



The Road to Nicaea and the Age of Imperial Persecution (AD 200-325)

In this dossier, we explore the earliest Church building ever discovered in the city of Dura Europos, and walk you through the age of empire-wide Christian persecution.

NICAEA, AD 325

In AD 325, in the Roman province of Bithynia, in the city of Nicaea (present-day Iznik in north-west Turkey), Christians from across the Roman world and beyond were gathering. It was the largest assembly of Christians so far. Thousands of elders (*presbyteroi*) and learned laymen had travelled there, accompanying more than two hundred overseers (*episkopoi*) of Christian communities.¹

They had come from across the Roman Mediterranean, North Africa, Anatolia, and the Middle East, and from as far west as Hispania (Spain) and Gaul (France).² A few had even come from the numerous communities beyond the Roman Empire, including from Persia and from among the nomadic ‘Scythian’ Goths living north of the Black Sea (in today’s Crimea, Ukraine, or Romania).³

Among them were those whose scars served as visible reminders of the recent persecution. Their missing eyes and lame legs spoke of the tortures they had endured and the time they had spent consigned to the mines for confessing their belief in Christ – earning them the name ‘confessors’ (*homologētēs*).⁴ Rough and wild figures came with them, those who spent their lives in the deserts, praying, battling demons and

¹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.6.

² Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.7-8. None are known to have come from Britain, but three British overseers were present at the assembly in Constantinople in AD 360.

³ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.7; Gelasius of Cyzicus, *Historia ecclesiastica* (late fifth century AD), 2.38.5.

⁴ Paphnutius, an overseer from Egypt, and Maximus the overseer of the community in Jerusalem were two frequently cited examples among fifth-century authors. See: Rufinus of Aquileia, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (ca. AD 402/3), 10.4; Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (ca. 439), 1.11; Gelasius of Cyzicus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 2.9; Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (ca. 440), 1.10. Maximus is only mentioned by Sozomen.

their own inclination to sin, so that they might experience the presence of God ever more strongly. They emerged from the wilderness to be here among their fellow believers for this momentous occasion.

The primary reason for their gathering was to resolve two topics of disagreement. The first concerned the teaching of an Egyptian elder called Arius about what it meant for Jesus to be divine. Few of those assembled doubted that Jesus was in some sense divine, but there were different ideas as to what this meant. The second issue concerned when Easter should be celebrated. Was it to be tied to the Jewish celebration of Passover or not? These were in many ways subtle points of disagreement, but they were causing increasing conflicts among the otherwise united Christians of the eastern Roman world. Disputes in the church had been faced and resolved by gatherings before - as we shall see - but this time was different.

The assembled believers processed through the city to the palace of the emperor and took their seats in the great chamber. All rose as the Emperor Constantine (r. 306-37) entered, adorned in glittering raiment, purple robes, gold, and precious stones of varied colour.⁵ Even two decades earlier, this scene, the emperor among the diverse believers, the confessors and hermits, would have been hard to imagine. Constantine opened the meeting with a speech declaring his desire for unity among the Christians of his empire.⁶ It was an incredible moment, only slightly dampened by the immediate bickering that broke out between the assembled overseers, laying out their grievances with one another before the emperor.⁷ But let's rewind to a different time, only a mere century earlier.

BACK TO THE THIRD CENTURY

While those assembled at Nicaea in 325 had come from far and wide, they were still for the most part from the Roman world, and particularly from the eastern Mediterranean. Yet, even at the start of the third century, believers in Jesus Christ could already be found far and wide.

In the city of Edessa, in Mesopotamia (present-day southeast Turkey), a man named Bardaisan (154-222), a childhood friend and courtier of the city's Roman client king, had become well known as a Christian philosopher.⁸ None of his works have survived, but some of his teaching was preserved by one of his students. This is one of the earliest surviving works in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic used in Edessa, which would go on to become the key language of Asian Christianity from Syria all the way to China. In this work, Bardaisan is shown describing how different people in the world have different cultures and culturally defined morality depending on where they are born (and the stars above them). But now Christ's message has shown people a universal morality - among the brothers and sisters of Edessa, Judaea, and Parthian Persia, from the Gauls in the west to the Kushans in the east (in present-day Afghanistan).⁹ This sense of a unified community that transcended borders, ethnicities, languages, and customs, united only by their relation to the divine was utterly unprecedented.

⁵ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.10.

⁶ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.12.

⁷ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.13. We are hugely reliant on Eusebius (ca. 260-340), the first Christian historian, for our knowledge of Christian life in the third and early fourth centuries. For the latter part of the period, he was able to draw on his own memories and experiences, especially of living through the Great Persecution. He also frequently quotes at length from the letters and accounts of earlier observers and participants, gathered through his own extensive research, as well as from the memories of older Christians. Still, Eusebius' account is fundamentally shaped by the monumental shift he witnessed under Constantine. Having experienced the height of Roman persecution, he became a highly enthusiastic champion of Constantine and the new order of Christian toleration and even prominence which he ushered in.

