

LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

AN EXAMINATION OF THE MARTYRDOMS OF LYON IN AD 177:  
A CRITIQUE OF THE THEORY OF THE TRINQUI

A THESIS

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## INTRODUCTION

In AD 177, a small band of Christians living in the ancient city of Lugdunum located in southern Gaul were arrested and tortured by Roman authorities for allegedly participating in acts of incest and cannibalism. Following the trial, some of the victims were beheaded; others were tortured to death in prison; still, others were used as gladiatorial entertainment in the local amphitheater. Afterward, the Romans placed the heads and bodies on public display for six days. Afterward, the bodies were cremated and swept them into the Rhone River. Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* preserves the account of "The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne to the Churches of Asia and Phrygia," (henceforth, *The Gallican Letter*). *The Gallican Letter* is the only historical account of the martyrdoms and is the basis for historians' understanding of the relationship between Christianity, pagan, and Roman elements in *Lugdunum* before, during, and shortly after 177.<sup>1</sup>

The events of 177 in Lugdunum offer valuable insight into the relationship between Roman, pagan, and Christian elements within the Empire and in the region of Gaul in particular. The persecution first began as a public harassment and exclusion of the Christians from places of commerce and social interaction such as bathhouses and markets but quickly increased to physical assault and charges of capital crimes. Soon, Christian began to be rounded up and brought before local authorities to undergo humiliation, torture, and the threat of death if they did not recant. Shortly thereafter, the unnamed provincial governor received a rescript from the emperor reaffirming Trajan's policy of concerning Christian apostates.<sup>2</sup> Those who did not

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<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *Eusebius: The Church History*, Translation and Commentary by Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2007). For the Greek text, see Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> Trajan's Rescript affirms the practice of allowing those Christians who recanted of their faith to be set free so long as they continued in that apostasy.

recant were tortured to death in the prisons, burned with hot instruments, strangled to death, or placed in the amphitheater to be gored by wild beasts.

The central question surrounding the cause of the martyrdom is the motivation of the persecutors. The cause and influence behind the martyrdoms has commonly been associated with the policies of the current Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, and to the anti-Christian mob violence that commonly occurred during the first three centuries. However, by the mid-twentieth century, a new theory arose to challenge this consensus—the *trinqui* theory. The *trinqui* theory relied on an act of the Roman Senate passed earlier in the same year. In 177, the Roman Senate ratified the *Senatus Consultum de Pretiis Gladiatorum Minuendis* (from here referred to as the *senatus consultum*), which gave local authorities permission to use criminals condemned to death as gladiatorial entertainment. The *senatus consultum* was likely passed to relieve the upper classes of the Roman Empire from the financial burden of sourcing the amphitheaters with expensive gladiators. This act had major implications for the whole Empire, but especially for the region of the Three-Gauls in particular. Palmer and Oliver were the first to propose that such an act was ratified as a concession particularly for the Three-Gauls for the purpose of supplying cheap sources of entertainment and sacrificial victims to be used for ancient pagan rituals.<sup>3</sup> The conclusion of this theory is that Christians were likely used as victims for such rituals. The theory has been supported by later historians Frennd, Croteau, Drinkwater, Kyle, Hertwig-Jaksch.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> James H. Oliver and Robert E. A. Palmer, “Minutes of an Act of the Roman Senate,” *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 24, no. 4 (October - December 1955): 320-349.

<sup>4</sup> Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, (London: Routledge, 1998). J. F. Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul: The Three Provinces, 58 BC-AD 260*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983). W.E.C. Frennd, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church; A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967). Shelly Croteau, “Marcus Aurelius and the Accidental Martyrs of Lyons (A.D. 177)” (PhD diss.), University of Missouri-Columbia, 1992). Michael Hertwig-Jaksch, “Studies in the Martyrdom of the Christians at Lugdunum, 177 A.D.,” (M.A. thesis) (University of Alberta, 1986). In Proquest Digital Dissertations and Theses.

While the ratification of this *senatus consultum* provides an understanding for the legal justification for the use of Christians in the amphitheater in Lugdunum, it does not fully explain why the Christians in Gaul may have been used as sacrificial victims or why there was an outbreak against the Christians in the first place. Croteau argues that the advocates of the *senatus consultum* did not directly call for the use of Christians as ritualistic victims nor did they lobby for its ratification for this purpose. Rather the law merely provided the means by which pagans exploited the Christians.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, in order to demonstrate that Christians were used as the *trinqui*, proponents of the theory need to provide strong evidence for the presence and practice of Celtic religious practices in Lugdunum before and during AD 177. In addition, the *trinqui* theory needs to show evidence that the persecutions of 177 were unique to Lugdunum since the *senatus consultum* made special concession to the aristocracy in Gaul.

### **Importance of the Problem**

The debate over the identity of the persecutors in Lugdunum in 177 has particular relevance to early Christian and Roman studies. Shedding light on this particular event in history potentially offers greater understanding of the relationship of Christian, Roman, and pagan groups in western Roman provinces and the Empire at large. It will help to answer the question of how early Christian studies should view the relationship of the Church with Marcus Aurelius. Do the events in Lugdunum suggest anything about Marcus Aurelius' attitude toward Christianity? In the latter half of the twentieth century, historians have questioned whether Marcus Aurelius should be viewed as a persecutor of Christians or simply an emperor following the example set forth by Trajan. Does the *trinqui* theory offer evidence in support of this latter view?

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<sup>5</sup> Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius," iii.

In addition, a rebuttal of the *trinqi* theory will help to substantiate the accuracy of Eusebius' historical assessment of Christian martyrdom during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Near the end of *The Gallican Letter*, Eusebius inserts a parenthetical comment surmising that the events in Lugdunum are represented of what took place in the other provinces during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.<sup>6</sup> Oliver and Palmer have indirectly challenged Eusebius' assessment. Instead, they have suggested Marcus Aurelius never intended for such abuses to occur and that the events in Lugdunum were limited in scope and hopefully mitigated soon thereafter.<sup>7</sup> The two assessments (Eusebius' and Oliver and Palmer's) appear to be mutually exclusive; but which is correct? By offering a rebuttal to the *trinqi* theory, this thesis hopes to lend support to Eusebius' account.

### **Statement of Position**

It is the position of this thesis that the *trinqi* theory—that the Gallic aristocracy and *Concillium Galliarum* exploited the ratification of the *senatus consultum* in order to perform an ancient religious ritual of the *trinqi* in which the Christian were killed as sacrificial victims—is not supported by historical and literary evidence within *The Gallican Letter* nor by the archeological evidence of religious life in Gaul during the second century. What the *trinqi* theory lacks is compelling historical and literary evidence to show 1) a revitalization of Celtic religion could have influenced the martyrdom, and 2) that the modes of torture and execution uniquely correspond to the ancient ritual of the *trinqi* as opposed to contemporary accounts of Christian martyrdom.

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<sup>6</sup> *HE* 5.2.1.

<sup>7</sup> Oliver and Palmer, "Minutes," 326.

I will critique the *trinqui* theory by offering archaeological, historical, and literary arguments against its critical components by arguing that the *trinqui* theory endeavors to prove what it can only speculate, and in light of alternative explanations which comport with the historical evidence, it should be rejected. Furthermore, I will show that the nature of the revitalization in Celtic religion does not lend support to the *trinqui* theory, but rather undermines it. Lastly, I will demonstrate that critical elements in the proceedings of the martyrdom are actually characteristic of Roman ritual and custom and are indicative of Christian martyrdoms occurring during the second and early third century.

### **Historiographical Overview**

The historical literature over the latter part of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century has focused on the question of responsibility—that is, who should be held responsible for the events that transpired. The earlier literature focused on the role of Marcus Aurelius and the imperial government, attributing the events at Lugdunum to either the anti-Christian policies of Marcus Aurelius and seeking to place much of the blame at his feet or explaining the cause of the event as sociological rather than political. Johann von Mosheim, in *Historical Commentaries on the State of Christianity During the First Three Hundred and Twenty-Five Years from the Christian Era* (published posthumously in 1854), argued that martyrdoms such as those in Lugdunum (in conjunction with the martyrdoms of Justin and Polycarp) reveal the anti-Christian policies of Marcus Aurelius. His rescripts and edicts, while not completely removing the protections set up by his predecessor Antoninus Pius, practically removed all inhibitions that previously prevented criminal convictions of Christians based on false and speculative accusations. The actions of the emperor suggest that the imperial government, while refraining from enacting any official policy of suppression, actively

encouraged the persecution of the Christians. The martyrdoms at Lugdunum reveal Marcus Aurelius' general consent to the discrimination of the Christian sect.<sup>8</sup>

Ernest Hardy, in *Christianity and the Roman Government* (1894), argued against the conclusion that the persecution of the Christians under Aurelius reveal a wider imperial policy aimed at suppressing Christianity. He argued instead that Aurelius' rescripts were practically similar to those of Trajan, and that there is no evidence to suggest an Empire-wide persecution of Christians. Hardy grants that Aurelius' personal feelings against Christianity no doubt fostered a general public attitude against them. Instead, the martyrdoms (such as those in Lugdunum) occurred in a sporadic nature and probably due to the increased presence of Christianity into new territories. If the Roman government had enacted an official policy, one would expect to see more widespread persecution throughout the Empire. Yet, this is missing from historical records. Rather, historical records show only intermittent martyrdoms with relatively low numbers of deaths.<sup>9</sup>

Hardy was followed by later historians of the early twentieth century. Camille Jullian, in *Histoire de la Gaule*, suggested that some historians were unduly to seeking to justify the policies of Marcus Aurelius by absolving him of any culpability in the martyrdom. Jullian posited that the Romans sought to teach the Christians a lesson.<sup>10</sup> Andre Chagny, in *Les Martyrs de Lyon de 177: Etude Historique*, notes that *The Gallican Letter* provides no reasons for the

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<sup>8</sup> Johann Lorenz Mosheim, *Historical Commentaries on the State of Christianity During the First Three Hundred and Twenty-Five Years from the Christian Era: Being a Translation of "The Commentaries on the Affairs of the Christians Before the Time of Constantine the Great,"* 2 Vols., Translated by Robert Vidal, Edited by James Murdock, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), 300-311.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest George Hardy, *Christianity and the Roman Government: A Study in Imperial Administration* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1925), 146-151.

<sup>10</sup> Camille Jullian, *Histoire de la Gaule, Vol. 4*, (Bruxelles: Culture et Civilisation, 1964). 459.

outbreak, and only Satan is mentioned as the originator and orchestrator of the persecution.<sup>11</sup> Pierre Wuilleumier, in *Lyon: Métropole des Gaules*, believed the conflict arose between the Christians and both the imperial cult of *Tres-Galliae* and the cult of Magna Mater. Whatever conflict there was with other cults, Christianity's interaction with the imperial cult is quite clear from *The Gallican Letter*.<sup>12</sup>

During the same period, the dating of the martyrdom was called into question by J.A. Thompson with his 1912 publication of "The Alleged Persecution of the Christians at Lyons in 177."<sup>13</sup> Thompson placed the event in the third century during the reign of Aurelian. Jean Colin in *L'Empire des Antonins et les Martyrs Gaulois de 177* identified the martyrdom with the persecutions in Galatia.<sup>14</sup> Both publications assumed Eusebius had made a grave error in dating the event. In *Lettres et Écrivains Chrétiens des IIe et IIIe Siècles*, P. Nautin dates the martyrdom to 175, believing that Eusebius aligned the martyrdom with the accession of Eleutherus as bishop of Rome.<sup>15</sup> However, the traditional date of 177 is nearly universally accepted historians.<sup>16</sup>

By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, studies on the martyrdom of Lugdunum took a different turn with the publication of James Oliver and Robert Palmer's article, "Minutes of an

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<sup>11</sup> Andre Chagny, *Les Martyrs de Lyon de 177: Etude Historique* (Lyons and Paris: Emmanuel Vitte 1936), 20-25.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Wuilleumier, *Lyon: Métropole des Gaules* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1953), 22.

<sup>13</sup> James Westfall Thompson, "The Alleged Persecution of the Christians at Lyons in 177," *The American Journal of Theology* 16:3 (July 1912): 359-384.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Colin, *L'Empire des Antonins et les Martyrs Gaulois de 177* (Bonn: R. Habelt, 1964).

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Nautin, *Lettres et Écrivains Chrétiens des IIe et IIIe Siècles* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1961), 62.

<sup>16</sup> T. D. Barnes, "Pre-Decian Acta Martyrdom," *Journal of Theological Studies* 19 (1968): 518. Barnes provides additional historiographical citations concerning Eusebius' dating of the event. There is virtually unanimous agree on the date of 177.

Act of the Roman Senate,” (1955).<sup>17</sup> After this publication, historical research focused on the identity of the persecutors and sought to explain the events as the outcome of religious conflict within the city. In this article, the authors provide one of the two competing theories concerning the cause and motives for the martyrdoms and the identity of the persecutors. They argued that the a *senatus consultum*, passed in the same year (177), which allowed for the use of criminals condemned to death to be used in gladiatorial entertainment provided the legal justification for the manner of execution against the Christians in Lugdunum. They argued that the use of the Christians as replacements for gladiators in the amphitheater suggested a connection (albeit a loose connection) between the *senatus consultum* and the martyrdoms. The treatment of the bodies after the massacre also bears similarities to sacrificial victims like the *trinqui*. Oliver and Palmer went on to argue that political, social, and economic factors in the region of the Three Gauls played a significant influence on the passage of this *senatus consultum* and the subsequent martyrdom of the Christians. They reject the claim that the persecutions occurred largely as random acts of mob violence. However, they admit that the martyrdoms were not a direct result of any systematized persecution by the hand of the imperial government. Rather, the policies of the emperor and senate reveal a lack of concern for the fledgling groups of Christians in western provinces. Hence, the martyrdoms occurred as an indirect result of political concession made to the leaders of the provinces in Roman Gaul.

G.E.M. Croix, in “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?” (1963), argues that during the second great period of persecution (64-250), the Christians were largely persecuted by pagan mobs for social and economic reasons stemming from their refusal to participate in pagan

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<sup>17</sup> Oliver and Palmer, “Minutes,” 320-349.

rituals and to acknowledge pagan gods.<sup>18</sup> The attitude of the Roman government was mixed, and the policies of the emperors varied. This suggests, argued Croix, that prior to the year 250 the Roman government lacked a universal policy toward Christian persecution. The trials and executions of Christians were largely left to the decisions of provincial governors who based their verdicts on their own interpretations and understandings of imperial *lexes, consultums*, edicts, and rescripts. Overall, this was a period of sporadic persecutions (prompted largely by the accusations of the pagan mobs) that were periodically interrupted by periods of general persecutions and protective edicts. Croix does not specifically mention the martyrs of Lyon, but he alludes to similar trials by noting the provincial governors had extreme liberty in determining the outcomes of criminal cases through a process of *cognitio extra ordinum* (lit: extraordinary knowledge).<sup>19</sup>

In “Law and Arbitrariness in the Persecution of the Christians and Justin's First Apology” (1964), Paul Keresztes provides much needed clarification concerning the nature of the mob-trials in relation to Roman law.<sup>20</sup> Roman law constituted three types of legal justification for bringing Christians to trial—*ius coercionis* (“right constraint”), criminal law, or special law proscribing all Christians. He notes that while the mob-trials were largely sparked by the social relations between Christians and their pagan colleagues, the arbitrariness of Roman law pertaining to Christians fostered an environment of capricious accusations and dubious convictions. Christians were brought to trial through spurious accusations, and only after it was revealed that the accused was a Christian would the crime of “Christianity” be substituted for the

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<sup>18</sup> G. E. M. Croix, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?,” *Past & Present* 26 (November 1963): 6-38.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-12.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Keresztes, “Law and Arbitrariness in the Persecution of the Christians and Justin's First Apology,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 18:4 (December 1964), 204-214.

initial charges. Although the edicts of Trajan and Hadrian sought to correct these abuses, the trial at Lugdunum reflected the general disregard for such edicts and revealed the general arbitrariness of the Roman legal system against Christians.

In his later publication, “The Massacre at Lugdunum in 177 A.D.,” (1967) Keresztes expands his initial argument in support of the Asian thesis. The events at Lugdunum resemble the “Asian pattern” wherein the governors’ orders to search out Christians preceded by initial violent outburst at the hands of the angry mob.<sup>21</sup> In these cases, the governor’s harsh punishment of the Christians was motivated by his unwillingness to agitate the mob. In all, there is a typical collusion between local and provincial authorities with the mob and a general disregard for Trajan’s and Hadrian’s rescript. The fact that the provincial governors possessed virtually limitless power to perpetrate such injustices reflects upon the unofficial policy of the Roman imperial government. The martyrdoms reveal a growing movement from the prohibition of “indiscriminant persecution” to a growing frequency of mob violence and collusion with provincial authorities, and eventually toward official Empire-wide persecution under imperial authority.

Keresztes follows up his research with “Marcus Aurelius a Persecutor?” (1968) in which he exonerates the emperor from the events of Lugdunum.<sup>22</sup> He argues that of the two distinct periods of persecution under Marcus Aurelius (161-168, and around 177), both periods of persecution probably resulted from the issuance imperial edicts—the first of which prescribed sacrificing to the gods, and the second were some sort of “new decrees.” Keresztes notes that one

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Keresztes, “The Massacre at Lugdunum in 177 A.D.,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 16:1 (March 1967), 75-86.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Keresztes, “Marcus Aurelius a Persecutor?” *The Harvard Theological Review* 61:3 (July 1968), 321-341.

of these “new decrees” may very well have been the *senatus consultum* of 177. While the outbreak of persecution can be connected to the ratification of these edicts, the violence against Christians should be interpreted as an *indirect* result rather than the intended goal of such edicts. Hence, while more persecutions occurred under the reign of Marcus Aurelius than any time before, he was, “basically and legally, innocent of Christian blood.”<sup>23</sup> Rather, the persecutions at Lugdunum reflect the wider problem of unlimited power of provincial governors and the “Asian pattern” of pagan mobs exploiting newly ratified Roman legislation to prosecute the Christians.

With the publication of T. D. Barnes, in “Legislation against the Christians” (1968), historical research began to focus on alternative explanation for the martyrdoms. Barnes offers a critique of Oliver and Palmer’s *trinqui* theory as well as Keresztes proposition of equating the “new decrees” referenced by Melito with the *senatus consultum* of 177.<sup>24</sup> Barnes writes:

While this *senatus consultum* may have had some bearing on the political and social background of, for example, the *pogrom* in Gaul which is traditionally, but on inadequate evidence, dated to 177, it can neither be brought into close connection with it nor be identified with the ‘new decrees’ of which Melito complained nor explain how Christians came to be treated as criminals in the first place.<sup>25</sup>

Barnes’ justification for his argument rests on the actions of provincial governors before 177 (e.g. Pliny the Younger). Barnes notes that provincial governors were “predisposed to punish those who attacked the established religions,” and could do so without legislation from either senate or emperor. Since the *mos maiorum* was the most fundamental aspect of Roman law and that which Christian attacked the most, the roots of persecution against the Christians lay in the attitude of the populace (“the minds of men”) more so than in Roman law. Hence, it was not

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>24</sup> T. D. Barnes, “Legislation against the Christians,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 58:1-2 (1968), 32-50.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 44.

legislation that provided justification for events like that of Lugdunum, but rather the sentiments of the Roman people against a growing sect which threatened its stability.

After Barnes' publication, the literature became divided between those who accepted the *trinqui* theory and those who did not. In "The *Trinci/Trinqui* and the Martyrs of Lyons" (1972), Walter Moeller suggested that the theory be brought back into mainstream.<sup>26</sup> He reinforces Oliver's and Palmer theory by drawing upon the linguistic work of Andre Piganiol in *Recherches sur les Jeux Romains* (1923).<sup>27</sup> Piganiol argued that the word *trinqui* was derived from *trincare* (Vulgar Latin) and was used to signify a "Gaulish type of sacrificial victim whose heads by ancient custom were cut off and displayed."<sup>28</sup> Moeller argued that since Piganiol's linguistic connection has been generally accepted, Oliver and Palmer's theory of the *trinqui* should be readmitted to the debate.

One of the most notable publications pertaining to this issue came via a historical conference in Lyon, France in 1977 in *Les Martyrs De Lyon*. The work was a collection of essays delivered at a conference in Lyon on this subject. In this work, Duncan Fishwick, in his chapter on "The Imperial Cult of the Three Gauls" shows the influence, power, and prestige of the imperial cult in the city of Lugdunum prior to 177.<sup>29</sup> He argued that since the events of 177 occurred during the annual festival held by the priests of the imperial cult in honor of *Roma et*

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<sup>26</sup> Walter O. Moeller, "The *Trinci/Trinqui* and the Martyrs of Lyons," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 21:1 (March 1972), 127.

<sup>27</sup> André Piganiol, *Recherches sur les jeux romains; notes d'archéologie et d'histoire religieuse*, (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra, 1923).

<sup>28</sup> Moeller, "Martyrs of Lyon," 127.

<sup>29</sup> Duncan Fishwick, "The Federal Cult of the Three Gauls," in *Les Martyrs de Lyon (177)*. Edited by Jean Rougé and Robert Turcan Paris: Éditions du C.N.R.S., 1978.

*Augustus*, it is likely that the imperial cult played a significant role in the trial of the Christians, implying that the imperial cult used the Christians as the *trinqui*.

