

**The Gods and Governors of the Roman Provinces**

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## Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Acknowledgments	2
Table of Contents	3
Note Regarding Translations and Citations	4
Timeline	5
Map	6
I. Religion, Government, and Power in the Provinces	7
II. Imperial Cult	14
<i>Pliny and the Cults of Claudius and Trajan</i>	17
<i>Arrian and Hadrian</i>	20
<i>The Decree of Fabius on the Provincial Calendar</i>	22
<i>The Cult of Augustus at Lugdunum</i>	23
<i>Governor Cult</i>	26
III. Christian Criminals and Roman Officials	30
<i>Pliny and the Trials of the Christians of Bithynia</i>	32
<i>Tertullian on Roman Government</i>	36
<i>The Trial of Christ</i>	38
<i>The Trial of Saint Paul</i>	42
<i>The Acts of the Christian Martyrs</i>	45
IV. The Jews and the Roman Government: Cooperation and Conflict	51
<i>The Jews of Berenice</i>	52
<i>Pontius Pilate and the Jewish People</i>	54
<i>Flaccus and the Jews of Alexandria</i>	57
<i>Petronius and Gaius</i>	62
<i>Gessius Florus and the War</i>	64
V. Sponsoring Local Cults	69
<i>Artemis at Ephesus</i>	70
<i>Samothrace</i>	72
<i>Panóias</i>	75
VI. Conclusion	80
Bibliography	82
Appendix A: Judicial Proceedings in the Martyr Acts	87

## **Note Regarding Translations and Citations**

All translations are as cited in the bibliography, unless otherwise noted.

All citation abbreviations are standard to the Oxford Classical Dictionary.

## Timeline

- 12 BCE: Augustus becomes *pontifex maximus*, Rome
- 12 BCE: the inauguration of the cult of Augustus at Lugdunum, Gaul
- 9 BCE: the proconsul, Fabius, issues a decree on the provincial calendar, Asia
- 11 CE: Augustus issues an edict banning governors' receipt of honors, Rome
- ca. 13 CE: the Jews of Berenice erect an inscription honoring their governor, Cyrene
- 26-36 CE: Pilate is prefect, Judaea
- ca. 33 CE: Jesus Christ is crucified, Judaea
- 32-38 CE: Flaccus is *praefectus Aegypti*, Alexandria
- 39-42 CE: Petronius is *legatus Augusti pro praetore*, Syria
- ca. 56 CE: the silversmiths of Ephesus riot in response to Saint Paul, Ephesus
- ca. 60 CE: Saint Paul is brought to trial, Judaea
- 64-66 CE: Gessius Florus is procurator of Judaea, Judaea
- 66-73 CE: The Jewish War, Judaea
- 110-112 CE: Pliny is *legatus Augusti pro praetore*, Bithynia-Pontus
- 112 CE: Pliny writes to Trajan about the trials of the Christians, Bithynia-Pontus
- 131-137 CE: Arrian is *legatus Augusti pro praetore*, Cappadocia
- 160 CE: the proconsul of Asia issues an edict acknowledging the *Artemisia*, Ephesus
- 165 CE: P. Antius Orestes is inducted into the Mysteries of the Great Gods, Samothrace
- 177 CE: trial of the Martyrs of Lyons, Gaul
- 180 CE: trial of the Scillitan Martyrs, Africa
- 197 CE: Tertullian writes the *Apologeticus*, Africa
- ca. 200 CE: Gaius Calpurnius Rufinus inaugurates cult at Panóias, Iberia



## I. Religion, Government, and Power in the Provinces

*Pontifex maximus ne fierem in vivi conlegae locum, populo id sacerdotium deferente mihi, quod pater meus habuerat, recusavi. Cepi id sacerdotium aliquod post annos, eo mortuo demum, qui id tumultus occasione occupaverat...*

I declined to be made *pontifex maximus* in succession to a colleague still living, when the people tendered me that priesthood which my father had held. Several years later I accepted that sacred office when he at last was dead who, taking advantage of a time of civil disturbance, had seized it for himself...<sup>1</sup>

In 12 BCE, upon the death of the former triumvir Lepidus, the Emperor Augustus assumed the position of *pontifex maximus*, the highest Roman religious office. By accepting this appointment, Augustus formally took up religious authority as part of his imperial duties. The explicit overlap between religion and government was evident throughout the Roman Empire. During the period of regime change and cultural transformation in the first two centuries following the accession of Augustus, the Roman government's interactions with religion shaped the politics and culture of the empire. Religion alternately bolstered the government's legitimacy and threatened its ability to rule. As *pontifex maximus*, Augustus exemplified the consolidation of religious and political authority on an empire-wide scale. This overlap also occurred locally in Roman provincial administration. Although provincial governors did not hold the same official authority over religion as the emperor, they frequently regulated and responded to religious groups and rituals.

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<sup>1</sup> *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 10

The successful administration of government in the early stages of the empire required the coordination of many officials over a broad expanse of space. Roman governors, as avenues through which law and culture were disseminated to the provinces, presented the first face of Rome to the conquered peoples of the empire. They had to balance their promotion of Roman culture with acceptance of local practices. The customs and policies traditional to Rome, however, frequently created friction with the conventions of the provinces. The successful governor handled the specific needs of his people while maintaining visible loyalty to Rome and the emperor.

Religion was a manifestation of the cultural tension between the center and periphery. In the early Roman Empire, religion was a central part of public life, causing the distinction between secular and religious to be blurred at best. Hence, religion must be defined in order to be dealt with at all. For the purposes of this discussion, religion denotes anything to do with the gods, worship, and sacrifice. Evidence of religion from the Roman provinces takes the form of literary testimony and archaeological and epigraphic remains from sanctuaries and temples.

This evidence offers multiple perspectives of governors' interactions with religion and religious groups. These perspectives reveal different understandings of how Roman provincial governors formulated religious policies. The Roman view of Pilate's crucifixion of Christ, for example, was very different from the Christian interpretation. The Christian interpretation of the Jews' reaction to Pilate exposes yet another layer of complication in the facts of Christ's trial and punishment. While it is difficult to discern the actual events of this or any other situation, the various perceptions of the government's responses to religion offer insight into the motivations of Roman administration in the provinces.

I have divided my research into four chapters, covering governors' interactions with the imperial ruler cult, with the Christians, with the Jews, and finally with the local cults of their provinces. In each of these cases, governors repeatedly faced the dilemma of being accountable both to the local populations and to the emperor. They attempted to conciliate religious groups that bore ideologies conflicting both with each other and with Roman customs.

Scholarship has long acknowledged the problematic nature of dealing with religion, but, as Fergus Millar points out in his *Government, Society, and Culture in the Roman Empire*, Roman government can prove a similarly slippery issue:

Administrative history has peculiar dangers of its own. We all know that we do not understand Roman religion. Administration seems easier, more readily comprehensible in present-day terms. Hence the evidence can be confidently distorted to fit entirely anachronistic conceptions.<sup>2</sup>

The government of the provinces is particularly problematic in that the structures of administration varied depending on time and location.<sup>3</sup> For the sake of contextualizing governors' interactions with imperial cult, Christianity, Judaism, and local cult, it is necessary to outline their general duties.

In the *Cambridge Ancient History*, Alan Bowman posits that the objectives of Roman government were uniform throughout the empire:

The need to encourage or create civilized and self-sufficient communities (whether based on *polis* or *civitas*) governed by their indigenous aristocracies; the need to ensure Rome's military security and the protection of her imperial interests in the broad sense, the cost of which

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<sup>2</sup> Millar (2004), 4

<sup>3</sup> Bowman (1996), Vol. 10, 348, 367, 357, 353

would be met (at the least) by the revenue which Rome could draw from the province enjoying her protection; finally, as a natural corollary, the need to support and promote the interests of Romans in the provinces.<sup>4</sup>

Bowman's proposed mandate aligns with ancient evidence for the ideal provincial governor. Ulpian, documenting the duties of the proconsul in the early third century, states that a good governor takes responsibility for the maintenance of peace within his province.<sup>5</sup>

Peace required the contentment, or at least the passivity, of the provincials. They were able to air their concerns to their governors through trials and hearings. In fulfillment of these duties, provincial governors undertook annual trips around their provinces.<sup>6</sup> Governors' responses to their citizens also involved answering written petitions. Both in response to these letters and of their own accord, governors often wrote to the emperor, inquiring how to handle situations.

The two types of province, imperial provinces and public provinces, demanded slightly different interactions between emperor, governor, and governed. Dio describes in formal terms Augustus' distinction between the provinces:

ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν ἀσθενέστερα ὡς καὶ εἰρηναῖα καὶ ἀπόλεμα  
ἀπέδωκε τῇ βουλῇ, τὰ δ' ἰσχυρότερα ὡς καὶ σφαλερὰ καὶ  
ἐπικίνδυνα καὶ ἤτοι πολεμίουσιν τινὰς προσοίκουσιν ἔχοντα ἢ  
καὶ αὐτὰ καθ' ἑαυτὰ μέγα τι νεωτερίσαι δυνάμενα κατέσχε.

And he did, in fact, restore to the senate the weaker provinces, on the grounds that they were peaceful and free from war, while he retained the more powerful,

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<sup>4</sup> Bowman (1996), 344-345

<sup>5</sup> Ulpian, *Dig.* 1.18.13: *Congruit bono et gravi praesidi curare, ut pacata atque quieta provincia sit quam regit.* "It befits a good and responsible governor to see that the province he rules is peaceful and orderly."

<sup>6</sup> Eck (2000), 273

alleging that they were insecure and precarious and either had enemies on their borders or were able on their own account to begin a serious revolt.<sup>7</sup>

The *legati Augusti pro praetore* of the imperial provinces were selected by the emperor and served until replaced.<sup>8</sup> The *proconsules* of the public provinces were selected by lot and served for one year.<sup>9</sup> The emperor was highly involved in the administration of both the imperial and public provinces via edicts.<sup>10</sup> The lines of communication between the emperor, the governors, and the people ensured the successful administration of the empire.

Pliny, governor of Bithynia in the first decades of the second century CE, demonstrates the importance of letters between governors and the emperor. In his letters to Trajan, he revealed his responsibilities as *legatus Augusti pro praetore* and raised a range of concerns: the creation of a guild of firemen, the oversight of building projects, the regulation of passports, the health of the provincials, and the finances of the cities.<sup>11</sup> His letters demonstrate that governors were responsible for a host of daily, often bureaucratic, duties in the administration of their respective provinces. The extent of Pliny's correspondence with Trajan raises the question of the governor's independence from the emperor. The quantity and scope of Pliny's correspondence alone could make a case for very little gubernatorial autonomy, a case that is also substantiated by sources that further describe governors sending *epistulae* to emperors, such as Suetonius' *Augustus* and Aelius Aristides' Εἰς Ῥώμην.<sup>12</sup> Trajan, however,

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<sup>7</sup> Dio, 53.12.2

<sup>8</sup> Millar (1966), 157

<sup>9</sup> Dio, 53.13.3

<sup>10</sup> Millar (1966), 160-161

<sup>11</sup> Pliny, *Ep.* 10. 34, 39, 47, 96, 37, 43, 55

<sup>12</sup> Suetonius, *Aug.* 45.1, 101.4; Aelius Aristides, Εἰς Ῥώμην 32 in Oliver (1953), *The Ruling Power*

frequently responded to Pliny's questions by affirming Pliny's own authority, suggesting that Pliny had greater autonomy than his own letters convey.

In the same way that governors looked to the authority of the emperor, so did provincial officials and individuals seek the opinion of the governor in passing local decrees and resolving disputes.<sup>13</sup> Governors influenced the behavior of the people of their provinces, but the people also influenced the rule of their governors. The accountability of the governor to the people was protected by the *repetundae* laws, which banned officials from extorting money from their provinces.<sup>14</sup> The population of a province could invoke these laws in order to have the governor judged and punished by the emperor. Additional laws instituted by Augustus in 11 CE restricted governors' receipt of gifts and honors while in office, implying that honors bestowed by the people played a substantive role in shaping provincial rule.<sup>15</sup> These laws were pivotal in influencing governors' actions and motivating them to maintain the favor of not only the emperor, but also their populace.

Governors had to present a loyal face to the emperor, while remaining answerable to the demands of their people. Religion was one tool that governors used in their efforts to achieve this balance. Imperial ruler cult, for example, was widely used by governors to affirm their loyalty to the emperor and to co-opt the people of the provinces. While governors sponsored certain practices among the people, the customs of the provincials in turn affected the actions of the governors. Religious ideology frequently threatened provincial stability; the religious zeal of the Christians and Jews living in the early empire forced governors to tread particularly carefully in

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<sup>13</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia: Praecepta Gerendae Reipublicae* 814f-815a

<sup>14</sup> Brunt (1961), 190

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 216

their actions toward these groups. Meanwhile, when governors engaged in local cult, they were often following or augmenting the traditions native to the people of their province.

The growth of the Roman Empire posed issues of conflicting cultures, customs, and ideologies. These issues presented the provincial governors with choices about how to manage peacefully the demands of the groups they ruled. Governors grappled with upholding Roman religious practices in areas that had their own entrenched and emergent customs. Minority and majority factions native to the provinces competed to influence the Roman governors and sought to protect their own religious codes and institutions. These groups, with the threat of uprising or the threat of appeal to the emperor, shaped the policies of their governors. Governors, for their part, sought to maintain their status and authority by satisfying the expectations of both the emperor and their people. Looking both up and down the chain of command, governors demonstrated loyalty to the emperor and responded to the attitudes and expectations of the provincials, using religious doctrine as a political device to preserve their positions of power. Governors' actions toward religion and religious groups, therefore, were critical to their ability to rule.

## II. Imperial Cult

Perhaps the most obvious illustration of the overlap between government and religion is the imperial ruler cult. The worship of the emperor, generally accompanied by the goddess *Roma*, was customary in the Roman Empire from the reign of Augustus onward. Expressions of ruler cult predictably varied widely throughout the empire, depending on local religious tradition. Ruler cult took the form of altars, temples, sacrifices, celebrations, and festivals. The origins of ruler cult were as complex and variable as the practices comprising the cult.

