Article

Resistance of an Emerging Community: Early Christians Facing Adversity

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Abstract

Situated at the intersection of social history and psychology, this study examines how early Christian communities in Bithynia-Pontus navigated the persecution narrated in Pliny the Younger's Epistle X 96. Through systematic textual analysis of Latin and Greek sources—triangulated with comparative evidence from Tacitus and corroborating archaeological data—and interpreted through Conservation-of-Resources and Social Identity theoretical frameworks, we reconstruct the repertoire of collective coping strategies mobilised under Roman repression. Our findings show that ritualised dawn assemblies, mutual economic assistance, and a theologically grounded expectation of post-mortem vindication converted external coercion into internal cohesion; these practices neutralised informer threat, sustained group morale, and ultimately expanded Christian networks across Asia Minor. Moreover, Pliny's ad hoc judicial improvisations reveal the governor's own bounded rationality, underscoring the reciprocal nature of stress between the persecutor and persecuted. By mapping the dynamic interaction between imperial policy and subaltern agency, the article clarifies why limited, locally triggered violence consolidated rather than extinguished the nascent movement. The analysis contributes a theoretically informed, evidence-based account of religious-minority resilience, enriching both early Christian historiography and broader debates on group survival under systemic duress.

Keywords: Bithynia-Pontus; collective coping; conservation of resources; early Christianity; Pliny the Younger; religious resilience; Roman persecution; social identity theory

1. Introduction

Pliny the Younger's Epistle X 96, a text well known and extensively analysed by historical criticism of all times (Fontana 2015, p. 408), poses interpretative challenges that remain influential in social-historical scholarship. This prominence is hardly surprising, for Pliny's letter and Trajan's later, terse, rescript contain the oldest and most complete pagan account of the Roman conflict with Christians during the first century of its existence (Sherwin-White 1966, p. 293). By contrast, modern scholarship has devoted comparatively scant attention to the coping and defence mechanisms mobilised by early Christian adherents. Accordingly, this article asks: How were such mechanisms manifested among the persecuted Christians described in Epistle X 96, and in what ways did they sustain communal survival under Roman repression? This is the research question that guides our study.

Born in Como in 62 A.D.[1] and having died sometime before Trajan's death in August 117 A.D., Pliny the Younger was adopted by his uncle, Pliny the Elder, a scholar and celebrated author of Natural History. Influenced by his teacher Quintilian, he developed

an intense political activity. The chronological framework established by Book X of his Letters indicates that Pliny the Younger was dispatched by Trajan mei loco[2] in 111 CE to the eastern provinces of Pontus and Bithynia, located in northern Asia Minor. This appointment formed part of a broader imperial strategy to restore fiscal equilibrium in provincial administration, accompanied by enhanced policies for maintaining social order through intensified surveillance, as corroborated by Plinian Epistles X, 77 and X, 78. It seems necessary therefore to frame the persecution that Pliny would undertake against Christians, which we will deepen later, in a context in which the function that had been entrusted to him had to transcend the financial aspects and focus on criminal conflicts prior to his arrival in office (Pl. *Ep.* X, 31–32).

For the first time in Roman imperial administration, Emperor Trajan appointed his own governor in a senatorial province, which accounts for the exceptionality of the measure; moreover, Pliny was not appointed governor only for one year but would retain the office as long as the emperor wished.[3] It was the first time that Pliny was appointed governor of a province, so he lacked experience in this regard, but his close friendship with the emperor counteracted this drawback. It was probably this inexperience that was why he sought the emperor's advice in some matters, many of them recorded in his Letters, and it seems that he felt more comfortable than other governors in consulting him frequently (Baz 2013, p. 267). We must, however, be wary of Pliny's rhetoric, for his feigned ignorance is, at least in part, the kind of doubt emperors expected from their rulers.[4]

2. Materials and Methods

Methodologically, the inquiry advances through three successive steps. First, the critical edition of Pliny's Epistle X 96 in the Gredos series serves as the primary textual foundation; select Latin lexemes are merely cross-referenced with the Loeb edition to preserve semantic fidelity. Secondly, the historical backdrop is reconstructed exclusively based on Pliny's own corpus and cognate literary testimonies, such as Tacitus (*Ann.* XV). Finally, insights from contemporary psychology are operationalised: Hobfoll's Conservation-of-Resources theory and Tajfel's Social-Identity framework supply the analytic categories for interpreting communal coping mechanisms (Hobfoll 1989, 2011; Tajfel et al. 1979; Tajfel 1981). These models are employed hermeneutically rather than nomothetically, privileging thick description over hypothesis testing. Attention to triangulation across textual layers and to the historian's reflexive positionality safeguards internal validity while mitigating anachronistic projection.

The methodological integration of historical and psychological frameworks necessitates explicit recognition of its interpretive constraints. While contemporary theoretical models provide analytical leverage for understanding ancient phenomena, their application requires careful calibration to avoid reductive explanations that diminish the complexity of historical agency. This study therefore adopts what Geertz (2008) termed "thick description" privileging contextual specificity over nomological generalization while remaining attentive to cross-temporal patterns of human behaviour under duress.

Any retrospective psychologization of ancient actors must navigate an epistemic minefield: diagnostic categories such as "dissociation" or "sublimation" emerge from twentieth-century clinical discourse and risk anachronism when grafted onto first-century subjectivities. Following Runyan's cautionary plea for "evidentiary humility" (1981) and mindful of Moss's warning against the "martyrological imagination" (2013), the present study treats modern constructs as heuristic lenses, not as claims about inaccessible interior states. Triangulation with material culture and administrative texts thus remains indispensable for preventing theoretical overreach.

3. Results

The analysis of primary sources pertaining to the Plinian persecution reveals a complex matrix of political, religious, and social factors that shaped both the repressive strategies of imperial power and the adaptive mechanisms deployed by Christian communities. The reconstruction of this historical context, articulated through four fundamental analytical dimensions—the Roman legal–religious framework, the specific situation of Christianity in Bithynia-Pontus, the concrete modalities of persecution, and the psychological devices of communal resistance—enables comprehension of the dialectical nature of interaction between imperial structure and subaltern agency. This multidimensional approach demonstrates that persecutory dynamics, far from constituting a unidirectional phenomenon of domination, generated complex processes of negotiation, adaptation, and mutual transformation that determined both the evolution of Roman religious policy and the institutional consolidation of the nascent Christian movement. Through systematic examination of these interconnected variables, the following analysis elucidates how mechanisms of coercion and resistance operated symbiotically to produce outcomes that neither persecutor nor persecuted could have anticipated through their initial strategic calculations.

3.1. Rome and the Christians

The long history of Roman religion reveals a continuous penetration of Italian, Etruscan, Greek, Egyptian and Oriental cults, and rites. Roman citizens soon discovered the fascination of the Eastern and Greek mysteries and surrendered to the foreign gods while maintaining the necessary formal observance of the state religion, so that, at different times, because of earthquakes, famines, or military disasters, non-Roman cults were introduced as a means of appeasing the gods.[5]

Roman jurists distinguished between *religiones licitae* and *religiones illicitae*, authorised and unauthorised cults, yet punitive measures against the latter were rare. Unlike the long-established Jewish communities, whose synagogues were explicitly protected by senatorial decrees and later imperial rescripts, the Christian assemblies possessed no comparable legal safeguards and thus remained exposed to governors' discretionary oversight. Their very novelty (*novitas*), a quality that authors from Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.44) to Suetonius (*Ner.* 16) found inherently unsettling, meant that what lacked ancestral precedent could not claim the customary toleration granted to time-honoured *religiones licitae*. In practice, therefore, foreign or immigrant cults that did not threaten civic order could often be performed with impunity. Imperial authorities displayed a pragmatic, if selective, tolerance, and the polytheistic environment of the Mediterranean generally fostered coexistence among a wide spectrum of ritual forms. Individual devotees might, without apparent contradiction, undergo initiation into several mystery cults and even hold priesthoods in more than one sanctuary. A few syncretistic practitioners in late antiquity seem to have honoured Christ alongside Mithras, Isis, or Adonis (Bromiley 1988), although such eclecticism lay outside emerging Christian orthodoxy.