Following the 1977 conference in Lyon and the publication of *Les Martyr De Lyon*, French historian, Amable Audin, in *Lyon, Miroir de Rome*, drew on archeological evidence around the city to explain the religious and social situation behind the massacre.<sup>30</sup> In this work, he suggests that the real perpetrators may have been worshippers of Cybele or Mithras. His work at least offers a tentative alternative to Oliver's *trinqui* theory.<sup>31</sup>

Another significant publication in defense of the *trinqui* theory came in 1992 with Shelly Croteau's "Marcus Aurelius and the Accidental Martyrs of Lyons (AD 177)."<sup>32</sup> Croteau offered a detail view into the socio-political background behind the *senatus consultum* of 177. She largely exonerates Marcus Aurelius and the imperial government from any direct responsibility in the martyrdoms of Lugdunum. Drawing on the linguistic analysis of Piganiol, she reiterates Oliver's thesis that the *senatus consultum* was passed as a political concession for the wealthy land owner in Gaul, and that the Roman legislation was then exploited by an aristocracy who sought to revive an ancient sacred ritual of the *trinqui*. The religious nature of the *trinqui* and the correlation of the *senatus consultum* to the events in Lugdunum suggest Oliver and Palmer's thesis is plausible. Again, the persecutions of the Christians was not so much a result of direct efforts on the part of the imperial government as it was the efforts of the local and provincial leaders exacting revenge for Christianity's social and economic effects in the region.

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<sup>30</sup> Amable Audin, *Lyon, Miroir de Rome* (Paris: Fayard, 1979).

<sup>31</sup> Although Audin believes the cult of Cybele may have played an important role in the trials and persecutions, he believes the archeological evidence reveals a revitalization of Celtic religion in the area by the middle of the century (leaving the door open to the *trinqui* theory).

<sup>32</sup> Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius."

In one of the most recent publications, “The Early Struggle: Understanding the Persecution of the Early Christians” (2010), Melissa Wiebe draws many of the same conclusions as Keresztes regarding the role of the imperial government in the persecutions under Marcus Aurelius.<sup>33</sup> Basing her conclusion off the research of Keresztes and Croix, she posits that the martyrdoms were part of a larger movement on the part of pagan community rather than explicitly anti-Christian legislation ratified by either Marcus Aurelius or the Senate. Although, Wiebe does not deal with the *trinqui* theory in detail, she acknowledges the role of the *senatus consultum* on the proceedings in Lugdunum.

### **Evaluation of the Literature**

With a few exceptions, the literature reveals the impact of the *trinqui* theory, notably promoted by Oliver and Palmer, Moeller, and Croteau. The theory understands the cause of the persecutions in Lugdunum as directly related to the ratification of *senatus consultum* and that this law was passed as a political concession for the aristocracy of *Tres-Galliae*.

The literature reveals two significant factors concerning Rome’s relationship to Christianity. First, there was no uniform policy in the Empire for dealing with Christians. This is not to say that the Roman government did not have laws in place concerning illegal religious practices but that the type of legal status under which the Christian fell allowed for arbitrary decisions to be made at the local levels, mostly by governors. As a result, Roman local authorities were free to take matters into their own hands. Pliny’s letter to Trajan reveals the amount of discretion governors were allowed to exercise toward the Christians, but it also

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<sup>33</sup> Melissa Wiebe, “The Early Struggle: Understanding the Persecution of the Early Christians,” (M.A. thesis, Concordia University, 2010).

reveals the lack of official policy existing within the Roman legal system during the time period.<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, the impetus for persecution likely stemmed from multiple sources—whether economic, religious, or political. Proponents of the *trinqui* theory further seek to show all three factors were at play, and the *senatus consultum* of 177 served as the catalyst for the entire ordeal. Historians have typically given either a general consent or perfunctory dismissal of the theory. It is tempting for the objective observer to find design or conspiracy behind otherwise senseless and random acts of violence. After all, the impetus for the persecution did not occur *ex nihilo*. If this *trinqui* theory is correct, then the ratification of the *senatus consultum* provides the historian with an understanding for the legal justification for the use of Christians in the amphitheater in Lugdunum and why the bodies were desecrated in such a cruel manner. However, other literary sources may already provide an adequate explanation. If so, the *trinqui* theory is unnecessary.

### Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 will examine the historical research concerning the theory of the *trinqui* and its strongest supporting evidence with the intent of discovering the social, economic, political and religious causes behind the martyrdom. Caught between the rising religious and social tensions at the local level and pressing economic and military matters on the imperial level, the Christians of Lyon and Vienne were the unfortunate victims of a revived ancient Celtic ritual of human sacrifice. The chapter will evaluate the major tenets of the *trinqui* theory and introduce the critical weaknesses in its interpretation of historical and literary analysis.

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<sup>34</sup> The governor of Lugdunum seems to have exploited the amount of discretion he possessed to abuse the Christians and to satiate the mob.

Chapter 2 will critique the *trinqui* theory's dependence on a second-century renaissance of Celtic religion. It will argue that the second-century renaissance of Celtic culture in Gaul would not have included a return to ancient forms of Celtic religion, especially the druidic practices of human sacrifice. Historical and archaeological evidence indicates that the impact of Romanization left an indelible mark on the religious consciousness of the people living in the Gallic provinces. After the first century, Celtic religious rites adopted Roman forms and interpretations, and the Celtic gods were assimilated into Roman modes of worship. Based on those findings, the link between the martyrdoms of 177 and an ancient Celtic rite of human sacrifice is practically untenable.

Chapter 3 will offer a final critique of the *trinqui* theory based on a comparative study of Roman execution and Christian martyrdom during the second and early third centuries. I will show that the events in Lugdunum in 177 resemble a common pattern found in several martyrdom accounts. These aspects include a refusal to sacrifice to the idols, "combat" in the amphitheater, tortures, exposure to beasts, beheadings, and corpse abuse. I will argue that the events in Lugdunum were largely representative of a wider trend throughout the Empire, and that the *trinqui* theory inappropriately interprets these elements as part of an ancient Celtic ritual. If the *trinqui* theory were correct, one should expect to see a marked difference in the events in Lugdunum compared to the accounts on other martyrdoms. Although the brutality of the torture, execution, and desecration of the bodies in the martyrdom at Lugdunum were especially heinous, these tactics were not uncommon among the manner of punishments administered upon convicted criminals by the Romans. Hence, the hypothesis that these tactics resemble (perhaps coincidentally) the religious practices of ancient Gallo-Celtic religion untenable.

The conclusion will review the arguments raised against the *trinqui* theory in each chapter and then return to the initial issue of relevance raised in the introduction: Is Eusebius' assessment reliable that the events in Lugdunum were indicative of wider persecutions occurring during the reign of Marcus Aurelius? Based on the historical and literary evidence, Eusebius seems to be correct. If so, then a rebuttal of the *trinqui* theory will further bolster the reliability of the traditional view as summarized by Eusebius.

## CHAPTER 1

### CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF THE TRINQUI THEORY

The events which occurred in Lugdunum in AD 177 serve as a gruesome reminder of the religious and social conflict between pagans and Christians during the second century. The theory of the *trinqu*, first proposed in the early twentieth century, attempts to explain the events at Lugdunum by virtue of the political and religious context in which the unfortunate Christians found themselves. Caught between the rising religious and social tensions at the local level and pressing economic and military matters on the imperial level, the Christians of Lyon and Vienne were the unfortunate victims of a revived ancient Celtic ritual of human sacrifice. This chapter will evaluate the major tenets of the *trinqu* theory and probe for possible weaknesses in its interpretation of historical evidence and literary analysis of *The Gallican Letter*. It will further argue that the *trinqu* theory endeavors to prove what it can only speculate, and in light of alternative explanations which comport with the historical evidence, it should be seriously modified.

#### **The Events at Lugdunum**

The exact start of the persecution remains uncertain, but scholars are reasonably certain the initial social purge against the Christians probably began a few months prior to the Festival of the Three-Gauls, which commenced every year on August 1.<sup>35</sup> The persecution initially took the form of social harassment and exclusion of the Christians from public places such as “houses, the baths, and the public square” and even a general prohibition against being seen in public.<sup>36</sup> This unfortunate policy forced the Christians to retreat into private meeting places and draw on

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<sup>35</sup> Oliver and Palmer, “Minutes,” 325.

<sup>36</sup> Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 63.

the support of stronger, wealthier believers to sustain the Christian community. The conflict quickly escalated to public ridicule and physical assault through “abuse, blows, dragging, despoiling, stoning, imprisonment, and all that an enraged mob is likely to inflict on their most hated enemies.”<sup>37</sup> Eventually, the Christians were arrested and brought before the “tribune and the chief men of the city” to be interrogated in front of the raging mob and subsequently imprisoned until the provincial governor arrived to officiate the proceedings.<sup>38</sup>

Once the governor arrived, one-by-one he examined the Christians, extracting confessions under the threat of torture and death. Vettius Epagathus, “a distinguished person” and lawyer, offered a defense for the Christians against the charges of “atheism and impiety.”<sup>39</sup> He too, when identified as one of the Christians, was imprisoned with the others. The most prominent members of the Christian community were the first to be subjected to the interrogations, while the Roman officials seized even their pagan servants to extort false testimonies. The slaves, “ensnared by Satan and terrified of the tortures they saw,” brought accusations of incest (Oedipean marriages) and cannibalism (Thyestian feasts) against their Christian masters.<sup>40</sup> From the perspective of the Roman authorities, the interrogations were moderately successful, securing the recantation of about ten Christians which mitigating the resolve of many others awaiting trial.

*The Gallican Letter* names several notable martyrs who underwent torture, among whom were Sanctus (the deacon of Vienne), Maturus (a new convert), Attalus, Blandina, Blandina’s servant, Biblis, Ponthinus (the bishop of Lugdunum), and Alexander (a Phrygian doctor). The

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *HE* 5.1.8.

<sup>39</sup> Murusillo, *Acts of Christian Martyrs*, 65.

<sup>40</sup> *HE* 5.1.14.

tortures were designed to extract recantations from the victims, and the methods used included beatings, stonings, floggings, and (in the case of Sanctus) burning with red hot irons.<sup>41</sup> Other methods included confinement to stocks, placed in darkness, and suffocation in prison. *The Gallican Letter* notes that the mob thought it “a serious fault and impiety to fall short in their viciousness towards [the Christians], for they thought that in this way they could avenge their gods.”<sup>42</sup> Four of the martyrs—Blandina, Maturus, Sanctus, and Attalus—were “exposed to wild beasts” as part of the gladiatorial spectacle arranged “expressly for [their] sake” in the amphitheater.<sup>43</sup> Sanctus and Maturus, after being mutilated by the beasts, were placed in the “iron chair” and scorched to death. Blandina was fastened to a stake and suspended as food for the wild beasts. Attalus was dragged around the amphitheater on display for the governor. Upon learning that Attalus was a Roman citizen, the governor returned him to prison until further instruction arrived from the emperor.

According to *The Gallican Letter*, the emperor commanded that any Roman citizen who confessed to Christianity should be beheaded, but those who recanted should be set free.<sup>44</sup> Following the emperor’s rescript, the governor beheaded all those who were Roman citizens. The rest were reserved for the spectacles scheduled to take place in the amphitheater during the Festival of the Three-Gauls attended by men “from all countries.”<sup>45</sup> Alexander, a Phrygian doctor, and Attalus (a second time) were condemned to the beasts. Blandina and Ponticus (a fifteen year-old boy) followed them.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.21.

<sup>42</sup> Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 73.

<sup>43</sup> *HE* 5.1.37.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.47.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Following the spectacles, the bodies of the martyrs were desecrated in various ways. Those who had died in prison were fed to wild dogs. The bodies of those who were scorched in the iron chair, maimed by wild beasts, or beheaded as Roman citizens were gathered together and placed under military guard in order to deny them a proper burial. During this time, the pagans took the opportunity to mock the bodies of the victims by “exalting their own idols, attributing their [the Christians’] punishment to them.”<sup>46</sup> After six days, the Roman soldiers burned the bodies and scattered their ashes in the Rhone river in the attempt to “deprive the martyrs of their restoration and...hope of the resurrection” for the crime of introducing a “new and strange cult” into the region.<sup>47</sup> In total, forty-eight Christians from Lyon and Vienne were martyred. “They were in the end sacrificed,” *The Gallican Letter* reads, “after being made all the day long a spectacle to the world to replace the varied entertainment of the gladiatorial combat.”<sup>48</sup>

Several important observations should be noted if the theory of the *trinqui* can be made to fit with the account in *The Gallican Letter*.

1. The martyrs are originally accused of impiety and atheism.
2. The martyrs do not “swear by the idols.”
3. These events take place during the festival of the Three-Gauls, when wealthy aristocrats from all regions of Gaul are in attendance.
4. The martyrs are used in place of gladiatorial entertainment.
5. The martyrs are sacrificed, and some are beheaded.
6. Their bodies are exposed publicly, along with the heads, for several days.
7. The pagans attribute the martyrdoms as retribution from the gods.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 5.1.60.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 5.1.63.

<sup>48</sup> Musurillo, Acts of the *Christian Martyrs*, 75.

### The Trinqui Theory as a Historical Explanation

A variety of explanations have been offered to explain the outbreak of these persecutions, which may or may not have occurred throughout the Empire during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Concerning the cause and impetus of the martyrdoms at Lugdunum, the historical context is not without its own problems. Historians and theologians are divided over the role that Marcus Aurelius played in these unfortunate events. It seems strange that Marcus Aurelius, an emperor known for his stoic skepticism and indifference toward religious practice, would allow for such abuses to occur under his watch. However, Croteau, a proponent of the *trinqui* theory, notes that the precedent had already been set by similar events during Marcus' reign. In 167, in response to a pestilence-cause famine, a subsequent plague, and the invasion of barbaric tribes from the north of the Danube, Marcus Aurelius issued a decree through the Empire which called for sacrifices and offerings to the gods in hopes of reversing the Empire's misfortune.<sup>49</sup> The decree would undoubtedly have engendered great concern among the Christian communities who refused to offer sacrifices and would have fostered greater suspicion against them among pagan Romans. Though there is little documentation of any persecutions, the ensuing martyrdoms were likely severe, and yet sporadic, influenced in large part by local uprisings rather than direct imperial policy. The Apology of Melito (circa 190) makes reference to "new decrees" (*καινὰ δόγματα*) by which local governors in Asia Minor were arresting and executing Christians by provincial fiat. It is unclear exactly what the "new decrees" entailed or from where

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<sup>49</sup> Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius," 50. See also *Marci Vita* 13 recorded in *Historia Augusta: The Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Edited by David Magie, Ainsworth O'Brien-Moore, and Susan Helen Ballou (London: W. Heinemann, 1922).

they originated, judging by Melito's apology it is likely that the local pagans exploited the new laws as opportunities to persecute the Christians.<sup>50</sup>

Letters such as Melito's offer needed clarification and explanation for the outbreak of martyrdoms such as those at Lugdunum. However, proponents of the *trinqui* theory maintain that the events at Lugdunum require further explanation since they were in many ways uniquely savage and primarily isolated (perhaps).<sup>51</sup> Croteau maintains that the events in Asia described by Melito, though similar to those of Lyon, fail to explain the outbreak of persecutions in the other regions of the Empire, and Gaul in particular. The "new decrees" mentioned in Melito's letter were likely local policies manufactured by provincial governors in Asia, and it seems unlikely that the same types of "new decrees" (local in scope) would also crop up in Gaul around the same time independent of general imperial policy. In Croteau's estimation, it would be a mere coincidence that similar persecutions would occur in other parts of the Empire around 177 without direct influence from the imperial government.<sup>52</sup> What then, according to proponents of the *trinqui* theory, could explain the origin and outbreak of widespread persecution throughout the Empire? Until the early twentieth century, no alternative adequate explanation had been offered. That is, until the discoveries of the *Aes Italicense* and *Marmor Sardinum* tablets which record the minutes from a senatorial decree issued on or before 177.

In 1888, a significant archeological discovery was made when researchers discovered a bronze tablet from Italica in Baetica. The discovery was copied in 1889 by E. Hubner and

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 51. See also *HE* 4.26.5.

<sup>51</sup> This is a major premise of the *trinqui* theory. The events in Lugdunum reflect the socio-religious tensions of the region rather than an indication of what was happening throughout the Empire.

<sup>52</sup> Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius," 52.

published in 1890 by Theodore Mommsen.<sup>53</sup> Later named *Aes Italicense*, the tablet recorded the minutes of a *senatus consultum* (ratified shortly before its inscription). Inscribed in Latin, the tablet records the central portion of a speech (*sententia prima*) given by a senator (who is it presumed was of Gallic origin or a friend of the priests of the *concilium Galliarum*). Although the beginning and ending of the speech are not preserved, the tablet does contain the most substantive portions, which recorded the controls placed on the prices of each gladiatorial rank and the processes by which the various provinces should acquire these fighters. The minutes pertain to the ratification of the *senatus consultum de pretiis gladiatorum minuendis*,<sup>54</sup> a decree which instituted price controls on the amount that procurators could charge for each rank of gladiator. The *senatus consultum* was likely passed as an attempt to alleviate the heavy burden of the upper-class aristocrats to provide gladiators for public spectacles. The cheapest source of gladiator, according to the minutes, was determined to be a “criminal condemned to death.”<sup>55</sup>

The piece of the inscription that is most pertinent to this discussion occurs on lines 56-58, in which the senator delivering the oration explains the benefits that this new policy will provide to the provinces of *Tres-Galliae*, of which he is most fond. Only here does the word *trinqu* appear and seemingly only in reference to sacred ritual. The section reads:

As for the Gallic provinces, (the same limits on prices for gladiators apply). But also for *trinqu*, who because of an ancient custom of sacred ritual are eagerly awaited in the states of the most glorious Gallic provinces, let the *lanistae* not charge a higher price than 2,000 sesterces apiece, since their Majesties the Emperors have announced in their oration that the policy will be for a procurator

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<sup>53</sup> See E. Hubner, “Aes Italicense,” *Ephemeris Epigraphica*, VII, 1892 (April, 1890): 384-387; Theodore Mommsen, “Observationes Epigraphicae XLI: Senatus Consultum de sumptibus ludorum gladiatorum minuendis,” *Ephemeris Epigraphica*, VII, 1892 (April, 1890): 388-416.

<sup>54</sup> Also called the *senatus consultum de sumptibus ludorum gladiatorum minuendis*.

<sup>55</sup> Aes Italicense, line 58.

of theirs to hand over to the *lanistae* at a price of not more than six gold pieces a man who has been condemned to death.<sup>56</sup>

Notice the importance paid concerning the cheap price of the *trinqui* on the basis of their requirement for the “ancient custom of sacred ritual” (whatever this means), which the provinces of *Tres-Galliae* eagerly awaited. The term *trinqui* is then equated with “a man condemned to death” who could then be used as an alternate and inexpensive form of gladiatorial entertainment. The law capped the price of the *trinqui* at 2000 sesterces since the *lanistae* would only have to pay six gold pieces for each of these victims acquired from the procurator as criminals condemned to death. These few lines in *Aes Italicense* would eventually serve as the central piece of evidence in the development of the theory of the *trinqui*.

Proponents of the theory have zeroed in on the references to Gallic customs as evidence that that Christians were killed as victims of an ancient ritual sacrifice pertaining to Gallo-Celtic religious custom. The seemingly insignificant reference to Gaul, ancient customs, and sacred rituals in lines 56-58 went virtually unnoticed for many decades until Andre Piganiol offered a pivotal reinterpretation based a linguistic analysis of the word *trinqui*.<sup>57</sup> Piganiol argued for the identification of the word *trinqui* with an ancient Gallic type of sacrificial victim. The victim’s head would be severed from the body and put on display as a sign of conquest or victory. Piganiol’s argument rests on a connection (albeit a fragile connection by his own admission) between the word *trinqui* and the Latin word *trincare*, which later became the French *trancher*, meaning “to cut” and the Spanish and Portuguese *trincar* (or *trinchar*) meaning “to slash or

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<sup>56</sup> Oliver and Pamler, “Minutes,” 343. For a detailed account of the textual-critical issues with both the *Aes Italicense* and *Marmor Sardinum*, see Oliver and Palmer’s copious notes, footnotes and bibliographies: 327-339.

<sup>57</sup> Andre Piganiol, “Les Trinci Gaulois: Gladiateurs Consacres,” REA 22 (1920): 283-290; See also Piganiol’s discussion in *Recherchessur les Jeux Romains*, 61-71.

carve.”<sup>58</sup> Piganiol concluded that the martyrs of Lyon were indeed killed as sacrificial victims whose heads and bodies were later put on display as part of the ancient Gallic ritual. If left to stand on its own, Piganiol’s analysis appears rather precarious, if not, almost entirely speculative based on a supposed connection between the “Gallic” *trinqui* and a hypothesized Latin cognate *trincare*.

Nevertheless, the *trinqui* theory received much needed support with the publication of Oliver and Palmer’s “Minutes from an Act of the Roman Senate.”<sup>59</sup> Their attempt to organize the theory into a coherent historical narrative is both impressive and commendable. They offer a textual critical analysis of the *Aes Italicense* and the *Marmor Sardinum* and their connection to the martyrs of Lugdunum.<sup>60</sup> The theory relies on the connection to reference made in *Aes Italicense* regarding the priests of Gaul in lines 12-18, the use of the *trinqui* in lines 55-58 (lines 12, 14,15 in *Marmor Sardinum*) and the acute descriptions of gladiatorial combat and sacrifice used in reference to the martyrs in *The Gallican Letter*.

Early on in the minutes of the senatorial hearing, the orator of the *sententia prima* makes specific reference to the alleviation of the financial burden from the Gallic provinces. Oliver and Palmer believe this portion of the *Aes Italicense* holds the key to understanding the economic impetus behind the martyrdoms. Although it cannot be definitely stated whether the senator in question was actually from Gaul, he appears to be, from all accounts, of Gallic origin or at least a friend and cohort to the priests of the *concilium Galliarum*. Whatever financial assistance the

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<sup>58</sup> Croteau, “Marcus Aurelius,” 83, 98. Croteau notes that this word does not appear in any Latin dictionary since Piganiol had to hypothesize its etymology from the Gallic root, *trinqui*. The closest Latin cognate is *truncare*, meaning “to cut.”

<sup>59</sup> See notation above, Oliver and Palmer, “Minutes.”

<sup>60</sup> The *Aes Italicense* and *Marmor Sardinum* record minutes from the same senatorial session. However, as Oliver and Palmer adequately explain, even though the *Aes Italicense* preserves more of the original speech, it is most likely an abbreviated version of the *Marmor Sardinum* (which were greatly damaged).

