

PERSECUTIONS

The persecution of Christians in Egypt has to be considered in connection with the religious policy and the ruler cult of the Roman emperors. Right from the start the Christians, being the followers of what was largely perceived as a Jewish sectarian executed by order of a Roman government representative, looked suspicious to both Romans and orthodox Jews (Vittinghoff, 1984). Notwithstanding their efforts to present themselves as loyal subjects of the Roman state, Christians had been occasionally persecuted since the time of Nero (A.D. 64). But only in the third century did large-scale persecutions become a feature of Roman religious policy. They generally aimed at destroying Christian belief and church organization rather than the Christians themselves (if the latter could be avoided).

State authorities would try to bring Christians to apostasy and would spare their lives when the defendants sacrificed to the gods of the empire as a gesture of respect to the person of the emperor. State pressure to secure political loyalty through applying the instrument of the ruler cult was often successful, and thus created for the church the problem of how to deal later on with those *lapsi* and apostates wishing to return to the community of the Christian church.

The dissensions on disciplinary measures within the Christian communities led in some cases to serious and long-lasting schisms such as the MELITIAN SCHISM in Egypt, and that of the Donatists in the [Latin](#)-speaking provinces of northern Africa. On the other hand, the extraordinary endurance of Christian confessors facing torture and death made a deep impression not only on believers but also on the noncommitted and the persecutors.

The literary genre of the *Acta martyrum* and the *Passio* kept alive and enhanced the memory of the confrontation between Christian confessor and pagan judge, as well as the ordeals of the Christians sentenced, after

torture, to the mines or to death (Frend, 1965; Musurillo, 1972). The tombs of the martyrs gave rise to memorial buildings and churches outside the city walls, thereby making a strong impact on the urban features of cities like Rome, Alexandria (Boukolia), and Carthage, and even leading to the development of new centers complete with churches, city dwellings, and accommodations for pilgrims, as was the case at Karm Abu Mena (Krause, 1978).

Ruler Cult and Persecutions of Christians in Egypt

As the emperors pursued a policy of growing autocracy and religious [exaltation](#) of their majesty, Christianity in Egypt took root first in Alexandria, home to a large Jewish community, and later in the Egyptian *chora* (rural area). There it made converts both in the Greek-speaking “towns” (e.g., the nome capitals) and in the traditional Egyptian milieu. But the spread of the new belief met with growing resistance, because the Christians, being fiercely monotheistic and rejecting any form of compromise with pagan polytheism, secluded themselves from all public activities involving sacrifice to pagan gods and Roman emperors. This must have been particularly resented in Alexandria, being as it were (and as Philo *Legatio ad Gaium* 338 states) a real paradigm of ruler cult. The Christians practiced a highly secretive religious life, which gave rise to suspicions that they were culpable of ritual murder and incestuous relations.

While there had already been sporadic actions against Christians in [Rome](#) and the provinces (e.g., under Nero, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius), we learn for the first time of persecutions in Egypt under the emperor Septimius Severus in 202. Origen’s father, Leonides, was one of the victims. The sojourn of Severus in the East (200 in Egypt) and his special veneration for Serapis may have contributed to this outbreak of anti-Christian feeling, but “the story in the Augustan History that he issued an edict prohibiting the [Jews](#) to proselytize and the Christians to make converts is a piece of fiction” (Birley, 1971, p. 209, referring to *Scriptores historiae*

Augustae, vita Severi, 17.1).

Still wider-ranging actions against Christians followed under Decius (249-251). First measures had driven Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, into flight and hiding. In 250, Decius issued a universal order to sacrifice to the gods, to pour a libation, and to taste sacrificial meat. The penalty for refusal was imprisonment, torture, and death. Those who complied received certificates for the accomplishment of the sacrifices (*libelli*, well known from Egypt, especially from the Fayyum). In the face of coercion, many capitulated, among them leaders of the church. But others withstood and endured.

The names of seventeen Egyptian martyrs are on record (Frend, 1965, p. 411). After the short reign of Decius and a pause of a few years, persecutions resumed in 257 under Valerianus (253-260). Dionysius and members of the Alexandrian clergy were deported to Libya. Others, including Christian laymen, suffered worse fates. But these actions came to a halt in 260, when Valerianus was defeated and captured by the Sassanids of Persia. His son and successor, Gallienus, permitted Christianity to survive unmolested, a policy largely followed until the end of the third century.

