



[Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon to the Churches of Asia and Phrygia](#)

Attalus, the Roman citizen

Preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V.1.43-44, 50-52

Date: 177 CE

Place: Gaul

Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Letter

Title of work: Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon to the Churches of Asia and Phrygia

Reference:

V.1.43-44, 50-52

Commentary:

The *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon* is preserved in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* V.1.1-2.8. It offers a lengthy and indulgent narrative of the martyrdoms of numerous Christians who died in the arena during the persecution of Christians in Lugdunum (Lyons), Gaul, under Marcus Aurelius, in 177 CE. At this point in time, the so-called "persecutions" of Christians were largely local affairs, with provincial governors essentially responsible for deciding how to deal with Christians accused by their neighbours, preferring in many instances to try and persuade those accused to swear an oath to Caesar, and perform a sacrifice (for instance, see the [Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs](#); *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9-10). The most famous example of a governor consulting the emperor on how to proceed regarding Christians is that of Pliny, governor of Bithynia, recorded in his [Letter to Trajan X.96](#). Justin Martyr, in his [First Apology LXVIII.1-LXX.4](#), also draws upon a document known as the Rescript of Hadrian to Minucius Fundanus, proconsul of Asia, supposedly advising him to consider carefully any cases involving accused Christians, and ensure that criminal charges are apparent, avoiding legitimating slanderous accusations. The historicity of Hadrian's Rescript, however, is uncertain.

As Candida Moss explains, there is some uncertainty as to when precisely Christianity arrived in Gaul. Our earliest description is from Sulpicius Severus, who in his *Chronicle* II.2 (fourth century CE) suggests that a Christian community was established before the persecution of 177 CE, but Sulpicius Severus was far removed from this chronologically. The present *Letter* is addressed to the churches in Asia Minor and Phrygia, and it seems that numerous immigrants from Phrygia worked in Lugdunum (Lyon), so it is likely that Christianity arrived in Gaul with these workers, along the trade route from Asia Minor to Massilia (Marseilles), and spread north from there (see *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, p. 100-101). Indeed, we learn in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* V.1.17, that the Attalus from the passage quoted above was himself from Pergamum, supporting the notion of migrants from Asia Minor being the source of Gallic Christianity.

The dating of the persecution described in the present *Letter* is inconsistent in Eusebius, who cites both 177 CE in the *Ecclesiastical History*, and 166-167 CE in his *Chronicle*. The former is generally accepted amongst scholars to be the most likely (however, see Timothy Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, p. 61, who argues that Eusebius may be completely incorrect with his dating, and that the persecution might even have happened after the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE). The authorship of the *Letter* is debated. Many believe it to have been composed by the famous second century bishop and heresiographer Irenaeus of Lyons, as there are certain thematic links and some shared technical language (see, for instance, Pierre Nautin, *Lettres*, p. 54-61, 93-95). However, this is very uncertain (Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, p. 105). It is not probable that Eusebius simply composed the work himself, as he was not too keen on working with Latin sources, (see Barnes, "Eusebius and the Date of the Martyrdoms"). As Moss argues, it would be strange, therefore, to invent this story from the West, when he was much more comfortable narrating the story of the church in the East (*Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, p. 104). This does not mean, however, that his editorial hand is not at work – he even admittedly omits a section of the letter at one point. Tacitus (*Histories* I.65) informs us that Lyons and Vienne were historically at odds with each other, meaning that the unity shown between them from the Christian community is likely deliberately indulged in by



Eusebius, who attempts to show through his presentation of this *Letter* that church harmony trumped worldly conflicts.

Our only account of this particular persecution in Lyon is the present *Letter* quoted by Eusebius. The amphitheatre in Lyons can still be seen today: (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amphiteatre_Trois_Gaules_Lyon.jpg)

The *Letter* claims that during the persecution, being accused of things such as cannibalism and incest, Christians were banned from visiting bath houses, the forum, and generally appearing in public at all. Christians were seized, often from their houses, by local authorities, questioned in the forum in public, and then imprisoned to await the arrival of the provincial governor, who would determine their fate (V.1.7-9). These circumstances are likely ahistorical. The Christian community was likely made up of various social classes (the text itself speaks of slaves, and more prominent members of society such as Attalus), and their Christianity would not necessarily have marked them out as particularly unlike their neighbours apart from at certain social events (such as where a sacrifice might be offered, for instance), meaning that a violent mass rounding up of all the Christians does not seem probable, and is more likely intended for dramatic effect. It has been argued by scholars such as James Oliver, Robert Palmer, and Paul Keresztes that the rounding up of Christians for the arena was due to wealthy local citizens wanting to take advantage of the senate's ruling of 176 CE allowing condemned criminals to be used as cheap gladiators for games (Oliver and Palmer, "Minutes of an Act," p. 324-326; Keresztes, "Marcus Aurelius," p. 337). However, there is no firm evidence that this was the case in Lyon.

The proceeding narrative is as gory as one might expect from a Christian martyrdom account seeking to promote the resilience of believers in the face of a horrific death. The various noble individuals described include an elderly Bishop Photinus, whose desire for martyrdom strengthened him, a frail female slave named Blandina (whose Christian mistress we are told was also with her in the arena), who upheld the courage of her companions, and Ponticus, a boy of just fifteen. As Moss states, "with the initial arrests, the stage is set for an athletically styled contest between the martyrs of Christ and the representatives of Rome (the governor and the torturer). This contest of will and bodily strength serves as a microcosm of the cosmic battle" (*Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, p. 107). However, as Johannes Quasten has acknowledged, the *Letter* does not shy away from describing those who apostatised when faced with the harsh reality of a torturous and painful death (*Patrology*, p. 180).

