Discipline and Diet: Feeding the Martyrs in Roman Carthage*

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Thus the Christian may enter prison just as though leaving it—experiencing not a punishment, but discipline.
—Tertullian, On Fasting

Although few Christians were likely to suffer the most violent consequences of persecution under the Roman Empire,¹ the experiences of those imprisoned, tortured, or killed were significant far beyond the lives of the individuals concerned. These living martyrs took on a significance that was important for the whole of Christian identity, becoming spiritual patrons dispensing grace, or exemplars of an alternative mode of life.²

¹This paper was written for the Brown University Seminar on Culture and Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean in April 2002. My thanks to Susan Ashbrook Harvey for that invitation, and to participants there and at two further presentations in 2002 (the North American Patristics Society Annual Meeting in May, and a colloquium at the United Faculty of Theology, Melbourne, in August) for critical and encouraging comments. I am particularly grateful for close readings by Lawrence Wills and Joan Branham, and for the substantial responses from two anonymous readers for HTR (particularly the first reader).


³“Martyr” at this time includes those who suffer but do not (yet) die. Other and especially later sources distinguish between “confessors” (those accused or imprisoned) and “martyrs” (those who died). Compare, however, Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 5.1.11, 5.2.3–4.

If it is clear that Christians at large viewed those incarcerated with curiosity, awe, and compassion, it may be more surprising to find that they were also deeply concerned about what and how much their imprisoned associates were eating. Accounts of imprisoned Christians in places as far apart as Gaul and Syria indicate that, during the late second and early third centuries, food was fundamental to the process whereby prisoners became figures not so much of pity but of power, and exerted an influence on Christian identity that was to extend beyond even the time of persecution. North Africa is an especially rich source of information from this period, not just about the feeding of prisoners, but for the controversy that the practice provoked among Christians. Through attention to evidence such as the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas and the writings of Tertullian, this study explores how and why some Carthaginian Christians preferred to feed the martyrs and feed them well, while others sought not just to preserve the martyrs’ bodies, but also to preserve the hunger that helped bestow authority upon them. These contrasting attitudes to the diet of prisoners nonetheless share two features: a view of the martyr as symbolically important for the whole church in the present, and a desire to cultivate the bodies of the prisoners for the future ordeal of torture and death. These alternative strategies for the nourishment of prisoners demonstrate that the question of appropriate eating and drinking touches on the very nature of the church itself and its relation to the persecuting empire.

Prison

Ancient Roman prisons were not corrective institutions or places of indefinite detention, but sites for immediate and active punishment, and of transition between arrest and trial or execution. Although sometimes circumstances (including actions taken against Christians) may have given rise to a de facto use of imprisonment as an actual penalty, and certainly many of those imprisoned were later released, detention was generally the necessary assumption of other processes rather than an end in itself.

Given the combination of the ad hoc and the vindictive that comprised this system, some of the accompanying experiences of the Roman prison were horrific, if more or less inherent in confinement in the crowded, dank spaces that seem to have been typical. Chains, darkness, and odors are most prominent among these

3The experience of the martyrs of Lyons and Lucian’s account of the imprisonment of Peregrinus Proteus may conveniently indicate the range of the evidence.

4Jens-Uwe Krause, Gefängnisse im Römischen Reich (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1996) 1.

5Ulpian in the Digests (48.19.8.9) reflects the view that “Prison ought to be used for restraining people, not for punishing them.” The necessity of making this point indicates that it was not universally followed.

more or less incidental features, and are often mentioned together in contemporary accounts. Other more active strictures were added, most obviously judicial torture. Thus, the mere fact that many of those imprisoned later walked free did not mean that they had escaped punishment through malign neglect, or “served time”; to be in a prison was itself active and passive punishment for the body. This was punishment as “an art of unbearable sensations,” as Michel Foucault put it, rather than the “economy of suspended rights” more familiar in modern times.

This important and acknowledged contrast between ancient and more recent practices of imprisonment also indicates, however, that the realities of ancient custodia are not adequately described or understood simply through an account of the role of the state in punishment. If ancient prisons and penalties were potentially spectacular in the extent of their violence or neglect, they were often less coherent, predictable, or all-encompassing in their function than their successors. The prominence of death and torture in martyr accounts ought not to obscure the complexity of social relationships and benefits, including those of participation in the Christian community, that might continue to operate for the ancient prisoner.

Roman law itself allowed for vastly different experiences of prison, decreeing, in theory, different forms of punishment depending on the social standing of the prisoner. Although traditional status distinctions were perhaps becoming increasingly irrelevant to penal practice during the Severan period (193–235 C.E.), the conditions of imprisonment may still often have varied according to the prisoner’s economic power. Detention could take forms ranging from the placement of restrictions on

“It is dark, but you yourselves are light; it has chains, but God has made you free. There it smells bad, but you are an aroma of sweetness” (Tertullian, Mart. 2.4). Compare Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.1.35 (from the Letter of the churches of Vienne and Lyons), where the deprivations are implicitly described in another account of reversal; the martyrs went into the arena “rejoicing, glory and grace being blended in their faces, so that even their bonds seemed like beautiful ornaments, as those of a bride adorned with variegated golden fringes; and they were perfumed with the sweet savour of Christ, so that some supposed they had been anointed with earthly ointment” (translation, NPNF 1:215).

Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (trans. Alan Sheridan; New York: Pantheon, 1977) 11. It is worth noting that “modern” here is specifically applicable to the Western/industrialized world and its practices. In other contemporary settings, particularly in the developing world, imprisonment and its relation to other forms of punishment may well seem at times to be more closely related to practices otherwise seen as characteristicly “ancient.” Discourses of “martyrdom” may well be prominent in non-Western settings today; see, for example, the essays in Martyrdom Today (Consilium; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983); Alfred McCoy, Priests on Trial (Ringwood, Australia: Penguin, 1984), esp. 206–50; and Lois Ann Lorenzen, “Writing for Liberation: Prison Testimonials from El Salvador,” in Liberation Theologies, Postmodernity, and the Americas (New York: Routledge, 1997) 128–47.

Custodia and vincula should be distinguished from forms of forced labor or penal servitude. See Peter Garnsey, Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970) 131–36; and in general now Krause, Gefangnisse.

