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THE ROMAN EMPIRE

A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 5
Christians to the lions

Blood on the sand

In summer AD 177 at Lugdunum (modern Lyon in southern France), it was fiesta time, and in the amphitheatre Christians were on the programme. Their fellow-believers later set down their eyewitness accounts of what happened. First, Maturus and Sanctus were brought in. They were subjected to every kind of torture; they ran the gauntlet of whips; they were mauled by wild animals; they endured all that the shouts of the excited crowd demanded. Next, Attalus and Alexander. They too were tortured and finally strapped to a heated iron chair which seared their flesh. On the last day of the festival, the slave woman Blandina was led into the amphitheatre. After the whips, after the lions, after the red-hot plates, she was flung into a net and offered to a bull. 'After being tossed for a while by the animal, she no longer had any sense of what was happening thanks to her hope, the firmness of her beliefs, and her communion with Christ.'

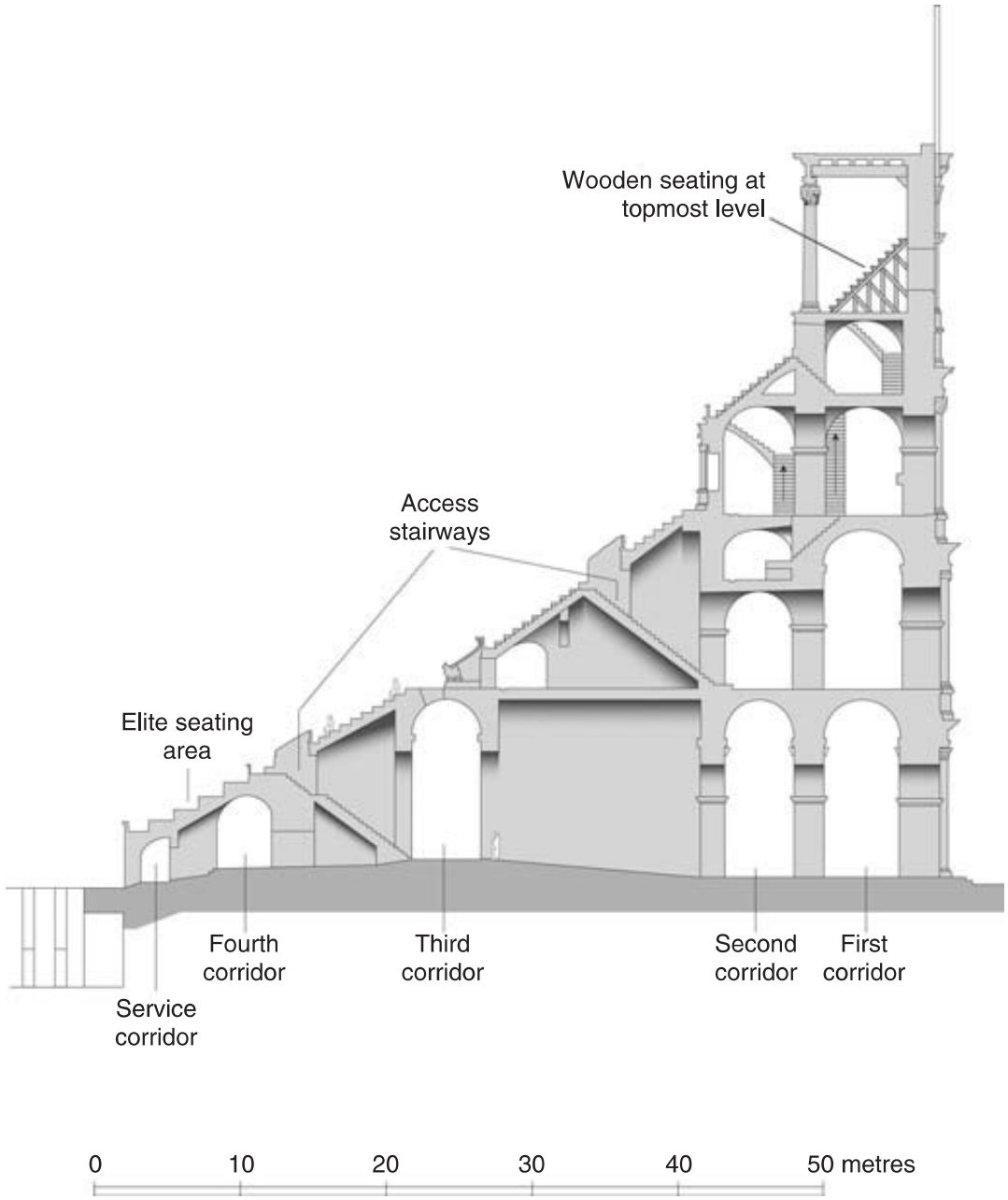
For the inhabitants of 2nd-century Lyon, Christians were part of a good day out; part of the entertainment; part of the show. The crowd – like the lions – roared. But it is also important to emphasize that in this story (and in many other tales of violence and brutality like it) the onlookers who enthusiastically cheered were not a disorderly rabble of local louts and layabouts. This was

