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Purging persecution or petty pursuit?

Reframing the conceptual application of persecution in the past

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Abstract

This article argues that persecution is not a stable historical category but an analytical construct whose meaning depends upon assumptions regarding state capacity, legal enforcement and historical memory. Through a comparison of early Christian persecution and later anti-pagan legislation, it argues that imperial intent and administrative reality frequently diverged, making 'persecution' a far less coherent phenomenon than modern historiography often assumes.

Keywords:

Persecution, late antiquity, early Christianity, ancient Rome, ancient history.

1. Episodes of persecution

Historians have long treated persecution as a defining feature of Roman religious history. Their description invites the assumption of a categorical, self-evident sequence of actions and events. The functionality of such a term as an analytical tool, however, turns the far more complex historical realities into an abstraction. The nature of concerted action against early Christians and, equally exemplary, against pagans in the ancient world, provides a context from which observations on the utility of the category of persecution can be drawn. This article, therefore, re-examines the analytical utility of persecution through a comparison of early Christian persecution and later anti-pagan incentives, arguing that the relationship between imperial intention and administrative implementation complicates the application of persecution as a coherent historical category. By providing an insight into this context, this article attempts to contribute to the wider debate on states and their management of religious groups.

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Terms such as 'state,' '(non)-Christians' and 'pagans' will be used for the sake of brevity only. Given the temporal scope, these terms are generalising notions with fluctuating meaning; moreover, as I try to demonstrate, 'state' is a problematic notion, as it encompasses all forms of (supra-)local administration, and cannot be defined as a homogeneous entity characterised by unity in action. Likewise, general terms such as 'Christians' or 'pagans' obscure the veritable diversity that was present within ancient society and, by their usage, allude to groups that are not reflections of reality. Given these nuances, the use of such terminology does not prevent us from making veritable observations on the mechanics and commemoration of persecution that so drastically shape it. In this respect, the period leading up to Constantine's conversion in 312[2] is widely seen as formative, not only because of the internal diversity of the Christian tradition (Ferguson 1999; Ehrman 2003)[3] but also because of the narrative of persecution that surrounds it. This discourse relies heavily on ancient literary sources and how later generations received and interpreted them (Fourier & Mayer 2020).[4]

For example, the extent and nature of Christian persecution are central not only to historical understanding but also to how group identity was constructed and is perceived up to the present. It equally shapes our notion of 'state,' as the declaration of loyalty to the emperors and their religious authority and status became a formal requirement, as we shall see further. Scholars like Judith Perkins and Nicole Kelley have argued that the commemoration of these events played a key role in shaping early Christian self-definition and representation (Perkins 1993:200-215; Kelley 2006:726-731). These stories were later incorporated into the broader martyrological tradition (Van Henten 1995), often amplifying their impact and shaping historical memory. For instance, the widespread copying of the early 4th-century *Martyrdom of Phileas* underscores the enthusiasm with which such texts were received and circulated (Bremmer 2021:81). Similarly, Cyprian of Carthage's refusal to betray fellow Christians, followed by his execution, offers a powerful example of this tradition, and his letter provides a long echo throughout time (Moss 2012:531-533; Koscheski 2011).

The vilification of Roman authorities is a constant in sources that reference or contemplate persecution, and their role in anti-Christian actions has long been debated. This discussion ties into a broader historical tension: the dynamic between minority religious groups and the state's management of them. It is therefore not surprising that persecution, both as an event and an idea, developed into

2 All dates are Common Era.
3 Numerous works can be cited; the introductions in Ferguson (ed.) and Ehrman are ample in their description.
4 For a more in-depth introduction to discourse and persecution, see the full reference in the bibliography.