Barnes, Tertullian, 147–48. Although Barnes notes the decreasing significance of the honestiores
the detainee’s movement and a demand for the provision of guarantors to more and less horrific forms of actual imprisonment. The wealthier or better-supported might even hope for *libera custodia*, a term that could refer both to “house arrest” and to less unpleasant forms of accommodation in an actual *carcer*. The evidence from both literary and archaeological evidence suggests that even in a given prison there might be different spaces, with varying conditions and ease of access for visitors and commodities, which could be allocated to prisoners. The actual conditions of *custodia* also depended not only on initial sentence and the venue of its execution, but also on jailers and supporters and their continuing interaction, most obviously through bribery. Jailers could increase their income by controlling access to prisoners and by restricting the flow of food and other goods to them.

Here then, the arbitrary or piecemeal functioning of the ancient prison is evident, and important. Punishment in this setting found ulimacy when it involved the permanence of marking or destroying the body, rather than by detaining it indefinitely or controlling it immediately and completely. Imprisonment did not involve totalizing control over the body, but allowed certain forms of social relations to remain functional, if in an attenuated sense. Thus it is not only the general character of the ancient prison as an arena of social control, but also the variety of responses that could be made to it, that invite exploration of ancient incarceration and its conditions.

2 Feeding the Martyrs

Hunger and thirst were prominent among the privations of imprisonment, and typically were also among the conditions that supporters of the prisoners sought to mitigate. Although authorities sometimes provided a *diaria* or ration for the support of prisoners, it was usually possible and often necessary for families or friends to maintain them. Hence, the privilege of receiving food from outside

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to whom Perpetua belongs, she in any case loses the family ties that afforded her the social status attributed to her at the beginning of the narrative.

Krause, Gefängnisse, 186–88. Philostratus (Vit. Apoll. 7.22) speaks of Apollonius of Tyana being in a “free prison” (Ἐλευθερία... ἑξουσία). The relevance of these issues to the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* is discussed below.


See *Martyrium Pionii* 11.3 (on appropriation of food gifts); Lucian, *Tax. 30*; *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 18. Those guarding Perpetua and her companions are bribed to allow temporary relief in the form of better conditions: *Pass. Perp. 3.7*.

Krause, Gefängnisse, 279–83.

See Seneca the Elder, *Controv. 9.4.20*.

See Pilar Pavón, “Régimen de vida y tratamiento del preso durante los primeros siglos del
the prison, while subject to restrictions, was not abnormal or remarkable.\textsuperscript{17} Such maintenance was not only an obvious benefit to prisoners; it also relieved the prison authorities of responsibility for their support.

The ties that might otherwise have provided material support for Christian prisoners may often have been jeopardized, less by imprisonment itself than by conversion. Existing family structures—the most obvious source of assistance—may well have been disrupted for many by their declared allegiance to the Church.\textsuperscript{18} The North African martyr Perpetua is herself depicted as ending her roles as both daughter and mother during her trial and time in prison (6.1–8).\textsuperscript{19} It is thus not surprising to find the martyrs actually being fed by other members of the church. Whether organized and community-led, or spontaneous and individual, such feeding was more than a conglomeration of personal acts of compassion, but the functioning of a community or family substituted for that compromised by conversion.\textsuperscript{20}

Just a few years before Perpetua's experience, the Christian author Tertullian had addressed a group of Carthaginian prisoners in terms of kinship, describing the offerings of their supporters as "the food for the body... which Lady Mother Church from her fruitful breasts, and each brother from his own means, provided for your needs in prison" (\textit{Ad Martyras} 1.1).\textsuperscript{21} Feeding the martyrs was thus a sort of family affair, the dietary construction or expression of relations already inherent in the formation of the Church, but rendered more concrete through the necessity of imprisonment.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{18} See Josephus, \textit{A.J.} 18.204, on the treatment of Herod Agrippa by Macro.
\textsuperscript{19} Of course, the circumstances of imprisoned Christians may also have depended on their social status and power in the broader sense, and not just on the new status of "martyr." Yet the accounts considered here, whether positive or critical, Christian or pagan, all emphasize the profound impact of the Christian feeding strategies. Whether these changes in status and power affected the \textit{matrona} Perpetua and the \textit{conserva} Felicitas differently remains an interesting but perhaps unanswerable question.
\textsuperscript{20} Perpetua is still depicted, however, as a sister of two brothers. Although one specific set of family dynamics is too little evidence on which to build a case, this may suggest that relations of descent and paternity were more threatened by Christian allegiance, including the refusal to sacrifice; see Nancy Jay, \textit{Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
\textsuperscript{21} Noted, and explored somewhat in this same connection, by Karl Olav Sandnes, \textit{A New Family: Conversion and Ecclesiology in the Early Church with Cross-Cultural Comparisons} (Berm: Peter Lang, 1994) 165–70; and now also more fully by Joseph H. Hellerman, \textit{The Ancient Church as Family} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 168–82.
\textsuperscript{22} CCSL 1:3; noted also by Hellerman, \textit{The Ancient Church as Family}, 172–73.
This could be an organized procedure coordinated by deacons, who according to the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas actually arrange for the movement of the prisoners into a better area so they can be fed. Yet individuals also seem to have participated somehow in feeding the martyrs, either as regular acts of piety or for specific ends, even taking from their own plates and cups at home to bring food into the prison, perhaps for a form of communal meal. Tertullian’s description of their provision as the work of both ecclesia mater and of various frates might correspond to more institutional and spontaneous aspects of this quasi-familial support.

Christians do seem to have shared the hopes of other prisoners for the improvement or alleviation of their condition. In the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, set in Carthage in 203 C.E., the dreams and visions of Christian prisoners reverse the violence, deprivation, and especially the hunger experienced in prison, invoking space, light, human community and, most strikingly, attractive things to eat and drink. Each of Perpetua’s visions includes a prize of food or drink won in circumstances evocative of her actual setting and its demands. She sees herself eating a sacramental morsel of cheese that tastes like honey, found in a garden at the top of the ladder adorned with instruments of torture (4.9); then she envisages the provision of drinking water for her dead brother, who languishes in a place of eternal detention (8.2); and finally she dreams of a branch of golden apples granted to the victor in a gladiatorial contest (10.8–9).

The provision of food for the martyrs thus seems to have been a common hope or shared expectation among members of the Carthaginian Church, in and out of prison. These practices reflected a shared goal of lessening the suffering of the imprisoned, or even maintaining for them some degree of normality in social relations and material conditions. They also indicated the importance of the ties within the Christian community, which were comparable to those familial or other relations upon which prisoners in general would have relied for support.