no hysterical mob; rather, good solid citizenry for whom publicly organized violence was a serious and absorbing pastime. Society's outcasts (bandits, robbers, condemned criminals, runaway slaves) were expected to perish horribly for the enjoyment of decent, law-abiding people. Similarly, professional fighters (gladiators, wild-beast hunters) were expected to perform. Some spectators were experts on their favourites' skills, training, and careers. For others, these battle-scarred bits-of-rough were the stuff of sexual fantasy.

All who went to the games were deeply involved. In Rome, the emperor Claudius is said to have been so fascinated by the death-agonies of the slain that he ordered their faces to be turned toward him. Indeed, according to the imperial biographer Suetonius, Claudius (himself a physical weakling) was such an enthusiast for gladiatorial violence that he would arrive at the amphitheatre before dawn and not leave during the afternoon when most of the wealthier members of the crowd retired home for their siesta.

Going to the games was one of the practices that went with being a Roman. In amphitheatres access to seating was through a complicated series of ill-lit passages, ramps, and steep staircases. Like the best 19th-century opera houses, these ensured that as far as possible those in the best seats had their own exclusive access to the auditorium. Emerging from the darkness the spectator – still blinking – beheld a striking, sunlit microcosm of his own society; each member dressed in festival best; each seated according to carefully calibrated gradations of age, rank, wealth, and occupation. The emperor Augustus had ordered the seating in theatres to reflect the empire's social hierarchy. In provincial cities, members of the town council occupied the best seats; then male citizens, with married men separated from bachelors; professional associations in designated rows; and citizen boys in a separate block.

No doubt in practice these seemingly rigid classifications were



14. Cross-section of the Colosseum (reconstruction)

blurred (grandees might, for example, invite their friends to sit with them), but their general intent is clear: the potentially rowdy urban poor was to be allowed only a very limited presence. In the Colosseum in Rome, 60% of its 50,000 seats were reserved for well-off citizens; only 20% at the rear were given over to the urban poor, non-citizens, and slaves. The remaining space, in cloistered rows right at the top of the tiered seating (a climb of 220 steps from the entrance at ground level), was allocated to women. The strict geometric architecture of an amphitheatre neatly divided the crowd

into clearly recognizable social segments. It mattered where you sat; and where you were seen to be sitting.

In Rome, an emperor at the games presided over a carefully ordered empire in miniature. The acclamations he received from the crowd were an audible register of popular support for the prevailing régime. Seated in the imperial box, the emperor was clearly visible to all. Both Julius Caesar and the late 2nd-century emperor Marcus Aurelius were strongly criticized for catching up on official correspondence instead of enjoying the show. Emperors were expected to pay attention both to the fighting in the arena and to the spectators, who might at any moment demand favours or with shouts of *Habet, hoc habet* – 'He has it! He has got it!' – applaud a winning hit or cheer on the death of a fatally wounded gladiator. Gladiators were trained not only to fight well, but also to die properly, chest out, leaning to the right, head drooping, half-seated on their weapons. This was the dying swan of the Roman world, a cool, formalized way of death, which, if not properly performed, would be loudly booed by a disapproving crowd.