During this period, the Egyptian national religion began to decline, the rural areas of the country turning progressively to Christianity but also witnessing the advance of Manichaeism, especially in Upper Egypt. This was also the period that saw the rise of Coptic and the decline of Greek in the *chora*. However, with the sources at our disposal, we are not able to give a clear picture of the advance of Christianity in the Egyptian hinterland. It has been argued in a forceful and brilliant manner that by 330 half of the Egyptian population had joined the Christian religion and that by the end of the fourth century, “the figure must have been at least ninety percent” (Bagnall, 1982, p. 123). E. Wipszycka (1986), however, has challenged that view with some good arguments. But nobody has ever contested that at least a small percentage of pagans survived into the

fifth century. In fact, we hear of monks still fighting paganism in the *chora* in that century.

Things changed again when Diocletian (284-305) undertook the ideological and political restructuring of the Roman empire. For the sake of discipline and the strengthening of the majority, the emperor and his colleagues in the tetrarchy took measures against Manichaeism (297) and against some recalcitrant Christians in the army. But the martyrdom that the so-called Theban Legion is said to have suffered on Maximian's orders when about to begin operations against the Bagauds of Gaul, in 286 most probably is not historical, since the specifics of the story cannot confirm the participation of a legionary force from the Thebaid (Van Berchem, 1956; Dupraz, 1961).

The tradition regarding Saint Menas, a Roman soldier first, then a hermit in Asia Minor, and finally a martyr there in the time of Diocletian, also is largely legendary. His body is believed to have been brought to Egypt and have come to rest in what was later called Karm Abu Mena. That place became a famous religious center for several centuries, until the remains of Saint Menas were transferred to Cairo.

The prelude to the Great Persecution began with the triumph of Caesar Galerius over the Persians in 297. His pressure, more than anything else, seems to have determined Diocletian to take action, first on 23 February 303, the pagan feast of the Terminalia. In a crescendo of edicts from 24 February 303 to the fourth edict in January/February 304, ever growing repression was applied to the Christians, leaders and flock alike. In Egypt it was the prefect Clodius Culcianus (301-307) who was responsible for the application of the tetrarchic edicts. The persecution left such a mark on Egyptian Christians that in their time reckoning they used the Era of the Martyrs, starting with the accession of Diocletian to the throne in 284. The *Acta* of Phileas, bishop of Tmuis, and his *Letter* refer to Culcianus' period of office, giving a vivid description of the sufferings of the martyrs at Alexandria (Musurillo, 1972, pp. xlvi- xlviii, 320-53).

Phileas was executed probably on 4 February 307.

Neither the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian on 1 May 305 nor Galerius' edict of toleration on 30 April 311 brought lasting relief for the Christians in Egypt. Maximinus Daia (caesar, 305-310; augustus, 310-313) continued the persecution until Constantine and Licinius met at Milan in 313 and pronounced themselves in favor of the toleration and restoration of the Christian church. Only with Maximinus' defeat at the hands of Licinius in 313 did the Great Persecution finally come to a halt. In Egypt, Sossianus Hierocles, prefect in 310/311 (Barnes, 1982, p. 150) is on record as a particularly active persecutor.

During his term of office, PETER I, bishop of Alexandria, was executed (25 November 311), and in the Thebaid, Christian eagerness for martyrdom led to fierce antagonism and persecution, of which the bishop and church historian Eusebius gives a chilling report (*Historia ecclesiastica* 8.9). We do not have any reliable data on the number of victims. Frend (1965, p. 537) estimates the number of martyrs in the entire East at between 2,500 and 3,000 in the period of the Great Persecution (303-313).

In 322-323, Licinius, preparing for his struggle with Constantine, resumed the persecution of Christians, but without much success, since he was defeated by 324. Constantine's victory inaugurated for the whole Roman Empire a new epoch, the "Peace of the Church," only briefly interrupted by the countermeasures of JULIAN THE APOSTATE (361-363). But peace from persecution did not mean peace within the church. The persecutions left a quite varied heritage: on the one side, the memory of the martyrs, on the other, a divided community rife with disciplinary, doctrinal, and personal conflicts.

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