Tertullian and the Diet of the Martyrs

If the provision of food for the martyrs was a shared expectation or assumption, there were nonetheless considerable differences within the Carthaginian Christian community as to the specifics: what food, and how much. Controversy over the

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Ethnicity in Paul’s Letters” (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2002). I am grateful to the author for providing access to this work.

33See Pass. Perp. 3.7

34Tertullian says that the martyrs were cared for per curam ecclesiae et agapen fratrum. Agape seems to allude not only to virtue, but also to the community meals given this name, described at Apol. 39.16 and referred to also in Pass. Perp. 17.1.

35Salisbury, Perpetua’s Passion, 86.
diet of the imprisoned was at least partly related to the tension within the church at Carthage over the influence of the ascetically-inclined New Prophecy, the movement otherwise known as Montanism. The most direct evidence for the dietary difficulties comes from Tertullian, whose writings, we shall see, document the tension and chronicle a personal development toward the New Prophecy, as well as providing some indications of just what and how the martyrs were actually being fed.

Although his own position became more acutely and overtly Montanist over time, works from the very beginning and end of Tertullian’s surviving literary output actually reflect a fairly consistent concern about how the imprisoned Christians ought to be fed. The brief treatise *To the Martyrs*, already cited, was written as a sort of discursive dietary supplement, a literary version of the food parcels being brought into the prison, occasioned by his perception that the generous material rations furnished to the imprisoned were not matched by forms of spiritual sustenance. Having referred to the material provision of the Church for their bodily needs, Tertullian urges the martyrs to “accept also from me some contribution to your spiritual edification; for it is not good that the flesh be feasted and the spirit starve. Indeed, if what is weak is looked after, what is weaker should not be neglected.” Tertullian goes on to suggest a reversal in proper understanding of the outward or apparent circumstances of the imprisoned Christians. Fetters, darkness, and foul odors are illusory, he says; the real tortures are those of the inner self, and the wider world the real prison. Yet Tertullian does not actually mention food among the strictures that must be endured and reinterpreted in these somewhat Stoicizing terms, despite his packaging of the work itself as a literary picnic basket. The reason for this omission seems to be that the diet of these particular prisoners was not at all bad, as he had already implied in his introductory plea for a more balanced diet of bodily and spiritual nutrition.

The suspicion that the catering arrangements in the prison might even be an active embarrassment to Tertullian is also hinted at as he pursues a positive interpretation of incarceration as *askesis*, or training, through the treatise. He compares the privations of *custodia* to two obvious occupations and their expected lifestyles: the rigors endured by soldiers on campaign, and the demands on athletes in training. Only in the latter case, however, does he mention food and drink as part of the comparison. The athlete, Tertullian says, would indeed hold back from “richer

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26 An early date is uncontroversial. *Ad Martyras* is dated first of all the extant works (i.e., before early 197 c.e.) by C. Becker and others (see Tertullian’s Apologeticum: Werden und Leistung [Munich: Kosel, 1954] 350–54, and CCSL 2:1627–8); Barnes (*Tertullian*, 32–33, 55) dates the text to 197 c.e., but he assigns five other treatises to the previous year.

27 *Mart.* 1:3; CCSL 1:3.

food and more pleasant drink." The discipline of the athlete, moderate or ascetic in eating habits, was a worthy model to offer as a corrective to the imprisoned, whose food and drink, Tertullian seems to imply, are richer and more pleasant than was appropriate. By contrast, Tertullian makes no correlation between prison fare and the food of the soldier. This may well be because a conventional military diet was neither moderate, nor meatless in particular. In fact soldiers were proverbial devourers of meat, probably the epitome of the "rich food" that had to be avoided, and perhaps much in evidence in the food brought to the prisoners. Tertullian's omission suggests that he was being careful to offer the dietary element of one model or metaphor, but not the other.

Thus, it seems that even before the obvious influence of the New Prophecy on the Carthaginian Church, there were two approaches to the feeding of the martyrs, one based on abundance and the other more ascetic. Tertullian was already a representative of a critique, if a relatively mild one, of the way the prisoners were being fed.

Perhaps fifteen years afterward, and certainly after the impact of the events recounted in the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, the ascetic ideal and the contrasting reality of abundant prison food are both rendered far more starkly in Tertullian's work On Fasting against the Psychics. In this later text, Tertullian is primarily concerned to defend the character and duration of Montanist fasts, and particularly the complete abstinence from meat and wine favored by adherents of the New Prophecy; nevertheless, the diet of martyrs remains a central issue. For Tertullian, the quantitative and qualitative issues of fasting are epitomized in the eating habits of prisoners themselves, and so the martyrs' diets are crucial to establishing the way others will fast.

Addressing now not the fed martyrs but the feeding church, or at least the more accommodating Christian opponents ("psychici") of the New Prophecy, Tertullian describes the potential of prison as a training regime more fulsomely:

For the prison must become familiar to us, hunger and thirst practiced, and tolerance both for the absence of food and for anxiety about it grasped. Thus the Christian may enter prison just as though leaving it—experiencing not a punishment, but discipline, and not the world's tortures, but his own habits; and to go out from custody to battle more confidently, with no misuse of the flesh, so that the tortures have nothing to work on, since he is armored sim-

29Mart. 3.4; CCSL 1:6.
30See Mirielle Corbier, "The Ambiguous Status of Meat in Ancient Rome," Food and Foodways 3 (1989) 229. Others claimed that athletes also needed meat; see Porphyry, Abst. 2.4.3.
31See further below regarding Tertullian's discussion of meat and wine in On Fasting, against the Psychics.
32Again, there is no great controversy on date; 213 C.E. (CCSL 2:1628) and 210/11 C.E. (Barnes, Tertullian, 55) have been proposed.
ply with dry skin, and toughened against the claws, the succulence of blood already having been sent ahead as the soul’s baggage. And the soul itself is now on the way, it having already, by frequent fasting, come to know death at first hand.\textsuperscript{33}

Some elements of contrast between earlier and later pictures of the diet of the martyrs are striking enough—compare “fruitful breasts” in \textit{To the Martyrs} with “dry skin” here in \textit{On Fasting}, for instance. Yet there are common elements that survive Tertullian’s Montanist radicalization. The bold and lean hypothetical martyr of this later work, who has sent precious bodily fluids ahead to heaven as checked baggage, is an uncompromising expansion of the ascetic athlete evoked years earlier. Unease about balancing the inner and outer life of the prisoner has now become a rousing call to all Carthaginian Christians to arm themselves inwardly and outwardly for the role of the prisoner, presented as of significance for all—an understandable development after the events of 203 C.E. This is, then, not a wholly new position, but a more acute and clearly articulated one.