Such carefully staged moments of life and death were part of a set of public extravaganzas whose sheer organization alone demands admiration. For emperors, the financing of these spectaculars proclaimed to all their wealth and position at the apex of society. Before an approving crowd it was in their interests that both blood and money flowed freely. In the funeral games that Julius Caesar staged in honour of his father in 65 BC, the gladiators' armour was made of silver. On other occasions it might be studded with jewels or decorated with peacock or ostrich feathers. In AD 80, the opening of the Colosseum was celebrated by 100 days of games, which included gladiatorial fights and the slaughter of 9,000 wild animals. The spectators were further entertained by the emperor Titus, who threw into the crowd small wooden balls each marked with a sign indicating that they could be exchanged for food or clothing or (for a lucky few) horses, silverware, or slaves.

The striking investment of time, wealth, and emotion that gladiatorial games involved underlines their importance as a display of dominance. The cheers and rhythmic chants of the spectators proclaimed both their communal solidarity and their collective distance from those whom they had come to see butchered. In deciding the fate of a defeated gladiator, the crowd asserted its absolute control over humanity. Fatal games were an interlude of controlled disorder sponsored by society in order to affirm its own security. In that sense, amphitheatres, and the carefully regulated crowds and murderous games they contained, were epitomes of both the violence and the order that helped hold the empire together. In these bloody spectacles violence was presented as an inescapable part of an ordered society, just as war had once been a necessary part of the acquisition of empire.

Importantly too, however successfully violence and order may be compressed into one site, they can never be entirely separated from each other. The stout wooden barricades that cordoned off the arena from the crowd marked out a division which could be crossed, confused, broken down, blurred. In 192, the senator and historian Cassius Dio attended games held by the emperor Commodus, who not only presided, but also fought as a gladiator.

> The games lasted fourteen days. When the emperor was fighting, we senators always attended . . . And there is a thing which the emperor did to us senators which gave us good reason to expect that we were done for. After he had killed an ostrich he cut off its head and came right up to where we were seated, holding the head in his left hand and waving his bloody sword in his right. He said nothing, but grinning he wagged his head, indicating that he would deal with us in the same way. Many who were laughing at him would have been eliminated by the sword there and then (for it was laughter rather than distress which overcame us) if I had not chewed some laurel leaves, which I took from my garland, and persuaded the others who were seated near me to chew theirs, so that by the steady movement of our jaws we might hide the fact that we were laughing.

In Cassius Dio's eyewitness account, the emperor Commodus, maniacally grinning and waving a severed ostrich head, is clearly, and dangerously, on the wrong side of the fence. What Dio later portrayed as amusement at a farcical spectacle, was more likely at the time the nervous, dry laughter of deep fear. To have an emperor waving a severed head at you is not really funny until that emperor himself is safely dead. Dio and his senatorial colleagues must have been panic-stricken. Their terror was well founded. At the games Roman emperors not only emphasized their importance as upholders of social convention, they also underscored their autocratic position by demonstrating their ability to violate society's rules with total immunity.

Emperors were powerful (and were seen to be so); unlike the crowd, seated in their orderly rows, or those slaughtered in the games precisely because they were outsiders, emperors could act however they pleased. They could capriciously cross the boundaries that separated violence and order. An emperor posing as a gladiator was a frightening sight for Cassius Dio and his colleagues precisely because it exposed the weakness of their position as senators and the importance of convention for the maintenance of their status. Unlike emperors, senators had no social room to move. Commodus' potent display of autocratic power challenged everything that Dio stood for, everything he relied upon for the security of his rank and position. It might be possible to laugh later; but, at the time, the only person smiling must have been the emperor: no doubt amused at the sight of rows of bovine senators surreptitiously munching their laurel crowns and hoping that nobody would notice.

What a society does in its leisure time is an important indication of how it seeks to organize its world. Amphitheatres, with the crowds and spectacles they were designed to contain, were places that celebrated both order and violence; places where Roman society and imperial power were on public parade; places where in the middle of its cities members of a militaristic society continued to wage war – sometimes against each other – even in times of peace.