The *senatus consultum* de Bacchanalibus, preserved in bronze inscriptions (CIL I^2 581), demonstrates that Roman interventions against religious associations, while exceptional, established legal precedents that provincial governors like Pliny could invoke when confronting novel religious phenomena. An exceptional case occurred in 186 B.C. when, by decree of the Senate, a severe investigation was conducted into the bacchanal rite, which had caused a flagrant immorality by its unbridled and violent character.[6] This precedent

demonstrates that, although sporadic, intervention by the imperial authorities in the affairs of religious associations was not without antecedent.

Roman authorities did not pursue Christians at random; repression proceeded from two interlocking logics: first, civic deviance—refusal to join in public sacrifice imperilled the *pax deorum* and branded Christians as atheists vis-à-vis ancestral cults; second, political disloyalty—by declining to burn incense before the imperial image, they signalled potential sedition, for Roman symbolic grammar cult and sovereignty were indivisible. Contemporary jurisprudence therefore assimilated obstinate believers to offenders against both divine and human order, an analogy reinforced by local expectations in Bithynia-Pontus that governors should maintain these as 'quiet provinces.' These twin anxieties—*impietas* and *maiestas*—explain why execution could seem legitimate even without a codified ban. In practice, provincial prosecutions proceeded with *extra ordinem*, i.e., at the governor's discretion outside any codified statute; charges were articulated through elastic formulae such as *superstitio*, *maiestas* or illicit collegiality. The absence of a universal ban meant that every dossier was ad hoc, its outcome contingent on local politics and magisterial temperament (Sherwin-White 1952; Rives 2011).

Moreover, the emperors of this time themselves had previously dealt with these issues. For example, Tiberius limited the circulation of books related to the Sibylline oracles and expelled practitioners of the Egyptian and Judaic cults from Rome (Tac. *Ann.* II, 85). But Rome was rarely a systematic persecutor and had allowed various forms of meetings to continue in the provinces, particularly feasts and games (Pl. *Ep.* X, 118). In fact, the very idea of empire necessitated tolerance of non-Roman religions.

In the case of Christians, there also seems to have been a gradual change in the position of the Roman authorities. Initially, an apparently favourable perspective for the supporters of the new religion is noticeable in certain passages of the Acts of the Apostles (*Acts* 8:7; 18:14; 24:1–26; 25:1–26:32) (Piñero 2022); we will discard, as implausible, Tertullian's reference to the supposed report sent by Tiberius to the Senate from Palestine revealing the divinity of Christ and threatening to punish the accusers of Christians.[7]

A much harsher behaviour later reflects the successive initiatives of Claudius ("who expelled from Rome the Jews who, incited by Crestos,[8] provoked continuous riots"),[9] Nero[10] ("submitted to torture the Christians, a type of men who practiced a new and evil religion";[11] "to put an end to the rumours, Nero presented as guilty of the fire[12] and subjected to the most elaborate torments those whom the vulgar called Christians, hated for their ignominy" (Tac. *Ann.* XV, 44)), Domitian (Tert. *Apol.* 5, 4)[13] and Trajan, the period in which Pliny's Epistle X, 96 and events such as the martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch are framed.

However, recent historiography, such as that by Carrier[14] and Piñero (2007, p. 67), has questioned the notion of widespread persecutions throughout the Empire, suggesting that these were predominantly local and restricted. As Moss (2013) persuasively argues, the later grand narrative of empire-wide, relentless persecution was largely a post-Constantinian construction rather than a first-century reality. On the other hand, on more than one occasion, the apostle Paul and his fellow missionaries were brought before the local magistrates and accused of promoting illicit customs according to Roman norms (*Acts* 16:19–39; 17:1–9) and came to be tried before the court of the provincial governor (*Acts* 18:12–17; 23:25–30). However, without exception, all these proceedings only served to exonerate the defendants and their religion.

Political imperatives changed the nature of these meetings and Trajan and his administration were closely concerned with limiting this freedom of assembly, reaching the prohibition of *heteriae*[15] at the risk of degenerating into urban movements. This was, a priori, the starting position of Pliny the Younger, who, as a good public servant, practiced the

official religion in an exemplary way, valuing the imperial cult only as a political institution and practicing it without any enthusiasm.

Recent scholarship has refined the long-standing debate over the severity and direction of Trajan's policy. James Corke-Webster's minimalist re-appraisal contends that imperial engagement was "episodic and discretionary rather than systematically repressive," foregrounding the governor's interpretative latitude instead of a centrally orchestrated campaign (Corke-Webster 2020). More radically, Corke-Webster's subsequent sociological study relocates agency below the imperial threshold: persecutions, he argues, were often catalysed by intra-municipal rivalries in which Christian and non-Christian actors alike mobilised local magisterial structures to negotiate status and honour (Corke-Webster 2023). In parallel, comparative work on Roman administrative pragmatism has drawn renewed attention to Trajan's *noli quaerere* principle as an early form of conditional toleration, emphasising its reliance on self-identification rather than doctrinal policing. Collectively, these studies complicate the binary of 'tolerant' versus 'persecuting' emperor; they depict a fluid landscape in which legal precedent, provincial custom and communal competition converged to shape the Christian experience in Bithynia-Pontus.

Perhaps for this reason, neither Pliny nor Trajan in their answer use precedents to guide themselves, either formally or informally, despite their general knowledge of courts and procedures elsewhere (Downing 1988, p. 106). Pliny does not ask permission to vary the established procedures but does what his words express most naturally: request approval of an ad hoc set of procedures that he has apparently had to devise from scratch (Downing 1988, p. 112). Although these procedures included a triple test (*Ep*. X, 96.3) which demonstrates the cautious character of this conservative governor, the excessive penalty of "execution by obstinacy",[16] and the fact that de facto Pliny adopted measures without turning back, such as the aforementioned executions, without even having the explicit approval of the emperor,[17] are at least striking, and would question, on the contrary, the absence of precedents (Williams 2012, p. 204).

Seen through the prism of contemporary decision-making theory, Pliny's procedural eclecticism illustrates the paradox of "bounded rationality" (Simon 1947). In the absence of a clear legal script, the governor adopts a satisficing approach by improvising a blend of punitive exemplarity (executing the obstinate), conciliatory gestures (offering a *paenitentiae locus* for recantation), and upward delegation of responsibility (seeking Trajan's counsel). His oscillation between rigor and leniency also aligns with prospect theory, which predicts that decision-makers inflate low-probability threats when the potential political costs of inaction seem irreversible (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). In short, the letter enacts a form of bureaucratic coping whereby cognitive dissonance is contained through procedural innovation, rhetorical self-exculpation, and the instrumental manipulation of informers. Such strategies reveal Pliny's predicament to be not only legal but also psychologically taxing, corroborating the article's broader claim that mechanisms of coping operate at both communal and individual levels.

3.2. Christianity in Bithynia-Pontus

With the enactment of the Pompeian Law, Rome established a new province called Bithynia-Pontus in northern Anatolia, the fruit of the union of the annexed kingdom of Pontus with the existing province of Bithynia to the west. The evidence we have today makes it difficult to determine the exact boundaries of the province, although it can be said that it covered an area of almost 40,000 square kms. In addition, no ancient literary text provides information about where exactly the capital of the province was located. Paul did not preach in this region,[18] with these places being supposedly evangelized by St. Andrew.[19]

Josephus,[20] in describing the situation of Ponto-Bithynia at the end of Nero's reign, indicates that there were no Roman troops in this province in permanent service, but Pliny (*Ep.* X, 21 and X, 106) makes it quite clear that around A.D. 110–111, there were at least two auxiliary cohorts on active duty. If we give Josephus credit for the accuracy of his account at this point, then these cohorts were sent to the province by the Flavians (Sherk 1955, p. 403). We understand this fact relevant to our subsequent exposition: given the limited number of these and understanding that law enforcement would normally deal with criminals accused or convicted of a specific crime, it is unlikely that Christians would have been prone to extensive policing.