That sketch in \textit{On Fasting} of an uncompromising stark ideal, intended primarily for those still outside prison, is immediately followed by a startling and bitter description of a very different reality inside, still addressed to the compromised bearers of food parcels for the prisoners:

Your practice is obviously to provide cook-shops (\textit{popinas}) in the prisons for unreliable martyrs, in case they miss their usual comforts, tire of life, and stumble over the novel discipline of abstinence, with which not even Pristinus—your martyr, not a Christian one—had ever had contact. He had long been stuffed, thanks to “free custody” (\textit{libera custodia}), and I suspect owed money to all the bathhouses (as if they were better than baptism, and to all the haunts of excess (as if they were more secret than the Church), and to all the enticements of this life (as if they were worthier than those of eternal life). Since he was unwilling to die, at noon on the last day of trial you premedicated him with doctored wine as an antidote.\textsuperscript{34} He was so completely enervated that on being tickled—for his intoxication made it feel like that—with a few claws, he was no longer able to tell the magistrate interrogating him just whom he confessed to be Lord. Put on the rack as a result, when he could only manage hicups and belches, he expired in the very act of denial. So—this is why they who preach sobriety are “pseudo prophets,” and why those who practice it are “heretics”? Why hold back from believing that the Paraclete, whom you deny in Montanus, was present in Apicius?\textsuperscript{35}

Again, Tertullian presents a picture that is more sharply etched, rather than entirely new. Just as the picture of the ideal ascetic has been developed from athletic meta-

\textsuperscript{33}Jejun. 12.2; CCSL 2:1270–71.
\textsuperscript{34}See also \textit{Passio Fructuosii} 3.
\textsuperscript{35}Jejun. 12.3–4; CCSL 2:1271.
phor into a more concrete model of the fasting Christian, so too the vague unease about insufficient deprivation expressed in To the Martyrs has now been cast in the specific person of Pristinus in On Fasting. This stuffed and premedicated pseudo-martyr represents not just an individual moral downfall, but a whole strategy of cultivating the martyrs through satiation, which Tertullian now not only seeks to correct or balance, but actively and acerbically to reject.

Tertullian's works thus support one of two tendencies with regard to feeding the martyrs, but provide some details of both. If his discourse provides the rationale for cultivating the martyrs through a strategy of asceticism, he also illustrates aspects of a strategy of abundance in his criticism thereof. Each of these dietary positions requires some further description and elucidation, and to these tasks we now turn.

The Strategy of Abundance: Martyrs as Patrons

It is clear enough that some prisoners were fed abundantly by Christian supporters, and how. Less immediately evident, from Tertullian’s own description of a Pristinus, is why. Closer attention to the specifics of the abundant feeding to which Tertullian objected indicates that the martyrs were viewed as powerful figures capable of bestowing “peace” in a variety of forms, to the living and the dead. This form of unequal reciprocity is readily comprehensible in terms of the systems of patronage or clientelae prevalent in Roman society; here food, as often, was a key element in cultivating these patrons.36

Tertullian’s early discomfort about the insufficiently grave state of the martyrs’ physical diet, and the actual fact and presentation of his treatise To the Martyrs as a literary dish, already revealed something of the passionate attention given to imprisoned Christians by their supporters. This was not culinary service alone; Tertullian provides more details in another work—To My Wife—composed in the interval between To the Martyrs and On Fasting.37 He asks what opportunities a Christian woman married to an unbeliever might find to serve the martyrs:

Who will allow her to creep into prison to kiss a martyr’s chains? Or for that matter to gather with any of the brethren for “the kiss,” or to bring water for the saints’ feet, to try to grab something from her food or drink, or to keep them in mind?38

In To the Martyrs, Tertullian had referred to feeding practice in order to make his own point about spiritual edification, without being particularly supportive of that

37Always dated before Tertullian's tendency towards Montanism becomes evident, hence before 203/4 C.E.; see Barnes, Tertullian, 54–55.
38Ux. 2.4; CCSL 1:389. See also Acts of Paul and Thecla 18.
practice. Similarly, in To My Wife he lists various pious performances, including
the feeding of martyrs, merely as examples of the constraints on the mismatched
woman, without giving reason to think that he himself advocated or participated
in those actions. That such actions took place, however, particularly as part of
the strategy of abundant feeding, is clear enough. 39 Food gifts—sometimes of a more
attractive and larger character than mere table scraps, it seems—were thus a central
commodity in an economy of service and attention.

Why all this attention, and all this food in particular? The mere physical neces-
sity of having food and drink is not to be separated from the symbolic and religious
importance of gifts of this kind, and of eating and drinking in general. Moreover,
gifts of food and drink play a particularly important role in establishing and reflect-
ing power relations. 40 In other ancient settings, a client might dine with a patron as
either guest or host, and even when the philosophical tradition of supposed equality
of diners really was maintained in dining practice, the tradition of supposed equality
involved in being hospes could actually be invoked as a medium for the transmis-
sion of messages about power and dependence. Giving and receiving food in the
context of patronage systems, whether at a meal or beyond, was clearly significant,
and sometimes ambiguous.

Food gifts, like meals themselves, could convey and establish either the donor’s
dependence upon the recipient, or the donor’s power over the recipient, and while
that ambiguity again might be part of their usefulness in the subtle structuring of
social relations, close attention to other actions associated with them is necessary
to establish just what relations and what power are expressed. Even under less
strenuous circumstances than these, food gifts were a means of offering hospitality
and service, sometimes a way of extending a meal and the importance of inclusion
in it to those not able to be present. 41 At times the giver might be expressing or
reinforcing a claim to power, as well as of affinity or inclusion; yet food was also
brought to patrons by clients. The reciprocity of this shared eating and drinking
was not straightforward. 42 While food gifts could in theory be largesse or tribute,

39The picture that the satirist Lucian draws of Peregrinus Proteus, imprisoned as a (temporary)
Christian somewhat earlier in Syria, confirms the general sense of devotion or attention, and the
specific emphasis on plentiful and valuable food: “from the very break of day aged widows and
orphan children could be seen waiting near the prison, while their officials even slept inside with
him after bribing the guards. Then elaborate meals were brought in, and sacred books of theirs were
read aloud” (Peregr. 12; trans. A. M. Harmon, LCL). Similar practices were widespread; see, e.g.,
Aristides, Apol. 15; Justin Martyr, 1 Apol. 57.
41Charles A. Bobertz, “The Role of Patron in the Cena Dominica of Hippolytus’ Apostolic
42Intriguingly, a study some decades ago could begin with the assumption that willingness to
accept martyrdom could only be the result of attempts at social control by the (rest of the) Church,
identifying the forms of reciprocity and/or patterns of patronage depends on the specifics of practice.  