There are two main propositions regarding the introduction of the imperial cult to the provinces: institution from the top down by the Roman government and establishment from the bottom up by provincial agency. Lily Ross Taylor, in *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, prefers the idea of Roman agency, particularly emphasizing the possibility of either the senate or the emperor introducing ruler cult to the provinces.<sup>16</sup> Ruler cult may have thus been a method of ideological and political co-optation of the provincials.<sup>17</sup> The opportunities for provincial elites to gain power and status from the priesthoods of the cult may have resulted in cooperation with the Roman establishment and may have rendered ruler cult a welcome institution to the provincials.<sup>18</sup> Simon Price, in *Rituals and Power*, hypothesizes that provincials adopted ruler cult as a mechanism for locals to assimilate the emperor into their mental and political landscapes. Keith Hopkins, in *Conquerors and Slaves*, also favors this thesis of provincial agency.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor (1931), 205, 212

<sup>17</sup> See Taylor (1931), 205, 212 for political incentive and Woolf (1998), 218-219 for ideological or religious incentive.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor (1931), 212

<sup>19</sup> Hopkins (1978), 208

Augustus' masterful propaganda throughout the empire suggests that he had an understanding of the need of the provincials to include him in their ideology. At Rome, in the early days of the principate, ruler cult was a sensitive topic. Deification and worship of the emperor ran contrary to the façade of Republicanism maintained by Augustus. However, the former Hellenistic kingdoms were accustomed to worshipping their rulers; the traditions of the people in the eastern half of the empire likely demanded ruler cult.<sup>20</sup>

Given the evidence, it is almost certainly true that, in the eastern empire, ruler cult was looked upon favorably by Rome as a means of integrating provincials into their social and political customs and keeping the peace.<sup>21</sup> The notion that ruler cult started in the east and spread to the west, either by Roman decree or by the efforts of the locals, is a popular one.<sup>22</sup>

The differences among the renderings of emperor worship in the western empire, or their "varied arrangements," are the crux of Hopkins' argument that the origins of ruler cult lay in "local initiatives or competitive innovations rather than imperial decree."<sup>23</sup> Since literary, numismatic, and archaeological evidence does not support the use of one formula in instituting ruler cult, Hopkins posits that the practice must have grown organically among the people.

In his studies of imperial cult in the western empire, Duncan Fishwick, meanwhile, construes the evidence to draw the conclusion that the Roman government adapted each manifestation of ruler cult to fit the situation in each region: "the context into which the cult would have to be fitted [by Rome] differed radically from one part

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<sup>20</sup> Price (1984), 23-24

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor (1931), 208; Hopkins (1978), 199; Fishwick (1987), 1.1.92

<sup>23</sup> Hopkins (1978), 208

of the West to another...as a result, the development of the Western ruler cult in its various manifestations takes on a different character from area to area.”<sup>24</sup> Such models for understanding the initiation of the imperial cult consider the involvement of Roman administration. Here, I wish to supplement these models by examining the role of governors as agents in this process.

If peace and stability were the goals of the Roman provincial government, the imperial cult would have to be adapted on a regional basis. Tacitus’ *Agricola*, the biography of a Roman general and governor of the province of Britannia in 77 CE, provides an example of how temples and other forms of Roman culture, were used to co-opt the conquered:

*Namque ut homines dispersi ac rudes eoque in bella faciles quieti et otio per voluptates adsuescerent, hortati privatim, adiuvare publice, ut templa fora domos extruerent, laudando promptos, castigando segnes: ita honoris aemulatio pro necessitate erat...idque apud imperitos humanitas vocabatur, cum pars servitutis esset.*

For, in order that a population scattered and uncivilized, and proportionately ready for war, might be habituated by comfort to peace and quiet, he would exhort individuals and assist communities to erect temples, market-places, houses, by praising the energetic, rebuking the indolent: so the rivalry for his compliments took the place of coercion...and among simple natives it was called ‘culture’ when it was an element of their slavery.<sup>25</sup>

Tacitus’ model here shows the imposition of Roman culture upon the provincials. The Britons, according to Tacitus, grew to value Roman customs and viewed them as

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<sup>24</sup> Fishwick (1987), 1.1.93

<sup>25</sup> Tacitus, *Agr.* 21 (adapted translation)

indicators of status.<sup>26</sup> Agricola, as governor, encouraged the people to build temples. Here, then, is an image of a governor who spurred the people to adopt Roman customs and put ownership of the changes in the hands of the provincials themselves.

In another passage of Tacitus, however, the institution of ruler cult had the opposite effect on the local people. At Camulodunum in Britannia, a temple to Claudius became a rallying point for Boudicca's revolt.<sup>27</sup> Seneca also made mention of this temple, the archaeological remains of which are believed to have been found at Colchester.<sup>28</sup> Tacitus described the temple as a point of contention between the locals and the Roman army, resulting in a siege upon the temple by the provincials.

Governors were motivated to implement policies of imperial cult by the opportunities the practice afforded them to influence the provincials. They were also inclined to make displays of their commitment to ruler cult in order to confirm to the emperor their allegiance to him. No single, monolithic practice comprised the imperial cult; rather, governors instituted, altered, and upheld the cult as they saw fit, depending upon the culture of their province and their relationship with the emperor.

### **Pliny and the Cults of Claudius and Trajan**

Pliny provides first hand evidence of governors' active involvement in the institution of the provincial ruler cult. Throughout his letters, he pointedly informs Trajan of the provinces' vows for the safety of the emperor and the state, and their celebration of Trajan's birthday and accession.<sup>29</sup> These public prayers and honors for the emperor are a means for Pliny to demonstrate his loyalty to Trajan.

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<sup>26</sup> Woolf (1998), 218-219, touches upon this passage of Tacitus in his discussion of Gallic ruler cult.

<sup>27</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.31

<sup>28</sup> Seneca, *Apoc.* 8; Fishwick (1987), 1.2.201-216

<sup>29</sup> Pliny, *Ep.* 10.35-36, 52, 88, 100, 102

Pliny also interacts with ruler cult under other circumstances. In letter 70, he asks Trajan's permission to touch property dedicated to the worship of the Emperor Claudius. Pliny wishes to use the site in the construction of a new bath. He gives the facts about it:

*Legaverat eam Claudius Polyaeus Claudio Caesari iussitque in peristylio templum ei fieri, reliqua ex domo locari. Ex ea reditum aliquamdiu civitas percepit; deinde paulatim partim spoliata, partim neglecta cum peristylio domus tota collapsa est, ac iam paene nihil ex ea nisi solum superest.*

It was left to the Emperor Claudius by the will of a certain Claudius Polyaeus, who also left instructions that a shrine to the Emperor was to be set up in the garden-court and the rest of the house was to be let. For some time the city drew rent for this; then, partly through pillage and partly through neglect, the whole house, court and garden gradually fell into ruins, so that now little but the site remains.<sup>30</sup>

Based on his description, Pliny was aware that certain laws governed the site, as it had been dedicated to the imperial cult of Claudius. However, the fact that it was in ruins was problematic and rendered the law ambiguous. Trajan confirmed the ambiguity of the situation:

*Illud tamen parum expressisti, an aedes in peristylio Claudio facta esset. Nam, si facta est, licet collapsa sit, religio eius occupavit solum.*

But you did not make it clear whether the shrine to Claudius had actually been set up in the garden-court. If

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 10.70.2

so, the ground is still consecrated to him even if the shrine has fallen into ruins.<sup>31</sup>

This problem, the resolution of which is not provided in Pliny's letters, demonstrates the conflicting religious interests and laws with which he contended as governor. In this case, the laws regarding the shrine conflicted with the highly practical issue of a public building project. In writing to Trajan about this, Pliny acted with characteristic caution. The issue of the imperial cult was particularly sensitive. His letter to Trajan made clear his respect for the shrine to Claudius and eliminates any doubts about his loyalty to the imperial cult.

Pliny also wrote to Trajan to ask what he ought to do with the fortune left to him in the will of Julius Largus of Pontus.<sup>32</sup> Julius Largus asked Pliny to use his wealth to fund public buildings dedicated to Trajan or to sponsor annual games:

*Rogavit enim testamento, ut hereditatem suam adirem cerneremque, ac deinde praeceptis quinquaginta milibus nummum reliquum omne Heracleotarum et Tianorum civitatibus redderem, ita ut esset arbitrii mei utrum opera facienda, quae honori tuo consecrarentur, putarem an instituendos quinquennales agonas, qui Traiani adpellarentur.*

He has left a will asking me to take formal possession of his estate and, after deducting 50,000 sesterces for my own use, to pay over the remainder to the cities of Heraclea and Tium, either for the erection of public buildings to be dedicated in your honor or for the institution of five-yearly games to be called by your name, whichever I think best.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 10.71

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 10.75

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 10.75.2

Pliny asked Trajan his thoughts on the matter and Trajan replied by telling Pliny that he could decide for himself.<sup>34</sup> No mention of deification or, indeed, religion was made explicit in these letters between Pliny and Trajan. However, the fact that games were conventionally named after deities implies that Trajan, here, was being understood as a god. Again, Pliny demonstrated concern that Trajan should remain informed of his actions and, therefore, his devotion to the emperor and the imperial cult.

### **Arrian and Hadrian**

Arrian, legate of Cappadocia 131-137 CE, wrote to Hadrian regarding the imperial cult in much the same manner as Pliny addressed Trajan. In 131 CE, at the beginning of his rule in Cappadocia, Arrian undertook a journey to oversee Rome's military bases along the Black Sea.<sup>35</sup> In addition to the formal report of his findings, he sent a more casual letter to Hadrian about his voyage. This letter came to be known as the *Periplus Ponti Euxini*.

In the *Periplus*, Arrian told Hadrian of altars overlooking the sea that made up a sanctuary dedicated to the emperor. He let Hadrian know that he had decided to rebuild the altars and inscribe them more clearly.<sup>36</sup> He also requested a new statue of Hadrian to be erected there:

ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἀνδριάς ἔστηκεν ὁ σὸς τῷ μὲν σχήματι ἠδέως—  
ἀποδείκνυσι γὰρ τὴν θάλατταν—τὴν δὲ ἐργασίαν οὔτε  
ἄλλως καλός. ὥστε πέμψον ἀνδριάντα ἄξιον  
ἐπονομάζεσθαι σὸν ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ τούτῳ σχήματι. τὸ γὰρ  
χωρίον ἐπιτηδειότατον εἰς μνήμην αἰώνιον.

And though your statue has been erected in a pleasing pose—it points out to the sea—the work neither resembles

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 10.76

<sup>35</sup> Liddle (2003), 20

<sup>36</sup> Arrian, *Periplus* 1.2

you nor is beautiful in any other way. So I have sent for a statue worthy to bear your name, in the same pose; for that spot is very well suited to an everlasting monument.<sup>37</sup>

Based on the resources that Arrian invested in the upkeep of the altars, the maintenance of the imperial cult in his province was important to him. Moreover, he cared about Hadrian's knowledge of his investment in the imperial cult as well. By discussing the altars at the very beginning of his letter to the emperor, he emphasized to Hadrian his attention to the cult. This may have been a way for Arrian to reassure Hadrian of his loyalty and piety toward the emperor.

Notably, unlike Pliny, Arrian simply informed Hadrian of his actions at the sanctuary. While Pliny, in each of his letters, carefully asked Trajan's opinion of the best course of action, Arrian did not request Hadrian's opinion. Given that Arrian was writing only two decades later than Pliny and was governing a culturally and geographically similar location to Pliny, it is unlikely that this change in convention was due to change in place or time. Rather, it may be indicative of a difference between Hadrian's style of rule and that of Trajan or a difference between Arrian's relationship with Hadrian and that of Pliny with Trajan.

The letters of both Pliny and Arrian convey an implicit concern with informing the emperor of their actions promoting the imperial cult of Trajan and Hadrian respectively. Arrian's correspondence with Hadrian, like Pliny's with Trajan, demonstrates that he was concerned not only with upholding the imperial cult sanctuary in Trapezus, but also with informing the emperor of his interest in the maintenance of his worship.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 1.3

## The Decree of Fabius on the Provincial Calendar

Based on Pliny and Arrian, by the second century CE, governors were concerning themselves with the upkeep of the imperial cult rather than the introduction of it. In the first centuries BCE and CE, however, the government was more concerned with the introduction of the cult to the provinces. Paulus Fabius Maximus, proconsul of Asia during the reign of Augustus, promoted the celebration of Augustus in his province. Fabius addressed the Assembly of Asia, proposing that they adopt Augustus' birthday as New Year's Day. The inscriptions of Fabius' edict were published in 9 BCE in both Latin and Greek:

δοκεῖ μοι πασῶν τῶν πολειτηῶν εἶναι μίαν καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν  
νέαν νομηνίαν τὴν τοῦ θηοτάτου Καίσαρος γενέθλιον,  
ἐκείνη τε πάντας εἰς τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐνβαίνειν, ἥτις ἐστὶν πρὸ  
ἐννέα καλονδῶν Ὀκτοβρίων, ὅπως καὶ περισσότερον  
τιμηθῆῖ προσλαβομένη ἕξωθέν τινα θρησκίαν καὶ μᾶλλον  
πᾶσιν γείνηται γνώριμος, ἣν οἶομαι καὶ πλείστην  
εὐχρηστίαν τῇ ἐπαρχίᾳ παρέξεσθαι.<sup>38</sup>

It seems proper to me that the birthday of the most god-like Caesar shall serve as the one and the same New Year's Day for all citizens, and that they all shall enter into their magistracies on that day, which is September 23, both that it may be honored more elaborately by drawing to itself a certain religious significance by association and that it may become better known to everyone, a thing which, I think, will afford the greatest utility to the province.<sup>39</sup>

Fabius' reference to Augustus as *θηοτάτος* indicates his reverence for the emperor as divine. Likewise, the fact that the decree was inscribed on a stele set up in the temple

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<sup>38</sup> *OGIS* 2.458

<sup>39</sup> Johnson (1961), 119

(ἐν τῷ ναῷ) indicates the religious nature of the ruling.<sup>40</sup> Although Fabius' motion did not involve the building of a temple or the sacrificing of an animal, his proposal for the observance of Augustus' birthday can be understood as a way of institutionalizing ruler cult in the province.

The bilingual inscription of Fabius' proposal to the Assembly of Asia in itself suggests that he desired the practice to be widely disseminated and likely wanted recognition for establishing the decree. Like Pliny and Arrian, Fabius was using imperial cult to assert his own devotion to the emperor. The inscription acknowledges an understanding of how his edict affected the people of Asia: it gave Augustus a heightened association with the divine and it increased the salience of this attitude in Asian society. Fabius, then, was motivated by the political impact that such a religious and cultural declaration would have on the people. The proconsul's decree intentionally instilled religious patriotism in the provincial society.

