



Decius, Valerian, and the Christians



Third Century Emperors		
230s Maximinus Thrax (235-238) Magnus (235-238) Quartinus (235-238) Gordian I, II (238) Balbinus and Pupienus (238) Gordian III (238-244) 240s Sabinianus (240) Philip the Arab (244-249) Silbannacus (244-249) Sponsianus (244-249) Philip Junior (247-249) Pacatianus (248) Iotapianus (248) Decius (249-251) 250s T. Julius Priscus (250) Iulius Valens Licinianus (250) Herennius Etruscus (251) Hostilian (251) Gallus (251-253) Trebonianus Gallus (251-253) Volusianus (251-253)	Aemilius Aemilianus (253) Mareades (253-260) Valerian (253-260) Celsus (253-268) Saturninus (253-268) 260s Ingenuus (260) Regalianus (260) Macrianus Senior (260-261) Macrianus Iunior (260-261) Quietus (260-261) Piso (261) Valens (261) Ballista (261) Mussius Aemilianus (261) Memor (262) Aureolus (262, 268) Gallienus (254-268) Claudius II Gothicus (268-270) Censorinus (268-270) Claudius Gothicus (268-270) Gallic Emperors Postumus (260-269) Laelianus (269) Marius (269)	Victorinus (269-270) 270s Quintillus (270) Felicissimus (270-271?) Aurelian (270-275) Tacitus (275-276) Probus (276-282) Domitianus (271-272) Urbanus (271-272) Septimius (271-272) Vaballathus (272) Firmus (273) Tacitus (275-276) Florianus (276) Probus (276-282) Tetricus I (271-274) Faustinus (274) 280s Bonosus (280) Proculus (280-281) Saturninus (281) Carus (282-285) Carinus (282-285) Numerian (282-285)

Gaius Messius Quintus Decius A.D. 249–251



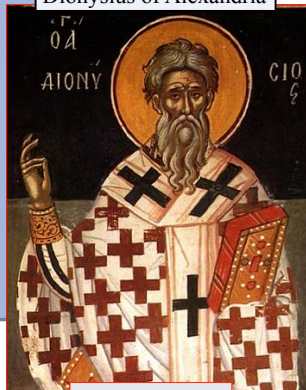
- In late autumn 249 or early 250 issued an empire wide edict
- The edict required all citizens indiscriminate of age, sex, status, race (Jews excepted), or cultic adherence to offer a sacrifice, pour a libation, and to partake of the sacrificial offerings.
- Why?
- Rome had just celebrated its 1000 anniversary the previous year (248) it may have been an especially opportune time for such a show of devotion.
- May have felt that in light of the particularly turbulent times such a collective act of piety would not only please the patron deities but hasten Rome's fortunes.
- Anti-Christian measure?

Edict of Decius

“But to resume. When Philip had reigned for seven years he was succeeded by Decius. He, on account of his enmity towards Philip, raised a persecution against the churches, in which Fabian was perfected by martyrdom at Rome, and was succeeded in the episcopate by Cornelius.”

Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.39.1

Dionysius of Alexandria



Died. c. A.D. 264–65

- Pupil of Origen
- Succeeded Heraklas as bishop c. 247
- died c. 265
- Deeply influenced by Origen in his biblical interpretations (allegorical approach)

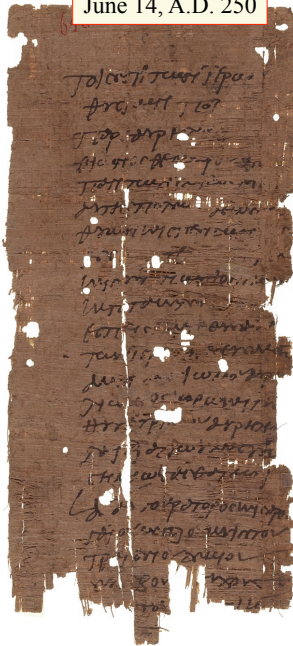
Works:

On Nature
On Promises
Refutation and Apology
Letters

Decian Libelli

- Decius required all the inhabitants of the empire indiscriminate of age, sex, religion (Jews excepted, to make an offering to the gods
 - This typically took the form offering a sacrifice, pouring a libation, and partaking of the sacrificial victim
- As proof that one had performed these actions they had to obtain a *libellus* (“petition”) where local magistrates verified the sacrificial offering(s)
- To date 46 *libelli* have been discovered in the dry sands of Egypt

P.Oxy. IV 658
June 14, A.D. 250

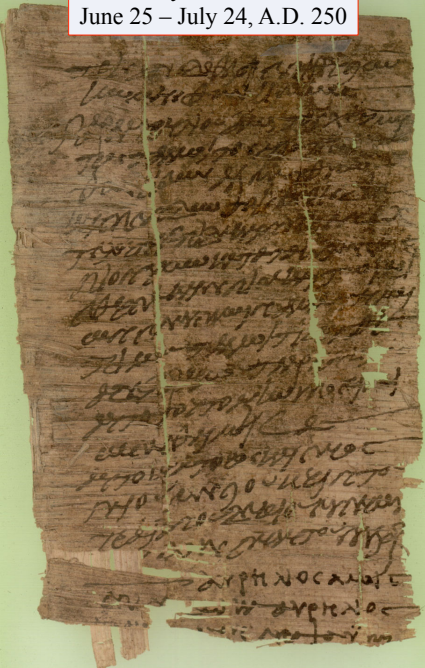


Decian Libelli

τοῖς ἐπὶ τῶν ἱερῶν [καὶ]
θυσιῶν πόλ[εως]
παρ' Αὐρηλίου Λ[.]
θίωνος Θεοδώρου μη[τρὸς]
5 Παντωνυμίδος ἀπὸ τῆ[ς]
αὐτῆς πόλεως. αἰεὶ μὲν
θύων καὶ σπένδων [τοῖ]ς
θεοῖς [δ]ιετέλ[εσα] ἔ[τι] δὲ
καὶ νῦν ἐνώπιον ὑμῶν
10 κατὰ τὰ κελευσθ[έ]ν[τα]
ἔσπεισα καὶ ἔθυσα κα[ὶ]
τῶν ἱερῶν ἐγευσάμην
ἅμα τῷ νιῷ μου Αὐρη-
λίῳ Διοσκώρῳ καὶ τῇ
15 θυγατρὶ μου Αὐρηλίᾳ
Λαίδι. ἀξιῶ ὑμᾶς ὑπ'ο/-
σημιώσασθαι μοι.
(ἔτους) α Αὐτοκράτορος Καίσαρος
Γαίου Μεσσίου Κνίντου
20 Τραιανοῦ Δεκίου
Εὐσεβοῦς [Εὐ]τυχοῦς
[Σεβασ]τοῦ [Παῦ]νι κ.
[.]ν() [-ca.?-]

To the commissioners in charge of the sacred victims and sacrifices of the city. From Aurelius L. . . thion, son of Theodorus and (l. 5) Pantonymis, his mother, of the same city. Always have I continued sacrificing and pouring libations to the gods, and now in your presence (l. 10) in accordance with what has been ordered I have poured a libation and I have sacrificed and I have tasted of the sacrifices together with my son Aurelius Dioscorus and (l. 15) my daughter Aurelia Lais. I request that you certify this for me below. Year 1 of Emperor Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus (l. 20) Traianus Decius Pius Felix Augustus. The 20th of Pauni. . . .

