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The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games*

Leonard L. Thompson / Menasha, Wisconsin

On February 23, 155—or thereabouts—Polycarp was executed as a criminal in the stadium at Smyrna during Roman blood games. The games were complex events, combining social, political, and religious elements. The rank and file attended them, along with imperial authorities, provincial bureaucrats, and city elites—rare occasions when ruler and ruled encountered each other face-to-face. There, in the stadium, they celebrated the power, justice, and glory of the empire, displayed in animal hunts, gladiator duels, and the execution of criminals such as Polycarp. They also celebrated cultural truths about Roman identity in the empire and the larger cosmic order. In that setting, charged heavily with imperial power and Roman truth, Polycarp was killed.

A “good guy/bad guy” mentality almost inevitably creeps into our thinking when reading about Polycarp’s martyrdom. Characters in the drama become two-dimensional. Christians are the noble underdogs, all the better to cheer because we know they won. Rome and the emperors are mad and sadistic (especially when played by Peter Ustinov). Or, with Edward Gibbon, we may reverse values: Later Christian writers created that image of an evil empire by attributing to Rome the “implacable and unrelenting zeal which filled their own breasts against the heretics or the idolaters of their own times.”¹ In either case, the players become flat, without much individualizing detail. In point of fact, the characters—

* This article is dedicated to the memory of Donald W. Riddle, whom I once interviewed at University of Illinois, then at Navy Pier in Chicago, where he was teaching American History. Why had he, in the late 1940s, left a distinguished career in the field of New Testament and early Christianity? I remember vividly his one-word answer: *Übergeschichte!* He said it with lip curled in disdain. Now the field once again appreciates the ballast of social history, though, alas, too late to benefit Riddle. A version of this paper was read at the Upper Midwest American Academy of Religion. Thanks to John Helgeland for his comments and encouragement.

¹ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 1:467.

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Christians and Romans—are round, “complex in temperament and motivation,” a mixture of negative and positive, as are all persons “in real life.”² Neither Christians nor Romans had a monopoly on goodness—or evil—as they played out their roles in the Roman games.

Christians who wrote about Polycarp’s execution privileged his role in the games over that of the Romans: their unjust coercion met his just resistance; their torture, his steadfast endurance; their accusations of criminality, his witness to noble martyrdom. In their account, no common ground existed between the killers and the killed. Christians formed an enclave, closed off from all else in the stadium. Yet, did not death in the Roman games affect how that New Religious Movement understood itself? For example, was not the passion of Jesus excerpted and highlighted from the founding myth of his life and teachings? And did not the public display of torture and death help bring into focus what Judith Perkins calls a “new subjectivity—the self as sufferer”?³ In brief, though Christian/Roman encounters in the arena are presented as a face-off, did not the setting in the games also contribute to the shape of Christian self-understanding?

ROMAN GAMES

Game day was an exciting, festive time. The workplace and normal routine were left behind. Streets leading out to the stadium were crowded with throngs of people who had been anticipating the games from the time that the events had been announced: “Twenty pairs of gladiators belonging to D. Lucretius Sater Valens, lifelong priest of Caesar”; “awning will be provided”; “crucifixions along with animal hunts and gladiator duels.”⁴ Best of all, the games were free and open to the public. More accurately, they were funded by either government bureaucrats or other benefactors who expected recognition of their benefaction. Thiasus, for example, showed himself worthy of being chief magistrate at Corinth by financing “a three-day gladiatorial display.”⁵ As among the North American Kwakiutl’s Potlatch ceremonies, the more wealth displayed and destroyed, the greater the status and prestige of the sponsor.⁶ Sponsors of

² M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1981), p. 20. An irony here: literary terms remind us of the complexity of historical characters.

³ Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 7.

⁴ Announcements of that sort were found in the ashes of Pompeii, see Thomas Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 56, 97.

⁵ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 10.18. The account is, of course, fictional, but it reflects real-life practices.

⁶ Compare Carlin Barton, “Savage Miracles: The Redemption of Lost Honor in Roman Society and the Sacrament of the Gladiator and the Martyr,” *Representations* 45 (Winter 1994): 47. For examples of costs, see Richard Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire*

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lavish displays gained status both locally and with imperial authorities, especially when the games were associated with honoring the emperor or the imperial family.⁷ But such matters were not on the mind of Smyrnaeans on the way to the stadium; they were on holiday.