### **The Cult of Augustus at Lugdunum**

Imperial cult arose in the western provinces during the rule of Augustus. The altar built at Lugdunum in Gaul is the earliest known example of formally instituted ruler cult in the west. The most detailed information about the context of the altar's construction has been passed down by the *Periochae* of Livy:

*Civitates Germaniae cis Rhenum et trans Rhenum positae  
oppugnantur a Druso, et tumultus, qui ob censum exortus in  
Gallia erat, componitur. ar<a> d<e>i Caesaris ad confluentum  
Araris et Rhodani dedicata, sacerdote creato C. Iulio  
Vercondaridubno Aeduo.*

The German communities located on the near and far sides of the Rhine are attacked by Drusus, and the uprising

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 119

that had arisen in Gaul because of the census is settled. An altar for Caesar the god was dedicated at the confluence of the Arar and the Rhône, and the Aeduan Gaius Julius Vercondaridubnus was made priest.<sup>41</sup>

Drusus, Roman general and brother of Tiberius, was the preeminent official in Gaul at the time of the founding of the altar.<sup>42</sup> What can be gleaned from this passage is that, according to the epitomator of Livy, around the time of the altar's construction, Drusus was at war, and revolt by the Gauls was suppressed. While Livy's epitomator is unreliable for the facts of the circumstances, the *Periochae* at least provide an account as later Romans understood it. It is tempting to deduce that the altar had something to do with the suppression of the revolt: perhaps an attempt by Drusus to co-opt provincials such as Gaius Julius Vercondaridubnus. The empowerment of Gaius Julius Vercondaridubnus in the position of the priesthood indicates that the cult was likely welcome among the local elites. Price offers the idea that the altar at Lugdunum may not have been initiated by Rome, though he acknowledges that the establishment of the altar certainly had Rome's blessing.<sup>43</sup>

Dio, like Livy, provides a brief mention of the altar:

τῶν τε γὰρ Συγάμβρων καὶ τῶν συμμάχων αὐτῶν διὰ τε τὴν τοῦ Αὐγούστου ἀπουσίαν καὶ διὰ τὸ τοὺς Γαλάτας μὴ ἐθελοδουλεῖν πολεμωθέντων σφίσι, τὸ τε ὑπήκοον προκατέλαβε, τοὺς πρῶτους αὐτοῦ, προφάσει τῆς ἑορτῆς ἦν καὶ νῦν περὶ τὸν τοῦ Αὐγούστου βωμὸν ἐν Λουγδούνῳ τελοῦσι.

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<sup>41</sup> Livy, *Peri.* 139; cf. Dio 54.33.5

<sup>42</sup> In 12 BCE, the accepted year for the founding of the imperial cult at Lugdunum, Drusus was neither proconsul nor *legatus*. He was, however, the direct agent of Roman rule for the province and was later granted the powers of proconsul.

<sup>43</sup> Price (1984), 74

The Sugambri and their allies had resorted to war, owing to the absence of Augustus and the fact that the Gauls were restive under their slavery, and Drusus therefore seized the subject territory ahead of them, sending for the foremost men in it on the pretext of the festival which they celebrate even now around the altar of Augustus at Lugdunum.<sup>44</sup>

Dio corroborates the account of the *Periochae* in that the context of the altar is war with the provincials, sentiments of rebellion in Gaul, and Drusus' leadership. Dio mentions the Gallic elites, οἱ πρῶτοι, perhaps alluding to Drusus' desire to pacify these men.

One of the most convincing aspects of the evidence surrounding the altar at Lugdunum that indicates Roman agency in the establishment of the cult is the writing ROM ET AVG on coins depicting the altar minted at Lugdunum.<sup>45</sup> Inscriptions further indicate the worship of the goddess *Roma* at the site.<sup>46</sup> This numismatic and epigraphic evidence shows that Augustus' policy, as stated by Suetonius, was followed in the ruler cult at Lugdunum.<sup>47</sup> Drusus, Augustus, the Senate, or another Roman authority, therefore, likely had input on the version of ruler cult to be established at the site.

The motivation behind the altar's construction cannot be discerned based on these literary sources, though they hint at Drusus' responsibility for it.<sup>48</sup> Drusus, as the most direct agent of Roman rule in the province, is perhaps a more likely candidate than the emperor or the senate for the creation of a ruler cult at Lugdunum. On the ground in Gaul, he would at least have been more invested in subduing the locals.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Dio 54.32

<sup>45</sup> Fishwick (1987), 1.1.125

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 1.1.131

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Fishwick (2002), 3.1.12. Also Taylor (1931), 209 n. 6

<sup>49</sup> Fishwick (1987), 1.1.99: Drusus' involvement in creating the imperial cult does not preclude, indeed, it may well imply, the emperor's involvement in establishing the cult.

The example of Drusus as an initiator of the imperial cult is complicated by the fact that he was a member of the *domus Augustus* and so would have been a recipient of cult himself. His familial tie to the emperor also differentiates his relationship with Augustus from that of Pliny and Trajan or Arrian and Hadrian. While Drusus is an unconventional example of a Roman official interacting with the imperial cult, he may, nonetheless, be an example of an instance in which an official used the cult to pacify revolt.

Drusus' activities honoring Augustus were not limited to Gaul. Dio tells of Drusus celebrating the birthday of Augustus lavishly at Rome.<sup>50</sup> This image of Drusus is again complicated, however, by Suetonius' testimony that he privately criticized Augustus' imperial power.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps this is an indication of how officials' public actions, in this case the sponsorship of the ruler cult of Augustus, differed from private sentiment.

### **Governor Cult**

Governors were not only the means by which ruler cult was instituted. They were also the objects of cult in their provinces, whether or not they were members of the imperial household, as in the case of Drusus. Governor cult, a phenomenon tied ideologically to imperial ruler cult, occurred in the provinces during the Republic and disappeared during the early years of the principate.

Just as governors were subject to accusations of misrule by the provincials following their tenure, so were they also given honors and even cult status. Suetonius attests to the frequency and extent of governor cult during the Republic and the early years of Augustus' rule:

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<sup>50</sup> Dio, 54.34.1-2

<sup>51</sup> Suetonius, *Tib.* 50

*Templa, quamvis sciret etiam proconsulibus decerni solere, in nulla tamen provincia nisi communi suo Romaeque nomine recepit.*

Although well aware that it was usual to vote temples even to proconsuls, [Augustus] would not accept one even in a province save jointly in his own name and that of Rome.<sup>52</sup>

Notable here is that proconsuls were worshipped and seem to have regularly been awarded temples, not just altars or other less significant forms of public worship. The degree to which proconsuls were worshipped during the imperial period, however, is questionable.<sup>53</sup>

The worship of governors and officials seems to have been common in provincial cities and towns.<sup>54</sup> The spread of governor cult indicates the understanding of the provincials that the local officials were the closest connection they had to Roman imperial rule. The administration of the Roman government at the most local level held an important position, both ideologically and practically speaking, for the locals who engaged in the cult of their local magistrates.

Due to corruption in the system, however, Augustus put a stop to this practice in 11 CE.<sup>55</sup> Dio discusses Augustus' edict banning the honoring of governors:

καὶ τῷ ὑπηκόῳ προσπαρήγγειλε μηδενὶ τῶν  
προστασσομένων αὐτοῖς ἀρχόντων μήτε ἐν τῷ τῆς ἀρχῆς  
χρόνῳ μήτε ἐντὸς ἑξήκοντα ἡμερῶν μετὰ τὸ ἀπαλλαγῆναι  
σφας τιμὴν τινα διδόναι, ὅτι τινὲς μαρτυρίας παρ' αὐτῶν

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<sup>52</sup> Suetonius, *Aug.* 52

<sup>53</sup> Price (1984), 46 asserts that no archaeological evidence exists for a temple dedicated to a local official, and generally the texts referring to governor cult only touch upon festivals or priests.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 43-44 for the geographical and temporal range of the cult of local Roman magistrates in the provinces.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 51

καὶ ἐπαίνους προπαρασκευαζόμενοι πολλὰ διὰ τούτου ἔκακούργουν.

He also issued a proclamation to the subject nations forbidding them to bestow any honors upon a person assigned to govern them either during his term of office or within sixty days after his departure; this was because some governors by arranging beforehand for testimonials and eulogies from their subjects were causing much mischief.<sup>56</sup>

Augustus was either truly concerned about political corruption among the self-interested provincial governors or was guarding for himself the honors bestowed by Roman subjects in the provinces, or both.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the dearth of evidence of governor cult during the empire, its very existence testifies to the complex relations between the emperor, the governor, and the local people of the provinces. While the extent to which governor cult permeated the culture of the provinces remains unclear and the motivation for the institution of the cult cannot be known with any certainty, worship of governors does indicate their importance as public figures among the provincials. The cults of Roman governors have been viewed as either corrupted forms of traditional Roman religious practices, bestowing divine honors on undeserving local officials, or understated practices that allowed provincials to make sense of the ruling administration.<sup>58</sup> Governor cults provide insight into the potential motivations of governors in their actions toward the provincials. With honors to be gained from their people, governors may have been compelled to ensure more thoroughly the peace and prosperity of their province.

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<sup>56</sup> Dio, 56.25.6

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.2

<sup>58</sup> Price (1984), 47

## **Conclusion**

Worshipping a living person, whether a local official or an emperor, was controversial in the Roman Empire. For governors, their own cults proved problematic because, though the honors of cult presumably indicated status among the people of their province, they also incurred suspicion from the emperor. The imperial cult, meanwhile, was a mechanism that was employed by the governor in order to gain the favor of the emperor and the loyalty of the provincials. Forms of emperor worship varied greatly and were adapted either by the Roman administration to fit the culture of the province or by the provincials themselves in order to assimilate the practice into their own traditions.

Based on the writings of Pliny and Arrian, the edicts of Fabius, and the presence of Drusus at the founding of imperial cult in the west, provincial officials may have played a larger role in imperial cult than has generally been thought. Governors, out of all Roman administrators, had perhaps the greatest incentive to institutionalize imperial cult. The possibility that local officials regularly participated in instituting ruler cult in the provinces implies that the practice was, at least in part, a means for them to assert their loyalty to the emperor and an opportunity for them to instill in the people allegiance to the government.

### III. Christian Criminals and Roman Officials

*Saturninus dixit: Initianti tibi mala de sacris nostris aures non praebebo; sed potius iura per genium domni nostril imperatoris. Speratus dixit: Ego imperium huius seculi non cognosco; sed magis illi Deo servio quem nemo hominum vidit nec videre his oculis potest. furtum non feci, sed siquid emero teloneum redo quia cognosco domnum meum, imperatorem regum et omnium gentium.*

‘If you begin to malign our sacred rites,’ said Saturninus, ‘I shall not listen to you. But swear rather by the *genius* of our lord the emperor.’

Speratus said: ‘I do not recognize the empire of the world. Rather, I serve that God whom no man has seen, nor can see, with these eyes. I have not stolen; and on any purchase I pay the tax, for I acknowledge my lord who is the emperor of kings and of all nations.’<sup>59</sup>

Religious disputes like this one abounded between Christians and Roman governors in the first centuries after the birth of Christ. Preserved in the accounts of these trials are the factors that motivated—or appeared to the Christians to motivate—governors’ religious policies.

A. N. Sherwin-White, in his discussion of Christianity and the law, posits that Roman governors were “indifferent to the religious aspects in the known cases.” According to this claim, governors were solely concerned with the compliance of the Christians with their orders.<sup>60</sup> Geoffrey De Ste. Croix disputes this claim in his argument on persecution, asserting that “the main motives of the government, in the

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<sup>59</sup> *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, 6

<sup>60</sup> Sherwin-White (1952), 211

long run, were essentially religious in character.”<sup>61</sup> He clarifies that the ancient conception of religion included both theological and political concerns.

As show by this debate, the interactions between Christians and local Roman officials make for a case study of governors’ interpretation of Roman law. By both Christian and Roman accounts, provincial governors were hesitant to convict professed Christians. Depending on the place, time, and context, however, the Christians prompted varied reactions from the Roman government. The ambiguity of the duties of governors and the rights of the Christians made for a range of policies toward this new religious group.

The distinction between religious custom and legal code proved problematic for all parties. The governors did not distinguish between religious and political issues; to the Christians, the governors’ judgments and actions with regard to law and religion appeared arbitrary and even contradictory. The Christians understood religious and political law to be separate and perceived themselves as persecuted for their religion, not prosecuted under the law. In the martyr acts and in the New Testament, they depict the governors as confused about this distinction in order to absolve themselves of any breach of Roman law.

Much of the interaction between governors and Christians took the form of trial and punishment. For the Christians, this was persecution, but, for the governors, the trials were but one aspect of their duty to Rome and the emperor. The Christians did not necessarily regard the Roman governors as evil figures, despite their roles in administering punishment. Rather, they more often portrayed the legates, proconsuls, and procurators as confused and self-interested. As will be discussed below, Christian

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<sup>61</sup> De Ste. Croix (1963), 27

accounts of trial particularly emphasize the influence of the mob over the governor. Such descriptions often point to the antagonistic role of the Jews towards the Christians, accounts that may have resulted more from Christian theology than historical fact.

The opinions of the populace influenced the governors for two reasons. First, as has already been covered, the governors were concerned about their own careers and were held accountable by the *repetundae* laws, which allowed the people of a province to bring the governor to trial for maladministration at the end of his term.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, the governors concerned themselves with the peace of their provinces and therefore sought to keep dissension to a minimum.<sup>63</sup> While, with the imperial cult, governors tended to demonstrate a preoccupation with showing allegiance to the emperor, when it came to Christianity, they were motivated by the issue of their provinces' stability. Governors were not only bound by the law and controlled by the emperor's orders, but also were held accountable to their subjects.

### **Pliny and the Trials of the Christians of Bithynia**

Pliny usefully supplies the perspective of a Roman governor on the trials of the Christians. He wrote to Trajan regarding Christian trials in 112 CE.<sup>64</sup> He asked about the standard punishments for Christians and requested approval for the judicial procedure he had been following. In writing to Trajan about the imperial cult, Pliny showed his loyalty to the emperor. In asking about the Christians, however, he showed nothing but uncertainty.

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<sup>62</sup> E.g. Tacitus *Ann.* 15.20-22; Sherwin-White (1963), 53

<sup>63</sup> De Ste. Croix (1963), 16; *Dig.* 1.18.3

<sup>64</sup> De Ste. Croix (1963), 9

Pliny said that when the Christians persisted in their confessions, he convicted them. When they denied Christianity, he had them make offerings to the gods and the image of Trajan. Pliny not only inquired about the judicial process, but also asked Trajan about the legal basis for the trials. His questions indicate that he was unclear about the laws governing the Christians:

*Nec mediocriter haesitavi, sitne aliquod discrimen aetatum, an quamlibet teneri nihil a robustioribus differant; detur paenitentiae venia, an ei, qui omnino Christianus fuit, desisse non prosit; nomen ipsum, si flagitiis careat, an flagitia cohaerentia nomini puniantur.*

Nor am I at all sure whether any distinction should be made between them on the grounds of age, or if young people and adults should be treated alike; whether a pardon ought to be granted to anyone retracting his beliefs, or if he has once professed Christianity, he shall gain nothing by renouncing it; and whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even if innocent of crime, or rather the crimes associated with the name.<sup>65</sup>

The question of whether it was the *nomen* of Christianity that merited punishment or the related *flagitia* reveals the central issue for Pliny. The *flagitia* were the crimes that the Romans assumed to be part of Christian practices. Pliny asked here whether Christianity itself was unlawful, or only its associated actions. He admitted that he was unsure of the legal reasons for punishing Christians. Unlike his question about the buildings and festivals to be dedicated to Trajan, Pliny's question here is primarily about the legal issue at hand.

