Soldiers and Sacred Space

Letterwriting and atrocity in the Later Roman Empire 300-420 AD.

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Cover image: soldiers sleeping in front of the empty Sepulchre; ivory panel from 'The resurrection of Christ', ca. 420-430 AD (The British Museum , London).

Introduction

> "My voice sticks in my throat; and, as I dictate, sobs choke my utterance. The City which had taken the whole world was itself taken" (Jerome, *Letter* 127).

The sack of Rome in 410 AD sent shockwaves throughout the Roman world. Although the capture of Rome had been of quite limited strategic significance for both Goths and Romans, the shock it evoked amongst contemporaries was nonetheless great. To many the ideological capital of the Roman Empire which had stood for more than a thousand year had been brought down by the Gothic *foederati* of *rex* Alaric.

Through the writings of contemporaries it is possible to get a glimpse of the shock and horror which betook people when they heard of Rome's fall. For example, we learn that the inhabitants, after weeks of encirclement, had been driven to starvation and to acts of cannibalism.[1] When the Arian Goths broke into the streets, the city was given over to a three day sack. The scene became one of pillage and burning as the barbarians worked their way through the city in search for treasure.[2] A noble woman named Proba who had escaped to the island of Igilium near the Etruscan coast stated that she could still see the smoke rising above the burning city from almost a hundred kilometers away.[3]

Jerome (c. 347-420) lamented that Rome, which had once been the 'capital of the world', had now become 'the grave of the Roman people'.[4] In his letters and commentaries he recounted how many people had lost their lives.[5] Countless people were driven into slavery and refugees had spread across the Roman world, even being sold by their fellow Romans.[6] He believed that the sack was the beginning of the end of the world and the herald of the Final Judgment. The empire of the Romans had been the last of this earth and with the fall of its city, he expected that Christ would return at any moment.[7]

Augustine (354-430) was confronted with the uncertainties of the many Roman refugees who had fled to Africa.[8] In his monumental *De Civitate Dei* he related how the Goths had raped and murdered their way through the city until the very doorsteps of Rome's most holy churches and that their corpses remained unburied.[9] He tells how the Goths had taken scores of prisoners and how women who had been stripped of their honor and virginity.[10] According to Augustine these women questioned whether or not they should kill themselves to alleviate the dishonor done to them.[11] Countless possessions had been lost and pagans were accusing the Christians that their recent depravations had been their very own fault.

Christians wondered how the sack of Rome fitted within the meta-narrative of Christian history. Was Christ

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[1] Jerome, *Epistles*, H. Wallace ed. (Peabody 2007) 127.2; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, P. Schaff, & H. Wace eds. & trans. (Peabody 1995) 9.8.

[2] Jerome, *Ezekiel*: *prologue book I*, H. Wallace ed. (Peabody 2007); Jerome, *Epistles*, 127.12; on burning: Augustine, *Sermons*, J. Rotelle & E. Hill eds. & trans. (New York 1994) 296.5-6; also on plundering, see; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 9.9.2-5; Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History*, F. Winkelmann ed. (Berlin 1981)12.3-4.

[3] Jerome, *Epistles*, 130; Rutilius, *On his voyage home to Gaul*, S. Lancel & J. Soler eds. & trans. (Paris 2007) 1.49.

[4] Jerome, *Epistles*,127.12.

[5] On the dead, see; Jerome, *Ezekiel*: *prologue book* I; *Epistle* 127.12.

[6] Jerome, *Epistles*, 130.7; Rutilius, *On his voyage home to Gaul,* 1.49.

[7] Jerome, *Ezekiel*: *prologue book I.*

[8] Augustine, *Sermons*, 296.5, 6.

[9] Augustine, *City of God*, G. Bettenson trans. (London 1972) 1.12.

[10] Augustine, *City of God*, 1.16-18.

[11] Augustine, *City of God,*1.16-17.

to return as Jerome predicted? Was the last Judgment on hand, ready to occur at any moment? Pagan intellectuals believed that Rome's sack had been the fault of the Christians. They accused the Christians that they had forced people to abandon their ancestral Gods.[12] Augustine, countering the pagan's critique, interpreted the sack quite differently. It had been Gods special way of chastising Rome's sinful inhabitants.[13] Augustine also argued that the fall of Rome had been rather insignificant. All worldly empires would eventually perish and the only place that was going to endure eternally was the coming heavenly city of God. But he presented the sack of Rome as less gruesome than those which had occurred in its pagan past. He also contrasted the Goths' protection of churches during the sack with the behavior of the pagan armies of the past. In the past, not even the most sacred sanctuaries were spared.[14] According to Augustine, even the pagans had been allowed to seek refuge in Christian sanctuaries.[15] Yet, like Jerome, Augustine also believed that the Judgment of God was about to occur at any moment.[16]

At first glance Paulus Orosius, one of Augustine's apprentices, presented the sack quite similarly. But in his seven polemical books of history, written to counter the pagans' interpretation of the event, Orosius took the portrayal of the sack of Rome a step further. Just like Augustine, he presented the sack as a 'discernment of Divine Judgment' and chastisement for a wanton and blasphemous city.[17] Like Augustine, Orosius highlighted that the Goths had respected the sanctuary right of churches. But according to Orosius, the Goths had behaved even more decently. No raped virgins and looting in his account. The Goths had treated virgins respectfully and had returned the church's most sacred vessels in a pious procession in which both Romans and Goth had sung pious hymns in honor of the Lord.[18]

For a stringent Nicene churchman such as Orosius, who had had actually started out his career as a heresiologist, the portrayal of the correct behavior of Arian soldiers can be considered to be something quite surprising and indeed somewhat out of place.[19] Normally, 'orthodox' intellectuals such as Orosius would have considered the barbarian Arian to inhabit a place somewhere between the world of demons and that of animals. In works written from a Nicene perspective, the portrayal of Arian and barbarian soldiers behaving quite decently would have been considered something entirely out of place. Arian soldiers were thought to be savage tools of Satan, the men who could turn an Arian bishop into a persecuting tyrant. Instead of protecting a Nicene church, they would normally be seen desecrating it. In fact, not mentioning anything about the Arian soldiers violent despoliation of church space, and not enliven the account of it by relating the graphic imagery accompanying such an attack, would have been considered a missed opportunity in any Nicene polemic. Indeed, Orosius fourth century heresiologist predecessors would have taken every opportunity to portray the Arians' behavior in the most gruesome and despicable way possible.

How to explain such an apparent contradiction? How to interpret Orosius 'pacifist' account of such a gruesome event as a city's sack? Strangely enough, in order to enliven his account Orosius seems to have used a

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[12] Augustine, *Sermons*, 296.5, 6, 7.

[13] Augustine, *City of God*, 1.29-36.

[14] Ibidem, 1.1-7.

[15] Ibidem, 1.2.

[16] Augustine, *Sermons*, 93.6, 7.

[17] Orosius, *Seven books of history against the Pagans*, A. Fear ed. & trans. (Liverpool 2010) 7.37, 39.

[18] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, 7.39.

[19] See below, pages 33-36.

narrative structure similar to that of fourth century polemical letters protesting against the desecration of sacred space. Investigating and explaining this similarity and its apparent contradiction with the rest of Orosius' narrative is very much the purpose of this BA-thesis. More specifically, the purpose is to explain the extent to which a detailed analysis of the literary representation of soldiers' violent desecration of sacred space, which within the context of fourth century church controversies was meant to perpetuate for a Christian audience the meta-narrative of pre- constantinian persecution and resistance, forces us to reconsider both content and meaning of Orosius' depiction of the Gothic Sack of Rome in 410 AD. The argument brought forward is that Orosius consciously turned the literary motif of soldiers' desecration of church space and its constituting elements on its head in order to downplay the atrocities of the sack of Rome and postulate an alternative understanding of Christian identity.

In order to explain Orosius' portrayal, I will first investigate and question to what extent the literary depictions of soldiers' violent desecration of Christian sacred space fit in with the general context of fourth century church controversies and in what manner these depictions could contribute to the formation of the various Christian identities in the fourth century Roman world. I will attempt to do this by reconstructing the fourth century context of Christological conflicts and Church controversies and will try to show how both foundational and atrocious acts of violence helped Christian intellectuals shape and formulate their communal identities. Second, by looking at several fourth century letters and one letter from the early fifth century, I intend to investigate which particular forms the narratives about the violent interruption of ecclesiastical space generally took, what the meaning would have been of its constituent elements and what messages they were meant to convey to the audience. Furthermore, an attempt is made to ascertain to what extent the general narrative structure and its constituent narrative elements were subject to change, and if so, investigate what these changes tell us about the mentality of the intellectuals who wrote down these stories. In the final part I intend to investigate to what extent an author such as Orosius could manipulate the 'soldiers in church' motif and ascertain what might have been the reasons for doing so.

This thesis will not discuss the precise historical chronology of the various fourth century church controversies, nor will it discuss the narratives about the desecration of non-Christian sacred space in any detail. The desecration of pagan temples has already been decently discussed in G. Fowden's article on the role of bishops in the destruction of temples in the Eastern Roman Empire between 320-435 AD.[20] The desecration of synagogues is discussed in quite some detail in E. D. Hunt's article on the destruction of the synagogue in Minorca in the early fifth century.[21] The development of church asylum, nor the laws and narratives detailing its use will be discussed in detail. These have already been touched upon in Anne Ducloux' *Ad ecclesiam confugere. Naissance du droit d'asile dans les eglises* in which she quite convincingly has tried to reconstruct the exact relationship between successive imperial laws on asylum on the one hand and the actual episodes which had presumably stood at the basis of these laws on the other.[22] However the episodes and texts referring to the

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[20] G. Fowden, 'Bishops and temples in the Eastern Roman Empire', *Journal of Theological Studies* 29 (1978) 53-78; also see: M. Salzman, 'Rethinking Pagan-Christian religious violence' in H. Drake, *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and practices* (Burlington 2006) 265-286.

[21] E. Hunt, 'St. Stephen in Minorca: An episode in Jewish-Christian relations in the early fifth century AD', *Journal of Theological Studies* 33 (1982) 106-123; also see: F. Millar, 'The Jews of the Graeco-Roman diaspora between Paganism and Christianity, AD 312-438' in J. Lieu et. al. (eds.), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians* (New York 1992) 97-123.

[22] A. Ducloux, *Ad ecclesiam confugere. Naissance du droit d'asile dans les église IVe- milieu du Ve s.* (Paris 1994).

respect or disrespect thereof will be touched upon on some occasions but no attempt will be made to reconstruct the general narrative structure or exact representation thereof. Only in the case of Orosius' depiction of the Sack of Rome will I discuss the general portrayal of the sanctuary right of churches in some detail.

This thesis is first and foremost meant as a contribution to the general debate on the representation of violence in Late Antiquity. Quite recently, a great many informative and insightful contributions have been made. For instance, Michael Gaddis had shown how in late antiquity the narrative of persecution was used by beleaguered Christian intellectuals to define the precise relation between church and state.[23] Thomas Sizgorich has shown how violence was used to delineate the communitarian boundaries of the many religious communities in the late antique Christian and Islamic east.[24] Zimmerman has shown how in classical antiquity the reference to extreme violence could be used to pour scorn on ones enemies.[25] H.A. Drake has managed to assemble the leading specialists on late antique violence into a single volume, with discussions on subjects ranging from the perceptions of barbarian violence to subjects like the murder of Hypathia and the practice of late antique book burning.[26] As a addition to these contributions, I hope to present some new perspectives on the ways in which historians should discuss the relationship between the literary portrayal of violence and persecution on the one hand, and identity construction on the other. I intend to highlight that self-identification, perception and acknowledgement of victimhood were part of a process of constant negotiation in which letters that portrayed extreme acts of violence played a fundamental role. I also hope that by placing emphasis on the narrative structure of these letters and its role in activating a sympathetic response by the audience will lead historians to new perspectives and interpretations of Orosius seven books of history against the pagans and its representation of the sack of Rome. Finally, I hope that by highlighting the origins and basic outlines of fourth century narratives on the desecration of sacred space and by showing the manner in which these could be manipulated, other historians might apply this knowledge in support of their own investigations on church desecration narratives.

I. Church controversy, soldiers and violence in the fourth century

Many Christians would have believed that Constantine's conversion to Christianity and the Edict of Milan had brought an end to almost three centuries of pagan persecution. The last persecutions under the tetrarchic emperors had left the geography of the empire dotted with sites and places bearing witness to the heroic resistance of martyrs.[27] Churches had been overturned and their bishops and virgins had been martyred in result of their unmovable perseverance in the faith in God. Local Christian communities nurtured the accounts of their members heroic resistance against the judicial violence of pagan emperors. Raymond van Dam has argued that fourth century Christian communities knew more about their local martyrs than about the actual bible.[28]

In fact, persecution and victimization had become ingrained in the Christian memory and understanding of the past. The martyrs' resistance, pious behavior and zeal for God in the past, were thought to be examples of

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[23] M. Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ: religious violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Princeton 1999).

[24] T. Sizgorich, *Violence and belief in late antiquity: militant devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia 2009).

[25] M. Zimmermann (ed.), *Extreme Formen von Gewalt im Altertum in Bild und Text* (Munich 2009).

[26] H. Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and practices* (Burlington 2006).

[27] On the persecutions under Diocletian, see: S. Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman recovery* (London 2000) 173-185.

[28] R. van Dam, *Becoming Christian: The conversion of Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia 2003) 33.

correct Christian behavior in the present.[29] The remembrance of the martyrs' suffering represented the metaphorical scars that were fundamental for a Christian group's self-definition as the once persecuted, yet triumphal true community of God. Confessors played a similar role. They could proudly display the physical scars of persecution and were revered by their communities with a devotion almost equal to that of real martyrs.[30] They had turned the other cheek, confessed their beliefs in the one true God, and had piously frustrated the attempts of the pagan Roman Empire when it had tried to coerce them into obedience and conformity to pagan religious practice.

However, this legacy of persecution had left many Christians with a lingering distrust of the imperial state.[31] During the times of persecution, imperial officials and soldiers had been thought of as the tools of the devil and most emperors had been considered a tyrant lacking knowledge of the true faith.[32] Initially however, the revolution of Constantine seemed to have turned this distrust into unquestioned allegiance.[33] There was every reason to. Bishops now enjoyed imperial protection and support, and everywhere it seemed as if the church would grow infinitely now that all its obstacles had been removed. Moreover, the church flourished both politically and financially through the granting of imperial privilege and prestige.

Although the interaction between the imperial authorities and the Christians had largely been one of confrontation, the Roman Empire had always figured large in the imagination of early Christian intellectuals, and its general image had not always been entirely negative. Christian intellectuals like Eusebius (263-339) had believed that it had been no coincidence that the birth of Christ had occurred at the time of Augustus. The might of the empire was part of God's plan to spread the faith far and wide. Others such as Lactantius (240-320) and believed that with the conversion of the empire, history was approaching completion. They thought that the Second Coming was to occur at any moment now that Christians were poised to rule the earth. The empire would force everyone to accept God's message, and the true community of God would praise the Lord in unisonous worship.

Within this Christianized empire a new task was set aside for the now Christian emperor. Church thinkers such as Eusebius and Lactantius believed that the power of the Christian emperor had been delegated by God.[34] They believed that it was the emperor's task to enforce unity of worship in His Name. It was thought that in fulfilling his task the emperor, like God, should be vengeful as well as benign. As God's representative on earth he had to preside Church councils and help solve Christianity's various theological disagreements. In fulfilling this task he could either agree with the consensus reached by the assembled bishops or force upon them his personal convictions by sheer threat of force.[35]

But not everyone saw this imperial quest for unity, or the doctrinal and theological agreement enforced by ecumenical consensus, in such positive terms. Some Christian groups believed the search for unity was

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[29] F. Avemarie & J. van Henten, *Martyrdom and noble death. Selected texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity* (London 2002) 2-7; for martyrs as exemplary figures also see the third century author, Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, R. Greer ed. & trans. (New York 1979).