*senatus consultum* offered to the rest of the Empire, it is clear that the provinces in Gaul clearly stood to benefit in a major way: “whatever importance the problems attacked here had or did not have for the rest of the Empire, the effect on Gaul, or specifically on the amphitheater at Lyon, was of the greatest importance.”<sup>61</sup> The comments of the senator in lines 12-18 reveal that shortly before or after the bill’s ratification, a Gallic priest withdrew an appeal made to the emperor on account of his fortune being lost due to the heavy burden of financing the spectacles year after year.<sup>62</sup> Building upon this reference, Oliver and Palmer note that in lines 55-58, the same senator refers again to the his beloved countrymen of Gaul, their enthusiasm over the new law, and its usefulness for carrying out an ancient custom of sacred ritual involving criminals who have been condemned to death:

The joy of the *principales viri* throughout the Three Gauls at the prospect of a supply of cheap victims for spectacles which they as priests of the *Concilium Galliarum* had to give at Lyons and, on the other hand, the need that the Emperors felt to explain away an obvious objection to what they were about to do in the Three Gauls suggest to the writer a connection with the martyrdom of the Christians at Lyons in A.D. 177.<sup>63</sup>

Enter the alleged Gallic conspiracy. According to the *trinqui* theory, the Gallic landowners and aristocrats both lobbied for the new law and plotted ways in which they could exploit the law for their ancient customs. Presumably, the ratification of the law or of its imminent passage reached the western provinces relatively quickly, perhaps in the spring of 177 or even in late 176. Coupled with the suspicion against the Christians on account of the famine,

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<sup>61</sup> Oliver and Palmer, “Minutes,” 324.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 340. Lines 16-18 read, “There was one who upon being appointed priest had given up his fortune for lost, had named a council to help him in an appeal addressed to the Emperors. But in that very gathering, he himself, before and after consulting his friends, exclaimed, ‘What do I want with an appeal now? Their most sacred Majesties the Emperors have released the whole burden which crushed my patrimony. Now I desire and look forward to being a priest, and as for the duty of putting on a spectacle, of which we once were solemnly asking to be relieved, I welcome it.’”

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

plague, barbarian invasion, and a general distrust of their anti-social community, the Gallic lobby quickly realized the advantage the new law had given them for ridding their society of the subversive cult. Oliver and Palmer speculate:

The news reached Gaul at a time when the sacerdots were assembled together, an occasion which can hardly be any other than the Festival of the Three Gauls beginning on August 1, A.D. 176. The new officials were already arranging for the coming year and the next festival; the grateful priest was in a mood to promise a show that would surpass all those of previous years.<sup>64</sup>

In order to bolster their historical reconstruction of this conspiracy, Oliver and Palmer draw upon a few general observations from *The Gallican Letter* to show the martyrdoms were conducted in a manner consistent with a sacrificial ritual and that the author of *The Gallican Letter* may have implied this by his retelling of the events. According to this theory, *The Gallican Letter* portrays the victims as being offered up as sacrifices before the pagan mob with permission from the Roman government; they are killed as replacement for gladiatorial entertainment; and they are killed in a manner reflecting the sacrificial rite of the *trinqui* whose heads are cut off and put on display. Oliver and Palmer confidently surmise these three propositions:

- (1) That the Christian martyrs of Lyons in 177 were killed at a festival of the Three Gauls like the *trinqui* of our dossier and with imperial permission. Eusebius V, 1, 47: *Ἐπιστείλαντος γὰρ τοῦ Καίρου...τῆς ἐνθάδε πανηγύρεω.*
- (2) That the Christians were a substitute for gladiators just as the *trinqui* were. Eusebius, V, 1, 40: *Οὗτοι μὲν οὖν δι' ἀγῶνος μεγάλου ἐπὶ πολὺ παραμενούσης αὐτῶν τῆς ψυχῆς, τοῦσχατον ἐτύθησαν διὰ τῆς ἡμέρας ἐκείνης ἀντὶ πάσης τῆς ἐν τοῖς μονομαχίαις ποικιλίας αὐτοὶ θέαμα γενόμενοι τῷ κόσμῳ ...*” Thus after a long time, when their life remained in them through the great contest, they were at last sacrificed, having been made a spectacle to the world throughout that day as a substitute for all the variations of gladiatorial contests.” Also Eusebius, V, 1, 53: *Τῇ ἐσχάτῃ λοιπὸν ἡμέρᾳ τῶν μονομαχιῶν*

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 326.

- (3) That the Christians were murdered like the *trinqi* in what passed for a sacrificial rite. Eusebius, V, 1, 40, *Ἐτύθησαν ...ἐτύθη καὶ αὐτή*.<sup>65</sup>

How could such a heinous act be allowed under the reign of the moderate Marcus Aurelius, especially one which involved ritual human sacrifice, a practice which had been outlawed and suppressed by the Romans for over two centuries? Oliver and Palmer postulate that, given the exigent circumstances of the need to satisfy his loyal aristocrats in the west, Marcus Aurelius, in full knowledge of the Gallic priesthood's intention to use the law for an ancient sacrificial rite, nevertheless allowed for the this exception in the new law as a political concession to the provinces of Gaul. It is doubtful, however, that the emperor knew the abuses that would result from the reform, and the events at Lugdunum are probably indicative of the unintended consequences of an otherwise well-intentioned effort to reform the gladiatorial system.<sup>66</sup>

The historical timeline, under Oliver and Palmer's reconstruction would chart the following points. During the years between 165 and 177, a famine which began near Seleucia along the Tigris River ravaged the Empire for over ten years. Along with the famine (caused by a pestilence), a plague swept over many regions of the Empire, claiming untold numbers of lives. The ensuing famine and plague left many Romans fearing the gods had sought retribution for neglect of civic worship. The suspicion against the Christians grew stronger as the years went by and culminated in 177.<sup>67</sup>

In 167, Barbarians north of the Germanic provinces invaded and quickly reached the Adriatic, laying siege to Aquileia and also making their way into Gallia-Belgica by 170. In the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>67</sup> *Historia Augusta, Vita Marci* 13.1-2.

same year of 167, Marcus Aurelius issued a decree to every province prescribing the offering of sacrifices to the gods in response to the invasion. The invasion required immediate attention by the emperor who relied on the loyalty of the western provinces to keep the barbarians in check. In 175, the emperor's attention was split between the war in the western provinces and the rebellion under Avidius Cassius in Syria and Asia Minor. For a time, war with the barbarians relied solely on the financial backing and manpower of the wealthy landowners of Gaul.<sup>68</sup>

Marcus Aurelius returned to Rome in November of 176 and resumes operations in the western provinces. In gratitude to the aristocrats of *Tres-Galliae*, he makes concessions for legislation that would enable the provinces of *Tres-Galliae* to acquire cheap sources of gladiatorial entertainment, presumably for the purpose of enacting ancient religious rituals of human sacrifice. News of the decision reached the priests of *concilium Galliarum* sometime in 176,<sup>69</sup> offering them enough time to plan for who would suffer as the unfortunate entertainment for the next year's Festival of the Three Gauls.

In 177, Marcus Aurelius begins his joint rule with his son Lucius Commodus, who also appears to be present during the meeting to discuss the *senatus consultum* (see the use of the plural form "emperors").<sup>70</sup> Early in the same year, during the months leading up to the Festival of the Three Gauls, social toleration of the Christian community reached its tipping point. Christians were excluded from places of commerce and social interaction and eventually arrested and accused of atheism, impiety, cannibalism, and incest. The beginning of the persecution likely

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<sup>68</sup> Oliver and Palmer, "Minutes," 326.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Oliver and Palmer posit that the news may have reached them as early as August 176, shortly after the Festival of the Three Gauls would have ended. The priests would then have begun planning for the sources of entertainment for the following year.

<sup>70</sup> *Aes Italicense*, lines 5-11.

began a few months prior to the Festival of the Three Gauls, perhaps early June.<sup>71</sup> During the interrogations, the charges switched from crimes of immorality to Christianity, and many were imprisoned to await trial by the governor. During August of 177, the Christians are systematically tried and sentenced to tortures and death, many of whom were used in the amphitheater in place of gladiatorial entertainment. The dead bodies are put on display shortly thereafter in accordance with Celtic ritual of the *trinqui*.

As fascinating and inspired as the *trinqui* appears to be, if left with only oblique references from the *Aes Italicense* and *Marmor Sardinum*, the theory remains rather precarious and its evidence circumstantial. Moss perceptively notes an important discrepancy between Oliver and Palmer's rendition and the accounts as described in *The Gallican Letter*. *The Gallican Letter* makes no mention of any new imperial decrees or attributes the massacre to recent changes in imperial policy, nor does it indicate any conspiracy against the Christian community from the provincial government or the aristocracy of Lugdunum. Rather than attributing the persecution to the schemes of the priests of the *consilium Galliarum*, *The Gallican Letter* simply describes the killings as stemming from the irrational whims of an outraged mob. In order for the *trinqui* theory to work, it would require "great foresight and fiscal pragmatism on the part of an unruly mob" in orchestrating the martyrdoms in the wake of the *senatus consultum*.<sup>72</sup> Given the typical prudential character of angry mobs, this seems rather unlikely.

Anticipating this objection, Oliver and Palmer postulate that the sacerdotēs of *Tres-Galliae* would have learned of the law's ratification or imminent ratification as early as the previous year (176) and so would have enough time to plan accordingly. Unfortunately, two

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<sup>71</sup> Michael Hertwig-Jaksch, "Christians at Lugdunum," 42-43. Hertwig-Jascke dates the first interrogations as early as April or May.

<sup>72</sup> Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 192.

problems persist with this explanation. First, and most obvious, this appears to be an exercise in historical speculation for the sake of reconstructing a coherent timeline for the events at Lugdunum. There is no indication that such planning took place with the exception that (according the lines 12-18 in *Aes Italicense*) the priest of the *consillium Gallarium* anxiously awaited word from Rome on the status of the new law. Such anticipation is hardly indicative of purposeful conspiring against a relatively small and insignificant Christian community in Lugdunum and Vienne. Rather, it merely indicates the aristocracy was elated at their financial relief. Second, the aforementioned speculation notwithstanding, it is striking that *The Gallican Letter* would make no mention of this conspiracy or of changes to imperial policy, but would attribute the killings solely to the plotting of the adversary, the devil<sup>73</sup> and his influence over an angry mob.<sup>74</sup> If there was any conspiracy at all, the author of *The Gallican Letter*, attributes solely to the schemes of the devil whipping the local mob into an enraged frenzy.

Hence, acceptance of the *trinqui* theory requires still greater support: a revival of Gallo-Celtic religion as a crucial piece in the enigma surrounding the events at Lugdunum. Perhaps, the socio-religious setting of second-century Gaul could offer valuable insight into the tensions between the Christians and the native Gauls. Consequently, the *trinqui* theory, building off of the linguistic analyses of Piganiol and the textual-historical reconstruction of Oliver and Palmer, could be more firmly established on the basis of historical and archeological evidence pertaining to the revival of Gallic religion in the provinces of Gaul.

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<sup>73</sup> *HE* 5.1.5, 6, 23, 42.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1. 25, 27, 25.

Croteau, building upon the work of Oliver and Palmer, brings this important issue to the forefront of the debate.<sup>75</sup> In the attempt to link the martyrs of Lyon with the *trinqi* of the alleged Celtic ritual sacrifice, Croteau endeavors to demonstrate that the revitalization of Celtic religion (as bizarre and archaic as such practices were) may not be as implausible as once previously believed by many historians. Certainly, the links between Celtic religious rites and the martyrs of Lyon require more than a simple demonstration of Celtic revitalization, but Croteau hopes to use this as a spring from which to interpret key passages in *The Gallican Letter*.

The history of relations between Roman and Celtic cultures is one of intermittent conflict, a clash between Roman domestication and Celtic resilience. From the time of Augustus, classical authors reveal the pervasive anti-Celtic sentiment among the Romans. The Romans viewed Celtic religious practice as both bizarre and superstitious. From the time of Julius Caesar's campaign, the Celts were known for the strange practices of human sacrifice as a tool for engendering favor from their gods.<sup>76</sup> The Celts, through the priesthood of the Druids, engaged in human sacrifice by various means, usually by ritual pyres involving beast, crops, and human victims. The most striking and most relevant illustration of Celtic ritual comes to us in the accounts of Posidonius where he records eyewitness testimony of a gruesome Gallic slayings. According to Posidonius, the victorious Gauls would sever the head of their victims, tie the heads around their horse's neck, and then attach them to their doors or embalm them for prolonged display.<sup>77</sup> These vicious practices, especially involving the displaying of heads, are also substantiated by Celtic art pre-dating first and second century BC, during which time the

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<sup>75</sup> Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius," 75.

<sup>76</sup> Julius Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, 6.16, In *The Gallic War*, Translated by H. J. Edwards (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

<sup>77</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 4.4.5, in *Geography*. Translated by Hans Claude Hamilton and W. Falconer (London and New York: G. Bell & Sons, 1903).

Celts constructed large shrines in which to house the heads of their victims. The head of a victim symbolized their power and life force, and by keeping the head as a trophy, the Celts believe hoped to bring honor to their gods and favor to themselves.<sup>78</sup>

By the first century AD, many of the Celtic and Druidic practices had been subjugated by the Romans and the region of Gaul effectively romanized. Augustus prohibited the Roman citizens from participating in druidic practices, and Tiberius also instituted measures to curb the practice and influence of the druids.<sup>79</sup> Claudius moved to entirely eradicate the druidic priesthood, which was comprised mainly of the wealthy aristocrats of ancient Gaul since the priesthood required great amounts of time, money, and training. Drinkwater notes how for Claudius the druidic priesthood represented the last vestiges of the strange practices of the Gauls, including the barbaric rite human sacrifice:

The subjugation, and then the Romanization of this aristocracy would have sounded the death-knell of the priesthood from a very early date... Tiberian and Claudian legislation as being not so much connected with the political side of Gallic life as with straightforward revulsion against the persistence of the bizarre activities of the debased remnant of the druidism in the back woods of the Three Provinces (especially the rite of human sacrifice.).<sup>80</sup>

With the subjugation (or eradication) of the druidic priesthood, and by consequence the practice of human sacrifice, how would the ancient custom find its way into the second century in time for the Festival of the Three Gauls in 177? Croteau, and others, basically argue that the druidic priesthood (and Celtic religion and culture in general) was not eradicated or subjugated

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<sup>78</sup> Marcel Pobé and Jean Roubier, *The Art of Roman Gaul; A Thousand Years of Celtic Art & Culture*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), 13-14. The famous Hall of Heads consisted of stone faces honed from the side walls of the building. The faces represented the heads of victims that would eventually be displayed. Once a raw human head was made available, the stone face was chiseled from the rock and replaced by the head of flesh and bone. The heads were fastened to the stone wall by large nails.

<sup>79</sup> Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 38.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

but merely driven underground (into the secluded countryside). The Romanization of the western provinces of Gaul was felt most in the cities, but the countryside (through subordinate) encountered less roman elements than the populated urban areas. As a result, druidic and Celtic culture survived underneath a superimposed layer of Romanization: “Despite the relatively successful Romanization in the northern portion of *Tres-Galliae* in the early Empire because of the occupation of the Roman army, it is clear that a native substratum co-existed with the Romanized one.”<sup>81</sup> Despite the fact that the Celtic language as a written language virtually died out by the late second century, the language did survive as a mode of common everyday communication (along with Latin) among certain regions of Gaul. Celtic art and sculptures existed in abundance, indicating that appreciation for Celtic heritage survived well into the late Roman Empire.<sup>82</sup>

The Celtic renaissance then began sometime in the second century, when heavy tax burdens on urban areas shifted the spectrum of political and economic power to the countryside (where Celtic culture was the strongest). But even Croteau admits that the Celtic resurgence best fits near the end of the second century and the beginning of the third century when “commercial links were re-established between east and west.”<sup>83</sup> However, according to Ramsay Macmullen, the Celtic renaissance would likely not reach full speed until at least three things: “that of

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<sup>81</sup> Croteau, “Marcus Aurelius,” 77.

<sup>82</sup> Ramsay Mucmullen, “Provincial Languages in the Roman Empire,” *The American Journal of Philology*, 87:1 (January, 1966): 15. Significant to this point is the absence of Celtic religious language in written form. MacMullen explains that the Druidic priests who were entrusted with the education of the aristocracy also put forth no effort to codify their language into written form. In addition, the priesthood closely guarded their knowledge of religious rites and practices. It seems likely then that the religious customs of the druids likely died out with them by the late second century. This alone is enough to make the *trinqui* theory tenuous at best, if not, improbable.

<sup>83</sup> Croteau, “Marcus Aurelius,” 78.

stimulation by contact with kindred, less Romanized races; that of economic decline; and that of nationalism.”<sup>84</sup>

Nevertheless, Croteau sees a possibility for the Celtic revitalization by the time of the martyrdoms in 177, if indeed the shift from urban cities to countryside offered the local populace greater exposure to their druidic heritage and also shifted political influence back into the hands of the Gallic aristocracy, educated incidentally by the druidic priesthood. “In any case, the survival of a strong Celtic tradition in Gaul is important because it is on that tradition that Roman due process rests in the matter of the deaths at Lyon in AD 177.”<sup>85</sup> If the same aristocracy, who were responsible for shouldering the burden of financing the gladiatorial entertainment during the festival, were also influenced by the druidic tradition and customs, then the *trinqui* theory becomes, consequently, more plausible.

As Oliver and Palmer have argued, the aristocratic priesthood in *Tres-Galliae* was elated at the news that they would be able to purchase criminals condemned to death for only two thousand sesterces. If the premise of Celtic resurgence is correct and its link to the Roman legal process in Lugdunum in 177 justified, then by implication, the same priests who benefited financially from the *senatus consultum* would also have ties to ancient druidic customs. The fact that the *senatus consultum* was publicized throughout the Empire shows that Marcus Aurelius was concerned to show that he had made great progress in alleviating the burden of the upper class, but especially those in Gaul. According to Croteau, the act came not only as a political concession but also as a cultural and religious one: “Although the emperor made the concession because of an economic crisis in the entertainment world, he made it the more easily because of

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<sup>84</sup> Ramsay MucMullen, “The Celtic Renaissance.” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 14:1 (January 1965): 103.

<sup>85</sup> Croteau, “Marcus Aurelius,” 80.

an archaic religious ritual in the Three Gaul involving human sacrificial victims as *trinci/trinqui*.<sup>86</sup>

However fragile the *trinqui* theory may be, Croteau believes literary evidence from *The Gallican Letter* also indicates that the victims were sacrificed in accordance with the druidic practice of the human sacrifice. Echoing Oliver and Palmer's notations of Eusebius, Croteau notes several similarities between the *trinqui* described in the *senatus consultum* and the martyrs described in *The Gallican Letter*. References to the former indicate the *trinqui* was a "kind of fighter damned to the sword" who "because of ancient custom and sacred rite" was permitted to fight in the amphitheater. Concerning the latter, Eusebius makes reference to the martyrs entering into combat (similar to gladiators) and engaging in a great contest or conflict. In the end, the martyrs are sacrificed. Several allusions in *The Gallican Letter* which refer to combat, contest, conflict, and even gladiators<sup>87</sup> leads Croteau to deduce that that *trinqui* mentioned in the *senatus consultum* were, in fact, the Christians of Lugdunum in 177. The evidence, she admits, is circumstantial, but given the parallels between the use of the *trinqui* in sacred Celtic sacrificial rite and the description in the account of the martyrdoms, the suggestion seems quite plausible.

In summation, Croteau notes first that the chronology of the theory comports with what is known to have happened in Lugdunum and in Rome in 177. The *senatus consultum* is traditionally dated to the year 177 since 1) both emperors are addressed in *The Gallican Letter*, 2) the joint rule of Marcus and Commodus began in 177, and 3) Marcus departed Rome for the last time in 178. Hence, the date of 177 is both reasonable and reliable.<sup>88</sup> Eusebius also dates the

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>87</sup> *HE* 5.1.37-38, 40.

<sup>88</sup> Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius," 88; See *Aes Italicense*, line 12.

deaths of the martyrs to the seventeenth years of Marcus' rule (177) and during the regional festival at which men from all countries would attend.<sup>89</sup> Second, the ratification of the *senatus consultum* was, primarily, a response to the requests of the priestly aristocracy in *Tres-Galliae*.<sup>90</sup> Although the law concerns alleviation of the wealthy throughout the Empire, its relevance to Gaul is significant and specific, especially since the senator delivering the oration is likely from the region himself. Third, the persecution at Lyon along with the beheadings and displaying of the heads and bodies corresponds to known druidic practices recorded by Posidonius.<sup>91</sup> The heads of the Christians, along with their bodies and limbs, are placed under guard for six days. During this time, the crowd mocked and jeered at the corpses, believing their death was in retribution for their impiety and immorality. For Croteau the evidence, though circumstantial, offers an “interesting coincidence that the *trinqui* were gladiators and the Christians were gladiators.”<sup>92</sup> Both were condemned to death; both were used in gladiatorial entertainment; both were (presumably) beheaded by virtue of sacrificial rite. The corroboration of time, place, religion, and circumstance all point toward the suggestion that the Christians of Lyon were used as the *trinqui* of the *senatus consultum*.

#### **Four Critical Components of the Trinqui Theory**

With the theory thus outlined in detail, it is essential to understand the critical pieces of evidence that bolster its credibility. Consequently, it is important to see that the strength of the

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<sup>89</sup> *HE* 5.1.1, 47.