Like the great mediaeval cathedrals of northern Europe, amphitheatres dominated the cityscape of many Roman towns. Alongside armies, taxes, laws, and administration, they helped impose a definitive and recognizable order on the conquered provinces of empire. Fenced off within the confines of an amphitheatre, the brutal process of conquest could be effortlessly re-enacted and (this time) loudly applauded. Bloody spectacles allowed regimented crowds all over the empire to go on campaign without leaving the comfort of their own home towns. And, importantly, in their amphitheatres the spectators always won.

The martyrs' brigade

It was in this same threatening space where Roman society sought to hold in play life and death, violence and order, society and its enemies that many Christians went willingly to their deaths. Martyrdom was not a Christian innovation, it had clear Jewish antecedents; but Christian martyrdom was distinctive in being deliberately sought in front of an unbelieving and hostile crowd. It ran its grim course in one of the most important public places in any Roman city. It intersected directly with the complex compression of violence and order that marked out the Roman experience of games in the amphitheatre.

That martyrdoms were bloody spectaculars should not be doubted. In AD 177, the crowd in Lyon that cheered a group of Christians to their deaths saw one torn on the rack, another fried in an iron chair, a third tossed by a bull, the rest thrown to half-starved lions who ripped their victims limb from limb. Throwing Christians to the lions in the full, public gaze of a well-dressed crowd sitting in orderly rows in an amphitheatre must have seemed a dramatic assertion of Roman majority power over a minority sect. But it is also necessary to maintain some proper sense of proportion. Amidst shows which brought together wild beasts and miscreants from all over the Mediterranean and slaughtered them for the enjoyment of

spectators, a few Christians thrown to the lions cannot have caused that much excitement. They were just another group of undesirables to be paraded round, jeered at, and killed.

But for Christians, a martyr's torture and death was not a demoralizing defeat at the hands of a hostile and unforgiving community. Martyrdom was a triumph; it was a dramatic public act of defiance in the very place where Roman society had chosen to put itself on display and to demonstrate its own superiority. For Christians in the cities of the empire, martyrdom became a signal affirmation of their faith and a potent demonstration of their open contempt for Roman order. A public profession of Christianity and a horrifically memorable public execution were central to martyrdom's claim to be a successful act of protest and a rallying point for believers. No other death sanctified an otherwise seemingly irrational desire for self-sacrifice.

Christians – like capricious emperors – deliberately set out to challenge the carefully constructed balance of order and violence at the centre of gladiatorial games. Emperors thereby demonstrated that they stood powerfully above the concerns and conventions of this world; Christians thereby proclaimed that they were only concerned with the world to come. In the early 2nd century, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria, declared uncompromisingly on his way to martyrdom:

> From Syria all the way to Rome I am fighting with wild beasts by land and sea, by night and day . . . Let there come upon me fire and the cross, and packs of wild beasts, laceration, dismemberment, the dislocation of bones, the severing of limbs, the crushing of the whole body . . . For I am the wheat of God and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts so that I may be found to be the pure bread of Christ.

Above all, it was martyrdom's power to subvert that mattered. The bloody stories of martyrs' sufferings were read out in church. These

vivid and detailed accounts of Christian deaths allowed their victories to be repeated at every reading. When in the mid-150s Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (modern Izmir), was burned at the stake, according to the account of those Christians who claimed to have witnessed the event:

> The flames formed into the shape of a vault, just like a ship's sail bellying out in the wind, and encircled the martyr's body like a wall. He was in their midst not as burning flesh but rather as bread being baked, or like gold and silver being refined in a furnace. From it we perceived such a sweet smelling fragrance as though it were smoking incense or some other costly perfume.

Christian martyrdom turned the Roman world upside-down. In Christian eyes, the mutilated bodies of the martyrs were beautiful to behold. To the Christian nose, the smell of singed flesh was overpowering in its scented sweetness. Beautification was a necessary prelude to beatification. And, importantly, in their martyr acts the Christians always won.

