

The Early Christians. What the Ancients thought of them.



The Plinys—Two Roman Gentlemen.

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, or Pliny the Younger, was the nephew of Gaius Plinius Secundus (AD 23 – August 25, AD 79.) Pliny the elder was a naturalist, author and a naval and army commander. He died when his rescue ship failed to escape the eruption of Vesuvius that destroyed both Pompeii and Herculaneum, August 24, 19 AD. Pliny the Younger wrote a moving account of the eruption and of his uncle's heroic rescue efforts.



Pliny the Younger (61-c.113) was a lawyer by profession, but soon rose in rank in the service of several successive emperors. He was known as an honest man. His many surviving letters have helped scholars to reconstruct the world he knew. While he was Roman governor of Bithynia-Pontus (now in modern Turkey) he wrote his famous letter to Emperor Trajan around 112 AD concerning dealing with Christians.

Letter to An Emperor

“Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. [Those that were Roman citizens he transferred to Rome.] . . . Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image . . . and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged. Others . . . declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. . . They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. . . Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

Above: Ruins of Pompeii with a smoking Vesuvius in the background. Below: Pliny the Younger's villa at Tifernum

The ancients considered Christians to be “atheists”—men who denied the gods and the worship due to them. Even worse, Christians did not observe the religious traditions protected by the State, and, for the Romans especially, tradition was what stabilized a civilized society and must be preserved.

Christians Fight Back— Using the Pen, Not the Sword



Origen Adamantius, (184/185 – 253/254) theologian, and Aulus Cornelius Celsus, (c.25-c.50) scholar.

Origen's Contra Celsum Celsus, was a second century Greek philosopher and opponent of Christianity. We know of him chiefly through the work of the Egyptian Christian theologian Origen, whose work, *Contra Celsum*, originally contained the words of Celsus which Origen sought to discredit. Today we have only Origen's text.

Celsus held that "the following are the rules laid down by them. (The Christians) Let no one come to us who has been instructed, or who is wise or prudent (for such qualifications are deemed evil by us); but if there be any ignorant, or unintelligent, or uninstructed, or foolish persons, let them come with confidence. By which words, acknowledging that such individuals are worthy of their God, they manifestly show that they desire and are able to gain over only the silly, and the mean, and the stupid, with women and children."



Tertullian (Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus,) c. 160 – c. 225 AD, one of the Ante-Nicene Fathers from Carthage, North Africa, fearlessly took up his pen to write among many other works, an *Apology for Christians*, *Against Marcion*, and *Prescription Against Heresies*.



Porphyry of Tyre (c. 234-c.305 AD), wrote Adversus Christianos. He was a pupil of the philosopher Plotinus, and published The Enneads, the only collection of the work of his former teacher:

"How can people not be in every way impious and atheistic who have apostatized from the customs of our ancestors through which every nation and city is sustained? ... What else are they than fighters against God?"

Above: Porphyry, the Neo-Platonist philosopher detail from an imaginary debate between Averroes (1126-1198), the Berber philosopher from Cordoba and Porphyry.

Augustine believed that Porphyry was once a Christian.

Sighs of Relief as Times Change With the Emperors

April 30, 311. The Emperor Galerius (Tetrarchy of Galerius, Constantine and Licinius) issued the Edict of Toleration of Christians from Sardica and posted it at Nicomedia This ended the Diocletian persecution.

“Christians may exist again and may arrange their own conventicals, yet so as that they do nothing contrary to public order.”

February, 313. Letter of Constantine and Licinius (co-emperors), the so-called “Edict of Milan.”

“We have resolved that there should be ordained those matters by which reverence for the Divinity was contained, that we should concede both to Christians and to all an unrestricted possibility of following which religion each one had wished . . .”

Contrary to many popular television “documentaries” Constantine did not establish Christianity as the official religion of his empire. This did not occur until forty-three years after his death.

February 17, 380. Edict of Thessalonica by Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius I on establishment of the Catholic religion (“Cultos populos.”)

“All peoples, whom the moderation of our Clemency rules, we wish to be engaged in that religion . . . by the religion which has descended even to the from him (Peter) . . . We order those following this law (Christianity) to assume the name of Catholic Christians . . .”

(You can read the complete wording of these documents in P. R. Coleman-Norton’s, *Roman State and Christian Church*, Vol. I.)

Right: Emperors who legislated for Christianity: (From the top) Galerius, Gratian, Licinius, Valentinian I and Theodosius I.

Parishioner David de Camp suggested the idea for this article.