<sup>90</sup> Croteau., Marcus Aurelius,” 89.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 91. Croteau also notes that the Christians were killed by imperial decree and equates this decree with the *senatus consultum*. This equation seems rather haphazard considering the imperial decree was a rescript sent to the governor instructing him on how to deal with Roman citizens who confessed or recanted of Christianity. There is no evidence to show the edict had anything to do with the *senatus consultum*.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

*trinqui* theory relies on four key components: 1) the ratification of the *senatus consultum* was made as a political (and perhaps religious) concession which enabled the priests of *Tres-Galliae* to use the Christians as the *trinqui* or human sacrificial victims; 2) Piganiol's linguistic analysis effectively identifies the *trinqui* as a human sacrificial victim whose head was cut off and put on display; 3) the revitalization of Celtic culture near the end of the second century grew to such an extent that it fostered a return to and appreciation for the ancient druidic practice of human sacrifice and that the Roman would have made allowed for this to occur in 177; 4) the Celtic practicing of decapitating one's opponent and placing the head on display is reflected in the treatment of the Christian martyrs whose heads and bodies were put on display for several days.

The first of these components appears, for the most part, to be fairly straight-forward and clearly demonstrable. The evidence to support the conclusion that Marcus Aurelius made certain political concession for the sake of the Empire is quite apparent. In addition, there is little difficulty in accepting this point without conceding to the other components or the *trinqui* theory as a whole. It also seems palpable that the *trinqui*, according to sacred Gallic ritual, were at least criminals that were permitted to fight as gladiators.

It is less clear, however, that the second component is as plausible. The linguistic connection of *trinqui* (a Gallic word?) to the martyrs of Lyon is based more on conjecture and speculation than on empirical evidence. In order for this premise to hold, proponents of the theory need to show that 1) the *trinqui* should be identified to the ancient druidic practice of human sacrifice, as Piganiol has argued, rather than to a type of criminal who was permitted to fight in the games. There is little direct evidence in the *Aes Italicense* or the *Marmor Sardinum* to suggest otherwise. All that can be deduced from the comments of the (Gallic?) senator is a connection between the *trinqui* and a non-descript ancient rite involving the use of criminals as

fighters. It is striking that Piganiol's linguistic analysis (a central component to the theory) relies on a link between the supposed Gallic word *trinqui* and the alleged Latin cognate *trincare*, a word that does not appear in Latin dictionaries.<sup>93</sup>

Moreover, that the Christian martyrs of Lyon were used as gladiators in the amphitheater and were victims of ritual human sacrifice seems far too reliant on an unusual interpretation of *The Gallican Letter*. Proponents of the theory are quick to equate the “sacrifice” and “combat” language contained in *The Gallican Letter* with the supposed uses of the *trinqui* from *Aes Italicense*. Croteau includes a lengthy chart of words from *The Gallican Letter* (which connote sacrifice, combat, contest, or gladiator) in hopes of showing a strong link between the events of the Lugdunum and the ancient Gallic ritual.<sup>94</sup> But is this identification warranted?

Certainly, the use of the Christians as a replacement for the gladiatorial entertainment seems quite apparent considering the explicit reference to this fact within *The Gallican Letter*.<sup>95</sup> However, is the use of “combat” and “sacrifice” language enough to merit the inference that the *The Gallican Letter* is referring to the religious practices of the local Celts? Could not the missionary purpose and occasion of *The Gallican Letter* call for an alternative interpretation in which the language of “combat” and “sacrifice” have specific connotations to the Judeo-Christian concepts of supernatural conflict and eschatological salvation? A comparison of *The Gallican Letter* to Jewish apocryphal and Christian literature may indicate this to be true. If so, the “combat” and “sacrifice” language may have reference to the particularities of Christian persecution occurring throughout the Empire during this time period and how various Christian

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 98. Croteau admits this deficiency in a footnote.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 129-131. Some of the more significant Greek words include *ἀγῶνος μεγάλου* (a great contest); *ἐτύθησαν καὶ αὐτοί* (“they too were sacrificed”); *ἐτύθη καὶ αὐτή* (“she too was sacrifice”); *καὶ λοιπῶν τὰς κεφαλὰς σὺν τοῖς ἀποτιμήμασιν* (“and the heads of the rest with the pieces of their bodies”).

<sup>95</sup> *HE* 5.1.40 reads, “Though their spirits endured much through the long contest, they were in the end sacrificed, after being made all the day long a spectacle to the world to replace the varied entertainment.”

communities sought to understand these persecutions in light of an eschatological framework of supernatural conflict between the forces of Satan and the kingdom of God. The political and economic factors influencing the *senatus consultum* notwithstanding, the connection between the “sacrificing” of the Christians of Lugdunum with the role of the *trinqui* in ancient Celtic ritual is far less plausible.

The third component requires the most attention if the *trinqui* theory can be substantiated. The premise implies that the revitalization of Celtic culture, tradition, and religion in Gaul occurred to such an extent that 1) the ancient druidic practice of human sacrifice gained favor among the aristocracy, 2) that Christians caused such great social tension that their impiety and immorality attracted attention from the druidic priests and 3) that Marcus Aurelius (the moderate stoic) and the Roman provincial governor would allow the priestly class to perform this ritual when it clearly violated Roman law. The burden of proof rests heavily on proponents of the *trinqui* theory to show that all three of these conditions were met in the circumstances of 177. If the revitalization was either not as early or not as strong as reported by the *trinqui* theory proponents, then the theory is severely weakened.

In addition, what was the religio-cultural situation in Lugdunum by 177? If sentiments for Celtic religion had revived, what relationship or affect did this have on other pagan cults in the region, such as Roman civic cults and the oriental cults Cybele and Mithras? If the Christians really were the source of societal tension in Gaul because of impiety and immorality, which gods did they offend, Gallic or Roman? Indeed, this should be taken into consideration when determining the impetus behind the martyrdoms.

Lastly, the theory relies on a fourth component: the connection between the display of the heads and bodies of the victims at Lyon with the ancient Celtic custom of displaying the heads of

conquered enemies. On the surface, the similarities are striking, especially considering all other corroborating evidence of “combat” and “sacrifice” language in *The Gallican Letter*. However, are the similarities really all that similar? A cursory reading of *The Gallican Letter* will reveal that those who were beheaded were decapitated on account of the Roman citizenship, and by decree from the emperor.<sup>96</sup> There is no indication that the beheadings took place for any other reason. Furthermore, no non-Roman citizens were beheaded, which seems odd if the beheadings took place by virtue of Celtic ritual. It is doubtful that the Celtic priests would have cared to make such distinctions between Roman and non-Roman victims. Moreover, why have proponents of the *trinqui* theory been so selective in their observations concerning the methods of punishment? Surely, the other forms of torture, execution, and mutilation offer clues toward identifying the religious and cultural sentiments of the persecutors. If it can be shown that these particular features of the martyrdoms closely correspond to Roman custom rather than Celtic, then the *trinqui* theory loses yet another critical piece of evidence.

That the *senatus consultum* greatly decreased the burden of the aristocratic priestly class in Gaul to find cheaper sources of entertainment is not in dispute, neither is the fact that the Christians were used in the place of gladiatorial entertainment in the amphitheater at Lugdunum. If the *trinqui* theory were to cease speculation at this point, there would be little controversy or debate. Alas, this is not the case. The connection of the word *trinqui* to an archaic Celtic ritual of human sacrifice is tenuous at best, and the link between the decapitation of the Christians and the ancient Celtic custom of “head-displaying” is even more speculative, relying not only on a revitalization of Gaul during the extent explain above but also on a cursory treatment of *The Gallican Letter* that fails to understand the literary importance of both “combat” and “sacrifice”

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 5.1.47.

language in the eschatological understanding of the early church and of the particularly Roman elements of torture and execution. Hence, if the *trinqui* theory wishes to survive, it should be greatly modified or scaled back from its original formulation.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE TRINQUI THEORY AND THE CELTIC REVITALIZATION

The Celtic renaissance, beginning as early as the late first century, bears a special relevance (albeit indirect) to the controversy of the martyrs of Lyon. The theory of the *trinqu*, as articulated by Oliver, Palmer, Croteau, and others, relies on a presumed second century revival of Celtic religion in general and the druidic practice of human sacrifice in particular. The extent to which Celtic religion had revitalized by the second will determine the strength or weakness of the *trinqu* theory. This chapter will articulate the *trinqu* theory's reliance on the revitalization in Celtic religion, examine the nature of that revitalization movement, and its impact on the *trinqu* theory. This chapter will further argue that the nature of the revitalization in Celtic religion—a world in which the indigenous gods of the Celts were reinterpreted, reinvented, and reformed into a Romanized imperial system—does not lend support to the *trinqu* theory, but rather undermines it.

#### **The Trinqu Theory and Celtic Religion**

The *trinqu* theory posits that the martyrs of Lyon and Vienne were victims of ritual sacrifice by the actions of the Gallic aristocracy who exploited the ratification of a *senatus consultum* to carry out an ancient religious rite of human sacrifice. Proponents of the *trinqu* theory admit that the *senatus consultum* did not directly call for the use of Christians as victims nor was it passed for this purpose. Rather it merely provided the means by which pagans exploited the Christians. The theory hinges on the meaning of the word *trinqu* as found in the *Aes Italicense* and *Marmur Sardinium* tablets. The *trinqu* theory argues that this word, *trinqu*, is of Gallic origin and refers to a sacrificial victim whose head was cut off. The perpetrators of the killings were likely Gallic aristocrats who sought to use the Christians as the sacrificial victims

during the gladiatorial games on 177. In order for their argument to succeed, proponents of the theory draw a connection between the use of the *trinqui* and the ancient Celtic practice of decapitation and the druidic practice of human sacrifice.<sup>97</sup> The ancient Celtic rite, though suppressed by the Romans in the first century BC and AD,<sup>98</sup> was sustained in the countryside where the effects of Romanization were not as apparent.<sup>99</sup>

If this *trinqui* theory is correct, then the ratification of the *senatus consultum* provides the historian with an understanding for the legal justification for the use of Christians in the amphitheater in Lugdunum and why the bodies were desecrated in such a cruel manner. However, two significant problems remain: First, the theory rests on an assumption that Celtic religion, and druidic practices in particular, had revitalized in Gaul (and Lugdunum) by the second century. In order to demonstrate that Christians were used as the *trinqui* one needs to provide strong evidence for the presence and practice of ancient Celtic practices in Lugdunum before and during 177. Second, the theory must demonstrate the extent to which these religious rites could have emerged within the Gallo-Roman religious system and influenced Roman legal proceedings of imperial significance. What seems to be missing from the *trinqui* theory is strong evidence that can demonstrate the revitalization of Celtic religion (specifically druidic human sacrifice) and how or why the pagan mob would exploit the *senatus consultum* in order to use the Christians as sacrificial victims.

What then can be said regarding the revitalization of Celtic religious practices and their impact on the event of 177? Is one to assume, based on the inferences of Oliver, Palmer, and Croteau, that the druidic rite of human sacrifice could have survived late into the second century,

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<sup>97</sup> See earlier comments, Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius," 75; Strabo, *Geography*, 4.4.5.

<sup>98</sup> Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 38-39.

<sup>99</sup> Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius," 77.

and that *The Gallican Letter* and *Aes Italicense* bears witness to this fact? Perhaps there is an alternative explanation that offers a much clearer picture of the religious situation in Gaul. The *trinqui* theory's reliance on a Celtic revitalization demonstrates the tenuousness of the theory. The evidence put forward by its proponents, moreover, is circumstantial and precarious. Historical evidence will show that it is much more likely that the impetus for the martyrdoms arose from social conflicts between the Christian sect and the adherents of the Roman civic and oriental religions and the imperial cult.

Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the consensus among historians has been that the cults of the Empire, particularly in Gaul maintained a peaceful co-existence and one in which Christianity posed a social, economic, and religious threat. According to this belief, the cults generally cooperated with one another, and that the Celtic cults in Gaul enjoyed a status of equal importance to the Roman cults. William Van Andringa's research over the previous decade has critiqued this view and instead proposed a theory of "religious combination" in which the foreign cults, including the Celtic cults of Gaul, were subsumed under the *interpretatio romana* of Roman civic religion.<sup>100</sup>

If this interpretation is correct, it may entail significant implications for the *trinqui* theory. The theory of religious combination is still developing, but it may provide the needed explanation for the religious setting of Lugdunum prior to the martyrdoms. Following from this research, the presumption that Celtic religion had revived by the middle of the second century (and therefore, druidic practice of human sacrifice) would be seriously called into question. In addition, the idea that Celtic religious practices could have made their way into Roman legal

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<sup>100</sup> William Van Andringa, "New Combinations and New Statuses: The Indigenous Gods in the Pantheons of the Cities of Roman Gaul," In *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, Edited by John North and S. R. F. Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 109-138.

proceedings would also be seriously questioned, if not, abandoned entirely. It would, therefore, be more likely that the imperial government and Roman civic religion had a greater role in the events on 177 than what proponents of the *trinqui* theory have admitted.

### **The Romanization of Gaul**

Gaul had been effectively conquered in 58 BC by Julius Caesar who defeated the military powers of the Celtic nations (*civitates*) and brought the region under the controlling influence of Rome and the idea of western culture that flowed from it. After the conflict, the Romans instituted a systematic “civilizing” of the region into Roman culture and commerce through the establishment of Roman colonies, military outposts, and commercial trading centers.<sup>101</sup> After the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BC, Augustus continued the process of Romanization by establishing provincial boundaries, reformed taxation, and the recognition of Lugdunum as the virtual capital of *Tres-Gallia*.<sup>102</sup>

The process continued into the reign of Tiberius, who in AD 21, squelched the Gallic uprising that threatened the stability of the region and of Rome’s campaign in Germany. The rebellion greatly affected the region and of the Roman attitude toward the Gauls—the revival of the *terror Gallicus* was no small matter in Roman-Celtic relations. Nevertheless, the advance of Romanization went on unimpeded, subordinating the Gauls into Roman economic, financial, military, and cultural norms.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 18-20.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. Lugdunum contains the great Altar of Rome and Augustus on which was inscribed the names of all sixty Gallic *civitates* subdued during the conquest. The altar, a symbol of the Roman conception of a unified Gaul into one nation, was the location of the annual sacrifice for the region of Gaul.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30. The *terror Gallicus* was the Roman suspicion that no Gaul could be fully trusted and that their treacherous nature threatened to destroy the stability of the western Empire.

The Romanization of Gaul reached its climax during the reign of Claudius, a native of Gaul and the city of Lugdunum. During this period, the aristocracy of Rome was almost entirely romanized, supported by the promotion of certain Gallic aristocrats to the Roman senate. The inhabitants of Gaul also gained Roman citizenship much easier during this time period. A complex system of Roman roads was completed, and an aqueduct was built at Lugdunum. Several towns in the northern regions received colonial status, and the economic and material well-being of Gaul generally improved to a level not previously experienced by its inhabitants.<sup>104</sup> After the rebellion of AD 68, provoked by the death of Nero, the provinces of Gaul endured a significant setback in their relationship to the rest of the Roman Empire (a revival of *terror Gallicus*), and subsequently entered a period during which they had little involvement or impact on the affairs of Rome. Nevertheless, the region benefited from economic development and Romanization was virtually completed during the reign of Domitian. However, the region suffered repeated and intermittent setbacks due to wars of the northern frontier with Germany and in Britain.

The religious activity of Gaul was not exempted from Romanization. In fact, it is the religious activity of the Gauls which received much of Rome's attention. The barbaric practices of the druids conflicted with Roman notions of civility, order, and general decorum. As noted in the previous chapter, the druids were known for the barbaric practice of human sacrifice, a practice the Romans despised and condemned. Hence, while Augustus and Tiberius took measures to limit the activity of the priesthood and to prohibit Roman citizens from participating in them, Claudius moved to eradicate the druidic priesthood from the social and religious consciousness of the Gallic peoples. Augustus' actions dealt a crucial blow to the power of the priesthood, and Tiberius' and Claudius' measures further subdued the priesthood's wild and

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 37.

barbaric ways. Drinkwater notes that these imperial measures were likely not connected to the political side of Gallic culture, but only at the barbaric druidic practices, particularly human sacrifice.<sup>105</sup>

As Romanization continued, the establishment of religious institutions played a key role in forming the new Gallo-Roman culture of *Tres-Gallia*. The *civitates* usually contained a classical temple, centrally located, which often housed the gods of the Capitoline triad—Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. However, some temples may have housed local gods who were important to that specific *civitates*.<sup>106</sup> The cities also contained several others places of worship in keeping with the polytheistic nature of Roman culture.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, even the religious life of the Gallic provinces took on distinctly Roman flavors. Romanization then, appeared to be complete and total.

### **Evidence of the Celtic Renaissance**

#### Art and Language

Through the first two centuries AD, as Romanization perpetuated in the western provinces, a flood of commercial activity from the rest of the Empire worked its way into Gaul. Diverse ethnicities, artwork, sculpture, clothing, jewelry, and religious items were bought and sold in the commercial markets of the cities, especially in Lugdunum.<sup>108</sup> The societal picture would have looked much like other parts of the Empire. However, despite the economic and cultural diversity, an inconspicuous substratum of Celtic heritage rested beneath the monolithic

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 38-39. Seutonius, *Claudius*, 25.5.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 144-147.

<sup>107</sup> Drinkwater notes that many of these places of worship (although the masonry is Roman in style) the floor plans reflect the Celtic culture.

<sup>108</sup> Audin, *Lyon*, 137-155.

overlay of Romanization. Around the turn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and into the third century, elements of Celtic life reflective of the *La Tène* period (400-1 BC) began to emerge in artwork, jewelry, sculpture, clothing, and coinage.<sup>109</sup>

The resurgence of Celtic culture has been explained by three contributing factors—renewed contact with similar culture (north of the Danube), the economic decline of the Roman Empire, and the persistence of nationalism among the Gauls.<sup>110</sup> As invasions from the north exposed the once “Romanized” Gauls to similarly-minded Germanic tribes, the influx of pre-Roman ways of life began to sprout through the superficial layer of Roman culture. As the Empire declined economically during the 160s and 170s, cultural influence shifted from the cities (upon which Roman power and influence depended) to the wealth and power of the Gallic landowners and aristocrats, who may have been familiar with and sympathetic to Celtic heritage.<sup>111</sup> In addition, because the markets would have been cut off due to invasions, the local and native-born artisans, potters, sculptures, and metal workers may have reverted to pre-Roman styles during this time, given the resurgence of materials in the late second century.<sup>112</sup> Celtic heritage also seemed to emerge among the language on pottery and the names given to children, including in the regions surrounding Lyon. Cult statues (dating to the reign of Marcus Aurelius) possessing Celtic features in hair, mouth, and shape, as well as the face of a Celtic deity, rather than Roman.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, “The Celtic Renaissance,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 14:1 (January 1965): 94.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>111</sup> See Oliver and Palmer, “Minutes,” 325. Croteau, “Marcus Aurelius,” 81-82.

<sup>112</sup> MacMullen, “Celtic Renaissance,” 101-102.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 100; Audin, *Lyon*, 140-ff.

By the early third century, Celtic language had revived as a language of common people, with Latin and Greek reserved for the courts and administrative realms of government.<sup>114</sup> It is probable that Celtic survived and flourished in the countryside of Gaul where involvement in government and civil entities was far less frequent than in the cities.<sup>115</sup> Irenaeus (in the 170s) even describes how he had to speak Celtic to his own congregation.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, Celtic habits of nomenclature seem to reemerge by the second century. In cities, names with Celtic roots comprised as much as 15% of the population, whereas, in the countryside, the number increases sharply to 40-50% of the population.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, strikingly little evidence remains of any form of written Celtic since the Celts never developed their own alphabet and only perpetuated written forms of their language in Latin letters.

#### A Revitalization of Druidism?

Significant to this point is the possibility for the revitalization of druidic practices. The role of the priestly druids, who would not have contributed to the development of a written Celtic since it was typical of the druids to safeguard their religious knowledge by committing it to memory rather than transcribing it. Human sacrifice played a major (though not exclusive role) in Rome's antipathy toward the Gauls. In fact, the nature of druidic human sacrifice was so despised by the Romans had an enormous value for propaganda in the conquest of Gaul.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, "Provincial Languages in the Roman Empire," *The American Journal of Philology* 87:1 (January 1966): 2.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 15; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.3.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>118</sup> Jane Webster, "At the End of the World: Druidic and Other Revitalization Movements in Post-Conquest Gaul and Britain," *Britannia*, 30 (1999): 13. In fairness, Rome's animosity for the druids may have stemmed from other factors, especially political or military if one considers the druids frequent anti-roman prophecies. Only a few

The Druids, as a powerful and reputable organization, belong a period of pre-roman Monarchy in Gaul, the *La Tène* period.<sup>119</sup> During Julius Caesar's time, the Druids were essential the heads over several realms of society—education , sacrifice, judgment. They administered all sacrifices, taught the young men of the society, and served as arbiters and judges in all disputes, whether criminal or civil.<sup>120</sup> Yet, as Roman culture advanced, the druids waned. Two factors that lead to the decline of the druids was the rise of the *res publica*, the “constitutional state” and the advance of Greco-Roman culture.<sup>121</sup> Before the conquest of Gaul, druidism likely offered young male a promising career, but those opportunities shifted to the *civitates* with the influx of Greco-Roman culture and the development of the civilized and economically advanced society.<sup>122</sup>

Since the druids were entrusted with the education of the aristocracy, both the druids and the upper class turned their backs on literacy. Consequently, when literacy came, the Celtic language survived through the less religiously conservative Celts and through Latin. Thus, Macmullen notes, “In Gaul, the rising prominence of Celtic [language] has no connection with religion.”<sup>123</sup> Given the fact of Rome's assimilation of the upper class into Hellenistic culture, overtime the illiterate druids and their aristocratic subjects would have waned as a notable influence on Greco-Roman culture in Gaul.

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sources make connects between the druids and human sacrifice, and most describe their role in education and legal matters, as well as, officiates of rituals.

<sup>119</sup> Norman J. DeWitt, “The Druids and Romanization,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 69 (1938): 331.

<sup>120</sup> Webster, “Druids,” 5.

<sup>121</sup> DeWitt, “Druids and Romanization,” 328.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>123</sup> MacMullen, “Languages,” 16.