In the case of the Carthaginian martyrs, the social relations involved do seem quite clear. Performances like the kissing of fetters distinctly expressed, and even helped create, the special power of the martyr as a figure straddling the threshold between divine and human realms, able to transmit information or mediate power from the heavenly to the earthly spheres. Feeding the martyrs was thus not merely the expression of a client relationship, but often an instrumental activity aimed at making use of that relationship. Devotion to the bodily needs of the martyrs was often linked to rather different needs on the part of the feeding Christians.

Tertullian had actually given a hesitant theoretical account of these processes and their goal in the earlier To the Martyrs, in the context of exhorting the prisoners to guard against weakness and indulgence. He seems to focus on difficulties encountered by some members of the Church in obtaining absolution or reconciliation: “Some, not able to find this peace (pacem) in the Church, have been accustomed to entreat the imprisoned martyrs for it. And so you ought to have it in you, and cherish it, and guard it, that you may be able perhaps to grant it to others.”

The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas also offers some insight into the likely purpose of these devotional performances, including feeding; again, receiving “peace” is at issue. In this narrative the martyrs often appear as brokers of spiritual power. Their placement between divine and human worlds is a basis for seeking revelations about their own fate, as well as knowledge and power regarding the fate of others, living and dead. Perpetua’s own prayer for her dead brother Deocratze effects his removal from a place of eternal detention that shares many of the features of her own earthly prison to a place where he is well clothed and fed (bene vestitum refrigerantem) and there is plentiful water.

One of her companions, Saturus, envisions powerful influence over two leaders of the Church who lack precisely the “peace” to which Tertullian had referred:

thus not showing much interest or any in the martyrs as powerful figures: see D. W. Riddle, The Martyrs: A Study in Social Control (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931).


As Catherine Bell (Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992] 100) puts it, “The molding of the body within a highly structured environment . . . primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves. Hence, required kneeling does not merely communicate subordination to the kneeler. For all intents and purposes, kneeling produces a subordinate kneeler in and through the act itself.” I thank Joan Brannan for pointing this passage out to me.

Mart. 1:6; CCSL 1:3.


Pass. Perp. 8:1; SC 417:130.
And we went out, and saw in front of the entrance Optatus the bishop to the right, and Aspasius the presbyter and teacher at the left, separate and sad. They put themselves at our feet, and said to us, “Make it up between us, because you have gone and left us this way.” And we said to them, “Are you not our father, and you our presbyter, and you are placing yourselves at our feet?” And we prostrated ourselves, and we embraced them; and Perpetua began to speak with them in Greek, and we went apart with them in the garden under a rose-tree.48

This vignette illustrates the sort of process to which Tertullian alludes in To the Martyrs, and the power relationships implied.49 Abasing themselves, the bishop and presbyter place themselves under the patronage of Perpetua, Saturus, and their companions in their present state, even though the martyrs reaffirm the position of the community leaders.

Another description of attending to the martyrs from Tertullian’s later Montanizing treatise On Modesty, which may be contemporary with On Fasting, extends the picture of intense attention paid by suppliants, but addresses the performances more directly and negatively:

If anyone conspires to put on the soft chains of the present nominal custodia, straightway adulterers beset him, fornicators get to him; instantly prayers echo around him, tears from all the polluted pool up around him; and none buy their way into prison more than those who have lost the Church.50

While the main target of his remarks seems to be alleged exploiters of the authority of martyrdom via “soft” forms of imprisonment (see also Jejun. 12.3), Tertullian refers here to the needs of those who invoked the power of the martyr primarily to compensate for sexual transgression. Although this picture and particularly the implied link between sexual transgression and dietary excess may reflect his own uncompromising asceticism, it is probably also an indication of many others’ concerns.51

Pax, then, was the commodity sought via the maintenance of the martyrs in culinary comfort. This could mean Deinocrates’ freedom from the place of torment, or the reconciliation of Aspasius and Optatus, or (and perhaps especially) forgiveness of various moral offences, for which no predictable or routinized system such as

49Of course Optatus and Aspasius might not have acted this way in reality; what seems clearer is that the vision presents a plausible scenario for the interaction of the martyrs with other Church members.
50Pud. 22.1; CCSL 2:1328.
51See also the contents of De paenitentia, perhaps to be dated a few years after De pudicitia (Barnes, Tertullian, 32–33, 52, 54–56). The need for a system for widespread reconciliation of apostates—the lapsi—developed a few decades later, during the time of Cyprian (see, for instance, Cyprian, Ep. 11).
penance yet existed.\textsuperscript{32} In all these cases, the martyrs were functioning as powerful intermediaries with the divine, providing a means for channeling peace, the restoration of individuals to and within the Christian community and its benefits, present as well as heavenly.

Food was one and perhaps the central means by which the martyrs were tended and guarded, as witnessed by this strategy of abundance, apparently manifested both in quantity of food and in provision of prized and desirable commodities such as meat and wine. The existence of the imprisoned Christians in a place of active and passive suffering bestowed on them the authority of those on the threshold between life and death, mediating truth and power otherwise unobtainable to the living. The cultivation of their bodily existence in this liminal setting where the body was on the way to destruction—the stabilization of the unstable—was precisely what many of those who attended to them needed. This paradox helps explain why the martyrs were fed in ways that may have borne more relationship to the needs of the suppliants than to those of the prisoner-patrons.