[30] M. Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 87.

[31] Ibidem, 79.

[32] Avemarie & Van Henten, *Martyrdom and noble death*, 4.

[33] On the so called 'Revolution of Constantine, see; R. van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (Cambridge 2007).

[34] C. Kelly, 'Empire Building' in G. Bowersock, P. Brown & O. Grabar (eds.), *Interpreting Late Antiquity. Essays on the Postclassical World* (Cambridge 2001) 181-183.

[35] Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, 317-353.

something inherently wrong, indeed quite similar to the motives of pagan persecutors of the past. Unity was perceived to be a trick of the devil with the purpose of challenging and seducing the true Christians in abandoning the true doctrine of God.[36] Constantine and his successors had in fact inherited an empire filled with a great variety of Christian groups who held on to quite different beliefs than those espoused by the great imperial led church councils. The reasons for this disunity were many. Donatists, for example, clung unto the memory that during the last persecution a number of Christian clergymen had sacrificed on the command of the pagan authorities.[37] They were convinced that the hands of these *traditores* ('traitors' or 'trespassers') had become filthy with sin and thereby, when they returned in their role as priest afterwards, threatened to pollute the entire Christian community as they baptized new members. After their sinful 'betrayal' they had ordained new priests and consecrated new churches. The Donatists believed that these churches needed to be cleansed and its priests be removed from office, even whilst the real trespassers had been long since gone.

Philosophical disagreement about Christology created its share of fourth century disputes. Nicene Christians, or Catholics as they liked to call themselves, held on to the Trinitarian dispositions agreed to at the council of Nicaea in 325. They held on to the conviction that God should be perceived as three divine persons, namely that of the Father, Jezus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three persons were thought to be distinct, but also to coexist in unity, being co-equal, co-eternal and consubstantial all at the same time. The Alexandrian priest Arius and his followers disagreed.[38] They held on to the conviction that Christ was subordinate to God and that the three 'persons' stood in a clear hierarchy. Even more, they thought that Jezus Christ, like any good son, should be considered as subordinate to the father.

There were also disagreements about asceticism and matters such as the relation between the body and soul. The followers of Priscillian believed in their leader's radical teachings on asceticism.[39] They nurtured Gnostic beliefs about the relation between the soul and the body, and even promoted quite revolutionary ideas about the equality of men and women within the leadership of the church.

However, one must be wary to see these groups as coherent. This is what the church intellectuals of the past wanted us to believe. Arianism or Donatism knew almost just as many divisions as Christianity in large. For example, the Donatist clergy refused to acknowledge the militant ascetic movement of the *circumcellions*.[40] Yet both were considered to be part of one group by those who wanted to refute the Donatists' ideas. This was also the case with Arianism. Some Arians thought that Christ, or the *Logos*, should be considered an actual created being. But others believed that the *Logos* was neither uncreated nor created as earthly beings.

These complex theological disputes witnessed an increasing resort to the use of violent means and the judicial powers of the Emperor in order to coerce the various groups into compliance. This was partly due to the fact that

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[36] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 7, 12, 79.

[37] M. Tilley (ed. & trans), *Donatist Martyr Stories. The Church in conflict in Donatist Africa* (Liverpool 1996) 11-27; For a more detailed discussion on Donatism, see: W. Frend, *The Donatist Church: a movement of protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford 2000/1952) 1-30.

[38] C. Galvao-Sobrinho, 'Embodied Theologies: Christian Identity and violence in Alexandria in the early Arian Controversy' in H. Drake, *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and Practices* (Burlington 2006) 321-322; for a more detailed discussion, see: R. Hanson, *In search for the Christian doctrine of God: the Arian controversy, 318-381* (Edinburgh 1988).

[39] H.Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avilla: the occult and the charismatic in the early church* (Oxford 1976) 77-81, 110, 188, 209.

[40] On the circumcellions, see; B. Shaw, 'Bad Boys: Circumcellions and fictive violence' in H. Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and Practices* (Burlington 2006) 179-197; Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 119-127.

Christian Roman emperors had inherited the persecuting zeal of their pagan predecessors.[41] Like their predecessors they were convinced that unity and correct worship were something to be achieved at all cost. Obstinacy (*contumacia*), superstition (*superstitio*) and heresy (*heraisis*) needed to be rooted out by whatever means necessary. Christians needed to be coerced into the correct kind of worship. Some Christian intellectuals, and in fact the emperors themselves, believed that making use of violent force to achieve unity or compromise was entirely legitimate.[42] Even more so because it was believed that if the emperor failed, God would punish the empire at any moment.

However, compromise was increasingly hard to reach in the militant climate of fourth century Christianity: especially when the majority of bishops and Christian intellectuals believed that only an exact definition of God could result in correct worship and Divine support. Like the emperor, they believed that in order to prevent Divine retribution their convictions had to be upheld at all cost.

The conflict between Arian and Nicene Christians can be considered the greatest church controversy of the fourth century. No other doctrinal controversy had in fact produced so many upheavals in the Roman world as the so-called Arian controversy.[43] Some contemporaries saw the conflict as a veritable 'civil war of the church'.[44] According to Eusebius, himself allegedly a supporter of Arius, the Arian-controversy caused 'people rising against people' and he lamented that they increasingly tried 'cutting down one another'.[45] The fourth century historian Ignatius of Selymbria shared this opinion. He lamented that once 'falling into the ears of people', the teachings of Arius 'gave rise to many quarrels and battles over the *Logos*'.[46]

The Arian-Nicene conflict became ever more complicated by the fact that the religious preferences of the emperors tended to shift in the course of the fourth century. Constantine had been an adherent of the Nicene cause but had near the end of his life become more supportive of the Arian creed.[47] His successors however were to be either Arian or adherents of a compromise formula. Although Arius' teachings had been condemned by successive church councils and outlawed by imperial degree, from approximately 325 bishops supportive to the Nicene creed lost their imperial support. In 381 the tables turned and now the Nicene bishops were the ones pulling the strings of the state's coercive power. From Theodosius I onwards all the emperors were to be supportive of the Nicene creed or its subsequent additions. Subsequently Arian doctrine came to be outlawed once again. Only across the borders amongst the various barbarian *gentes* of the north or amongst the newly settled Gothic *foederati* in the northern Balkans could Arian beliefs freely be expressed.[48]

Bishops of either side often took the initiative in employing and using the coercive powers of the state to force their opponents into compliance.[49] Opponents needed to be deposed and their supporters forced to accept their replacements. When a bishop ended up deposed by an imperially recognized church council but refused to give up his seat, imperial troops could be called in to drive him out. Those who persisted were threatened with

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[41] Sizgorich, *Violence and belief in Late Antiquity*, 3.
[42] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 6-8.
[43] Galvao-Sobrinho, 'Embodied Theologies', 322.
[44] Ibidem, 323.
[45] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, A. Cameron and S. Hall eds. & trans. (Oxford 1999) 3.4.
[46] Galvao-Sobrinho, 'Embodied Theologies', 323.
[47] Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, 343-351.
[48] For Arianism among the barbarians and the Goths, see; E. James, *Europe's Barbarians AD 200-600* (Harlow 2009)127-128, 196-197, 220-225.
[49] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ,* 75.

exile or worse.[50] The problem was that if a bishop resorted to the coercive apparatus of the state he risked being represented by his opponents as being dependent on this worldly power. He was then presented as a mere servant of the emperor and as being devoid of God's support and that of his people.[51] Only by the means of the persecutor could his will be coerced. Peter II, the pro-Nicene bishop of Alexandra (373-380), was able to describe the entrance of his opponent, and emperor's candidate Lucius into the city of Alexandria in quite similar terms:

> In this state of things when even I had withdrawn from the church— for how could I remain where troops were coming in—where a mob was bribed to violence—where all were striving for gain—where mobs of heathen were making mighty promises?—forth, forsooth, is sent a successor in my place. It was one named Lucius, who had bought the bishopric as he might some dignity of this world, eager to maintain the bad character and conduct of a wolf. No synod of orthodox bishops had chosen him; no vote of genuine clergy; no laity had demanded him; as the laws of the church enjoin. Lucius could not make his entrance into the city without parade, and so he was appropriately escorted not by bishops, not by presbyters, not by deacons, not by multitudes of the laity; no monks preceded him chanting psalms from the Scriptures; but there was Euzoius, once a deacon of our city of Alexandria, and long since degraded along with Arius in the great and holy synod of Nicaea, and more recently raised to rule and ravage the see of Antioch, and there, too, was Magnus the treasurer, notorious for every kind of impiety, leading a vast body of troops.[52]

Those who were on the receiving end of coercive force tended to justify their resistance by using the argument that there existed a clear divide between matters of the church and those of the Emperor. Nicene sources had a special hand in this. Michael Gaddis has shown that Nicene sources had a tendency to justify their defiance against imperial decrees 'by appeal to a rhetoric of separation between secular and ecclesiastical spheres'.[53] Those on the receiving end of imperial coercion argued that Caesar should not try to usurp the bishops' spiritual authority nor attempt to intervene in church affairs: 'Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's' (Matthew 22:21).

But during the fourth century, bishops were hardly the only ones who were prepared to resort to violence. Occasionally acts of Christian violence occurred which had not been officially sanctioned, neither by imperial authority nor that of bishops. Militant ascetics, such as the eastern black-robed gangs of *parabolani* and the North-African *circumcellion* highwaymen, roamed cities and countryside in search of sinners, pagans and Jews whom they could beat or scourge and desecrate temples which stood in their way.[54] Fourth century sources are full with references to local mobs descending on each other, ready to kill and maim for the greater glory of God.[55] Local incidents with pagan or Jewish neighbors and with people deemed heretics could often result in

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[50] On exile as the 'special treatment' for bishops, see; E. Fournier, ' Exiled Bishops in the Christian Empire: Victims of Imperial Violence?' in H. Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and Practices* Burlington (2006) 157-166.

[51] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 270-272.

[52] *Letter of Peter of Alexandria,* in Theodoret Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* (trans. NPNF) 4.22

[53] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have* Christ, 77-78.

[54] For Parabolani see, *Codex Theodosianus*, C. Pharr trans. (Princeton 1952) XVI.2.42; XVI.2.43.

[55] Mob violence in the fifth century context is excellently described in; T. Gregory, *Vox Populi. Popular opinion and violence in the religious controversies of the Fifth Century A.D.* (Columbus 1979).

violent clashes and pogrom-like situations.[56] Churches, temples and synagogues were often the main target, and in case of the latter not a stone was to be left standing. Often the imperial authorities had no choice but to follow along with these outbursts of popular violence.[57] In fact, within the sources referring to such outbreaks, almost no evidence can be found that soldiers or local authorities had any objections about such violent outbreaks.[58] In most cases they were prepared to join in and do their share of temple smashing.

People disagreed whether or not it was right for Christians to use violence. The books of the Bible were ambivalent on this question. Christ had preached to turn the other cheek (Luke 6:27-31/ Matthew 5:38-42), but Old Testament texts gave the impression that God's chosen should be prepared to make a stand. Christian intellectuals had quarreled for centuries about whether or not it was sinful to kill or if the use of force to defend oneself should be considered legitimate.[59] But apparently, many Christians believed that killing or torturing their fellow man (and woman) should not be considered any problem at all: although it should be stated that most Christian intellectuals disagreed. They believed that it was sinful to kill one's fellow man. Yet, even in the minds of these Christian intellectuals, some Christians were thought to be more equal than others.

To these intellectuals, violence and torture were deemed to be reprehensible when it affected certain classes of people thought to be exempt.[60] Within late Roman thinking, violence done to fellow *honestiores* was considered an outrage. Hurting or killing *humiliores* was considered to be quite a different case. Violence or torture used against *humiliores* was deemed to be entirely legitimate. They belonged to the lower dregs of society, had no voice to be heard, and almost no-one to stand up for them. They could only ask Christ or his Saints to intervene on their behalf.[61] However, violence used against priests and monks was deemed to be an even greater outrage then violence done against imperial officials (although some monks were quite happy to use some violence themselves)**.** For example, Christian intellectuals were shocked when in 385 they were informed that Priscillian had been executed for his heretical beliefs by the usurping emperor Magnus Maximus.[62]

An even greater outrage was violence directed against consecrated virgins.[63] According to the sources originating from this period, virgins were frequently singled out for special forms of degrading treatment. We hear of virgins being raped, and at other times being degraded by what seems to have been a ritual act of public stripping. Such an act is vividly described in a complaint of the Sardican bishops against the Nicene bishop Marcellus of Ancyra (d. 374). They objected that holy virgins who had vowed themselves to God and Christ 'had their clothes dragged off' and were exposed publically by Marcellus 'with horrifying foulness in the forum

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[56] For these situations see two excellent articles on anti-Jewish and anti-pagan violence; Hunt, 'St. Stephen in Minorca,106-123; also see: Millar, 'The Jews of the Graeco-Roman Diaspora between Paganism and Christianity, 97-123.

[57] R. Tomlin, 'Christianity and the Late Roman Army' in S. Lieu & D. Montserrat (eds.), *Constantine. History, historiography and Legend* (New York 1998) 29-31.

[58] Tomlin, 'Christianity and the Late Roman Army', 29-31; A. Lee, *War in Late Antiquity. A social history* (Oxford 2007) 193-205.

[59] Tomlin, 'Christianity and the Late Roman Army' 23-24; Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, 178-181.

[60] J. Harries, 'Violence, victims and the Legal Tradition in Late Antiquity', H. Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and Practices* (Burlington 2006) 85-102; J. Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge 1999) 85-102; 109, 124-129, 140-143,150 .

[61] P. Brown, 'Arbiters of the Holy: the Christian Holy Man in Late Antiquity' in P. Brown (ed.), *Authority and the Sacred. Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman World* (Cambridge 1995) 57-78.

[62] Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avila*, 166-169.

[63] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 83-86, 167, 180.

and the city center to the gathered populace'.[64] Athanasius (296-373), the famous Nicene bishop of Alexandria, described the conduct of his Arian opponents in quite similar terms. When recounting the public stripping and scourging of virgins he occasions himself to compare it to the torture of Christ:

> Pilate, to gratify the Jews of old, pierced one of our Savior's sides with a spear. These men have exceeded the madness of Pilate, for they have scourged not one but both his sides; for the limbs of a virgin are in an special manner the Savior's own. All men shudder at hearing the mere recital of deeds like these. These men alone did not fear to strip and to scourge those undefiled limbs which the virgins have dedicated solely to our Savior Christ.[65]

Christian intellectuals commonly took the virgin's body to stand for the imagined community of Christ.[66] Virgins were considered to be chaste and holy figures, free from worldly sin or sexual pollution. As Brides of Christ they were solely dedicated to God, any form of bodily harm done to them was considered an insult and assault on the honor of the entire Christian community. Protests against their desecration can be considered emblematic for the community's fears about boundary transgression and the (sexual) pollution of the community as a whole. Therefore it was also a helpful tool in Christian polemic. Referring to one's enemies desecration of virgins was an ideal way to support one's refusal of your opponents' ideas.

Violence was also considered to be wrong when it was committed at certain moments or places. Trespassing imperial protection of buildings and property could count on a strong judicial response, even resulting in capital punishment.[67] Nighttime attacks were considered to be the work of those as base as thieves and robbers.[68] They were to be met with severe punishment such as bodily mutilation or capital punishment.

