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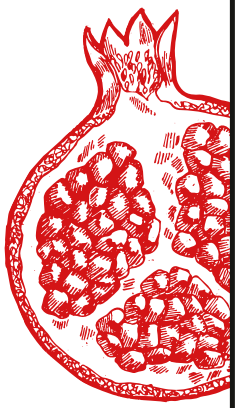

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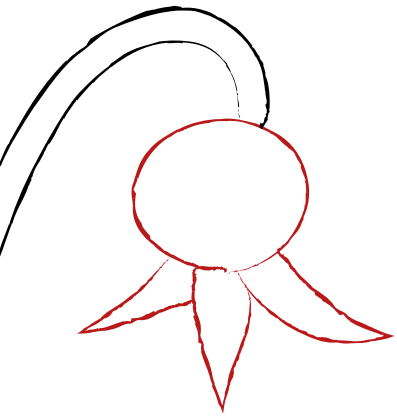
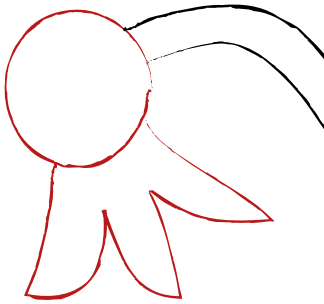


Thematic Issue: Global and Local Cultures in the Roman East



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LETTER FROM MARTYRS OF LYONS AND VIENNE AS A DIASPORA QUEST FOR AUTHENTICITY

Jarkko Vikman

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Keywords: early Christianity, diaspora, ethnic minority, Eusebius, martyrdom

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Abstract

This article argues that the *Letter from the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne* (Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* 5.1–4) should not only be treated as an early Christian martyrdom narrative, but also analyzed as a Greco-Roman minority text. Even though it concentrates on violent outbursts against a group of Jesus adherents and possesses graphic depictions of their suffering, its significance is not limited to intra-Christian discussions. It also displays experiences and needs from a colonized world full of competing diaspora realities. It can be read as a message home from an author living abroad. It emphasizes the genuine way of life of the diaspora group and uses it as a device in translocal negotiations. Paradoxically, many of these valuations of authenticity were also shared by the Roman authorities in Gaul as well as by the resistance that the Roman authorities had previously faced. According to Rey Chow's (1993) diaspora studies, this paradox colors all production of diaspora culture. This article enlightens this feature by comparing the text with two non-Christian sources: Tacitus's depiction of Gallic resistance fighter Mariccus (*Hist.* 2.61) and a letter that Syrian merchants sent to their hometown from Roman Puteoli (*OGI* 595).

Cette contribution explique que la *Lettre des martyrs de Lyons et de Vienne* (Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 5.1-4) ne doit pas être lue seulement comme un récit de martyre chrétien primitif, mais aussi être analysée comme un texte minoritaire gréco-romain. Même si le texte se concentre sur des explosions de violence à l'encontre d'un groupe d'adeptes de Jésus et sur la description graphique de leurs souffrances, sa signification ne se limite pas aux discussions intra-chrétiennes. Au contraire, le texte présente également les expériences et les besoins d'un monde colonisé empli de réalités diasporiques rivales. Il peut être lu comme le message d'un auteur vivant à l'étranger à l'intention de son lieu d'origine. Il souligne le mode de vie authentique du groupe de la diaspora et l'utilise comme un dispositif dans des négociations translocales. Paradoxalement, bon nombre de ces valeurs d'authenticité étaient également partagées par les autorités romaines en Gaule, ainsi que par des groupes de résistance à laquelle les autorités romaines avaient été confrontées auparavant. Selon les études de Rey Chow sur la diaspora (1993), ce paradoxe colore toutes les productions dans la culture de la diaspora. L'article met en avant cette caractéristique en comparant le texte avec deux sources non chrétiennes : La description par Tacite du résistant gaulois Mariccus (*Hist.* 2.61) et une lettre que des marchands syriens ont envoyée à leur ville d'origine depuis la ville romaine de Puteoli (*OGI* 595).

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LETTER FROM MARTYRS OF LYONS AND VIENNE AS A DIASPORA QUEST FOR AUTHENTICITY

Jarkko Vikman

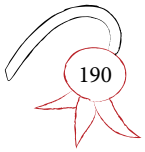
Introduction

What else can we learn from an early Christian martyr narrative, besides how to live and die as a Christian? I argue that the *Letter from the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne* (Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* 5.1–4) should not only be treated as an early Christian martyrdom narrative but also as one Greco-Roman minority text among others. Even though the text concentrates on violent outburst against a group of Jesus adherents and on graphic depictions of their sufferings, its significance is not limited to intra-Christian discussion of what it meant to act as good Christ-believer. Instead, the *Letter* also displays experiences and needs from a colonized world full of competing diaspora realities.[1] Eusebius

[1] I use the term "diaspora" as a wider indicator of an ethnic minority group living abroad and of the sociopolitical realities that are related to living as an ethnic

claims that the narrative had a twofold goal, namely, to interact with the inhabitants of the *Letter's* "native land" in Asia Minor and to alter the way prophetic movements from Asia Minor were appreciated in the capital of Rome. If we choose to believe Eusebius in this statement but remain critical of his views on the universal nature of Christian identity, the *Letter* can be read as a message to home from an author[2] living abroad that emphasizes the genuine way of living of the diaspora group and uses this way of life as a device in translocal negotiations.

I argue that the *Letter* wants to indicate how thoroughly a diaspora group of Asians and Phrygians living in Lyons and Vienne are following the honorable behavior of exemplary Asian individuals. Paradoxically, many of these valuations of honorific behavior were also shared by the Roman authorities in Gaul as well as by the resistance that these authorities had previously faced. This paradox can be analyzed as part of a diaspora rivalry for authenticity: the need to follow closely the "original" cultural system of a perceived native land and the tragedy that arises from the fact that no such pure cultures and identities exist. As Rey Chow (1993) in his research on contemporary Chinese diasporas has argued, this need for authenticity creates essentializing caricatures of stable ethnically divided cultures, which the ones living in the diaspora still must support in hopes of future success.



The *Letter*'s quest for an authentic minority way of life can be compared to the letter that Tyrian merchants sent to their native land from Puteoli (*OGI* 595). On the other hand, the impossibility of a genuine diaspora culture becomes apparent when we compare the *Letter* with Tacitus's description of the resistance of the Gallic hero Mariccus in *Hist.* 2.61. As in Tacitus, so too in the *Letter*: Roman ideals, the struggle of a subordinated minority, and stereotypical depictions of mindless

minority in an imperial context (Edwards 2007). It should thus not be understood as a term related only to the Jewish diaspora. This means that I also wish to leave open the question of how much the "Asians" of the *Letter* would have considered themselves as related to Judeans.

[2] For the sake of readability, I will use singular form about the one(s) responsible for the creation of the text. This does not need to imply that a single historical person wrote it.

barbarity mix to create a complex picture of colonized experiences. The text's rhetoric may thus not persuade us as critical scholars about the diasporic lifestyle's authenticity. Researchers familiar with cultural phenomena know all too well that such authenticity is always an over-simplification. Still, the text's tragic narrative could have been used to persuade its recipients that the author was worthy of recognition. In addition to this speculation about the motives for the text, we should also be aware that it may solely be responsible for creating the group that it describes. It is by no means necessary that the author was part of a socio-historical group that also included the individuals described as suffering diaspora inhabitants. Instead, the author may have wanted to benefit from making them appear as part of a group of oppressed traditionalists.