Although he is confused about the legal questions of punishment, Pliny is resolute in his intent to eradicate Christianity for his own reasons. He knew the

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<sup>65</sup> Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.2

behavior of the Christians to be deviant and he had seen the negative effects of their practices on the mores of the province. Pliny understood that Christianity was threatening the culture and even the economy of Bithynia:

*Certe satis constat prope iam desolata templa coepisse celebrari,  
et sacra sollemnia diu intermissa repeti passimque venire  
<carne> victimarum, cuius adhuc rarissimus emptor  
inveniebatur.*

For there is no doubt that the people have begun to throng the temples which had been almost entirely deserted for a long time; the sacred rites which had been allowed to lapse are being performed again, and flesh of sacrificial victims is on sale everywhere, though up till recently scarcely anyone could be found to buy it.<sup>66</sup>

Pliny recognized the religious and practical problems the Christians posed. Possibly, his own personal piety played a role in his judgments about them. There is no evidence for this either way. All that can be deduced from this portion of the letter is that Pliny saw the *superstitio* of the Christians as a plague upon his province and, therefore, as a possible threat to its stability.<sup>67</sup> Pliny's statement that "an anonymous pamphlet has been circulated which contains the names of a number of accused persons" suggests that the Christians were causing discord among the people, prompting Pliny to bring the issue to Trajan's attention.<sup>68</sup>

If Pliny's motivations, then, were to restore peace to the province, the issue that remained was that of his legal justifications. Pliny may have used the concept of

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 10.96.10

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 10.96.9; cf. Sherwin-White (1952), 210. Sherwin-White posits that Pliny saw the Christians as "virtuous men." This argument does not fit with Pliny's characterization of Christianity.

<sup>68</sup> Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.5: *Propositus est libellus sine auctore multorum nomina continens.*

*contumacia*, obstinacy, as a legal reason for prosecution. He indicates this in his description of the Christians' stubbornness as a reason for punishment.<sup>69</sup>

Trajan's motivations and justifications mirrored Pliny's:

*Neque enim in universum aliquid, quod quasi certam formam habeat, constitui potest. Conquirendi non sunt; si deferantur et arguantur, puniendi sunt, ita tamen ut, qui negaverit se Christianum esse idque re ipsa manifestum fecerit, id est supplicando dis nostris, quamvis suspectus in praeterium, veniam ex paenitentia impetret.*

It is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula. These people must not be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance, however suspect his past conduct may be.<sup>70</sup>

The perspective of the emperor here confirms that no general edict had been issued up until then regarding the Christians. For later Christians, Trajan's advice seemed contradictory, in that he said that the Christians should not be sought out, implying that they were innocent of any legal crime, yet he said that they must be punished if they confess. This, again, exposes the complexity of the Roman government's view of religious custom versus law.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 10.96.4; for the counterargument, see De Ste. Croix (1963), 18.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 10.97.1-2

## Tertullian on Roman Government

The contradictions apparent in Trajan's advice to Pliny were not lost on Tertullian. Writing at the turn of the third century CE, he cited these letters in his discussion of Roman law in the *Apologeticus*, directed to Roman magistrates.<sup>71</sup> Tertullian points out Pliny's hesitation to sentence the Christians and takes issue with Trajan's reply:

*Tunc Traianus rescripsit hoc genus inquirendos quidem non esse, oblatos vero puniri oportere. O sententiam necessitate confusam! Negat inquirendos ut innocentes, et mandat puniendos ut nocentes.*

Trajan replied in a rescript that men of this kind were not to be sought out, but if they were brought before Pliny they must be punished. What a decision, how inevitably entangled! He says they must not be sought out, implying they are innocent; and he orders them to be punished, implying they are guilty.<sup>72</sup>

Tertullian's assessment of Trajan's edict expresses the Christian view that the Roman government itself was confused about the persecutions. The simultaneous guilt and innocence that he saw implied in Trajan's letter was a product of his own view that the Christians had not committed crimes under the law. From the Christian perspective, the Roman understanding of law and religion was just as "entangled" as Trajan's decision.

This issue of religious and political overlap arises again in Tertullian's discussion of gods being voted upon by the senate at Rome.<sup>73</sup> For the Romans, this was convention.

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<sup>71</sup> Barnes (1971), 107-110

<sup>72</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 2.7-8

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* 5.1

The gods were both political and religious entities, and the Romans did not distinguish between the two characterizations. Tertullian, however, viewed the government's votes of divinity to be an inversion of the power structure: God should rule man, not the other way around.

Tertullian's interpretation of Roman law as strictly political also explains his assertion that no Roman law existed under which the Christians could rightfully be tried. Many Christian accounts of trial depict Roman governors as agreeing with Tertullian's sentiment.<sup>74</sup> Tertullian, like the accounts of the Bible and other early Christian writings, tended to view governors as dogmatic in their adherence to Roman law. When the governors depicted in these accounts find no legal foundation for their judgments, they bend to the demands of the mobs in their provinces.

In discussing the case of Pontius Pilate crucifying Christ, Tertullian explains the conviction of Christ by pointing to the anger of the Jewish people:

*Ad doctrinam vero eius, qua revincebantur magistri primoresque Iudaeorum, ita exasperabuntur, maxime quod ingens ad eum multitudo deflecteret, ut postremo oblatum Pontio Pilato, Syriam tunc ex parte Romana procuranti, violentia suffragiorum in crucem Iesum dedi sibi extorserint.*

His teaching, with its refutation of the instructors and chief men of the Jews, so incensed them (chiefly because of the vast multitudes it turned to him) that at last they brought him to Pontius Pilate, at that time Roman procurator of Syria, and by the fury of their suffrages extorted it from Pilate that Jesus should be handed over to them to be crucified.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 4.1-5

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 21.18

The Jews' "extortion" of the sentence from Pilate was drawn from the New Testament's account of Christ's trial. Tertullian used this as an example of a Roman governor not knowing what legal foundation he was using for the conviction. By using the language of extortion, he implies that Pilate did not want to convict Christ. If Pliny's model can be carried over, however, Pilate would have desired to do away with Christ if only to restore peace.

Tertullian's treatment of both Roman and Christian sources reveals his view that the Romans did not have any legal basis for persecution. Nor did the government, in Tertullian's assessment, even believe itself to have a legal foundation for the trials.

### **The Trial of Christ**

Tertullian's characterization of Pilate was derived from the New Testament's portrayal of him. The Gospels have preserved a first- or early second-century Christian perspective of the judicial process. The historicity of the accounts—that is, whether or not the events of the Gospels actually occurred as they are described—is inconsequential to this discussion. The reality of the trial as perceived, or at least depicted, by the Christians reveals their perspective on the Roman provincial government.

In each of the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, Pilate does not find any legal grounds for the execution of Christ.<sup>76</sup> The Christian authors of the New Testament predictably claimed Christ's innocence before the law. They did not show Pilate cruelly convicting Christ under false pretenses, but rather emphasized the governor's confusion about the legislation under which he could conceivably be executed. According to the New Testament, Pilate was caught between the wishes of

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<sup>76</sup> Mark 15:14; Matthew 27:22-25; Luke 23:4; John 18:38

the Jews, that he should execute Christ, and the laws of the empire, that he should let Christ go.<sup>77</sup>

Pilate, it seems, was accustomed to placating the Jews. All of the canonical Gospel accounts say that he customarily released one prisoner to the Jewish crowd on Passover.<sup>78</sup> Besides the narrative role this detail plays in the plot, it also serves as a precedent for Pilate appeasing the Jews with a judicial ruling, as he goes on to do in the case of Christ.

Pilate's inability to find a legal basis for executing Christ served the Christian purpose of acquitting him of any crime. Of the Gospels, Luke most directly addressed the need for a legal basis of prosecution:

ἤρξαντο δὲ κατηγορεῖν αὐτοῦ λέγοντες, τοῦτον εὗραμεν  
διαστρέφοντα τὸ ἔθνος ἡμῶν καὶ κωλύοντα φόρους  
Καίσαρι διδόναι καὶ λέγοντα ἑαυτὸν χριστὸν βασιλέα εἶναι.

And they began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man trying to mislead our nation, opposing the payment of taxes to Caesar, and claiming himself to be Christ, a king.'<sup>79</sup>

These charges of subversion and tax evasion comprise the only explicit argument based on codified political law for the conviction of Christ attested by the Gospels.<sup>80</sup> Even these charges, however, were insufficient for a sentence of execution.

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<sup>77</sup> The Gospel accounts differ on whether Jesus was guilty of anything under the law. Mark 15:14, Matthew 27:23, and John 18:38 have Pilate saying that he has found no basis for a charge against Christ. Luke 23:4 has Pilate saying that he has found no basis for the execution of Christ. Regardless of whether there was no charge or only no charge requiring the death penalty, all of the Gospel accounts are consistent on Pilate's hesitation about the legal foundations of crucifying Christ.

<sup>78</sup> Mark 15:6-8; Matthew 27:15; Luke 23:18-19; John 18:39

<sup>79</sup> Luke 23:2

<sup>80</sup> Cf. the exchange between Pilate and Jews in John 18:29-30: ἐξῆλθεν οὖν ὁ Πιλάτος ἔξω πρὸς αὐτοὺς καὶ φησὶν τίνα κατηγορίαν φέρετε κατὰ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τούτου ἀπεκρίθησαν καὶ εἶπαν αὐτῷ, εἰ μὴ ἦν οὗτος

Since Pilate insisted upon Christ's innocence before the law, the Christian accounts of the Gospel turned to the Jewish populace as the catalyst for Christ's punishment. The Gospels claim that Pilate's conviction of Christ was prompted by the Jewish mob:<sup>81</sup>

ὁ δὲ Πιλάτος βουλόμενος τῷ ὄχλῳ τὸ ἱκανὸν ποιῆσαι  
ἀπέλυσεν αὐτοῖς τὸν Βαραββᾶν καὶ παρέδωκεν τὸν  
Ἰησοῦν φραγελλώσας ἵνα σταυρωθῇ.

So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released to them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.<sup>82</sup>

Pilate is said to have caved in, driven either by fear of uprising or alarm about his own political career. Thus, the influence of public opinion controlled the actions of the governor, inverting the normal direction of authority.

The other authority swaying Pilate's actions was that of the emperor. Although the emperor is not directly discussed in the Gospels, the account of John signifies that the Christian authors of the New Testament were aware of his *imperium*:

ἐκ τούτου ὁ Πιλάτος ἐζήτει ἀπολῦσαι αὐτόν οἱ δὲ Ἰουδαῖοι  
ἐκραύγασαν λέγοντες, ἐὰν τοῦτον ἀπολύσης, οὐκ εἶ φίλος  
τοῦ Καίσαρος. πᾶς ὁ βασιλέα ἐαυτὸν ποιῶν ἀντιλέγει τῷ  
Καίσαρι.

From that point on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews kept shouting out, saying, 'If you release this man,

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κακὸν ποιῶν οὐκ ἄν σοι παρεδώκαμεν αὐτόν. ("So Pilate came outside to them and said, 'What accusation are you bringing against this man?' They replied to him, saying, "If this man were not doing something wrong we would not have handed him over to you.")

<sup>81</sup> Mark 15:15; Matthew 27:24; Luke 23:23-24; John 18:12-16

<sup>82</sup> Mark 15:15

you are no “Friend of Caesar.” Anyone who claims himself to be a king opposes Caesar.”<sup>83</sup>

The mob’s reminder to Pilate is the closest that John comes to a legal accusation of Christ. The mob thus framed Pilate’s judgment as a choice of loyalty or opposition to Tiberius. As has already been discussed, governors deliberately expressed loyalty to the emperor with institutions such as the imperial cult. Pilate was likely cognizant of his own image before the emperor and would have wanted to avoid any question of his allegiance.

In response to the Jews’ statement that Christ is “king of the Jews,” Christ retorts that his “kingdom is not of this world.”<sup>84</sup> In these accounts, Christ distinguishes between the Roman Empire and the Kingdom of God. Christ’s assertion of the existence of two separate realms, the secular empire and the kingdom of heaven, appeared, in the Christian telling, to confuse Pilate, as shown in his reply to him: “You are a king then!”<sup>85</sup> Pilate did not conceive of the religious sphere as distinct from the political: as Tertullian would have it, for pagan Romans the two realms were entangled.<sup>86</sup>

The Christian approach to Pilate was the basis for all other Christian portrayals of governors, which eagerly depict governors’ uncertainty regarding legal justifications for their prosecutions. The governors of Christian accounts neither want to convict without a legal basis nor wish to violate the demands of their populace. Furthermore, Christians conceive of Roman governors as unable or unwilling to distinguish between religion and politics. Pliny’s understanding of the impact of Christianity on the pagan religious customs of his province could be taken to corroborate this assertion on the

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<sup>83</sup> John 19:12

<sup>84</sup> John 18:36

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 18:37

<sup>86</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 2.8

part of the Christians. He saw how the Roman laws (or lack thereof) concerning Christianity had an impact upon the welfare of the temples.<sup>87</sup> Pliny's concern about the temples may be taken as concern for the *pax deorum* insofar as it affected the prosperity of the province.<sup>88</sup> He would not have seen this other realm as separate from the Roman Empire, just as Pilate did not understand Christ's assertion that his "kingdom [was] not of this world."<sup>89</sup>

The Biblical account of Pilate's trial of Jesus raises four important points that recur throughout Christian accounts of trials: (1) there was no legal basis for the prosecution; (2) the governor bowed to the demands of the people; (3) the influence of the emperor and loyalty to him played a role in the governor's ultimate verdict; and (4) the governor did not see a distinction between secular and religious.

### **The Trial of Saint Paul**

Each of these features was evident in the trial of Paul in the *Acts of the Apostles*. According to *Acts*, he was dragged out of the temple by a mob of Jews and accused by them of desecrating the holy space.<sup>90</sup> Two different governors, Felix and Festus, then detained him before he claimed his right to trial before the emperor at Rome.<sup>91</sup>

Paul's status as a Roman citizen afforded him protection. According to the account in *Acts*, he had committed no crime, as evidenced by one of the governors' statements, *περὶ οὗ ἄσφαλές τι γράψαι τῷ κυρίῳ οὐκ ἔχω* ("But I do not have anything

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<sup>87</sup> Pliny *Ep.* 10.96.10

<sup>88</sup> See De Ste. Croix (1963), 29 for the argument that "Religion, for [some Romans of the governing class], was above all the *ius divinum*, the body of state law relating to sacred matters, which preserved the *pax deorum* by means of the appropriate ceremonial."

<sup>89</sup> John 18:36

<sup>90</sup> *Acts* 21

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* 23-24

definite about him to write to my lord”).<sup>92</sup> According to *Acts*, the governors were unable to condemn Paul under the law, yet they were equally unwilling to release him for fear of the Jewish mob. Like Pilate, Felix and Festus were caught between having no legal basis for conviction and feeling the pressure of the Jewish populace.

Felix, the governor under whom Paul was initially arrested, held Paul and delayed his verdict:

ἅμα καὶ ἐλπίζων ὅτι χρήματα δοθήσεται αὐτῷ ὑπὸ τοῦ Παύλου: διὸ καὶ πυκνότερον αὐτὸν μεταπεμπόμενος ὠμίλει αὐτῷ. Διετίας δὲ πληρωθείσης ἔλαβεν διάδοχον ὁ Φῆλιξ Πόρκιον Φῆστον: θέλων τε χάριτα καταθέσθαι τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ὁ Φῆλιξ κατέλιπε τὸν Παῦλον δεδεμένον.