The succession of letters exchanged by Pliny with Trajan is chronological, but, nevertheless, it is not possible to conclude definitively whether Epistle X 96 refers to events related to Amiso (*Ep.* X, 92) or Amastris (*Ep.* X, 98). Amiso, a commercial metropolis with Hellenistic roots in northern Asia Minor, contributed to the spread of Christian influence. As the port city of Pontus Euxinus, accessible travel to and from Christian hotspots such as Jerusalem was not uncommon (Wilson 2011, p. 2), to the point that it is believed that the city had Christians from an early period (Bryer and Winfield 1985, p. 92) and that the spread of Christianity in the region would have begun there. Amastris, on the other hand, is in the current Turkish city of Amasra; from Amastris to Amiso, following the coastal path there was about 450 kms. Authors such as Sherwin-White opt for Amastris because it was, in their opinion, the main Christian centre of Pontus (Sherwin-White 1966, p. 694). As it happened in the rest of the world (from the multitude of about one hundred and twenty people (Acts 1:15) to six million members in 300 A.D. (Stark 1996, pp. 22–23), the growth of Christianity in the region would have been spectacular.

3.3. The Persecution of Pliny

Scholarly opinion diverges on the precise motives that prompted Pliny to posit an empire-wide injunction to uphold traditional cults; others emphasise legal responses to crimes such as cannibalism, incest, or magical malpractice. Historiography proposes hypotheses such as the application in a specific territory of a slogan raised for the entire empire in response to the risk of abandonment of traditional Roman religion or, more simply, as the legal response to criminal practices such as anthropophagy (in reference to the Eucharist), incest (by the terminology of brothers and sisters) or magic (Sherwin-White 1952, p. 199). Contemporaries who overheard spouses address one another as "brother" and "sister," and who learned of ritual ingestion of Christ's "body and blood" could plausibly infer incestuous or cannibalistic wrongdoing.[21]

Let us look at both possibilities. On the one hand, the fulfilment of the duties towards the gods[22] translates into the scrupulous observance of the rites and governs the attitude of the Roman towards the city and the homeland. The one to whom Christians sing hymns as to a god is exclusively Christ, not to the pagan deities of the Roman pantheon: the *impietas* they show in the eyes of the Roman power could well be considered a crime against the fatherland.[23] Hence, Romans could construe Christians either as heretical deviants endangering cultic consensus or as recusant subjects undermining political loyalty; both readings fed the same punitive reflex.

On the other hand, a governor might well decide (like Pliny) that, whatever the true nature of Christianity, Christians deserved exemplary punishment. They were, after all, agitators disturbing the 'quiet provinces', whose preservation was their supreme duty (Barnes 1968, p. 49). It might therefore seem that Pliny's main concern was the very fact of the meetings, the periodic meetings of Christians—given the imperial preoccupation with associations (Pl. *Ep.* X, 93)—rather than any pre-existing official position on Christianity, for which there is simply no evidence.

However, Pliny does not actually say that Christians formed *hetaerae*. This would have gone against their general tendency to portray them as strange and stubborn followers of a superstition who should be brought back to reason, but who posed no real threat to anyone. Pliny uses the reference to the imperial orders on *hetaerae* to show two things: the general tendency of Christians to avoid the slightest appearance of acting illegally (even, as recorded in Epistle X, 96, after Pliny's edict on the subject they had stopped meeting for food) and Pliny's own eagerness to carry out Trajan's orders. Pliny had recently confronted the emperor with two possible exceptions to the prohibition of *hetaerae* (Eckhardt 2018, p. 301), and in one case had received a rather negative response (X, 33–34 and 92–93). Undoubtedly, the phrase with which he opens his letter V, 20 ("*Iterum Bithyni!*") and, perhaps, the intrinsic conflict of the people of those lands makes the Plinian management of the Christian case an atypical persecution (Johnson 1988, p. 422).

The procedural ambiguity reflected in Pliny's correspondence illuminates broader tensions within imperial administration regarding religious diversity. Recent scholarship has emphasized that Roman religious policy operated through a complex matrix of local custom, imperial pragmatism, and legal precedent rather than through systematic doctrinal enforcement (Rüpke 2016). This contextual framework renders Pliny's epistolary uncertainty less anomalous than previously assumed, situating his judicial improvisations within established patterns of provincial governance.

In any case, Pliny himself is not clear "whether Christians should be punished by the name itself, even if they have no crime, or the crimes are implicit in the name" *(Ep.* X, 96.2), and, contrary to its usual practice, does not refer to any official judgment that might be applicable to this particular situation (*Ep.* X, 56; X, 58; X, 65; X, 72). What lies behind Pliny's doubt? In J. G. Cook (2020, p. 249)'s view, the best explanation for Pliny's possibility that the name *Christianum* was directly a guilty plea is that Nero set a legal precedent, not necessarily an order, rescript or edict, but simply his decisions at the trials in Rome.[24]

As for the list of suspicious activities for Pliny, it overlaps significantly with the Greco-Roman stereotype of Christians (Benko 1985, p. 163). The fact that Christians will not swear to the gods or agree to make sacrifices with wine and incense to an image of the emperor[25] confirmed what Pliny had previously suspected: that Christians were troublemakers.[26] It is paradoxical, however, that the accused were finally convicted of something for which they had not initially been charged, and perhaps it is this paradox that arises when he discovers that Christians do not commit any of the crimes of which he had initially presumed them guilty that leads Pliny to submit his doubts about it[27] to Trajan's consideration. This is even though, although governors were not allowed to summarily execute citizens, they could certainly execute them judicially (Garnsey 1968, p. 54).

Let us dwell on the informers.[28] The phenomenon of betrayal in Bithynia does not appear for the first time in Epistle X 96: letter X 56 refers to two cases, one of them anonymous. The Christian case does not thus seem to be an altogether inadequate companion for these other specimens of Pliny's dossier (Johnson 1988, p. 420).

It seems that non-Christians were suspicious and offended by their attitudes and behaviour and were willing to condemn their Christian neighbours to execution. Even many natural disasters such as droughts and earthquakes were attributed to Christians (de Ste Croix 2006, p. 136), if the reaction of the community was largely limited to such occasions, then the intermittency of Christian persecution becomes more understandable (Williams 2012, p. 234).

What were the reasons for this popular hostility? In the opinion of de Ste Croix (1963, p. 24), the crucial factor of this was the total refusal of Christians to worship any god other than their own, a position that was thought to alienate the good will of the gods and endanger the *pax deorum* and, finally, as has been said, was responsible for the disasters

that befell the community. We can also add to the above several characteristics unpleasant for the pagan community (atheism, aggressive and polemical proselytism, secrecy, Jewish origins, apocalyptic expectations, . . .) (Walsh 1991, pp. 255–56). Tertullian aptly observed that "the truth has been the object of hatred since it was born; As soon as she appeared, she was considered an enemy. As many are his enemies as are strangers to him: especially, out of envy, the Jews; for bribery, the soldiers; because of their condition, even our slaves themselves" (Tert. *Apol*.7,3).