I believe this kind of push toward the appreciation of local realities and networks between different local actors is a needed turn in a scholarly world that has often concentrated on universal-like ideologies.[3] Whether the emphasis has been on the social identities of religious groups or on the theological connotations of certain authors, a real situatedness has often only given a "context" for ideas to rise. Unlike these universal-like interpretations, my reading contributes to scholarly discussions by stating that the force of the *Letter* lies precisely in its capability of creating conventional interaction between certain local realities.

[3] This of course does not denote that the social setting could be analyzed somehow separately from ideological valuations, only that the local contexts need to be taken into consideration as one part of early Christian formation—a notion already arising from regional differences in early Christian belief as analyzed in Walter Bauer (1934). Heikki Räisänen—one of the key researchers of the early Christian thought world—introduced the relation of ideological and other factors to the study of early Christianity: "I do not want to explore ideas as if they were floating in the air. On the contrary, they are to be firmly rooted precisely in the 'social and cultural realities': in the experience of those who gave verbal expressions to the ideas" (Räisänen 2010, 2). If this article helps to scaffold the *Letter* into the local and translocal cultural politics of its Roman context, I will be more than satisfied.

Scholarly Views on the *Letter* and Its Context

I begin by briefly presenting the *Letter* and the introductory problems related to its historical context. After the introductory matters, I argue that Eusebius's way of framing the *Letter* guided research to understand it as a struggle between abstract ideologies, and not as diaspora text. I then widen the previous understanding with the help of Maia Kotrosits's (2015, 2020) research on early Christianity as a multifaceted assemblage of diaspora anxieties that had arisen from colonial settings. I give the examples, mentioned above, of Puteoli merchants and Tacitus's Mariccus, as they may help us find similar diaspora patterns as that found in the *Letter*. I especially focus on the *Letter's* portrayal of the deaths of the diaspora inhabitants as a tool for proving the honorable nature of the author's inner circle. Lastly, I hypothesize about why this kind of diaspora had a need for such reassurance about their noble nature in the first place.

The Letter from Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne paints a gruesome image of a local violent outburst that was directed toward a minority living in the cities of Lyons and Vienne in Gallia Lugdunensis. According to the text, the events occurred during the seventeenth reigning year of Marcus Aurelius (177 CE). The *Letter* has been preserved only as part of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*. The first chapter of the *Letter* describes the sudden rise of the "tribulations" (θλῖψις; *Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.4), the verdicts that are given to those considered guilty of being Christians, and the latter's subsequent executions. The second chapter describes the modesty and love that the convicted ones show toward their fellows. In the beginning of the third chapter, Eusebius adds further details about the group: how Alcibiades, one of the imprisoned ones, had a vision that criticized his extreme ascetism, and how the group decided to send a letter to Asia, Phrygia, and Rome discussing the rising local Phrygian prophetic movement known as Montanism. The fourth chapter brings the description of the Gallic group to a close by presenting its recommendation for Irenaeus to be sent to bring a message from the Gauls to Eleutherus, the overseer of a Roman Christ group.

I focus my analysis on the *Letter's* descriptions of trials, judgments, and death penalties in its first chapter. Particularly interesting for ear-

lier research as well as for my topic have been the fates of three different characters of the narrative (even though several others are also mentioned in the *Letter*, as will become apparent). A deacon named Sanctus is the first one presented in the plot. He is applauded as he gives no further information about his background to his interrogators besides the words "I am a Christian" (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.20). A second character of interest is Attalus, who is described as part of the local elite, yet he must meet a disgraceful death in the arena (5.1.43–52). Finally, the narrative seems to culminate in the fate of an enslaved girl named Blandina (5.1.41–56). Though coming from a significantly lower social stratum than that of Sanctus or Attalus, it is she who gets the most attention in the plot of the *Letter*: she even takes the form of Christ when facing more cruel violence than the other characters in the narrative. Blandina stays alive through torture twice (5.1.41–42, 54), is whipped, thrown to beasts, roasted, and finally dies when trapped in a net and thrown before a bull (5.1.56).

Curiously, no other witnesses about the Gallic persecution of early Christians are available to us before the fourth-century author Sulpicius Severus (*Chron.* 2.32.2). Even his statement may only imply that some of the first Christians in Lyons were arrested at the end of the second century CE.[4] Besides these historical problems, the *Letter*'s background as a Gallic second-century document has also been questioned.[5] However, most scholars seem to regard Gaul as the original provenance of the text, as its vocabulary differs from the rest of *Ecclesiastical History*. Furthermore, the *Letter*'s interest in the character of Stephen from Acts 7 (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.2.5) seems to be an especially Gallic phenomenon, since Irenaeus of Lyons is one of the few other early Christian writers who refer to the martyr-deacon.[6] I agree with the majority view about Gallic provenance, even though it must be acknowledged that Eusebius framed

[4] Thompson 1912, 361–64; C. R. Moss 2012, 100–1.

[5] For the text as a complete third-century forgery, see Thompson 1912. For the text's heavy redaction by Eusebius, see Löhr 1989.

[6] Iren. *Haer.* 3.12.10; 3.12.13; 4.15.1. See the detailed discussion on the date and provenance of the *Letter* in C. R. Moss 2012, 103–6; Petitfils 2016, 211–16.

the *Letter* in a new textual setting, which undoubtedly had a significant impact on the observations of its readers (DeVore 2014, 233–35).

Even though the *Letter*'s diasporic nature has been widely acknowledged, lately this aspect has not gained much scholarly attention. Instead, research has emphasized the *Letter*'s role as a creator of early Christian identity. Elizabeth Castelli, Stephanie Cobb, Candida Moss, and James Petitfils have each analyzed what kind of ideals the *Letter* gives for living (and dying) as a Christian, and how these ideals are entangled with wider Greco-Roman values.[7] This is an understandable scholarly emphasis, since it has become harder and harder to understand sources such as the *Letter* as historically apt descriptions of actual second-century persecutions. And so it seems reasonable to look for ways to understand the text as something other than a mere historical reporting of facts. The notion of community building is a straightforward starting point for seeking other explanations for the wide popularity of martyrdom narratives. However, I wish to complicate this explanation (and others) by concentrating on how the local and translocal dimensions of the *social* reality may have played their part in the creation of the *Letter*.

Even if the diaspora aspect of the *Letter* has not been the main topic of research lately, roots for this kind of perspective go back to the nineteenth century. Already William Simpson (1870, 73) suggested that originally Polycarp from Smyrna had first sent missionaries to Lyons. And Irenaeus would have been among these missionaries. Whatever we think of Simpson's suggestion, it is evident that Asians and Phrygians formed a significant minority in the area. Lyons seems to have functioned as a vivid center for trade, and thus attracted people from around the Empire.[8] The Phrygian cult of Kybele became a popular one in Gaul, and we also have evidence of Phrygian participants in the localized cult of the divine mother in Lyons.[9] An Asian minority population, consisting of sailors and merchants, is attested in sev-

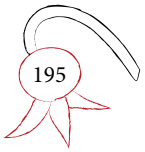
[7] Castelli 2004; Cobb 2008; C. R. Moss 2010, 2012; Petitfils 2016.

[8] Frend 1964, 127; 1965, 4.