At the same time he was hoping that money would be given to him by Paul, so he sent for him frequently and conversed with him. When two years had passed, Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus, and wanting to curry favor with the Jews, Felix left Paul in prison.<sup>93</sup>

The author of *Acts* paints a portrait of a self-interested governor. Felix hoped to benefit personally from the situation, believing that Paul might offer a bribe for his freedom. He also feared a backlash from the Jews. He appeased them, either because of his duty as governor to keep the peace or because of his concern for his record and career. Felix’s favor toward the Jews may have been a measure to prevent his subjects from accusing him under the *repetundae* laws upon his return to Rome.<sup>94</sup> His detention of Paul was not out of the ordinary and was therefore unlikely to damage his own reputation.

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 25:26

<sup>93</sup> *Acts* 24:26-27

<sup>94</sup> Sherwin-White (1963), 53

The Christian account of Acts portrays Festus as similarly paralyzed in his reaction to Paul, caught between the law and the demands of the Jews. The governors were weak in the eyes of the Christian author(s) of Acts. Felix and Festus were limited in their authority by the threat of an uprising, the assumed consequence of releasing Paul. Felix and Festus did not appeal to the emperor for advice in this situation. Rather, Paul invoked *provocatio*. As a Roman citizen, he had the right to a hearing before the emperor, a right that weakened the importance and authority of the governor. The governors were inactive in their administration of judicial decisions and reactive to the anger of the Jews in their peacekeeping efforts.

Festus found himself in the predicament of having to send Paul to Rome with a statement of the charges. As told in Acts, however, he does not know what accusation to convey to the emperor:

ἐγὼ δὲ κατελάβομην μηδὲν ἄξιον αὐτὸν θανάτου  
πεπραχέναι, αὐτοῦ δὲ τούτου ἐπικαλεσαμένου τὸν  
Σεβαστὸν ἔκρινα πέμπειν. περὶ οὗ ἀσφαλές τι γράψαι τῷ  
κυρίῳ οὐκ ἔχω...

I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but  
because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to  
send him to Rome. But I have nothing definite to write to  
His Majesty about him...<sup>95</sup>

Festus could not determine the charges leveled against Paul, yet he had been holding him prisoner. In this case popular opinion did not paralyze the governor; genuine confusion did. Acts asserts that no real charges were leveled against Paul.

The trial of Paul in Acts demonstrates the position in which the governors found themselves. Hesitation and confusion on the part of Felix and Festus in this Christian

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<sup>95</sup> Acts 25:25-26

account derive from the threat of a Jewish uprising and from confusion over the religious and legal nature of the charges.

### **The Acts of the Christian Martyrs**

The power of the populace and the confusion of the governors are similarly demonstrated in the acts of the Christian martyrs. The martyr acts, which took place over a significant span of time and space display the hesitancy of the governors in reacting to the Christians. The authors of the martyr acts, as audiences of the New Testament, may have relied on the themes and framework of the trials of Christ and Paul in the Gospels and in *Acts*. Nonetheless, the martyr acts are confirmation of the Christian view of Roman governors. The accuracy of the martyr acts is immaterial to the argument, if it can at least be accepted that extant recensions reflect an early Christian understanding of their trials.<sup>96</sup>

The interaction between the governor and the Christians attested by the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* provides insight into the Christian conception of Roman law and religion. The Scillitan martyrs were, it is generally accepted, tried in North Africa on July 17, 180 CE. The account of their trial is the earliest dated document from the Latin church.<sup>97</sup>

The Scillitan martyrs, following their confession of Christianity and their refusal to sacrifice to the gods and swear by the *genius* of the emperor, defended their innocence before the law:

*Speratus dixit: Ego imperium huius seculi non cognosco; sed  
magis illi Deo servio quem nemo hominum vidit nec videre his*

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<sup>96</sup> For fuller coverage of the judicial proceedings of the martyr acts, see Appendix A. This table breaks down the governors' treatment of the Christians in the trials of the martyr acts in the Musurillo (1972) edition.

<sup>97</sup> Musurillo (1972), xxii

*oculis potest. furtum non feci, sed siquid emero teloneum redo quia cognosco domnum meum, imperatorem regum et omnium gentium.*

Speratus said: 'I do not recognize the empire of the world. Rather, I serve that God whom no man has seen, nor can see, with these eyes. I have not stolen; and on any purchase I pay the tax, for I acknowledge my lord who is the emperor of kings and of all nations.'<sup>98</sup>

Speratus differentiated between the secular and religious: the *imperium seculi* and the world ruled by the god *quem nemo hominum vidit*. Speratus went on to say that he had done nothing wrong before the law of the Romans: he had neither stolen nor avoided taxes nor, as he later asserted, committed murder, nor given false witness.<sup>99</sup>

Speratus also defended his faith and actions as morally sound:

*Speratus dixit: Numquam malefecimus, iniquitati nullam operam praebuimus: numquam malediximus, sed male accepti gratias egimus propter quod imperatorem nostrum observamus. Saturninus proconsul dixit: Et nos religiosi sumus et simplex est religio nostra, et iuramus per genium domni nostri imperatoris et pro salute eius supplicamus, quod et vos quoque facere debetis.*

Speratus said: 'We have never done wrong; we have never lent ourselves to wickedness. Never have we uttered a curse; but when abused, we have given thanks, for we hold our own emperor in honor.'

Saturninus the proconsul said: 'We too are a religious people, and our religion is a simple one: we swear by the

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<sup>98</sup> *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, 6

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* 7. Cf. Matthew 22:20-21: καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς, τίνος ἡ εἰκὼν αὕτη καὶ ἡ ἐπιγραφή; λέγουσιν αὐτῷ Καίσαρος. Τότε λέγει αὐτοῖς, ἀπόδοτε οὖν τὰ Καίσαρος Καίσαρι καὶ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τῷ θεῷ. "And Jesus said to them, 'Whose image is this, and whose inscription?' They answered him, 'Caesar's.' Then he said to them, 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'"

*genius* of our lord the emperor and we offer prayers for his health—as you also ought to do.’<sup>100</sup>

The proconsul asked the defendant to comply with the Roman custom of swearing by the *genius* of the emperor. Speratus acknowledged his religious beliefs and actions to be deviant, but insisted that he had not contravened a Roman law. The governor ignored Speratus’ legal defense and convicted him on religious grounds. Speratus and Saturninus differed in their conception of the law. Speratus saw a difference between a legal crime and a religious act, while Saturninus only saw deviant behavior and sought to maintain the status quo. The Christians portrayed Saturninus in this way in order to explain why they were convicted as guilty and to defend themselves as innocent before the law.

The issue of political versus religious law was particularly salient in the interaction between the governor and the defendant in the trial of the martyrs of Lyons. The account, a letter from Lugdunum to the churches of Asia, describes a mass trial of Christians that occurred in 177 CE.<sup>101</sup> In this case, the magistrates appealed to the governor to preside over the hearing.<sup>102</sup> The governor made a spectacle of the trial and threw the accused to the beasts.<sup>103</sup> It seems that he exercised his own *imperium* in making this decision about the punishment. He did, however, appeal to the emperor regarding Christians who were Roman citizens:

μαθὼν ὁ ἡγεμὼν ὅτι Ῥωμαῖός ἐστιν, ἐκέλευσεν αὐτὸν ἀναληφθῆναι μετὰ καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν τῶν ἐν τῇ εἰρκτῇ ὄντων, περὶ ὧν ἐπέστειλε τῷ Καίσαρι, καὶ περιέμενε τὴν ἀπόφασιν τὴν ἀπ’ ἐκείνου.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 2-3

<sup>101</sup> Musurillo (1972), xx

<sup>102</sup> *The Martyrs of Lyons*, 1.8-9

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 1.8, 37

But when the governor discovered that [Attalus] was a Roman citizen, he ordered him to be brought back to prison with the others who were there; for he had sent an inquiry concerning them to the emperor and was waiting for his decision.<sup>104</sup>

The governor's power to pass autonomous judgments was restricted to non-citizens.

Thus, he awaited the emperor's order regarding the citizens:

ἐπιστείλαντος γὰρ τοῦ Καίσαρος τοὺς μὲν  
ἀποτυμπανισθῆναι, εἰ δέ τινες ἀρνοῖντο, τούτους  
ἀπολυθῆναι...

Now it was the emperor's order that these should be beheaded, but that those who had denied their faith should be released...<sup>105</sup>

The governor, then, was bound by the emperor's decision. Particularly with regard to Roman citizens, the governors were hesitant and constrained by the *imperium* of the emperor.

The other constraint on the autonomy of the governors in the martyr acts was the mob. The mob recurs throughout the acts as a source of influence over the governors.<sup>106</sup> Like the Jews in the trials of Christ and Paul, the people were depicted in the martyr acts exerting control over the governors.<sup>107</sup> The governors are repeatedly compelled to convict Christians in order to please the mob. The punishments, like that

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 1.44

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 1.47

<sup>106</sup> e.g. *The Martyrs of Lyons*, 1.7, 1.44; *The Martyrdom of Saints Montanus and Lucius*, 2

<sup>107</sup> Grig (2002), 329 on the power structure between governor and martyr: "The martyr is calm, unruffled, and able to mock at ease, while his torturers, who supposedly are measuring and controlling the pain they are inflicting, have lost control and become bestialized. The power relations between authority and subject are being reversed." Cf. Tertullian's issue with the Romans' reversed power structure between man and god, page 35 above.

described in the martyrs of Lyons, are often depicted as highly public; governors thus emphasized to their populace their opposition to the deviance of the Christians.

As was the case with Pilate, Felix, and Festus, the authors of the martyr acts show the governors as weak. They were, in the eyes of the Christians, confused about the nature of their own laws and were swayed by the threat of unrest.

## **Conclusion**

The interactions between Roman governors and the Christians have been documented and studied since Christianity's inception. The miscommunications and misunderstandings, both legal and religious, between the governors and the Christians are clear in all accounts and analyses.

The Roman governors were aware and highly concerned with the religious implications of the Christians and their trials. While the governors trying the Christians did not conceive of the trials as either religious or political in nature, they were certainly aware of the repercussions of their policies toward the Christians. The rulings of the governors had both religious and political implications. Pliny expressed concern about the welfare of the temples of his province as they came under threat from Christianity. He seems to have understood the importance of maintaining the temples and the worship of the gods, in order that his province and the empire as a whole might enjoy prosperity. Pilate, Felix, Festus, and the other governors described in Christian accounts, meanwhile, cared about the political ramifications of their actions toward the Christians. Most particularly, these governors, as depicted by the Christians, were mindful of their own image in the eyes of the Jews, the people of their province, and the emperor. As represented in Christian accounts, ambiguous laws regarding the actions of the Christians resulted in the governors acting on their own

political initiative, attempting to avoid rebellion among the people and trying to maintain the good graces of the people and the emperor.

#### IV. The Jews and the Roman Government: Conflict and Cooperation

Inscriptions honoring governors and local officials were common throughout the ancient Mediterranean, from the kingdom of Alexander the Great through the Roman Empire. A stele from Berenice in Cyrene, dating from 13 or 14 CE and honoring a Roman proconsular legate, is one such example. This inscription, written in Greek on a slab of Parian marble, was dedicated and erected by the Jews of Berenice. The inscription uses conventional Greek phrasing and honors M. Tittius son of Sextus of the tribe Aemilia for his benevolence toward the Jews.

This stele raises many of the questions that arise throughout Jewish history in the Roman Empire. For the sake of my treatment of the subject, I view the Jews primarily as a religious group. While the Jews were, and still are, an ethnic group, it was their religion that distinguished them from the Romans. Their monotheistic beliefs, their rejection of idols, their refusal to worship the emperor, and their protection of the Temple at Jerusalem clearly set them apart in Roman society.<sup>108</sup>

While they were distinct in their religious customs from the Greeks and Romans, the Jews were also an integral part of the society of the Roman Empire. They spoke Greek; they paid taxes; they interacted with and even participated in government. During the first century CE, the Jews' interactions with their governors were well documented by Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher and writer during the reigns of Gaius and Claudius, and Josephus, a Jewish historian who wrote under the Flavian emperors.

The Jews' opinions of their governors are documented through inscriptions and through the writings of Philo and Josephus. Based on these sources, the Jews were

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<sup>108</sup> For the Roman perspective on Jewish religious practices, see Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.4

concerned with the governors' tolerance of their customs and practices and with the governors' protection of their rights under the laws of the empire. They understood that the actions of the governors resulted from the policies of the emperors. In the same way as the Christians saw Roman governors submitting to the wishes of their people, the Jews also overwhelmingly depicted their governors as vulnerable to the demands of the masses. While the laws pertaining to the Christians were unclear and left the governors appealing to the emperor and acting on their own initiatives, the laws about Jewish practices were generally clear. Governors therefore formulated policy toward them based on the commands of the emperor and on the demands of the people, whose favor it was imperative they maintain.

### **The Jews of Berenice**

During the reign of Augustus, the Jews of the Roman Empire were afforded the privilege of being allowed to honor their customs, free from fear of Roman law.<sup>109</sup> Josephus relates that the emperor himself issued decrees on behalf of the Jews.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, the Jews of Cyrene, when they found themselves mistreated at the hands of their Greek neighbors in the first and second decades CE, appealed directly to the emperor. The Greeks, according to Josephus' account, were intercepting the sacred monies that the Jews customarily sent to Jerusalem and were confiscating them as taxes:

πάσχοντες δὲ κακῶς καὶ πέρας οὐδὲν εὐρίσκοντες τῆς τῶν  
Ἑλλήνων ἀπανθρωπίας, ἐπρεσβεύσαντο πρὸς Καίσαρα καὶ  
περὶ τούτων. ὁ δ' αὐτοῖς τὴν αὐτὴν ἰσοτέλειαν ἔδωκεν,  
γράφας τοῖς κατὰ τὰς ἐπαρχίας. ὧν ὑπετάξαμεν τὰ

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<sup>109</sup> Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 14.202-268

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* 14.202-268

ἀντίγραφα μαρτύρια τῆς διαθέσεως ἣν ἔσχον ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν  
ἄνωθεν οἱ κρατοῦντες.

And so, being mistreated and seeing no limit to the inhumanity of the Greeks, they sent envoys to Caesar about this state of affairs. And he granted them the same equality of taxation as before, and wrote to the provincial officials letters of which we subjoin copies as evidence of the (friendly) disposition which our former rulers had toward us.<sup>111</sup>

That the Cyrenaean Jews sent envoys to the emperor implies either that they were bypassing local authority or that they had already witnessed the local officials' tolerance of the mob's activities.

This altercation occurred in 14 or 13 BCE.<sup>112</sup> The account of Josephus, then, provides historical context for the inscription of the Cyrenaean Jews in honor of M. Tittius, who was likely a praetorian legate in Berenice in 13 or 14 CE.<sup>113</sup> The Jews of Berenice honored him for being “not burdensome” (ἐν τούτοις ἀβαρῆ ἑαυτὸν παρέσχηται).<sup>114</sup> Tittius, evidently, treated the Jews favorably and honored the laws protecting them.