a deeply ideological narrative with shifting interpretations across time. Indeed, the most exemplary case here is Lactantius' *De mortibus persecutorum*,[5] written in the early 4th century during the early reign of Constantine (r. 306-337). And this timing also makes apparent an observation that looms large in the history of persecution: the narratives are indicative only of post-persecution sentiments. In this work, Lactantius offers a stark portrayal of several Roman emperors, listing those whom he saw as persecutors of Christians in the previous decades (see DePalma Digeser 2000:92, who provides a complete account of Lactantius' views). The tone is polemical, as he details the supposed divine retribution that befell them. The emperor Decius (r. 249-251), for example, gained the epithet of an 'abominable creature' who had 'raged against God' (*De Mort. Pers.* 4.1-4). His successor, Valerian (r. 253-260), was described rather dramatically as having 'spilled the blood of the righteous' amply (*De Mort. Pers.* 5.1-2; Zangenberg 2018:50-51). The emperor Aurelian (r. 270-275) is in turn described as nothing short of a bloodthirsty tyrant whose more extreme plans did not come to fruition due to an early death (*De Mort. Pers.* 6.1-2). Scholars have debated whether Lactantius' account represents a transformative Christian perspective on persecution or continues an existing apologetic tradition in line with earlier writers from North Africa[6] (Städele 2003:34-35; Colot 2005:145-146; Cook 2019:386).[7] Certainly, it is one of the earliest sources to contemplate persecution so explicitly after the edicts of Serdica in 311 and Milan in 312, which traditionally end the Great Persecution. In this respect, Lactantius provided a rhetorical and stylistic template to vilify the Roman emperors that preceded Constantine.

Given that Lactantius lived through this period and also regularly emphasised the role of emperors as culprits, his work must be read with attention to the authority and influence it carried for later authors. Jerome, for instance, recognised Lactantius' prominent role in Constantine's court and cited him approvingly in his *De Viris Illustribus* amongst other works (*De Mort. Pers.* 44-45, for Lactantius' positive account of Constantine; Vir. Ill. 80, for Jerome on Lactantius, Halton 1999:111-113). That *De mortibus persecutorum* is at best a biased account is hardly surprising. The more pressing question, however, is to what extent his era should truly be regarded as one of genuine persecution, especially when that label is shaped by modern notions tied to the actions of an interventionist state. Crucially, the 'why' and 'who' questions about persecution are of interest; what role could the 'state' logically play in antiquity (Noethlichs 2006:115-117)?

5 I rely on Creed's 1984 translation; see the bibliography for the full reference. The English title is generally *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*.
6 Specifically, Origen and Tertullian can be cited; see the referenced works for discussion.
7 Cook equally cites Städele's assumption that *De Mort. Pers*. is to be regarded as a unique text rather than a mere continuation of convention.

In this regard, two periods are loosely discernible for persecution in the Roman world. We can distinguish between pre- and post-Decian eras of Christian persecution, with a dividing line in the middle of the 3rd century (Rives 1999:135-136; De Vos 2017; Kinzig 2019:68-72).[8] Though this distinction is artificial, it reflects an arbitrary point from which an important set of differences in the nature and extent of imperial involvement can be identified. The earlier phase is marked by limited and sporadic action against Christians, largely due to the absence of any centralised imperial policies. Sources from this period are also relatively scarce.

One of the most notable exceptions, alongside the brief Neronic persecution, which is also hotly debated (Shaw 2015; Jones 2017), is the early 2nd-century case of Pliny the Younger. As governor of Bithynia and Pontus, Pliny wrote to Emperor Trajan for guidance on how to handle Christians in his province. Their exchange (preserved in *Epistulae* X. 96) offers a rare glimpse into the situational approach applied to Christianity. This consultation illustrates only a snippet of what was undoubtedly a recurring, albeit arguably minor issue during the early 2nd century (Sherwin-White 1966:778-784; Humphries 2006:218-224; Öhler 2021:274-291). Before the year 250, in the absence of centralised legislative attempts to regulate Christianity, the phenomenon was handled by individual provincial governors like Pliny and their local administrations (Frend 2008:506-508). Pliny and others were not appointed or tasked specifically with this function in mind; they tackled the situation as it passed into their hands.

In contrast, direct imperial intervention marked a significant shift from this practice. The decree issued by Decius in 249-250 CE (Rives 1999:135) represents a clear break, exemplifying the point that defines our dichotomy. Although the text of Decius' decree has not survived, it clearly required individuals to provide a formal attestation of sacrifice, demonstrating their loyalty to the gods and the emperor, as a means of verifying allegiance to the Roman state (Rives 1999:137-138; Schubert 2016:176-177; Corke-Webster 2023:35). Evidence for the decree's implementation survives most clearly in Roman Egypt, where approximately 50 such certificates (*libelli*) have been preserved, each documenting participation in the required rituals (see overview in Schubert 2016). Although the decree was not explicitly directed at Christians, their refusal to conform to state-sanctioned religious practices made them especially vulnerable to its enforcement (Frend 2008:531; Potter 2018:19-20; Humphries 2018:66-71). Local bureaucracy appears to have carried out Decius' decree with surprising thoroughness, requiring written attestations of compliance at an almost unprecedented level of individual

8 This dichotomy is one way of (arbitrarily) splitting the history of Christian persecution; numerous alternative ways have been proposed, such as by de Ste. Croix or Plescia, as discussed below.

scrutiny. The evidence from Roman Egypt, which is our best source of its effects, should likely be seen as a preservation outlier, rather than representative of empire-wide efficiency. The more centralised initiative to ascertain loyalty reveals the position of Christians and their increasingly ideal role as scapegoats in times of tension (De Blois 2001:112-114).