Historiography has provided different answers to the question posed: such diversity may be due to the multicausality of the phenomenon. Perhaps the first temptation of any researcher would be to resort to the popular slogan "Follow the money". In fact, Tacitus already refers to the existence of authentic professional informers: "moved by the rewards, Rome, Italy and the citizens everywhere wherever they were had been at their mercy and thus ruined many" (Tac. *Ann*. 3.28.3). The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius of Caesarea collects the words of Melito, who refers to the persecutors as "shameless sycophants and lovers of others who go around stealing openly, and night and day plunder those who committed nothing evil" (Eus, *H. E.* 4.26.5); the same work records the accusations against the Christian soldier Marinus by a Roman interested in his work: "He was already about to receive the honour when another appeared before the court stating that, according to the ancient laws, Marinus could not take part in Roman dignities, since he was a Christian and did not sacrifice to emperors, and that the office belonged to him" (Eus, *H. E.* 7.15.2).

The fact that the charges against Christians in Pliny's court were brought principally, or partially, out of animosity is ultimately unprovable (Johnson 1988, p. 422), although, as Robinson (2007, p. 207) suggests, the possibility that anyone could use the right of indictment to pay for a private grudge was compounded when the accusers were rewarded with the property of those who were successfully tried.

But among all the possible explanations, we are nevertheless left with the religious rivalry between Jews and Christians. At the time the Epistle was written, the two were distinct but related religious communities, often competing for followers and resources. The Jews may have seen the Christians as a threat to their status and power within Roman society and therefore decided to report them to the authorities.

In the last lines of his Epistle, Pliny relativizes the magnitude of the problem he faces, and despite recognizing "the contagion" of Christianity "by peoples and even by the fields" (*Ep*. X, 96.9) believes it feasible to redirect the situation, and sees signs that the situation can be stopped and corrected, such as the increase in the sale of the meat of animals sacrificed to the gods.[29] Pliny finally shows an empathic attitude, because he closes his letter giving rise to repentance (*paenitentiae locus*) after what seems like a previous argument in favour of this position.[30] This procedure seems to be aligned with other facts recorded in his Letters, such as his intervention on behalf of a freedman before his employer (*Ep*. IX, 21–24) or his sorrow for the death of one of his slaves (*Ep.* VIII, 16).

3.4. Coping and Defence Mechanisms Against Persecution

In social psychology, coping mechanisms refer to the cognitive and behavioural strategies that people use to manage, resist, and adapt to stressful or conflicting situations. These mechanisms can encompass a variety of techniques, from cognitive reappraisal (changing how stressful a situation is perceived) to social support (seeking help from others). Coping mechanisms represent a comprehensive area of study within psychology, with a growing inclination towards their exploration in the social sphere. These methods of adaptation or handling adverse situations, instead of being confined to the individual dimension, are also applicable to collectives, reflecting collectively shared responses to stress or change (Hobfoll and Shirom 2001). These mechanisms seek to reduce psychological

stress ([Folkman and Moskowitz 2004](#)) and promote adaptation and well-being in the face of adversity or challenges.

On the other hand, in psychoanalysis, defence mechanisms are posed as automatic psychic operations that seek to reduce anxiety through the distortion of reality, which arise when the ego is threatened ([Freud 1936](#)). Unlike coping mechanisms, they have no direct adaptive purpose and can generate dysfunctional consequences ([Bouchard et al. 2008](#)). Some examples of defence mechanisms are repression, denial, dissociation, and sublimation. Defence mechanisms provide a framework for understanding subconscious responses to emotional conflict from their function of protecting the self and sense of self-worth and operate mostly at an unconscious level ([Cramer 2006](#)).

Psychohistory, the study of the psychological origins of historical events, has been a field of vibrant scholarly debate since Erikson's seminal works (1958). The debate is marked by divergent stances. Advocates such as [Lloyd DeMause](#) ([1981](#)) and [Alan Elms](#) ([1994](#)) emphasize the relevance of psychoanalysis in probing the unconscious motivations and emotional realities underlying historical figures and events. Critics such as [Runyan](#) ([1981](#)), however, challenge psychohistory's methodological foundations, emphasizing its susceptibility to anachronistic projection and interpretive overreach. Runyan particularly cautions that researchers may be "too eager to accept the first psychodynamic interpretation that renders previously mysterious events comprehensible," thereby privileging explanatory parsimony over historical complexity. More nuanced scholars advocate for a balanced approach that reconciles psychological and historical perspectives, asserting that psychohistory can play a legitimate role as an interpretive tool, if oversimplification is avoided, and rigorous criteria are applied in its use.

We believe, for our part, that both the coping mechanisms of social psychology and the defence mechanisms of psychoanalysis offer a complementary and potentially enriching approach to our study, as they do not replace other existing research methods, but enrich them, allowing us to offer a more complete and nuanced interpretation of the sources. Psychological categories provide a language and a set of concepts that allow historical phenomena to be described and examined more accurately and methodically. Thus, we can discover patterns and dynamics that would go unnoticed if we only used categories and concepts contemporary to the period investigated.

Moreover, modern psychology can help humanize the protagonists of the story, showing them not only as products of their time, but as individuals with agency and ability to face the challenges they faced. Finally, this approach can facilitate historical and cross-cultural comparisons, contributing to our understanding of the universality and variability of human experiences and responses over time and in different cultural contexts. Although this approach can be criticized for its presentism, it can also provide valuable insights into historical research, if it is used consciously and carefully.

People do not face stressful situations without resources. They rely on a system of beliefs, practices, and relationships that affects how they deal with difficult situations. Religion is part of this general guidance system ([Hood et al. 2009](#)) and can give a unique meaning to each specific situation, as it can influence the valuations that make up the interpretations that individuals make of each event ([Silberman 2005](#)). Despite the obvious importance of religion to individuals and societies, psychologists and other social scientists have paid relatively little attention to religious phenomena in empirical literature. ([Ano and Vasconcelles 2005](#)). The apparent neglect of religious experiences as subjects of psychological inquiry is more surprising given the persistent nature of religious belief, practice, and experience among the population ([Hill et al. 2000](#)).

Faith in life after death (the "theological immortality" on which [Lifton](#) ([1973](#)) reflects, which implies the triumph of the spirit over bodily death), community solidarity and the

sublimation of suffering through hope in salvation, among other mechanisms, provided Christians, as we will see below, with the necessary means to face adversity. Not surprisingly, following the work of Malinowski (1965), death, which of all human events is the most disturbing and disorganizing for man's calculations, is perhaps the main source of religious belief. Christians not only survived persecution, but their faith was strengthened, which resulted in the consolidation of Christian beliefs and practices.

In the context of the first documented Christian persecution, as detailed in the correspondence of Pliny the Younger, it is first possible to identify the use of psychological coping mechanisms to deal with the imminent threat of harm or death. According to Pliny, some of those questioned denied their Christian faith when they were directly questioned by Pliny (Ep. X, 96.3). This response can be interpreted as a manifestation of denial, a psychological defence mechanism. This process involves the conscious or unconscious repression of certain aspects of reality to avoid the recognition of facts that generate pain, fear, or internal conflict. In this scenario, the denial of their Christian identity would allow these individuals to try to safeguard themselves from the danger posed by their admission. Denial, as a form of protection against a threatening reality, is then shown as a strategy to mitigate the immediate risk posed by Roman persecution. Denial is helpful in the early stages of a stressful transaction, but it makes coping difficult (Mullen and Suls 1982).

On the other hand, Pliny points out that some of the defendants claimed to have abandoned Christianity years earlier (*Ep.* X, 96.6). This statement can be understood as a case of dissociation, another relevant mechanism in psychology. Dissociation is characterized by a disruption in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, or identity to isolate particularly disturbing or threatening mental material. Peritraumatic dissociation, defined as dissociation occurring at the time of the event, entails a "shock" accompanied by perceptual distortion and amnesic phenomena in the immediate period after receiving frightening news (Dalenberg and Paulson 2009). In the case at hand, dissociation, by allowing the separation of the current self from the self previously committed to the Christian faith, would serve as a mechanism of self-protection against persecution, diluting its responsibility and minimizing the risk associated with the proscribed faith.

