Punishment*, 124-9. The fact that Attalus is described as *ὀνομαστός* (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:43) does not seem to give us a clear indication of his social status.

their faith (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:33),⁵⁹ but after the emperor's response had reached Lyon, their situation appears to have changed:

And Christ was greatly honoured by those who had formerly recanted, who now confessed contrary to the expectation of the pagans. For they were questioned in private so that they could be let go, but they confessed and were added to the ranks of the martyrs. (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:48)

The authorities once again questioned the Christians who had previously recanted (this time in private), and the author of the letter emphasizes that this occurred "with the intention of letting them go". This suggests that this new round of interrogations was initially seen as somewhat redundant, if procedurally necessary, now that it was clear that those who abandoned their faith were to be released. While the author focusses on the renewed declaration of faith by these Christians, and the surprised reaction of the Roman authorities, it is equally important to note that even at this stage the general population of Lyon still appears to have been actively involved in the proceedings: it is later mentioned that they were furious that these former apostates retracted their previous statements (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:50), and that they even attempted to make Christians swear by statues of the gods in an effort to make them renounce their faith once and for all (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:53f).

⁵⁹ Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius", 57 suggests that these actions of the governor of Lyon towards Christians who recanted were unprecedented in the second century C.E. This does not mean, however, that his actions were inexplicable, or illegal. It seems that at least some Christians who recanted may have been rearrested (Löhr, "Der Brief", 143) and held for a longer period of time, possibly due to accusations of murder or the other crimes of which Christians had been accused (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:33). Others, however, may have retained their liberty, since they are reported to have returned to the governor's tribunal (possibly of their own volition) in order to confess their beliefs soon after the emperor's reply ordering the release of all Christians who had recanted arrived (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:45f). The distinction between these two groups may have been the moment of their arrest, but details are sadly lacking. In any case, the emperor's reply seems to suggest that the governor had asked a question regarding the treatment of lapsed Christians, and their continued captivity may thus have been the result of attempted diligence on the part of the authorities rather than excessive cruelty.

This combination of executions and attempts to encourage recantation shows strong parallels with the events described by Pliny the Younger several decades earlier, and thus suggests that both governors were struggling with very similar questions, the most important of which may well have been whether Christians who renounced should be released.⁶⁰ While such similarities suggest that no firmly established procedure for the treatment of Christians existed at this point in time, and that governors continued to feel a need for imperial guidance, the emperor's ultimate response seems to have been the same in both cases. In addition, both Pliny and Lyon's governor seem to have followed the imperial command as closely as possible. Rome's influence only reached so far, however: nothing could stop the locals from mutilating the bodies of the executed Christians. Some were fed to the dogs, but others were exposed to the elements for a number of days before being burned. The ashes were subsequently thrown in the Rhône, according to the author of the letter "so that not a single trace of them remained on earth" (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* V 1:57-63).

V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to re-examine the persecution of Lyon and Vienne in the context of Roman provincial administration. In doing so, I have argued that attempting to find a centralized imperial order that would have formed the basis for this persecution is not the most fruitful course of action, since any indication that such a measure existed is absent from the available sources. Instead, it is more beneficial to see persecutions like the one in Lyon as

⁶⁰ Pliny's question runs as follows: *detur paenitentiae venia, an ei, qui omnino Christianus fuit, desisse non prosit?* See Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* X 96:2 and 5f. See also *Ep.* X 97:2 for Trajan's confirmation that lapsed Christians should, indeed, be released.

arising from negotiation between the various levels of government, which included not only the emperor and the Roman governor, but also a strongly localized component.

We have seen that the local population, including, significantly, Lyon's city council, was instrumental throughout the persecution: pagan inhabitants of the city arrested Christians and performed a preliminary trial before the Roman governor even arrived in the city, and their influence continued to be felt during the second trial under his supervision. In addition, it seems very likely that the local circumstances of these events made themselves known in the magistrate's selection of the methods of execution that would be used, even when we discount the idea that Christians who were particularly hated by the locals received more public, humiliating punishments: the condemnation of some Christians to a death in the arena may well be seen as an attempt by the governor to placate the local population by paying homage to Lyon's festival of the *Tres Galliae*. It would seem, then, that the governor was under significant pressure, and that he thought it necessary to adhere to the wishes of the locals in order to prevent further escalation. That this was certainly a realistic risk is demonstrated by the frequent references to large, enraged mobs contained in the letter.

Both the governor and the population of Lyon, however, had to contend with certain limits. We have seen that it was considered necessary to ask the emperor about the treatment of both Roman citizens and Christians who had renounced their faith. In the case of the latter, the emperor's remarks led to a significant change in the position of these individuals: where at first they were held captive despite their recantation, likely in anticipation of the emperor's response, the command to release these apostates seems to have met with no opposition. At the same time, it must be remarked that the emperor's involvement was both brief and limited: the

majority of the persecution took place without any involvement on his part, and when that involvement finally came, it was in response to a question his governor had asked him.

This lack of centralized Roman involvement does not mean, however, that what took place in Lyon was in any way unlawful. While it is true that the descriptions of the violence are extreme, the events in Gaul show close similarities to the trials against the Christians described by Pliny the Younger, and – in fact – to the principles of provincial government in general. The fact that these parallels are not immediately obvious is more due to the genre of the letter cited by Eusebius than any concrete administrative differences. As such, the persecution of Lyon and Vienne is less exceptional than at first seems the case.

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