There was a set game plan for all the events. On the evening prior to the games a public banquet (*cena libera*) was held that included gladiators and prisoners condemned to die the next day. As Paul Plass writes, it was a “unique dinner mediating between the living and the dead, between normal and abnormal activities.”⁸ People apparently came to the banquet in part out of curiosity to see who was to be killed. Perpetua and Saturus gave Christian testimony at their dinner, warning the curious “of God’s judgement, stressing the joy they would have in their suffering, and ridiculing the curiosity of those that came to see them.”⁹ The next day, the games began with a parade through the stadium, followed by the games themselves, performed in fixed order: in the morning, fighting and hunting of wild beasts (*venationes*); during the midday break, execution of criminals—insurgent slaves, captives of war, arsonists, murderers, and those committing sacrilege—though sometimes they were killed in connection with the morning hunts; in the afternoon, gladiatorial duels (*munera*), fought on foot or mounted or in chariots.¹⁰

The crowd at Smyrna entered a stadium (*stadion*), built originally for foot and horse racing, but remodeled so that a wall protected spectators

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 153–54; and Keith Hopkins, *Death and Renewal*, Sociological Studies in Roman History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 7–8. The games became especially expensive when each sponsor sought to outdo his predecessors in, for example, the number or variety of animals in the *venationes*. Both Nero and Marcus Aurelius put controls on spending in order to avoid exploitation of wealthy provincials and to keep from overburdening magnates; cf. Wiedemann, pp. 134–35. Those who sponsored the shows, like baseball owners today, periodically cried out, “Save us from ourselves.”

⁷ Robert concludes from his analysis of inscriptions that the gladiator fights came directly from Rome along with the imperial cult (Louis Robert, *Les Gladiateurs dans l’Orient Grec* [1940; reprint, Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1971], p. 240, cf. p. 270). For example, *IGRom* 1454 from Smyrna: Φαμίλῖα μονομάχων Λ. Τύμωνος Ἀσιάρχου νεωτέρου, a family of gladiators honors a sponsor of shows who is designated as Asiarch. The relation of the Asiarch to the imperial cult is a complex one; see Steven J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), pp. 92–113. Priests of local temples also sponsored games; see A. H. M. Jones, *Greek City: From Alexander to Justinian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), p. 230.

⁸ Paul Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p. 52.

⁹ *Of Perpetua and Felicitas* 17 in Herbert Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 125. According to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (*Mart. Pol.*), Polycarp would not have been present at the banquet, for the authorities had not yet located him. Unless otherwise indicated, text and translation of *Mart. Pol.* are from Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

¹⁰ Although those three types of performances had different origins, they were linked together by the time of Augustus; see Wiedemann, pp. 55–57.

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from the wild animals. In Rome and western provinces, the games were held in amphitheaters, structures with viewers' seats all the way around.¹¹ The grandest amphitheater was the Flavian Colosseum at Rome, a gigantic structure that held at least 50,000 people. Elsewhere in the West, as many as 252 other amphitheaters have been discovered, several of which were part of military complexes along the borders of the empire.¹² But in the eastern provinces, few amphitheaters were built, perhaps no more than twenty, for in those provinces Roman games—just as popular there as in the West—were held in stadiums and theaters remodeled for the blood sports.¹³ There was an amphitheater in Pergamum and Cyzicus, but apparently not in other cities in the province of Asia.¹⁴ Whether stadium, theater, or amphitheater, those structures reminded provincials that they were part of the Roman Empire, for architecture was an important means of Romanization.¹⁵

Those making their way to watch the blood games included all strata of society at Smyrna—not just the masses. The famous, well-respected Smyrnaean orator, Polemo, for example, could make witty comments as he watched a gladiator in “sheer terror of the life-and-death struggle before him.”¹⁶ Of course, fascination with violence, suffering, and dying was not unique to those at Smyrna. Plato tells of Leontion's fascination with some corpses recently killed: “For a time he struggled with himself . . . but at last his desire got the better of him and he ran up to the corpses, [as he reprimanded himself], ‘There you are, curse you—a lovely sight! Have a real good look!’”¹⁷ And Augustine tells the well-known story about

¹¹ See Dio 43.22.3: “called an amphitheatre [ἀμφιθέατρον] from the fact that it had seats all around [περί παντοχόθεν ἔδρας].” Unless otherwise indicated, Greek and Latin texts and translations are from the Loeb Classical Library.

¹² Pierre Grimal, *Roman Cities*, ed. and trans. G. Michael Woloch (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), pp. 63–68; Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), pp. 53–76.