Within the framework of coping mechanisms, "social support" is an essential collective coping mechanism that enables groups to withstand and overcome adversities (Haslam et al. 2009). Pargament (1997) provides a comprehensive psychological model showing how religion supplies coping resources that reframe threat, sustain hope, and mobilise communal resilience. It emerges as a vital strategy for the Christian community in Pliny's time. Their regular meetings, described in detail in Epistle X, 96, provided a safe space for emotional validation, exchange of experiences, and group solidarity, all key components of social support. Faced with situations of extreme stress and threats to their existence, these community encounters would function as an emotional and psychological support network, enabling Christians to face and resist the persecutions of their time.

Pliny notes that Christians were in the habit of "meeting together on a certain day before dawn and alternately singing among themselves a hymn in honour of Christ, as if he were a god, and binding themselves by an oath" (*Ep*. X, 96.7). This description provides us with a valuable insight into the practice of Christian worship in the early second century, known only from scattered references in ancient sources. Among the earliest surviving documents, apart from canonical literature, are 1 Clement (c. A.D. 96); the Epistles of Ignatius, written on his way to martyrdom (c. A.D. 108); and the mysterious ecclesiastical text known as the Didache,[31] whose writing is estimated between 80 and 100 AD. The liturgy that Pliny describes would take hold over time, as testified by Tertullian (Tert. *of Coron.* Iii), who records meetings before dawn to celebrate the Eucharist and sing in honour

of Christ. Young (1990) interprets martyrdom itself as a form of public liturgy, an enacted confession that transformed judicial death into a communal act of worship.

These meetings served a purpose that went beyond the mere observance of faith. They constituted a space for mutual emotional support for the formation of a collective identity and for the reaffirmation of their commitment to the beliefs that, despite the threat of persecution, they shared. Such gatherings may have helped alleviate the stress and anxiety of Christians in their marginal and threatened situation, strengthening their resilience in the face of adversity. The community offered not only a sense of belonging, but also a common belief system and social structure that could help individuals interpret and manage stressful situations. An important aspect to highlight in relation to the organization of the first Christians is the mention by Pliny of two deaconesses.[32] Leaders can play an essential role in promoting group cohesion, resolving conflicts, and facilitating social support among their members. They can also act as role models and provide guidance and emotional support to group members.

First, Peter can plausibly be read as the Christian counterpart to the measures described in Pliny's dossier. Its contents presuppose that no formal prosecutions have yet taken place, but they clearly anticipate the possibility of trials. Downing (1988, p. 116) therefore argues that the letter, probably composed at Rome, views the situation in Pontus-Bithynia from the perspective of believers who may soon face judicial scrutiny rather than from that of any Roman magistrate. Addressing "God's elect, exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1 Pet 1:1), the author speaks to small domestic worship groups in which enthusiasm, radicalism and fear of persecution coexisted (Hopkins 1998, p. 201). He exhorts them "not to be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is coming upon you to test you" (1 Pet 4:12) and insists that they give no occasion to be accused "as murderers, thieves, evildoers or busybodies" (1 Pet 4:15). Significantly, Pliny's own investigation likewise uncovered none of these crimes, only "a perverse and extravagant superstition" (*Ep*. X 96.8).

The letter thus commends what Tertullian would later call a mode of "normal life," the ordinary existence of "men who live among you, sharing the same food, clothing, way of life and necessities . . . who frequent forum, market, baths, shops, workshops, inns, fairs and every form of exchange. We sail with you, serve in the army with you, farm the fields and trade alongside you" (*Apol*. 42). Such unassuming goodness is captured by Jérôme Carcopino's portrait of a faith that,

> "in the face of the many idolatries, whether attenuated by the metaphysics of celestial ether or reinforced by the blood of sacrifice, offered instead a spiritual cult stripped of astrological aberration, bloody ritual and dubious initiation, proposing a baptism of pure water, the gentleness of prayer and the fraternity of a communal meal" (Carcopino 2001, p. 182).

Peter's text refers to the coping mechanism of "cognitive restructuring" or "positive reinterpretation." This mechanism involves changing the way one interprets or thinks about a stressful situation. In the letter, Christians are encouraged not to be surprised or afraid of persecution, but to understand it as a test of their faith. Instead of seeing persecution as an insurmountable threat, they are encouraged to reinterpret it as an opportunity to demonstrate their devotion and strength of character. Likewise, the exhortation not to be accused as criminals and the insistence on the normality and goodness of their lives suggests an attempt to redefine Christian identity in positive and socially acceptable terms. In this way, Christians could maintain a positive self-image and continue with their daily lives despite adverse circumstances. This cognitive restructuring mechanism can be a powerful tool for managing stress and adversity, helping individuals find meaning and purpose in difficult situations and maintain a positive and resilient attitude.

After the insistence of some Christians in their faith during the interrogation of Pliny (*Ep*. X, 96.3), the presence of the defence mechanism known as sublimation in psychoanalysis could be perceived. This mechanism makes it possible to transform potentially destructive instincts into socially acceptable and positive behaviours. In the case of the first persecuted Christians, sublimation would have played an important role, turning the anguished experience of persecution into hope and faith in a successful afterlife. Early Christianity, with its conceptualization of heaven and post-mortem life, provides a platform for observing sublimation.

From the beginning of the Christian mission in Asia Minor, there was a remarkable interest in theologizing violence, since it was perceived that the deaths of Christians related to cosmic matters and served a purpose: a certain number of deaths were necessary to fulfil cosmic lack (Moss 2012). In the face of persecution, Christians could have sublimated their fears and the threat of death into the unshakable belief in salvation and the ascent to heaven: death as the moment of departure to God would become a cliché in martyrial literature (Moss 2010). The earliest Christian literature in the region already refers explicitly to the important role of suffering in the lives of Jesus' followers.[33]

Celestial reward, envisaged through motifs of exaltation and glory, thereby operates as the symbolic locus where traumatic suffering is re-inscribed as salvific triumph. In addition, sublimation could also have strengthened the cohesion and commitment of the Christian community, by reinforcing the shared identity and purpose among Christians, and thus contributing to the maintenance and strengthening of the community despite persecution. It is relevant to note that, although sublimation might have helped persecuted Christian's cope with distress, this defence mechanism is an unconscious process. Persecuted Christians would not have consciously chosen to sublimate their fears but would have emerged as a natural response to the situation of extreme tension they were going through. But the exceptional effort of Christians to construct a discursive identity centred on suffering, which pagans knew through the response of martyrs, became a distinctive feature of Christianity (Perkins 2002).

Beyond legal pragmatism and eschatological sublimation, the Plinian dossier discloses a subtler mechanism: the deliberate cultivation of a stigmatized minority identity. Social Identity Theory predicts that, when an out-group defines a category as deviant or dangerous, in-group cohesion is reinforced through accentuation of distinctive norms and mythic self-descriptions (Tajfel et al. 1979; Tajfel 1981). Early Christian narratives of victimhood, catalogues of martyrdom rather than of routine accommodation, thus functioned as boundary-maintenance devices that converted external hostility into symbolic capital.

Castelli (2004) underlines that martyr stories functioned as powerful media through which the nascent church forged a cohesive collective identity. Moscovici's theory of minority influence further clarifies how a cohesive, consistent and resilient minority can, by articulating an uncompromising worldview, provoke attributional reconsideration among majority observers and progressively normalise what was once deemed aberrant (Moscovici et al. 1976). The rhetoric of exclusive monotheism, far from being poor "marketing," endowed the movement with a clear normative anchor that satisfied converts seeking cognitive certainty within the pluralistic religio-civic marketplace of Trajanic Asia Minor (Lieu 2004). Consequently, the Christians' paradoxical mix of social marginality and ideological inflexibility became—not despite but because of its confrontational posture—a catalyst for recruitment and for the rapid diffusion of a new collective identity.