Furthermore, the druids were priests whose deities seem to be similar to those belonging to the Greeks and Romans.<sup>124</sup> The erection of the altar of Rome and Augustus represented an alliance between the old and new forms of religion. It is possible that the function of the druids survived here as the sacerdotēs of the great altar only now devoted to Rome.<sup>125</sup> The decrees against the druidic human sacrifices, while not completely successful, were largely successful in driving the druids underground at least, and out of the public sphere. The lack of archaeological evidence suggests that by the middle of the first century the Druids were an organization in crisis.<sup>126</sup> Primitive forms of the druids may have survived in the back waters of Gaul, but the new and true “druids” were sophisticated, educated gentlemen of Roman Gaul belonging to the new order. The barbaric practice of human sacrifice was, by all accounts, eradicated from the social consciousness of Gaul.

The druids, Webster points out, represented a group of religious elites whose political interests were incompatible with those of Rome.<sup>127</sup> Since Rome typically administered the provinces through the assimilation of the social elites, the aristocratic elite of Gaul would have found themselves between two exclusive positions, the Romans and the subversive attitudes of the druids. The role of the druids as mediators between men of deities would have become incompatible with the political interests of the “state-forming” elites of first century BC Gaul. Hence, by the middle of the first century AD, the druids represented a waning political as well as religious force in Gaul due to Roman suppression. Consequently, the druids’ trajectory in the

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<sup>124</sup> DeWitt, “Druids and Romanization,” 321.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>126</sup> Webster, “Druids,” 11.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 14. For example, the Druids played a key role in the rebellion of AD 68 through anti-Roman prophecies predicting the downfall of the Empire. These prophecies were used to incite social unrest and resistance in the provinces.

revitalization movements (sometime in the second century) was distinctly different than those of other Celtic groups.<sup>128</sup>

### The Anomaly of Gallo-Roman Religion

What other evidence is there to suggest such revitalization in Celtic religion? A plethora of archeological evidence dating to this time period also appears to support the theory of a general renaissance in Celtic culture or at least a peaceful co-existence between Roman and Celtic religious customs as demonstrated by the existence of both Roman and Celtic deities seated together in temples and shrines peppering the Gallic countryside. Some have interpreted the archeological evidence to suggest that even pre-Roman forms of worship began to revive during the second half of the second century. “The imported pantheon, having for long enjoyed a pre-eminence among resident Romans and among the richer Gauls alike, began to give way before resurgent native gods and goddesses.”<sup>129</sup>

A vase from *Sains-du-Nord* represents a Gallo-Roman sanctuary.<sup>130</sup> A Stele discovered near Reims contains three deities, a Gallic god with stag horns flanked by Mercury and Apollo.<sup>131</sup> In Lugdunum, several artifacts depicting Celtic deities have been discovered over the past century. The archeological museum at *Fouvier* (in Lyon) holds many sculptures, base reliefs, and inscriptions that belong to *Sucellus*, and a base relief containing Mercury and Maia side-by-side

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>129</sup> MacMullen, “Celtic Renaissance,” 99. Even the druids, who were nearly eradicated by Claudius, somehow maintain their existence in obscure places, and began to make a notable comeback in the third and fourth century. Although, even MacMullen admits here that the status of the druids was not decisive at this time. It is unknown whether the druids were ever able to fully revive their practices, especially human sacrifice.

<sup>130</sup> William Van Andringa, “Religion in the Cities of Roman Gaul: First to Fourth Centuries CE,” In *The Cambridge History of Religions in the Ancient World*. Vol. 2. (New York, NY: Cambridge, 2013), 459.

<sup>131</sup> Van Andringa, “New Combinations,” 111.

was discovered near Lyon, in *Duchère*.<sup>132</sup> The base of a statue discovered at Rennes-Condade mentions the god Mars-Mullo, a combination of the Roman god with a local indigenous deity.<sup>133</sup>

It is important to note the numerous examples from statues, base reliefs, and sanctuaries depicting Celtic deities, and their significance for the *trinqu* theory is equally important. For the purpose of this thesis, the central question to be answered then concerns the relationship between Roman and Celtic religion and how it pertains to the martyrs of Lyon. How are historians to understand the relationship between Roman and Celtic religion, and could Celtic religion have revived early enough and to the extent that the druidic practice of human sacrifice could have been performed during the trials of 177? It may be best to address the first part of this question in order to shed light on the possibilities for the latter. If a revitalization of Celtic religion did occur, did the nature of its rites remain the same or undergo an evolution with the changing times of Roman culture?

Concerning the relationship (or the interaction) between Roman and Gallic religion, the dominant theory during the twentieth century viewed this relationship as one of peaceful coexistence—adherents of Roman and Celtic cults enjoyed a cohabitation and cooperation within the temples of Gaul. The study of the religions in Gaul suggested that there was an increase in conflation, evolution, and redefining of indigenous and oriental cults with the gods of the Roman pantheon. This theory of conflation between cultic deities arose from archeological discoveries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and fostered the belief that the Gallo-Roman culture created its own “hybrid deities” from the synchronization of the gods from both Roman and Celtic worlds.<sup>134</sup> Vivienne

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<sup>132</sup> Audin, *Lyon*, 159.

<sup>133</sup> Van Andringa, “Religions and Cities,” 435.

<sup>134</sup> Van Andringa, “New Combinations,” 109.

Walters advances this theory from the archeological evidence that the names and attributes of pagan gods continued to homogenize and conflate due to the nature of Roman rule over Gaul since 28 BC. For example when documenting the relationship between Mercury and Celtic religion in Gaul, Walters notes that Mercury was a popular god among the Gallic people, and it was common for Mercury to be conflated with the Celtic god, Cissonius. Several inscriptions in Gallia Belgica have been discovered with dedications to “*Mercurius Cissonius*.” In fact, a Mithream in Konigshoffen (Strasbourg, France) contains a dedication to *Cissonius*.<sup>135</sup>

According to Walters, the conflation of the religions likely occurred due to the increased integration of Roman and Gallic culture. Ever since the conquest of Gaul and the subjugation of Celtic religion and culture, the social classes consisted of mixed generations of Gallic natives, Roman citizens, merchants from the east, and a varying degree of slaves and freedman. Because of this, Gaul became a place of increasing religious diversity between the native Celtic religions (propagated by the last vestiges of the druidic priesthood), oriental cults such as Mithras and Cybele, and the pantheon of Roman gods (Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Mars, Mercury, etc.). Deities possessing similar characteristics and attributes were conjoined into a singular mode of worship by their patrons. The environment was, therefore, one of peaceful coexistence and cooperation between adherents of Roman, oriental, and Celtic deities.

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<sup>135</sup> Vivienne J. Walters, *The Cult of Mithras in the Roman Provinces of Gaul* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 118-119. For example, there is a significant amount of evidence showing the conflation of Mithras and Mercury in the provinces of Gaul. The most notable illustration of this conflation was on a marble statue of Mercury discovered in Merida, Spain which dated to 155 AD. The inscription on the statue reads as a dedication to Mithras. Another example includes a Mithream containing statues to Mercury with inscriptions of the symbols for both Mithras and Mercury, and dedications to both deities. The inscription from the altar discovered at Apt (mentioned above) also contains dedications to both deities. The altar discovered at Aix containing the dedication to SOLVIT may be a conflation of Apollo and Mithras.

### Religious Combinations and Imperial Dominance

Recent research has challenged this long-held belief in a peaceful syncretism by arguing that the theory is based on the interpretation of archeological evidence in isolation from its historical context and presumes that the Gallic deities were static and unchanging in their modes of worship. Revell poignantly sums up this problem:

There is a danger of using the archaeological evidence of temples and inscriptions as diagnostic of change, rather than undertaking a more rigorous analysis in order to understand how religion and ritual formed part of this broad-based homogeneity, and the way in which the people of the provinces made sense of how to act and behave within a new social and political world. Furthermore, through creating the hybrid of Romano-Celtic, there is the temptation to concentrate on the identification of the Celtic (or pre-Roman) and Roman elements, and then to think about them in isolation, downplaying the dynamic way in which the people of the provinces negotiated their way through the new imperial context.<sup>136</sup>

It is preferable, therefore, to understand the archeological evidence through the lens of *interpretatio romana*, a concept referring to the “interpretation of alien deities and of the rites associated with them” within the narrative of Roman culture and religion.<sup>137</sup> In the past, the policy of religious integration suggested a peaceful coexistence between the two religious systems, and attempts by all sides to play safe and fair with each other. However, the name-pairing of Celtic gods with Roman gods constituted “the superimposition of one belief system over the other,” and in this case, Roman over Celtic.<sup>138</sup> The process of interpretation occurs within the context of imperial rule when colonial discourse determined the translation of divine attributes from one deity to another. During the conquest of Britain, victory was taken to mean

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<sup>136</sup> Louise Revell, “Religion and Ritual in the Western Provinces,” *Greece & Rome* 54:2 (October 2007): 210.

<sup>137</sup> Jane Webster, “‘Interpretatio’: Roman Word Power and the Celtic Gods,” *Britannia* 26 (1995): 153.

<sup>138</sup> Webster, “Interpretatio,” 158. Name-pairing of multiple Celtic gods with a single Classical god (e.g. Mars, Apollo, etc.) occurs more frequently than the name-pairing of multiple classical gods with Celtic gods. Webster notes, that “*interpretatio* is essentially naming, and naming involves mastery.”

the capitulation of a foreign deity to Rome, which then entailed that deity becoming Roman, and a subsequent policy of religious tolerance was conferred to the defeated.<sup>139</sup> Presumably, the same held true for the Celtic deities in Gaul during and after the Roman conquest. Celtic deities were, in a large part, subsumed under Roman hegemony. “Foreign gods were not simply viewed in terms of the Roman pantheon - they were converted to it by force.”<sup>140</sup>

William Van Andringa proposed an alternate theory of “new religious combinations”—a theory that claims the appearance of Celtic, Oriental, and Roman gods (side-by-side in Gallic epigraphy and artifacts) does not imply that the patrons conflated the deities into new hybrids with new roles and attributes. Rather, the archeological evidence, when examined in its historical and geographic contexts, reveals an amalgamation of Roman and local deities which worked to shape the unique religious identity of each *civitates*.<sup>141</sup> Through *interpretatio romana* and the unified call of city gods to protect both the Empire and the emperor, there emerged a common religious language and culture among the provinces of the Roman Empire.<sup>142</sup> This is not to say that Celtic deities were completely subsumed and subordinated, or that Roman gods enjoyed the exclusive right of public space. What it suggests is a reorientation of the identities of the deities according to their municipal locations. “Rather than focusing on ‘indigenous’ or ‘Roman’ gods, the point was to worship familiar gods and cults whose power was guaranteed by municipal investiture, gods who also established a connection with Rome and were adapted to their times,

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>141</sup> Van Andringa, “New Combinations,” 110.

<sup>142</sup> William Van Andringa, “Religions and the Integration of Cities in the Empire in the Second Century AD: The Creation of a Common Religious Language,” In *A Companion to Roman Religion*, Edited by Jorg Rupke, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 84.

the situation of individuals and their place in society.”<sup>143</sup> During the imperial period, the indigenous gods of Gaul “either changed their appearance or assumed a secondary position” to the pantheon of the Roman conquerors.<sup>144</sup>

These [indigenous] gods had forged a link with Rome, adapted to their time, to the situation of the people, and to their place in society. In this way, we can explain how naturalization of deities and their integration into the Roman Empire took place in many cities. It also explains the wealth of combinations that helped to keep the gods in touch with their time.<sup>145</sup>

The development of cities and towns in Gaul was a direct result of Roman involvement, designed according to the Roman model of urban planning. The towns played a central role in connecting the religious activity of the local people to the administrative and imperial efforts of Rome. Key to this urban development was the construction of the city forum, which provided a place for the local senatorial body to administrate under the providence of deities adapted to fit the new social order. Temples were constructed and local deities adopted into a new system which on the one hand expressed the local religious identity of the town, and on the other hand, operated in the context of the imperial system and adapted for its purposes.<sup>146</sup> The local deities are thus paired with Roman deities for this purpose. Within the city forum, the most common combination included the cults of Rome and Augustus, the local genius of the city, and Jupiter.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>144</sup> Van Andringa, “Religions and Cities,” 456.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 458.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 460-461. Although the epigraphical evidence is scarce, there is considerable archaeological and historical evidence to suggest that the towns of Roman Gaul each contained a temple dedicated to the cult of Rome and Augustus. The temple is connected to the creation of the town and its forum, “marked by Roman authority and the community’s integration into the Empire.”

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 465. In Lugdunum, Jupiter is ubiquitous in the public spaces. Mars also had a sanctuary in Lugdunum. In Vienne, Mercury was the dominant deity of the city.

For instance, consider the stele of *Nuits-Saints-Georges* depicting three gods side-by-side—Fortuna, Cybele, and a three-headed horned god (Gallic). *Prima facia*, the stele appears to show a placid coexistence between the gods of Rome, the orient, and Gaul, which characterized the syncretism of the day. However, following the *interpretatio romana*, the stele depicts a shift in importance among the indigenous gods who acquired new identities as they were brought into the Roman pantheon. The temple in which the stele was located was dedicated one of the major deities of the Roman pantheon (Mars or Apollo), thus implying that the set of three deities in the stele has assumed a secondary role of importance in the religious life of the *vicus* in which the temple was built.<sup>148</sup>

In Gaul especially, *civitates* experienced the combination of civic and local deities into a synthetic Roman pantheon, driven in large part by Roman influence and control of the cities. Artifacts like the *Pillar of the Nautae* and the *Altar of the Butcher of Perigueux* reveal the supremacy of the civic gods over the native deities.<sup>149</sup> The Roman civic gods appear to have taken on the roles of many of the native deities while still retaining their Roman names and identities. The native and oriental deities were most likely then subsumed under the civic gods in the cities and villas of Gaul. Being interested in Romanizing the Gallic people and lands, the Romans sought an assimilation of Gallic culture and belief into Roman civilization and practice. Thus, the old modes of religious expression to the native Celtic deities were replaced with modes more appropriate for worship in the civic cults. The natures and roles of the Celtic deities,

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 456.

<sup>149</sup> Van Andringa, “New Combinations,” 126-127. The particular piece of evidence Van Andringa uses is the Pillar of the Boatman. This pillar was erected during the reign of Tiberius and dedicated to him as “the father of the gods.” Along with Tiberius, the civic god, Jupiter, is invoked as the highest of all civic gods. Below Jupiter, portraits of both Roman and Celtic deities move down on all four sides of the pillar. The mother goddess, Cybele, is included in this pillar, suggesting she was also considered secondary to Jupiter. By constructing the pillar this way, the boatman were publicly acknowledging, with full endorsement from the sponsoring college, the supremacy of Caesar and the civic god Jupiter and the subjugation of all other gods.

therefore, were not static and unchanging, but adaptive and evolutionary following their assimilation into Roman civilization.<sup>150</sup>

The religious combinations underwent further transformation in religious rites and religious space, adopting the Roman methods and ordeals. In terms of sacrifice, rituals of animal sacrifice took on a predominantly Roman form. The sacrifices of horses and dogs in the city of Vertault disappeared by the middle of the first century, coinciding with the construction of a new temple in the same area. The city had become a *vicus* under the new imperial system, and the cult of the city probably evolved in both form and ritual. The sacrifices of horse and dogs ceased, but the cult and the deity continued to exist, with new meaning given to its rites.<sup>151</sup> Over time, the rites began to assume the form of Roman sacrifices.

Religious space came to be transformed through the *interpretatio romana*.<sup>152</sup> The local deities of Gaul were then naturalized into the Roman pantheons, changing both their names and their identities in accordance with Roman religious understanding. Temples also underwent significant evolution. The public forums (in which the centrally located temples were erected) contained temples which dedicated to the imperial cult but displaying the architecture of pre-roman Celtic religion. Pre-roman building layouts in temples, once thought to be evidence of a steadfast Celtic religion, upon further excavation have failed to produce a “Celtic” model. A more likely explanation places the construction of these temples during the imperial period, as

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 132-136.

<sup>151</sup> Van Andringa, “Religions and Cities,” 457.

<sup>152</sup> Van Andringa, “Common Religious Language,” 87. Local deities were given names such as Mars Mullo at Rennes or the Treveri’s ancient tribal deity who took the name Lenus Mars. Each of these indicates that they were “municipal deities whose powers were specific to the region in question.” The exceptions to this would be local gods such as Cernunnos (see above) who probably did not have a Roman equivalent to which it could assimilate.

representations of the religious combinations between Roman and Celtic systems.<sup>153</sup> This amalgamation, Van Andringa notes, does not exist prior to the second century, and therefore, must have been created during this period.<sup>154</sup> Thus, the reorientation of the indigenous gods in Gaul corresponded to the reconstitution of sacred space.

The future of the provincial communities was henceforth anchored to the Roman state, symbolized by the emperor and the father of the gods. While the cults established in the city center did take account of the selection by local authorities, the evidence compels us to conclude that indigenous or Gallic deities were barred from the civic space.<sup>155</sup>

There then existed two kinds of space, which coexisted harmoniously. The first was the public forum, dedicated for the cults of Rome and Augustus, Jupiter, and the genius of the town. The second, on the outskirts, comprised of the cults imported by recent urban settlers, who frequently incorporated indigenous deities (in the early period). There is no indication that the two ever comingled in a manner that would suggest a “side-by-side” coexistence of indigenous and Roman deities, or of a revitalization of Celtic religion in the public forums. If the indigenous gods lived on, it was because they changed their identities to become acclimated to civic existence, under the civilized urban development of the Roman Empire. The gods were forever linked to Augustus and the imperial system. The exuberance manifested with rites and ceremonies involving Gallic deities reflected a political maturity, a connection between the cults, the gods of Rome, and the emperor.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Van Andringa, “Religions and Cities,” 459.

<sup>154</sup> Van Andringa, “Common Religious Language,” 86-87.

<sup>155</sup> Van Andringa, “Religions and Cities,” 463. Most of the sanctuaries containing local deities were pushed to the outskirts of the city.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 478.

Van Andringa's research on the "religious combinations" of Gallo-Roman religion may help in understanding the situation in Lugdunum in the second century. With the archeological evidence interpreted through the lens of "religious combinations" of the *interpretation romana*, the revitalization of Celtic culture in the second century had little bearing on proceedings of the martyrdoms in 177. The religious identity of the Gauls under the Roman Empire could be characterized as a Romanized form of Celtic religion, connoting that the appearance and identity of the indigenous gods, along with their sacred rites and rituals, transformed and adapted to the imperial context of the Roman Empire. Hence, the notion of a revitalization of druidic practices—such as human sacrifice—and their use in the proceedings of 177 is considerably weak. Also, considering Roman contempt for druidic human sacrifice, an attitude which persisted well into the late Empire, the connection between the *trinqui* of *Aes Italicense* and the sacrificial victims of druidic religion should also be seriously doubted. The revitalization of Celtic culture had little connection to the religious practices of the druids, and the infusion of Celtic deities under a new imperial paradigm and limited to municipal boundaries bars any notion that ancient Celtic rites would have influenced Roman legal proceedings of imperial significance such as policies pertaining to Christians.

There must be, therefore, another explanation for the political or religious impetus of the killings. Perhaps, *The Gallican Letter* contains textual and contextual indicators that point to this fact, facts which indicate the events in Lugdunum were, as Eusebius claims, indicative of persecution of Christians during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.<sup>157</sup> If so, then the persecutions can be understood within the social and religious context of Rome's general discriminatory policies against Christianity and Christianity's conflict with pagan religions. There may be no need to see

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<sup>157</sup> *HE*, 5.2.1.

a direct connection between the ratification of the *senatus consultum* and the martyrdoms. Rather, the martyrdoms offer circumstantial evidence for the general troubles of the Empire and for the region of *Tres-Galliae* and the suspicion directed towards Christians who had offended the gods.<sup>158</sup>

### **Alternative Religious Factors**

The cult of the Cybele expanded its presence throughout the Hellenized world quite successfully. Evidence has shown that the cult existed in nearly every region of the Roman Empire. Taurobolic altars have been uncovered in nearly every province of the Roman Empire, and temples dedicated to Cybele exist in many of the major capitals and cities, including Lugdunum. In the province of Italy, inscriptions, temples, and altars of Cybele are particularly dense, especially around Vesuvius, Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Stabia. In Carthage and Roman Africa, the cult gained significant popularity among the Roman people—a temple was dedicated in AD 72. was discovered near Leptus Magna. Since it was considered part of the “civic loyalty and imperial cult,” the cult was most popular among the coastline, trading routes, and centers of Roman commerce.<sup>159</sup> In this region, the cult enjoyed reasonable success and influence even to the time of Augustine in the fourth century.

In the western part of the Empire, the presence of the cult of the Great Mother was less prominent. Most significant to this study is the presence of Cybele in the region of Gaul. Gaul contains more *taurobolic* altars than any other region of the Western Roman Empire. Archeological evidence for the cult of Cybele in this region dates to as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC when Phocaeans landed in Marseille. However, conclusive evidence for the presence of

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<sup>158</sup> Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul*, 78-79.

<sup>159</sup> Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996), 57-58.

Cybele in Gaul dates only to the time of the Antonine emperors.<sup>160</sup> Most importantly, the cult of Cybele was present in the city of Lugdunum by the mid-second century as archeological evidence reveals the presence of both statues and a temple located just above the amphitheater in which the Christians were martyred. Lugdunum was the capital of the region of the *Tres-Gallia*, and the center of the Phrygian cult was also located here. The city possessed the earliest known *taurobolic* altar, erected sometime around or after 160 in commemoration of the Lugdunum's first *archigallus*.<sup>161</sup>

Lugdunum was also the capital of the imperial cult of the *Tres-Gallia*. Through its relations with Ostia via the Rhone valley and the Arles, Lugdunum remained the epicenter of imperial religion (supported by Phrygian cult of Cybele). Since by this time the cult of Cybele was part of the civic religion, the relationship between the two entities was a workable one. The legacy of the emperor Claudius, who was born in Lugdunum and was an ardent supporter of the cult of Cybele and Attis, aided this religious association. In fact, Turcan notes, "Phrygianism which worked liturgically for the safeguarding of the Caesars was hand in glove with the religion of the sovereign...Lyon's mother worship went hand in hand with imperial loyalism."<sup>162</sup> Thus, it seems there is enough evidence to warrant the conclusion that the cult of Cybele maintained a prominent status among cults in the city of Lugdunum around the time of 177.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid. There are at least fifty "votive monuments" that support the theory of a sixth century BC origin.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 61-63. The inauguration of this priestly ministry also coincided with the commemoration of the temple above the amphitheater. Turcan notes that the temple located above the amphitheater has not been shown to belong to the Great Mother. Turcan does not subscribe to the theory that the persecutors of 177 belonged to the Phrygian cult.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 63. It should be noted that since the time of Claudius, the cult of Cybele had been placed under some restrictions concerning the practice of its Phrygian rites. However, many of these restrictions had been lifted by the time of the pogrom in Lugdunum in 177. The taurobolic sacrifice was now an accepted practice in the eyes of the public. See also Frend, *Martyrdom*, 11.