[9] *CIL* XIII 1751 (Tabbernee 2007, 29).

eral Lyonnaise inscriptions.[10] W. H. C. Frend notes how Greek seems to function as the native language for the *Letter*'s distressed community: every time a member of the group speaks Latin, it is explicitly pointed out.[11] Frend also points out how Attalus is described as being from Pergamum (5.1.17) and Alexander—another one among the eight named martyrs—as a Phrygian (5.1.49).[12]

This aspect of diaspora and translocal correspondence is easily bypassed. In the following sections, I argue that this omission is due not only to scholarly neglect. Eusebius himself may have intentionally cast the narrative as a universal fact about what being a Christian was like, and thus set aside the *Letter*'s role as an example of a mundane piece of "business-as-usual" diaspora correspondence.



The Universal Tone of Eusebian Martyrdom

Eusebius has an interest in displaying the events depicted in the *Letter* as a common feature of the translocal church. This becomes evident in his conclusion of the events in *Hist. Eccl.* 5.2.1: "Such things happened to the churches of Christ under the above-mentioned emperor, from which we may reasonably conjecture the occurrences in the other provinces."[13] The persecution of "the" church is a universal feature for Eusebius, one defining marker of its orthodoxy (C. R. Moss 2012, 105, 116). As David DeVore notes, Eusebius's opening words for the events had already set the scene by citing features of Christianity that are significant everywhere:

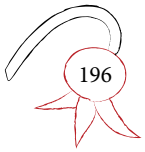
[10] For proof of an Asian minority population, see *CIL* XIII 2005, 2022, 2448 (C. R. Moss 2012, 190 n. 6). For the presence of sailors and merchants, see *CIL* XIII 1942, 1945 (Tabbernee 2007, 29).

[11] *Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.20, 1.44, 1.52.

[12] Frend 1964, 126–27. Gregory of Tours (*Glor. Mart.* 48–49) names forty other martyrs, half of whom have Asian names (1964, 127). However, the list includes several problems and historical improbabilities (Thompson 1912, 364–65).

[13] Translations of Eusebius Pamphilus's *Ecclesiastical History* are from McGiffert 1890.

> At the beginning of book 5 Eusebius quotes the greeting of the *Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne*, where communities in Gaul address other communities in Asia and Phrygia. The distance between the letter's senders and its addressees highlights the reach of ecclesiastical communication. Eusebius emphasizes this distance by noting before the greeting that "the Rhone River, which flows round the entire country [of Gaul] with a powerful current, passes through both" Lyons and Vienne. This detail—the only geographical description I have found in the *Ecclesiastical History*—introduces the location of the martyrdoms as remote, unknown territory, inviting readers to ponder the distance between Lyons and the Asian and Phrygian addressees of the *Martyrs*. (DeVore 2014, 233)



According to DeVore, the rare geographical description points to the same universalizing direction as Eusebius's words related to the martyrdom of Polycarp. When describing the heroic tragedy of Polycarp, Eusebius similarly emphasizes how all the churches around the world read the letter that depicted Polycarp's death. Eusebius has a keen interest to show that martyrdom is an essential feature of the Christians around the world and that all the Christians in most distant places are interested in it (DeVore 2014, 232–34). However, Eusebius is writing 150 years after the anonymous author of the *Letter*. Not only is their context different, but their motives might differ as well.

Eusebius's universalizing tone can also be detected from the way he portrays the relationship of the Gallic martyrs to Roman Christians. Eusebius describes how the ones imprisoned in Gaul wrote a letter about the Phrygian prophetic movement that was sent both to Asia Minor and Rome (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.3.4). Later, Eusebius ends his presentation of the Gallic situation with a letter of recommendation from the martyrs to Roman Christ group leader Eleutherus regarding their fellow Irenaeus (5.4.1–2). At least for Eusebius, the recommendation seems to have functioned, as Irenaeus is later depicted as having close ties with fellow Roman Jesus adherents. This is noted by DeVore, who considers that Eusebius deliberately presents introduction letters first and then later sets their senders and recipients in the same geographical location. This way, Eusebius can portray Christian relationships as stable, long-lasting, and as translocal as

possible.[14] Yet, as I argue in more detail below, these letters that Eusebius portrays as proof of stable Christian relationships can also be read as diaspora competition for prestige and praiseworthiness.

Eusebius's universalizing tone may have affected the scholarly questions that have been asked of the *Letter*. Current research has concentrated on the *Letter*'s tactics for portraying early Christian identity, as well as its relationship to the phenomena of martyrdom and honorable death. The questions have remained at the abstract level of ideas and identities. This would suit Eusebius, who uses these stories as markers of true Christians everywhere around the world. Yet, while these questions of Christian identity markers are important and interesting, one can also ask other questions.

One way to highlight different aspects of the *Letter* is to apply Jonathan Z. Smith's categories of "here," "there," and "anywhere" religions (2003, 30–35). In Smith's categories, the Eusebian understanding of the *Letter* would belong to the dimension of "anywhere": it is interested in dimensions that transcend geographical limits and seems disinterested about questions of political power and material goods. In addition to these "religions of anywhere," Smith's categories name those traditions that are especially interested in kinship lineages and ancestral customs as "religions of here." The third category, "religions of there," is about the religious practices that are linked to official institutions out *there* in public life, especially to temples that also function as centers of political and economic activity. In the following section, I would like to introduce these dimensions of "here" and "there" to the analysis of the *Letter*. I understand the function of text as something that consists of all three dimensions named by Smith. The *Letter* is a local text with a "here" nature: a narrative about a certain kinship lineage—a diaspora group—following the ways of highly esteemed Asian figures. Yet, it also has translocal needs, as it seeks to enforce the tangible sociopolitical realities of the author with the help of translocal exchange. As a by-product of this here-and-there exchange, the *Letter* also participates in creating

[14] For Irenaeus depicted together with the Roman *ekklesia*, see *Hist. Eccl.* 5.5.9–5.6.5, 5.20.1, 5.24.11–17 (DeVore 2014, 233–34).

a new and forceful mode of translocal identity that we have learned to recognize as early Christianity.

Diaspora theory may help to bring aspects of "here" and "there" to the analysis of the *Letter*. The perspective allows us to theorize what it is like to live in a certain location while simultaneously emphasizing that one could also live authentically in another context, and how these kinds of emphases may interact with ideological flows of an "anywhere" nature. I now present one such perspective.

"Early Christianity" as One Tool for Claiming Diaspora Authenticity—Among Many Other Honorable Minority Positions

Maia Kotrosits (2015, 2020) has analyzed how first- and second-century martyrdom narratives can be viewed as diaspora experiences in colonized contexts. Instead of understanding them as tools for intra-Christian identity construction and mythmaking, Kotrosits understands them as diaspora documents that aim to turn experiences of not-belonging to victory and success.[15] I would argue that the *Letter* should be analyzed from a similar perspective. We should take time to assess it as a diaspora document that was sent to Asian and Phrygian people by an author who claims to be their fellow, and who is currently living as one of the "slaves for Christ" in Vienne and Lyons (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.3). The *Letter* does construct Christ myths and shows various aspects of common reactions to these myths. Yet, as Kotrosits argues, diaspora contexts and their complexity should be considered as an even more important background

[15] Kotrosits 2015; 2020, 124–44. To fit my argument into a single article, I have had to cut Kotrosits's emphasis on affective forces of not-belonging and hostility and reduce this theoretically rich view to a vague label, "colonial experiences." Even though this choice does not do full justice to Kotrosits's argument, I still hope that her views as I have presented them may help to give new light to the scholarly discussion related to the *Letter*. The affective side of Kotrosits's work is introduced in Kotrosits 2015, 1–20.

for these kinds of texts than abstract intra-Christian discussion (which is a mark of "anywhere religion," as Smith [2003] would call it).