\textbf{The Strategy of Asceticism: Martyrs as Exemplars}

The more rigorist perspective on the care of Christian prisoners represented by Tertullian saw that some forms of support could actually undermine the basis of interaction between hungry martyr and feeding suppliant; if hunger brought the prisoner authority, enthusiastic feeding was clearly a problematic response. Yet the alternative and ascetic strategy advocated by those who tended toward Montanism viewed the prisoners not as patrons, but as models or exemplars of holiness, involuntary pioneers of a way of life to which even those outside the prison were increasingly called.

The actual practice of the ascetic strategy is not easy to reconstruct. Outside the prison, advocates of the New Prophecy certainly prolonged stational fasts on Wednesdays and Fridays, and advocated their universal rather than voluntary observance—a hint that dealing with the specific pastoral needs of individual Christians was not central in this view of the interaction between the Church and the martyrs.\textsuperscript{33} Montanists also avoided all meat and wine, foods perhaps seen as luxurious or indulgent, but also as tainted through their association with pagan religion.\textsuperscript{34} But how did the more ascetically inclined Christians at Carthage actually deal with feeding those in prison?

\textsuperscript{32}See \textit{De pudicitia} in particular. A second repentance involving fasting and confession was provided for, but nothing further; see Tertullian, \textit{Paen.} 7–12.

\textsuperscript{33}See Tertullian, \textit{Jejun.} 10.

\textsuperscript{34}Andrew McGowan, \textit{Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals} (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), esp. 60–86.
The perceived luxury involved in feeding prisoners evoked from Tertullian a
typical and radical rhetorical response, one that might initially seem to be making
a virtue of neglect. A careful examination, however, suggests that his pictures of
lean martyrlic athleticism reflect a regimen of austerity, rather than demanding
absolute neglect of the prisoners. Tertullian's discussions of prison diet do imply
a preference for smaller quantities of food, and also for a qualitatively different
diet. Yet a clear description of the strategy of asceticism in action is lacking from
Carthage.\footnote{Whatever the alleged affinities of the \textit{Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas} with Montanism,
in at least some respects the martyrs there seem to fit the strategy of abundance rather than that of
asceticism. This is perhaps a further indication of the inadequacy of reifying Montanism as a \textit{peculiar}
group, rather than as a movement or tendency in Carthaginian Christianity.} For a possible account of this strategy in practice, it is necessary to
resort to a slightly earlier and geographically distant source, the experience of the
martyrs of Vienne and Lyons. The letter sent by the martyrs in Gaul to the Asian
Churches bears witness to the dietary details of some of the prisoners:

> For one of them, a certain Alcibiades, it was very austerely, sharing in nothing
> whatsoever, except bread and water. When he tried to lead this sort of life in
> prison, it was revealed to Attalus after his first conflict in the amphitheater
> that Alcibiades did not do well to refuse the things God had made, and was
> placing a stumbling-block before others. Alcibiades obeyed, and shared in
> everything freely, and gave thanks to God.\footnote{\textit{Hist. eccl.} 5.3.2–3; GCS 9/1:432.}

This story illustrates both the role of martyr as channel of divine wisdom and
power that was basic to the strategy of abundance (Attalus), and also the somewhat
different place of the martyr who accepts the strategy of asceticism (Alcibiades).
Although Alcibiades was "fed" rather than "feeder," and for that matter shifted
quickly enough to the more accommodating dietary position, he may well have
been motivated by the same concerns as Tertullian. Alcibiades's refusal of abundant
food (and apparently of meat and wine particularly) does maintain the appropriate
privation of the imprisoned martyr, granted that it may also be modeled on other
sources or concerns. This picture of a hungry prisoner as his own creation may also
suggest that with abundant and various foods available, the practice of the strategy
of asceticism depended squarely on the resolve of the imprisoned to maintain it.
It also illustrates that the ascetic approach might not be a complete rejection of
responsibility for feeding the martyrs, but a qualitative and quantitative challenge
to how it was actually being done.

Both the story of Alcibiades and Tertullian's treatise \textit{On Fasting} highlight a
particular qualitative concern regarding the diet of the martyrs. Tertullian defends
the Montanist rejection of meat and wine, and at first Alcibiades takes only bread
and water—the result, presumably, of a similar avoidance, also attested in a variety
of contemporary Christian and other sources.\(^5\) While its austerity makes for an immediate contrast with the better food available to the (other) martyrs, this ascetic diet is also a symbolic rejection of the culinary accoutrements of the pagan religious rituals refused by the martyrs—the "cuisine of sacrifice," as Marcel Detienne and others have put it.\(^6\) Thus, the alternative to the strategy of abundance was not a rejection of the Church's role as alternative familial or social structure and feeding system, but construction of a set of qualitative as well as quantitative restrictions on that role, dependent as much on the martyrs' voluntary asceticism as on the character of the food gifts brought to the prison.

In the later treatise On Modesty, Tertullian begins to expound a different theory of the relation between martyrdom and forgiveness that may correspond to the ascetic feeding strategy:

> Who permits a human being to allow what is reserved for God, by whom those things have been condemned without appeal—things which not even apostles, as far as I know, who were martyrs themselves, have judged allowable? Even Paul had already fought with beasts at Ephesus when he decreed destruction for one who committed incest. Let it be enough for a martyr to have purged their own sins. It is also a case of ingratitude or pride to lavish upon others what has been obtained at a high price. Who has redeemed another's death by his own, except the Son of God alone?\(^7\)

It is not that the deprived martyr as liminal figure better channels grace or revelation, but rather that the final suffering of the martyr emulates the death of Christ and shares to some extent in its salvific power, if only for his or her own self. Pax is fulfilled only then, and only for that combatant. The homology between the victor who has gone ahead and the others who remain in training must be maintained initially through fasting, and ultimately in death. For Tertullian, the significance of imprisoned martyrs, as far as the forgiveness of sins is concerned, is real but representative—their deaths will be the point at which they achieve something of lasting significance.

In this strategy of asceticism, then, the relationship between the martyrs and the rest of the Christian community differs from that relationship as it is constructed according to the strategy of abundance. Even in the early treatise To the Martyrs, which he presents as metaphorical sustenance for the prisoners, Tertullian does not

\(^{5}\) See McGowan, Ascetic Eucharists, 169–70.