⁸ Sextus Julius Africanus, *Kestoi* (early third century), I.20.

⁹ Philip, *Book of Laws and Countries* (early third century).



DURA EUROPOS, AD 240

A few days' journey from Edessa down the river Euphrates takes us to a city in which we can visit one of these communities. We arrive at the city of Dura Europos (present-day east Syria), lying on the verdant banks of the Euphrates, between the great Syrian desert and the life-giving waters. This is one of the most easterly cities of the Roman Empire. Beyond the river stretch out the vast domains of the Sasanian Persian King of Kings (*Shahanshah*) Shapur I (r. 240-70), lands also home to numerous and growing Christian communities.¹⁰

Dura Europos is surrounded by great walls in case the Persian armies ever attack. It is less than a hundred years since the city was first taken by the Romans, and only a few years ago, in AD 238, Sasanian Persian armies had crossed the river and threatened the city. A large garrison of Roman soldiers are stationed in the city to ensure its defence.

Entering by the main western gate which leads from the desert road, we are immediately confronted by the huge temple of Tyche, the goddess of fortune. Within the city, there are more than a dozen temples, including at least four to Zeus and two to the Babylonian god Bel. One block further up the road which runs along the defensive wall is the city's synagogue, decorated with vibrant paintings of Old Testament stories. One block down the road, past the large public baths, is the Christian house-church. Coming to what looks like an ordinary townhouse, built right up against the city wall, we are invited inside.¹¹ People are gathering in the open air courtyard at the centre of the house, the *atrium*, a typical feature of large Roman town houses like this one. But as we make our way into a large assembly hall, it is clear this is not an ordinary house.

The house itself was built in 232, but in around 240 it was converted into a church. It is the earliest church building we know of – a development from the earlier casual sites of Christian meeting, in private houses or outside, but still not yet a purpose-built church building.¹² A similar converted house-church, dating perhaps from the end of the third century, has been found at the other end of the Roman world, in Lullingstone, Britain.¹³

¹⁰ The Sasanian dynasty ruled the Persian Empire from the early third century until the Muslim Conquest in the seventh. They were perhaps the Roman Empire's most significant and enduring rivals.

¹¹ The site of the house-church was identified in 1920 and excavated between 1931-5. The whole city site seems to have been largely destroyed by ISIS between 2011-14 as a result of looting.

¹² An often cited reference from the sixth century *Chronicle of Edessa* to a church building in Edessa, destroyed in a flood in AD 201, is doubtful.

¹³ This site is today managed by English Heritage.



The large hall, maybe originally intended as a dining room, a *triclinium*, was turned into the main assembly hall, with a raised platform built at one end but no discernible altar. Looking around at the brothers and sisters assembled here, we see a whole range of people. There is no typical Christian, and that is perhaps well illustrated in this garrison town. Beside us are men and women, some might be slaves, others more wealthy. Most probably speak Greek, but many likely also speak Syriac, other dialects of Aramaic, or Latin.¹⁴ While some are from the town, a large number of the men are soldiers from the garrison, young men with Roman names who have come from elsewhere in Syria.¹⁵

Together they worship, praying and singing songs. When praising, they raise and stretch out their arms in the manner of Jewish worship.¹⁶ Besides the Psalms, they also sing hymns of local composition. Bardaisan had composed some, none of which have survived, but they have their legacy in the great hymns of Ephrem of Edessa (d. 373). As well as songs of praise, Ephrem also wrote sermons and apologetics in verse, initiating a key feature of Christian Syriac literature. At Dura-Europos they might also have sung from a collection known today as the *Odes of Solomon*, hymns composed in Syriac or Greek in the second century, perhaps by a Jewish-Christian. These express exuberant joy, praising God for his grace and salvation, and his presence in times of trouble. They allude to Jesus' birth, baptism, miracles, crucifixion and resurrection, and draw on the letters of Paul and the *Song of Songs*: "the lover has found the beloved."¹⁷

Readings from scripture follow. A century before Nicaea, there was already a fairly universal consensus about the four gospels, the letters of Paul, 1 John, and 1 Peter.¹⁸ There had been a burgeoning of biblical scholarship. Christian scholars, educated in classical Greek philosophy and literature, rigorously studied and debated the Old and New Testament scriptures. Foremost among these was Origen (d. ca. 253), a Greek resident of Alexandria whose father had given him an extensive education before being killed for his faith. Origen became renowned as a teacher and scholar, and particularly for his knowledge of Hebrew.¹⁹

¹⁴ Greek and Syriac writing were found on the walls of the assembly hall.

¹⁵ The names Paulus and Proclus, believed to belong to Roman soldiers, were written on the walls.