Roman reactions

By and large, Romans regarded Christians as a laughable and easily expendable group. At the turn of the 2nd century AD, 25 years after the 'Martyrs of Lyon' went to their deaths, a graffito was scratched on the wall plaster of a building that formed part of the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill in the centre of Rome. It shows the crucifixion of a man with the head of a donkey; beside the cross an onlooker raises his arms in an attitude of prayer; underneath an awkwardly executed inscription reads (in Greek), 'Alexander worships his God.' This is clearly neither a sophisticated nor penetrating critique of Christian religion. But the point (in all its crassness) is clear: Christians are a joke; Alexander is a fool; he worships his god – a crucified donkey.

In similar vein, Minucius Felix, a lawyer and Christian convert

15. Anti-Christian graffito from the Paedagogium, part of the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill, Rome

writing in the early 3rd century, filled out his imaginary dialogue between a Christian and a pagan by including some of the abuse to which he claimed Christians were regularly subjected.

> They recognise each other by secret signs and marks. . . . I hear that they consecrate and, following some absurdly ignorant belief,

> worship the head of a donkey, the lowest of all beasts. . . . The stories of the initiation of newcomers are as revolting as they are well known. An infant covered with dough to deceive the unsuspecting is placed next to the person to be inducted into the sacred rites. The novice is incited to inflict what seem to be harmless blows on the surface of the dough and by these unseen and secret wounds the infant is killed. The blood – and this an unholy outrage – they lap up greedily; the limbs they eagerly tear apart.

These insults should not be taken too seriously, either as a description of early Christianity or of what ordinary Romans really believed about it. (Although, one should perhaps not be too surprised at the accusations of cannibalism. A religion whose central rite involves the symbolic consumption of the body and blood of its founder might perhaps expect such an attack.) In this passage factual accuracy is unimportant; what matters above all is that it is pure abuse. Here abuse, as it so often does, marks out boundaries and reinforces group solidarity. That is the lesson of every junior school playground. Listening to abuse, we often learn more about those making the insults than about their targets. For some Romans, accusing Christians of bizarre, inhuman, or anti-social practices was also a way of defining what was acceptable in their own society. Colourful accusations against Christians helped establish what was properly Roman.

For many, what was most puzzling was Christian martyrs' steadfast refusal to participate in Roman society, to enjoy the benefits of empire, to show due and proper deference to the emperor. No doubt too, the martyrs' religiously inspired death frenzies were difficult to comprehend. As a way of publicly expressing belief, in contrast to the carefully regulated parades and festivals central to well-ordered civic society, martyrdom must have seemed both mystifying and unappealing. Even so, on the whole, the Roman authorities were not keen to become involved in seeking out Christians and prosecuting them. At the beginning of the 2nd century, Pliny the Younger, while governor of Bithynia-Pontus, faced that dilemma.

He suspected that the secret meetings and common meals held by Christians had a more sinister purpose. Pliny began an investigation and duly executed several Christians who refused to deny their faith. Yet as so often happens in witch-hunts, accusations multiply as each new charge is seized upon as a way of settling old scores. Pliny was next presented with an anonymous pamphlet that named various people who were allegedly Christian. Perhaps now somewhat regretting that he had ever started his inquiries, he asked the emperor's advice. Trajan's reply was both simple and revealing. He instructed Pliny to back off. Christians were not to be sought out; they were to be given every chance to renounce their faith; those who recanted were to be pardoned; no anonymous accusations were to be entertained under any circumstances.

In AD 180, three years after the martyrdoms in Lyon, another group of Christians came before the Roman governor at Carthage. Their leader was one Speratus. Christian eyewitnesses later recorded their version of events in the form of a trial transcript.

Governor: You may merit the clemency of our lord, the emperor, if you return to a right mind.

Speratus: We have never committed any wrong, we have never been party to any wicked deed, we have never uttered a curse, but we have given thanks when ill-treated because we honour our own emperor.

Governor: We also are a religious people and our religion is simple: we swear by our lord, the emperor, and pray for his safety, as you also ought to do.