Another key episode that shapes our understanding of persecution is the so-called Great Persecution initiated under Diocletian (r. 284-305) and his co-rulers. It began in early 303 and effectively concluded in 311 (DePalma Digeser 2012:9-12; Kinzig 2019:81-85). Lactantius referred to Diocletian as 'turning the world upside down' (*De Mort. Pers.* 7.1-2; DePalma Digeser 2012:179). The Great Persecution terminology itself implies a unified and deliberate effort to suppress Christianity. Equally, the connection between a coordinated approach and the narrative provided by later sources such as Lactantius, even if biased, distorts the image in that direction.

Three important observations complicate this interpretation. First, the pattern of persecution appears to have varied significantly across different regions of the empire. Our surviving narrative sources focus predominantly on the eastern provinces. As a result, modern scholarship tends to adopt a more cautious approach when addressing events in the western parts of the empire (Frend 1965:141-145; Barnes 1981:142; Keresztes 1983:386-387; DePalma Digeser 2012:189; Corke-Webster 2019:18). The ambiguity present here implies the administrative issues involved that complicated enforcement, as we will see further.

Second, despite the dramatic tone of many martyrological sources, a substantial number of Christians appear to have complied with the imperial edicts, either by performing the required rituals or by avoiding any action altogether (Rebillard 2012:50-54). The succeeding Donatist schism, for example, would remain a factor after the end of the Great Persecution. This challenges the notion of a unified Christian response to persecution, highlighting the diversity of reactions within early Christian communities (Humphries 2018:71). It equally complicates the idea that persecution is a univocally received reality and showcases the diverse strategies employed by communities to deal with the situation at hand. Moreover, the actual number of executions remains highly contested, and quantification is problematic (Davies 1989:68-69).

Third, persecution during this period was not limited to Christians exclusively, or what could be understood under that term. The decrees passed during the Great Persecution were in design analogues to that of Decius; nonconformism, not doctrine specifically, was the actual target (DePalma Digeser 2012:75-76).[9]

9 DePalma Digeser provides apt insights into the intellectual opinions and background leading to persecution.

Manichaeism, for example, equally came under imperial suspicion and was subjected to similar official condemnation (Lieu 2015:123-126; Matsangou 2023:66).

2. Discussing the problem of persecution

Given that these consecutive 'persecutions' appear episodic and sporadic, further discussion is necessary to explain this rhythm. In response to the irregularity of persecutions, Peter Garnsey famously argued that the more standard, tolerant position in the Roman world was not necessarily a benevolent gesture extended by the state towards religious minorities or divergent practices. Nor was it, at least explicitly, a calculated strategy for managing internal diversity. Rather, Garnsey proposed, toleration often stemmed from a fundamental recognition, or perhaps resignation, regarding the state's inability to sustain a policy of intolerance effectively. What he termed 'toleration by default' (Garnsey 1984:9) was more characteristic than the exception.

Although not all elements of this analysis are easily transferable or unambiguous in application, the core argument about the ineffectiveness of enforcing authority seems compelling (for further discussion, see Drake 2011:181-197; Mayer 2018:6-9). The underlying assumption not only reflects the difficulty of framing a coherent discourse around the contested concepts of tolerance and intolerance in antiquity but also aligns with what might reasonably be expected within such historical frameworks (Garnsey 1984:25; DePalma Digeser 1998:129-131). More broadly, it brings into focus the structural complexity to which pre-modern state power was invariably subject, whether consciously acknowledged or not. Rather than emphasising the assertive capacities of the state, Garnsey's perspective reveals its inherent limitations. The pursuit of policy goals, particularly those requiring systemic enforcement, was consistently hindered by constraints at multiple levels of authority. These limitations were not incidental but endemic, surfacing most acutely when the state's instruments proved inadequate for executing even foundational steps of policy implementation. Such structural weaknesses were especially evident in the case of religious persecution in the Roman Empire, as we will see further and as has been amply demonstrated in the scholarly discussions on the subject.