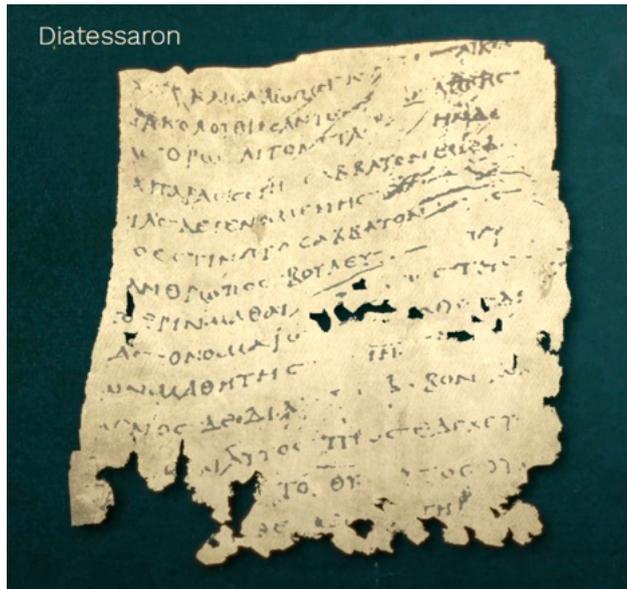
¹⁶ This is a posture frequently seen depicted in third to fourth century Christian frescoes and sarcophagi from Rome's catacomb cemeteries.

¹⁷ Ode 3.

¹⁸ For instance: Origen in) *Eusebius Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.14, 3.25.

¹⁹ Much of Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiastica* Book 6 is devoted to Origen. Various works by Origen survive, such as *Contra Celsum*, a detailed refutation of Roman philosopher's attack on Christianity, *On Prayer*, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, and numerous fragments of his biblical commentaries and sermons.

Origen and others, such as Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215), Dorotheus of Antioch (d. ca. 362), and Dionysius of Alexandria (d. 264), a pupil of Origen, were already engaged in sophisticated critical scholarship.²⁰ For instance, the case of the disputed Revelation of John. Dionysius observed its differing tone and style when compared to the gospel and epistles of John, and he concluded that it was written by another John. However, he still accepted it as scripture, citing the general consensus among Christians that it was spiritually edifying.²¹ Origen also compiled the *Hexapla*, a comparative edition of the Old Testament which presented six different versions of the text alongside one another.²²



In the Dura-Europos community, they also use a Greek translation of the *Diatessaron*, a Syriac gospel harmony which combines the four gospels into a single narrative.²³ This was originally written by Tatian (d. ca. 180), a Mesopotamian Syriac-speaking convert to Christianity who had studied under the second-century Christian philosopher Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165) in Rome.²⁴

In the third century there was still plenty of diversity and disagreement between Christians about who God is and how they were to live as a community. Long before Nicaea, frequent meetings were held among local communities to discuss such points of contention.

Often, this was very amicable. Dionysius of Alexandria, dealing with a dispute regarding the interpretation of John's *Revelation*, whether it described a literal thousand-year period (Dionysius thought not), gathered together all the elders, teachers, and any interested laity in a community in Egypt to publicly discuss and debate the issue. He was left impressed by their sincerity and reasonableness, they debated good naturedly and clearly, approaching each other with open minds and a desire for unity. For them, difference of opinion was natural, not a problem.²⁵

Other instances were contentious in the extreme. In an early echo of Nicaea, Paul the overseer of the community of Antioch was reported to be teaching that Christ had been merely (or at least mainly) human, and, in around 269, the heads of other communities, including those of Alexandria and even Rome, gathered in Antioch with local believers to discuss the issue. Yet, there was an aspect of more mundane personal conflict to the dispute too, as Paul was also accused of embezzling the community's money, funding a luxurious lifestyle, and having inappropriate (and potentially spiritually coercive) relations with young women in his community. While it was decided that Paul should be removed, he refused to give up the church building, and in an unprecedented move, which again foreshadowed Nicaea, an appeal was made to the Emperor Aurelian (r. 270-5). Aurelian backed up the council, and Paul was expelled from the building.²⁶

²⁰ Much of Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiastica* Book 7 is devoted to Dionysius, who also appears towards the end of Book 6. Dorothea appears in Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 7.32.

²¹ Eusebius, *adr* 7.25.