¹³ For the numbers, see Futrell, p. 230. For the distribution of gladiator fighting in the East, see Robert, pp. 241–48. Robert concludes, “Greek society was corrupted by this sickness from Rome. It was one of the achievements of the Romanization of the Greek world” (p. 263). On remodeled stadiums: *IGRom* 845 and 861, from Laodicea on Lycus: “a stadium [τὸ στάδιον] with seats for spectators all around [ἀνφιθέατρον].” On remodeled temples, see Robert, nos. 23–24 (the theater at Philippi); Hazel Dodge, “Amusing the Masses: Buildings for Entertainment and Leisure in the Roman World,” in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*, ed. D. S. Potter and D. J. Mattingly (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 233–35.

¹⁴ Dodge, pp. 231, 233–35. There were several amphitheaters in Syria, Galilee, and Judea.

¹⁵ Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 190–91.

¹⁶ According to Philostratus, *Vit. soph.* 541, Polemo commented: “You are in as great an agony as though you were going to declaim.” In *Les Gladiateurs*, Robert establishes in detail that the “upper classes” supported gladiator fights (pp. 254–62).

¹⁷ Plato, *Resp.* 440A.

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Alypius, who became so taken up with the violence and madness of the games that he had to return to them.¹⁸ One sees the same fascination in descriptions of hangings in eighteenth-century England or lynching bees in the United States, which occurred as late as the middle of the twentieth century. Residents from nearby towns came to enjoy the festivities with picnic lunches and their children who were photographed smiling next to a hanging victim.¹⁹

Why this virtually universal fascination with observing suffering and dying? Boswell thought that he was drawn to public executions at Tyburn because they reminded him of his own death: "They are both death; they are both that wonderous, that alarming scene of quitting all that we have ever seen, heard, or known and at once passing into a state of being totally unknown to us."²⁰ Geertz's comment on Balinese cockfights is also apropos: "Man and beast, good and evil, ego and id, the creative power of aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosened animality fuse in a bloody drama of hatred, cruelty, violence, and death."²¹ Whether Balinese cockfights, executions at Tyburn (or Texas), or blood sports, those at Smyrna, like most civilized, cultured people, preferred to watch the sweet horror of tumult and death from the stands and then exit for the safer, ordered life of Smyrna.

Whatever explanations may be given for a broad human interest in watching violence and death, those entering the stadium at Smyrna were awash in patriotism. The games were powerful social rituals for promulgating and maintaining central values and central institutions of the Roman Empire. Just as Alexander the Great introduced the Greek games of music and gymnastics to hellenize western Asia Minor, so the Romans used blood games to Romanize the same area. In return, when cities such as Smyrna hosted the games, they demonstrated their loyalty to Rome, and those who attended showed social solidarity with the Romans. Moreover, when they returned home, they did not forget. Scenes from the games have been found on graffiti, mosaics, pottery tableware, oil lamps, and glassware. The educated elite were both familiar with the shows and assumed that their audience would also be familiar with them. Adults discussed the games. Children played at being gladiators.²²

Each segment of the games expressed in its own way the values, the power, and the glory of the empire. The morning animal hunts displayed

¹⁸ Augustine, *Conf.* 6.8.

¹⁹ Compare the exhibition at the New York Historical Society, "Lynching Photography in America" announced in the *New York Times* (April 9, 2000).

²⁰ Quoted in Plass (n. 8 above), pp. 184–85. See also pp. 15–24 and Plass's long footnote 10 on pp. 184–86.

²¹ Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), pp. 420–21.

²² See Wiedemann (n. 4 above), pp. 23–24 and 41.

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its wealth and organization as strange, exotic beasts transported from all around the empire were loosed into the arena to fight each other or criminals or professional fighters. The carnage was greatest in games put on by the emperor. When the Colosseum was opened, Titus had 9,000 animals slaughtered in games that included battles between cranes and among four elephants.²³ Lucius Sulla exhibited a combat of 100 maned lions. Augustus sent in 420 female leopards. Antonius Pius introduced a variety of beasts—"elephants, hyenas, lions, tigers, rhinoceroses, crocodiles, and hippopotamuses."²⁴ Sometimes those dangerous animals appeared as in the wild but, contained in the arena, displayed the power of the empire over the threat of wild nature.²⁵ The greater the number of animals, the more impressive the morning games.