\(^{7}\) Pud. 22.3–4; CCSL 2:1328.
address the imprisoned Christians as spiritual patrons, or as figures who, like those portrayed in the *Martydom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, are capable of mediating grace, knowledge, and power to others. It is not that he thought of a fasting martyr simply as a more effective channel for those seeking *pax*. Tertullian's preference was always to see the martyrs not as patrons but as representatives, an example to the whole Church of a calling that is shared by all. If the hungry martyr becomes the "stuffed" absurdity of a Prustinus, then for Tertullian the fasting Church—his ideal and perhaps the reality of those inclined to Montanism—has lost not so much a conduit to the divine, but a model or forerunner, a symbolic center whom those outside are called to imitate.  

For Tertullian it is therefore not enough that imprisonment grant the status of martyr in a purely formal way, as for instance in *libera custodia*. The effectiveness of the martyr seems to be an empirical matter, and suffering itself was divinely allowed as a form of test, hence to be endured rather than avoided or mitigated. 61 Tertullian is certainly an example of a broader tendency during this period "to represent the human subject as a body in pain, focused on suffering and death," as Judith Perkins has put it. 62

So although from the point of view of the New Prophecy the martyrs ought to have been fed less and differently, this does not mean that they were expected simply to starve and reap a spiritual benefit. The ascetic feeding strategy accepts the basic premise of support for the imprisoned, but suggests a vastly more cautious form of acting upon it, at least physically. Allowing the divinely-ordained reality of persecution to have an impact on the marginal bodies of the martyrs—allowing them to be hungry, or at least less well-fed than others outside—ensures the maintenance of their position as representatives of the whole Christian community which is meant to be, in its own way, marginal and hungry also. Given the importance and fragility of the martyr's body, this too was a form of care.

The End of the Banquet

One further aspect of this dispute over feeding demands some attention. We have seen that the two tendencies within the Carthaginian Church began with a common commitment to support for the martyrs, and then diverged radically on the

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61In fact, Montanist reality was probably rather mixed. Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.18.6) records the testimony of one Apollonius, perhaps a contemporary of Tertullian, concerning untrustworthy Montanist martyrs, including one Alexander who dined regularly with one of the women prophets.


63*The Suffering Self*, 192. Perkins' treatment of Christian discourse on suffering illuminates a position such as Tertullian's as reflecting a general tendency during the Second Sophistic to reflect intensely on the body and pain. Yet the conflict at issue here does also indicate that a variety of constructions of selfhood and pain were at work; for many, pain was still to be mitigated or avoided, rather than analyzed or understood.
question of how to fulfill that responsibility. The very end of the process, however, reveals a final point of convergence. Both the strategy of abundance and the strategy of asceticism shared the concern that through diet the martyr be physically as well as spiritually prepared to obtain the victory of dying without apostasy. Each intended or claimed that their preferred diet be the best means for the martyrs to be strengthened and trained for endurance. Although in physical terms the contest would be lost, spiritual victory depended on its being endured in a specific way, and the body itself was the key to successful endurance.

Perpetua and Priscus may seem to present the alternative means and ends clearly enough, at least from the ascetic perspective. Tertullian’s sarcastic account of the drugged and overfed hedonist unable properly to deny his Lord contrasts with that of the young woman who could not be killed except with her own compliance, and whose behavior is couched, even at the end, in terms of control over her diet:

But Perpetua, that she might taste (gustaret) something in the way of pain, cried out when pierced between the ribs, and she herself moved the wayward right hand of the youthful gladiator to her throat. Perhaps such a woman could not have been killed otherwise, unless she herself had wanted it, since she was feared by the impure spirit.63

In fact the two tendencies among the Carthaginian Christians reflect and make use of two existing but rather contradictory popular traditions about the best diet for those undertaking physical trials or competitions. A discourse about fasting as preparation or training has survived directly in the Carthaginian Christian literature; as we saw, Tertullian’s fasting martyr is soldier or athlete, trained by abstinence (voluntary or otherwise) to prevail. Traditions of bodily formation by self-denial are clear enough elsewhere also. This particular strategy of scarcity forms the body by askesis, refiguring the inner as well as the outer realities.

Yet the enthusiastic and intentional feeding of those preparing for similar struggles is also attested clearly enough in other sources of the period, and not always in Christian circles or in judicial processes. Tertullian refers elsewhere to the customary feasting of those who were to fight wild beasts in the arena (Apologeticum 42.5) the night before the contest. Fifty years or so later, Cyprian alludes to the regular Carthaginian (and Roman) understandings of proper preparation:

The gladiatorial games are prepared, that blood may gladden the lust of cruel eyes. The body is fed up with stronger foods, and the vigorous mass of limbs is enriched with brawn and muscle, that the wretch fattened (saginatus) for punishment may die a harder death.64

This sort of understanding may also underlie the measures taken by Christian deacons, impresarios of the gladiator-martyrs, to improve the situation of Perpetua

64Ad Donatum 7; SC 291:92.
and her companions, or of Pristinus. It is by no means clear that Perpetua’s training neatly followed an ascetic model such as Tertullian’s in all respects.

Despite the often-claimed affinity of Perpetua’s narrative with Montanist opposition to sacrifice and meat, these patron-prisoners are depicted seeking “refreshment,” that is, food and drink, or even perhaps better food and drink. Shortly prior to the games organized for the birthday of Geta Caesar that were the occasion for the killings, we are told that the martyrs were constrained more rigorously than before, for fear that they had means of escape through the performance of magical rituals (incantationibus aliquibus magis). The inevitable suspicion that the worrisome rites had been eucharistic meals, and that the most obvious implication of closer confinement was hunger, is strengthened by Perpetua’s protest at this treatment: “Why do you not at least permit us to be refreshed (refrigerare), since we are the most distinguished of the damned, belong to Caesar, and are to fight on his birthday? Or is it not to your credit, if we are brought forth fatter for that occasion?” The reference to “refreshment” clearly includes eating, given the barb from Perpetua that likens the martyrs to plump sacrificial victims. The embarrassed tribune allows “their brethren and others to go in and be refreshed (refrigerandi) with them.”

All this is a reminder that “heroic” Perpetua and “dissipated” Pristinus were actually being cared for by the same system. Although they may have made their own individual ascetic choices—as did Alcibiades in Lyons—Perpetua and her companions as a group did obtain the more lenient form of imprisonment that seems to have allowed substantial contact with supporters, including better provisions. They also held a form of cena libera, as was expected of combatant prisoners the night before their deaths. Refrigerium, rather than leimonium, might well be the technique of bodily formation presented in that narrative.