Mithraism spread west through trade routes and port cities, and it is almost certain that the cult rose to great prominence in Roman Gaul. Turcan posits that the Mithraeum temple discovered in Bordeaux suggests it was one of the most important cults in the region.<sup>163</sup> Trading routes running through Lugdunum from the Rhone Valley and Alps no doubt contributed to its growth and popularity. The rivers Moselle, Langres, and Saone also contributed to the cult's expansion in and around Lugdunum. Most importantly, Lugdunum, the capital of *Tres-Gallia*, was the commercial trading center of the region and was the seat of the Imperial cult. Merchants from both east and west of Lugdunum passed through it, bringing their religious beliefs with them. The ancient city contained crypts of Mithras, as did the city of Vienne. At Lugdunum, in particular, the crypt was located near the barracks of the Roman soldiers, and the quartermaster was expected to give offerings to Mithras as a form of piety.<sup>164</sup>

While the evidence within Lugdunum is scarce, there is a greater amount of evidence existing in the surrounding regions of Gaul (such as artifacts dating from the first and second century) which increase the likelihood of the cult's presence in and around the city during the second century.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, other Mithraean dating to the second century have been

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 209. Yet, the dating of the evidence is problematic for determining Mithras' influence in Lugdunum in the second century. Vivienne Walters has produced a categorized list of the monuments, inscriptions, coins, and other artifacts related to the cult of Mithras in Roman Gaul. Overwhelmingly, much of the archaeological finds have been dated to the third or fourth century. The evidence which dates to the second century is far more scarce, and at times, speculative. More specifically, *conclusive* evidence of the cult's presence in Lugdunum and Vienne by 177 is quite scarce.

<sup>165</sup> Vivienne J. Walters, *The Cult of Mithras*, 80-83. Two important artifacts from Lugdunum most likely date to sometime during the latter half of the second century. The first is an inscription on a marble block used as a dedication to Mithras which reads: *Deo Invicto Mithrae Secundinus Dat*. The origin of the marble stone is suspected to be part of another monument from which the stone had broken away. The name *Secundinus* suggests the patron was part of a *cognomina* dating to the second century and was most likely a Roman soldier since the stone was discovered near the military quarter of the city. The quarter is known today as Quartier de St. Just. The second artifact is a bronze plaque discovered in the sepulcher of St. Just. The dating depends largely on the name inscribed on the plaque: *Aurelius Secundinius Donatus*. Walters notes that name belongs to a class of *praenomina* which was used in the later Empire, from the second century onward. Again, the name *Secundinius* indicates the patron lived

discovered in *Tres-Galliae*, *Gallia-Belgica*, Iberia, and northern Gaul.<sup>166</sup> The archeological evidence for the presence of Mithras in Gaul increases the likelihood that the cult had a presence in Lugdunum by 177. Though evidence within the city is scarce, the circumstantial evidence of the surrounding areas gives credence to the belief that Mithras had members living within the city and would have been witness to the trials and executions of the Christians. The popularity of Mithras among slaves from the east may explain why the testimonies of slaves were used against the Christians during the trials at Lugdunum. If the slaves were not Christians, as *The Gallican Letter* states, could they have been worshippers of Mithras? Eusebius reveals that the slaves were sympathizers with the pagan accusers, and the slaves were eager to testify against their Christian masters. Yet, the religious identity of the slaves is unstated in *The Gallican Letter*, and the archaeological evidence is at best circumstantial, so the premise is only hypothetical.

### **Religious Setting of Lugdunum**

One can assume with reasonable certainty that the cults of Mithras and Cybele were present in Lugdunum by the middle of the second century, and almost certainly before the trials of 177. Whether the members of these cults had the motivation and ability to influence the trials is a question that is yet to be answered. Various cults from the orient, cults from the Roman

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during the second century and was a probably soldier serving in the military quarter of Lugdunum. Walters notes that the plaque was lost sometime before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., A Mithream discovered in Sarrebourg (northeast Gaul) contained coins dating from the first and second centuries (p. 17). Another Mithream located in Trier (northern Gaul) is difficult to date, but may have been used in the second century (p. 27). Also, an altar was discovered near Vienne containing an inscription showing it to be dedicated by a father and son. The *cognomina* and *praenomina* suggest the altar dates no later than the second century. The father's name *C. Amandus Billicatidos* suggests the patron was a Romanized Gaul living no later than the second century (p. 87). An inscription on an altar discovered in Apt (southern Gaul) contained the name, *Optatus*, a popular *cognomen* used for slaves and freedman in the second century (118). An inscription from Aix reads *Tallius Onesimus*, a *praenomen* dating no later than the second century and part of a class of freedman who likely migrated to Gaul through trade routes in the Rhone Valley (126-128) The same inscription is unclear as to the identity of the deity it is dedicated to. Walters notes that the term on the inscription, *SOLVIT*, may refer to Apollo or Mithras. However, since the conflation of deities occurred frequently in Gaul, the altar may be a mixture of the two.

pantheon, the imperial cult, and Celtic religion (see above) resides within the city.<sup>167</sup> Yet, how did these various groups co-exist in peaceful toleration and how would Christianity threaten this?

If Van Andringa's theory of "religious combination" is correct, then perhaps, the religious context in which the martyrdoms of Lugdunum took place was more similar to situations elsewhere in the Empire rather than dissimilar. The root causes and motivation for the martyrdoms is yet to be explored in detail, but the historical and archeological evidence reveals a religious setting quite analogous to the rest of the Empire. The influence of Celtic religion on the proceedings, as proponents of the *trinqui* theory have argued, seems unlikely considering the place Celtic religion held in Romanized Gaul. However, the cults of Cybele and Mithras may still have played a significant role in the proceedings, as at least one historian has suggested,<sup>168</sup> but this influence would likely have manifested itself through participation in Roman civic religions. The worshippers of the cult of Cybele, given its prominence among Phrygian cults in Gaul, would have carried the most influence on the situation. Mithraism may have had some influence, but this would probably have been nominal compared to the cult of Cybele. However, the Roman soldiers (who were likely followers of Mithras) no doubt would have participated in the persecutions.

As noted earlier, the cults of Cybele and Mithras had certainly established themselves throughout the Empire, and Christianity would have interacted with these cults in other locations. Except for the presence of Celtic religions and their assimilation into Roman worship, the religious setting of Gaul was not that dissimilar from the rest of the Empire, it would seem, in light of the research concerning the relationship between Celtic religion and Roman imperialism,

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<sup>167</sup> For a detailed discussion of the religious make-up of the city, see Audin, *Lyon*, 137-153.

<sup>168</sup> Audin, *Lyon*, 172-188; Michael Hertwig-Jaksch, "Christians at Lugdunum," 38-40.

the *trinqui* theory's premise concerning a revitalization of druidic human sacrifice has been severely weakened. However, the possibility that the cults of Cybele and Mithras played a significant role in the trials may retain plausibility. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that these cults were present in the city by the second century and were both popular among the Romans. Moreover, *The Gallican Letter* was written to the churches in Asia and Phrygia, regions in which both the cults of Mithras and Cybele enjoyed great popularity. If a connection can be made between the persecutors at Lyon and Vienne and the missionary purpose of *The Gallican Letter*, then a clearer picture may emerge concerning the religious impetus of the killings. Perhaps the author of *The Gallican Letter* hoped to write to encouraged the churches in Asia and Phrygia who were experiencing similar persecutions following the aftermath at Lugdunum. If so, given Cybele's prominence and relationship with the imperial cult and Mithras' popularity among the Roman army, it would seem that the two cults would have been in positions to influence the trials and executions, even if indirectly.<sup>169</sup>

The *trinqui* theory relies so heavily on the assumption of a renaissance in Celtic religion that it is severely weakened when this assumption is shown to be unwarranted. The renaissance of Celtic religion, whatever its extent, supports neither the revitalization of ancient druidic practices of human sacrifice nor the premise that sentiments for Celtic religious practices could have influence the legal proceedings of the trials in 177. Rather, the persistence or revival of Celtic religion was made possible only by its assimilation and acclimation into the Roman imperial system through which both its deities and rites were renamed, reinterpreted, or reinvented entirely. Hence, the *trinqui* theory's premise that the Christians were used in an ancient rite of human sacrifice should be dismissed as extremely unlikely and implausible.

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<sup>169</sup> More attention will be given to this idea in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL PROBLEMS

This chapter will address literary and historical evidence within *The Gallican Letter* linking the martyrs to the *trinqu* of *senatus consultum*. The evidence in question concerns the methods of torture and execution as well as the treatment of the bodies thereafter. Proponents of the *trinqu* theory understand these elements as undeniable confirmation of their hypothesis. The chapter will argue that these elements are actually characteristic of Roman ritual and custom, not Celtic. The proceedings of the martyrdom (the legal proceedings, modes of torture, styles of execution in the arena, the beheadings, the open display of the bodies, and the disposal by water) are well-documented means of Roman punishment for social outsiders, criminals, and political dissidents. Likewise, these methods were common elements in the accounts of Christian martyrdom from that time period. Therefore, the persecution should be understood as quintessentially Roman in nature and scope, and the *trinqu* theory should be abandoned.

The martyrdom of Lugdunum presents a particular case study on the relationship of Christianity and Roman authority. Proponents of the *trinqu* theory believe *The Gallican Letter* provides historical and literary clues that point to the identity of the persecutors as basically Celtic, and their motivations as basically economic and religious. Proponents of the *trinqu* theory have taken key elements of *The Gallican Letter* and extrapolated from them a connection to the *senatus consultum* of 177. As noted above, Oliver and Palmer (followed by Croteau) have noted both temporal, religious, and economic connections between the Roman legislation and the use of Christians as gladiators in the amphitheater during the festival of *Tres-Galliae*.<sup>170</sup> Croteau has built on these connections by cataloging similarities between the supposed uses of the *trinqu*

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<sup>170</sup> Oliver and Palmer, "Minutes," 324-325; Croteau, "Marcus," 86.

and the treatment of the Christians, basically equating one with the other.<sup>171</sup> According to Croteau, the use of “combat” and “sacrifice” language (along with the decapitations) not only provide the proof that the Christians were used as gladiators, but also that they were executed as the *trinqui* in accordance with Celtic sacred ritual. The decapitations are equated with the *trinqui*'s decapitation, and the display of the bodies is linked with the ancient Celtic custom of displaying the heads of victims.

### **Christianity and *Superstio***

In the first two centuries after the birth of Christianity, the church experienced intermittent periods of persecution at the hands of the Roman government and in cooperation with the local populace who, on several occasions, brought the Christians to trial on false or spurious charges. As Christianity began to expand within a pluralistic and polytheistic culture of the Greco-Roman world, an inevitable conflict arose between Christianity's monotheistic exclusivism and pagan polytheism, which was manifested through political, economic, and social categories and, at times, culminated in Christian martyrdom.

The causes behind many of the persecutions in the early church were a combination of legal, social, and religious factors, and it is probable that many of these same factors would have also been present in the events at Lugdunum. The legal status of Christianity engendered suspicion and disdain from typical Roman society and served as the impetus for arbitrary discrimination and persecution. Keresztes notes that Roman law was comprised of three types of legal reasons for bringing Christian to trial—*ius coercitionus* (“right constraint”), criminal law,

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<sup>171</sup> Croteau, “Marcus Aurelius,” 129-131. Croteau emphasizes the use of “combat” and “sacrifice” language in *The Gallican Letter* as evidence for this connection.

or special law pertaining to all Christians.<sup>172</sup> The arbitrariness of Roman law toward Christianity promoted an environment that allowed pagans to level spurious accusations against their Christian neighbors with little or no evidence of wrong doing. Within this context, Christians could be brought to trial on the basis of unfounded accusations; and only after it was revealed that the defendant was a Christian, the initial charges (albeit unfounded) would be substituted for the crime of Christianity (*religio illicitas*).<sup>173</sup> This procedure was common throughout the Empire since it provided the means by which pagans could rid themselves of their Christian colleagues.

The religious impiety of Christians toward pagan gods also contributed to the rise in persecution. When Christianity first appeared in secular literature by the second century, the word most often used by pagan authors to describe Christian activity was *superstitio*. These references almost always occur within the context of persecution during which Christians were suspected of having offended the gods by committing immoral acts and crimes of atheism—a refusal to worship the civic gods or popular gods of the Empire. The charge of *superstitio* was significant since the Romans typically described religious activity as *religio*. *Religio* engendered sentiments of respectability: it referred to proper acts of piety and respectable rites of public religion.<sup>174</sup> In contrast, *superstitio* referred to socially subversive behavior and religious impiety toward the gods.<sup>175</sup> The distinction between *religio* and *superstitio* categorized Christianity as a

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<sup>172</sup> Paul Keresztes, “Law and Arbitrariness,” 210.

<sup>173</sup> Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 45; Celsus attempted to portray Christianity as “an association contrary to the law.” Celsus’ criticisms also included impiety—the Christian refusal to worship the pantheon of Roman gods. In Celsus’ thinking, it was simply irrational to avoid worshipping several gods, for by doing so one would surely be worshipping that which belongs to the great God (see Celsus, *On True Doctrine* 8.2)

<sup>174</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2003), 593-594. Ferguson notes that the term was first used by pagan authors who reserved the term for the personal emotional religions of the east. Christianity came to be identified in the same category.

<sup>175</sup> MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 17. Ramsay McMullen notes that within Greco-Roman society, the prevailing attitude of the government and the populace was one of religious tolerance (so long as one did not offend the gods). The Roman government frequently adopted a policy of tolerance and assimilation when it

dubious sect of inferior social status. As Seneca noted, “Just as religion cherishes the gods, then, whereas superstition wounds them...”<sup>176</sup> Having maintained a community of social and theological exclusivity, Christianity naturally engendered the label of *superstitio* from pagan authors. As a result, the stigma of *superstitio* invited the charge of atheism. In essence, pagans considered Christians to be socially subversive due to their abandonment of the Roman deities.<sup>177</sup> Tacitus applied this label to Christianity while recounting the fire of Rome in AD 64, explaining that these social misfits were despised for their “hatred of mankind” (*odio humani generus*).<sup>178</sup>

In his often-cited letter to Trajan, the Bithynian governor, Pliny, delineates the suspicions of the Romans: the Christians had been accused of cannibalism, incest, human sacrifice, and impiety. The disturbance that led to Pliny’s initial investigation apparently originated from Christian missionary impact on the economics of idol worship. As the Christian church made more converts, pagan temples sold less meat and facilitated fewer sacrifices—and lost a great amount of income. After Pliny found no evidence to procure any criminal convictions, the Christians were forced to prove innocence from the crimes of immorality and impiety and to demonstrate their loyalty to the Empire by offering sacrifices.

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encountered new religions, and the personal and civic cults largely followed this pattern. So long as it did not threaten the stability of the Empire, discourage social cohesion, or commit acts of public indecency, a new god, cult, or religion posed no threat to Roman authorities and received no opposition within this accept milieu. For a detailed explanation of Roman ideas of *pietas*, see King, *The Organization of Roman Religious Belief*, p. 301-307.

<sup>176</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *On Clemency*, 2.5.1, In *Anger, Mercy, Revenge*, Translated by Robert Kaster and Martha Nussbaum, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), EBook Collection, EBSCOhost (Accessed November 20, 2012), 173.

<sup>177</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 595.

<sup>178</sup> Tacitus, Cornelius, *Annals*, 15.44.2-8, In *The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero*, Translated by John Yardley, and Anthony Barrett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), EBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (Accessed November 20, 2012), 359-360. Christians were considered to have held some responsibility for the fires, and so they many of them were tortured and executed under Nero.

As a whole, the Christian movement was generally isolated from the pagan community. Christians would often avoid public festivals where pagan religious rites would certain to occur. Christians would not marry non-Christians, and they remained a close-knit community that would only initiate outsiders after they had been thoroughly questioned and confirmed.<sup>179</sup> The Christian community eventually formed its own social norms and rules, adjudicating between its own members and establishing its own societal expectations. This mode of seclusion and secrecy fostered attitudes of superstition and slanderous rhetoric from pagan authors who typically wrote from the perspective of the upper classes (an upper class which understood very little of this socially contemptible group from the lower class).<sup>180</sup> Christian polemics against polytheism and idol worship aroused resentment from writers like Celsus who made it a point to mock the Christian disdain for the idols: “Who but an utter infant imagines these things are gods and not votive offerings and images of gods.”<sup>181</sup>

The perceived isolation of the early church attracted the scorn of Christianity’s most virulent critics. Naturally, these authors employed pejorative labels against the contemptible Christian sect.<sup>182</sup> Terms such as “revolutionary” and “seditious” began to be used in reference to the strange cult of Jesus. “The Christian group was revolutionary not because it had the men and

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<sup>179</sup> MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 35.

<sup>180</sup> Celsus, 3.44-59, In T. R. Glover, *The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire, Fifth Edition*, (London: Methuen & Co, 1914), 241. For example. Celsus’ writings wonderfully illustrate how the Roman upper class viewed Christian tactics of proselytizing. Ironically, in an effort to discredit Christianity, Celsus compares the strange practices of Christianity to the arcane (although antiquated by this time) oriental practices of Cybele and Mithras, and he is the first to name Jesus as a worker of magic.

<sup>181</sup> Celsus 7.62, In Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 119.

<sup>182</sup> Wilken, *The Christians As the Romans Saw Them*, 98. Wilken notes that the term *maleficus* (used by Celsus and others) may refer to one who practices magic or as an adjective, “magical.” The pagan authors seemed to believe that Christianity amounted to a group of superstitious soothsayers who practiced incantations on the unsuspecting masses of the lower class. Such views were encouraged by the Christians’ invocation of the names of Jesus during miracles and exorcisms.

resources to wage a war against the laws of the Empire, but because it created a social group that promoted its own laws and its own patterns of behavior.”<sup>183</sup>

To make matters worse, Christians equated the myths and miracles of pagan gods to the work of demons (*daimonia*), and the followers of pagan gods were considered to be sitting under the judgment of God as “children of wrath” awaiting eternal damnation.<sup>184</sup> Bryant accurately notes:

This negative image of the ‘new superstition’ was based primarily upon the monotheistic exclusiveness of Christian belief—which actually went so far as to openly characterize pagan deities as malevolent demons—and upon misconceptions of secretive Christian religious practices: the ‘body and blood’ in the Eucharistic service, for example, was thought to entail some form of ritual murder or cannibalism, while the congregational agape or ‘love-feast’ suggested various sexual perversions, including incest.<sup>185</sup>

The theological insults coupled with the impiety of atheism no doubt infuriated the pagans. The situation in Lugdunum reveals the sentiments of vengeance and hatred largely motivated how the martyrs were treated during the trials. Moreover, this exclusive universalism fostered the formulation of community life and fellowship that segregated itself from Roman social life where pagan cult worship played a significant role. As converts to Christianity increased, the business of buying, selling, and sacrificing to idols experienced an enormous financial setback. The buying of certain meats and participation in pagan festivals undoubtedly impacted the financial investments of the pagan working class.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>184</sup> Ramsay, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 18.

<sup>185</sup> Joseph M. Bryant, “The Sect-Church Dynamic and Christian Expansion in the Roman Empire: Persecution, Penitential Discipline, and Schism in Sociological Perspective.” *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 44:2 (June 1993): 313.

<sup>186</sup> See Acts 19 where the smiths who produced idols of Diana (Artemis) caused a riot in the city of Ephesus after Paul had converted many of their patrons to Christianity. See also Romans 14 where Christians are instructed that if it harms their conscience, they are to refrain from buying meat offered to idols.

It should not come as a surprise then that *The Gallican Letter* reveals that economic discrimination precipitated the martyrdoms at Lugdunum. The persecution first began in the form of harassment and exclusion of the Christians from public bathhouses and places of business, thus forcing the Christians to retreat into private meeting places and draw on the support of stronger, wealthier believers to sustain the Christian community. Studies on this issue suggest that pagans in Lugdunum who profited from the imperial games and festivities likely felt the impact of the economic recession first and would have cause to despise Christian businesses and patrons who refused to support the civic festivals so essential to the life of the city.<sup>187</sup>

In *The Gallican Epistle*, the Christians are brought to trial on the charges of secret crimes of *superstitio* (thus offending the gods), and later convicted for the crime of Christianity. The Christians are stereotyped with the same labels of *superstitio* and atheism. The theological exclusivity of the Christians, along with their doctrines of the resurrection and eternal life, were met with ridicule and mockery.<sup>188</sup> The persecutions reveal economic and social factors influencing the trials, since Christians are subjected to economic discrimination as a result of their religious beliefs. The mob initiates the violence by trumping up the dubious charges and

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<sup>187</sup> Hertwig-Jaksch, "Christians at Lugdunum," 43-44; Luther H. Martin, "Roman Mithraism and Christianity," *Numen* 36:1 (June 1989): 58.