In the afternoon, gladiators took the field. Spectators viewed them ambiguously with, as Barton states vividly, "both worship and disgust, emulation and loathing, sympathy and revulsion."²⁶ On the one hand, most of them were slaves, condemned criminals, or freedmen, who lived lives apart from the rest of society, rarely able to gain manumission if slaves, or citizenship if free.²⁷ Apollonius objected to the way people "would buy for large sums adulterers and fornicators and burglars and cutpurses and kidnappers and such-like rabble, and then arm them and set them to fight with one another."²⁸ Those of higher ranks who chose to fight in the arena were degraded, becoming infamous and shameful.²⁹ On the other hand, gladiators displayed Roman military virtues of strength, courage, quickness, bravery, and endurance.³⁰ They bound themselves by an oath (*sacramentum*), more brutal even than the oath to be a soldier: to endure

²³ So Cassius Dio 66.25.1.

²⁴ Wiedemann, p. 61; Pliny, *Nat.* 8.20, 24, 28, 29.

²⁵ Wiedemann, pp. 62, 65, 90.

²⁶ Barton (n. 6 above), p. 52.

²⁷ Petronius, *Satyricon* 45. Hopkins (n. 6 above), pp. 24–25; Wiedemann, p. 28: "the contrast between the fame of individual gladiators and the *infamia* with which gladiators as a group were stigmatised is striking." For an inside view of the life of a gladiator, see Robert (n. 7 above), pp. 302–7. In the inscriptions there are references to gladiatorial troupes. They married. One epitaph is set up for the child of a gladiator. As outcasts, or at least as heavily marked "others," they shared characteristics with Christian martyrs. In contrast to gladiators, however, most of the (Christian) documents of martyrdom present an insider's view with few references to martyrs from the outside.

²⁸ Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 4.22.

²⁹ See Plass, p. 72.

³⁰ David S. Potter, "Entertainers in the Roman Empire," in Potter and Mattingly, eds. (n. 13 above), p. 306; Wiedemann, p. 39. Hopkins suggests that senators and knights performed as gladiators, for "it was their last chance to play soldiers in front of a large audience" (p. 21). Potter mentions that prizes of spears and torques were given to gladiators as they were to soldiers. Gladiator duels were popular with soldiers, for the gladiators displayed those virtues of the warrior (p. 316). (Recall that amphitheaters were often built close to military camps.)

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being burned, bound by chains, flogged, or even death by sword.³¹ When they fought bravely and honorably, they were an inspiration to the spectators, young and old alike. Pliny praises Trajan's games: "nothing lax or dissolute to weaken and destroy the manly spirit of his subjects, but one to inspire them to face honourable wounds and look scorn on death, by exhibiting love of glory and desire for victory even in the persons of criminals and slaves. What generosity went to provide this spectacle!"³²

If the morning hunts displayed the empire's power over nature in the wild and the afternoon gladiatorial duels exhibited Roman military virtues, the midday executions demonstrated Rome's concern for law and order. Punishment corrected the imbalance created by a criminal act and reestablished proper social order. Criminals—arsonists, murderers, those committing treason—were punished appropriate to the crime. "A person who burns down a building or a pile of corn set beside a dwellinghouse is directed to be bound, flogged, and put to death by fire."³³ When Galba was governor of Hispania Tarraconensis, "he cut off the hands of a money-lender who carried on his business dishonestly and nailed them to his counter," but Suetonius says that was overly severe.³⁴

The midday executions could be the most brutal of the day's events. During those executions, many spectators left the stadium to lunch on the grounds (prior to the gladiator duels), but the remaining hardcore were vicious. Seneca writes that "in the morning, men are thrown to lions and bears. At midday they are thrown to the spectators themselves. . . . You may object that the victims committed robbery or were murderers. So what? Even if they deserved to suffer, what's your compulsion to watch their sufferings? 'Kill him', they shout, 'beat him, burn him.'"³⁵ According to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, it was the noonday crowd that reacted "with uncontrollable wrath" when Polycarp confessed to being a Christian. They first cried out to Philip the Asiarch to let a lion loose on Polycarp, but Philip could not do that, for the morning hunts were closed. Then the crowd cried out "with one mind that he should burn Polycarp alive."³⁶

³¹ Hopkins, p. 24, quoting Petronius, *Satyricon* 117. On the oath, see also Barton, p. 52, n. 68.

³² Pliny, *Pan.* 33. Perhaps it was because of their manliness that some upperclass women were attracted to gladiators. Juvenal 6: "he was frightfully ugly, Scarred by his helmet, a wart on his nose, and his eyes always running. Gladiators, though, look better than any Adonis: This is what she preferred to children, country, and sister, This to her husband. The sword is what they dote on, these women" (*The Satires of Juvenal*, trans. by Rolfe Humphries [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958]).