Violence inside churches was presented as something simply unforgivable. A succession of laws from the fourth and fifth century show that the church building was progressively seen as a sanctuary for those desperate to flee to, even criminals could count on the Church's protective embrace .[69] Disturbing religious services was thought to be equally wrong, and was indeed forbidden by law in the year 408.[70] However, assaults against temples and synagogues was quite a different case. On the one hand, imperial laws prescribed restraint on the destruction or seizure of synagogues or temples, but on the other hand forbid their rebuilding.[71]

The weapons used in the act of violence were thought to have their own symbolism. Beating with sticks or scourging with whips were thought to be forms of punishment intended merely for slaves or animals.[72] Spears, swords, and darts in particular were thought to be meant only for the field of battle. But the sword was also meant for the execution of men of honor or as an instrument for heroic acts of suicide.[73]

Some people were thought to be more prone to violence than others. Barbarians were thought to be violent

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[64] Hilary of Poitiers, *Against Valens and Ursacius*, L. Wickham trans. (Liverpool 1997) 1.2.9.
[65] Athanasius, *Apology before Constantius* A. Martin ed. & trans (London 1985) 33.
[66] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 83-86.
[67] *Codex Theodosianus*, 15.1.19.
[68] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 3, 214-215.
[69] For a collection of these laws, see; Ducloux, *Ad ecclesiam confugere*, 263-290.
[70] For the law in 393 on the destruction of synagogues see, *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.8.9; for the disturbance of churches see, Codex Theodosianus 16.8.18 and Millar, 'Jews of the Graeco-Roman Diaspora', 116-119.
[71] *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.8.2.
[72] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 143-144.
[73] Sizgorich, *Violence and belief in Late Antiquity*, 82; Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ,* 127.

by nature.[74] The ambitious were thought to seek gain by all means. Their violence was just one tool to oppress the helpless.[75] Surprisingly, monks were thought by many to be most violent of all, in fact they were perceived to be a lazy lot having nothing to do but eat their bellies full. Their religious zeal was thought to result in all sorts of irrational violence.[76]

The coercive means employed by the Roman state during the sectarian conflicts of the fourth century were quite similar to those which had been used by pagan persecutors of the past and deployed to very much the same ends. Laws, exile, imprisonment, violent crowd control, confiscation of property or buildings and even capital punishment were all part of the emperor and his officials' judicial arsenal. Once again the Roman penal system distinguished between specific punishments suited for *honestiores* and *humiliores*.[77] The crimes of the former were usually to be punished by fines, confiscation of property, or exile. The crimes of the latter would result in flogging, branding, mutilation or other forms of gruesome and exemplary corporeal punishment.

The main instrument used to implement these coercive means in the fourth century was the army.[78] The Late Roman army was a heterogeneous force in which in which men of various ethnic and religious backgrounds were enrolled. The great majority of soldiers originated from rural areas within the Roman empire. The other great component consisted of foreigners, or barbarians as the Roman liked to call them. Within the militarized empire, the Roman army was generally perceived to be an oppressive institution, almost a nation within a nation. Billeting, army requisitions, pressgangs and a multitude of plundering and hungry field armies had become common features of everyday Roman life. Even the jobs of state officials were thought as part of the *militia*, or army service. For people who had no knowledge of the army, it was often quite difficult to distinguish whether or not one was dealing with a Roman or barbarian army, because within the military culture of the Roman army various ethnic forms of distinction and outward appearances tended to be very similar to those of its enemies.[79] The various names of the Roman units themselves contributed to the difficulty in distinguishing what kind of ethnicity or religious preference dominated in these units. Units whose names were based on tribal entities like the *Heruli Seniores* or *Celtae Seniores*, or on the basis of religious features such *Ioviani-* and *Herculani Seniores* made it very hard for the uninitiated observer to distinguish between barbarian and Roman and between pagan and Christian soldiers.[80]

Recently, Guy Halsall has offered a quite convincing thesis on the relationship between barbarian behavior

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[74] On the perception of barbarian violence and its relation to identity, see; W. Pohl, 'perceptions of barbarian violence' & R. Mathisen, 'Violent behavior and the construction of barbarian identity in Late Antiquity' in H. Drake, *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and practices* (Burlington 2006) 15-36.

[75] On the actions of the rich and ambitious and the perception thereof, see; Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 251, 271-273.

[76] Sizgorich, *Violence and belief in Late Antiquity*, 93-107; Libanius, *Oratio 30: Pro templis*, D. Russel ed. & trans. (London 1996).

[77] R. MacMullen, 'Judicial savagery in the Roman Empire' in R. MacMullen (ed.), *Changes in the Roman Empire: essays in the ordinary* (1990) 204-217.

[78] For the role of the army in church policies, see; Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, 193-205.

[79] G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West 376-568* (Cambridge 2009) 102-110, 54-57.

[80] The units names often came to good use in portraying army conflicts as civil wars between pagans and Christians. In his account of the famous battle of the Frigidus in which Theodosius army defeated the allegedly army of Eugenius the latter's soldiers, actually the Herculani and Joviani, are represented as offering and praying to Jupiter and Hercules. Whether these units actually were completely pagan is impossible to say; A. Cameron, *The last pagans of Rome* (Oxford 2011) 93-131.

and the perceived identity of Late Roman army units.[81] He argues that in the minds of late Roman authors, the defining characteristic of the barbarian (at least in the wild) was imagined to be his inability to live according to law. But he states that Roman authors were also able to represent other people who refused to live by Roman law and used force without authorized authority, like bandits and brigands, as being part of the barbarians. regardless of their origins. Romans who behaved the wrong way could be criticized and presented as having cast off their *Romanitas* and in doing so could take on the guise of animals, barbarians and even that of women.

It is possible to see a similar dynamic at work in the representations of Roman soldiers' behavior and identity by the ecclesiastical authors of the fourth century. From their texts we learn that they believed that the world was inhabited by two kinds of soldiers: the 'good' soldier and the 'bad' soldier.[82] Good soldiers were presented as 'ethnically' Roman and faithfully Christian. They had as their literary ancestor the 'good centurion' from biblical literature (Acts 10:2/ Matthew 8:5-14). They are shown escorting virgins during their pilgrimage or bishops on their laborious journeys.[83] These were soldiers serving out of a sense of duty and not for coin, praying to God before battle and subsequently defeating their barbarian and pagan enemies, preferably in bloodless battles.[84] And if this good soldier had killed someone, he preferably abstained from communion afterwards.[85] These were the soldiers who out of a sense of Christian piety respected sacred space and the sanctuary rights of the church.[86] And finally, these were the soldiers who participated in the attack and occupation of non-Christian and heretical sacred space, yet refrained from plundering afterwards.[87]

The bad soldier on the other hand was imagined to be the persecuting one. These were the soldiers who behaved like a disorganized mob and killed out of sheer pleasure. Soldiers who disrespected property and profaned all things sacred. The bad soldier degraded virgins and churchmen, and violently desecrated Christian sacred place. They were presented as mercenaries who fought for gain, instead of duty. The bad soldier resembled an ordinary robber, always intent on plunder.[88] In most cases he is a barbarian, a wild and uncivilized lawless creature, or a pagan, considered to be a tool of Satan and devoted to heinous forms of religious belief.[89]

Exactly how the soldiers responded to the implantation of church policies is almost impossible to establish.[90] In the great majority of texts, soldiers are represented as having no reservations at all at being used in tearing down temples or church buildings, or dispersing angry mobs. Quite naturally there is a polemical strategy behind all this. Perpetrators could only be condemned if they were portrayed using 'bad soldiers' and wicked forms of violence. However, we might also imagine that emperors and churchmen tended to choose the right men for the right job. We are able to get a glimpse of this in the work of Ammianus Marcellinus (330-391), a pagan soldier who had become involved in matters related to the sacred in 355. He informs his readers on how he belonged to

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[81] Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West,* 54-57.

[82] For the 'good' and the 'bad' soldier, see; Tomlin, 'Christianity and the Late Roman Army', 39-42.

[83] For example Egeria on her itinerary through the lands of the bible and John Chrysostom on his exile, see: Egeria, *Itinerarium* Egeriae, V. Hunnink ed. & Dutch trans. (Hilversum 2011) 9.3; John Chrysostom, *Letters to Olympias*, A. Malingrey ed. & trans. (London 1947)1-9.

[84] Most famous are the representations of the Battle of the Frigidus in 394, see: A. Cameron, *The last pagans of Rome,* 93-131.

[85] For example as advised by: Basil of Caesarea, *Letters*, R. Deferrari ed. & trans. (Cambridge, MA 1926) nr. 116, 155, 188.

[86] Ambrose of Milan, *Epistles*, M. Zelzer ed. (Peabody 1990) 20.12, 20.26.

[87] Mark the Deacon, *Life of Porphyry of Gaza*, G. Hill trans. (Oxford 1925) 63, 65.

[88] Paulinus of Nola, *Letter 25: to Crispianus*, P. Walsh ed. & trans. (New York 1967) 5.

[89] See below, pages 23-26.

[90] Some have tried though only to find limited success, for example; Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, 202-205.

a unit that was tasked with getting out the usurping emperor Silvanus of his church chapel. It is possible that Ammianus's own unit was unsure whether or not they should desecrate the sacred confines of the holy place. There were 'Gallic' soldiers on hand, but of rather 'doubtful fidelity'. Ammianus recounts the solution his commanders found as follows:

> Therefore, after we had secured our success by the address of some agents among the common soldiers, men by their very obscurity fitted for the accomplishment of such a task, and now excited by the expectation of reward, at sunrise, as soon as the east began to redden, a band of armed men suddenly sallied forth, and, as is common in critical moments, behaving with more than usual audacity. They slew the sentinels and penetrated into the palace, and so having dragged Silvanus out of a little chapel in which, in his terror, he had taken refuge on his way to a conventicle devoted to the ceremonies of the Christian worship, they slew him with repeated strokes of their swords.[91]

The militarization of the third and fourth century Roman empire influenced the way in which ascetics and churchmen understood their struggle with sin.[92] Early Christians had already believed the world to be divided between truth and falsehood. Enemies existed both inside and outside the community and the soul. As early as Paul's exhortation about the military equipment of faith in his letters to the Ephesians (Ephesians 6:1), devotional language had been steeped in militaristic imagery and had been so ever since.[93] The heroic resistance of martyrs could be understood as a form of spiritual combat, an idea which can be found throughout early Christian discourse and practice. Ascetics for example believed that *askesis* was nothing less but a continuous battle against an enemy that was perceived to be very real. Monks could be represented in standing valiantly in ranks against the demons who tried to deceive the faithful into worshipping other Gods and personified the dangerous temptations of the flesh.[94] St. Pachomius, an ex-military man and fourth century Christian ascetic, organized his monasteries in such a way as to resemble a military *castellum*, including perimeter walls, specialized buildings, and barrack-like houses.[95] These monasteries recalled the forts he had known from army life, only the enemies meant to be kept out had changed. In Christian thinking demons were perceived to be the cosmic evil behind Christianity's worldly adversaries such as Jews, pagans and heretics. Such an attitude could easily give rise to a more militant attitude to belief and an increased willingness to use violence.

II. Narrative, identity and extreme violence

It seems that the fundamental undercurrent of the violent confrontations between those supportive to the Nicene or Arian cause was an increasing tendency to define oneself in terms of a more militant Christian identity. Since the edict of Caracalla in 212 AD, every inhabitant of the empire could consider himself a Roman. Local and regional identities gradually lost their significance.[96] As the empire gradually became Christian, identities were increasingly defined on the basis of religious confession and behavior.

[91] Ammianus Marcellinus, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, W. Hamilton ed. & trans. (London 2004) 15.30-15.31.
[92] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 23-24.
[93] Ibidem, 23-24.
[94] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have* Christ, 23.
[95] Tomlin, 'Christianity and the Late Roman Army', 23 n12; *S. Pachomii vitae graecae*, Halkin ed. & trans. (Geneva 1982) 4-5.
[96] On Roman identity in Late Antiquity, see; A. Sherwin-White, *The Roman citizenship* (Oxford 2001) 451-468.

In his article on late-antique Christian identity, Galvao-Sobrinho has proposed two defining characteristics of late antique Christian identity.[97] He argues that Christians first of all constructed their identity as Christian through repeated interactions with the divinity in activities such as prayer, oblations, litanies and the rituals of initiation and worship in the church'. He states that through such practices, believers expressed and celebrated their devotion to God and became fully aware of themselves as Christian. Secondly, by making use of S. Pulleyn's research on the relation between prayer and self-image in ancient Greece, Galvo-Sobrinho postulates that the awareness of being a Christian developed out of a 'projected notion of the deity'.[98] Since acts of devotion conveyed an appreciation of God, they must have presumed a notion or mental image of God as the recipient of that devotion. He also argues that during occasions such as the Eucharistic liturgy, the abstract notion of God became a live and palpable presence in the shape of the bread that was offered and shared between the worshippers.[99] It was exactly this problem, of defining the abstract notion of God, which had become the basis for the great Christological disputes and violent confrontations between the Arians and Nicene-orthodox during the fourth century AD.

However, there appears to have been another element which Galvao-Sobrinho does not mention, but which seems to have played quite an substantial role in the way in which Christian identity was constructed. First of all I would like to propose that these two principles of Christian identity, were in fact accompanied by a general increase in militant attitudes wherein the act of violence and the remembrance thereof helped Christian intellectuals and their communities to establish the precise contours of Christian identity as opposed to non-Christian identity. Mostly because Arian and Nicene Christians, or any other Christian group involved in violent conflict, actually shared many forms of religious behavior and doctrinal and scriptural beliefs. Thomas Sizgorich has shown that community leaders of all religions thought it to be increasingly important to delineate the boundaries between their two respective communities.[100] They sought to define the parameters of acceptable behavior, formulate its theological underpinning and urge their members to police the communities' boundaries by all means.

Secondly, I would like to suggest that historical narratives about atrocious acts of violence play an important role in the construction of identity and in explaining and interpreting the moment to moment experience of the community and its members. In order to sustain the community's boundaries, leaders and intellectuals sought to construct narratives in which the history of their local community was maintained from its earliest beginnings to the very present. They did so through the protection and preservation of their community's divinely revealed truths, but also through recounting acts of personal piety and episodes which told about the suffering and persecution of its members. Especially the idea of victimization and persecution was a fundamental constituent of this identity and also very much the fundamental basis of the communities' actions and expected forms of behavior when their community came under siege.

In such a narrative, each and everyone had a role to play. Anthropologist Margret Somers has suggested that individuals have a tendency to understand themselves to be 'emplotted' in narratives and have a tendency to just

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[97] Galvao-Sobrinho, 'Embodied Theologies', 324-326.
[98] S. Pulleyn, *Prayer in Greek religion* (Oxford 1997) 65-100.
[99] Galvao-Sobrinho, 'Embodied Theologies', 324.
[100] Sizgorich, *Violence and belief in Late Antiquity*, 22-45.

as easily place other individuals and groups within these same narratives.[101] The result is that these individuals become characters with their own roles to play within the moment-to-moment experience that was perceived to be the larger story or meta-narrative: roles that for a great part are determined by the narrative's underlying 'themes' and 'plots'. It is thus becomes quite easy for a Christian community to see the persecution done by an heretical emperor as a continuation of the meta-narrative of persecution and resistance that was thought to have been played out since the execution of Christ. By understanding persecution or violence done against the community in such away, it becomes possible to argue that nothing had in fact changed since the pagan persecutions of the past. In doing so it became necessary for the composers of these narratives to 'emplot' the community's present enemies in the story as well. In these narratives, the bishops who had to enforce the emperor's decisions, and in fact the emperor himself, tended to take on the guise of the persecuting tyrants. The local commander was often presented as behaving in the exact same manner as a pagan *iudex*.[102]

The persecuted themselves and those who were lost in the struggle took on the role as the successors to the famous confessors and martyrs who had heroically suffered in the past. This was very important indeed, first of all because martyrs were upheld as examples for the community. They embodied exemplary behavior and had remained faithful to their beliefs even until the very end. And secondly because recognition of martyrdom played an important role in deciding whether the idea of persecution was perceived to be legitimate or not. However, this could only be achieved if other Christian communities became convinced that they themselves were part of this persecuted community. They needed to believe that the victims of the persecution were real martyrs in every sense of the word and were in fact theirs as much everybody else's. The reason for wanting to convince other communities that one's martyrs and victimhood were real was to deny the possibility that they or the persecutors would deny one's martyrs.[103] They were afraid that if they did so one's theological viewpoints and accepted forms of behavior would also be refused. Moreover, an attempt had to be made to criticize the behavior of the Emperor and his persecuting, if it were ever to be curtailed. Self identification as a persecuted victim and the acknowledgement thereof were part of a process of constant negotiation.