As we have seen, targeted and specific decrees that required extensive bureaucratic involvement were indeed created within imperial circles or by individual emperors. The realisation that persecution was difficult to formalise and carry out was analysed by more detailed studies in the mid-20th century. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, arguably the leading figure in the study of Christian persecution,[10] noted that the

10 A collection of essays by de Ste. Croix was posthumously published by Oxford University Press in 2013, edited by Whitby & Streeter; see References section.

correspondence between Trajan and Pliny the Younger explicitly ordered the latter not to seek out Christians (de Ste. Croix 1963:9). This aligns with the idea that the state was often unable to root out those it aimed to target through specific decrees.

Anyone following the debate between de Ste. Croix and Sherwin-White in the 1950s and 1960s would find a wealth of technical discussions mainly focused on Roman law (Sherwin-White 1952:200-202; de Ste. Croix 1963:13-14; Sherwin-White 1963:26-28; de Ste. Croix 1964:28; Corke-Webster 2017:371-374 for a summary). The 'sacrifice test,' which was a key part of Decius' now-lost decree, was portrayed by de Ste. Croix as the practical culmination of persecution (de Ste. Croix 1963:19-20). It was also the last chance for the accused to avoid a final penalty. Any stubbornness in refusing was a direct path to punishment or execution (Schubert 2016:173). Consequently, it became a dramatic moment often depicted in stories of defiance, such as the martyrdom of the Twelve Scillitans in 180, who chose death over swearing loyalty to the emperor (de Ste. Croix 1963:10). How Christianity was deemed illegal remains somewhat obscure in retrospect; the prohibition was not clearly codified in law for a long time (Corke-Webster 2017:81), yet to de Ste. Croix and those who followed him, its existence was evident. But how exactly was this persecution practically carried out? If Christianity was illegal or at least intolerable, who orchestrated the events leading to enforcement? And what circumstances caused Christians to find themselves before the court or the state?

Corke-Webster, in his recent comprehensive article on the subject, aptly shifted the question from *why* Christians were persecuted to *who* persecuted them, noting that these questions grew more intertwined throughout the 20th century, even in de Ste. Croix's work. Essentially, the implementation of persecution and the question of who 'pursued' Christians became increasingly complex. De Ste. Croix's focus on 'pagan' hostility and the similar focus by his contemporary, Frend, on Jewish-Christian rivalry exemplify the search for a clearly defined 'anti-group' (Corke-Webster 2023:7-9). If Roman authorities were unwilling (or rather unable) to identify Christians themselves, then such a group would act as a logical intermediary connecting the accused to the authorities' jurisdiction. Plescia, writing contemporaneously with de Ste. Croix and Frend, summarised these views most coherently: 'In conclusion, the initiative of the persecutions against the Christians has passed, as we have seen, from the Jews to the pagan commoners, thence to the public authorities' (Plescia 1971:129). Within his transitional formulation, identity and organisation were knitted tightly together. As he continues:

> Scattered throughout the Empire, but united by an efficient hierarchy, the Christians, with their widespread exclusive meetings, with a financial organization, with their pledges which bound the initiates to one

> another, with all this, together with the unknown of fanaticism, formed in the eyes of the public authorities a dangerous empire-wide organization. (Plescia 1971:130)[11]

The anti-Christian animosity, however, was attached too strongly to the religious identity that seemingly defined all incentives of our persecutors, as Corke-Webster (2023:8) notes (see also Van Nuffelen 2020:516-517; Praet 2014).[12] Rather, and the point is aptly conceived, Roman legal proceedings required 'accusers' to bring forth a case; *delatores* had to accuse an individual or group (Corke-Webster 2023:4-5; Johnson 1988:418-419). The severe internal diversity within Christian communities made them susceptible to intra-communal violence as supplementary to any supposed state action (Corke-Webster 2023:13; Van Nuffelen 2020:516-517). Christians may well have been common targets of violence or persecution by other groups of Christians, considering that religious identity was considerably less the driving force for non-Christians and that the state did not actively seek out individuals (Corke-Webster 2017:381).[13]

Adding to this, internal Christian differences were likely not readily understood or were of no concern to the authorities or non-Christians. Therefore, the hypothesis provides us with a logical intermediary party, yet nuance should be in order. That local animosities were always a crucial factor in persecution seems to be a credible conclusion that puts neither gravity upon the state, the non-Christians, nor intra-Christian violence. The yardstick by which we measure the intensity of persecution comes down to this very emphasis, and it is readily contrasted by clear instances of extra-communal violence as well. Corke-Webster notes the theories set forth by David Nirenberg (1996; Corke-Webster 2023:12-13), who highlighted the role played by informants and accusers, giving most persecutions and controversies a very local and non-partisan basis at their root. The sum of a problematic implementation of decrees, a legal system not adequately designed to purge society of targeted groups, and a biased assumption that persecution was driven by one party or state leads to a very different image.