³³ *The Digest of Justinian*, ed. and trans. Alan Watson (hereafter cited as *Digest*) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 47.9.9.

³⁴ Suetonius, *Galba* 9.

³⁵ Seneca, *Letters* 7.2., quoted in Hopkins, p. 3.

³⁶ *Mart. Pol.* 12.2–3. In what follows, I hold no particular brief for the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Was a version of it written soon after the events—either Eusebius's or Pionius's? Fash-

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In sum, Polycarp was executed in a place and a time for celebrating Roman values and the glory of the Roman Empire. Smyrnaeans from all strata of society entered the stadium to participate in social rites of display and destruction. In the morning, animals were the victims. In the afternoon, patrons provided gladiators who inspired young and old alike as they displayed the military virtues of strength, bravery, and endurance. And in the interval between the animal hunts and the gladiators, criminals (and prisoners of war) supplied the blood. Polycarp and other Christian criminals thus appeared in the stadium during “the interval,” the “time-out” between the major events. They were part of a sideshow in which strict, law-abiding denizens of Smyrna could celebrate law and order in the empire.

POLITICAL THEATER

The saga of Polycarp’s martyrdom begins after “the most noble Germanicus . . . fought gloriously with the wild beasts.” Then the crowd shouted, “Away with the atheists; let Polycarp be searched for.”³⁷ What triggered local Smyrnaeans at this time to bring charges against Polycarp who had most likely spent all of the eighty-six years as a Christian in Smyrna? Had hostility toward this alien cult been mounting steadily? Was this “new and wicked superstition” (Suetonius) gaining too many converts or amassing too much wealth? Or had something specific happened—a natural disaster, a demand, a conflict—to cause the hostility? We do not know.

We do know that by this time imperial *rescripta*, responses an emperor made to questions sent to him by a person having to make a judgment, had established Christian confession as a crime deserving death.³⁸ In

ions on the date come and go, as Daniel Boyarin points out (“Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6, no. 4 [1998]: 588–89, including references). Is it written from a Christian perspective? No doubt. But ideological shaping of a document need not require a great length of time; it occurs with perception and memory. Would a non-Christian have written about Polycarp’s martyrdom in the same way? Obviously not. But since this is the only account that we have, what else can we do but work with it? Where ideology enters, then that should be taken into account. For example, it seems obvious to me that the account has been influenced by the gospel tradition of Christ’s crucifixion. But too hasty a rejection of what is stated can lead to mistakes. For example, Gary Bisbee comments that the stadium “is an improbable place for games (*ludi*) that involved death and/or animals; its structure would not have well accommodated such activities” (*Pre-Decian Acts of Martyrs and Commentarii* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988], p. 122). But, as indicated above, in the eastern provinces, a stadium was regularly remodeled so as to be suitable for the games.

³⁷ *Mart. Pol.* 3. According to *Mart. Pol.* 19, Polycarp was, “together with those from Philadelphia, the twelfth martyr in Smyrna.”

³⁸ So, according to Lactantius, Ulpian had “collected the disgraceful *rescripta* of the emperors, in order to make clear what penalties should be applied to those who confessed themselves worshippers of God.” (*Div. Inst.* 5.11.19, quoted in Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* [London: Duckworth, 1977], p. 556).

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terms of legal status, it mattered little whether the emperor gave a response or presided over the court himself (*decreta*), for, as Ulpian says, “A decision given by the emperor has the force of a statute.”³⁹ Both *rescripta* and *decreta* had the status of pronouncements of the emperor (*constitutiones principis*) and the force of law.⁴⁰

In 112 the Emperor Trajan set the precedent for dealing with Christians in his response to Pliny, who wrote from the region of Bithynia-Pontus. He agreed with Pliny that cases of persons charged with being Christians should be handled separately without trying to follow one uniform rule. He also decreed that Christians should not be hunted down, but if charges were made properly and proven before Pliny, then Christians must be punished. Those who denied being Christians and proved it by worshiping “our gods” should be pardoned, however suspect their past conduct. Finally, Pliny should not take into account evidence submitted anonymously.⁴¹ Trajan’s pronouncements were more or less reiterated by Hadrian and, probably, by Antonius Pius.⁴²

The crime of Christians, according to those rescripts, squares with the cry of the crowd: Christians were atheists; that is, they refused to offer prayers to “our gods.” Or, as the crowd later accused Polycarp: “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our Gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship.”⁴³

According to the narrative in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Polycarp was tried without benefit of formal petition or court proceedings before the *bema* (a raised platform) in the forum. Normally that was where the governor held court, as he traveled from one assize (court) city to another hearing cases.⁴⁴ According to the narrative, however, Polycarp was brought

³⁹ *Digest* 1.4.1.