One way of doing this was by arguing that the community had been the victim of an atrocity or sacrilege.[104] The way to support this argument of victimization was by relating it to an extreme form of violence that had resulted in countless casualties. Mentioning the dead and the way they had suffered was an important element in this polemical strategy. Historical anthropologist A. Assmann has shown that every cultural memory had its core in the remembrance of the dead.[105] She argues that the persistence and foundational elements of cultural memory are often linked to 'foundational scenes of violence', or as anthropologist Clifford Geertz would have called

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[101] M. Somers, 'Narrative constitution of identity: a relationship and network approach', *Theory and Society* 5 (1994) 613-617.

[102] Sizgorich, *Violence and belief in Late Antiquity*, 135-144.

[103] Optatus tried to delegitimize the Donatists' martyrs in various ways: 'How can you call them martyrs when none of them has been struck by the sword (…) show me the man who has ever been struck by the sword under Macarius', in; Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, M. Edwards trans. & ed. (Liverpool 1997) 3.8; Optatus was answering a claim made in the Donatist sermon on the passion of St. Donatus of Avioccala: 'As if they could say it was less of a martyrdom, because they were massacred by clubs instead of swords', in: *Sermon on the Passion of St. Donatus of Avioccala*, M. Tilly ed. & trans. (Liverpool 1996) 6.

[104] On atrocious violence in classical antiquity, see; Zimmermann, *Extreme Formen von Gewalt*, 1-25.

[105] A. Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich 1999) 222, 251, 336.

them, 'primordial acts of violence'.[106] Moreover, the impact of the literary report about the community's past was for the audience linked to violence, bodily harm and death.

In order to convince the audience that the violent act had in fact affected their very sense of being and should be considered an offence against all, the report about the atrocious act of violence needed to sound credible in order to activate a sense of *pathos*. Only when the audience's emotions were activated was the narrative about the atrocity capable of evoking horror and disgust and bring shame on the perpetrators. Zimmerman has shown that violence is 'culturally coded' and depicted according to literary and iconographic narrative patterns that are based 'on a shared cultural consensus'.[107] Naturally the impact of the representation depended on the familiarity of the audience with both form and contents of the report. Ideally it should be an act of violence the audience was familiar with and could threaten the audience itself at any time or moment. More specifically, it should be an act of violence similar to those recorded many times before in the audience's own collective memory and one which was thought to transgress the boundaries of acceptable violence. It should be an act which had hurt certain classes of people thought to be exempt and more specifically should disturb objects or actions the community held dear. Most of all because its messages, topoi and motifs needed to be understood by the audience, but also because the audience expected certain demands of genre. These needed to be followed closely or the story would lose its credibility and its appeal to the audience. Ideally the literary depiction of extreme violence and the boundaries of acceptable behavior it was deemed to transgress should encapsulate the various moral, ethical and social arrangements the community had constructed for itself and were believed to be fundamental for the community's very identity. In the representation of the extreme act of violence, the persons, objects and even buildings connected to these arrangements and which symbolize the audience's identity should at best be shown degraded and dishonored in order to evoke disgust, fear and horror in the audience's reaction.

It is thus possible to argue that, in a sense, the way in which a late antique author represented an outrageous act of violence actually tells us something about how he and the members of his community understood their own identity and the roles they assumed in the meta-narrative of Christian history

Letter writing and church desecration

The manner in which communities tried to convey the story of an atrocity was by 'emplotting' its narrative within the historical memory of other Christian communities across the Roman world. It was hoped that in doing so the atrocious acts of violence and the suffering of a local community would become emblematic for the general suffering of the entire Christian community, and indeed would come to be considered as an offence against all. The reason why a community wanted to share its suffering and perpetuate the idea that it was a persecuted community, was to bring shame to the perpetrators and perhaps curtail their behavior. Making the recipient share one's suffering was also meant to preempt the official response that the victimized community had deserved the persecution and that its martyrs were thus hardly martyrs at all, thereby completely delegitimizing the doctrinal viewpoints, beliefs and arguments of the beleaguered community. And finally, the more people knew of the outrage, the more people would protest against it, especially when they would considerer the outrage an offence against the entire community of Christ.

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[106] C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures* (New York 1973).

[107] M. Zimmermann, 'Violence in Late Antiquity reconsidered' in H. Drake, *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and Practices* (Burlington 2006) 355.

The preferred medium for local Christian communities to translate their sense of victimization to other communities and make sure that these appropriate the story as part of their own, was the letter. Letter writing had always been part of Christian tradition. The apostle Paul had sent dozens of letters across the Roman world in order to teach communities about the faith in Christ and His acts of suffering on behalf of all humanity. Acts of pre-constantinian martyrdom were in most cases conferred to by letter.[108] Late antique letters came in a variety of forms, ranging from letters of exhortation to those of accusation.[109] Their main use lay of course in the fact that letters could be copied quite rapidly and with reasonably little effort. Because of their relative small size, the letter could spread the outrage and narrative of persecution far and wide as it was copied successfully down the ladder by its successive recipients.

Like the non-Christian letters of the fourth century, the letters about atrocity were written by way of closely following the conventions of ciceronian epideictic rhetoric.[110] These conventions defined how the author of a letter should describe a violent act and how he should convince his audience that the act should be considered an outrage. Their primary use was that they could help an author or rhetorician convince and persuade his audience. But if the author was planning to achieve this, certain ground rules needed to be followed. Rhetorical manuals such as that of Cicero prescribe that when using epideictic rhetoric the orator should rely on three means of persuasion.[111] First of all, the story should be grounded on credibility. Second, it should be grounded in the psychology and emotions of the audience. And third, it should contain logical patterns of reasoning. The epideictic rhetoric should further be based on certain elements of style such as the use of certain words (like 'tyrant') and metaphors (usually be referring to biblical scenes). Finally, the rhetoric should have a fixed arrangement, containing elements that naturally follow upon another and that are recognizable (and perhaps expectable) for the audience.

The atrocity or extreme act of violence most frequently referred to in these fourth century letters, and one which was deemed offensive by all Christians, is that of the violent intrusion of armed soldiers into ecclesiastical space. In many ways, it showed the effect and the destructive consequences of the violent intrusion of soldiers into sacred space. These episodes of violent intrusion are also narrated in the many church histories of the age, and can indeed be considered to be part of any decent church history written in the fourth or fifth century.[112] But especially in letters did the image of soldiers desecration of church space find striking polemical use. These told the story of very real incidents happening under fairly similar circumstances, but they were narrated in very much the same way.

The actual reasons presented for such an intrusion in both letters and church histories are manifold. Soldiers could be ordered to arrest or remove an uncompromising bishop from his basilica. Mention is also made of decrees which ordered that churches and their property had to be confiscated or its congregation be replaced by that of another religious denomination. The intentional de-sacralisation of ecclesiastical space might also have been an intention, but it is nowhere explicitly referred to. However, there do exist some references in which the

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[108] For example, see the various local acts of martyrdom in Eusebius's *book of Martyrs*; Eusebius, *Book of Martyrs*, C. Cruse ed. & trans. (Peabody 1998) 307-333.

[109] Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, 185-216; S. Stowers, *Letter writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (London 1986).

[110] On the use of epideictic rhetoric in letter writing, see; Stowers, *Letter writing in Greco-Roman antiquity*, 1-20.

[111] Cicero (conj.), *Rhetorica ad Herennium,* H. Caplan trans. (Harvard 1989) III.

[112] For a systematic overview of episodes narrated in church histories, see; Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, 100-101.

de-sacralisation of non-Christian sacred space are presented as intentional.[113] The 'pollution' and invasion of temples and synagogues were intended to de-sacralise its sacred confines and alters whereby they were made useless for its devotees.[114] Whether or not this was also intended in relation to Christian sacred space is less clear. It was a commonly held assumption that deceased persons and their blood were capable of polluting sacred space.[115] That the dead should have no place in sacred space is for example also reflected by the various discussions and laws on the question whether burial of the dead inside Roman cities or churches was legitimate or not.[116] If in fact the de-sacralisation of a church would have been purposefully intended, one can notice that the effect would often have been quite the opposite.

Fortunately for our purposes, many of the letters that were written before the year 420 have actually survived. The reason why is that they had been included in 'local' church histories or in various polemical tracts.[117] These letters were composed in various parts of the empire, mostly by bishops who in one way or another had ended up at the receiving end of military led coercive force.

The earliest letter to survive is commonly referred to as the *Sermon on the passion of Donatus of Aviocalla*.[118] It was written by its anonymous author somewhere between 317 and 321, during the first period of repression of the Donatists. Originally the sermon was meant for the annual anniversary of an attack which had been made by local authorities on the sermonist's church somewhere around the year 317. In that year Constantine had published an edict in which he had ordered the local authorities to confiscate Donatist churches and properties and to hand them over to Catholics, in this case to the 'tyrannical bishop' Caecilian. The sermon tells the story of an attempt by armed soldiers to expel the Donatist worshippers from their basilica. The sermon narrates the terrible outrages committed in the church, the heroic resistance of the martyrs and the treatment and burial of the casualties afterwards Quite surprisingly, the sermon never refers to an actual martyrdom of St. Donatus, but only to that of an anonymous bishop of Avioccala.

The subsequent letters all originate from the Roman east, most of them from Alexandria. The *Encyclical Epistle of Athanasius* was written by the Alexandrian bishop Athanasius himself a short time after Lent in the year 339.[119] The letter is addressed to all 'his fellow ministers in every place', from which we might postulate that Athanasius expected as wide an audience as possible. The letter narrates the many outrages committed by Athanasius's adversary, the Arian bishop Gregory, and an almost systematic refutation of his opponents beliefs. The key episode narrated in the letter is the bloodshed that had occurred when imperial soldiers under the orders of the Arian emperor Constantius had tried to remove Athanasius from the Alexandrian basilica and replace him with a bishop more favorable to the Arian cause. The letter contains an appeal for 'all the bishops of the church' to unite against Gregory.

The *Diamartyria* is another letter to survive that details Athanasius resistance against his Arian opponents. This letter takes the form of a popular petition and it survives in one of Athanasius' polemical tracts called the

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[113] B. Caseau, 'Sacred Landscapes' in G. Bowersock, P. Brown & O. Grabar (eds.), *Interpreting Late Antiquity. Essays on the Postclassical World* (Cambridge 2001) 22-23.
[114] Caseau, 'Sacred Landscapes', 22-23.
[115] Ibidem, 22-23.
[116] Ibidem, 37.
[117] On the church historians of this period, see; W. Treadgold, *The early Byzantine historians* (London 2010) 121-175.
[118] *Sermon on the Passion of St. Donatus of Avioccala*, M. Tilly ed. & trans. (Liverpool 1996).
[119] Athanasius, *Encyclical Letter*, A. Martin ed. & trans (London 1985).

History against the Arians.[120] The letter was probably written sometime after Athanasius second flight in 356. it It is unlikely that Athanasius had written the letter himself. The authorship of the letter is referred to in more general terms as being a written by 'the people of the Catholic church of Alexandria'. However, it is possible that the letter is of Athanasius' own hand, and that he had written it during his exile. But the style of the *Diamartyria* is one of brevity and short sentences and seems to bear almost no resemblance to the other works of Athanasius. The petition is addressed to the future consuls, and to Athanasius' fellow bishops. That it was written with the intention to spread far and wide can be confirmed by the fact that information originating from the letter is referred to in contemporary church histories such as that of Socrates Scholasticus (ca. 380-439) which indicates that the suffering of the Alexandrians had been implotted in other local Christian communities' own stories.[121] The letter itself tells the story of how in the year 356 Constantius II (337-361) once again tried to replace Athanasius with a more friendly bishop, this time by installing the Arian Gregory. To enforce his decision, the *dux* Syrianus was sent with a force, reputed to be 5000 men strong, to drive Athanasius from his basilica. Although Athanasius managed to flee, the attack on the Alexandrian basilica ended in bloodshed. This incident is also mentioned earlier in Athanasius' *History against the Arians.*[122] Athanasius probably wanted to include the *diamartyria* at the end of his work as a form of testimony for his argument that the people of Alexandria wanted him as their bishop and not the 'heretical' George.

Unfortunately, some letters have only survived in a fragmentized form. One example is the Letter of Peter of Alexandria. The letter is partially included in Theodoret of Cyrrhus's (ca. 393-457) *Ecclesiastical History.*[123] The fact that the letter is included in Theodoret's history can be considered testimony to the fact Peter probably intended his letter to spread far and wide. Theodoret explains that he had hesitated 'to insert it at full length', and that he had decided to only 'quote some extracts from it', because he believed the contents of the letter to be too horrible for his reading audience. But luckily one of these extracts contains Peter's narrative of an attack on his Alexandrian church (the same one of which Athanasius had been driven out in 356) somewhere in the year 373.The letter recounts how with imperial approval the *comes sacrum largitionem* (Count of the sacred largess) Magnus had taken a military force from Syria to depose bishop Peter and to replace him with an Arian candidate named Lucius. Peter had fled before the attack began which had ended in bloodshed.

The last letter to survive from the fourth and early fifth century dates from the year 404. This letter was written by the domineering John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407), the by then deposed bishop of Constantinople.[124] The letter is addressed to pope Innocent I of Rome (401-417). Copies of this letter were also addressed to bishop Venerius of Milan and bishops Chromatius of Aquila. The reasons why the letter was addressed to the Pope are uncertain but they are possibly reflective of the fact that from the end of the fourth century appeals of protest and those concerning other disputes were more frequently addressed to the bishop of Rome. The letter is particularly interesting because it narrates a conflict that was not at all part of Christological and doctrinal conflicts as discussed before. This was a conflict about power and authority within the eastern church and one that was fought out amongst the Nicenes themselves. The patriarch of Alexandria, and John's rival, Theophilus, had been

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[120] *Second Petition* or *Diamartyria*, quoted in: Athanasius, *History of the Arians*, A. Robertson trans. (London 1891) 81
[121] Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, P. Schaff, H. Wace and A. Zenos eds. & trans (Peabody 1995) 2.11.
[122] Athanasius, *History against the Arians*, 48.288.
[123] Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, L. Parmentier ed. (Berlin 1954) 4.19.
[124] John Chrysostom, *Letter to Innocent I*, A. Malingrey ed. & trans. (Paris 1964) 3-4.

summoned to Constantinople in order to be judged for his alleged mistreatment of some Christian monks. However, Theophilus could not stand idle now that his enemies under the leadership of John were trying to judge him like a common criminal. He responded by gathering around him a large group of supporters and was so able to turn the tables around. Now Chrysostom was the accused and as a consequence was violently removed from his basilica and driven into exile. The letter of John Chrysostom is quite an interesting case because it survives both in the church history of Sozomen of Bethlehem and in the eulogy on the life of St. Chrysostom written by his admirer Palladius (ca. 363-420).[125] Palladius had in fact been a member of the party which had delivered the letters to its various recipients in Italy, and had perhaps played a role in the translation of John's letter into Latin. However, his version of the narrative is slightly different, containing personal touches perhaps influenced by other accounts or of later editing.