Kotrosits argues that the term "Christian" is used in these martyrdom narratives both to exclude diaspora minorities from the wider society and to turn this experience of ostracism into victory (2015, 104–5). Kotrosits uses letters of Ignatius of Antioch as the earliest examples of the use of the term "Christianity," and links its usage to this phenomenon of not-belonging (2015, 76–77).[16] The letters present Ignatius as a cultic authority who has been imprisoned in Antioch and is now being transported to Rome to face the death penalty. Throughout his journey, Ignatius writes to other authorities of Jesus adherents in Asia Minor and Rome. Yet, he does not describe himself in the letters as a Christian. He says that he is called such and is hopefully about to become one. According to Ignatius (*Rom.* 3:2–3), he will become a Christian, as he becomes eaten by the beasts of the arena and as his body totally vanishes (Kotrosits 2015, 77–78). In this way, he becomes sacramental nourishment for the groups that have accepted his message (*Rom.* 4).[17] Kotrosits's understanding of "Christianity" as part of diaspora experience does not imply that the significance of the phenomenon should be reduced to an inner emotion. Kotrosits states that Christianity in the Ignatian epistles is also a belief system and a social reality comparable to Judaism. This can be seen in the letter to the Magnesians (*Mag.* 8.2), which states that prophets of ancient Israel were actually Christians (and not Jews), for they were persecuted because of Christ (Kotrosits 2015, 72–73). Christianity is a belief structure, but for the author of the Ignatian letters it is a belief system that breathes through the need to not-belong and to react correctly to the ostracism and violence.

[16] The situation would not drastically change even if the letters would be considered as late-second- or early-third-century forgeries. For example, no other writer in the collection of the Apostolic Fathers uses the term (Kotrosits 2015, 77). I am not assuming that the author of the *Letter* had to know the Ignatian epistles. I only consider it likely that the author may have known the same tradition that Polycarp also mentions about the executed overseer called Ignatius (Pol. *Phil.* 9, 13).

[17] Kotrosits 2015, 79–80. See also Castelli 2004, 80–83, whose interpretation of Ignatius as becoming a disciple of Christ has affected to the work of Kotrosits.

According to Kotrosits, complex experiences of colonized minorities become manifested in statements entwined with trauma, forced actions, tragedies, and violent scenes.[18] These embodied experiences become visible when the diaspora group negotiates its borders and alliances with others. Kotrosits applies Chow's (1993) studies on contemporary Chinese diaspora culture to elaborate how this negotiation easily leads the diaspora culture to become particularly obsessed with its own authenticity: how closely it follows the "original" cultural system of the perceived native land. The most authentic diaspora group is also seen as the most valuable one. Yet, when seen from the outside, such authenticity does not even seem to exist, as negotiations of belonging and surviving in a colonized environment will inevitably lead to compromises and hybrid identities (Kotrosits 2015, 12–13, 95–96). These negotiations are often conducted between a rock and a hard place, as it were, and thus leads to the creation of bonds with odd bedfellows. They create "monstrous families of reluctant belongings" as one must join the same team with those who could be perceived as a diaspora group's archenemies in different contexts (Kotrosits 2015, 96–97, 112–15). Negotiations with colonizing powers and rival groups also become visible in the *Letter*'s violent narrative (as we can see below). As earlier studies on martyrdom stories have already noted, these negotiations often lead to strange actions and valuations that override our simple categories of Jewish, Christian, Pagan, or Roman influences.[19]

Another Letter of a Diaspora Group: The Case of the Tyrian Merchant Station

The importance of authentic diaspora behavior is not limited to early Christian narratives on martyrdom. A similar theme is addressed in

[18] Kotrosits 2015, 37–39, 80–83, 165–68, 187–88, 227–28; 2020, 143–44.

[19] See, e.g., Daniel Boyarin's (1999, 64) notion of "the enormous convolutions of cultural multicausation, Hebrew, Greek, and Roman, in the production of the multifold discourse of martyrdom." Boyarin's statement is applied to the *Letter* in Petitfils 2016, 248 n. 185.

the letter from Tyrian merchants stationed in Puteoli, Campagna, to their native compatriots in Syria in 174 CE (available to us through the inscription *OGI* 595 = *IGRom.* I 420).[20] The inscription consists of two parts: (1) a plea for help sent to the city of Tyre; and (2) a resolution that was made in the meeting of the city. Here, I offer Philip Harland's (2012) translation of the first part:

> This is a letter which was written to the city of Tyre, the sacred, inviolable, and autonomous metropolis of Phoenicia and of other cities, and mistress of a fleet.
>
> To the civic leaders (*archontes*), Council and People of their sovereign homeland, from those settled in Puteoli (*hoi en Potiolois katoikountes*), greetings. Because of the gods and the fortune of our lord, the emperor, if there are any other stations in Puteoli, our station (*statiōn*) is better than the others both in adornment and in size, as most of you know. In the past, this was cared for by the Tyrians settled in Puteoli, who were numerous and wealthy. But now our number has dwindled to a few and, since we pay the expenses for the sacrifices and services to our ancestral gods established here in temples, we do not have the means to pay the station's annual payment of 250 denarii, especially as the expenses for the bull sacrifice at the games in Puteoli have been imposed on us. We therefore beg you to provide for the station's continued existence. Now it will continue if you make provision for annual payment of 250 denarii. For we took care of the other expenses and those incurred in the restoration of the station for the sacred day of our lord, the emperor, so as not to burden the city (i.e. Tyre). We also remind you that no income accrues either from shippers (*nauklēroi*) or from merchants (*emporoi*) to our station, as is the case with the station in royal Rome. We therefore beg you to make provision in this circumstance. Written in Puteoli, July 23, during the consulship of Gallus and Flaccus Cornelianus.

Already the openings of the letter from Puteoli and the letter from Gaul bear interesting similarities. "The slaves of Christ" are depicted

[20] Sosin 1999, 275. See line 20 of the inscription, which indicates that the response from the Tyrians to Puteoli was formed in a gathering "of the boule conducted on 11 Dios year 300 [= 174 CE] …". The inscription and translation are available in Sosin 1999 and in the Associations in the Greco-Roman World database (Harland 2012).

as Οἱ ἐν Βιέννῃ καὶ Λουγδούνῳ τῆς Γαλλίας παροικοῦντες (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.3). They live in the foreign lands of Vienne and Lugdunum (Lyons). Respectively, the merchants at Puteoli begin their letter with the greeting τῆς κυρίας πατρίδος οἱ ἐν Ποτιόλοις κατοικοῦντες χαίρειν—"settlers from Puteoli that greet their sovereign homeland." Both openings are thus setting the scene for what follows: the groups are far away from home and inhabiting an area that is not ancestrally theirs.

When the merchants ask for financial support (a rather modest sum of 250 *denarii*) and recognition of their unique status amid other merchant stations, their problems are framed in cultic language. The ancestral traditions of the "greatest and most splendid" merchant station in Puteoli have caused them economic stress, as they not only had to take care of their own ancestral customs, but also contribute a bull offering to an annual festival of the town. The station exceeding all the other stations in greatness also wanted to exceed others in piety. On the other hand, the moderate plea from Puteoli might merely evince an experience of injustice at the hands of a rival Tyrian merchant station in Rome.[21] The Port of Ostia, near the city of Rome, was rising to a position more significant than ever before. In addition, the Tyrian station in Ostia did get supplementary funding from associations of shippers and merchants—a benefit not available to the older Puteoli station (as the inscription also notes). The relatively small sum might not have been the main issue of the note. Its significance might have been to function as a symbol for stating the injustice and thereby as a means to gather more support for the Puteoli station.