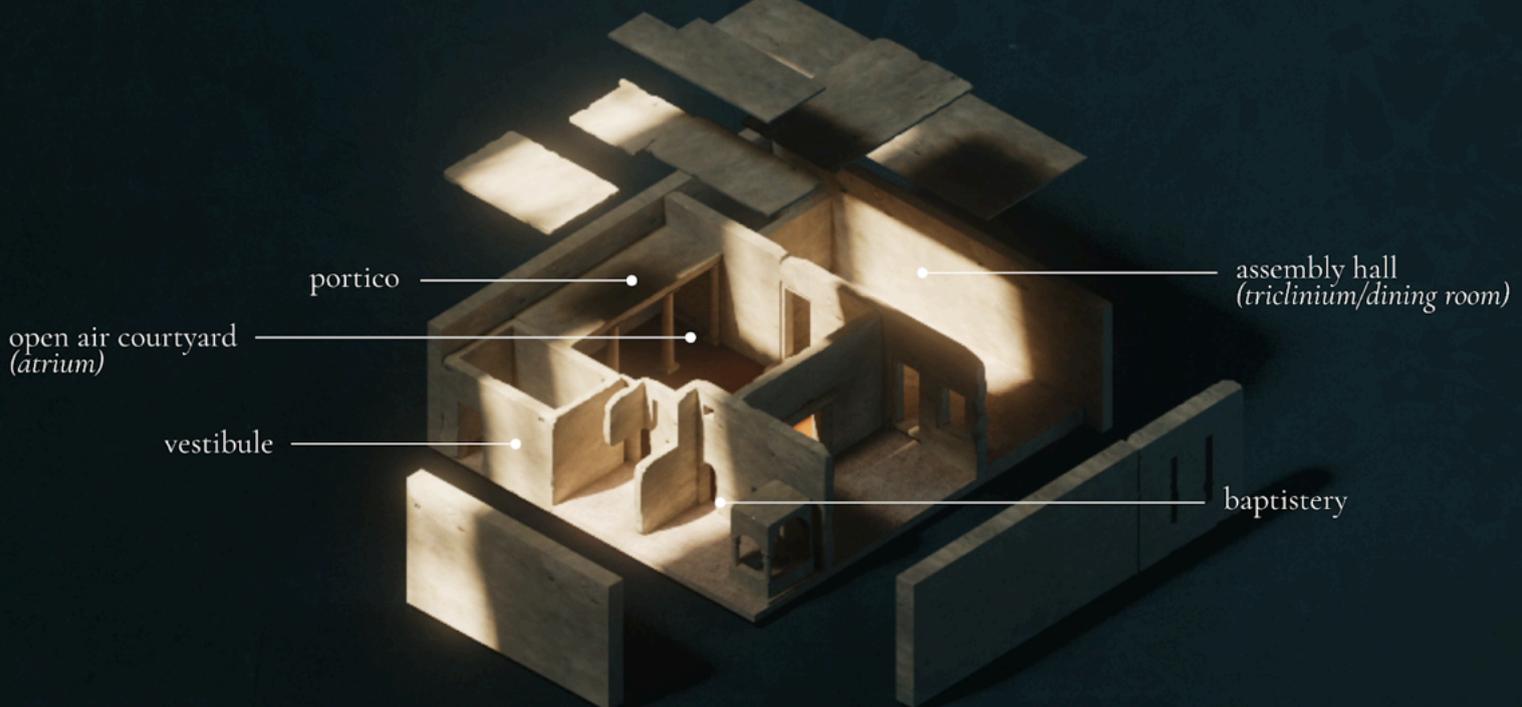
²² Described in Origen's Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. Various fragments of the work also survive.

²³ A fragment was found in Dura-Europos, catalogued as Uncial 0212.

²⁴ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 4.29.

²⁵ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 7.24.

²⁶ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 7.27-30.



BAPTISTERY

Back in Dura-Europos, on the day we are visiting at least, there is no such contention. Today is a special day. The community here is welcoming a new believer into their midst in baptism. Joining them, we head out of the hall, across the courtyard, and into a smaller room. There are no windows, so everyone is carrying oil lamps. The light of the flames dances across the walls, revealing rich red surfaces covered with painted figures, the baptism pool at the end.

Beside us, a fresco depicts a procession of white clad women, paralleling our own procession towards the baptistery, their torches appearing to flicker in the light of our own. The meaning of this scene still eludes modern scholars, and suggestions include the women at the tomb or the wise bridesmaids at the wedding feast.²⁷ Just above the baptismal pool we see Adam and Eve covering their shame beneath the tree. Most striking of all is the central image above them - a beardless young shepherd carrying a sheep, leading a flock through pastures beside running water – the good shepherd.

In the Christian art of the third century, we find no crosses or crucifixions.²⁸ Generally, the imagery used was not explicitly Christian but drew on classical Roman iconography and styles. In Rome's Christian catacombs, underground cemeteries begun at a similar time to Dura-Europos, we find again, frequently appearing in frescoes and on sarcophagi, the image of the young beardless shepherd.²⁹ Other images show a bearded and toga-ed philosopher teaching, often intended to represent an Old Testament prophet, and believers praying with their arms and faces raised towards heaven. A series of these worshippers also decorate the house-church walls at Lullingstone in Britain.

In the catacombs again we find scenes of Old Testament stories, symbols of the resurrection, the hope of the deceased buried beneath them. Jonah in particular was everywhere, thrown from his ship; eaten and expelled by an aquatic dragon-like monster; sitting beneath a vine.³⁰ Elsewhere, Abraham and Isaac praise God for the ram;³¹ the three youths praise God in the Babylonian fire and Daniel in the lions' den; while Noah, popping out of his box-shaped ark, praises God at the arrival of a dove bearing an olive branch.