⁴⁰ Barry Nicholas, *An Introduction to Roman Law* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), pp. 17–18; John A. Crook, *Law and Life of Rome* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 20–22.

⁴¹ Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96–97. See also A. N. Sherwin-White, *Fifty Letters of Pliny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 178. Note that Trajan’s rescript makes no mention of offering wine and incense to his statue, which Pliny had required (Pliny, *Ep.* 96.5). R. M. Grant suggests that Pliny’s use of the emperor’s statue may have been Pliny’s own “ad hoc procedure” (*Greek Apologists of the Second Century* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988], p. 30). Grant also notes parallels between Pliny’s procedures and treatment of Bacchanalia (pp. 29, 203–5).

⁴² For Hadrian’s rescript: Justin, 1 *Apol.* 68.5–10 and Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.9. I assume that Hadrian wrote a rescript, even though Christians may have later modified it. For Antoninus Pius: Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.10. Around 175, Melito appeals to Marcus Aurelius to stop the pillaging of Christians—an economic issue is present—in the province of Asia; he seems to be suggesting to the emperor that this activity is new and inappropriate (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.5). T. D. Barnes suggests that the pillaging occurred when a new proconsul of Asia issued edicts (“Legislation against the Christians,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 58 [1968]: 39).

⁴³ *Mart. Pol.* 12.2; cf. 9.2.

⁴⁴ So, at least, in several of the other martyrologies (in Musurillo [n. 9 above]): (1) Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice: the proconsul was in residence at Pergamum (p. 22, line 1); a

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directly to the stadium where he was both tried and executed. As Gary Bisbee points out, that was “an improbable place for a trial.”⁴⁵

Yet, it could have happened that way, for by the middle of the second Christian century, a governor (proconsul) had considerable latitude in how he handled criminal cases within his own province (nowhere else). He was not obligated to follow any particular court procedure, doing as he saw fit in making inquiry (*cognitio*), summoning parties, determining issues, hearing evidence, pronouncing the penalty, and seeing to its execution.⁴⁶ The technical term for this way of judging was *cognitio extra ordinem* or *cognitio extraordinaria*.⁴⁷ Only the governor had power to execute a person, so the crowd followed legal procedure in calling for the governor to prosecute Polycarp.

It could also have happened that way because in the stadium, power and meaning between ruler and ruled were negotiated differently, more freely, than at other, more formal contact points. As Keith Hopkins puts it, the emperor or governor was in a setting where he could be outvoted by the mass who claimed the stadium as their parliament.⁴⁸ Or, as G. E. M. de Ste. Croix comments: “It was the provincial governor in each case [of Christian persecution] who played the more significant role [not the emperor]—and even his attitude might be less important than what I must call ‘public opinion.’”⁴⁹ An unruly crowd would remind the proconsul of his first obligation, which, according to Ulpian, was “to see that the province he rules is peaceful and orderly.”⁵⁰

crowd was present (p. 26, lines 3–4); the martyrs were hurried to the amphitheater to be executed (p. 26, line 16). (2) Martyrs of Lyons: they were dragged into the forum (*agoran*) and interrogated by both a military tribune (*chiliarchou*) and city authorities in the presence of all the people; when they confessed to being Christian, they were locked up until the governor came (p. 5, lines 27–28); they were brought before the prefect (*hēgemona*) (p. 62, line 38); crowd around the tribunal (*bēma*) shouted . . . Martyrs were beaten there (p. 64, line 11); they were brought to the *bēma* by soldiers, accompanied by civil magistrates and a mob (p. 70, lines 25, 28–29). (3) Scillitan Martyrs at Carthage: they were in the governor’s chambers (*in secretario*) (p. 86, line 2); they were led forth to execution (p. 88, lines 27–30). (4) Apollonius: he was ordered to come back in three days (p. 92, line 23); also present were a crowd of senators, councillors, and prominent philosophers (p. 92, lines 25–26). (5) Perpetua: Perpetua was taken to the forum; a huge crowd gathered (p. 112, line 23). Even when holding court formally, the governor could not always keep the proceedings in an orderly manner; see, e.g., Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse* 35.15, and Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 10.28.