Unlike the governors' duties with regard to the Christians, Tittius' duty to protect the Jews' rights was very clear according to Augustus' edicts. He would have only had to consult these edicts to know that he had a duty to protect the Cyrenean Jews' freedom to practice their religious customs. If Josephus' account of Greek mistreatment of the Jews is the context of the inscription, then perhaps Tittius'

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<sup>111</sup> Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 16.161

<sup>112</sup> Bowsky (1987), 508. Dating is based on references to Augustus as *pontifex maximus* and the dating of Agrippa's return to Rome from Syria.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 509

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 495 and 509

resistance to the Greek citizenry of his realm was what merited him the honors inscribed upon the marble slab. In erecting this Greek inscription, the Jews of Cyrene were not only conferring honors upon Tittius, but were also signaling to future governors that protection of their rights resulted in honors. Tittius apparently proved himself a fair and successful administrator to the Jewish community, governing in a manner that so many of his colleagues were unable to achieve.<sup>115</sup>

### **Pontius Pilate and the Jewish People**

Four decades later, across the Mediterranean in Judaea, another governor found himself confronted by the demands of an outraged group of Jews. This time, the Jews were not asking for the freedoms guaranteed them by the law but were petitioning for the condemnation of a criminal who had violated the laws of their Temple. This governor was Pontius Pilate and according to Christian accounts, despite his inability to find a legal basis for condemning Christ, he wished to placate the Jewish mob (ὄχλος) and sentenced him to crucifixion.<sup>116</sup> While the Jews' situation in Judaea had a different set of circumstances from those surrounding the populations of the diaspora, the example of Pilate provides insight into the attitudes of Roman officials toward the Jews in their native land.

Josephus' telling of Pilate's interaction with the Jews centers not upon the angry mob of the New Testament, but rather upon the most respected of the Jewish community (οἱ πρῶτοι):

Καὶ αὐτὸν ἐνδείξει τῶν πρώτων ἀνδρῶν παρ' ἡμῖν σταυρῶ  
ἐπιτετιμηκότος Πιλάτου οὐκ ἐπαύσαντο οἱ τὸ πρῶτον  
ἀγαπήσαντες.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 509

<sup>116</sup> Mark 15:15; Matthew 27:24; Luke 23:23-24; John 18:12-16; see discussion on pages 38-42

When Pilate, upon hearing [Christ] accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him.<sup>117</sup>

Pilate, according to this account, is not the cowardly and confused governor of the Christian versions, but rather a judge responding to accusations presented by the Jews, his subjects.

Pilate, however, was by no means a just governor in the eyes of the Jews. In fact, one of the Jews' most salient impressions of Pilate was of him intentionally subverting their religious law. According to Jewish sources, Pilate brought standards bearing the image of the emperor into Jerusalem and displayed them in the palace.<sup>118</sup> This action violated the Jewish law against graven images as they viewed the standards as idols. According to Philo and Josephus, however, the Jews manage to persuade Pilate to remove the standards. Notably, Philo and Josephus acknowledge the emperor's authority over the governors, as they show the Jews convincing Pilate only by writing to Tiberius.

Evident here is that Philo and Josephus viewed Pilate as influenced by the masses of the Jews, much as the Christians saw him in the case of the crucifixion of Christ. Pilate, according to Philo, was afraid of the Jews' power to appeal to the emperor and of being convicted of maladministration:

Τὸ τελευταῖον τοῦτο μάλιστα αὐτὸν ἐξετράχυνε  
καταδείσαντα, μὴ τῷ ὄντι πρεσβευσάμενοι καὶ τῆς ἄλλης  
αὐτὸν ἐπιτροπῆς ἐξελέγξωσι τὰς δωροδοκίας, τὰς ὕβρεις,  
τὰς ἀρπαγὰς, τὰς αἰκίας, τὰς ἐπηρείας, τοὺς ἀκρίτους καὶ

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<sup>117</sup> Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 18.64. It should be noted that there exists speculation that this is a later Christian interpolation, bringing its validity as a strictly Jewish account into question.

<sup>118</sup> Josephus, *Bel. Jud.* 2.184-204; Philo, *Leg. ad Gai.* 38.302-303

ἐπαλλήλους φόνους, τὴν ἀνήνυτον καὶ ἀργαλεωτάτην  
ὠμότητα διεξελθόντες.

This last remark exasperated Pilate most of all, for he was afraid that if they really sent an embassy [about the standards], they would bring accusations against the rest of the administration as well, specifying in detail his venality, his violence, his thefts, his assaults, his abusive behavior, his frequent executions of untried prisoners, and his endless savage ferocity.<sup>119</sup>

Pilate did not appease the Jews out of a desire to be a benevolent governor. According to Philo, he desired to keep the masses happy in order that he might continue to rule without the intervention of the emperor. Only at the order of Tiberius did Pilate remove the standards.

This is not the only one in which Pilate is shown as confronted by a Jewish throng. Josephus tells of Pilate robbing the coffers of the Temple in order to build aqueducts.<sup>120</sup> The Jews assembled in an uprising against this maladministration and Pilate responded with force, ordering soldiers into the crowd to beat down the riot.<sup>121</sup>

Based upon Jewish accounts, Pilate had little interest in the theological issues of the Jews. He was apparently oblivious to the damage he caused the Jews (and, for that matter, the Christians). Pilate's concerns were the practical issues of everyday life, such as the convenience provided by a newly built aqueduct, and Roman ideology, as in the case of the standards. Pilate was stubborn and antagonistic, but not because of any specific hatred for Jewish customs. His primary concern, as related by Philo and Josephus, was his own wellbeing and his ability to escape accusation by his subjects.

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<sup>119</sup> Philo, *Leg. ad Gai.* 38.302

<sup>120</sup> Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 18.60-62

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

The characterization of Pilate as selfish and fearful of uprising and accusation runs parallel to Christian accounts of Pilate's fear of the Jewish mob at the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>122</sup> Pilate was ultimately deposed due to accusations of maladministration by the Samaritans, indicating that the descriptions of Pilate's fear of his own people were probably fair and showing that his concerns were not unfounded.<sup>123</sup>

### **Flaccus and the Jews of Alexandria**

Another local official who had frequent interaction with the Jews was Aulus Avilius Flaccus, *praefectus Aegypti* at the end of the reign of Tiberius. Like Pilate, Flaccus, as his character has been preserved by Jewish sources, was concerned with his success as governor and was therefore conscious of appealing to the masses that he governed. He was more fearful of the power of the Greeks to accuse him before the emperor than he was of Jewish rebellion, resulting in an antagonistic policy toward the Jews.

In 38 CE, during Flaccus' rule in Alexandria, unrest broke out between the Greeks and the Jews. The source of the Greeks' resentment towards the Jews is unclear, but was sparked either by the privileged status of the Jews vis-à-vis ordinary Egyptians or by general animosity toward the Jews' eccentric customs.<sup>124</sup> Philo, the main source of information regarding this conflict, either feigned an inability to understand the motive for the Greeks' anger or truly did not comprehend the source of their animosity.<sup>125</sup>

Philo says that Flaccus' rule began benevolently, but that, at the accession of Gaius and the outbreak of civil unrest, he began to undertake corrupt practices.<sup>126</sup> In

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<sup>122</sup> Cf. discussion of Pilate and the Jewish mob in the New Testament, pages 38-42

<sup>123</sup> Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 18.87-89

<sup>124</sup> van der Horst (2003), 22, 26

<sup>125</sup> Philo, *In Flacc.* 51

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* 1-17

particular, he failed to uphold the laws protecting the Jews' customs. At first, he only failed to intervene on their behalf, but, according to Philo, he then began to actively participate in their persecution in order to maintain the favor of his Greek subjects:

Τοῦ δὲ ἐπιτρόπου τῆς χώρας, ὃς μόνος ἐδύνατο βοθηθεὶς  
ὥρα μιᾶ τὴν ὀχλοκρατίαν καθελεῖν, προσποιοθμένου ἅ τε  
ἑώρα μὴ ἐπακούειν, ἀλλ' ἀνέδην ἐφιέντος πολεμοποιεῖν  
καὶ τὴν εἰρήνην συγχέοντος.

The prefect of the country, who could have put an end to this mob-rule single-handed in an hour had he chosen to, pretended not to see and hear what he did see and hear, but allowed the Greeks to make war without restraint and so shattered the peace of the city.<sup>127</sup>

The natural direction of rule was inverted in the minds of the Jews: καὶ γίνεται ὁ μὲν ἄρχων ὑπήκοος, οἱ δ' ὑπήκοοι ἡγεμόνες, “Thus the ruler became a subject and the subjects became leaders.”<sup>128</sup> Like the governors in the martyr acts, the governor was perceived by the persecuted to have become vulnerable to the mob's demands.<sup>129</sup>

The initial acts against the Jews during this conflict consisted of destroying their synagogues or turning them into temples honoring the emperor.<sup>130</sup> Philo's description of this provides insight into the relationship between the Jews' religious customs and their political practices:

Λελήθατε ἑαυτοὺς οὐ προστιθέντες τοῖς κυρίοις τιμὴν,  
ἀλλ' ἀφαιρούμενοι, οὐκ εἰδότες ὡς τοῖς πανταχόθι τῆς  
οἰκουμένης Ἰουδαίοις ὀρμητήρια τῆς εἰς τὸν Σεβαστὸν  
οἶκον ὀσιότητός εἰσιν αἱ προσευκαὶ ἐπιδήλως.

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<sup>127</sup> Philo, *Leg. ad Gai.* 20.132

<sup>128</sup> Philo, *In Flacc.* 19

<sup>129</sup> Cf. discussion of martyr's power over the governor, pages 45-49

<sup>130</sup> Philo, *In Flacc.* 41-42; for more on Flaccus' actions toward the Jews at the beginning of the conflict, see Gambetti (2009), 151-160.

It apparently escaped your notice that in this way you did not pay homage to our masters but actually deprived them of it! You do not realize that for the Jews all over the world it is their synagogues that clearly form the basis for their piety towards the imperial family.<sup>131</sup>

Presumably, Philo was referring to the Jews' practice of praying and sacrificing on behalf of the emperor.<sup>132</sup> He interestingly acknowledged the Roman rulers as "masters" (οἱ κυριοί), though undoubtedly he used this word in reference to the master of the Roman world, and not master in the sense of God.<sup>133</sup> Philo, here, demonstrated his understanding that the Romans and their governors were generally interested in the religion of the Jews only insofar as it affected the present political situation. In this case, the Jews' ability to fit the emperor into their religious and ideological framework was compromised by Flaccus' actions.

Philo occupied himself at length with Flaccus' desire to appease the throng.<sup>134</sup> Many of Flaccus' actions of persecution were very public, occurring at processions or in theaters. For example, Philo tells of Flaccus' arrest of members of the Jewish council of elders:

Καὶ στείλας καλὴν πομπὴν διὰ μέσης ἀγορᾶς πρεσβύτας  
δεσμίους ἐξηγκωνισμένους, τοὺς μὲν ἱμάσι, τοὺς δὲ  
σιδηραῖς ἀλύσεσιν, εἰς τὸ θέατρον εἰσάγει.

Then he organized a fine procession, in which he marched these old men through the middle of the market place,

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<sup>131</sup> Philo, *In Flacc.* 49

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Philo, *Leg. ad Gai.* 45.357 in which Gaius scorns the Jewish practice of sacrificing on behalf of the emperor, rather than to the emperor.

<sup>133</sup> Philo, *In Flacc.* 49. Cf. the Christian martyrs' refusal to acknowledge the emperor as master in the context of their trials: *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, 6

<sup>134</sup> Philo, *In Flacc.* 82

their hands bound behind their backs, some with straps,  
others with iron chains, and took them into the theatre.<sup>135</sup>

As the Jews perceived the situation, Flaccus desired to make his policy toward them abundantly clear to the rest of the population. Philo's account emphasizes this by describing the atrocities committed against even women of the Jewish race in the theatre:

εἰ δ' ἐφάνησαν ἡμέτεραι, προσέταπτον οἱ ἀντὶ θεατῶν  
τύραννοι καὶ δεσπῶται γεγονότες κρέα χοίρεια δίδοναι  
κομίζοντας. Ὅσαι μὲν οὖν φόβῳ κολάσεως ἀπεγέυσαντο,  
μηδὲν ἔτι δεινὸν προσυπομείνασαι ἀπελύοντο. αἱ δ'  
ἐγκρατέστεραι βασανισταῖς παρεδίδοντο πρὸς αἰκίας  
ἀνηκέστους, ὅπερ τοῦ μηδὲν ἀδικεῖν αὐτὰς σαφεστάτη  
πίστις ἐστί.

But when they were found to belong to our nation, then these spectators turned into despotic tyrants and ordered swine's flesh so as to give it to these women. All who, for fear of punishment, ate from the meat were released without undergoing any further maltreatment. But the more resolute women were handed over to the torturers to suffer unbearable tortures, and this is the clearest proof that they were absolutely innocent.<sup>136</sup>

This account in particular emphasizes the public aspect of the affair of punishment, as though it was a trial in which the entire populace served as audience, or even jury. Philo's description of these spectacles is reminiscent of the accounts of the acts of the Christian martyrs.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 74

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. 96

<sup>137</sup> It should be noted that governors' making an exhibition of the punishments they meted out was standard Roman practice. For more on this see Coleman (1990).

While most of Philo's focus was on Flaccus' compliance with the masses and his desire to mistreat the Jews, his description of the governor's demise demonstrates an understanding of the key role the emperor played in shaping Flaccus' policies. Philo explained that governors were frequently charged by the emperor on suspicion of maladministration upon their return to Rome.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, Philo says, Flaccus was tried on such charges even before his tenure was up and was exiled. Philo's description of Flaccus in exile reveals much about his potential motives in his telling of the misdeeds of Flaccus.

While in exile, Philo says, Flaccus repented and acknowledged the legitimacy of Jewish religious beliefs.<sup>139</sup> Philo, it is not a stretch to say, could not have had any knowledge as to whether or not Flaccus actually did make such a concession after his punishment. This narrative, then, can be taken as Philo's desire to demonstrate in his writing the legitimacy of Judaism, not only before the law, but also before a governor who had once erred and convicted Jews based only on popular sentiment toward them. It is not unlikely that Philo's account captured accurately the position in which governors could find themselves: torn between factions of their subjects and all the while fearing trial and accusation before the emperor. Philo's preoccupation with the influence of the mob upon Flaccus may be a reflection of his desire to emphasize the Jews' religious immunity before the law.