²⁷ Despite strong iconographic suggestions of the former, the latter is symbolically preferred, since in the third century baptism was more generally understood in the language of salvation than death and resurrection.

²⁸ The first Christian images of the crucifixion do not appear until the fifth century.

²⁹ The oldest of these is that today known as Priscilla after its reputed third-century donor.

³⁰ Jonah is cited as a symbol of resurrection by Jesus in Matthew 12:38–41, 16:4 and Luke 11:29–32.

³¹ Representing resurrection as in Hebrews 11:17–19.

These are all subtle scenes. Jesus himself is rarely depicted. However, in Dura-Europos, we find the very earliest pictures of Jesus. Beardless and draped in a toga, we see him walking on water, Peter walking towards him, the fishing boat in the background. Again, we see Jesus healing the paralytic, depicted before and after, lying in his bed and carrying it on his back. This is Jesus the miracle worker. On the tombs in Rome from slightly later, Jesus is shown healing and multiplying baskets of bread. Above the graves of women, we see particularly collections of his interactions with women. The woman suffering from internal bleeding touching the hem of his robe, the Samaritan woman at the well.

In the catacombs, we also frequently find Mary with the infant Jesus, the star above them. Sometimes they are attended by the gentile prophet Balaam (referencing his prophecy in Numbers 24:17) and the three magi presenting gifts.³² These show Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy.

The drawings at Dura-Europos are simple and rough, crude compared to those of the synagogue up the street. They reflect a homegrown style and reveal a very intimate relation to these stories. Jesus, the shepherd who heals. Prophecies and stories which resound with the hope of forgiveness and resurrection.

The baptism takes place. The sheep is led down to quiet waters. The life of the Dura-Europos house church was short. In AD 256 the city was besieged by the Persians. It seems to have been a particularly long and brutal siege. During its course, the defending Roman military reinforced the western wall by piling up earth, burying the buildings immediately adjacent, including the house-church.³³ As such, it was preserved untouched until its discovery in the twentieth century, providing an unprecedented glimpse into the world of early Christians.

The city was left completely empty after this siege. If there were Christian survivors, we don't know what happened to them, although Shapur I is known at this time to have had Christians in the Roman border regions, including from the city of Antioch, deported further east to southern Mesopotamia (present-day south Iraq and south-west Iran), where there were already growing local Christian communities.

PERSECUTION

Christianity grew rapidly across the third century, perhaps going from hundreds of thousands of believers to millions.³⁴ Even in AD 200, there were already whole Christian villages in some areas of Roman Palestine and Phrygia. In Rome, the third century saw a huge expansion of Christian tombs, and there were even Christians among high-ranking members of the imperial household.³⁵ Christians were becoming a familiar part of the Roman world.

The crude rumours of their crimes and depravities which had previously dogged them gave way as ordinary Romans came into more regular contact with Christians. Roman authors now generally regarded them as mostly harmless fools.³⁶ Yet, conversely, this was also the period in which they experienced the most brutal persecution so far.

³² "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel." Numbers 24:17.

³³ The painted synagogue was similarly preserved, as was the city's temple of Mithras.

³⁴ One estimate puts the increase in the Roman Empire in this century at 200,000 to 6 million (in an empire of over 40 million).

³⁵ Hippolytus, *Refutation of all heresies* (early third century), 9.12; Irenaeus, *Against heresies* (ca. AD 180), 4.30; Tertullian, *Apologeticum* (ca. 197), 37.4; Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam* (ca. 212), 4.

³⁶ Lucian of Samosata, *Death of Peregrinus* (late second century); Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (late second century), 11.3; Celsus, *True doctrine* (late second century) (in Origen, *Contra Celsum*); Galen, *Summary of Plato's Republic* (late second/early third century) (in Ibn Abi Uṣaybi'a, *Lives of the Physicians*; 'al-Qifṭī, *Ta'rikh al-Ḥukama*).



Prior to the third century, persecution had generally been local and low-level. While Nero (AD 54-68) seems to have set the precedent for Christianity being a crime deserving death, this rarely led to imperial authorities seeking Christians out, and most cases came to court only as the result of private denunciations or civil disturbances.³⁷

In the third century, however, those commanding the empire became increasingly concerned by their growing numbers. With their refusal to participate in public life and religion, Christians presented a threat to the Roman way of life and the social and moral order of the empire. In particular, as the third century wore on and social and political crises increased, Christians' defiance of the gods who had made and sustained Rome's greatness became especially troubling.

DECIUS, AD 250

The short reign of Decius (r. 249-51) witnessed the first of these punctuations of violence. It was a time of particular instability for the empire. The last fifteen years had seen seven emperors come and go, all murdered or killed fighting other Romans. Now, Decius faced increasing threats from the Sasanians in the east and the Goths in the north, alongside growing inflation and continued political instability. In all of this, he saw and feared the anger of the gods.