P.Oxy. LVIII 3929
June 25 – July 24, A.D. 250



Decian Libelli

τοῖς ἀναδοθεῖσι ἐπὶ θυσιῶ(ν)
κώμης Θώσβεως
παρὰ Αὐρήλιου Ἀμόιτος χρη(ματίζοντος) μη-
τρὸς Τααμόιτος ἀπὸ κώμης

5 Θώσβεως. αἰὲ μὲν θύων
καὶ σπένδων τοῖς θεοῖς διε-
τέλουν, ἐπὶ δὲ καὶ νῦν ἐνώ-
πιον ὑμῶν κατὰ τὰ κελευσθ(έντα)
ἔθυσσα καὶ ἔσπισσα καὶ τῶν ἱερί-

10 ων ἐγευσάμην ἅμα τῇ μη-
τρὶ μου Τααμόιτι καὶ τῇ
ἀδελφῇ μου Τααρπαῖσις,
αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἀξιώ ὑποσημι-
ώσασθαί μοι. (ἔτους) α

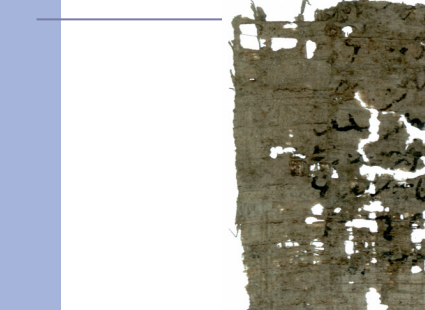
15 Αὐτοκράτορος Καίσαρος
Γαίου Μεσσίου Κνίντου
Τραιανοῦ Δεκίου Εὐσεβοῦ[ς]
[Εὐ]τυχοῦς Σεβαστοῦ, Επεῖφ . [-ca.?-]
—— (hand 2) Αὐρήλιος Ἀμόις

20 ἐπιδέδωκα. Αὐρήλιος
... [. . .] ἰων ἐγραψα ὑπὲρ

To the commissioners of sacrifices of the village of Thosbis, from Aurelius Amais officially known as the son of his mother Taamais from the village (l. 5) of Thosbis. Always have I continued sacrificing and pouring libations to the gods, and now in your presence in accordance with what has been ordered I have sacrificed and I have poured a libation and (l. 10) I have tasted of the sacrifices together with my mother Taamais and my sister Taharpaesis, and I request that you certify this for me below. Year 1 of (l. 15) Imperator Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Traianus Decius, Pius Felix Augustus, Epeiph . . . (second hand) I, Aurelius Amais, (l. 20) have submitted (the application). I, Aurelius . . . ion, wrote on his behalf . . . (Verso, first hand?) Registration of Amais, mother Taamais.

Decian Libelli

P.Oxy. LXI 2990



[Α]ὐρ(ήλιος) Ἡρακλ[ε]ίδη[ς]
εἶδον ὑμᾶς θύοντας
καὶ γενομένους.

(hand 2) Μ(άρκος) Αὐ(ρήλιος) Σεσονγῶσις
καὶ ὡς χρηματίζω εἶδον
5 ὑμᾶς θύοντας καὶ {γε}
γευσαμένους
τῶν ἱερείων.

... I, Aurelius Heraclides, have seen you (pl.) sacrificing and tasting. I, Marcus Aurelius Sesongosis, (l. 5) and however I am styled, have seen you (pl.) sacrificing and tasting of the sacrifices.

Edict of Decius

But to resume. When Philip had reigned for seven years he was succeeded by Decius. He, on account of his enmity towards Philip, raised a persecution against the churches, in which Fabian was perfected by martyrdom at Rome, and was succeeded in the episcopate by Cornelius.

Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.39.1

From Christian sources it becomes evident that the edict wreaked havoc on the Church. Dionysius of Alexandria in a letter to Fabian, bishop of Antioch, dramatically describes the effects of the edict on the Church once it began to be implemented in Alexandria:

The edict arrived, and it was almost like that which was predicted by our Lord, well-nigh the most terrible of all, so as, if possible, to cause to stumble even the elect. Howsoever that be, all cowered with fear. And of many of the more eminent persons, some came forward immediately through fear, others in public positions were compelled to do so by their business, and others were dragged by those around them. Called by name they approached the impure and holy sacrifices, some pale and trembling, as if they were not for sacrificing but rather to be themselves the sacrifices and victims to the idols, so that the large crowd that stood around heaped mockery upon them, and it was evident that they were by nature cowards in everything, cowards both to die and to sacrifice. But others ran eagerly towards the altars, affirming by their forwardness that they had not been Christians even formerly; concerning whom the Lord very truly predicted that they shall hardly be saved. Of the rest, some followed one or other of these, others fled; some were captured, and of these some went as far as bonds and imprisonment, and certain, when they had been shut up for many days, then forswore themselves even before coming into court, while others, who remained firm for a certain time under tortures, subsequently gave in (**Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.10–13**).

Valerian
253–260



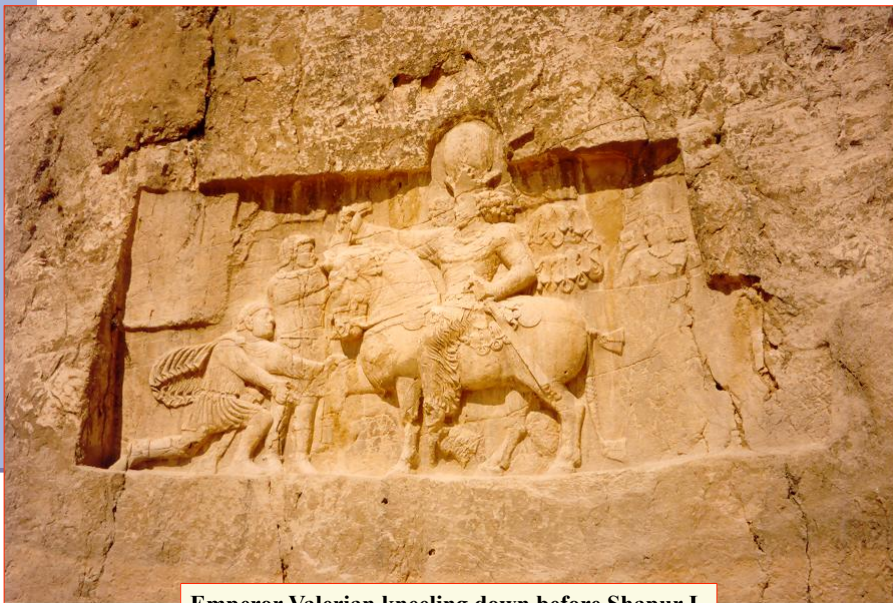
Edict 1

recognoscere romanas ceremonias
(acknowledge the Roman ceremonies, i.e. religious ceremonies) under penalty of banishment, Christian cannot gather together in churches or meet in cemeteries

Edict 2

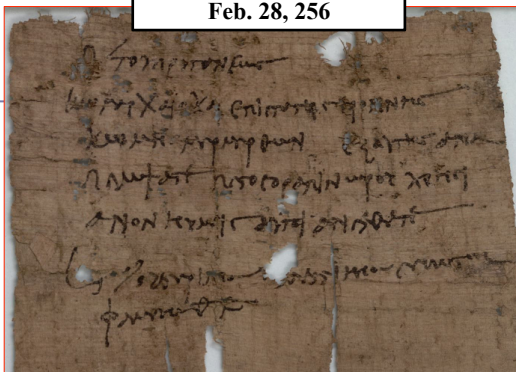
Christians from the upper classes were required to forfeit their property, and if they persisted in the Christian faith they were to be executed.

bishops, priests, and deacons were to be “*in continenti animaduertantur*” (punished immediately).