The authors of these letters wanted their audience to imagine that the attacks on their basilicas had been very bloody affairs. However, one must understand that the specific narrative aims, images and plots used in these letters quite considerably impede our view and understanding of the main characters and the extent to which the violence was actually committed. This had to do most of all with the fact that the recipients played an important part as third party observers in deciding whether the violent invasion of ecclesiastical space was legitimate or not. They had to be convinced that the violent act should indeed be considered an outrage.

The image these letters present, namely that of armed soldiers violently occupying a church and disrupting religious services, was described in a fairly consistent manner. A narrative detailing a violent attack on ecclesiastical space was often very formulaic and showcased a considerable amount of rhetoric, topoi and narrative themes. The composers of these letters were hardly interested at all in providing their readers with 'objective' historical information. This was partly because the audience expected certain literary standards, narrative forms and biblical or classical references in order to be convinced that the author's 'proposition of historical reality'. Authors also tried to encapsulate in their narratives a moralistic and didactic undertone which juxtaposed the preferred and exemplary forms of 'good' and 'bad' Christian behaviour. Authors also tried to play into the collective memory and shared historical past of the audience. For this purpose the parameters of good behaviour were often borrowed from a shared historical past which was held in common by all Christian communities. An author, for example, could model the behaviour of the victims on that of the pre-constantinian martyrs or he could describe the desecration of churches in similar terms to that of the early Christian- or Old Testament past. And finally, the images and arguments late antique authors wished to present were constructed in terms of shared norms about how, why and when it was deemed fit for people to use violence and in what way that violent behaviour was justifiable.

The authors of these letters had plenty examples to work with. Narratives and stories about the desecration of sacred space were hardly something new in the fourth century. These had featured prominently in classical pagan literature. Famous examples such as the violation of temples and priestesses during sack of Troy as recounted by

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[125] Palladius, *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom*, Gregory ed. & trans. (Peabody 1988) 57-58; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.21, 23.

Virgil or Sallust famous account on the conduct of Catiline conspirators can be said to have been part of any decently written historical account.[126] These could contain quite graphic imagery:

> Virgins and boys are violated, children torn from the embrace of their parents, matrons subjected to whatever should be the pleasure of the conquerors, temples and houses plundered, slaughter and burning rife; in fine all things filled with arms, corpses, blood and wailing.[127]

Indeed, these stories were ingrained in the foundational myths and collective historical memory of local communities across the Roman world.

For the fourth century Christian writers could also delve into their own scriptural and historical accounts in search for examples of the violent desecration of sacred space. Featuring prominently in early Christian imagination were the biblical passages on the sack and destruction of the first and second Temple. Graphic imagery such as the biblical description of the sack of the first temple would have been ingrained in the minds of any Christian intellectual. But although the destruction of the final Temple of Jerusalem had been fundamental in Christians' understanding and perceived veracity of Christ's predictions, the Temple had never been perceived to be the centre of 'true' Christian devotion.[128]

For the actual first reference to the destruction of Christian centres of gathering and worship one has to wait until at least the very beginnings of the fourth century. Eusebius of Caesarea, writer of the *Ecclesiastical History*, can be considered to be the first one to refer to the destruction of churches. These occurred during the last tetrarchic persecutions and were actually quite a novel feature.[129] Eusebius presents the destruction of churches and persecution of Christians as a form of divine punishment. He starts by recounting how Christianity had come to flourish under the privilege of Roman emperors and how the number of Christians and churches had greatly increased.[130] However , as Eusebius writes, 'by the reason of excessive liberty we sank into neglect and sloth, one envying and rivalling one another in different ways; we were almost at the point of taking up arms against each other, assailing each other with words as with darts and spears.'[131] It was God's punishment that the churches be overturned by pagan persecutors:

> It was in the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian. (302-3 AD) Imperial edicts were published to tear down the churches to their foundations, and to destroy their scriptures by fire. They also commanded that those who were in honourable positions should be degraded and that those who were freedmen should be deprived of their liberty if they persevered in their adherence to Christianity.[132]

The narrative is then followed by a detailed account of the martyrdom and suffering of the various Christian communities across the empire. Eusebius tells how women of piety were tortured and defiled, bishops were tortured and exposed and how adherents of the Christian faith were killed across the empire. Eusebius's main

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[126] Virgil, *Aeneid*, D. West ed. & trans. (London 1990) 2.761; Sallust, *Conspiracy of Catiline*, W. Badstone ed. & trans. (Oxford 2010) 51. Both episodes are mentioned by Augustine, see; Augustine, *The City of God*, 1.5.
[127] Sallust, *Conspiracy of Catiline*, 51.
[128] Caseau, 'Sacred Landscapes', 40.
[129] Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, 193.
[130] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.1.
[131] Ibidem, 8.1.
[132] Ibidem, 8.1.7.

purpose was of course to stress the importance of unity in order to pre-empt divine retribution, thus buttressing the authority and attempts to solve church controversies of later Christian emperors.

For information about what could have happened inside such a church one has to turn to its representation by Lactantius, a contemporary of Eusebius. In his polemical tract *On the death of the persecutors*, he recounts that, suddenly 'while it was still twilight', the prefects party came to the church of Nicomedia and forced open the doors.[133] What happens next can best be described in Lactantius's own wording:

> 'they forced open the doors and searched for the image of God; they found the scriptures and burnt them; all were granted booty; the scene was one of plunder, panic and confusion(…) Then the praetorians came in formation, bringing axes and iron tools, and after being ordered in from every direction they leveled the lofty edifice to the ground within a few hours'.[134]

This scene of destruction is followed by scenes of torture, similar to the ones in Eusebius account. But here the main purpose was to highlight the evil deeds of the persecutors. Lactantius saw the eventual, grievous deaths of the persecutors as a divine punishment for their zealous persecution of Christians. He argued that their coerced form of religion could never be true religion. Indeed, Lactantius was convinced that violent coercion undid and delegitimized the cause for which it was used.[135]

Telling the story: the 'soldiers in church' motif

What did the letters narrating the violent desecration of church space have in common? As mentioned before, fourth- and early fifth century letters detailing the violent military invasion of ecclesiastical usually contain a fixed set of narrative elements, topoi and tropes. Michael Gaddis had argued that these found consistent use during the fourth century and kept very much their own fixed shapes.[136] Unfortunately, Gaddis has not attempted to explain these shapes in any detail, nor does he acknowledges that the motif could be given a quite personal touch. Gaddis has also failed to notice the main medium by which these stories were spread, namely the letter, and the various reasons why the story had to be spread. I agree with Gaddis that the images these narratives presented were of course highly symbolic, and even more so, allegorical. But I would also like to argue that the desecration shown of objects, people and services should be considered an eloquent description of the intruders violation of everything the community held dear, and should indeed be considered an assault on the community's very identity. Studying the letters spreading word of the atrocity must be considered essential.

In these letters the attack of soldiers on a basilica is usually presented as taking place at the time when the congregation is still holding religious services or when other acts of devotion are taking place, for instance around midnight when the devotees are holding a vigil. In *the sermon on the suffering of St. Donatus* the congregationists knew of the gruesome act which was about to occur.[137] A topos also used in earlier Christian martyr texts.[138] Knowing what was about to occur and that the *traditores* were going to seize their church, 'they flew undaunted to the house of prayer with a desire to suffer'. The sermonist praises the coming victims for their

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[133] Lactantius, *On the death of the persecutors*, J. Creed ed. & trans. (Oxford 1984) 12.2-5

[134] Lactantius, *On the death of the persecutors*, 12.2-5.

[135] Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, A. Bowen & P. Garnsey eds. & trans. (Liverpool 2004) 5.6.

[136] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ,* 79-83.

[137] *Passion of St. Donatus*, 6.

[138] Avemarie & Van Henten, *Martyrdom and noble death*, 4-7, 98-101.

pious devotion as they 'grazed on the sacred readings, and prescribed fasts fed them with continual prayers'.[139] According to Athanasius *Encyclical Letter*, the attack on him and his supporters occurred quite unexpectedly. It had been the 'holy season of Lent', almost Easter, a time when the devotees were keeping pious fasts.[140] His supporters were holding 'pious assemblies' and people advanced 'in pious conversation' when the letter pertaining their ejection was suddenly presented and subsequently the attackers suddenly burst in. The composers of the *diamartyria* also lamented that the attack on the basilica had been made quite suddenly. In fact it had occurred whilst they were keeping a midnight vigil and were engaged in the pious prayer.[141] Even worse, communion had been in preparation and the lessons from sacred scripture were being read, all whilst the bishop was sitting on his throne. According to John Chrysostom his church had come under attack at a time when evening was approaching. It had been 'the great Sabbath itself' when the attackers made their violent entry 'under cover of night' when women in the oratories were still naked because they had 'stripped themselves for baptism'.[142] Unfortunately, the part of Peter's letter detailing the time of the attack has been lost. Theodoret states that Peter had fled the scene to Rome as soon as he had 'beheld the unforeseen conflict'.[143] From this statement we might deduce that the original letter contained a reference to the suddenness and disruptive nature of the attack.

Writing for a largely Christian audience, the authors usually present their foes in the most dehumanized and un-Christian terms as possible. The sermonist of the *Passion of St. Donatus* presents those who attempt force the Donatists out of their church as tools of the devil. He states that bishop Caecilian, *dux* Ursatius and the tribune Marcellinus had the devil as their councilor.[144] He states that their practices were 'rooted in the Old Serpent who had already shown himself the enemy of the Christian Name'.[145] Caecilian was a 'Catholic' and thus part of a long line of *traditores*. He is described as being nothing but a 'rapacious robber'.[146] The author states that Caecilian and 'the enemy of salvation had concocted an evil plan' aimed at defiling the faith.[147] The author notes the Catholics legitimated their efforts by the appeal to unity.[148] The soldiers accompanying them were not just normal soldiers, they were cruel mercenaries who had been paid in advance and were indeed only thinking of pay.[149]

Athanasius describes his enemies in equally stark terms. Gregory, who was to replace him, is presented as an Arian and a man of 'no respectable character'.[150] He is presented as someone 'full of zeal against the Church' who had succeeded in bringing together against his church a passionate multitude of heathen, Jews and 'disorderly persons'.[151] The armed Jewish men were especially offensive because in Athanasius opinion these

[139] *Passion of St. Donatus*, 6.
[140] Athanasius, *Encyclical Letter*, 4.
[141] *Diamartyria*, 81.
[142] Chrysostom, *Letter to Innocent I*, 3.
[143] Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.18.
[144] *Passion of St. Donatus*, 2.
[145] Ibidem, 2.
[146] Ibidem, 3.
[147] Ibidem, 3.
[148] Ibidem, 3.
[149] Ibidem, 6.
[150] Athanasius, *Encyclical Letter*, 3.
[151] Ibidem, 3.

had been 'the murderers of our Lord'.[152] Gregory was accompanied by a certain *prefect* named Philagrius, 'who had long been a persecutor of the church and her virgins' and indeed 'an apostate already'. Athanasius places these two in the role of persons who were considered to be the arch villains of Christianity's common past. He tells that Gregory 'exhibited the disposition of a Caiaphas' and compares Philargius with 'Pilate the governor'.[153]

When referring to the attack on their bishop and the seizure of the basilica, the petitioners of the *diamartyria* tried to downplay the various ethnic and religious terms to describe their enemies. Possibly because the letter had been intended for the official authorities themselves. Duke Syrianus who led the attack on the church receives the title 'most illustrious Duke'.[154] Constantius II, the grand architect of the attack, is described as 'the most gracious emperor'.[155] This was in fact normal in official correspondence, dignitaries had to be mentioned alongside their official titulature if the appeal to imperial authorities were to have any sympathetic response. We might only imagine what Athanasius would have thought himself of these flattering remarks. In his own work he normally portrays Constantius II in the most negative terms as possible, usually as an heretical Arian and as a successor of the persecuting emperors of the past. The shocking image in the *diamartyria* is that of the worldly soldiers themselves:

> Legions of soldiers armed with naked swords and javelins and other warlike instruments, and wearing helmets on their heads; broke down the doors (…) and when the doors were burst open by the violence of the multitude, he gave command, and some of them were shooting; others shouting, their arms rattling, and their swords flashing in the light of the lamps.[156]

Peter's enemies take on a variety of identities. They are mostly described in quite neutral terms, like for instance as 'crowds' and 'villains'. He also relates to a transvestite who's is brought in when the attackers decide to throw in a party and a naked boy who sits on the bishop's throne ranting scorn and abuse on Christ's Name.[157] Bishop Lucius, who is to replace Peter, is presented as an adherent to the doctrine of Arius.[158] The way in which Alexandria's native pagans greeted him represents Peter's opinion of his opponent: 'Welcome, bishop, because thou deniest the Son. Serapis loves thee and has brought thee to us.'[159] For Peter, these acclamations indicated that Lucius was not a real Christian but a pagan. Peter also presents Lucius acting in a similar way as the persecutors of the past. He mentions how Lucius and his cronies forced the Nicene orthodox to swear the Arian creed:

> (…) he shouted "accept, accept the doctrine of the Arians; God will pardon you even though you worship with a true worship, if you do this not of your own accord but because you are compelled. There is always a defence for irresponsible compulsion, while free action is responsible and much followed by accusation. Consider well these arguments; come willingly; away with all delay; subscribe the doctrine of Arius preached now by Lucius.[160]

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[152] Ibidem, 3.
[153] Ibidem, 4.
[154] *Diamartyria*, 81.
[155] Ibidem, 81.
[156] Ibidem, 81.
[157] Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.19.
[158] Ibidem, 4.22.
[159] Ibidem, 4.22.
[160] Ibidem, 4.22.