The short extracts above detail the case of a man from Pergamum (see above) named Attalus, who it is said was well known to the crowd, who cheered vehemently for his blood. We are not informed as to the precise nature of his renown. Among the Christian community, his discipline and commitment to "truth" (???????, *al?theia*) apparently marked him out as admirable, but that he was also known to many attending the arena as spectators suggests that he perhaps held some sort of public role. We are also told that he was "a Roman" (???????, *R?maios*) (i.e. he held Roman citizenship), and that the governor, upon learning this, temporarily extracted him from the arena and returned him to the prison. Apparently, the governor had been uncertain how to deal with Roman citizens found to be Christians, prompting him to write to the emperor for guidance. The emperor had apparently instructed that any who denied being Christian could be set free. At V.1.47 we subsequently learn that "whoever had the rights of Roman citizenship [were] beheaded. The rest he sent to the wild beasts." In theory, then, Attalus's Roman citizenship would have spared him being torn to death by wild animals. However, as the text quoted above states, unfortunately for Attalus, the governor disregarded this right of his citizenship and decided to return him to the arena. Attalus's declaration just before his death is very significant. Speaking in Latin, the language of the Romans, thereby reemphasising to the reader his own membership of Rome's citizen body, he points out the hypocrisy of the fact that while the Christians are accused of human sacrifice and cannibalism, something condemned by the Romans (and something which the Christians certainly do not practice), his barbaric death on a burning iron chair (which is literally cooking his flesh) essentially amounts to indulgence in this act by the governor and the rest of the audience. By distinguishing between "you" and "we" Attalus suggests that his identification as part of the Christian community trumps his identification as a Roman citizen, his rights of course currently being denied.

Because the historical details of the martyrdom of the Christians in Lyons are difficult to determine precisely from this source, we cannot know how much truth lies in Attalus's story. It seems that there are two potential options; 1) the governor presiding over the trial and execution of the Christians did in fact fail to uphold the customary death by beheading of Attalus (and/or one or more Christians found guilty); 2) Attalus's death is a fantastical account serving to make a point about the injustices the Christians faced at the hands of their persecutors. We read of the execution of Christians with Roman citizenship by beheading elsewhere in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 17, where although the citizenship of those on trial is not discussed, that they are described as being beheaded makes



this clear. Paul the Apostle also famously appealed to his Roman citizenship in order to ensure for himself a fair trial after he was arrested following unrest surrounding him within the Jewish community in Jerusalem ([Acts 21:27-40 and 22:22-29](#)), and Christian tradition holds that he eventually met his death by beheading in Rome (for example, see the apocryphal *Acts of Paul*, which states that he was decapitated at the request of Nero). While being a Roman citizen did not prevent one from being arrested and condemned to death if found to be a Christian unwilling to recant, in theory it did afford one the advantage of a quick death with more limited suffering and humiliation than those forced to contend with gruesome tortures and wild beasts. Many early Christian writers, notably the apologists of the second century CE, complained of the way in which Christians were often treated when arrested, with Roman legal procedure, they argue, frequently being undermined by governors either eager to appease those accusing Christians, or simply being uncertain how to proceed when no clear criminal charges were apparent (see, for instance, Justin Martyr, *First Apology* VII.1-5; Athenagoras of Athens, *Plea for the Christians* XXXVII). However, it seems that regardless of the ways that the Christian writers record their maltreatment during arrest and imprisonment (and of course owing to the naturally polemical tone of these writings we must allow for certain exaggerations), the rights of Roman citizens to a more merciful death were generally respected. Bearing in mind that the present *Letter* speaks of Christian Roman citizens being beheaded elsewhere, Attalus is perhaps best simply understood as an ahistorical exception.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [amphitheatre](#)
- [Gaul](#)
- [martyr](#)
- [martyrdom](#)
- [persecution](#)
- [prison](#)
- [Roman citizenship](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman governor](#)

- Bibliographical references:** Barnes, Timothy D., [Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History](#) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010)
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Keresztes, Paul, "[The Massacre at Lugdunum in 177 A.D.](#)", *Historia* 16 (1967) : 75-87

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Justin Martyr, *First Apology* LXVIII.1-LXX.4](#)

Hadrian's Rescript to Minucius Fundanus

- [Read more about Justin Martyr, *First Apology* LXVIII.1-LXX.4](#)

Text

[Acts 21:27-40 and 22:22-29](#)

Paul is seized in the Jerusalem Temple, and appeals to his Roman citizenship

- [Read more about Acts 21:27-40 and 22:22-29](#)

Text

[The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs](#)

The record of the trial of a group of Christians in Carthage

- [Read more about The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs](#)

Text

[Pliny the Younger, *Letters* X.96-97](#)

Pliny's correspondence with the Emperor Trajan regarding how to deal with Christians.

- [Read more about Pliny the Younger, *Letters* X.96-97](#)

Text

[The Martyrdom of Polycarp \(extracts\)](#)

Extracts from the Martyrdom of Polycarp

- [Read more about The Martyrdom of Polycarp \(extracts\)](#)

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