<sup>188</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 11. It is also worth noting that there was likely a non-orthodox element of Christianity in Lugdunum around this time. Irenaeus speaks of a gnostic teacher by the name of Marcus who was active in both Asia and the Rhone Valley and who was known for practicing forms of divination and sorcery. Frend suggests that this group may have added to the social tension between the pagans and Christians in the city. According to Frend, since the orthodox stressed the outward confession of the name of Jesus, and by their refusal to accept the civic gods of the Roman society, they likely invited the persecutions which the Gnostics were successful at avoiding. Frend's theory is intriguing, but speculative at best. There seems to be little evidence to determine whether the Gnostics had any influence on the events of 177. Only orthodox Christians suffered in their trials, and *The Gallican Letter* does not mention any activity or influence of the Gnostics in the city. Still, *The Gallican Letter* reveals that the pagans living in the city were disgruntled by the "new and strange religion" that the Christians had introduced to the area. Frend comments that this remark might seem strange considering that Romans would have almost certainly known of Christianity long before this time. However, it may be that the Romanized natives of Gaul had only recently encountered Christianity for the first time through the young churches in Lyon and Vienne.

bringing the Christians before the Roman authorities. The crimes of atheism, incest, and cannibalism were used as the initial charges against the Christians in Lugdunum. As the interrogations progress, the charges of criminal behavior are either ignored or dropped entirely, and the focus of the trial shifts to the crime of Christianity. Though economic, agricultural, or societal factors may have been at work, the true motivation of the mob is explicitly stated as the desire to vindicate the gods. Not surprisingly, the ordeal follows the general pattern outlined by Keresztes, and it appears the situation in Lugdunum was generally indicative of the hostility Christianity faced throughout the Empire. If this latter statement holds true, bears particular significance for criticism of the *trinqui* theory.

### **Links between the *Trinqui* and the Christians**

At its core, the *trinqui* theory rests on a circumstantial argument based on the similarities between the *trinqui* and the martyrs of Lyon. According to Croteau, there are at least five critical pieces of evidence linking the two groups: 1) the time and place of Lugdunum in 177 correspond to both *The Gallican Letter* and the *senatus consultum*,<sup>189</sup> 2) the Christians are killed at the annual Festival of *Tres-Galliae*, 3) they are substituted as gladiators (like the *trinqui*) in a public contest in the amphitheater, 4), they are sacrifice in a ritual manner (like the *trinqui*), and 5) their heads are cut off and put on display (like the *trinqui*).<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> As noted in the introduction, this piece is not greatly disputed, not is it controversial. Barnes provides a few objections to the date of the *senatus consultum* based on a disputed date for Eusebius' account: AD 177, 167, or possibly 175. Although he accepts the date of 177, he remains dubious about the *trinqui* theory's relationship to the massacre: "The theory simply assumes a date which has been challenged above. There need, in fact, be no connection at all between the outbreak of persecution and the *senatus consultum*. But if there is, the connection is surely that the pogrom was partly the result of the shortage of gladiators which the *senatus consultum* set out to alleviate. Hence, no temporal relationship between the two can be established." Barnes, "Pre-Decian Acta Martyrdom," 518-519.

<sup>190</sup> Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius," 86-92. Ironically, Croteau admits to the circumstantial nature of the argument, but she maintains its plausibility.

In order to substantiate her claims, Croteau catalogues the references to “combat” and “sacrifice” language as well as references to the amphitheater and public games.<sup>191</sup> As expected, *The Gallican Letter* contains several allusions to contests<sup>192</sup> in which the Christians engage as noble athletes.<sup>193</sup> Having prepared and trained, they endure against their opponents,<sup>194</sup> fighting against the beasts,<sup>195</sup> in the amphitheater,<sup>196</sup> until they win a victor’s crown.<sup>197</sup> The martyrs are made a spectacle to the pagan mob,<sup>198</sup> and a finally sacrificed in the end<sup>199</sup> with the heads of the victims being displayed in public.<sup>200</sup>

Croteau believes the use of combat and sacrifice language lends support to the *trinqui* theory, as though such language strongly suggests a connection to the practice of human sacrifice and the use of *trinqui* in gladiatorial entertainment. In fact, Croteau makes an important (though unstated) assumption from the literary evidence—namely, that the use of combat and sacrifice language is unique to this martyrdom account and points to a practice not commonly performed

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<sup>191</sup> Croteau, “Marcus Aurelius,” 129-131.

<sup>192</sup> *HE*, 5.1.11 (ἀγωνος μεγαλου); 5.1.36: (ἀγωνα); 5.1.40 (ἀγῶνος); 5.1.41 (ἀγῶνι); 5.1.42 (Ἀγῶνι, ἀγῶνος).

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.17 (γενναῖον ἀγωνιστήν); 5.1.18 (ἀγωνιστρια ἀγωνιωσις); 5.1.19 (γενναῖος ἀθλητής); 5.1.36 (γενναῖος ἀθλητάς); 5.1.41 (ἀγωνιζομένοις); 5.1.42 (Μέγαν καὶ ἀκαταγώνιστον ἀθλητὴν Χριστὸν); 5.1.43 (ἀγωνιστής); 5.1.53 (μονομαχίῶν).

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.54 (ὑπομεινάς); 5.1.6 (καταργηθέντων); 5.1.23 (καταργῶν τὸν ἀντικείμενον); 5.1.5, 36, 42.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.37 (τὸ δῆμόσιον καὶ εἰς κοινὴν τῶν ἐθνῶν τῆς ἀπανθρωπίας θέαμα ἐπίηδες τῆς τῶν θηριομαχίῶν ἡμετέρουσ διδομένης—“to the public and to a common exhibition of the inhumanity of the people, for the day of fighting the beasts was especially appointed for them”).

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.38, 51 (ἀμφιθεάτρον); 5.1.44 (ἀμφιθεάτρον).

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.36; (στέφανον); 5.1.38 (στεφάνου); 5.1.42 (στεψαμένη στέφανον).

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.40 (διὰ τῆς ἡμέρας ἐκείνης ἀντὶ πάσης τῆς ἐν τοῖς μονομαχίας ποικιλίας αὐτοὶ θέαμα γενόμενοι τῷ κόσμῳ—“having been made a spectacle to the world throughout that day as a substitute for all the variations of single combats”); 5.1.47 (θεατρίζων τοὺς μακαριοὺς καὶ ἐμπομπέων—“making a show and parade of the blessed”).

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.40 (τούσχατον ἐτύθησαν); 5.1.56 (ἐτύθη καὶ αὐτή).

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.59 (καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν τὰς κεφαλὰς σὺν τοῖς ἀποτμήμασιν—“and the heads of the rest with their trunks”).

in typical Roman festivities or Christians martyrdom. Unfortunately for the *trinqui* theory, the opposite is true.

The following segment will show that every element, which is necessary to substantiate the *trinqui* theory, occurs in multiple martyrdom accounts. In addition, there are many other elements of Roman punishment which *The Gallican Letter* holds in common with other martyr accounts as well as secular accounts of criminal execution. By implication, the events at Lugdunum were not atypical of Christian persecution nor do they suggest that Christians were made victims of religious rites uniquely limited to Gaul. On the contrary, the events at Lugdunum correspond to Christian persecution occurring in various Roman provinces before, during, and after the reign of Marcus Aurelius.

### **Roman Elements in Martyrdom**

#### The Use of Gladiators and the Amphitheater

The substitution of Christians for gladiatorial entertainment is a key feature of *The Gallican Letter* as narrative focuses on the various ordeals endured by a select handful of the Christian victims. The amphitheater played a central role in the annual festival and in the local entertainment, and it also serves as an important interpretive piece for the *trinqui* and the Christians. According to *Aes Italicense*, the *trinqui* were to be purchased from the governor by the imperial priests and used for entertainment in the amphitheater. According to *The Gallican Letter*, a handful of Christians are used as gladiatorial entertainment during the annual festival. Insofar as the Christians were used in the same manner as the *trinqui*, the theory remains plausible. However, the equation of the *trinqui* and the Christians poses two problems almost immediately.

First, line 58 of *Aes Italicense* reveals that the *trinqui* (*damnati*) were to be obtained from the imperial procurator at the price of six gold pieces per victim. However, *The Gallican Letter* gives no indication that the procurator sold any of the Christians to the priests.<sup>201</sup> In contrast, the governor remains in complete control during the entire ordeal. The imprisonments, the tortures, the exposure to beasts, and the executions are all conducted by his decree. It is unlikely that the author of *The Gallican Letter* could overlook such an important element as the selling of Christians to the *Concilium Galliarum*.

Second, *The Gallican Letter* names only six individuals who were taken into the amphitheater: Matturus, Sanctus, Blandina, Attalus, Alexander, and Ponticus. The rest of the martyrs (forty-two in total) are tortured elsewhere (outside of the amphitheater), beheaded (because of Roman citizenship) or killed in prison. Furthermore, those taken into the amphitheater are not used as gladiators in the traditional sense (as the *trinqui* were intended to be used). The *trinqui* was meant to be a substitute fighter for more expensive gladiators; the Christians are not made into fighters.

Matturus and Sanctus endured the whole gamut of tortures contrived by the pagans: “They ran the gauntlet of whips (according to the local custom), the mauling of animals, and anything else that the mad mob from different places shouted for and demanded.”<sup>202</sup> Blandina was hung from a post and exposed to beasts, but after the animals refused to touch her, she was taken back into the prison. Attalus is led around the amphitheater behind a sign which read, “This is Attalus, the Christian.” When the governor discovers he is a Roman citizen he is

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<sup>201</sup> Michael Carter, “Gladiatorial Ranking and the ‘SC de Pretiis Gladiatorum Minuendis’ (CIL II 6278 = ILS 5163),” *Phoenix*, 57:1/2 (Spring-Summer, 2003): 87. See also Barnes, “Pre-Decian,” 519. Barnes notes, “Unfortunately, for these theorists, The Gallican Letter of the Gallic churches depicts the Christians as being executed by the governor alone (*HE* 5.1.8, 9, 10, 14, 17, 21, 31, 44, 46/7, 50, 57) and does not so much as mention the priests of the imperial cult.”

<sup>202</sup> Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 75.

returned to prison to await the decision of the emperor. Attulus is led back into the arena, along with Alexander, and subjected to more tortures. Blandina is returned to the arena with Ponticus (a young boy) where both are tortured and thrown to the beasts.<sup>203</sup> *The Gallican Letter* nowhere describes the martyrs behaving as “fighters” in the literal sense (like the *trinqui*).

Also, the use of criminals in the amphitheater as a spectacle was not unique to Gaul, and this element of *The Gallican Letter* suggests a unique and distinct Roman influence in the martyrdoms. The implication from this fact is subtle, yet important. The presentation of spectacles was itself a symbol of Romanization. Although the violence of Roman spectacles was more acceptable in the provinces of the northwest (e.g. Gaul) than in the east, the amphitheater, wherever it was built, “symbolized Roman power.”<sup>204</sup>

The “spectacle” language has specific connotations to Roman imperialism, particularly as it stood in relation to the intolerance shown toward the Christian church. Rome frequently used condemned criminals in spectacles games, and it frequently did so in increasingly spectacular ways. Much like the punishment *The Gallican Letter* describes for Blandina and her companions, exposure to beast (*damnati ad bestias*) was among the most common forms of torture and execution. The execution of criminals became “part of the standard *munera*” and serve to reassure the populace of Roman monopoly on force against those who violated societal norms.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> *HE*, 5.1.37-44, 50-56.

<sup>204</sup> Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, 323, 339. The synthesis of sport and spectacle, from athletic competitions to beast combat, especially in association with the ecumenical emperor cult, had synergy.” By this Kyle suggests that the proliferation and promotion of gladiatorial spectacles had an economic as well as political motivation. The games provided a common place in which rich and poor, citizen and non-citizen, elite and masses could benefit from the imperial entertainment.

<sup>205</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 325, 328. Kyle notes that since *damnati ad bestias* represented the cruelest form of punishment, beasts were commonly used as punishment for slaves, foreign enemies, or freedmen guilty of heinous crimes. They were far more common than gladiator-on-gladiator contests.

Punishment of the Christians was not unique, nor was it the most prominent or recurrent element in spectacles. However, reluctantly, we should see the persecution of Christians in the light of the Romans' conviction that their success depended on observance of proper rituals and respect for their gods.<sup>206</sup>

### Combat Language in *The Gallican Letter*

Special attention should also be given to the use of combat language in other martyrdom accounts. *The Gallican Letter* stands as just one example in a long line of Christian martyrdom spanning three centuries. The descriptions of the trial, tortures, and killings share similar (if not identical) characteristics with the genre of martyr literature composed during the second and third century. The similarities in language and allusions, specifically to contest (*ἀγων*) and sacrifice (*θυσία*) language, suggests the early church understood these events in the context of spiritual struggle primarily against Satan, the enemy of the church, and secondly against the world power of the Roman Empire.

The author of *The Gallic Letter* portrays the trials and tortures as a cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan and the martyrs bodies serve as the battlefield. The primary villain in the drama is not the angry mob, but Evil One. The Devil sets out to “prepare and train” (*πρόγυμνάζων*) the pagans for the contest.<sup>207</sup> The governor is described as being possessed by Satan himself, as were the guards and prisoners.<sup>208</sup> The actions of the governor are directed by Satan as he attempts to lead the martyrs into apostasy. The martyrs “overcome” the tortures of the Devil (*καταργηθέντων*).<sup>209</sup> “The role of Satan in

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<sup>206</sup> Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, 329.

<sup>207</sup> *HE*, 5.1.5.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.27.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.6.

the account is both general in that he orchestrates the torture and execution of Christians, and personal, in that he is embroiled in individual struggles with martyrs.<sup>210</sup>

Concerning Ponthinus, “He too was dragged before the tribunal, exhausted as he was by age and illness and the infirmity of his body; but he still held on to life so that Christ might triumph in him.”<sup>211</sup> For Sanctus, his body is the locus of struggle between Satan and Christ, and his perseverance is interpreted as a conquest of Satan by a victorious Christ.<sup>212</sup> “The language of victory is most consistently connected to the defeat of Satan.”<sup>213</sup> Blandina’s victory over the wild animals, coupled with her “crucifixion-style” display, serves to exemplify Christian suffering and to illustrate the defeat of Satan: “thus for her victory in further contests, she would make irreversible the condemnation of the crooked serpent, and tiny, weak, and insignificant as she was, she would give inspiration to her brothers, for she had put on Christ, that might and invincible athlete, and had overcome the Adversary in many contests.”<sup>214</sup> Finally, this martyrdom is said to be “the greatest of all contests against the Demon...and Beast.”

Similar combat language appears in martyrdoms predating and postdating the massacre at Lugdunum. Ignatius (AD 117) is brought into the amphitheater at Rome and devoured by the beasts. In the martyrdom of Polycarp (AD 155), many Christians are exposed to the beasts.<sup>215</sup> A young man named Germanicus fights with the beast.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 114.

<sup>211</sup> *HE*, 5.129; Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 71.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.20-24.

<sup>213</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 114.

<sup>214</sup> *HE*, 5.1.42; Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 75.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.15.4.

Polycarp is taken into the amphitheater<sup>217</sup> and by his death attains a crown of immortality.<sup>218</sup> Carpus and Papyrus (during Aurelius' reign) are brought to the amphitheater and both are given the title "noble athlete" (ὡς γανναῖος ἀθλητής).<sup>219</sup>

The martyrdom most similar to *The Gallican Letter* is probably the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas (AD 203).<sup>220</sup> Here, the martyrs are scheduled to fight the beasts in the amphitheater at the military games on the occasion of the emperor's birthday.<sup>221</sup> Perpetua is rubbed down with oil as was customary "before a contest." She fights her "opponent" (an Egyptian, who is a symbol of the Devil) in the arena.<sup>222</sup> The editor refers to trials and games as a "spectacle" (*spectaculi*).<sup>223</sup> The martyrs "day of victory" dawns as they march to the amphitheater with joy and peace, while Felicitas is described as having morphed from mother to gladiator (*retiarium*).<sup>224</sup> Perpetua and Felicitas "fight" a red heifer, and the Devil is credited with preparing this event.<sup>225</sup>

Moreover, the accounts of Christian martyrdom seem to be deeply rooted in the ideas expressed in Jewish apocryphal accounts of martyrdom, particularly in 4 Maccabees. Moreover,

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 4.15.5.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 4.15.16.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 4.15.40.

<sup>219</sup> Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 27.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 106. The Latin text is derived from the critical edition of C.J.M.J van Beek, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetua et Felicitatis* (Nijmegen, 1936), 1-62.

<sup>221</sup> Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 115.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 129.

the athletic and military imagery may also be drawn from the Maccabean accounts and other New Testament figures.<sup>226</sup> They martyrs are “assimilated to a cast of scriptural actors.”<sup>227</sup> The martyrs are likened to Stephen in their plea for God’s forgiveness on behalf of their pagan persecutors.<sup>228</sup> *The Gallican Letter* compares Vetius Apagathus to Zachary, the father of John the Baptist: blameless, upright, caring for his neighbor, and fervent in spirit.<sup>229</sup> *The Gallican Letter* also contains several striking parallels to 4 Maccabees:<sup>230</sup> the victims are engaged in a contest (*ἀγων*) and are described as athletes,<sup>231</sup> they regain strength amidst tortures,<sup>232</sup> they endure suffering,<sup>233</sup> they exhaust their executioners,<sup>234</sup> they seal their witness by death,<sup>235</sup> and they gain a crown of immortality.<sup>236</sup>

Moss links the bishop Ponthinus with the elderly Maccabean Eleazar and Blandina with the mother of 2 Maccabees. Ponthinus, like Eleazar, is invigorated in spite of the persecution.<sup>237</sup> This exemplifies the theme of *The Gallican Letter* that the victims are imbued with supernatural

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<sup>226</sup> *The Gallican Letter* makes several allusions to New Testament epistles. “Fought the good fight” (2 Timothy 4:7), “Poured out as a drink offering” (2 Timothy 4:7), “a crown of righteousness” (2 Timothy 4:7), “living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1), “sweet savor of Christ” (2 Cor. 2:15), Christ as “a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2), “A crown of life” for perseverance in trial (James 1:12; Revelation 2:10; 3:11).

<sup>227</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 114.

<sup>228</sup> *HE*, 5.2.5.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.1.9.

<sup>230</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 20.

<sup>231</sup> 4 Maccabees 6.11, 16.

<sup>232</sup> 4 Macc. 7:13; *HE*, 5.1.19, 24.

<sup>233</sup> 4 Macc. 6:10; *HE*, 5.1.19, 24, 56.

<sup>234</sup> 4 Macc. 6:4; 7:4; 11:26; *HE*, 5.1.18, 24.

<sup>235</sup> 4 Macc. 7:15; *HE*, 5.2.3.

<sup>236</sup> 4 Macc. 17:15; 12:4; *HE*, 5.1.36.

<sup>237</sup> *HE*, 5.1.29.

power and energy as they endure their persecutors.<sup>238</sup> Just as the mother of 2 Maccabees endures the killing of her children before being put to death, Blandina endures the death of Ponticus before dying herself.<sup>239</sup> Like the martyrs of the Maccabean accounts, these martyrs are reinforced by the examples of the elder (Ponthinus) and the mother (Blandina).<sup>240</sup>

Considering the preponderance of evidence from Jewish and Christian sources, it is fair to assume that the combat language in *The Gallican Letter*, has greater reference to the spiritual struggle against God's enemy, the Devil, than it does to actual gladiatorial combat. The Christians do not engage in gladiatorial combat in the typical sense (as one should expect from the *trinqu*). Rather, their "combat" is a battle of perseverance against torture, exposure to beasts, and fire. They are described as gladiators and athletes who compete against the forces of the Evil One. It would be highly misleading to infer from these allusions of "combat" that the Christians were used as substitute fighters like the *trinqu*.

#### Decapitation and the Display of Heads

After the Christians are murdered, the heads and bodies of the victims are collected and placed under Roman guard for six days. During this time, surviving members of the church make several attempts to retrieve the bodies but are unsuccessful. The pagans mock the corpses and attribute their demise to the vengeance of the gods, and after six days, the remains are cremated

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<sup>238</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 111.

<sup>239</sup> *HE*, 5.1.41-42, 55-56.

<sup>240</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 112.

and dumped in the Rhone River. *The Gallican Letter* states that the pagans did this in hopes of denying the Christians any hope of the resurrection.<sup>241</sup>

Concerning decapitation and the displaying of the bodies, proponents of the *trinqui* theory point to the desecration of the martyrs and the subsequent displaying of the heads and bodies as a possible link to the *trinqui* (with reference to the ancient Celtic practice of head-displays).<sup>242</sup> The link between the supposed *trinqui* of the *senatus consultum*, an ancient Celtic ritual, and these martyrs is almost immediately assumed. As with the other elements of the *trinqui* theory, several problems arise from this as well.

First, there is the obvious problem of the impetus for the decapitations. *The Gallican Letter* explicitly states that by imperial decree all those possessing Roman citizenship were to be beheaded.<sup>243</sup> The rest of the martyrs were condemned to the beasts (whether inside or outside the arena). There is no indication that the decapitation occurred for any other reason. Herein persists a major discrepancy for the *trinqui* theory: those who are beheaded are distinct and separate from those who are used in the amphitheater. According to the *trinqui* theory, the *trinqui* are both used as gladiators and then beheaded. In *The Gallican Letter*, no Christian endures both the arena and a beheading. Based simply on this discrete difference, the Christians cannot be equated with the *trinqui*. Moreover, decapitation was a common form of execution for Christians who possessed Roman citizenship. Justin and his companions (AD 165) are beheaded as Roman citizens.<sup>244</sup> The

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<sup>241</sup> *HE*, 5.1.63. Although public mockery of deposed criminals was a common practice in Roman culture, the pagans' ridicule in this instance was specifically occasioned by Christian teaching on the resurrection of the body.

<sup>242</sup> Croteau, "Marcus," 91; Piganiol, "Les Trinci Gaulois," 283-290.

<sup>243</sup> *HE* 5.1.47. Attulus is the only exception. He was led back into the amphitheater after the governor gave in to the pressure from the mob.