Speratus: I do not recognise the empire of this world; but rather I serve that God whom with these eyes no man has seen, nor can see.

Governor: Cease to be of this persuasion.

Speratus: But that is evil.

Governor: Do you persist in remaining a Christian?

Speratus: I am a Christian.

Governor: Do you not wish any time for consideration?

Speratus: When right is so obvious there is nothing to consider.

Governor: Have a reprieve of thirty days and think it over.

Speratus: I am a Christian.

As Speratus became increasingly subversive in his remarks, the governor was forced, still unwillingly, to order his execution. This is an important text. It shows that, at least for some Romans, Christians could be regarded as an anti-social group who tried, often rather noisily, to attract attention to themselves. As Speratus' trial reveals, in the face of Roman disinterest, many Christians had to try quite hard to get themselves thrown to the lions.

For the most part, Christians remained on the edges of Roman society and on the margins of its consciousness. In the late 180s, an excited throng mobbed the tribunal of the governor of Asia, Caius Arrius Antoninus. They made it clear that they were all Christians and that they expected the governor without delay to condemn them all to death. Antoninus obligingly had a few of them led away to execution, but as the others ever more insistently demanded the same fate, he turned on this pious crowd in exasperation: 'You wretches,' he cried, 'if you want to die, do you not have cliffs and ropes?'

Importantly too, pagan Romans, in abusing, executing, or just ignoring Christians, demonstrated that they had missed – or simply could not be bothered to recognize – one of the crucial points about this new religion. By lumping Christians together with criminals, robbers, and other undesirables, Romans obscured in their own minds what made this movement exceptional. Christianity was a religion (obviously); but above all else it was a religion of the book. Like Judaism, which the Romans regarded as an odd, ethnic, but undeniably ancient, superstition, Christians relied on a set of sacred texts which they believed to be the word of God. It is this reliance on a set of scriptures that marked out Christianity. It made it more

than an anti-social organization likely to crumble in the face of state-sponsored violence.

The establishment of a canonical set of texts was crucial to early Christianity. The New Testament did not appear fully formed. In the two centuries after Christ, different versions were written; different attempts at writing about God hotly debated. A key figure in these disputes was Marcion. Writing in Rome in the early 2nd century, Marcion argued that the Jewish God of the Old Testament was not the same as the Christian God. As he set out to demonstrate in his aptly entitled *Antitheses*, the inconsistencies were simply too great. The God of Moses had created Adam and Eve and thus allowed evil to come into the world. He was responsible for what Marcion regarded as the humiliating process of sexual reproduction, the discomforts of pregnancy, and the pains of childbirth. This Old Testament god, far from being a model of beneficent mercy, had allowed his prophet Elisha to vent his rage on children who had teased him by having them mauled by bears. He had stopped the noonday sun to give Joshua a better opportunity for the slaughter of the Amorites. His ignorance was clearly manifest in his question to Adam in the Garden of Eden: 'Adam, where art thou?' Marcion argued that this was not the sort of question one should expect an omniscient deity to have to ask. Such a god could not be the guarantor of Christian salvation. The revealed creator-god of the Old Testament, with its harsh judicial sanctions and demands for vengeance, was distinct from the God of the New Testament with its promise of liberating grace.

For Marcion, this was a distinction insufficiently recognized by the evangelists. The Gospels needed radical re-editing to make the point. In his new version, Marcion rejected outright the stories of the birth of Christ. In his view, it was inconceivable that God could have been born of a women – virgin or otherwise. Four Gospels too, he contended, produced unnecessary contradictions. Marcion eliminated Matthew, Mark, and John, and expurgated Luke, adding a selection of St Paul's letters. Needless to say, Marcion's ideas did

not find general acceptance; in 144 he was expelled from the church in Rome. That is unsurprising: after all, Marcion's project went to the heart of this new religion. If Christianity was to be based on a book, then what should that book look like?