⁴⁵ Bisbee (n. 36 above), p. 122.

⁴⁶ Adapted from Crook, p. 85.

⁴⁷ See *Digest* 48.19.13 (Ulpian): “Nowadays [a judge] who is hearing a criminal case *extra ordinem* may lawfully pass what sentence he wishes, whether heavier or lighter, provided only that he does not exceed what is reasonable in either direction.”

⁴⁸ Hopkins (n. 6 above), p. 16.

⁴⁹ G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?” *Past and Present* 26 [1963]: 15. See also (n. 38 above), pp. 365–66, 373–74. Attalus was sent to the beasts “to please the crowd” (Eus., *Hist. eccl.* 5.1).

⁵⁰ *Digest* 1.18.13.

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If that is the way it happened, the crowd was the informer (*delator*), and the proconsul chose to listen to “public opinion,” as was his legal right in *cognitio extra ordinem*. No imperial police were stationed in the province of Asia, so the proconsul ordered the local chief of police to find Polycarp, and “the police chief [*eirēnchos*] . . . hastened to bring him to the arena.”⁵¹ After he was brought to the proconsul, the crowd made a great uproar. Polycarp had entered political theater.⁵²

The space of the stadium now defined Polycarp’s social status and his place in the social order. The most prestigious location in the stands was reserved for Statius Quadratus, the proconsul who governed the province. Philip the Asiarch was seated near him, with imperial and provincial officials nearby. City and provincial officials no doubt had seats down front in the vicinity of the governor (no sky boxes then).⁵³ Senators and knights stood out in their purple-bordered togas, while citizens wore the white woollen toga. Other spectators probably sat higher up in the stands, further from the arena, with women and the poorest men furthest removed from the field.⁵⁴ Garnsey and Saller state the matter succinctly: “Putting everyone in his proper place was a visual affirmation of the dominance of the imperial social structure, and one calculated to impress the bulk of the population of the empire.”⁵⁵

But all the spectators, whatever their rank and status, were separated physically from the arena, where Polycarp, animals, and gladiators were displayed. All those in the stands—proconsul, imperial and provincial officials, local elite, and common people—were united in solidarity as they gazed down upon the creatures in the arena. Whatever case Polycarp or others might make on behalf of their religion, he was the one gazed upon, objectified, as subhuman, along with the morning animals. Virtually upon entering the stadium, he was a condemned man, dead socially

⁵¹ *Mart. Pol.* 6. 2. On the imperial use of local police, see Theodor Mommsen, *The Provinces of the Roman Empire*, ed. William P. Dickson, 2 vols. (1909; reprint, Chicago: Ares, 1974), 1:350–51; Jones (n. 7 above), p. 349. It is also possible that the local police chief (*eirēnarchos*) arrested the suspect, made a preliminary interrogation (*Mart. Pol.* 8.2), and then sent the suspect on to the governor, who would hear the case from the beginning (*Digest* 48.3.6: Marcian, referring to instructions given by both Hadrian and Antoninus Pius). Criminals still had to be given a hearing, because not all eirenarchs “drafted their reports in good faith.” See also Barbara Levick, *The Government of the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1985), pp. 44–45.

⁵² The phrase is Hopkins’s (p. 14).

⁵³ According to an inscription from Pergamum, the priest of Asclepius “shall be entitled to a front seat at all the games” (*Inscr. Perg.* 2:251, quoted in Emma J. and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius: Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998], p. 281).

⁵⁴ Suetonius, *Aug.* 44; Livy 34.44; Hopkins, p. 17, especially his note that “seating was generally but not uniformly by rank . . . habits changed.”

⁵⁵ Garnsey and Saller (n. 15 above), p. 117.

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though physically alive.⁵⁶ Once in the arena, Polycarp was condemned to be “a prop, deprived of self, something for the real stars to play with.”⁵⁷

The proconsul held a brief trial. In the trial, the exchange between Polycarp and the proconsul is worth quoting in full:

The proconsul asked him if he was Polycarp, and when he admitted it he tried to persuade him to deny, saying: “Respect your age,” and so forth, as they are accustomed to say: “Swear by the genius of Caesar, repent, say: ‘Away with the Atheists’”; but Polycarp, with a stern countenance looked on the crowd of lawless heathen in the arena, and waving his hand at them, he groaned and looked up to heaven and said: “Away with the Atheists.” But when the proconsul pressed him and said: “Take the oath and I let you go, revile Christ,” Polycarp said: “For eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” But when he persisted again, and said: “Swear by the genius of Caesar,” he answered him: “If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you say, and pretend that you are ignorant who I am, listen plainly: I am a Christian [*Christianos eimi*]. And if you wish to learn the doctrine of Christianity fix a day and listen.” The proconsul said: “Persuade the people.” And Polycarp said: “You I should have held worthy of discussion, for we have been taught to render honour, as is meet, if it hurt us not, to princes and authorities appointed by God. But as for those, I do not count them worthy that a defence should be made to them.” And the proconsul said: “I have wild beasts, I will deliver you to them, unless you repent.” And he said: “Call for them, for repentance from better to worse is not allowed us; but it is good to change from evil to righteousness.” And he said again to him: “I will cause you to be consumed by fire, if you despise the beasts, unless you repent.” But Polycarp said: “You threaten with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. But why are you waiting? Come, do what you will.” And with these and many other words he was filled with courage and joy, and his face was full of grace so that it not only did not fall with trouble at the things said to him, but that the proconsul, on the other hand, was astounded and sent his herald into the midst of the arena to announce three times: “Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian.” (*Mart. Pol.* 9.2)

Neither Polycarp nor the proconsul is in an enviable position. Polycarp is facing execution. The proconsul is facing the possibility of killing a foolish, stubborn old man probably belonging to the provincial elites. Each follows his own protocol. The proconsul seeks repentance from Polycarp. If Polycarp refuses to repent, the proconsul fails. So, he per-

⁵⁶ Compare Watson, ed. and trans., *Digest*, 48.19.29: “those condemned to the extreme penalty immediately lose their citizenship and their freedom. This fate therefore anticipates their death, sometimes by a long period, as happens in the persons of those who are condemned to the beasts.”

⁵⁷ David Potter, “Martyrdom as Spectacle,” in *Theater and Society in the Classical World*, ed. Ruth Scodel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 65.

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suades, threatens and coerces. Polycarp, on the other hand, is scripted to play the martyr. In his first move, he detracts with irony: He speaks as requested, "Away with the atheists," but his gesture and gaze make clear that he refers to the crowd. In response to further pressure to obey and be let free, Polycarp testifies to Christ as savior. The proconsul still persists, and in response, Polycarp makes the damning statement, "I am a Christian," followed by an offer to defend his faith. Persuasion meets persuasion. The proconsul diverts: "Persuade the people." Polycarp parries with civility: Only you are worthy of such a discussion, not the unworthy rabble (an assessment that the proconsul would probably find agreeable); moreover, "I have been taught to render honor to princes and authorities appointed by God (such as you)." The uneasy proconsul shifts tactics: "I have wild beasts. Repent." Polycarp puts a spin on repentance: "We would not repent from better to worse. Better (that you) repent from evil to righteousness." The proconsul continues to threaten with violence: "I will cause you to be consumed by fire." Polycarp plays with fire and the judgment to come. Then Polycarp, not the proconsul, brings the exchange to a close: "But why are you waiting? Come, do what you will." He gives further testimony, and his face fills with courage, joy, and grace, rather than fear and shame at being a condemned criminal. The proconsul is astounded, says nothing more, and sends out the announcement that Polycarp has confessed to being a Christian. Polycarp's execution by burning then follows.⁵⁸

That stylized account of Polycarp's trial lays out an almost textbook presentation of governmental coercion and criminal resistance. Anyone looking on recognized that the imperial official was in control and would ultimately determine the destiny of the criminal. For the state's social control to be effective, however, Polycarp must acknowledge the rightness of the proconsul's actions, preferably by becoming a Christian apostate, the intended aim of the governor.⁵⁹ If not that, then even a cry of pain or eyes cast down during the torture would vindicate the justness of the state's coercion. The criminal would accept his criminality, the deviant his deviancy.⁶⁰ If, on the other hand, Polycarp maintained his intention to be a Christian martyr and did not repent in word, gesture, or posture, then coercion failed. When the smoke cleared, the victor might be in the ashes. In any case, victory for either side would be ambiguous. Both church and empire could claim that its power and justice were inscribed on Polycarp's burnt skin.

⁵⁸ Compare Ulpian: "Enemies [of the state] and also deserters to the enemy are punished by being burned alive" (*Digest* 48.19.7.2).

⁵⁹ Ste. Croix (n. 49 above), p. 20.

⁶⁰ Compare Potter, "Martyrdom," p. 53.