<sup>244</sup> Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 47. From Greek text *Recensio A*, 1.5.

twelve Scillitan martyrs (AD 180) are beheaded (presumably as Roman citizens).<sup>245</sup> Apollonius (AD 185) is condemned to death by beheading.<sup>246</sup> Basilides (circa AD 206) is also beheaded.<sup>247</sup>

Nevertheless, there is another glaring problem with the *trinqui* theory. This line of argumentation problematically (albeit conveniently) overlooks the Roman custom of decapitation and “head-displaying” throughout its history. For the Romans, corpse abuse and the denial of burial were two common methods in its treatment of public enemies. Kyle provides several examples of heads belonging to prominent figures that were displayed above the Rostra in Rome (e.g. Cicero and P. Sulpicius) or abused and put on display in the public forum.<sup>248</sup> For Rome, decapitation and corpse abuse symbolized physical and spiritual defeat of its enemies: “displays and disposal of heads not only symbolized the defeat of an enemy in this world; the distancing of the head from the corpse meant that there could be no proper burial or peace in the afterlife.”<sup>249</sup>

#### Disposal by Cremation and Water

In addition, cremation was a preferred means of human disposal for the Romans. It must be noted that a few historians have attempted to link the cremation of the bodies with an ancient Gallic custom.<sup>250</sup> After all, cremation was a native custom in Gaul and continued to be so until

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 87-89. Text derived from Text from J. Armitage Robinson, *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* (Text and Studies 1:2, Appendix, Cambridge, 1891).

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>248</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 220; Livy, 2.19.1.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>250</sup> Hertwig-Jasck, “Studies,” 38; Amable Audin, *Essai Sur la Topographie de Lugdunum* (Lyon: Revue de Géographie de Lyon, 1964), 159; Fishwick, “The Federal Cult of the Three Gauls,” In *Les Martyrs de Lyon (177)*, Edited by Jean Rougé and Robert Turcan (Paris: Éditions du C.N.R.S., 1978), 35. The annual gathering at Lugdunum climaxed with the games which, on occasion, would oratorical contests of Greek and Latin, in which the

the third of fourth centuries.<sup>251</sup> Nevertheless, cremation was also the predominant burial practice of Romans from the early republic to the first century AD. Not until the second century, during the reign of Hadrian, did inhumation begin to supplant cremation as the preferred means of burial.<sup>252</sup>

Cremations were also common in Christian martyrdoms during this period. Polycarp is burnt alive.<sup>253</sup> Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice are consumed by fire.<sup>254</sup> In the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, three Christians (Jucundus, Saturninus, and Artaxius) are burnt alive.<sup>255</sup> Pionus is burnt alive along with Metrodorus.<sup>256</sup> The act of cremation in *The Gallican Letter* represents another religio-cultural conflict between Romans and Christians—the belief in a bodily resurrection: “and so some of the bodies of the martyrs...were then burned and reduced to ashes...they did this as though they could overcome God and deprive the martyrs of their restoration, in order, as they themselves said, “that they might have no hope of the resurrection in which they put their trust.”<sup>257</sup>

Worse yet for the *trinqui* theory, the denial of burial and the disposal by water further suggest Roman custom of shaming their enemies. As a final act of desecration, the bodies of

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losers were thrown in the Rhone River. Audin was the first to posit that this punishment was a mimicry of a local Celtic burial rite which was replicated in 177. Herein lies a strong indicator that, perhaps, certain elements of Celtic culture were still at play, but the connection between this custom and religious rites is questionable.

<sup>251</sup> Arthur Darby Nock, “Cremation and Burial in the Roman Empire,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 25:4 (October 1932): 325.

<sup>252</sup> Jocelyn Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1971), 39-40.

<sup>253</sup> *HE*, 4.15.37.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.42-47.

<sup>255</sup> Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 121.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 83. *HE*, 5.1.62.

criminals (*damnati, noxii*) were frequently disposed of in ways that amount to pagan damnation—denying them burial either by dumping them into the Tiber River or in a pit.<sup>258</sup> Early in the Empire, after executions in spectacle games, criminals’ bodies were frequently exposed for as long as three days on the *Scalae Germoniae*, and were left there for “public exposure and disgrace.” Among other severe crimes, imperial treason earned criminals the denial of burial and disposal in the Tiber. “The use of the Tiber to remove waste and restless spirits beyond the *promerium* was an appropriate final phase in the damnation of *noxii* to the arena, which usually entailed denial of decent burial in addition to corporal abuse and death.”<sup>259</sup> Kyle also notes that “those who had become *hostes*, who threatened or insulted the people, were abused, killed, and disposed of via the Tiber without proper burial.”<sup>260</sup>

It is more than coincidental that such treatment parallels the desecration of the martyrs in Lugdunum, for such was customary for the Romans following spectacles involving the execution of criminals. The amphitheater in Lugdunum, like Rome, was located near a major river, the Rhone, and like Rome, Lugdunum often held its spectacles of death near this major body of water.<sup>261</sup> The motifs of angry mobs, mockery, corpse abuse, exposure to the elements, denial of

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<sup>258</sup> Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, 327; Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 213. Rome’s custom of dumping bodies into the Tiber had both religious and practical benefits. The running water of the river provided an easy means of removing the body from the area. The denial of proper burial also fostered concerns that the hostile spirits of the dead (though deserving of death) would trouble the living. The river providing a ritual by which the bodies could be disposed.

<sup>259</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 214.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 218-224. When recording the conspiracy against Tiberius in 133 BC, Plutarch notes that the Senate denied Gaius access to bury Tiberius’ body, and that afterward followers of Gracchus were killed and thrown into the Tiber. The same happens to Gaius and his followers in 121. Marius ordered the custom repeated upon Sulla’s supporters in 82, and Sulla confers the same favor upon Marius’s followers in the same year, except that Marius himself is cremated first and dumped in the Anio River. Tiberius is cremated by his soldiers while many spectators prayed for his body to be given a home with the damned in the Tiber. After being condemned by the senate as an enemy of the state, Commodus’s body is abused and thrown into the Tiber.

<sup>261</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 214; Audin, *Essai*, 159. Compare Kyle’s description of Rome’s topography to Audin’s description of Lyon.

burial, and disposal by water are “credible and characteristic” of Roman methods. Burial was denied even though friends tried to get their bodies by night, money, or supplication.

Whether Romans routinely denied burial to martyrs is uncertain, but early martyrdoms included Christian fears of such insults.<sup>262</sup> It was commonplace for Roman authorities to deny burial to the bodies of their Christian victims.<sup>263</sup> It would not have seemed out of place for the bodies of some Christians to be openly displayed, denied burial, or thrown into the river; nor were any of these methods exclusively reserved for Christian dissenters. Each of these elements can be found in the execution accounts of pagans and Christian alike (see above).<sup>264</sup>

Apparently, the bodies of Christians executed in normal fashion on the edge of town were not always simply handed over, and the bodies of Christians killed in the amphitheater suffered additional abuse... a public displaying of the corpse seems to have been customary, and concerns about Christian conceptions of the resurrection and the veneration of martyrs’ relics often lead to a second burning of the bodies.<sup>265</sup>

Whether by fire or beast, with water as the final act, the Romans were following typical modes of dealing with social misfits and perceived threats to its authority.<sup>266</sup> When one understands the Roman disdain for Christian ideas of the resurrection and Roman preference for dealing with undesirables in various inhumane fashions, is it any wonder that the bodies of Christians at Lugdunum were so cruelly desecrated?

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<sup>262</sup> Kayle, *Spectacles of Death*, 251.

<sup>263</sup> Polycarp’s body is placed under watch to prevent the Christians from burying it (*HE* 4.15.41) His body is “put out before everyone” and later cremated (*HE* 4.15.43).

<sup>264</sup> In 306 at Ceasarea, Apphianus and Agapius are thrown into the sea (*HE* 8.4). In 303 at Nicomedia, Christian imperial servants are bound and thrown in the sea (*HE* 8.6.6-8). Egyptian martyrs at Tyre are exposed to beast, killed by swords, and cast into the sea (*HE* 8.7.1-6).

<sup>265</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 247.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 252. The Passion of Theodotus details the martyrdom of seven Christian virgins who, after refusing to offer sacrifices, were drown in a lake and placed under guard to deny them burial. Another Christian named Valens had been dumped in the Halys River. According to another tradition, in 303 Diocletian executes a Christian tribune named Sebastian by ordering him beaten to death and his body dumped in a canal.

Considering the well-attested parallels between the events in Lugdunum and Roman customs, what then are the implications then for the *trinqui* theory? With each historical parallel, the *trinqui* theory appears less and less plausible as a suitable explanation. *The Gallican Letter* reveals that the persecutors are Roman in culture, custom, and practice. From the initial outbreak to the final desecration of the bodies, the author depicts a conflict between the church and the powers of the Satan who backs on the imperial order of the Roman Empire. The trials, spectacles, tortures, decapitations, cremations, and disposal by water all smack of Roman habits for dealing with their undesirables.

In addition, the seditious whims of the governor, the demand of the Christians to sacrifice to the idols, the trumped up charges, and the anger of the mob all parallel Christian martyrdom accounts from this time period. Except for the excruciatingly detailed descriptions of the tortures forced upon a few of the Christians, *The Gallican Letter* is strikingly similar to many other martyrdom accounts. There is no need nor is there any warrant in attempting to find a religio-economic conspiracy on the part of the Celtic natives. Just as the religious consciousness of Gaul had been effectively Romanized by the second century, so too, the social and legal consciousness was essentially morphed into Roman norms.

## CONCLUSION

The debate over the identity of the persecutors in Lugdunum in 177 has particular relevance to early Christian and Roman studies. Shedding light on this particular event in history potentially offers greater understanding of the relationship of Christian martyrdom in the western Roman provinces and the Empire at large. It also helps to answer the question of how early Christian studies should view the relationship of the Church to Marcus Aurelius. Do the events in Lugdunum suggest anything about Marcus Aurelius' attitude toward Christianity? In the latter half of the twentieth century, historians have questioned whether Marcus Aurelius should be viewed as a persecutor of Christians or simply an emperor following the example set forth by Trajan. Does the *trinqui* theory offer evidence in support of this latter view?

This thesis has argued that the *trinqui* theory endeavors to prove what historians can only speculate, and in light of alternative explanations, it should be rejected or seriously modified to rule out the influence of the Celtic religious rite of human sacrifice. The nature of the revitalization in Celtic religion does not lend support to the *trinqui* theory, but rather undermines it. The thesis has also asserted that critical elements in the proceedings of the martyrdom are actually characteristic of Roman methods of torture and execution in Christian martyrdoms occurring during the second and early third century.

Chapter 1 examined the historical research concerning the theory of the *trinqui* and its strongest supporting evidence with the intent of discovering the social, economic, political and religious causes behind the martyrdom. The theory holds that the Christians, after being caught between the rising religious and social tensions at the local level and pressing economic and military matters on the imperial level, were the unfortunate victims of a revived ancient Celtic ritual of human sacrifice. The chapter evaluated the four major components of the *trinqui*

theory—political concession made to the Gallican provinces; the use of “sacrifice” and “combat” language in The Gallican Letter; the revitalization of Celtic religion, corpse abuse and beheading. The first of these elements is of no real significance if the latter three are shown to have no direct connection to the *trinqui* of *Aes Italicense* and *Marmur Sardinium*.

Chapter 2 critiqued the *trinqui* theory’s dependence on a second-century renaissance of Celtic religion. It argued that the second-century renaissance of Celtic culture in Gaul would not have included a return to ancient forms of Celtic religion, especially the druidic practices of human sacrifice. Historical and archaeological evidence indicates that the impact of Romanization left an indelible mark on the religious consciousness of the people living in the Gallic provinces. After the first century, Celtic religious rites adopted Roman forms and interpretations, and the Celtic gods were assimilated into Roman modes of worship. Based on these findings, the link between the martyrdoms of 177 and an ancient Celtic rite of human sacrifice is practically untenable.

Chapter 3 offered a final critique of the *trinqui* theory based on a comparative study of Roman execution and Christian martyrdom during the second and early third centuries. It posited that the events in Lugdunum in 177 resemble a common pattern found in other martyrdom accounts. The similar elements included 1) a refusal to sacrifice to the idols, 2) “combat” in the amphitheater, 3) varied tortures, 4) exposure to beasts, 5) beheadings, and 6) corpse abuse. From these similarities, it seems clear that the events in Lugdunum were generally representative of a wider trend throughout the Empire, and that the *trinqui* theory inappropriately interprets these elements as part of an ancient Celtic ritual.<sup>267</sup> If the *trinqui* theory were correct, one should

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<sup>267</sup> Given the tendency of agrarian societies to associate cult worship with agricultural festivities, and the general Roman attitude of assimilation and accommodation of new religions, certain aspects of the massacre may reflect an abiding substratum of Celtic cult worship. Nevertheless, *trinqui* theory supporters seem to exaggerate such elements to the neglect of the more obvious Roman aspects. The possibility of indirect minimal Celtic influence is

expect to see a marked difference in the events in Lugdunum compared to the accounts on other martyrdoms. Although the brutality of the torture, execution, and desecration of the bodies in the martyrdom at Lugdunum were especially heinous, these tactics were not uncommon among the manner of punishments administered upon convicted criminals by the Romans. Hence, the hypothesis that these tactics modeled (perhaps coincidentally) an ancient Gallo-Celtic religious rite is extremely unlikely.

As noted in the introduction, this issue is particularly relevant to the historical credibility of Eusebius' account. A rebuttal of the *trinqui* theory helps to substantiate the accuracy of Eusebius' historical assessment that Christian martyrdom was widespread during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Near the end of *The Gallican Letter*, Eusebius inserts a parenthetical comment surmising that the events in Lugdunum are representative of what took place in the other provinces during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.<sup>268</sup> Oliver and Palmer indirectly challenged Eusebius' assessment. By suggesting that Marcus Aurelius never intended for such abuses to occur and that the events in Lugdunum were limited in scope and hopefully mitigated soon thereafter.<sup>269</sup> Croteau devotes her dissertation to exonerating Marcus Aurelius of any culpability. The two divergent views on Marcus Aurelius appear to be mutually exclusive, but are they, and which is correct? By offering a rebuttal to the *trinqui* theory, the thesis hopes to lend support to Eusebius' conclusion. However, the question of Marcus' involvement and responsibility are still left up for discussion.

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not ruled out entirely this critique of the *trinqui* theory and such evidence in no way controverts it. However, as mentioned elsewhere, one can only speculate as to the nature and extent of such evidence in the face of overwhelmingly Roman characteristics.

<sup>268</sup> *HE* 5.2.1.

<sup>269</sup> Oliver and Palmer, "Minutes," 326.

Some of the confusion surrounding the events at Lugdunum arises from Eusebius' comments in the opening of Book 5 where he claims the events at Lugdunum took place under the reign of Antoninus Verus, whereas later on he notes that Marcus Aurelius, the bother of Antoninus, was the emperor who kept Christians in the army and protected the faith.<sup>270</sup> Croteau presumes from this that Eusebius understood Lucius Verus to be Caesar over Marcus, and so the emperor mentioned in *The Gallican Letter* was probably then Lucius Verus. From the description of *The Gallican Letter*, the cause of the outbreak was a local uprising and the emperor played no direct role in the persecutions except in his edict to the provincial governor. It has already been noted that the instructions in the edict generally followed the policies of previous emperors—those who recanted were set free, Roman citizens were beheaded, and the rest killed in various ways. Marcus Aurelius neither reversed the policies of his predecessors nor made specific decrees that Christians be tried for anything other than legal infractions.<sup>271</sup>

The outbreak of persecution during this time could be explained by other political, religious, or economic factors. A critique of the *trinqui* theory need not rule out that persecution likely arose from factors such as the widespread famine and plague that had persisted for ten years, Marcus' imperial edict of 176 ordering all citizens to offer sacrifices, or the possible presence of Montanism in Lugdunum around 177.<sup>272</sup> As noted earlier, Melito's *Apology* refers to *καινὰ δόγματα* which local governors exploited in order to bring Christians to trial. Whether these new decrees were local or imperial is a matter of debate, and so the evidence directly linking the emperor to the persecutions is not definitive. Nevertheless, Eusebius' remark near the end of *The Gallican Letter* should give pause to those would seek to exonerate Marcus Aurelius

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<sup>270</sup> Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius," 103. *HE* 5.5.1, 6.

<sup>271</sup> Croteau, "Marcus," 113; Frend, *Martyrdom*, 8.

<sup>272</sup> For evidence on this view, see Croteau, "Marcus Aurelius," 114; Frend, *Martyrdom*, 17.

of any culpability or to those who assume the outbreak at Lugdunum was an isolated incident. Similar persecutions likely occurred in other regions of the Empire, such as Asia and Phrygia.

There are several pieces of evidence linking the churches in Lyon and Vienne to the churches in Phrygia and Asia. The first and most obvious is the title of *The Gallican Letter*, addressed to the churches in both Phrygia and Asia. Yet, *The Gallican Letter* is not only addressed to these churches, but also to “brethren who had the same faith and hope of redemption.”<sup>273</sup> The names of the martyrs also suggest an ethnic connection to the church in Phrygia and Asia. It is not improbable that the churches in Gaul originated through migrant missionary efforts from Asia. All of the leaders of the church and half of the 48 known martyrs had names of Asiatic origin.<sup>274</sup> Ponthinus, the elder, appears to be an immigrant, and his disciple, Irenaeus, was from Smyrna.<sup>275</sup> Attalus is described as a Roman citizen from Pergamum.<sup>276</sup> Vettius Apagathus suggest the name of a Greek or Asiatic freedman, and Biblis, Elpis, Ponticus, and Alcibiades are names which indicate Asiatic origin.<sup>277</sup>

The contents, recipients, and occasion of *The Gallican Letter* indicate this kind of renewed persecution was taking place throughout the Empire and not simply in Lugdunum. Furthermore, the recipients in Asia would no doubt recognize the distinctly Roman style of torture and execution, since similar methods were used in previous martyrdoms. In addition, the explicit language of *The Gallican Letter* concerning the accusations by which the Christians were brought to trial (impiety, incest, cannibalism, etc.) portends similar trials which were likely

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<sup>273</sup> *HE* 5.1.3.

<sup>274</sup> Fend, *Martyrdom*, 3.

<sup>275</sup> *HE* 5.20.4.

<sup>276</sup> *HE* 5.1.17.

<sup>277</sup> Fend, *Martyrdom*, 3.

to occur in other regions of the Empire and that those Christians should not be shocked when they did.

Perhaps *The Gallican Letter* was originally composed as an exhortatory epistle, designed to encourage perseverance to Christians experiencing similar persecutions. The examples of the martyrs in *The Gallican Letter* invoke incredible emotional and theological motifs intended to move the reader to deeper devotion and a willingness to enter into martyrdom. Less likely is the theory that the events in Lugdunum reflect a return to archaic ritualistic sacrifice of Gallo-Celtic religion (an activity that was not only deemed immoral by Roman society, but also illegal).

There are no direct references within *The Gallican Letter* that would communicate to its recipients that ancient Celtic rituals were used or that the priests of the imperial cult purchased the Christians from the governor. Instead, *The Gallican Letter* reveals just the opposite, that the events mirrored previous persecutions: the initial local outbreak; dubious criminal charges, the interrogations by the Roman governor; the demand to sacrifice; multi-faceted tortures; the use of the amphitheater; exposure to beasts; beheadings; corpse abuse; denial of burial; cremation; and disposal by water.

In light of the striking similarities between *The Gallican Letter* and methods of Roman persecution and the absence of evidence for a revitalization of Celtic religious practice (especially of human sacrifice), the most probable conclusion to is that the *trinqui* theory is highly speculative and seems to exaggerate the evidence for a Celtic influence on the trials. While appearing to makes sense of a seemingly senseless outbreak of violence, the *trinqui* theory attempts to string together several pieces of circumstantial evidence in hopes of offering a coherent and historically consistent explanation for the martyrdom. However, the theory's reliance on circumstantial evidence turns out to be its greatest weakness, for it lacks the

necessary corroboration from the historical, literary, and archaeological evidence in order to substantiate its most critical premises. Although the traditional explanation does not reveal the initial impetus for the mob's violent outbreak (as the *trinqui* theory attempts to do), it demonstrates a correlation with the typical proceedings of Christian martyrdom occurring during this time period and so should be the preferred interpretation of the martyrdom at Lugdunum.

Nevertheless, for a better understanding of this incredible event, further research is needed in at least a few areas. One such area is similarities in the religious settings of Asia and Phrygia—what role did cults (such as the cult Cybele) play? On the presence of the cult of Cybele in Lugdunum, Audin provides an extensive argument for its dominance in the city, linking the cult with the municipal powers.<sup>278</sup> Turcan also surmises that these cults may have influenced the trials.<sup>279</sup> Hertwig-Jaksch, pointing out the similarities between Christians and Cybelism, gives several reasons for thinking the cult played a direct role in the persecution since it was the “natural enemy” of Christianity.<sup>280</sup> Perhaps there is some significance to *The Gallican Letter*'s goal in writing to Phrygia, the location of the cult's origin.

Secondly, research could also be performed on the source and scope of the *καινά δογματά* mentioned in Melito's Apology and the role they played in persecution. Were they decrees handed down by provincial governors, or by imperial policy? Marcus Aurelius' personal writings do not suggest a man with hostile intentions toward Christianity. His stoic tendencies notwithstanding, laws were ratified during his reign which enabled disgruntled members of the Empire to enact revenge upon their Christian counterpart. Although direct blame cannot be

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<sup>278</sup> Audin, *Lyon*, 148-80.

<sup>279</sup> Robert Turcan, “Les Religions Orientales a Lugdunum en 177,” *Les Martyrs de Lyon (177)*, Edited by Jean Rougé and Robert Turcan (Paris: Éditions du C.N.R.S., 1978).

<sup>280</sup> Hertwig-Jaksch, “Studies,” 38-39.

placed solely at the emperor's feet, he does bear some responsibility. New findings concerning the *καινά δογματά* could reveal where culpability should be placed.

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