Outside the Christian fold these arguments surrounding the creation of a book that in some way defined a divinity were mostly ignored. When Speratus came before the governor in Carthage, he had a satchel under his arm. The governor asked: 'What have you got in that case?' Speratus replied: 'Books and the letters of Paul, a just man.' But the governor showed no further interest. It was only at the very end of the 3rd century, when the Christian church was a widespread and well-organized institution, that the importance of these documents was realized. In 303, another transcript of proceedings against Christians shows Roman authorities looking for books. In Cirta (modern Constantine in Algeria), Felix, the head of the town council, confronted Catullinus and Marcuclius, junior officials from the local church.

Felix: Bring out the scriptures which you possess so that we can obey the orders and command of the emperors.

(Catullinus produced one reasonably large volume.)

Felix: Why have you given me one volume only? Produce the scriptures which you possess.

Catullinus and Marcuclius: We don't have any more because we are sub-deacons. The readers have the books.

Felix: Show me the readers!

Catullinus and Marcuclius: We don't know where they live.

Felix: If you don't know where they live, tell me their names.

Catullinus and Marcuclius: We are not traitors; here we are, order us to be killed.

Felix: Arrest them.

But this is not a story of martyrdom. Pressure is exerted and the sub-deacons change their mind. Eventually the chief magistrate, having located the readers, retired satisfied with several volumes of religious material.

These proceedings formed part of the persecution by the emperor Diocletian. This was the most effective attempt by the Roman government to deal with Christianity. By seizing books rather than people, Diocletian went to the core of this new religion. It is not surprising that later Christian writers should have referred to these years as 'The Great Persecution'. In the end, the Church survived: Christianity was low on Diocletian's list of priorities; by the end of the 3rd century, the Church was a strong, tightly knit body, and many confronted by the Roman authorities were able successfully to pass off other books as their sacred texts. But the lesson of the Great Persecution was important. It clearly exposed to all, and especially to those imperial officials charged with executing Diocletian's orders, Christianity's dependence on the written word.

This was a lesson not lost on the emperor Constantine. In 312, ten years after Diocletian's Great Persecution, Constantine became the first Roman emperor to embrace Christianity. A key element in Constantine's subsequent public support of his new religion was a concern to establish a firm and testable basis for belief. His aim was to end the debates on the nature and number of the scriptures and to define the Christian God. Constantine was remarkably successful. Faced with a bitter dispute on the divinity of Christ, he summoned the first Mediterranean-wide, ecumenical conference of bishops. They met in June 325 at the lakeside town of Nicaea in north-western Turkey. It is principally thanks to Constantine's coercion of those Christian leaders assembled at the Council of Nicaea that the 'Nicene Creed' was first drafted:

> I believe in one God, Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible: And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all

> worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made.

This statement remains the basic formula which modern Christians of all major denominations continue to use in expressing and affirming their faith. The Nicene Creed is not to be found anywhere in the New Testament. It is the product of a much later drive to define Christianity as a system of beliefs, a means of imposing unity on the Church as an institution.

For many who did not share the emperor's beliefs, Constantine's open profession of Christianity must have come as an unpleasant surprise. Looking back – with all the advantages of hindsight – they might perhaps have regretted the previous nonchalant indifference of many Romans. Some no doubt wished that more Christians had been thrown to more lions. But treating Christians like criminals missed the central point of Christianity. It obscured its fundamental reliance on language, on the scriptures, on the Word. It failed to prevent the growth of a sect of fanatics, self-righteously convinced of their own beliefs; a sect that gained both identity and adherents through its glorification of the martyrs, many slaughtered in one of the most symbolically significant spaces in a Roman town. On reflection, it would have been far better to have let the Christians go. Throwing them to the lions certainly provided good entertainment, but it was ultimately counter-productive. If the Roman authorities in the first two centuries AD had been really interested in suppressing Christianity, a much more effective strategy would have been to ignore individual Christians and instead to have seized and burned their books.

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It is worth noting that the *Penguin Classics* translations of Plutarch's *Lives* break up the biographical pairs and omit the formal comparisons; the translation of Pausanias can likewise be misleading, as it has been reordered to suit the modern tourist.

Chapter 5: Christians to the lions

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