Emperor Valerian kneeling down before Shapur I

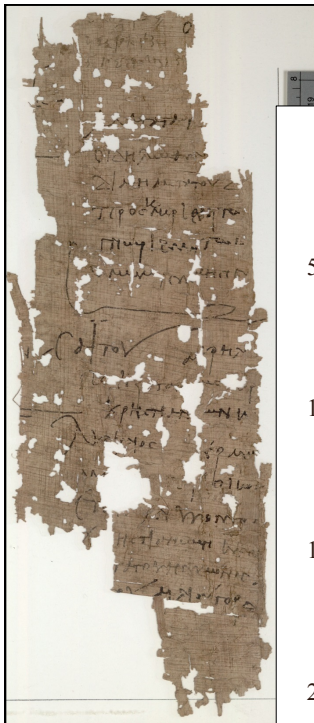
P.Oxy. XLII 3035
Feb. 28, 256



π(αρά) τοῦ πρυτάνεως
κωμάρχαις καὶ ἐπιστάταις εἰρήνης
κώμης Μερμέρθων. ἐξαυτῆς ἀνα-
πέμψατε Πετοσαράπιν Ὁρου χρισ<τ>ι-
ανόν, ἢ ὑμεῖς αὐτοὶ ἀνέλθατε.
(ἔτους) 3 Οὐαλεριανοῦ καὶ Γαλλιηνοῦ Σεβαστῶν
Φαμενώθ 3.

From the *prytanis* to the *komarchs* and overseers of peace of the village of Mermertha. Immediately send up Petosorapis son of Horus, a Chresianios (i.e. Christian), (l. 5) or you yourselves come up. Year 3 of Valerian and Gallienus Augusti. Phamenoth 3.

P.Oxy. XLIII 3119



ο[-ca.?-]
 [-ca.?-]
 [-ca.?-]
 [-ca.?-]
 5 μετὰ τὰ . . [-ca.?-]
 οἱ δηλωθεν[-ca.?-]
 διασημοτάτου δ[-ca.?-]
 προσκ/εκρίσθαι τῷ [-ca.?-]
 γνώριζε ἐν τῷ . [-ca.?-]
 10 ὁ ἐκομισάμην γρ[-ca.?-]
 (ἔτους) ζ [-ca.?-]
 Σαΐτου. Αὐρηλί[ου Ἑρμε-]
 περὶ ἐξετάσ[ε]ως . . ρ[-ca.?-]
 Χριστιανῶν κ. [-ca.?-]
 15 Αὐρήλιος Ἑρμε. [-ca.?-]
 . . . [. . .] π[ε]ρὶ οἴκῳ. [-ca.?-]
 ἐπὶ τῶν ὑπογεγρα[-ca.?-]
 Χ[ρ]ηστιανῶν κελευ[-ca.?-]
 [. .] τατου ἡγεμόνος . [-ca.?-]
 20 [. .] ου Αἰλίου Γορδι[ανοῦ -ca.?-]

(ll. 6–11) . . . Those
 declaring . . . of the most
 eminent d[e]puty prefect
 (L. Mussius
 Aemilianus) . . .] to
 adjudge . . . know
 (imperative) . . . (l. 10)
 that I received (a
 letter ?) . . . year 7. (ll.
 12–20) From the Saite
 nome, Aurelius
 [Herme ? . . .]
 concerning the
 inspection of assets . . .
 Christians . . . (l. 15)
 Aurelius Herme[. . .]
 concerning
 (buildings ?) . . .
 underwritten . . .
 Christians, ordered . . .
 prefect . . . (l. 20) Aelius
 Gordianus . . .



Cyprian, Bishop Of Carthage
 c. 200 – 258

- **Bishop of Carthage from c. 248 – 258**
- Episcopacy primarily dealt with the aftermath of various persecutions
- Wrote a number of letters that are still extant, details church administration in the middle of the third century
- Wrote treatises *On the Lapsed*, *On the Unity of the Church*, *On the Lord's Prayer*
- Was martyred in A.D. 258 during the persecution of Valerian; a martyrdom relating the events of his execution is still extant (*Acta Proconsularia Sancti Cypriani*)