Everyone, citizens and non-citizens, children and slaves, were ordered to make a sacrifice to the gods for the good of the empire. At the temple, they would throw a pinch of incense on the fire, pour out a libation of wine, and eat a piece of meat from the sacrifice. They would then receive a document, a *libellus*, to prove they had made the sacrifice.³⁸

It is unclear whether this edict was intended primarily to find out and compel Christians to sacrifice to the gods, or whether the empire-wide prayer itself was the main objective. Probably the two were intertwined. Decius wanted the gods' help, while the growing number of Christians, with their arrogant refusal to honour the gods, presented an obvious offense to them.



³⁷ See Episode 1. On Nero's persecution (AD 64), see: Suetonius, *Nero* (ca. 119), 16; Tacitus, *Histories* (early second century), 15.44. For a local instance of persecution (ca. 112), see: Pliny the Younger, *Letter on the Christians* X.96. For a local persecution prompted by anti-Christian riots, see the case of Lyons and Vienne (177): Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 5.1-5.

³⁸ This is all described in 46 surviving Decian *libelli*, dating from 12 June to 14 July 250, discovered in Egypt. (Four of those discovered at Oxyrhynchus are now in the Bodleian, Oxford - Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 658; POxy 1464, POxy 2990, POxy 3929).

Whatever the intention, the result was the most widespread and systematic persecution of Christians so far. Across the empire, Christians were forced to make a choice. Many gave in, making the sacrifice or buying *libelli* which said they had.³⁹ Others, like Dionysius of Alexandria and Cyprian (d. 258), the overseer of the community in Carthage, North Africa, who had only become a Christian five years earlier, fled their homes or went into hiding.⁴⁰

Many, however, stayed and refused the order. Some of these were executed, but many more were subjected to torture and imprisonment as the authorities tried to compel them to make the simple ritual action.⁴¹ Origen was one of those subjected to tortures and died several years later as a result of his wounds.⁴² The leaders of the communities in Antioch and Jerusalem both died in prison, as did Fabian, the overseer of the community in Rome.⁴³ Fabian's tomb has been discovered in the Roman catacombs, marked by a stone cover with the inscription 'Fabian *episkopos* martyr'.⁴⁴

Decius was killed the following year fighting the Goths, and the persecution died down. However, the Christians of the empire were now faced with the challenge of reconciling their communities. Many of those who had complied with the government order wanted to return to their faith and communities, many indeed may have felt that they had never really given them up. But some of those who had stayed and faced suffering felt that those who had lapsed shouldn't be allowed to return - they had betrayed their communities and God.⁴⁵ This was the first of several such arguments that accompanied the different waves of persecution in the third and early fourth century. Many of the church's leaders, Cyprian of Carthage and Dionysius of Alexandria in particular, argued vigorously that no sin was beyond forgiveness but that genuine regret and repentance were necessary for forgiveness and reconciliation.⁴⁶

VALERIAN, AD 258

Although less sustained, Christians continued to come under intermittent and local pressure for at least the next decade. At the instigation of the Emperor Valerian (r. 253-60), various efforts were made to seek out and compel Christians to conform. A rare surviving warrant from 256 was uncovered in Egypt, issued by the local governor and ordering village officials to send to him a Christian named Petosarapin to be tried.⁴⁷ Similar warrants were no doubt issued for Cyprian when he was summoned to appear before the authorities in 257 and 258. He was both times ordered to conform to the Roman rites. Refusing, he was first exiled from his community and the following year sentenced:

"You have long lived an irreligious life," pronounced the proconsul Galerius Maximus, "and have drawn together a number of men bound by an unlawful association, and professed yourself an open enemy to the gods and the religion of Rome." As an unrepentant ringleader, he was to be made an example of. He was put to death by the sword.⁴⁸ The greatest trials, however, were still to come.

³⁹ Cyprian, *De Lapsis* (On the Fallen).

⁴⁰ Cyprian, *De Lapsis* (On the Fallen); Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.40.

⁴¹ On the sufferings inflicted on Christians during this persecution, see Dionysius' account in: Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.40-42, 45.

⁴² Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.39.

⁴³ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.39.

⁴⁴ He was buried by his recent predecessor Pontian (d. 235) whose tomb covering also describes him as a martyr. Saint Callixtus Catacombs, Rome.

⁴⁵ Most notably this was the hardline position of Novatian, an elder in Rome: Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.43-46.

⁴⁶ Cyprian, *De Lapsis* (On the Fallen); Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.43-46.

⁴⁷ Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3035.

⁴⁸ The official records of his trial and sentencing are preserved in: *Acta Proconsularia* (Proconsular acts), 1, 3.