3.5. Subsequent Persecutions

From Trajan's answer (*Ep.* X, 97), Christianity is placed in a totally different category from other crimes. Although Christians were not to be treated as common criminals,

Christianity was not a lawful religion and therefore members of the community could be punished if they drew too much attention to themselves (Frend 1965, p. 220). No empire-wide edict prior to Decius declared the mere name *christianus* illicit; nevertheless, once an individual openly professed this *superstitio*, a governor was empowered to initiate a *cognitio extra ordinem*. The proceedings could be terminated at any stage if the accused performed the requisite sacrifice, which ipso facto extinguished the action. During the second and early third centuries, those accused of being Christians remained free if they performed a symbolic act of sacrifice and were punished if they did not. Trajan's rescript indicates that Christian adherence functioned less as a formally typified *crimen* than as a legally salient status subject to discretionary sanction: punishment attached to the continuing refusal to participate in the public rites, and it could cease instantaneously upon sacrificial compliance. An apostate would presumably represent a victory for traditional religion (Johnson 1988, p. 421). For Roman officials, persuading a Christian to apostatize and resume participation in the civic cult counted as a tangible victory for the traditional Greco-Roman religion, not for Judaism. Only one clear instance is known in which suspected Christians were punished even after such recantation: the violent persecution at Lyon (Barnes 1968, p. 37).

The legal position of the Christians would continue exactly as Trajan defined it until Decius;[34] however, while the presumption that Epistles X, 96, and X, 97 dictated the later treatment of Christians has generated considerable historiographical unanimity, authors such as Sherwin-White were cautious in pointing out the limitations of any later legal use of Trajan's rescript (Sherwin-White 1952, p. 209). There is no trace of Trajan's rescript in later non-Christian literary or legal sources. For example, the reply that the emperor Hadrian sent to the proconsul of Asia Minucius Fundanus with a clear norm to be able to deal with the legal situation of the Christian faithful has reached us through the first of the Apologies of Justin (Santos Yanguas 2021, p. 37).

Tertullian of Carthage, writing some decades later, paraphrases Pliny's correspondence and turns it into a forensic *reductio*. After summarising the governor's report and Trajan's reply, he exclaims:

> 'A strange verdict! You forbid the search for Christians as though they were innocent yet command them to be punished as though they were guilty. You pardon and you lash; you overlook, and you chastise. If they deserve punishment, why not seek them out? If they deserve to be overlooked, why punish them at all?' (Apol. 2.6–8).

The polemic is instructive. From the Christian vantage-point the Pliny–Trajan protocol appeared logically incoherent: believers were not pursued for conventional crime—murder, fraud, or treason—but merely for bearing the name *christianus* and refusing ritual obeisance to the emperor. Yet the exchange also reveals the Roman rationale behind that seeming contradiction. By classifying confessed Christians as a *status offence* (*superstitio obstinata*), Trajan could curb popular zeal for denunciations while still upholding magisterial authority whenever the refusal to sacrifice became publicly manifest. The surviving evidence is therefore asymmetrical: most of it comes from Christian authors preoccupied with commemorating martyrdom rather than cataloguing the spectrum of official responses, which may have varied considerably from province to province (Rives 2011, p. 209).

In the early second century A.D., Pliny the Younger was appointed governor of the Roman province of Ponto-Bithynia. Upon his arrival, he had to manage, without prior jurisprudence or without knowledge of it on his part, the rise of a new religion, Christianity. Pliny initially adopted a series of decisions that included, in the most extreme case, the execution of those Christians who, "obstinately", stood firm in their faith. But before the development of events, with anonymous accusations on the one hand and

the only confirmation by the ruler of a harmless "superstition" on the other, he decides to consult Trajan on the adequacy of his methodical procedure. According to Theodor Mommsen, the right to conduct criminal trials and inflict summary punishments that Roman officials possessed by virtue of their empire obviated the need to postulate a particular law prohibiting Christianity (Mommsen 1890, pp. 389–429). Trajan's concise reply (*Ep.* X, 97) points out in a very concrete way the steps to be followed: (i) Christians are not to be persecuted; (ii) if they are denounced and found guilty, they must be punished; (iii) whoever shows repentance and proves it by deeds shall be acquitted; (iv) under no circumstances shall anonymous accusations be accepted.

Trajan's rescript must be read as a pragmatically minimalist solution, not as a doctrinal condemnation. By proscribing "*inquisitiones*" yet endorsing punishment of the obstinate, the emperor sought to deter popular denunciations while preserving the governor's discretion under *cognitio extra ordinem*. In effect, Christian adherence became a *status offence*: harmless if socially invisible, culpable once publicly confessed and accompanied by sacrificial refusal. The rescript thus balanced civic tranquillity with juridical flexibility, illuminating why later persecutions remained local and episodic rather than empire wide.

Was there, then, a formal persecution of Christians in Asia Minor? If one reads Trajan's rescript in a strictly literal sense, the answer appears to be negative, because the emperor explicitly forbids governors to seek out believers. Yet the reply is not a charter of toleration; it sketches the minimal conditions under which punishment becomes legitimate. Trajan allows prosecution only when (i) an identified individual is denounced, (ii) the charge is substantiated by interrogation, and (iii) the accused persists in refusing the sacrificial test. In other words, there must be a demonstrable breach of the public cultic law, not heresy in a later theological sense, but contumacious *impietas* that threatened the *pax deorum* and, by extension, the emperor's *maiestas*. Once contumacy was established, the governor possessed full discretion under *cognitio extra ordinem* to impose capital sanction.

This conditional logic explains why the earliest coercive measures remained sporadic and locally triggered. Sherwin-White (1952, p. 212) already noted that both Trajan and Hadrian sought to keep the matter "within bounds," tolerating passive Christians while punishing overt recusants. Eusebius of Caesarea corroborates that policy when he remarks that, although no universal decree existed, "opportunities arose here and there at the instigation now of the populace, now of a provincial governor" (*HE* 3.33.2). In every recorded instance, whether a riotous mob, an informant's denunciation, or a volunteer for martyrdom, the Roman hearing is reactive, not proactive (Rives 2011, p. 202).

The same logic also clarifies why voluntary martyrdom could succeed as a public testimony: by refusing the sacrificial oath, the aspirant deliberately crossed the legal threshold that Trajan had set, provoking a death sentence that simultaneously satisfied Roman jurisprudence and Christian eschatology. As Bowersock (1995) argues, such self-exposure was intelligible within wider Greco-Roman ideals of honourable death and civic spectacle. What from a Christian perspective looked like irrational hostility was, from the magistrate's viewpoint, the predictable penalty for a status offence defined by obstinate impiety.

Now, by the time Trajan's answer reached Pliny, a good number of followers of the new faith would have already been executed, and the news would have spread, to the point that texts such as 1 Peter record how Christians should behave in this situation. The violence continued unabated; in the years and centuries that followed, countless new killings for religious reasons occurred, adding yet another dark chapter to history. Years and centuries later would see countless new murders for religious reasons, one more of the black episodes that dot history.

4. Conclusions

Three analytically distinct mechanisms underpinned early Christian resilience and expansion: first, ritual support—tightly choreographed dawn liturgies forged affective synchrony and deepened intra-group trust; second, mutual economy—congregational burial funds, almsgiving and emergency credit translated symbolic solidarity into tangible material aid, lowering the transaction costs of conversion; third, eschatological expectation—a teleology of imminent vindication reframed suffering as redemptive capital and neutralised the deterrent effect of persecution. Ritual cohesion, economic reciprocity and eschatological hope thus supply a historically grounded explanation for an otherwise improbable religious ascent.