Like the letter of the Puteoli merchants, so too the *Letter* from Gaul belongs to the sphere of multifaceted diaspora realities. In these contexts, examples of mythologized traditions were used to negotiate between diaspora minorities, native areas, rival groups, and colonizing

[21] Scholars have even suggested corrections to the inscription so that the correspondence would have addressed larger sums—without too much to base their corrected readings on, as Joshua Sosin has demonstrated (1999, 279–81; arguing against larger sums expressed in, for example, Mommsen 1850, 61; Dubois 1907, 92–93; D'Arms 1974, 105).

forces. The *Letter* uses cultic language related to Christ myths in these negotiations.

The Impossibility of a Genuine Diaspora Culture: The Case of Mariccus in Tacitus' *Histories*

As Kotrosits and Chow have noted, the struggle for authentic diaspora culture is not tantamount to an innocent listing of existing values. More likely, it should be treated as a vigorous need for creating an authentic way of life in a context where previously obvious realities have been questioned. At the same time, this demand for authenticity hides the colonial forces that always complicate the demand for authenticity. Even in the case of the *Letter*, the appreciation of the pure and authentic ways of the great men of Asia is an impossibility arising from diaspora needs. For example, Blandina's death closely resembles not only the fate of Polycarp, who had to face several executionary efforts before giving up his life (*Mart. Pol.* 15–16), but also the story that the Roman Tacitus recounts about a Gallic resistance fighter Mariccus in *Hist.* 2.61. Tacitus depicts the end of Mariccus in Lyons in 68 CE:

> While men of high distinction were thus [in a more cowardly manner] endangered, it raises a blush to record how a certain Mariccus, a common Boian, dared to take a hand in Fortune's game, and, pretending the authority of heaven, to challenge the Roman arms. And this liberator of the Gallic provinces, this god—for he had given himself that honor—after collecting eight thousand men, was already plundering the Aeduan cantons nearest him, when that most important state, with the best of its youth and the cohorts which Vitellius gave, dispersed the fanatic crowd. Mariccus was taken prisoner in the battle. Later, when he was exposed to the beasts and the animals did not rend him, the stupid rabble believed him inviolable, until he was executed before the eyes of Vitellius.[22]

Tacitus appreciates Mariccus's manner of heroic death, even though in other aspects he seems to consider Mariccus and his followers as

[22] Tac. *Hist.* 2.61; trans. Moore 1925.

mindless savages.[23] The legend related to Mariccus may point to Chow's and Kotrosits's conceptualization of diaspora identity: it is in continuous negotiation with several other forces, such as dominating ethnicities and colonizing powers. In the *Letter*, the diaspora from Asia Minor joins with an ideal that was also related to Gallic resistance. Elsewhere, the *Letter* sides with Tacitus's standard Roman mockery of "the stupid rabble" and their uncivilized and unmanly savagery (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.57–60)—as if siding with Tacitus's notion of Mariccus's supporters.[24] The *Letter* wants to show its protagonists as heroes of resistance such as Tacitus's Mariccus, but at the same time displays its antagonists as mindless savages like Mariccus's followers. The legend of Mariccus indicates the complexity of resistance themes in the diaspora context of the *Letter*: one's resistance is one's accommodation and vice versa. There is no optimal equilibrium for an authentic diaspora identity.

Kotrosits's theorization on diaspora experiences may thus help to widen recent discussions on the nature of the *Letter*. For example, James Petitfils (2016) has recently argued that the text wants to emphasize the exclusivity of the Christian identity. Petitfils interprets Sanctus's responses to his torturers (in *Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.20) as proof of this exclusivity. According to the *Letter*, "he [Sanctus] would not even tell his name, or the nation or city to which he belonged, or whether he was bond or free, but answered in the Roman tongue to all their questions, 'I am a Christian.'" Petitfils argues that this is to signify that Christianity is the only relevant self-categorization that the author wishes the audience to have: "The ubiquitously celebrated confession of the martyrs functions as a rejection of bloodline, hometown, and inherited status" (2016, 235–36, 243). Eusebius would certainly agree with Petitifils's reading: Christianity should be the only defining factor for the whole Empire. However, for the *Letter*'s author, it might have been enough to

[23] In addition, Tacitus wanted to portray Emperor Vitellius as a bloodthirsty savage by emphasizing that Mariccus's execution had to be postponed until Vitellus happened to arrive in Lyons. On Tacitus's interests regarding the depictions in *Hist.* 2.61, see Morgan 1993, 770–76.

[24] The barbarity and unreasonable unmanliness of the crowd is also analyzed in Cobb 2008, 84–86.

show that the protagonists did not show any kind of cooperative spirit when facing their opponents, but merely wanted to be handled in the way that was familiar to them from tales about Ignatius, Polycarp, and others. This as such does not mean that the author wanted to portray the heroes only as Christians, but that the text wanted them to be perceived as such when facing the distresses of colonial realities.

For Petitfils, the way the ingroup continuously calls its members "brethren" (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.5.2–8) also displays the overriding Christian identity for the group that was detected from Sanctus's responses to his torturers (2016, 242–43). For the same reason, Petitfils repeatedly translates the kinship term ἀδελφοί as "Christians."[25] While I do not wish to state that the group could not have considered themselves as Christians, there remains a need to understand this kinship terminology from perspectives other than that of intra-Christian discourse. As Harland has noted, kinship vocabulary was a key part of the language that many informal associations used to denote belonging to their group. For example, in addition to cultic groups, several professional guilds call their members ἀδελφοί. In several situations, it is impossible for us to define whether a group calling themselves merely "brothers" should be understood as referring foremost to a cultic gathering or to an activity related to professions, neighborhood, leisure time activities, or to something else (Harland 2005). For the *Letter*'s context, I would especially underline the ways kinship terminology is also apparent in the sources that we have from different ethnic (diaspora) groups from the turn of the Common Era. Judean groups from several locations around the Mediterranean considered their members as brethren.[26] The funerary inscription of Selgian immigrants in Cilicia states that the ἀδελφοί could sell their burial rights to other brothers, but not to outsiders.[27]

[25] Petitfils 2016, 227 (regarding ἀδελφῶν in *Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.9 and 5.1.10), 228 (ἀδελφῶν in 5.1.10), 240 (ἀδελφούς in 5.2.4), 242 (ἀδελφῶν in 5.2.5; 5.2.8).

[26] *IEgJud* 114 (Heliopolis); *IEurJud* II 171 (Rome); *IEurJud* II 528 (Rome); *IEgJud* 86 (Egypt); *IJO* III Syr 70 (Syria); Harland 2005, 500 n. 25.