DIOCLETIAN, AD 303

Diocletian (r. 285-305) was a new breed of emperor. A professional soldier from the Balkans, he possessed an unyielding determination to restore the decaying empire. External threats had only increased, and internal instability now resembled civil war. All but two of the eighteen emperors since Decius had been murdered or killed in battle. On top of inflation, plagues were also ravaging the empire, made worse by famine.⁴⁹ Diocletian's great political innovation was the tetrarchy, the division of the empire between four co-emperors, all like him, military professionals from the Balkans.

Yet, Diocletian was not so naïve as to imagine that a political solution alone was enough. The gods desperately needed to be won back. This was driven home to him when, in AD 303, a Christian named Romanus reputedly tried to stop a sacrifice at the imperial court in Antioch. Diocletian made sure he was cruelly put to death, but clearly the problem was much bigger. The Christians' disrespect of the gods could not be tolerated any longer. "Jupiter protects us, and all these recent disasters are because of the foolish and immoral people who are bringing the entire world to suffer."⁵⁰

All across the eastern empire, in the lands under Diocletian and his co-emperor Galerius (r. 293-305), who seems to have found Christianity particularly concerning, Christians were forbidden from meeting, and church buildings were pulled down. Books of scripture were seized and burned in piles in the public forums.⁵¹ Christians in the army, like those we saw in Dura-Europos, as well as those in the imperial household and government, were especially targeted, alongside the overseers, elders, and other leaders of the Christian community.⁵²

Again, some gave in and made the necessary sacrifices, while others were tortured and killed. This is the period to which a great many of the martyr stories later told are attributed – especially those of military martyrs, such as Alban and George. The first historian of the church, Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260-340), lived through the persecution and documented in detail the brutal tortures that many Christians suffered.⁵³ Among those who were killed was his own teacher and friend, Pamphilus.⁵⁴ However, not all were executed. Many were maimed, or imprisoned, or enslaved, and sent to the mines. Others were exiled or had their property seized.

⁴⁹ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 8.14-16.

⁵⁰ The words of one of Diocletian's successor tetrarchs Maximinus Daza (r. 305-15): Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 9.7.

⁵¹ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 8.2.

⁵² Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 8.4.

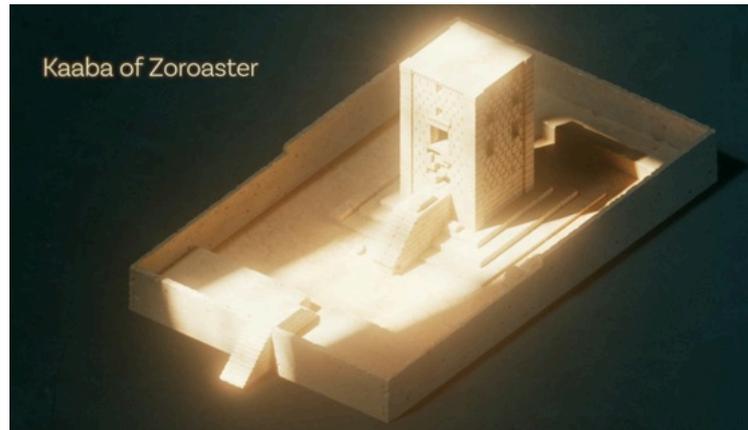
⁵³ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 8.10-13.

⁵⁴ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 8.13.

In an unprecedented move, Diocletian abdicated in 305, ensuring a smooth transition of power, but the persecution continued unabated, spurred on particularly by his successors in the tetrarchy, Galerius and Maximinus Daza (r. 305-15). The persecution seems to have been generally concentrated in the more populous and prosperous eastern half of the empire, and it is unclear to what extent Christians faced similar challenges in the western half. Potentially Constantine's father Constantius (r. 293-306) was less concerned by the Christian threat there.

SASANIAN PERSIA, AD 280

During this same time, if we had wandered over the border into the Sasanian Empire, we might have seen Christians coming under similar pressures. These lands are, however, shrouded in a much denser fog of time. Few texts of any kind survive from the Sasanian world, despite their empire's evident splendour and power, which easily equalled that of the Romans.



Glimpses survive in various official inscriptions. On a monument known today as the cube of Zoroaster, in Naqsh-e Rostam (in present-day Iran), the burial place of the ancient Persian kings, a Persian inscription dating from around AD 280 records the career of Kartir, a Zoroastrian chief priest (*magus*). He had served under four *shahanshahs*, king of kings, gradually increasing in power. While the third-century Sasanian rulers seem to have been generally content to ignore Christians in their lands, the powerful and established Zoroastrian priesthood was more concerned about the growth of these dangerous cults. They saw the world locked in a struggle between two great spiritual powers – Ahura Mazda, the god of gods and creator, and Ahriman, the spirit of destruction. The shahanshah and the magi were Ahura Mazda's workers in the world, defending order against the demonic forces of chaos. Christians were bringing the teachings of Ahriman, leading people astray and causing chaos. As in the Roman world, here also they threatened to destabilise the carefully balanced spiritual order maintained for generations.