The findings of this study are consistent with recent psychological research on the effects of religious persecution (Tomka 1998; Ting and Watson 2007). Such findings corroborate the role of community coping mechanisms, social support, and positive reinterpretation in people's ability to endure extreme contexts of religious persecution, as occurred with early Christians. Our study, however, has limitations. First, it is based on a single historical source, Pliny the Younger's Epistle X 96, which, despite its relevance, does not offer a complete picture of the experiences of early Christians. Second, the application of modern psychological and psychoanalytic concepts to a historically and culturally distinct context, which, while providing valuable perspectives and allowing for greater interpretive depth, may present challenges due to inherent differences in the understanding and handling of psychology in early Christian times compared to contemporary conceptions. Future research should triangulate Pliny's testimony with archaeological data and non-Christian documentary evidence to mitigate source bias and to furnish a more granular view of provincial diversity. Also, they should examine other ancient sources to obtain a more complete picture, developing theoretical approaches that merge psychology and history to better understand human experiences in historical contexts, and comparing them with other persecuted religious groups to understand how faith can be a source of resilience and resistance.

This study opens new avenues for future interdisciplinary research at the intersection of psychology and history. Our findings demonstrate the value of applying modern psychological concepts to understanding human experiences in specific historical settings. More research is needed that utilizes psychological categories to describe and interpret complex historical phenomena like religious persecution more accurately and nuancedly.

The interdisciplinary methodology demonstrated here reveals the potential for productive collaboration between historical and psychological inquiry. By applying contemporary theoretical frameworks to ancient phenomena, we achieve both historical illumination and theoretical refinement: historical sources provide rich empirical data for testing psychological models under extreme conditions, while psychological theories offer analytical tools for detecting patterns that purely historical methodologies might overlook. This reciprocal enrichment suggests promising avenues for future research that could examine comparable instances of religious persecution across different temporal and cultural contexts.

The methodological innovations demonstrated in this study reveal significant potential for expanding interdisciplinary collaboration between historical and psychological inquiry. Future research should examine comparable instances of religious persecution across different temporal and cultural contexts, employing similar theoretical frameworks to identify universal patterns of minority group resilience. Such comparative analysis would strengthen the external validity of our findings while contributing to broader theoretical understanding of collective coping mechanisms under systemic oppression.

The broader implications of this study extend to contemporary understanding of minority group resilience under systematic oppression. The mechanisms identified among

Plinian Christians—community solidarity, cognitive reframing, ritualized resistance, and transcendent meaning-making—appear consistently across diverse instances of group persecution, suggesting fundamental patterns of human adaptation to existential threat. Such insights possess both scholarly and practical value for comprehending how communities survive, adapt, and ultimately transform conditions of adversity into sources of collective strength. The historical record thus becomes not merely a chronicle of past events but a repository of human wisdom about endurance, resistance, and the psychological foundations of social transformation.

Abbreviations

In accordance with the journal's editorial policy, the table below lists all abbreviations used in the text, each linked to the specific modern edition cited in the References section; consequently, the same abbreviation may appear in multiple entries when more than one edition of a work has been referenced.

For clarity and consistency, each entry provides first the original Latin title of the work, followed in parentheses by its English title, and finally the modern edition employed, with author and year.

Abbrev.	Work and Edition
1 Clem.	*Epistula Prima ad Corinthios* (First Epistle of Clement) (Clement of Rome 2003)
Acts	*Acta Apostolorum* (Acts of the Apostles) (Acts of the Apostles 1994)
Ann.	*Annales* (Annals) (Tacitus 1980)
Apol.	*Apologeticus* (Apologetic) (Tertullian 2001)
Apol.	*De Corona. Ad Scapulam. De Fuga in Persecutione* (The Crown. To Scapula. The Escape in the Chase) (Tertullian 2018)
B.J.	*Bellum Judaicum* (The Jewish War) (Josephus 1997)
D.C.	*Historia Romana* (Roman History) (Cassius Dio 2011)
Dig.	*Digesta* (Digest) of *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (Justinian 1985)
Ep.	*Epistulae* (Letters) (Pliny the Younger 1889)
Ep.	*Epistulae* (Letters) (Pliny the Younger 1969)
Ep.	*Epistulae* (Letters) (Pliny the Younger 2005)
H.E.	*Historia Ecclesiastica* (Ecclesiastical History) (Eusebius 1926)
Inst.	*Institutiones Divinae* (Divine Institutes) (Lactantius 2006)
Liv.	*Ab Urbe Condita* (From the Founding of the City) (Tito Livio 1993)
Med.	*Meditationes* (Meditations) (Marcus Aurelius 2011)
Nat.D.	*De Natura Deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods) (Cicero 1955)
Suet.	*Vitae Caesarum* (Lives of the Caesars) (Suetonius 1992)

Notes

[1]   The date of Pliny the Younger's death is not known exactly, but it should not necessarily have occurred at the end of his rule in Bithynia, or even immediately afterwards, as has usually been considered: Mayer i Olivé (2014) reflects extensively on this aspect.

[2]   Pl. *Ep*. X, 18. Latin *mei loco* ("in my place"): Trajan's formula for appointing Pliny as his personal legate.

[3]   As the most powerful official in the Roman provinces, the governor possessed complete judicial authority. Justinian (Dig. 1.16.7.2) summarizes it with the following words: "*plenissimam autem iurisdictionem proconsul habeat, omnium partes, qui Romae vel quasi magistratus vel extra ordinem ius dicunt, ad ipsum pertinent et ideo maius imperium in ea provincia habet omnibus post principem, nec quicquam est in provincia, quod non per ipsum expediatur*". In particular, and in relation to the present case, in the second century. provincial governors could in certain circumstances convict and execute Roman citizens without appeal, but in other circumstances, they reserved the decision on Roman citizens to the emperor, whether they appealed or not (Jones 1960, pp. 53–65).

⁴ Williams (2012, p. 204) reflects on the six points on which Pliny, at the beginning of his epistle, argues ignorance (the nature or extent of punishment for Christians; the causes for initiating an investigation; the scope of the investigation; whether a distinction should be made on the basis of age; whether ancient Christians should be pardoned; and whether the name alone, without the associated crimes, it is a punishable offense) and dismantles all of them.

⁵ Note the paradox in the fact that, as will be discussed later, in the case of Christians they were held responsible, and not potential solvers, for such disasters.

⁶ Livy's description of the suppression of the bacchanals in 186 B.C. may have influenced the view of Christianity by Pliny and other cultivated Romans. Although this event took place almost three hundred years before the time of Pliny, the tremendous popularity of Livy's History of Rome made the events available and well known to the reading public, who were able to draw parallels between the bacchanals and the Christian problem (Benko 1985, p. 11). There are points on which Pliny even borrows the phraseology of Livy when describing the situation he faces with Christians: in this regard he reflects on a brief but very successful article by R. M. Grant (1948, pp. 273–74). However, the Christian practices that Pliny confronts with the supposed religion of the bacchanals, a façade in reality of a criminal underworld, have little in common, where wine and nocturnality and the promiscuity of sexes and tender and adult ages eliminated all limits of modesty and all kinds of depravities began to be committed, for each had within his grasp the satisfaction of desire to which he was most inclined by nature (Liv. 39.8–9).

⁷ In Barnes (1968, p. 32), there are, however, supporters of the plausibility of this account: Volterra (1947), Cecchelli (1956), Sordi (1957), and Sordi (1960).

⁸ The appointment, picked up from Suet. Cl. XV,4, raises doubts about whether this group of "followers of Crestos" were Christians or not. Justin Martyr (*Apol.* 4), Tertullian (*Apol.* 3.5.) and Lactantius (*Inst.* 4.7.5), "part" sources, affirm, in this regard, emphatically yes, and that the pagans pronounced the name of Christ as "Chrestus". J. G. Cook (2020, pp. 255–57) reflects extensively on the matter to conclude that during the reign of Claudius the name Crestos was indeed used to refer to Christ.