3. Persecution or decline?

When we extend our temporal horizon beyond the conversion of Constantine and the gradual growth of Christian influence within the Roman world, we find

11 Plescia notes that the Christians formed a *nefaria congregatio*.

12 Corke-Webster aptly deconstructs the homogenous agency attested to vast groups such as 'pagans' or 'Christians,' thereby implying a sort of unity that did not exist. Van Nuffelen similarly notes that religion in late antiquity did not stringently define one's identity.

13 For the sake of clarity, there are precedents before this one, which fall outside of the scope of the present article.

a succession of Roman emperors issuing decrees to suppress non-Christian religious practices. All but the emperor Julian (r. 361-363) followed in Constantine's footsteps by favouring Christianity over traditional polytheistic religions during the remainder of the 4th and early 5th centuries. This curious historical situation reversed the tides of anti-Christian policies in the opposite direction. As we have seen, direct imperial involvement through decrees in regulating religious practices from the 250s onwards remained a recurring phenomenon.

The emperor Constantine's immediate position on non-Christians after consolidating power in the 310s was both elusive and contested, with links to traditional imperial and religious symbolism still overtly clear in his early reign (Bradbury 1994:120-123; Lenski 2008:213-214; Barnes 2014:18). However, Constantine's rule saw a gradual growth in 'anti-pagan' legislation and rhetoric, likely fuelled by the personal sentiment of the ruler, as evidenced by positive discrimination in favour of Christianity. Eusebius reports a letter by the emperor written in 324 in this regard, which calls the polytheist temples 'shrines of falsehood,' even if the letter was curiously long regarded as one of tolerance (Barnes 2014:110; Eusebius 1999:111).[14] Humphries notes an inscription from the city of Hispellum, voicing the citizens' desire for the renaming of the town and the construction of a temple to the imperial dynasty, which Constantine granted on the basis that no 'superstitious' elements would contaminate it (Humphries 2018:71-72).[15] But for those interested in the imperial decrees and legislation, the Codex Theodosianus (CTh) provides the most insightful information regarding imperial policy.

The codex was compiled in the 430s under Theodosius II (r. 408-450) and essentially groups imperial decrees from Constantine up to the rule of Theodosius II into a systematic overview spanning about a century (see introductions to the CTh in Honoré 1986:133-140; Matthews 1993:19-45; Harries 1998; 2007). Book XVI primarily addresses religious matters and can be read as both a legal and moral response to what was deemed incompatible with prevailing orthodoxy (Salzman 1993:362-365). Examples of regulating non-Christian religious activity are consequently rife within the Codex. The emperor Constans (r. 337-350), for example, abolished 'pagan' sacrifice (CTh 16.10.2) but deemed it worthwhile to maintain the old temples for the time being, citing their role in celebrations and festivals as too important (CTh. 16.10.3; Humphries 2018:61; Woudhuysen 2018:174-176; CTh 16.10.4) Then, it puzzlingly requires the temples to close. CTh 16.10.9 forbids sac-

14 I follow Barnes' (2014) interpretation of the letter in the *Life of Constantine*; there has been ample debate, as he explains on pages 109-111. For the mention of the letter in the *Life of Constantine*, see Eusebius, *VC* 2.56) or the 1999 Cameron & Hall translation, 111, which Barnes also uses.

15 This is paraphrased for brevity from Humphries; the evidence he uses is epigraphical, as the city was to be renamed *Flavia Constans*. For the debate on 'superstitio' in the Codex Theodosianus, see the works by Salzman cited below.

rifice yet again, and so forth (Salzman 1987:177). The matter is therefore not as straightforward as it seems.