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<sup>138</sup> Philo, *In Flacc.* 105-107. Gambetti (2009), 141-145, discusses the precariousness of Flaccus' rule; she examines Philo's list of Flaccus' concerns.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* 170; cf. Christian accounts of Pilate converting to Christianity after condemning Christ to death: Tertullian, *Apol.* 21.24

## Petronius and Gaius

While Flaccus was fearing the uprising of the Jews in Alexandria, his colleague governing Syria, Petronius, was confronted by a similarly angry horde of Jews. Upon acceding, according to Philo and Josephus, Gaius fashioned himself as a god and ordered Petronius to erect his statue in the Temple of the Jews at Jerusalem. Philo recorded his understanding of Petronius' reaction to this order:

ὁ μὲν οὖν Πετρώνιος τὰ ἐπισταλέντα διαναγνοὺς ἐν ἀμηχάνοις ἦν, οὔτε ἐναντιοῦσθαι δυνάμενος διὰ φόβον— ἦδει γὰρ ἀφόρητον οὐ μόνον κατὰ τῶν τὰ κελευσθέντα μὴ πραξάντων, ἀλλὰ καὶ κατὰ τῶν μὴ εὐθύς—οὔτε ἐγχειρεῖν εὐμαρῶς, ἦδει γὰρ ἀνθ' ἑνὸς θανάτου μυρίου ἄν, εἶπερ δυνατὸν ἦν, ἐθελήσοντας ὑπομεῖναι μᾶλλον ἢ περιδεῖν τι τῶν ἀπειρημένων δρώμενον.

Now Petronius was gravely perplexed when he read his orders. He could not oppose Gaius because he was afraid—for he knew that he was ruthless not only to people who did not carry out his commands but even to those who failed to do so instantly; yet he could not set to work with an easy mind either, knowing as he did that the Jews would be prepared to undergo countless deaths, if it were possible, instead of a single death, rather than allow any forbidden action to be performed.<sup>140</sup>

Philo thus described Petronius as a conscientious governor, concerned not only with his own welfare and his safety before the emperor, but also with the welfare, or at least the lives, of the people.

The accounts of both Philo and Josephus demonstrate their awareness of the threat Petronius faced from Gaius.<sup>141</sup> Petronius seems to have understood that the

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<sup>140</sup> Philo, *Leg. ad Gai.* 31.209

<sup>141</sup> Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 18.276

edicts of Augustus protecting the rights of the Jews conflicted with the command from the new emperor telling him to violate those rights. This understanding, along with pressure upon Petronius by the Jews, shaped his response. High-ranking Jews, according to Philo, pressured Petronius into writing a letter of appeal to Gaius.<sup>142</sup> Josephus' and Philo's accounts both say that Petronius could not bear to see the Jews massacred and thus petitioned the emperor and attempted to buy himself time.<sup>143</sup>

While Flaccus was treating the Jews with such contempt in Egypt, it is perhaps surprising to see another Roman governor portrayed so favorably by the same authors. Flaccus and Petronius, however, both appear to have the same motivations. Both governors' actions were shaped by the demands of the masses that they ruled and their fear of the repercussions of their actions with the emperor.

Petronius' fear of the emperor, as attested in the Jewish accounts, is unsurprising. The emperor directing the governor is the normal direction of rule. Similarly, the governor ruling the people is the standard chain of command. The chain of command was inverted in the cases of Pilate, Flaccus, and Petronius, who were all governed by the demands of threatening mobs. In the same way, the direction of power was reversed between the emperor and the governor for Gaius and Petronius:

ἐπαινῶν αὐτὸν ὅσα τῷ δοκεῖν εἰς τὸ προμηθὲς καὶ τὴν τοῦ  
μέλλοντος ἀκριβῆ περισκεψιν. Σφόδα γὰρ τοὺς ἐν  
ἡγεμονίαις εὐλαβεῖτο τὰς πρὸς νεωτεροποιίαν ἀφορμὰς  
ὄρων ἔχοντας ἐν ἐτοίμῳ, καὶ μάλιστα τοὺς ἐν ταῖς  
μεγάλαις καὶ μεγάλοις ἐπιτάττοντας στρατοπέδοις, ἥλικα  
τὰ πρὸς Εὐφράτη κατὰ Συρίαν ἐστίν.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. 18.279-280; Philo, *Leg. ad Gai.* 31.209

On the surface he [Gaius] complimented him [Petronius] for his forethought and detailed consideration for the future. For he was very much afraid of the provincial governors, since he saw that they held in their hands the means to rebel, especially the governors of large districts who commanded large armies, such as the Euphrates army in Syria.<sup>144</sup>

It is unlikely that Philo truly knew the motivations for Gaius' reply to Petronius or, indeed, what the reply actually contained.<sup>145</sup> Philo's assumption, then, that Gaius feared Petronius' power is logical based on his reasoning regarding the military might of local officials. However, Philo's conclusion conflicts with the ideological belief that was widely disseminated regarding the emperor's power. Perhaps Philo's views were predicated on the Jews' belief that God was above the emperor. Petronius, like Flaccus, was motivated in his actions toward the Jews by the demands of the people of his province. Flaccus, who feared inciting revolt among the Greeks of Alexandria, prevented the Jews from carrying out their religious practices. Petronius, meanwhile, concerned himself with maintaining peace by protecting the Jews' religious privileges, even at the expense of disobeying the emperor.

### **Gessius Florus and the Jewish War**

Petronius' successful rule of Syria contrasted with Gessius Florus' rule as procurator of Judaea in the 60's CE. Josephus portrayed the behavior of Florus as exceptional among governors across the provinces. Whereas the other governors of Josephus' and Philo's histories were motivated by fear of rioting, Florus desired to instigate war. Like Petronius, Flaccus, and Pilate, however, Florus was fearful of the emperor:

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<sup>144</sup> Philo, *Leg. ad Gai.* 34.259

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 18.304

εἰρήνης μὲν γὰρ οὕσης κατηγοροῦς ἔξειν ἐπὶ Καίσαρος  
Ἰουδαίους προσεδόκα, πραγματευσάμενος δὲ ἀπόστασιν  
αὐτῶν τῷ μείζονι κακῷ περισπάσειν τὸν ἔλεγχον ἀπὸ τῶν  
μετριωτέρων.

For, if the peace were kept, he expected to have the Jews  
accusing him before Caesar; whereas, could he bring  
about their revolt, he hoped that this larger crime would  
divert inquiry into less serious offences.<sup>146</sup>

At this point in Josephus' narrative, the Jews have already appealed to Cestius Gallus, legate of Syria, who tried to placate the Jews by promising that Florus would improve.<sup>147</sup> Thus, as Florus apparently feared, it was not unlikely that the Jews' next step would be appeal to the emperor.

The only reason why Florus feared the Jews' accusations in the first place was his maladministration. He had antagonized them, presumably by embezzling their sacred money or otherwise defying their religious practices. Bizarrely, however, Florus' solution, as told by Josephus, was not to begin to appease the Jews, but rather to enrage them to such an extent that he could cause a distraction from their accusations of him. As Ulpian attested in his *De Officio Proconsulis*, one of the primary duties of a Roman governor was to maintain peace.<sup>148</sup> Perhaps Josephus rendered Florus thus in order to demonstrate that, by any standards, he was a bad governor. Furthermore, he depicted Florus as greedy, continuously embezzling from the Jews both to instigate rebellion and to add to his private funds.<sup>149</sup> The embezzlement of money was the primary accusation

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<sup>146</sup> Josephus, *Bel. Jud.* 2.283

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* 2.280-1

<sup>148</sup> Ulpian, *Dig.* 1.18.13; Eck (2000), 273

<sup>149</sup> Josephus, *Bel. Jud.* 2.285-288, 293

that governors could face before the emperor upon their return to Rome, as stated under the *repetundae* laws.<sup>150</sup>

Josephus was unsurprisingly determined to depict Florus as going to great lengths to instigate rebellion. The Jews professed themselves to be a highly peaceable people and so, in order to reconcile this self-image with the Jewish rebellion that followed Florus' tenure, it was important for Josephus to emphasize Florus' crimes and his responsibility for the war.

Therefore, Josephus testimony recounts Florus' embassy to Gallus as another means by which he sought to begin war:

Ἐτέραν δὲ ἐπιβολὴν τῷ πολέμῳ ποριζόμενος ἐπέστειλεν  
Κεστίῳ Ἰουδαίων ἀπόστασιν καταψευδόμενος, τὴν τε  
ἀρχὴν τῆς μάχης περιθεὶς αὐτοῖς, καὶ δρᾶσαι λέγων  
ἐκείνους ἃ πεπόνθεσαν.

With a view to providing further ground for hostilities, Florus now sent a report to Cestius, falsely accusing the Jews of revolt, representing them as the aggressors in the recent fighting, and charging them with crimes of which in fact they were the sufferers.<sup>151</sup>

This is only one example of Josephus' emphasis upon Florus' desire to stir up insurrection. In this case, Florus does so by falsely accusing the Jews of rebellion.

Based on Josephus' record, the accusation was false.

Florus received full blame from Josephus for instigating the Judaeo-Roman wars. Nero, Cestius Gallus, and King Agrippa II all escape fault in the account. According to the Jewish perspective, this governor, by violating Jewish religious code, intentionally

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<sup>150</sup> Brunt (1961), 190

<sup>151</sup> Josephus, *Bel. Jud.* 2.333

stirred up his subjects to insurgency in order to save himself from accountability before the emperor.

## **Conclusion**

The Jews of the Roman Empire had broadly varying impressions of the motivations of their governors, depending on their location, time period, and general circumstances. As is evident from the accounts of Philo and Josephus alone, Roman governors ranged broadly in their attitudes and policies toward the Jews.

None of the governors seems to have taken an interest in the religion of the Jews beyond its ability to irritate other groups of the province and incite them to rebellion. Despite this lack of interest in the beliefs of the Jews, the Roman government did view Jewish customs as controversial. The governors were interested in the deviant customs of the Jews insofar as they could affect their ability to rule. The Jews, meanwhile, only seem to have been interested in the politics of the Romans when they came into conflict with their religious customs and codes.

The Jews of the early Roman Empire, as witnessed by Philo and Josephus, understood that their governors' actions were shaped largely by the fact that they could be charged before Caesar for maladministration. The accounts of Philo and Josephus demonstrate that the actions of Pilate, Flaccus, Petronius, and Florus resulted from complex power structures that worked not only from the top down, but also from the bottom up. The emperor intimidated and commanded the governors of the provinces and the governors ostensibly ruled the people. Often, however, the mobs and the threat of riot seem to have influenced the governor more than the other way around. The inscription of the Jews of Berenice also demonstrates the inverse of this incentive. The Jews posed a threat to the governor in many situations, but the

inscription shows that the Jews' were also overt in their demonstrations of gratitude. Roman governors' duties toward the Jews were generally clear from the edicts of the emperor. Nonetheless, governors reacted to the Jews in what they deemed to be the most expedient manner for their own political goals.

## V. Sponsoring Local Cults

For reasons of religious piety and patriotism, Roman governors worshipped and paid public honors to the traditional gods of Rome. Governors carried their established Roman religious customs with them into the provinces and encouraged the proliferation of these traditions throughout the empire.

Governors seem to have also conformed their policies regarding religion to the existing culture of their provinces. They did not limit their sponsorship of religion to the traditional practices of Rome. Rather, governors paid tribute to certain deities and recognized certain holidays based on what would appeal to their constituents.

Aside from traditional Roman festivals and rituals, governors were also known to have participated in and sponsored mystery cults that were less immediately acceptable within the traditional mores of Rome. In this chapter, I will examine three instances of Roman officials sponsoring the rituals of local cults. At Ephesus, in 160 CE, the people set up an inscription displaying the decree of the provincial governor officially acknowledging the city's festival of Artemis. Five years later, at Samothrace, a Macedonian governor was inducted into the cult of the Great Gods. In the late second or early third century CE, across the empire, in Panóias (in modern-day Portugal), another Roman official established a sanctuary dedicated to a combination of local deities, oriental gods, and traditional Roman gods. Each of these examples raises questions regarding the motivation of the governors to engage with these cults.

As has been demonstrated by their actions toward imperial cult, Judaism, and Christianity, governors, like any politicians, adjusted their actions and attitudes based on what was likely to please their populace. They also, generally, tailored their actions to reiterate their devotion to the emperor. Governors' sense of obligation to the

emperor was not applicable to the actions of these officials paying tribute to mystery cults. Thus, other motivations for engagement in these religious practices must be found. Perhaps some Roman officials simply held a personal belief or had a genuine interest in local cults that encouraged them to participate in and promote these local forms of worship. Alternatively, Roman governors may have been prompted to engage in certain cults by the traditions of the provinces that they governed. Given governors' roles as religious agents with regard to the imperial cult, the Christians, and the Jews, it follows that they fulfilled a similar role with regard to local cults. For the polytheistic governors, the inclusion of more deities into their practice of worship was natural. Sponsoring local cults was sensible for governors, not only in terms of appealing to the locals of their provinces, but also in terms of maintaining the favor of any divine powers that might be prevailing in that area.

### **Artemis at Ephesus**

Across the empire, local Roman officials sponsored traditional Roman religion; notably, they often did so with an eye toward the interests of their people. At Ephesus, for example, there is evidence of the provincial governor formally recognizing the festival of the *Artemisia* for the city.<sup>152</sup> This decree encouraged the festival of Artemis and honored the goddess. Artemis, as a Greek goddess, is not an unexpected object of reverence for a Roman governor. Nonetheless, this example can be taken as an instance of a governor engaging in religion in a manner that was sure to please the citizens of Ephesus.

The importance of the cult of Artemis to the people of Ephesus is shown by, among many other sources, the riots described in *Acts 19*. In this passage of the Bible,

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<sup>152</sup> Oliver (1954), 164

Paul preaches in Ephesus, causing silversmiths of the city to rise up in fear that their business of making silver shrines for Artemis would be threatened by the spread of Christianity.<sup>153</sup> The local city official described in Acts implores the people of the city to cease their riot and, if they have any legal scruple, to address the proconsul.<sup>154</sup>

Thus, it was in the best interest of all the officials of the city and the province to support the worship of Artemis at Ephesus in order to keep the peace in the city. Over a century after the recorded riots of the silversmiths, in approximately 160 CE, the proconsul of Asia issued this edict preserved in an inscription:

[Γαίος Πο]πίλλιος Κᾶρος Πέδω[ν] ἀνθύπατος λέγει  
[ἔ]μαθον ἐκ τοῦ πεμφθέντος [πρός] με ψηφίσματος ὑπὸ  
τῆς λαμπροτ[ά]της Ἐφεσίων βουλῆς τοὺς πρὸ ἐμ[οῦ]  
κρατίστους ἀνθυπάτους ἰε[ράς] νομίσαι τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς  
[πα]νη[γύρεως τ]ῶν Ἄρτε[μισίων], καὶ τοῦτο διατάγματι  
δεδηλωκέναί.<sup>155</sup>

[Gaius Po]pilius Carus Pedo [proconsul says] 'I learned from the decree sent to me by the splendid city of the Ephesians that the *clarissimi proconsules*, my predecessors, made the days of the festival of the Artemisia holidays and that they proclaimed it by edict.'<sup>156</sup>

He goes on to say that he will proclaim the same edict as his predecessors, honoring the holidays of the city.

The inscription itself serves as evidence that the people of Ephesus recognized that the proconsul Gaius Popilius Carus Pedo was officially acknowledging the cult of

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<sup>153</sup> Notably, it was not the religious zeal of the citizens that caused the uprising, according to this account, but rather the economic implications of the changing religious landscape of the city. Cf. Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.10 writing to Trajan about the impact of Christianity on the sacrificial meat market.