⁹ Smallwood (1976, p. 212) opines that it may well be imagined that Christians preaching in Rome, directed primarily to the Jews, aroused there the same kind of opposition and uproar as that of St. Paul among the Jewish communities of Asia Minor and Greece, and that the resulting disturbances constituted a serious threat to public order.

¹⁰ Romans 16 shows that there was an active Christian community in Rome during Nero's rule.

¹¹ Suet. *Nero*. XVI. In this case, there seems to be less possibility of confusion with the Jews, since Smallwood (1976, p. 217) notes, there is no evidence of any value in the classical writers, Jewish or ecclesiastical, to suggest that the Jews were in actual or even potential danger at the time, and Josephus' silence on this point can be taken as conclusive.

¹² On 19 July, 64 AD, a fire broke out in one of the shops located around Rome's Circus Maximus. The fire caused extensive damage to the city and claimed a considerable amount of human life (Tac. Ann. XV, 38–40).

¹³ Another Christian document, the Apocalypse, has also been used as evidence of a persecution of Domitian. But not all scholars link it to his reign; Jones (2002, pp. 114–17) states that it could well refer to Nero. The same author refutes many of the other assumptions concerning Domitian's connection with the persecution of the early Christians

¹⁴ Carrier (2014) states that Pliny was a contemporary and friend of Tacitus and yet openly shows his ignorance about the Christian collective. Pliny the Younger was also an admirer and reader of the work of his uncle, who lamented the burning of Rome and blamed Nero (Plin. *Nat*. 17.1.5) but did not mention Christians as guilty. According to Carrier, Tacitus' use of the past tense *appellabat* in describing people "calling the fire scapegoats Christians" may suggest that the once-existing group no longer existed during his time and that Tacitus may have been describing the followers of Crestos mentioned in Suetonius. Unlike Carrier, who sees in Tacitus' text a later interpolation, Shaw (2015) is of the opinion that, although Ann. XV 44 is probably genuine, it reflected the ideas and connections prevalent at the time the historian was writing and not the realities of the 1960s.

¹⁵ These were factions or political associations composed of groups of young aristocrats. Also, non-profit or even charitable associations (Mignot 2015, p. 129). Both could potentially degenerate into subversive urban movements (Pl. Ep. X, 34).

¹⁶ Marcus Aurelius (*Med*.11.3) opined, years later, that the proverbial disposition of Christians to die reflected "mere stubbornness."

¹⁷ Sherwin-White (1952, p. 210) notes that Trajan was very reluctant to make his cult the basis of charges of treason, that worship was voluntary, and its ceremonies were administered by and largely limited to municipal and provincial aristocracies.

¹⁸ "When they arrived in Mysia, they tried to go to Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus did not allow it" (*Acts* 16:6–9).

¹⁹ Tradition that appears in Ribadeneyra (1897), Flos Sanctorum, in La Leyenda de Oro, L. González y Cía. Editores, t. IV, p. 435.

²⁰ "How much could Bithynia, Cappadocia, Pamphylia, Lycia, and Cilicia say in favour of freedom, that they pay tribute without being forced to bear arms?" (Jos. *B.J.* 2, 368).

²¹ For a comprehensive analysis of allegations of incest, infanticide, and cannibalism, see Wagemakers (2010).

²² *Est enim pietas iustitia adversum deos raises* (Cic. *Nat. D*. 1, 116).

²³ Years after Pliny, Cassius Dio, born in Bithynia, wrote "Those who introduce new gods in the place of the old convince others to accept strange customs, from which are born conspiracies, factions and associations that suit very little to the monarchical power" (D.C. 52.36.2).

[24]   Once again, the doubt arises as to whether Pliny knew previous references of legal treatment of Christians, even though he himself affirms that he does not know what activities and to what extent they are usually punished or investigated in this regard (Pl. *Ep.* X, 96.1).

[25]   As Scott (1932, p. 164) records, the provincial cult of emperors flourished under Trajan.

[26]   Lozano Gómez (2018, p. 102) points out that sacrifice for the gods and emperors was a ritual way of marking fidelity to the Empire. It should be noted, however, how contradictory it is that Pliny absolved Christians who did so and blasphemed Christ, when Trajan himself had previously said the following to him (Pl. *Ep.* X, 82,1): " You know perfectly well my purpose of not getting respect for my name neither by fear nor by terror nor by accusations of maiestas".

[27]   The decisions taken by Pliny before consulting Trajan would seem to corroborate the existence of a legal order, a rescript to the urban prefect or some similar document providing that henceforth persons appearing before him as Christians would be punished with capital punishment (Crook 1967, p. 279).

[28]   According to J. G. Cook (2020, p. 242), the life of an informer could nevertheless be very dangerous. The author reaffirms his argument by turning to Quintilian (*Decl. min.* 331.2): *Qui capitis accusaverit neque damnaverit, ipse capite puniatur.*

[29]   In 1 Cor 10:27–29, St. Paul reflects on the desirability of consuming meat from immolated animals. According to Saulnier (1984, p. 255), Paul wanted to distinguish several cases: on the one hand, he considers it inadmissible to participate in a meal near a sanctuary, because the pagan reference is too obvious; on the other hand, it authorizes the purchase of meat sold in the market, provided that its origin is unknown, and has only slight reservations regarding meals, taken from a non-believing friend. Paul's position, therefore, is very nuanced and does not tend to marginalize the Corinthians by isolating them from their social relations and forbidding them completely from the consumption of meat. The apostle only wants to avoid participation in pagan communion sacrifices and sacred banquets.

[30]   Barnes (1968, p. 36), citing Hardy (Pliny the Younger 1889, p. 65).

[31]   In Martin (1964, pp. 51–52), the exact references to the liturgy appear in the sources cited: 1 Clem. lix–lxi; Ignatius, Eph. iv; vii. 2; xix; Trallians ix; Smyr. i.; Didache ix–x, xiv.

[32]   *Quo magis necessarium credidi ex duabus ancillis, quae ministrae dicebantur, quid esset veri, et per tormenta quaerere. Nihil aliud inveni quam superstitionem pravam et immodicam* (Pl. *Ep.* X, 96, 8). John Paul II himself in his apostolic letter Mulieris Dignitatem (1988, p. VII, 27) stated that women played an active and important role in the life of the early Church, in the building from its foundations of the first Christian community—and of the later ones—through their own charisms and their varied service. The apostolic writings record their names, such as Phoebe, "deaconess of the church of Cenchrea" (*Rom* 16:1, although there are translators who refer to Phoebe as a deacon and not a deaconess), Prisca with her husband Aquila (2 *Tim* 4:19), Euodia and Syntyche (*Phil* 4:2) and Mary, Tryphaena, Persis and Tryphosa (*Rom* 16:6,12). St. Paul speaks of his "hard work" for Christ, and this hard work involves the various fields of the Church's apostolic service, beginning with the "domestic Church." In the latter, the "sincere faith" passes from the mother to the children and grandchildren, as in the house of Timothy (2 *Tim* 1:5). In this regard, the exhaustive work of Zagano (2011) addresses the problem of women in Catholicism.

[33]   Moss (2012, p. 49) mentions Paul, who rejoices and even praises the merits of suffering, describing it as "completing what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ" (*Col* 1:24). It also picks up references to suffering in Revelation, which exhorts to "overcome" like Christ through suffering and promises heavenly rewards for obedience (e.g., *Rev* 2:11; 2:17; 2:26–28; 3:12; 3:17).

[34]   The persecution initiated by Decius (AD 249–251) is generally regarded as the first empire-wide campaign against Christians to receive formal approval from the imperial authorities.

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