

Mythbusting Ancient Rome: Throwing Christians to the Lions

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"The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer," a painting by Jean-Leon Gerome. Image from Wikimedia

"CHRISTIANS TO THE LIONS!" rang without end through all quarters of the city.

So writes Henryk Sienkiewicz in his novel "Quo Vadis," written in 1895, about the bloody reign of Roman Emperor Nero. By the end of the 19th century, the image of Christians cowering before lions became a symbol for Roman persecution.

Movies and other books have enshrined this grisly scenario in popular culture. Today, the prevailing modern view is that many emperors were responsible for this persecution. But is this true?

Blaming the emperors

The myth of constant persecution largely stems from two works written in the early fourth century A.D. The authors of these two books lived during the reign of Constantine, the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire. They charted the history of Christian suffering up to

Constantine's era. In both their works, the torture and execution of Christians is associated with the emperors under whom they occurred. But in reality, the punishment of Christians was mostly haphazard and not directed by the emperors directly.

Early Christians called Nero their first persecutor among the Roman emperors. After the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64 nearly burned down the entire city, and rumors swirled that Emperor Nero himself had ordered it, Nero blamed the Christians instead. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero had the Christians covered in wild beast skins and torn to death by dogs.

Tacitus described Christianity as a “pernicious superstition” and the Christians themselves as degraded and horrible. However, no ancient writer suggests that these Christians were persecuted for their faith alone. They were charged with committing the crime of arson.



Christians were unpopular with the Romans. This is shown in a letter from Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia (modern-day northern Turkey) to the emperor Trajan in the early second century A.D. Pliny reported that the people he governed had denounced Christians to him. Trajan replied:

"They must not be searched for, but if they are denounced and found guilty they must be punished..."

On the other hand, the emperor Trajan said Christians must be forgiven if they agreed to sacrifice to the Roman gods. In other words, the government would not seek out Christians to persecute, but it would punish those who were discovered.

In many places, prejudice against Christians led to mob violence. In cities like Lyons and Smyrna, local people harassed, imprisoned and killed Christians on their own.

Not just lions

Christians were disliked and punished for not honoring and sacrificing to the Roman gods. Punishments varied. In the first and early second centuries A.D., Christians who were Roman citizens were executed by beheading. Later in the second century, beheading was a privilege for only high-ranking citizens. Others were subject to more violent punishments, like being crucified, burned to death and attacked by beasts.

Being condemned to the beasts was especially grisly. It meant that you and your companions would be put in the arena with wild animals, including leopards, boars and yes, lions. These shows for the public were just one part of a daylong festival of violence and slaughter that often included fights by gladiators. Feeding people to wild animals was usually scheduled during the lunchtime interval to provide some light relief.

It is important to emphasize that such cruel deaths were not unique to Christians. Condemnation to the beasts was a popular punishment for criminals of any type. This maximized their suffering and allowed good and proper Roman citizens to gain pleasure from the deaths of wrong-doers.

For the good of the empire

The pattern of sporadic persecution of Christians changed in A.D. 250. In that year, the emperor Decius issued an edict that ordered all Romans to sacrifice to the gods and present a certificate to prove that they had done so. This edict was prompted by serious barbarian invasions of Rome.

Decius believed that Romans needed to unite to show support for the gods in order to protect the empire from invasion. His sacrifice edict was not specifically directed at Christians, but it posed special problems for them. The Christians generally refused to worship Roman gods.

Decius died a year later and Christians breathed a sigh of relief until A.D. 257. That's when emperor Valerian issued an edict ordering that everyone in the empire must perform sacrifices to the gods. This time the edict targeted Christians. The law described those who did not sacrifice as un-Roman.



Death was not automatic for Christians who refused to sacrifice. Some were condemned to hard labor, a punishment normally reserved for slaves. In A.D. 260, Valerian's son Gallienus took over and rescinded the edict, and proclaimed free worship for all.

The "Great Persecution"

After Valerian, the Roman government took no official action against the Christians for more than 40 years. In A.D. 303, however, the emperor Diocletian and his junior co-emperor Galerius initiated the "Great Persecution." Both co-emperors viewed Christianity as a threat to traditional Roman beliefs.

The emperors ordered the destruction of churches, the seizure of church property and the burning of Christian texts. Christians were allowed to live if they acknowledged the Roman gods. The types of penalties inflicted on Christians depended on provincial governors. Some prisoners were tortured and then burned to death. Others were mutilated and then sentenced to work in the copper mines in Egypt. But many governors refused to harm Christians. Finally, in A.D. 313, the "Edict of Milan" granted religious toleration for Christians.

So the treatment of Christians by Romans was erratic. At times they were persecuted, and others they weren't. Empire-wide laws calling for Christian persecution only happened twice in the third and early fourth centuries A.D. They were a result of the emperors trying to reinforce traditional Roman religion in increasingly unsettled times.

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