As with Decius' edict and Diocletian's Great Persecution, it is hard to attest the efficacy of these all-encompassing do-or-die decrees in a practical sense (Humphries 2016:151).[16] The recurring reiteration of the bans on sacrifice, for example, signals at best the prevalence with which they were, or were believed to be, still practised (Gladigow 2008:270-276; Stroumsa 2008:38-39; Belayche 2009:198-202). Mark Humphries summarises this point effectively: 'It was one thing for an emperor to wish to prohibit this or that religious custom; but it was entirely another matter for that wish to be translated into practice' (Humphries 2018:63). When reflecting on the Theodosian code in relation to non-Christians, Humphries writes, 'For paganism to be extirpated by law required a degree of control over individuals that the Roman state never possessed' (2018:76). Humphries' observation has broader implications than just for the study of paganism in late antiquity. If even the comparatively sophisticated administrative machinery of the 4th century struggled to implement religious policy consistently, similar caution should be exercised when interpreting earlier episodes of Christian persecution. The issue is therefore not confined to one period but concerns the relationship between imperial legislation, local administration, and historical interpretation more generally.

Similarly to Corke-Webster's analysis of *delatores*, which were necessary to act as an intermediary link between the accused and the authorities, the reach of the Codex Theodosianus in regulating non-Christian practices is debatable. If Christian persecution required accusers, then the decree passed under Arcadius (r. 395-408) and Honorius (r. 395-423; CTh 16.10.16) requiring the destruction of temples in the countryside surely needed 'breakers.' And in contrast to the limited archaeological evidence of early Christianity, the infrastructure of traditional Roman religion offers opportunities for observation (Trombley 1995:219-221; Hahn 2011:207; Ward-Perkins 2011:187-188). Barring a set of famous narratives and instances of clear destruction, the question is how systematic we should imagine the implementation of these policies to have been. Here again, the highlighted and dramatic stories overtake the realities faced by communities, temples and rituals on the receiving end of any decree or legislation.

Particularly strong analysis has been conducted in this regard in the past decades, faulting earlier scholars for their far too exclusive reliance on legal sources and their uncritical translation of them onto the realities of 4th- and 5th-century religious transformation (Dijkstra 2011:390; Humphries 2018:73). When we examine several case studies, it becomes evident that the enforce-

16 Specifically on the rhetoric used in these laws and decrees.

ment of the destruction of temples linked to imperial orders was at best a minor affair. The destruction of Mithraea,[17] for example, is cited by Ward-Perkins to render 'most disappointing' evidence of Christian violence (Ward-Perkins 2011:194). Equally, the destruction of temples in Roman Egypt, long held to be a violent affair, is now understood as a lengthy transitional process, disconnected from a top-down, state-sponsored campaign to close or destroy them (Dijkstra 2021:5). Here, too, the complexity created by legal enforcement looms large over processes that appeared to be evident based on the reception of laws or narratives on destruction. Even if legislation against non-Christians is explicit in the Codex Theodosianus, it was always vying for attention with a string of heresies. Contemporaneous with the decree to destroy and close temples in the late 4th century, North African bishops were far more concerned with petitioning the pope to act against the schismatic Donatists (Salzman 1993:376). This excessive lobbying reached a high point in 405, when Pope Innocent I was compelled to issue a letter to halt the overflow of visiting bishops and letters coming to Italy on this issue (Merdinger 1997:97-99; Hahn 2011:4). And even if petitioning was a preliminary to legislative undertakings in the form of decrees, the painstaking implementation of them, as we have seen, was inherently thwarted and seldom led to coordinated action.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, there has historically been plenty of zeal to instigate, decree and pursue persecution on religious grounds, and our modern assumptions frame our perception of narratives and legal traces of persecution. This article, however, has provided an overview of the inherent problems associated with persecution, state authority, and legal enforcement in antiquity. It should be clear by now that persecution is not only a biased conception but also a problematic, post-factum construct spurred by limited sources and supported by shifting emphasis throughout time. Most apparent and relevant are the difficulties inherent in organising any form of persecutory acts in an ancient context. The ample citation of the works of Corke-Webster and Humphries signals reliance on their strong summary accounts of the deficiencies of local governmental and legal tools in organising persecution. The evidence suggests that even periods of heightened imperial intervention were constrained by the administrative realities of governing a vast and decentralised empire. A cross-reading of Christian persecution and subsequent attempts to eradicate

17 These are gathering places for Mithras worship, generally spread throughout the empire between the late 1st and late 4th centuries.

paganism thus exposes analogous shortcomings inherent in the enforcement of anti-religious sentiments by states, rulers, or local bureaucratic authorities. In contrast, I have tried to shed some new light on the paradigm of persecution and to provoke reflection on our own past associations (see, for example, Baudy 2006:103-105).

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