Amongst his achievements as chief priest, Kartir announced proudly that he had overseen the smiting of 'Nazarenes', as well as of Jews and Buddhists, and the destruction of their meeting places, the nests of demons.⁵⁵ Quite how this was experienced by local Christians is lost to time. But it would not be the last time that Christians came under intense pressure in Sasanian Persia.

⁵⁵ Kartir's inscription on the Ka'ba-ye Zartosht, Naqsh-e Rostam, Iran.



HOW DID CHRISTIANITY GROW?

Despite all these efforts to suppress it, Christianity continued growing. Why?

Christianity offered the same attractions as in previous centuries. It gave dignity to slaves and women. Its prophecies and teachings proved intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually compelling to many. In the third-century, at a time when the Roman Empire was increasingly fractious, Christians also enjoyed a degree of communal unity unparalleled in wider society – even despite their frequent disagreements and arguments.

Personal relationships remained key. As more people became Christians, more people encountered them as friends and family members, people they knew, liked, and trusted. They benefited from Christian communities, whether as members or non-members. Later, the Emperor Julian (r. 360-3), often known as the apostate because of his rejection of his Christian upbringing and attempt to revive Roman religion, looking to identify how priests could compete with Christians, noted how the ways Christians conducted their lives attracted people to them: “Why do we not observe that it is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism?⁵⁶ It is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galilaeans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.”⁵⁷

The practical love to which Christians felt called was brought into sharp relief in the third century with the outbreak of plague. Shortly after the reign of Decius, a pandemic struck the empire on an unprecedented scale. Following close on the heels of the recent persecution, the plague presented yet another challenge to beleaguered Christian communities, but they approached it with similar boldness.

In Carthage, many people had fled the city or hidden away with their families, but Cyprian appealed to the city’s Christians, now more than ever, to love and care not only for their Christian brothers and sisters, but also those outside the Christian community, including those who had so recently been persecuting them.⁵⁸ Trusting firmly in the resurrection of Christ, they had no more to fear from the plague than the persecution.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Romans often called Christians atheists because of their refusal to recognise the many other gods.

⁵⁷ Julian, *Letter 22* - to Arsacius, high priest of Galatia. In his book *The Caesars*, Julian also negatively portrayed Christianity as attractive to the worst kinds of sinners, “seducers, murderers, the sacrilegious and infamous,” because of the repeated forgiveness it offered.

⁵⁸ Pontius, *Vita Cypriani* (Life of Cyprian), 9. This biography of Cyprian was written by a member of his community only a few years after his death.

⁵⁹ Cyprian, *De Mortalitate* (On Mortality).

In Egypt, Dionysius proudly described the actions of the believers there: “Heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them they departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.”⁶⁰ Their deaths, he declared, showed just as great faith as that of the martyrs.

Christians became notable for tending the dying, burying the dead, and caring for the poor. While the flagging Roman state struggled to care for its citizens, Christian communities had the unity and organisation, as well as the motivation and boldness, to respond. Their actions spoke for themselves, and they continued to grow. Christians still remained a minority in the empire, but they were an increasingly major one, with a strong sense of community that Roman citizenship and religion struggled to match.

TOLERATION, AD 313

In AD 313, everything changed for Christians in the Roman Empire. Between 309 and 313, the various tetrarchs died or were killed in battle with Constantine’s armies, leaving Constantine to consolidate his control over a once again united empire. In 311 Galerius had, on his deathbed, dramatically switched policy with a declaration of tolerance for the empire’s Christians, and two years later this was confirmed by Constantine and his co-emperor Licinus (r. 308-24) as official imperial policy.⁶¹

Despite the great effort to suppress those angering the gods with their defiance, the empire had continued to suffer from plagues and ever-increasing instability. The spiritual order was irrevocably upset, and Constantine believed that in some way he owed his victories to the aid of the god of the Christians. The greatest persecution yet faced had suddenly ended, and in its place was an emperor with a growing personal interest in his Christian subjects and their beliefs.

As the believers gathered at Nicaea, they could still remember their friends’ deaths and their own imprisonments. They bore the scars of their sufferings on their own bodies. But Constantine’s decision to embrace Christianity, and Christians’ decision to embrace him, had begun a revolution in the western Latin and Greek church which is still playing out today...

Of course, for the many Christians outside the Roman Empire, the story continued quite differently, and we will follow both in the coming instalments.

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⁶⁰ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 7.22.

⁶¹ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 8.17, 9.10



Recommended reading:

PRIMARY SOURCES

- Eusebius, *History of the Church*, Books 6-9.
- *Odes of Solomon*.
- Pontius, *Vita Cypriani (Life of Cyprian)*.
- Dura-Europos frescoes, Yale University Museum.
- Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome.

SECONDARY READING

- Tom Holland, *Dominion* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), Chapter 4.
- William H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), Chapters 8-13.
- Michael Peppard, *The World's Oldest Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).
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