[27] *IKilikiaBM* II 201; Harland 2005, 497–98. For Harland's argument, it is relevant to separate the uses of fictive kinship language from "literal" kinship, as he is comparing the language of associations to the wordings of New Testament "fictive

Thus, as I will argue in more detail below, the *Letter*'s claims for persecution of "brothers" should not be understood only as a sign of exclusively Christian identity. Instead, the term also points to an ideal of a shared bloodline with common ancestors, which is one dimension in the construction of shared ethnic identity.[28] The significance of brotherhood thus does not empty to "religious" affiliation. Instead, it is also closely related to the way the diaspora author wants to cast the group also as an ethnic minority in Gaul.[29] This notion aligns with Kotrosits's wider project, which wants to question the recent scholarly focus on specific early Christian identity. According to Kotrosits, the current scholarly focus tends to understand early Christian identity as something totally different from the surrounding ways of belonging—as a *sui generis* phenomenon in the Greco-Roman world—when in fact it should be understood as nothing more than one aspect of living in a complex social reality full of negotiating and competing colonial experiences (Kotrosits 2015, 21–60). Similarly, in the *Letter* the tribulations

kinship." For my argument, the division between fictive and actual kinship does not need to be this clear, if we choose to believe that several members of the group described in the *Letter* are portrayed as part of the same ethnic group. Ethnicity is often constructed according to ideas of common ancestors and a shared bloodline. In this construction of ethnic identity, kinship terminology descriptions may vary between more metaphorical usages and those usages that describe the genealogical relatedness of individuals. Furthermore, I would argue that it also signifies the relationship that the *Letter* portrays with its heroic ancestors, whose honorable behavior in hostile circumstances is imitated in the violent events described in the text. My view aligns with Smith's description about the role of associations and their fictive kinships in the birth of the religion of anywhere: "Associations have the potential of working at cross-purposes to the older conceptualizations of family in the religions of 'here,' as when differing memberships divide genealogical siblings while, at the same time, establishing new, intimate relations and loyalties among their socially created fellow 'brothers' and 'sisters'" (Smith 2003, 35).

[28] Schermerhorn 1970, 12; Horowitz 1985, 51–54; Hutchinson and Smith 1996, 6–7.

[29] It needs to be noted that also "Christianness" can be seen as an alternative ethnic identity, as argued in Buell 2005; Hodge 2007; Horrell 2020. This may also be used to read the Eusebian imperial "everywhere identity" of Christianity against its purposes.

and the honorable reactions elicit prestige in a situation that is painted as diasporic anxiety. Affirming one's Christian identity is thus not solely a question of devotional identity.

The *Letter*'s Honorable Deaths as Proof of Properly Imitated Behavior

Several scholars have pointed out how the motive of imitation should be understood as an important feature of the *Letter*, especially in its descriptions of reactions to extreme violence. The *Letter*'s protagonists have been interpreted as imitators of Roman elite virtues, idealized masculine behavior, and Jewish / early Christian heroes. Candida Moss has studied the imitation of motives embodied by Christ in the *Letter*.[30] Stephanie Cobb has focused on the *Letter*'s habit of portraying its characters as mimicking the masculine noble death tradition of Greco-Roman society.[31] Petitfils's analysis seems to function as a synthesis of those of Moss and Cobb, as it traces both ideals of Roman elite and especially early Christian/Jewish elite virtues in the text (2016, 224–48). To supplement these views, I argue that the diaspora author was writing to Asia Minor to prove their loyalty to the native traditions. This allowed displaying the behavior of exemplary characters, shared with the intended audience of the native land.

To clearly underline the domestic-yet-displaced diaspora realities of the *Letter*, I have chosen to treat the prototypical heroes as reputable men that were especially well-known in Asia Minor. These figures can be compared to the role that "ancestors" have in Smith's typology. Following Smith's "religion of here," I consider that these exemplary figures display the local character of Asia Minor as well as the behavior expected from those honoring an important local figure (2003, 24–27). The narratives about Paul, Ignatius, and Polycarp are relevant, because they share the ethos born out of the patriarchal ideas of the time: these

[30] C. R. Moss 2010, 68, 90–94; 2012, 113, 118–21.

[31] Cobb 2008, 55–57, 78–79, 113–16.

martyrs live by the honorary code displayed by those who want to present themselves as ideal men.

Again, this is not to state that we could not also comprehend the roles of these important men as proponents of a new cultic identity. Their significance, however, is not reduced to their Christian "anywhere" nature. To follow Kotrosits, they can also be read as representations of ideal behavior from "back home." They were natives crushed under brutal imperial forces, yet they managed to save face and to preserve the honor of their extended families. By relating to these Asian figures, one also relates to the ways their cry for being a Christian signified the fantasy of staying true and authentic under the threats of imperial powers and local ethnic majorities. I demonstrate next how the diaspora author may have proceeded to assure fellow individuals or associations in Asia and Phrygia that the group in Gaul shared the same role models as them—even when the loyalty of the Gallic group is tested by extreme circumstances. Partly, this could have been done by demonstrating how the personal attributes tied to prestigious exemplars—such as Polycarp, Paul, and Ignatius—had spread in the community.

Unlike the tribulations of Polycarp, Paul, and Ignatius, the narrative of the *Letter* does not have a single main character. The events are not described from a perspective of a single leading authority. Instead, several individuals from different social strata and genders are acting as suffering exemplars. Already, the disorder of character presentations is peculiar: their judgments, tortures, and executions are not presented in a clear order. The author does not handle the legal process of each character separately. Nor does the narrative proceed gradually from judgments to tortures to executions. If we want to build an inner logic for the presentation, it may be interpreted as a story of heightening antagonism that finds its highpoint in the person of the enslaved Blandina and in the injustice and violence that she faces.

Sanctus the deacon is said to become the example of a hero tortured for others (5.1.23: εἰς τὴν τῶν λοιπῶν ὑποτύπωσιν). Yet, he is not described as an exemplar of one who dies as a martyr. Pothinus the overseer is the first one in the narrative whose death is explicitly described (5.1.31). He does not die spectacularly in the arena but following his injuries in jail.

The true "enthronements" (5.1.36) of the martyrs begin only after the description of the mistreatments faced by these officeholders.

Sanctus and Maturus die as first "spectacles for the world" (5.1.40). Already at the beginning of their respective spectacles, they are aware of the outcome: their victory (5.1.38), which is gained through their personal sacrifice (5.1.40). As in the beast fight that Ignatius of Antioch awaits impatiently (*Rom*. 4), similarly the result of the victorious game is decided for Sanctus and Maturus beforehand: they are to be victorious.

After the deaths of Sanctus and Maturus, the execution narrative pauses for two scenes of torture and humiliation. First, Blandina is put up on a cross. This Christ-like scene inspires Blandina's brethren (5.1.41). Next, Attalus, "a man of distinction," is brought to the amphitheater and is forced to circulate around the arena with a sign pointing to his Christianness. The crowd mocks him during his walk of shame. Connections to Jesus's humiliating path to Golgotha are obvious. The *Via dolorosa* is also a motif that the author of the Ignatian letters wanted to apply in the description of Ignatius's travel toward his execution. Even when the character of Ignatius is explicitly following Christ's footsteps, he is at the same time imitating Paul and his experiences of living "in chains" across Asia Minor and thus being a "disgrace for Christ."[32] Unlike Ignatius's journey, Attalus's passion suddenly cuts off, as the governor learns that Attalus is a Roman citizen and therefore should deserve a nobler punishment (5.1.43–44)—another feature that strongly echoes the status of "Roman citizen" of Paul in Acts and the way his citizenship causes twists in the court narratives (Acts 16:37–38; 22:25–29; 23:27).

[32] For example, Ign. *Rom*. 6:3: "Allow me to be an imitator of the suffering of my God. If anyone has him within himself, let him both understand what I want and sympathize with me, realizing the things that constrain me" (trans. Ehrman 2003). For Paul as Ignatius's role model in his painful travels, see Ign. *Eph.* 12.2: "You are a passageway for those slain for God; you are fellow initiates with Paul, the holy one who received a testimony and proved worthy of all fortune. When I attain to God, may I be found in his footsteps, this one who mentions you in every epistle in Christ Jesus" (trans. Ehrman 2003). Ignatius's imitation of Paul is handled in more detail in Y. Moss 2017.