Lucius is also presented as 'having a bad character' and showing the conduct 'of a wolf'.[161] A military man named Magnus is presented as Lucius's cruel pagan bodyguard and commander. He is shown 'behaving like a persecutor' and mention is also made that Magnus had in fact burned another church during the reign of the heinous Emperor Julian (r. 361-363).[162]

Like Peter, Chrysostom describes his enemy Theophilus (d. 412) as a tyrant. Chrysostom presents his opponent as one who is accompanied and supported by foreigners in the guise of Syrians. Possibly the reference to Syrians is meant to show that Theophilus' power was supported by those whom he had brought from places other than his own diocese. Theophilus is presented as having a track record of violence. Accredited to him are accusations of 'assault, and slaughter and countless other crimes'.[163] The religious and ethnic identity of the soldiers involved in the attack are slightly more difficult to define. Peter merely states that some of 'the dense group of soldiers' were un-baptized, which actually means that the great multitude of them apparently were baptized.[164] The actual ethnic identity of the attackers is presented in the work of John's admirer Palladius. He presents them as 'Tracian youths' (slang for Goths) who had only recently been recruited to aid in the attack.[165]

The authors of the desecration letters present the clergy being degraded by a variety of means. They are shown being beaten with sticks and rods, and fleeing in every direction. The Donatist *sermon on the suffering of St. Donatus* simply postulates that the slaughter of priests is just too gruesome to mention.[166] But on the other hand he does make reference to a certain holy bishop of Siciliba who had died by a sword thrust to the throat.[167] Athanasius recalls in his *Encyclical Letter* how monks had been trampled underfoot and how some of them had even been hurled across the church.[168] He recounts that other priests had been wounded and beaten and the presbyters and laymen had 'their flesh torn'.[169] The petitioners of the *diamartyria* recollect how their deacons had been beaten with clubs and stripes and how their bishop Athanasius was seized and had managed to escape only in nick of time before being 'torn to pieces' by his opponents.[170] The petitioners state that even at the time when they were asking their favors they did not know where Athanasius had run off to.[171] Peter on the other hand hardly mentions the faith of his clergy at all. He merely laments his own flight and makes no reference to the fate of the other priests. What might have happened to these priest we might read in the letter of Chrysostom. He recounts that in his case more than forty bishops who were associated to his cause were violently expelled alongside his supporters and clergy.[172]

The virgins and women are usually represented as the ones who received the most excruciating treatment. For example, the passion of St. Donatus laments that it is almost too gruesome to speak of the defilement of his Basilica's holy virgins.[173] The sermonist recounts how these virgins, 'keeping their eyes shut', where cut down

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[161] Ibidem, 4.22.
[162] Ibidem, 4.22.
[163] Chrysostom, *Letter to Innocent I*, 1.
[164] Ibidem, 3.
[165] Palladius, *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom*, 192.
[166] *Passion of St. Donatus*, 5.
[167] Ibidem, 7.
[168] Athanasius, *Encyclical Letter*, 3.
[169] Ibidem, 4.
[170] *Diamartyria*, 181.
[171] Ibidem, 181.
[172] Chrysostom, *Letter to Innocent I*, 2.
[173] *Passion of St. Donatus*, 5.

in the middle of the basilica along with the other martyrs.[174] In the *Encyclical Letter* of Athanasius' the defilement of virgins is shown in really stark terms. His virgins were defiled in a variety of ways:

> For holy and undefiled virgins were being stripped naked, and suffering treatment which is not to be named and if they resisted, they were in danger of their lives (…) Certain impious men also, following the examples set them in the bitterest persecutions, were seizing upon the virgins and ascetics by the hands and dragging them along, and as they were haling them, endeavored to make them blaspheme and deny the Lord; and when they refused to do so, were beating them violently and trampling them under foot. (…)virgins were stripped of their veils, and led away to the tribunal of the governor, and then cast into prison; others had their goods confiscated, and were scourged; the bread of the ministers and virgins was intercepted.[175]

The petitioners of the *Diamartyria* lament that their virgins had been slain and stripped naked by the invading soldiers.[176] These virgins are shown as trying to protect their chastity at all cost. The petition recounts that they were in fact 'more afraid of being even touched by them than they were of death'.[177] And finally, the authors tell us that 'the most holy virgins who were left behind were buried in the tombs, having attained the glory of martyrdom'.[178]

Peter's virgins received a beating. He tells his audience that it truly a shame to tell anything of the outrages that had been offered to the 'Virgins of Christ'.[179] He writes that the virgins 'whose conversations gave an exact likeness of saints' were dragged naked through the town 'as if they were born':

> they made indecent sport of them at their pleasure; their deeds were barbarous and cruel. Did anyone in pity interfere and urge to mercy he was dismissed with wounds. Ah! Woe is me. Many a virgin underwent brutal violation; many a maid beaten on the head with clubs lay dumb.[180]

Contrary to the graphic descriptions of the defilement of virgins in other accounts, John Chrysostom's letter does not make a direct reference to them. In his letter we encounter a rather playful manipulation of this 'virgin-topos'. In the letter he tells his audience how 'women from the oratories who had stripped themselves for baptism just at that time, fled unclothed, from terror at this grievous assault, not being permitted to put on the modest apparel which befits women; indeed many received wounds before they were expelled'.[181] This is in effect a very graphic image. The women had already stripped themselves for baptism, ready to be included into the community of God. They had almost shed of their defilement of earthly life by being baptized in the pure waters of the baptismal font. All of this was not to happen due to the violent interruption of soldiers into the church. The baptismal pools were filled with blood, making any attempt at future baptism impossible.

The desecration of virgins and women was meant to be representative of what was going to happen with the church building, and more specifically its material contents. In the aftermath of the attack, the church building is

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[174] Ibidem, 8.
[175] Athanasius, *Encyclical Letter*, 3.
[176] *Diamartyria*, 81.
[177] Ibidem, 81.
[178] Ibidem, 81.
[179] Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.19.
[180] Ibidem, 4.19.
[181] Chrysostom, *Letter to Innocent I*, 3.

usually presented as a scene of plunder and festivity in which not even the most sacred objects were spared. According to the author of the Passion of St. Donatus, the basilica taken over by the *traditores* was turned into a 'tavern'.[182] He tells his audience that pious prayers were from now on to be profaned by impure deeds and 'illegitimate incantations'.[183] The basilica was turned into a place of banquets attended by 'lascivious youths' and despicable women.[184] The author thought it was even a crime to mention what had happened amongst such festive occasions.[185] He then tells how afterwards some of those who had fled returned to the basilica and saw human bodies littering across basilica floor.[186] The author continues by stating that those who had returned had decided the bury the victims in the basilica itself.[187] This is in fact the earliest reference to a so called burial *ad sanctum*, as the bodies of the martyrs were placed next to that of the fallen bishop himself. The author could only praise their piety:

> What passion of soul! What groan of lamentation! What devotion! Dashing among the bodies of the massacred, they hurried to identity each of those lying there. When children happened on the bodies of their parents cast upon the ground, and parents on the bodies of their children, you could see some of them holding their dead in their arms.[188]

Athanasius tells in his *Encyclical Letter* how in the aftermath of attack on his basilica, the building became the scene of various celebratory acts of desecration. For example, he states that all kind of 'impious' deeds were committed upon 'the Holy Table':

> They were offering birds and pine cones in sacrifice, singing the praises of their idols, and blaspheming even in the very churches our Lord and Savior Jesus-Christ, the Son of the living God. They were burning the books of Holy Scripture which they found in the church; and the Jews, the murderers of our Lord, and the godless heathen entering irreverently (O strange boldness!) the holy Baptistery, were stripping themselves naked, and acting such a disgraceful part, both by word and deed, as one is ashamed even to relate.[189]

Athanasius tells his audience that this festive atmosphere was accompanied by acts of plunder.[190] The doors of the church were taken out of their sockets and the storage of holy oil was plundered. The wine, which happened to be present in a quite a large quantity, was either drunken or stolen. He also recounts how the sums of money stored in the church were divided amongst the intruders and that the candles of the church were either stolen or lit before idolatrous altars. Athanasius writes that afterwards even the holy baptistery was set on fire.[191]

Similar feats of plunder were narrated to the audience of the *diamartyria*. Next to acts of murder and bloodshed, the soldiers are presented as giving themselves over to plunder and rapine. They are shown

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[182] *Passion of St. Donatus*, 4.
[183] Ibidem, 4.
[184] Ibidem, 4.
[185] Ibidem, 4.
[186] Ibidem, 13.
[187] Ibidem, 13.
[188] Ibidem, 13.
[189] Athanasius, *Encyclical Letter*, 3.
[190] Ibidem, 4.
[191] Ibidem, 4.

surrounding the sanctuary and even entering into the places 'were not even all Christians are allowed to enter'.[192] The authors tell their audience that when the attackers had eventually left that what remained afterwards was a scene of dead people and weapons, both littered across the floor.[193] They recount how after the attack, the congregation gathered up the weapons left behind and decided to exhibit them. They state that at the time they were writing, the weapons were still there, visible for everyone to see, despite the efforts of the embarrassed local commanders to have them removed. Possibly the action of exposing the bodies and weapons was also as an educational tool for the victimized congregation and those visiting:

> For the bodies of the slain which were discovered and were exposed in public, and the bows and arrows and other arms found in the Lord's house, loudly proclaim the iniquity (...)Evidence of the nature of this hostile assault is afforded by the fact that the armour and javelins and swords borne by those who entered were left in the Lord's house. They have been hung up in the church to this time, that they might not be able to deny it, and although they sent several times Dynamius the general (*strategos*), as well as the commander of the city guards, desiring to take them away, we would not allow it, until the circumstance was known to all.[194]

Peter refers to a similar carnavalesque atmosphere as the one narrated in the *encyclical letter* of Athanasius. Peter tells that at the very altar of his basilica 'the impious perpetrated what, as it is written (Joel I.2.), neither happened nor was heard of in the days of our fathers'.[195] He recounts that the occupants 'uttered the praises of idols' and that instead of the pious reading of holy scripture there could be heard the 'unseemly clapping of hands with unmanly and indecent utterances'. Peter recounts to his audience that the perpetrators had decided to throw in a party, but this was not a normal party. He tells his audience that a transvestite made his way to the altar. Peter tells how this boy:

> smeared with antimony, and face reddened with rouge like their idols, in woman's dress, was set up to dance and wave his hands about and whirl round as though he had been at the front of some disreputable stage, on the holy altar itself where we call on the coming of the Holy Ghost, while the by-standers laughed aloud and rudely raised unseemly shouts (…).[196]

Even worse, for Peter, the Name of Christ was mocked when the invaders decided to organize a mock trial of Jezus Christ himself. The advocate chosen was a man 'famous for utter baseness' who was stripped naked and seemingly uttered all kinds of offences against Christianity instead of 'divine words'.

> Then for divine words he uttered shameless wickedness, for lawful doctrines wanton lewdness, for piety impiety, for continence fornication, adultery, foul lust, theft; teaching that gluttony and drunkenness as well as all the rest were good for man's life..[197]

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[192] *Diamartyria*, 81.
[193] Ibidem, 81.
[194] Ibidem, 81.
[195] Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.19.
[196] Ibidem, 4.19.
[197] Ibidem, 4.19.

John Chrysostom compared the desecrations done in his church with those committed during a barbarian siege.[198] Sieges had always been portrayed as especially gruesome affairs accompanied by death, destruction, plunder and even cannibalism. But for the audience this comparison might perhaps have had even more connotations. His audience would have still remembered the violent invasions of the Goths in northern in Italy at the start of the fifth century, or the destruction wrought to many a Balkan city in the 370's.[199] As we have already seen, John had referred to how the church's baptismal pool had been filled with blood. By referring to the blood mixing in with the baptismal water, John wanted to highlight to his audience the charge that his adversaries had polluted the most holy sacrament of the church. It also recalled for his audience what in old martyr texts is often called a baptism of blood, thereby already supporting the argument that John's community was perpetuating the narrative of martyrdom and resistance.[200] But this was hardly all, John recounts how the soldiers entered the place where church vessels and indeed the very blood of Christ had been stored. He tells how the soldiers plundered the place empty and that 'the most holy blood of Christ' was subsequently spilled upon the soldiers garments.[201] For a Christian audience, the profanation of the actual blood of Christ would have been deemed unforgivable.

Lastly, the letters usually contain a number of brief references in which the audience is asked to share the author's grief and condemn the act which had been perpetrated. In these parts the audience is exhorted to acknowledge the persecuted community's martyrs and sense of victimization and to support the argument that injustice had been done to them. The author formulates arguments in order to convince the audience that it itself had become the victim of the attack and that something similar could happen to them at any moment. Because the audience itself has become the victim, the author asks his audience to protest against the offence and to make sure that the author's request are fulfilled in order to curtail the actions of the perpetrators.

The sermonist of *the Passion of St. Donatus* evokes images which correspond to the past of persecution and martyrdom to activate his audience's sense of *pathos*. The martyrs are presented as having given themselves up voluntarily as a sacrifice like 'the crown before the altar of God'.[202] The slain are compared to soldiers in the line of battle.[203] The author exhorts his audience that the dead are martyrs, even those who had spilt no blood at all because they had been clubbed to death.[204] Even more, the sermonist relates that the victimized congregation had found its own way to remember the act by placing a commemorative inscription relating the names of the martyrs and the persecutors[205] The dead are presented as examples for the community to follow, they are to serve as instruction for the unbeliever that the *traditores* always try to seduce them and that to be silent about the martyrs is 'contrary to religion'.[206]

Athanasius does something quite similar in his *Encyclical Letter*. First of all, Athanasius states that he wants to inform his audience of present circumstances, and remind them of what happened. He uses the biblical story

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[198] Chrysostom, *Letter to Innocent I*, 3.
[199] W. Bayless, 'The Visigothic Invasion of Italy in 401', *The Classical Journal* 1 (1976) 65-67.
[200] Gaddis, *There is no crime for those who have Christ*, 82.
[201] Chrysostom, *Letter to Innocent I*, 3.
[202] *Passion of St. Donatus*, 13.
[203] Ibidem, 14.
[204] Ibidem, 6.
[205] Ibidem, 8.
[206] Ibidem, 1.

of a Levite whose wife had been killed (Judges 19:29).[207] Athanasius tells his audience that the Levite chose to perpetuate the act by sending parts of his wife's body far and wide to the fellow tribes. He then relates how the tribes had acted astounded, just as the receivers of the letter should. Athanasius also asks his audience to spread the word of the basilica desecration.[208] He also warns them that the audience itself was being threatened, because according to Athanasius the 'madness of the Arians' who committed cruelties 'greater than in times of war' threatened to corrupt the entire Church.[209] They are asked not to allow the church of Alexandria 'to be trodden down'.[210] Athanasius also requests his audience to tear to pieces the letters of the perpetrators which defended their actions.[211] And finally, Athanasius requests his audience to condemn the actions of his enemies and to sent their own letters thereby hoping that the perpetrators 'may be reformed by your letters, and brought at last, though late, to repentance'.[212]

The *diamartyria* seems to present a situation being somewhere halfway in the negotiation of victimhood as described above. First of all because the letter was aimed at convincing the official authorities themselves. Secondly, because the petitioners refer to a first petition, to which apparently there had not been given any satisfactory response.[213] The letter also contains an unveiled threat to the authorities. The petitioners relate that they themselves were prepared for martyrdom if Constantius would decide to persecute them also.[214] Reference is also made to the virgins and it is stated that these had already become martyrs themselves.[215] The petitioners relate that they had found their own way to perpetuate the attack. They narrate that they had decided to exhibited, for all Alexandria to see, the bodies and weapons that had been left after the attack.[216] Appeals of victimhood are made to the emperor and the prefect of Egypt.[217] The authors also ask 'the masters of vessels' (the clergy) to spread the story and to 'carry them to the ear of the most religious Augustus'.[218] The authors further occasion themselves to formulate Constantius's response to condemn the act.[219] Just as in the letter of Athanasius and the *sermon on the suffering of St. Donatus*, the petitioners present the desecration of the church as an act of war.[220]

The 'war-topos' is also referred to in the letter of Peter of Alexandria. In it, Peter presents the persecution of his congregation in terms of a 'truce-less war'.[221] He also refers to acts of martyrdom. For instance, the victims of his enemies are referred to as 'Christ's athletes', terminology which had found similar use in earlier acts of martyrdom.[222] Although the original appeal to the audience is lost, there is one segment of the letter in which Peter asks his audience 'to rise in our vindication'.[223] From it we might surmise that similar appeals and similar

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[207] Athanasius, *Encyclical Letter*, 1.
[208] Ibidem, 1.
[209] Ibidem, 1,6,7.
[210] Ibidem, 1,7.
[211] Ibidem, 7.
[212] Ibidem, 7.
[213] *Diamartyria*, 81.
[214] Ibidem, 81.
[215] Ibidem, 81.
[216] Ibidem, 81.
[217] Ibidem, 81.
[218] Ibidem, 81.
[219] Ibidem, 81.
[220] Ibidem, 81.
[221] Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.19.
[222] Ibidem, 4.19.
[223] Ibidem, 4.19.

language had originally been part of both introduction and closing statements of Peter's letter.

John Chrysostom's letter is also accompanied by war imagery. In it, he compares the attack on his church with a barbarian siege.[224] He also writes that he is convinced that his audience had probably already heard of the desecration.[225] In his letter, the act of desecration is not merely presented as an offence against John, but an offence against the entire church and a 'most grievous storm' which he thought had to be stayed of.[226] Chrysostom also asks his audience to rouse itself on his behalf, stating that in doing so they would confer a favor not only upon themselves, but upon the entire Church.[227] But not only does Chrysostom ask his audience to lament the attack, he also asks them to perpetuate it and curtail the behavior of his enemies.[228] If they do so, John promises, they were to be rewarded by God.[229]

Church desecration and identity

As said before, the way in which the portrayal of violence is rendered to the audience is never aimed at an absolute or objective representation. The representation of the extreme act of violence is loaded with meaning and it contains implicit references to what the community holds dear and sees as constituent for its own identity. By investigating these desecration narratives it is possible to reconstruct what the author and his community and that of the recipient held dear and considered essential for their own identity.