<sup>154</sup> Acts 19:35-41

<sup>155</sup> SIG 867

<sup>156</sup> Oliver (1954), 164

Artemis and the festivals surrounding her worship. Perhaps this was the governor's goal: gaining recognition and favor from the Ephesians as a sponsor of their religious practices.

### **Samothrace**

At the site of the sanctuary of the Great Gods at Samothrace, initiates into the cult customarily inscribed their names on stelae, stone bases, and other available surfaces.<sup>157</sup> Fragments of these inscriptions found at the site preserve the names of several Roman governors, all from the province of Macedonia. One such inscription, which surfaced in the mid-twentieth century among rubble on the Western Hill near the sanctuary, records the visit of the Roman governor of Macedonia on May 1, 165 CE.<sup>158</sup> The governor and his entourage were probably initiates, though the extant fragment of the stele does not confirm this.<sup>159</sup> The proconsul is identified as P. Antius Orestes and was accompanied by a large group of people consisting of *amici*, *servi*, and possibly freedmen.<sup>160</sup>

The cult of the Great Gods of Samothrace welcomed ambassadors called *theoroi* to the sanctuary, as well as initiates called *mystai* and *epoptai*. The *theoroi* hailed from various cities, representing their communities, attending festivals, and offering sacrifices.<sup>161</sup> Initiates undergoing the rituals of the cult for the first time became known

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<sup>157</sup> Dimitrova (2008), 79

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* 80; Oliver (1966), 75

<sup>159</sup> McCredie (1965), 114

<sup>160</sup> Oliver (1966), 77-78; Harris (1992), 72. Harris insists Oliver's assertion that the last names listed on the inscription were *milites* is incorrect.

<sup>161</sup> Dimitrova (2008), 10-12

as *mystai*.<sup>162</sup> *Mystai* could return after a year and undergo the second stage of the mysteries and become *epoptai*, “viewers.”<sup>163</sup>

The mysteries of the cult are known to have focused on chthonic deities and the underworld and were meant to lead to good fortune in the afterlife.<sup>164</sup> The cult at Samothrace was well known throughout the ancient world and attracted the likes of Philip II of Macedonia.<sup>165</sup> Perhaps because such esteemed Macedonian figures had participated in the cult or perhaps due to the proximity of Macedonia to Samothrace, Macedonians comprised many of the initiates of the cult of the Great Gods under the Roman Empire.<sup>166</sup> Many of the fragmentary inscriptions bear names of initiates and *theoroi* hailing from Macedonia, and six of them bear the names of identified proconsuls and quaestors of Macedonia dating from the later Republic and early empire.

The Macedonian governors and officials whose names appear as *mystai* of the cult (none of them seem to have been inducted as *epoptai*) were: L. Julius Caesar, proconsul 93-92 BCE; L. Calpurnius Piso, proconsul 57-55 BCE; P. Sextius Lippinus Tarquitianus, quaestor in 14 CE; L. Pomponius Maximus Favinus Silvanus, quaestor in the first century CE; Q. Plinius Sardus Varius Ambibulus, proconsul in the 120's CE; and P. Antius Orestes, proconsul in 165 CE.<sup>167</sup> The very fact that so many inscriptions recording Macedonian governors have been found at Samothrace indicates that it may have become customary for members of the Macedonian administration to participate in the cult during the first centuries BCE and CE.

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid. 78

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. 6

<sup>165</sup> Plutarch, *Alexander*, 2.2

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. 71

<sup>167</sup> Cole (1984), 90-92

Why this custom arose cannot be known with certainty. The geographical proximity of the island to the Macedonian coast likely caused part of the historical interest in the sanctuary among the rulers and people of Macedonia, and surely continued to be a factor during the Roman period. The Roman governors may also have desired to place themselves within the tradition of the fourth, third, and second century BCE kings of Macedonia, creating continuity between their image and that of the former royal family of Macedonia and legitimizing their rule over the region. Thus, the officials may have had political aims in becoming initiates. Furthermore, by participating in the cult, the officials could ensure the support of the sanctuary, an important influence in the region.<sup>168</sup>

The mysteries of Samothrace appealed to a broader and more aristocratic base than many of the oriental and Egyptian cults that found their way into Roman society, making it unsurprising that Roman officials living close to the cult might have desired to participate in it for reasons of personal belief.<sup>169</sup> Even if belief did not play into the officials' decision to be initiated (and there is no way of knowing whether or not this was the case), curiosity is certainly a sufficient explanation. The mysteries of Samothrace, based on the inscriptional evidence at the sanctuary itself, were highly popular in the culture of Macedonia. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that the governor of the province would desire to understand the cult that played such an important role in the society that he was governing. The evidence for the initiation of Macedonian governors at Samothrace challenges assumptions about the role of governors in interacting with religion. While it is unclear whether the phenomenon of

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<sup>168</sup> Fraser (1960), 16

<sup>169</sup> Cole (1984), 90-91

interest in the mysteries of the Great Gods was specific to Macedonian governors, it is likely that Roman governors' interests in religion were shaped by the region they ruled.

### **Panóias**

Governors' interactions with mystery cults were not confined to the Greek world. The Roman Empire facilitated the migration of beliefs and practices over a very large geographical expanse. The site of Panóias, located in Lusitania, housed a mystery cult of its own that emphasized chthonic deities, much as the mysteries of Samothrace did. This area of Iberia contained many rock sanctuary sites like that of Panóias. The sanctuary of Panóias, situated on a mountain, consisted of three large crags, each with man-made cavities cut into the rock.<sup>170</sup> The site likely was a former sanctuary dedicated to the local indigenous cult of the *Lapitae*.

Five inscriptions from the site suggest the circumstances of cult. One inscription, engraved on a small rock, reads:

*Dīs [deabusque templi] huius. Hostiae quae cadunt hic immolantur. Extā intra quadrata contra cremantur. Sanguis laciculis iuxta superfunditur. [G(aius) C (-- ) Calp(urnius) Rufinus v(ir) c(larissimus)].*

To the gods and goddesses of this sanctuary. The sacrificed victims are slaughtered here. The entrails are burnt in the squared-off holes opposite. The blood is poured on the small channels nearby. (This was all established by) Gaius Calpurnius Rufus, senator.<sup>171</sup>

Gaius Calpurnius Rufinus, the senator, seems to have been a member of the imperial administration of the area. Certainly, he was a representative of Rome with enough

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<sup>170</sup> Alföldy (2002)

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. Sandys (1919), 193: "*Clarissimus vir* was mainly used of senators, and, in the course of the first century, it became a fixed epithet of senatorial rank."

clout and wealth to establish this mystery cult. The mysteries were likely based on cult practices at Perge in Pamphylia. The senator, who probably hailed from Perge and brought the cult with him, sponsored the sanctuary at Panóias in the late second or early third century CE.<sup>172</sup> This inscription offers, in Latin, instructions on sacrifice to the initiates of the mysteries and serves to explain the purpose of the basins cut into the stone.

Another inscription found at the site, that would have been viewed by the initiate before climbing up to the first crag tells the viewer:

*Diis Seve[r]is in hoc templo lo[ca]t[i]s aedem G(aius) C(---)  
Calp(urnius) Rufinus v(ir) c(larissimus).*

Gaius Calpurnius Rufinus, senator, consecrated a shrine to the *Di Severi* placed in this sanctuary.<sup>173</sup>

The *Di Severi*, the gods of the underworld, evidently were central to the cult, as was their shrine, which was established by the same senator.

A third inscription above one of the craters cut into the rock confirms that the craters were used to burn the entrails. This inscription introduces other deities to the cult:

*Diis deabusque aeternum lacum omnibusque numinibus et  
Lapitearum cum hoc templo sacrauit G(aius) C(---) Calp(urnius)  
Rufinus v(ir) c(larissimus). In quo hostiae voto cremantur.*

To the gods and goddesses and also all the deities of the *Lapitae* Gaius Calpurnius Rufinus, senator, consecrated, together with this sacred enclosure, an eternally sacred

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<sup>172</sup> Alföldy (2002)

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

pit, in which the victims are burnt in accordance with the rite.<sup>174</sup>

The *Lapitae*, mentioned only at this site, seem to have been gods native to the area.

They have been interpreted as nymph-deities or a name for the people of the region.<sup>175</sup>

The local divinities of northwest Iberia were likely very geographically specific, unlike the Greco-Roman pantheon. Over half of these local divinities, like the *Lapitae*, are documented at only one site.<sup>176</sup>

Besides these local deities, Gaius Calpurnius Rufinus also introduced to the site the worship of Highest Serapis, as attested in an inscription placed before a rounded pit or *gastra*:

Ἐπίστῳ Σεράπιδι σὺν γάστρᾳ καὶ μυσταρίοις *G(aius) C(---)*  
*Calp(urnius) Rufinus v(ir) c(larissimus)*.

Gaius Calpurnius Rufinus, senator, dedicates the sanctuary, with a *gastra* and mysteries, to Highest Serapis.<sup>177</sup>

Serapis, a Romano-Egyptian deity, here acts in his role as a god of the underworld. The appearance of oriental divinities, and specifically Serapis, at sanctuary sites was not unique to this site in Roman Iberia. Several other mentions of and statues of Serapis have been found throughout the region; a Mithraeum of the mid-second century CE not far from Panóias is further evidence of oriental religious practices making their way to the western edge of the Mediterranean.<sup>178</sup>

The *gastra* was a place for roasting the meat of the sacrificial victim, which the initiate then ate before the inscription naming the Highest Serapis. This was the

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Lambrino (1954), 120-1

<sup>176</sup> Richert (2005), 16

<sup>177</sup> Alföldy (2002)

<sup>178</sup> García y Bellido (1967), 125-139; Étienne (1973), 160

central act of initiation for the cult.<sup>179</sup> Following this act, the initiate proceeded to a final pit where he purified himself with blood, fat, and soot.

The sanctuary of Panóias has far-reaching implications for our understanding of western provincial religion. This site combines the structure of Greek mystery cult with the worship of both local deities and the Romano-Egyptian god Serapis. How Gaius Calpurnius Rufinus conceived of this cult and moreover why he instituted it are questions central to the understanding of Roman rule and religion in this area.

Gaius Calpurnius Rufinus, as a Roman official, may have simply wanted to propagate among the people of the province a cult practice that he believed would bring favor in the eyes of the gods. Given that *C. Calpurnius Rufinus, vir clarissimus*, appears on every substantial inscription found at the site, it is not unlikely that he also desired recognition for sponsoring this cult, either from the gods or from his colleagues and provincial subjects. The hybrid nature of the cult, combining local and oriental elements, also indicates that he may have created the cult with the intent of appealing to the natives of the area.

Without clearer indications of the audience of the cult or its origins, it is difficult to determine why a Roman provincial official would want to found such a hybrid mystery cult. What is clear from this example, however, is that Gaius Calpurnius Rufinus' work with regard to religion in his province encompassed many undertakings beyond sponsorship of imperial cult or building of altars to the Roman pantheon.

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<sup>179</sup> Alföldy (2002)

## Conclusion

Governors of the Roman Empire held multi-faceted attitudes toward religion. While provincial Roman governors and officials certainly were advocates of the traditional Roman pantheon and of imperial cult, their practices, both public and private, acknowledged a much larger diversity of religious traditions. In the cases of the Asian governor at Ephesus, the Macedonian governors at Samothrace, and the provincial officials at Panóias, each Roman official engaged in religious behavior specific to his province. The Asian governor gave official recognition to the cult of Artemis at Ephesus; Macedonian governors became part of a long tradition of rulers from that region to participate in the mysteries of the Great Gods; Gaius Calpurnius Rufinus included deities of the local cult in his mystery rites.

The religion of the Roman people, both of the city and of the empire, had much more depth and color than could be captured by the gods that were traditionally recipients of state worship. As demonstrated by these three examples of officials participating in mystery cults, the religion of the government officials of the provinces was as diverse as the religious customs of the people whom they ruled.

Governors engaging with local cults had the freedom to accept and sponsor religious practices as they saw fit for their personal and political aims. The Roman provincial officials were never bound by edicts dictating their responses to these religious practices, as they were with regard to the Christians and Jews. Thus, the local officials could use their power to create favorable responses among the people of their provinces. As with imperial cult, governors adapted their religious policies and their own religious practices to fit the traditions of the province they governed.

## VI. Conclusion

In order to capture the diversity of religious ritual in the early Roman Empire, this paper has covered an array of practices in a range of eras and locations. Governors' behavior toward religion reveals their attitudes toward their duties and toward their province. Provincial governors established ruler cult across the empire, from Gaul to Egypt; they condemned Christian martyrs to death in response to accusations by the populace; they alternately defended and denied the rights of the Jews to maintain their sacred laws; they established and participated in local cult practices from the Iberian peninsula to Ephesus and possibly further afield.

Governors were concerned about religious customs insofar as they affected their own wellbeing and the prosperity and peace of their province. In dealing with religious matters, governors balanced the demands of actively pleasing the emperor and pacifying the people. By instituting imperial cult, governors demonstrated their loyalty to the emperor. In the trials of Christians, they responded to threats of instability and provincial uprising. The customs of the Jews, meanwhile, elicited varied responses from Roman administration as governors attempted to protect their own political interests. Finally, local cult provided governors with an opportunity to integrate Roman traditions into the customs of the provinces and engage with the practices to which their people were accustomed. Religion had no single, fixed function in the Roman world, as evidenced by the sheer range of rituals and practices throughout the empire. At least one of its functions, however, was as a political device to protect and bolster the power of the government.

The complexity of the power structure of provincial government shaped governors' responses to religion. The government of the Roman Empire is most simply

conceived of as the emperor commanding the governors, who in turn ruled the provincial people. However, as many of the religious conflicts outlined in this paper demonstrate, these power structures could be inverted such that the people swayed the governor and the governor influenced the emperor. In discussing religion, the fourth level of this hierarchy of power is that of the divine. Even the gods' power, however, was complicated by the imperial cult and the recognition of the emperor as equal to the gods. Governors' control over religion during the first two centuries of the imperial period can be seen as a further inversion of the power structure: man regulating the gods, rather than the gods ruling man.

The power of the governors within the administration of the empire was not static. During the third and fourth centuries, Roman provincial administration altered radically, due in part to the changing religious landscape. As Christianity gained traction, governors' interactions with religion, along with duties in general, changed drastically.

While the intersection between religion and government may have altered in nature, it never diminished. Religion has always been a rallying point within politics and government. Rulers legitimize themselves under a Mandate of Heaven, incorporate patriotic ideology into religious ritual, confront issues of tolerance under the law, and grapple with problems posed by extremist religious doctrine. The governors of the provinces of the Roman Empire confronted the issues of religion and government in an environment of cultural diversity, ideological dogmatism, and communal violence. Governors' interactions with religion were shaped by their political motivations as they sought to maintain their power, the peace of their province, the support of the people, and the favor of the emperor.

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