Attalus's luck does not last long: when the local festivities begin, the furious mob demands that he return to the stage. He meets his death accompanied with Alexander, who also has confessed to being a Christian (5.1.51). The narrative reaches its macabre culmination when the slave girl Blandina and a 15-year-old boy Ponticus are killed (5.1.53–56). According to Cobb, the scene highlights that even an adolescent boy and a female slave are more in (Roman) manly control of the situation than the mindless (Gallic) masses, who as "wild and barbarous" (5.1.57) are unable to control their emotions. Exactly like Polycarp in *Mart. Pol.* 13–14, Blandina also stays calm in the middle of the turmoil—she does not even experience pain during the torture.[33]

The disorganized narrative creates a succession of chaotic events, unexpectedly connected with each other, flavored with almost sadistic descriptions of violence. This chaos is met with uniformity and order: the suffering ones react to the tribulations similarly and, even more importantly, calmly. The unanimous answers of the main characters to the chaotic events have guided my interpretation about the intentions of the *Letter*. I believe this technique of connecting haphazardly several shocking yet glorified destinies could have been used to prove that the Gallic community learned a single model that guides their behavior, and that the model is not limited to a certain social or cultic status. When Blandina hangs on a cross, this model is explicitly named: her fellows are seeing her as "him who was crucified for them" (5.1.41). Yet, as we have seen, echoes of Paul, Polycarp, and Ignatius can also be heard through this suffering Christ.

Adequate reactions to persecution, suffering, and death can be learned from the *Letter*'s several protagonists. Some of them are explicitly called exemplars. Yet, while a deacon can function as an example, so can a slave girl hanging on a cross.[34] This resolve when confronted with

[33] *Eccl. Hist.* 5.1.19, 56; Cobb 2008, 65–66, 81–85.

[34] Similarly, Petitfils 2016, 225: "Even socially disadvantaged martyrs (like Blandina, for example) are presented in *Lyons* as leaders and ideal paradigms for individuals of all social stripes." An important and grimmer interpretation on the role of Blandina can be gained from Ronald Charles's analysis. Charles (2019, 178–83) emphasizes that the slave girl is only used as a tool in the author's

chaos was used to create trust in the receivers of the *Letter*. Especially if we conceive of the *Letter* as a plea for help from a diaspora author, it shows that the Asian diaspora in Gaul stands unified and in control when faced with gruesome spectacles despite their terrible nature. It emphasizes that the community (whether it is imagined or real does not need to concern us at this point) is worth helping during their tough times, whatever their actual challenges may have been. Whether group leaders and nobility or slaves and teens, all are acting according to their honorable exemplars: remaining controlled under a duress—not joining the overemotional barbarity but giving their lives in sacrifice. Whatever the motives were for writing "back home," the author wanted to prove that their diaspora group was honoring the proper code of conduct across several social strata, and that this socially heterogeneous yet unanimous group was worth noticing.

The author of the *Letter* creates a picture of a group that has learned its lesson in imitating their exemplars. The sociocultural knowledge associated with Ignatian, Pauline, and Polycarpine traditions has been embraced. The diaspora society is now acting as a single noble man. The explicit violence of the text separates the sensible, honorable, and masculine behavior from the barbarian and unmanly rage. It creates anxiousness to condemn the illegal and dishonorable bloodshed and strengthens the belief that the diaspora Asian and Phrygian heroes of the spectacles are on God's side, while the Gallic barbarous mob and their Roman leaders are in union with Satan.

At the same time, this idealized image about the honorable ways of the community members is not as seamless as the author would like it to be. The diasporic obsession for authenticity leads to an ironic outcome: Roman ideals, Gallic resistance, and Asian exemplars are mixed

technique for stating how all the Christians from all social strata are virtuous, and how God is in command of each life. Yet, the contempt for enslaved persons is still visible, as Blandina does not get much to say. Her character is not meant to act, but to face the actions of others. Her role is only to face unimaginable amounts of sadistic violence. The author creates her body to disappear, so that others may see the body of Christ. In total, Blandina is a silenced inferior body used for relaying an ideological message.

to create one genuine reaction to persecution. This closely resembles the legend about Mariccus, whose death Tacitus describes as both an act of mindless anti-Roman resistance and as a sign of proper Roman honorable death. In addition, the *Letter*'s depiction of noble masculinity breaks down in the case of Blandina. As Luis Josué Salés has noted, when masculine virtues are attached to the chaste maiden, the result is a queer hybridity: "Amusingly enough, the result is that even these stereotypical images of femininity become queered through their disconnect from the system of differences that render them intelligible in their original articulations" (2021, 95).

The *Letter*'s quest for pure honorability is thus simultaneously Roman and Gallic, Christian and pagan, hypermasculine and queer, and barbaric and civilized. Its purpose is to convince outsiders that the diaspora group members are genuine heirs of their local heroes. In this, the *Letter* shares in the strategy of the Puteoli merchants: the ingroup is the greatest, most splendid, and the most pious group known in the area.

Whence the Need for Authenticity?

Lastly, one needs to ask: from where did this desire for displaying authentic diaspora behavior arise? We cannot reach certainty about the concrete questions and problems that motivated the Gallic author. Even if the *Letter* contained some concrete pleas, Eusebius only selected passages relevant to his project. This becomes evident in the way Eusebius first presents the opening of the *Letter* and then proceeds to the contents most urgent to him: "Then, having related some other matters, they begin their account in this manner" (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.4). Nevertheless, the example from Puteoli may remind us that diaspora communities have other needs besides cultic identity formation, and that these needs may still have been approached through cultic language. The Puteolian example of financial distress may guide us to ask whether the *Letter* from Gaul could have been composed in an analogous situation: is it a plea for economic support in a tough situation?

On the other hand, the example of the Puteolian merchant station also points to how authentic ancestral behavior can be used as a tool in

the rivalry between different diaspora communities. Puteolians wanted to surpass the newer Ostian station, who had been able to secure funding where the Puteolians had not. This dimension may help us to understand the role of other letters "from the same imprisoned" group that Eusebius attaches to his report on Gallic persecutions. Eusebius describes how the ones imprisoned in Gaul wrote a letter about the Phrygian prophetic movement that was sent both to Asia Minor and Rome (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.3.4). Later, Eusebius ends his presentation of the Gallic situation with a letter of recommendation from the martyrs to the Roman overseer Eleutherus regarding their fellow Irenaeus (5.4.1–2). Since this letter is discussed right after the one about the prophetic movement, it is easy to get the impression that the recommendation was needed in order for Irenaeus to deliver the letter concerning Phrygians to Eleutherus (Tabbernee 2007, 34–35).