First and foremost, constant references are made to the desecration of the act of worship, something embodied by the disturbance of baptismal rituals, the Eucharist and nightly vigils whilst they were still taking place. As Galvao-Sobrinho has argued, it is through repeated actions with the divinity like these that Christians themselves became aware of being Christian. Second, constant references that are made to the vessels and the other objects such as the bread, wine and the altars by which the community mediated its interaction with the divine. By placing emphasis on the desecration of these objects the authors wanted to postulate to their audience that by plundering and desecrating these objects the intruders had tried to frustrate the communities participation with the divine. God would no longer become present in the form of the bread and wine and the altars on which the miracle was thought take place could no longer be used. Desecrating these objects frustrated the community's worship of God Himself. Third, the clergy, being the mediators with divine and the community's leaders, are presented as being the victim of a special kind of degrading treatment. Whilst the community considers them to be men of honor, they are nonetheless whipped and clubbed by their opponents like dogs and common criminals. Like traitors and heretics they are forced to flee. Fourth, it has already been stated above that virgins were believed to be the symbolic representatives, or more precisely the embodiments of the community of Christ and indeed Christ himself. Their profanation stands symbolic for the profanation of the entire community. And last, the martyrs and the casualties themselves play an important role. They are figures who had shown exemplary behavior and their death is presented as proof of the communities status as an persecuted community and makes it possible for them to reenact and perpetuate the grand narrative of persecution, suffering and resistance.

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[224] Chrysostom, *Letter to Innocent I*, 3.
[225] Ibidem, 1.
[226] Ibidem, 1.
[227] Ibidem, 4.
[228] Ibidem, 1, 4.
[229] Ibidem, 4.

So within these desecration narratives the community's identity appears to be embodied by the virgins, the clergy, the martyrs, and by the objects and rites by which the community mediated its interaction with the divine. What gave these markers of Christian identity such an important role in the desecration letters, was that they were shared and cherished by all Christian communities across the fourth century Roman world.

Note that within these narratives the church building itself hardly plays any role at all. It is the community itself and the objects and rites by which they try to mediate with the divine that are shown desecrated. From this can be deduced that the authors of these texts still believed that churches were not temples for the divinity but gathering places for the worshippers. Churches were not yet believed to be places in which the divine resided. The church building only united under its roof the altar and the Christian worshipping community. These were believed to be holy, not the actual building that housed them. This idea, that the Church is embodied by the community and not by the actual building, is similar to how early Christians had perceived themselves. St. Paul is reputed to have said that the worshippers themselves were the temples of the living God (2 Corinthians 6:16.). Tertullian had stated something quite similar, namely that the community was holy, not the church that housed it.[230] Augustine had argued the same: the building was there to congregate the community, not the divine.[231] The building thus had only a derivative sacredness embodied by the community, their worship, and the objects meant to aid in this worship. These were the cherished markers of a community's identity that were threatened by the violent invasion of church space. More specifically, these are the markers that corresponded not only to the identity of present Christians as a collective, but also to that of Christians living in the past. Because these markers were shared by all Christians, their desecration would be considered a grievous outrage.

For fourth century Christians, the invasion of the church and the desecration of its community symbolized the notion that people are challenged to accept the opponents behavior or stand firm at all costs. The physical transgression of the community's boundaries symbolized for them the transgression of its non-physical or behavioral boundaries. The authors who conveyed the story of such a breach emphasized that it had in fact been an act of war that threatened the desecration of everything the community held dear. They hoped to convince their audience that their community had become the victim of a violent assault. Referring to the dead and the martyrs, and the desecration of everything the community held dear was considered to be fundamental precondition if the communities status as being the victim were to be acknowledged. The audience, or third party observers, needed to be included in the suffering of the community, and even more so, they were asked to appropriate the atrocious act as an offence against themselves. A letter referring to the degradation of these markers of identity that Christians held in common as a collective, was the essential medium to include the third party observers into the party of the victims. By acknowledging the victimhood of the besieged community, their martyrs and the role they were playing in the grand-narrative of persecution and resistance, the acts of the perpetrator came to be delegitimized. Consequently, the perpetrator became steadily fixed in his role as persecutor and the victims took on the role of the persecuted, the ultimate acknowledgement of victimhood. This sense of victimhood corresponded to a commonly held understanding of the past, a story shared by all Christian and ingrained into the collective memory. Acknowledgement of being the victim is essential for the community's own understanding of being victimized and is indeed a constituent for its own militant identity. It

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[230] R. Marcus, *The end of ancient Christianity* (Cambridge 1990) 140; Tertullian, *De corona*, J. Fontaine ed. & trans. (Paris 1966) 9.2.
[231] Augustine, *Sermons*, 337.

helped them believe in their role as persecuted, thereby making it possible to reenact their own glorious past.

The enemy can be considered the binary opposite of the community. He is presented as everything the community is not. Its behavior transgresses both the community's physical and behavioral boundaries. The enemies of the community are presented as the dangerous and seductive 'other' always on the lure to seduce Christians from the true faith. They are the overwhelming force that always threatens the community and indeed buttresses their militant form of Christian identity. The enemy is the worldly secular force which tries to tear down both the community's religious and behavioral boundaries. They were the ones who according to John Chrysostom made good Christians shelter within the walls of their community. Outside of these walls lurked beasts intent on devouring lost souls. Christ had left these beasts just outside the church so that the Christians would huddle together within it. [232]

III. Orosius and the sack of Rome

Paulus Orosius had started his career as a presbyter and heresiologist somewhere in the Priscillianist badlands of Spain.[233] In Spain he had presumably participated in the many church controversies over the teachings of the Priscillianist and Origenists, apparently combating their ideas with considerable skill. Somewhere around the year 411 he had to leave his native lands.[234] Exactly why is not entirely clear. But it can be assumed that the many upheavals which had hit Spain at this time, like for instance the many Vandal and Sueve raids, may have forced him to flee. It is also possible that Orosius had left on invitation of Augustine. But unfortunately, the exact reason why he left can no longer be ascertained. No mention of it is made in any of his writings, nor in that of his contemporaries

The fact is that Orosius was received by Augustine with quite some enthusiasm. Augustine had become interested in Orosius apparent doctrinal battles against the arch heretics of Spain. Somewhere around the year 414 Orosius presented Augustine with his so called *Commonitorium de errore Priscillianistarum et Origenistarum*.[235] The work contained a careful refutation of the various heretical opinions of his Priscillianist and Origenist opponents about matters such as the finite relation between the body and soul and on which one of the two had been created first. His work was received by Augustine with great enthusiasm. Augustine even responded with his own doctrinal refutation of Priscilianism and Origenism, the *Contra Priscillianistas et Origenistas liber ad Orosium*.[236] Indeed, Orosius had made such an impression with Augustine that he was sent with a letter of introduction to Jerome in Bethlehem, somewhere around 415.[237] There, he represented Augustine and the Nicene orthodox at the Synod of Jerusalem where he was tasked to convince his brethren to convict the ideas of Pelagius.[238] The entire affair had ended somewhat a failure, the bishop of Jerusalem presiding the council decided that Orosius and his supporters' arguments were to be presented before Pope Innocent in Rome.

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[232] John Chrysostom, *Adversus Judaeos orationes*, P. Harkins ed. & trans. (Washington, D.C. 1977) 3.1.7.

[233] D. Rohrbacher, *The historians of Late Antiquity* (London 2002) 135-138.

[234] A. Fear, *Orosius Seven books of history against the pagans. Translated texts for historians volume 54* (Liverpool 2010) Introduction 3.

[235] Rohrbacher, *The historians of Late Antiquity*, 135-136; Fear, *Orosius Seven books of history against the pagans*, 4.

[236] Rohrbacher, *The historians of Late Antiquity*, 135-136; Fear, *Orosius Seven books of history against the pagans*, 4

[237] Augustine, *Letters*, B. Ramsey & R. Teske ed. & trans. (New York 2004) 166; Fear, *Orosius Seven books of history against the pagans*, 4.

[238] A. Merrils, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Melbourne 2005) 37-40; Fear, *Orosius Seven books of history against the pagans*, 3-4.

A great deal of Orosius apparent argumentation survives in the so called *Liber apologeticus de arbitrii libertate* which contained the many arguments Augustine had set forth against the heretical Pelagius.[239] We might imagine that Pelagius' subsequent legitimization at the council of Diospolis (415), which Orosius did not attend, was probably met by him with some grief.[240] Afterwards Orosius returned to Africa one more time to attend the council of Carthage (418) and afterwards presumably returned home to his native Spain, possibly making a short detour to the ever increasing anti-Jewish Minorca to deliver the relics of St. Stephan.[241]

Orosius most famous work is the so called *Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII*. It is not entirely clear when the work was completed, presumably somewhere in—or shortly after—the year 418, because its last reference is to the death of King Whallia in Spain. The work's seven books detail the pagan and Christian history of the world from approximately the foundation of Rome until Orosius's own times. The reason why it was written becomes clear from the introduction of the work. In it, Orosius recounts that he has obeyed the bidding of his 'most blessed father Augustine' who had asked Orosius to 'speak out in opposition to empty perversity of those who, aliens to the City of God, are called 'pagans'(*pagani*) from the crossroads and villages of country places or 'heathen' (*gentiles*) because of their knowledge of earthly things'.[242] Apparently, the work was meant to accompany that of Augustine himself. Orosius recounts that at the time of writing Augustine himself was finishing the eleventh book of his monumental *De Civitate Dei*.[243] Most likely, Orosius's own work was meant to be some kind of supplement to Augustine's own refutation of pagan criticism and Christian apocalyptic thinking. However, Orosius was not entirely clear whether he had made a useful contribution to Augustine's own work. He even advises Augustine to destroy his work if it would not live up to his own standards.[244] But of course this could also be a mark of literary *humilitas*, not uncommon in the many rhetorical works of the classical past.

In his own work, Orosius was trying to set out his own understanding of pagan and Christian history. He wanted to show 'the desires and punishments of sinful men' and 'the many problems of the world and the Judgment of God'.[245] Orosius wanted to separate Christian times from those of the pagan past.[246] Moreover, he wanted to counter the pagans' very sense of history. Orosius scorned the pagans because they, unlike good Christians, 'do not inquire into the future' and even worse that they 'either forget and do not know of the past, yet defame present times'.[247] Orosius lamented that the *pagani* believed that all the evils and calamities which had hit the empire since the time of Christ were due to the belief in Christ and the neglect of the worship of idols.[248] Orosius could not agree. By enquiring into the past, he learned that pre-Christian history was wreaked by countless calamities and miseries. Orosius postulated the idea that the past had been just as oppressive as his

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[239] Fear, *Orosius Seven books of history against the pagans*, 5.

[240] On council of Diaspolis, see: Augustine*, Letters*, 146; Fear, *Orosius Seven books of history against the pagans*, 5.

[241] Hunt, 'St. Stephen in Minorca', 106-123.

[242] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, Preface to book 1.

[243] Ibidem, Preface to Book I.

[244] Ibidem, 7.43.

[245] Ibidem, Preface to Book 1, 7.43.

[246] Ibidem, Preface to Book 1

[247] Ibidem, Preface to Book 1

[248] Ibidem, Preface to Book 1; 'Although they do not inquire into the future, and either forget or do not know the past, yet defame present times as most unusually beset, as it where by evils because there is belief in Christ and worship of God, and increasingly less worship of idols (…)'.

own time.

Orosius can be considered a master of spin.[249] In his work, he carefully manipulates some of the most famous episodes from pre-Christian history in order to convey the message that God's support was indeed totally lacking for the pagans' endeavors in the past. Acts of divine support for pagan endeavors or lack thereof are either presented as evidence that the Gods didn't exist at all, or are ascribed to more worldly circumstances. For example, the fact that the temples of the Phocians were sacked by their enemies is presented by Orosius as evidence for the lack of divine support and indeed non-existence of the pagan Gods.[250] Justinus, from whom Orosius had plucked a great deal of his narrative narrative, had presented this same episode in quite different terms, namely as a divine punishment for the Phocians erroneous behavior.[251] In some cases, Orosius counters pagan beliefs by referring to the self-criticism of the pagans themselves. In Orosius's third book he delegitimizes the oracle of Amon, and indeed the oracles of all the Gods, by simply referring to the criticism of the pagan authors themselves.[252] In some cases, Orosius misinterprets his sources in such a manner that they are given a completely different meaning. These rhetorical ploys are not uncommon in fourth century apologies and heresiologies. In fact, they were part of the standard arsenal of any heresiologist to refute the ideas of his heretical opponents. We see something quite similar in the works of Athanasius against the Arians and Augustine's attacks on the Manichaean Gnostics.[253]

In Orosius program to refute the ideas of his 'imaginary' pagan opponents, the seventh book played a fundamental part. It contains an historic description detailing events from the birth of Christ until Orosius's own time. The account is full of references to the conviction that Christ had made the world better and that since His coming Christians across the Roman Empire were living in unity. He naturally compares this with the apparent disunity of their pagan oppressors, but when Orosius starts discussing the history after the conversion of Constantine, something quite strange occurs. Quite suddenly Christianity is presented as not being in unity at all.[254]

In fact, when the contents of seventh book are glimpsed at, one is able to get a glimpse at Orosius's earlier work as an heresiologist. Though some historians have argued that his work's rhetoric is directed primarily against pagan criticism, Orosius nonetheless occasions himself several times to refute and smite scorn on the ideas of several Christian movements. The fact that he presents Christianity to the presumed pagan audience as a divided religion is actually quite contrary to his reputed intentions. For a work which was presumably written with the intention to refute the idea of pagan's that Christians had brought ruin to the Roman Empire, the decision to include narratives into the work about how his fellow Christians excelled at killing each other can hardly be called a sound strategy, especially when it is compared with Orosius's original intentions.[255] However, when we look at the seventh book of his history and thus his *coup de grace*, we notice that especially the Arians could count on his scorn as he recollects the history of persecuting heretical emperors such as Constantius and Valens. For Orosius there appears to have been nothing worse than persuading people that 'there are certain

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[249] Fear, *Orosius Seven books of history against the pagans*, 15-16.

[250] Orosius, *History against the Pagans,* 3.12.17.

[251] Justinus, *Histories*, J. Yardley trans. (Oxford 1997) 8.2.

[252] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, 3.16.13.

[253] Augustine, *De natura boni contra Manichaeos,* J. Zycha ed. (Prague 1892).

[254] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, 7.25.

[255] Ibidem, Preface to book 1.

gradations in God'.[256] To criticize the Arian emperors, Orosius recounts their persecution of Nicene Christians and how they had violently attacked orthodox churches. He also recounts how these emperors and their supporters had attempted to seduce the Goths with Arian doctrine, but also how these same Goths had refuted the ideas of Arian, because 'the Goths clung to the basic teachings of the first faith which they had received'.[257] As his narrative continues he presents Christianity, in fact symbolized by the inhabitants of Rome themselves, slowly descending into disunity and unrepentant sin. What then follows appears to be the coup the grace of his work's apologetic program—the sack of Rome.[258]

Historians disagree about how his portrayal of the sack should be interpreted. For some the positive portrayal of the Goths is clear evidence that by the time of the sack of Rome they had become fully Christian and thus behaved as such.[259] They have argued a literal interpretation of events which contrasts sharply with normal Late Roman accounts on siege warfare.[260] Others, like M. Kulikowski have argued that Orosius's account is entirely unreliable, and indeed 'remarkably short on substance'.[261] From the other contemporary evidence they conclude that the sack had been an outright atrocity. In some cases the sack of Rome is used in the argument that the Late Roman context was actually as violent as the antique authors had tried to portray it.[262] Others have seen his account more as a literary miss-representation of events. For example, Halsall argues that Orosius wanted to present the Goths as *nobles sauvages* who made it possible for him to criticize the corrupt Romans themselves.[263]

When we look at Orosius' narrative of the sack of Rome it is possible to observe a number of striking similarities with fourth- and early fifth century letters on the desecration of sacred space. In fact, all the narrative elements and topoi of the 'soldiers in church' motif normally contained within these letters appear to be there, the only difference is that these seem to have been turned rather quite eloquently upside down. Moreover, his interpretation of events of the sack of Rome is quite positive when it is compared to other contemporary descriptions like for example the various letters of Jerome or the commentaries of Augustine in his *De Civitate Dei*. There are no raped or vandalized women and virgins here, no unburied corpses left behind, nor laments on loss of property.