These two letters sent by the "same imprisoned group" in *Hist. Eccl.* 5.3.4 and 5.4.2 point to a situation in which other Asian/Phrygian cultic authorities and a leader of a Roman Christ association (whether friend or rival to the group in Gaul) were meant to be convinced about the validity and honorability of the diaspora group in Gaul. In 5.3.4, the "imprisoned ones" are sending "their own prudent and most orthodox judgment in the matter [of the Phrygian prophetic movement]" to Eleutherus, overseer of a Christ group in Rome. As the brief mention of prudence and orthodoxy leaves many interpretations possible, several views exist about the relationship between the Gauls and the New Prophecy (later known as Montanism or simply as the "Phrygian heresy"). For example, Antti Marjanen (2005, 193–94) claims that the Gauls decided to side with the New Prophecy. Marjanen deduces this from the information according to which it was specifically Irenaeus who was selected to bring the letter to Eleutherus (see below). Irenaeus does not seem to condemn the movement anywhere in his own texts. Instead, he sides with the New Prophecy concerning the Pauline gift of prophecy and the Gospel of John, which were both criticized by opponents of the movement (Iren. *Haer.* 3.11.9). Against the view of Marjanen, several researchers have argued that the mention of orthodoxy underlines how the Gauls disapproved of the Phrygian

movement.[35] William Tabbernee reads the juxtaposition of prudence and orthodoxy as a diplomatic strategy to reach an equilibrium between those siding with the New Prophecy and those opposing it (2007, 33–34). According to Tabbernee, the group did not want to exclude those siding with the prophecy. Yet, it still needed to prove that even when accepting the New Prophetic tendencies from their native area, the group as such remained an honorable bearer of Asian traditions.[36]

As I mentioned above, the Gauls decided that Irenaeus should be the one to make their views known to Eleutherus. The "martyrs" are so unanimous in their wish to recommend Irenaeus to Eleutherus in 5.4.2 that some researchers have suggested Irenaeus as the author of a narrative directed to polish his own reputation.[37] Even if this seems unlikely (why would Eusebius not mention Irenaeus as the author of the *Letter*?), it correctly indicates the context of the martyrdom narrative: it may have played a role in negotiations that were occurring (1) between different diaspora actors in Rome; and (2) between different cultic associations in Asia and Phrygia. It sends a message to Rome and Asia Minor that resembles the one of the Tyrian merchants in Puteoli: "Even though we are not in the capital of the world, we are still the most pious, oldest, and the greatest when it comes to honoring the ways of our fathers." If we read the mention of "prudent and orthodox evaluation" as a diplomatic statement (as Tabbernee suggests), this may point to the balancing of Phrygian prophetic tendencies with other valued traditions of the diaspora author's native land.

[35] For a thorough discussion, see Tabbernee 2007, 33 nn. 133, 134.

[36] According to Tabbernee, this balancing could also explain the way Alcibiades turns away from the extreme ascetism (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.3.2–4): he wants to perform his prophetic practices in an honorable way, which does not include extremities. This does not need to be understood as a critique of the New Prophecy. Instead, it may merely claim that its adherents were also decent people who could fit into the larger society.

[37] Irenaeus was considered as the author of the *Letter* already by tenth-century writer Oecumenius (Migne, *PG* 119, 536C–D). This view has been followed in Nautin 1961, 54–61; Steenberg 2008, 10 n. 24. For a critical review of this thesis, see C. R. Moss 2012, 104–6.

My perspective suggests that the *Letter* and its glorified violence should not be understood only as part of intra-Christian identity formation. It also belongs to the sphere of multifaceted diaspora realities, in which examples of mythologized heroes were used to negotiate between diaspora minorities, native lands, rival groups, and colonizing forces. Cultic language related to Christ myths is used in these negotiations. Yet, this does not need to imply that the negotiation is done primarily between individuals understanding themselves as exclusively Christians. Even less does it imply that the negotiated questions were related strictly to Christianity. Instead, the inscription of Tyrians in Puteoli may point to the tangible questions that were often handled with cultic language related to ancestral customs. My perspective does not imply that the research of early Christian identities would be a futile task. I only wish to highlight (along with Kotrosits) that the research should be conducted so that it takes the complexity and fluidity of identities seriously. In addition (and along with the theme of this special issue), I wish to highlight how local realities and translocal relations should be considered as valid factors in the complex processes of identity construction. That is, all three Smithian perspectives of here, there, and anywhere should be taken seriously in the research of early Christian identities.

Finally, the social reality behind the *Letter* needs to be complicated through one more notion. In the *Letter*, we do not have access to the work of a group, even though the text itself claims so. It is the work of an author (or several) who claims to be part of a group that (according to the author) has faced persecution. We do not know if such a diaspora group existed, or if the members of such a group would have counted themselves as part of the same group as the author. A distinction needs to be made between a group that writes about persecution and an author that writes about a group facing persecution. Textual activity is thus also a part of group creation. It signifies to its recipients (both in Asia Minor and Rome) that there is a significant group in the Gaul, who lives and dies honorably, whose opinion should be heard in cultic matters, and who know important people such as Irenaeus and Eleutherus. We simply cannot know if this was really the case. Yet, the translocal effort that the text makes also does its part for bringing this kind of group alive in the minds of

others.[38] The creation of a cohesive group is the starting point for the author's technique: there first needs to be a group that can be considered as an authentic diaspora community in the middle of colonial hostilities.

Conclusion

I have argued above that the *Letter from Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne* should not be approached only as a sign of an actual conflict between locals and early Christians in Gaul, nor solely as a document of universal early Christian identity (even though Eusebius's presentation of the matter may easily guide our interpretation in this direction). Instead, we may also understand the *Letter* as a tool for a diaspora author who wants to create and maintain alliances abroad. I have applied an approach from diaspora studies on the need for "authentic" cultural representation in

[38] This view owes much to Stanley Stowers's perception of the problems that should be considered evident when talking about historical communities behind early Christian texts (and thus to sociologist Rogers Brubaker's concept of "groupism"). To quote Stowers: "Paul did not merely try to persuade those whom he wanted as followers that they ought to become a very special kind of community. He told them that they had in their essence already become such a community. This was a brilliant strategy. Instead of putting an impossible ideal before them and saying, 'try to reach this goal,' he said 'you are this community of transformed people so live up to what you are.' As the sociologist Rogers Brubaker writes, the skill of ethnopolitical or religious entrepreneurs is that 'by invoking groups, they seek to evoke them, summon them, call them into being' …. Paul told them that no matter what their ethnic-religious identity, gender, or social status, they were all ontologically one (Gal 3:27–28)" (Stowers 2011, 242, quoting Brubaker 2004, 10). Whereas Paul may have created a group out of his audience, I argue that the author of the *Letter* may have created themselves a group to belong to. The unanimous group is an ideological creation of the author (even though we cannot be sure about in what sense it is based on historical characters). Even as this seems an obvious fact, my experience still is that this innovative aspect of community building becomes easily forgotten. This has become evident during the writing of this article, as I have needed to revise several times sentences that have begun with the phrase "the diaspora group says/writes/argues."

diaspora realities. From this perspective, the *Letter* can be understood as a device that constructs a threat through which the honor of the diaspora group can be tested and then depicts reputable reactions to the distress. These honorable reactions arise from the code of conduct that the author may have considered as authentic Asian behavior. While the threats of violence and the death penalty may have been fictional, they may still bear the social stigmas and complex negotiations of colonized experience. The author of the *Letter* turns this wounded experience into its own victory by presenting a monstrous situation and a collectively honorable resolution to it. As is the case in every such effort for authentic minority identity, this effort arises from specific needs and does not stand as a consistent depiction when analyzed outside its context: the *Letter* ends up building a peculiar hybrid identity for its ingroup. The specific need for the proof for authenticity is hard to discern, but some direction can be gained from the alliances and group-level rivalries that Eusebius explicitly states after the martyr narratives: rivalries over honorability seen through the eyes of those living in the "native land" and the trustworthiness in the larger imperial discussion on the valid prophetic praxis of those coming from Asia Minor.

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