As shown in the fourth century letters, the devotees of the church were normally presented as attending church service or participating in pious worship and rites of baptism as the attack on their basilica occurred. But in Orosius's account the people of Rome are doing something quite differently. Orosius argues that the inhabitants of Rome were living in a state of sin.[264] They had participated in idolatrous worship and had quarreled amongst each other right up until the sack of Rome. They had been following the heinous Eucherius,

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[256] Ibidem, 7.29.

[257] Ibidem, 7.33.

[258] Ibidem, 7.38-7.40

[259] P.Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire. A new history* (London 2005) 227-232.

[260] For an excellent analysis of normal accounts of siege warfare in the Later Roman Empire, see: Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, 123-146, 223-224.

[261] M. Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars from the third century to Alaric* (Cambridge 2007) 179.

[262] One notorious example is BrianWard-Perkins. His entire, rather dubious argument seems to focus on the idea that foreigners only brought trouble (and low quality pottery) to the Roman Empire: B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the end of civilization* (Oxford 2005) 16-17.

[263] But note that Halsall has a tendency to base his actual account of the sack on the rather dubious lost history of Olympiodorus: Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 56-57, 216-217

[264] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, 7.37-7.39.

who had promised to restore the pagan idols to former grandeur.[265] The episode referring to Eucherius is actually another one of Orosius literary ploys. Eucherius had been Stilicho's son who was executed alongside his parents in 408.[266] He could have never given the order to restore pagan worship because he had never been in a position to do so.

In the desecration letters, the figures who ordered and led the attacks on churches are always described in the most negative and indeed most inhumane manner as possible. Orosius describes the leader of the attack in more positive terms. Alaric is presented as a barbarian, but not one of the normal sort as the ones described earlier in Orosius' account. Alaric was 'a hostile king, but a Christian'.[267] When his soldiers break into Rome he orders them not to seize Rome's religious buildings, especially not the basilicas of Sts. Peter and Paul.[268] He is shown giving his soldiers the task to protect the holy places and the people who had chosen to take refuge inside. Moreover, Orosius has Alaric give the order that his men should refrain from plunder and should refrain from unnecessary bloodshed.[269]

Normally within the 'soldiers in church' motif, the clergy become the target of beating and scourging. The bishop normally has to flee because his church came under violent assault and is in many cases portrayed as escaping in the nick of time or as nearly losing his life. In Orosius we encounter something quite different. He recounts that the bishop of Rome happened to be in Ravenna long before the actual sack began.[270] In the context of the fourth and fifth century, the bishop abandoning his flock in ignominious flight would have been met with horror and disgust.[271] Orosius probably acknowledged that some form of legitimization for the bishop's actions was necessary. Orosius states that when the sack occurred Innocent was resorting in Ravenna, because like Lot, he could not see the destruction of the sinful people (Genesis 19:16).[272] Innocent clearly did not want to turn into a salt pillar himself. Moreover, Orosius presents the accidental flight of Rome's bishop as proof that the sack was indeed the result of divine retribution. He states that it was God who had led the Gothic soldiers in, not their bravery.[273]

In the letters about the desecration of ecclesiastical space, the virgins usually receive the most excruciating treatment. They are shown violated, being stripped naked and in some cases even being raped. Afterwards the scene normally becomes one of plunder and desecration with the most sacred objects, altars and vessels

[265] Ibidem, 7.38.

[266] Zosimus, *New History*, R. Ridley ed. & trans. (Sydney 1982) 5.34-35, 5.42.3.

[267] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, 7.37.

[268] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, 7.39.1; Note that both churches were located outside Rome's perimeter walls. Sozomen notes that both banks of the Tiber and Portus had already been captured and occupied by the Goths. From this we may deduce that both churches had already been under control of the Goths quite some time before the actual sack of Rome: Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 9.6-9.7; For a decent, yet rather confusing discussion on the right of sanctuary during the siege of Rome, see: Ducloux, *Ad ecclesiam confugere*, 134-140.

[269] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*,7.39.1.

[270] Ibidem, 7.39.2.

[271] For example, note the difficulty Athanasius had legitimizing his own flight and failure to attain martyrdom in 356; "The flight of those who are persecuted is a strong argument against those who persecute", in: Athanasius, *Apology for his Flight*, A. Robertson trans. (London 1980) 25-27.

[272] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, 7.39.2; According to the church historian Sozomon pope Innocent had been sent as an envoy representing Honorius' court in order to broker a deal between Alaric and the emperor. Though it is not entirely clear where this episode fits in with the overall chronology, nor whether Innocent was sent from Rome or to Rome, see: Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 9.7; Zosimus, *New History*, 5.45.

[273] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, 7.39.2.

plundered or defiled beyond imagination. We have already seen how Augustine was confronted by questions about whether or not it was right to commit suicide when a woman was raped and thus stripped of her honor. This is testimony to the fact that indeed just like in the letters which contained the church soldiers motif, actual rape had been part of the Gothic sack. We have also seen how virgins were thought be symbolic for the imagined community of the Church and the Church building itself. Further we have seen how defilement of their chastity was understood to be an offense against all Christians. Orosius tries to solve these problems quite eloquently by inserting a story about the intrusion of a Gothic soldier into a Roman church, a quite elaborate spin of the 'soldiers in church' motif.

Orosius recounts that the soldier was a Christian and that he had entered a convent in search of plunder. Searching the place, he was met by an elderly virgin.[274] The soldier decided to ask her respectfully for gold and silver:

> (…) she, with faithful firmness, replied that she had a great deal in her possession and would presently bring it forth, and she did so, and when she perceived that the barbarian was astonished by the riches which were displayed, by the quantity weight and beauty, although he did not know their nature, the virgin of christ said to the barbarian: "These are the sacred vessels of the apostle Peter. Presume if you dare; you will answer for the deed. For my part, since I cannot protect them, I dare not hold them.[275]

Orosius then writes that the barbarian became 'stirred with religious awe by the fear of God and the faith of the virgin' and immediately send word to Alaric of what he had found.[276] Alaric orders that all the vessels were to be brought back to the basilica of St. Peter and that the virgin and all the Christians following her should be placed under armed escort.[277] The undefiled and untarnished virgin symbolized that Christianity in its entirety had not been dishonored by the Gothic soldiers. Orosius does not mention the raped women referred to in Augustine's *City of God*. By stating that the virgin was treated quite decently and by ignoring the fate of the other women Orosius also blatantly ignored their victimhood.

What then follows is a playful manipulation of the festive scenes of plunder and desecration, and pagan forms of worship which usually follow the invasion of a basilica in the 'soldiers in church' motif. Again Orosius turns these topoi completely on their head. Here there are no naked boys on bishops throne's in his accounts, nor pagan or transvestite festivity. Orosius recounts how a pious procession was organized and made its way to the basilica of St. Peter.[278] He recounts how the procession was protected on all sides by drawn swords. Orosius then shows the party raising a hymn to God and recounts how both Romans and Barbarians were joining in:

> In the sacking of the city, the trumpet of salvation sounded far and wide, and invited and struck all, even those hiding in hidden places (Matthew 24:31); from all sides they came together to the vessels of peter, the vessels of Christ; a great many even pagans mingled with the Christians in profession, although not in faith; and in this way

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[274] Ibidem, 7.39.3.

[275] Ibidem, 7.39.3-6.

[276] Ibidem, 7.39.6.

[277] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, ; similar stories are contained in: Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.9.10; Jerome. *Epistles*, 127.13.

[278] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, 7.39.3-10.

they escaped temporarily that they might become more confused. The more thickly the Romans in their flight came together, the more eager the barbarians surrounded them as their defenders.[279]

That the pagans were joining in and were indeed gladly making use of the Christians' protection is also touched upon by Augustine in his *City of God*.[280] This is of course meant as being part of the strategy to prove to the pagans that the era of Christianity had been more peaceful than that of pagans. Even the unbelievers could count on the Church's protection, Orosius argued.

And finally, as is normal with the 'soldiers in church' motif, the author tries to activate a sympathetic response with his audience. Normally the readers are exhorted to mutually condemn the attack on the basilica and that they should consider the attack an offence against themselves. Usually a reference is made to the dead and the martyrs who had stayed true to their faith until the very last moment. And conclusively the audience is asked to undertake action against the violation and spread the story of what has happened as far and wide as possible

Orosius disavows this sense of victimization and turns the exhortations to perpetuate the memory of the attack completely around. First of all, he does this by arguing that the inhabitants of Rome had deserved their trepidations because they had been living in unrepentant sin.[281] Something which Orosius thought was confirmed by the fact that their bishop had abandoned them just at the right moment. Some were saved by God's grace, but others 'like dung and straw, already judged for their very unbelief and disobedience, were left for extinction and burning'.[282] He tells that after three days of plunder, the Goths had voluntary left and had only burned a few buildings.[283] Subsequently, Orosius forces himself to counter the idea that the sack had been more horrific than those which had occurred in the past. First of all by saying that more buildings were burnt in the time of Nero than at the sack of Rome.[284] And secondly by arguing that the conflagration had been the result of divinely ordained lightning strikes.[285] And last, he comments that if one would hear the survivors talking 'he will think that nothing took place'.[286] This is of course the ultimate refusal of victimhood, and indeed of all the many uncertainties which had troubled the survivors of the sack of Rome as recounted by Augustine. It seems that Orosius thought that the ultimate way of countering pagan criticism was to deny the laments of the very Christians who by their gruesome testimonies had supported the pagan's argument. Perhaps even worse for the refugees and victims themselves, their loss and suffering were entirely refused by Orosius. Indeed he thought they themselves had been nothing but sinners and that they deserved divine punishment.

Thus in a sense, the identity Orosius presents is one of Christian unity and triumph instead of a more militant one of suffering and resistance as presented by the letters on the desecration of churches. This message Orosius

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[279] Ibidem, 7.39.10; By referring to the vessels of Christ, Orosius is presumably referring to the Christians themselves indicating that Orosius believed that Christianity's sacredness was embodied by the community.
[280] Augustine, *City of God*, 1.1.
[281] Orosius, *History against the Pagans*, 7.38.7, 7.39.14, 7.40.2.
[282] Ibidem,7.39.14: Orosius probably intented to make a biblical allusion to Matthew 13:25-31 which contains similar imagery.
[283] Ibidem, 7.39.15; The three day sack is in fact a typology referring to the resurrection of Christ from his sepulcher, see: Acts 2:24.
[284] Ibidem, 7.39.16, 6.14.5, 7.7.4-7.
[285] Ibidem, 7.39.18.
[286] Ibidem, 7.40.1.

presents, is like the work of Augustine, meant for both the critical pagan audience and the aggrieved Christian reader. If we follow this interpretation it becomes clear that Orosius didn't really have an pagan audience in mind, especially not when we look at his seventh book which presented Christianity, save the episode on the sack of Rome, as being plagued by all kinds of disunity. He was writing for a Christian audience which he feared might have been swayed by the pagan arguments and was now starting to believe that perhaps the Christians had abandoned their God. This can also be seen in the *City of God* wherein Augustine tells his audience that some Christians during the siege had given themselves over to idolatry in order to save the city.[287] Orosius tries to assure his audience that the pagans' arguments were essentially wrong and that Christians should not allow themselves to cross the boundaries and participate in pagan worship. The persecutors, pagans and sinners, so prominent in the desecration letters, had received their divine chastisement. Romans and Barbarians, normally foundational opponents, are shown in unisonous worship. The foundational enemy of Rome, the Barbarian, has been Christianized and thus pacified, in fact he is shown behaving as how Orosius thought any good Christian should. They had spared the virgin, not plundered the vessels, and protected the churches of the apostles of Rome. By doing so, instead of violating the community of Christ, they had protected and indeed beatified it. The message postulated is that if all peoples accepted Christ they were to live in unity and peace. The message he gives is that Christians should forget the quarrels of the past and the gruesome events of the sack of Rome and that pagans should not think their times were better than the time of Christ. The boundaries of this community were not so much threatened by foreign or pagan invaders but by their own sins. They weren't to be closed off or hermetically sealed from those outside. On the contrary, Orosius presents these boundaries and the embrace of Christianity to be entirely open. In fact, Orosius argues by showing the pagans participating in the procession that even the pagans could join the embrace of Christ, even if they themselves did not believe so.

Conclusion

Christians in late antiquity constructed their identity by locating themselves and their day-to-day experiences within a larger story. This story made it possible to make sense of what had happened in the past and was happening in the present. The story they constructed for themselves contained a great many references to primordial and foundational acts of violence. For fourth century Christians, these were episodes of violent persecution and heroic acts of suffering and resistance. When people were confronted by similar acts of persecution, they refitted the narrative so that it might apply to their own circumstances. The narrative of past resistance was appropriated in service of the present and in doing so both past and present became entwined into a single narrative. This narrative was meant for understanding the moment-to-moment experience in the present, but it was also meant to support religious arrangements, behavioral standards and identity constructions the community cherished.

As shown above, the narrative applied to fourth century church conflict was that of persecution and resistance. Both victims and perpetrators were emplotted into this meta- narrative. But victimization is always dependent on third party observers. Indeed, victimization was part of a process of constant negotiation, it needed to be acknowledged by the majority, otherwise one might suddenly find oneself placed in the role of the perpetrator and find out that people thought that the perpetrator himself had been the victim. To solve this

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[287] Augustine, *Sermons*, 296.5-7; Augustine, *City of God*, 1.29-36.

problem, late antique intellectuals tried to include the third party observers into their own suffering by stating that the acts of violence were an offence against them as well. The medium to do this was the letter which could be spread far and wide pressing upon the recipients the victims' version of events. The particular event narrated in these letters, that of the violent invasion of churches, was meant to evoke a sense of *pathos*. It highlighted to the audience an event that could have happened to themselves and invoked the shared collective memory of the past of persecution and suffering. The narrative of this form of 'extreme violence' contained minute references to objects and persons that were degraded and profaned. These were objects and persons that were cherished by all Christian communities. Moreover they were held to be fundamental for their own understanding of being a Christian. By referring to degradation of these 'markers of identity'(priests, virgins, devotees, liturgy and liturgical—and baptismal objects) the recipients themselves were invited to participate in the narrative of persecution. Only if they felt included could the violent act be condemned and the behavior of the perpetrators, now without question emplotted in the role of persecutor, be curtailed.

Although Orosius referred to these same markers in his narrative on the sack of Rome, the way he portrayed them was actually quite different. He was confronted by pagans stating that the sack of Rome had been a retribution of the Gods who had been abandoned in favor of worship in Christ. The refugees in Africa, and indeed Christians across the empire doubted whether the pagans had a point. The refugees themselves supported their argument that the sack had been a excruciatingly grievous affair. But by turning the constituent elements of the desecration motif on its head, Orosius argued that the victims themselves had been sinners and that it was the Christian God who had punished Rome for its sins. Their idea of victimization was denied, nothing bad had happened at all. The Christian Goths had behaved quite decently and had joined their Christian brethren in pious unity. The victims themselves were emplotted in the role of the perpetrators.

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