Two specifics regarding food and drink alluded to in the case of Pristinus make for an even clearer link between gladiatorial and martyrial eating. Tertullian speaks ironically of the establishment for the “pseudomartyr” of popinae, “cook-shops” where cheap cuts of meat were served in dubious surroundings and worse company. Granted the mocking tone, this is probably a real reference to provision of meat for Pristinus, as well as a criticism of other aspects of conduct. The expectation that soldiers be fed meat is not unrelated; meat was a source of fortitude, of building up the body for strength, or at least for a death that would be hard-won. Pristinus

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63 Pass. Perp. 16.3; SC 417:160.
64 Pass. Perp. 16.4; SC 417:160.
65 The prisoners, however, are described as transfiguring it into an agape, perhaps implying that they restricted themselves to the expected elements of the eucharistic meal, or to other unholy food; see McGowan, Ascesic Eucharists, 100–3.
was probably being fed not just with care or generosity or hope for his spiritual influence, but with a particular interest in his physical strength and endurance for the trial, and particularly with meat.

We also hear that Prustinus was given a form of drugged wine—an anesthetic practice familiar from the Passion narratives of the Gospels, and referred to in other martyr accounts also, but typically as being refused. This may well have been aimed not merely at lessening pain for its own sake, but at protecting the martyr from apostasy. The contradiction involved in giving both meat for fortitude and wine for insensibility is obvious enough, but the possibly ad hoc nature of some of the feeding means it is not hard to imagine. Even if the same “blessed deacons Tertius and Pomponius” (Pass. Perp. 3.7) were responsible for Prustinus’s treatment, and for Perpetua’s, it is not impossible that meat and wine were combined in a more sanctioned but sometimes desperate attempt to keep the martyrs from the ultimate defeat. For the suppliant psychici, Prustinus’s final inability to perform an act of apostasy might actually have been a successful result.

Just as meat and wine may have had a particular negative significance for the strategy of asceticism because of their association with luxury and sacrificial ritual, they may also have had a particular positive value in the strategy of abundance because of their invigorating and anesthetic properties, respectively. The fact that they are both highlighted in the story of Prustinus may, of course, reflect Tertullian’s aversions, as much as actual “psychic” concerns. Yet that particular ascetic refusal may now be understood not only as characteristic of avoiding the “cuisine of sacrifice,” but also a rejection of the particular roles these elements played in what seemed the unseemly feedings and ignoble passings of such as Prustinus.

The Martyrs, the Church, and the Empire

Feeding the martyrs could thus be affirmation of bonds of community, utilization of patronage, cultivation of exemplars, preparation of combatants, and more besides. Practical concern for the diet of the martyrs, whether abundant or ascetic in form, may also be understood as a sort of response or even resistance to the fact of imprisonment and torture. Both Christian feeding strategies enact a form of opposition or refusal of the imperial strategy of dismemberment to which incarceration is prelude; both seek to make imprisonment a state of building up the body in anticipation of its being broken. Both are provisional, however, in that they expect to be negated in the execution of punishment.

Both strategies use food practices as a way of linking themselves to the imprisoned. The “Catholics” make the martyrs like themselves through the reciprocity of meal, and the Montanists make themselves like the martyrs by their mimesis of hunger. While the former feast the imprisoned to assure themselves of present

*Passio Fructuost 3.*
spiritual benefits, the latter support and depend on the martyrs' privation to assure a future spiritual benefit for all.

Above all, for the feeding Christians the martyrs have a specialized role as mediators in a heavenly *clientela*, whose bodily sustenance is desirable as maintenance of a relatively stable system of intercession, especially when their eating embodies and effects their interdependence with their clients. This system assumes and co-opts both regular arrangements for feeding prisoners, and generally held assumptions about the role of food in establishing and maintaining social relations. As clients, those who cater to the martyrs expect a form of reciprocity—visions, petitions, peace. As friends or family that feeds—collectively mother and individually brothers and sisters to the martyrs—the Christians participate in the power of the imprisoned, and even exercise influence over them. As sharers in persecution and hope, the Christians establish the martyrs as fit for the struggle of an adequate death. In the strategy of abundance, feasting is thus an appropriate norm for the martyrs, and the possible “excesses” pilloried in a Pristinus make sense as the enthusiastic cultivation of the marginal martyrly body as secure locus of divine presence.

The more ascetic response proposed by Tertullian involved a reconstruction of the imprisoned self, insisting on the primacy and centrality of the soul, and the understanding of bodily experience in relation to the sovereign, unbound inner reality. His insistence on a thoroughgoing conceptual reversal of the apparent meaning of the punishment of the body stands in contrast to the partial material reversal effected by the food practices of the rest of the “psychic” Church. For Tertullian and perhaps for the Montanists generally, the martyrs are important not as specialists, but as representatives of a general call to ascetic practice, and exemplars of power that should be accessible to all Christians. What is inflicted on the martyrs involuntarily should be imitated by others of their own volition; what is done voluntarily outside the prison depends on the same being done by force, without mitigation, inside. The martyr’s body is different from other bodies, but cannot be too different from other Christian bodies. Like his “psychic” opponents, Tertullian is also anxious for the effective action of a system of penitence and rehabilitation based on martyrdom—but one with a radically different scope, in that some will find peace only in the paradisiacal scenes reported by Perpetua and her companions. In *On Modesty* Tertullian had indicated that only martyrdom itself can deal with some forms of sin—the very sins for the sake of which the petitioners are feeding the martyrs. Hence his concern to preserve the prisoners in a state of deprivation is not necessarily or only to do with the maintenance of the ascetic purity of these individuals for their own sake. Working out their own salvation, they represent to the rest of the Church the necessity of ascetic perseverance, rather than abundant provision.
Conclusion

In this setting of crisis and violence, no less than in more predictable and stable customs and institutions, food turns out to reflect and create forms of sociability, and to mediate power. The compelling reality of hunger, and other forms of necessity that characterized ancient imprisonment, combined with the symbolic power of food and eating to create a somewhat new set of social relations and a new kind of spiritual transaction. That strategy of abundance was countered within the Christian community by a strategy of asceticism that sought to employ the bodies of the martyrs differently, as models of a distinctive Christian existence. This latter practice arises as a way of competing with and opposing the imperial system of constraint and privation, not through mitigation but by complete reinterpretation. As elsewhere, ascetic performance is “designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity.” Here external suffering, whether voluntary or not, is transformed into an askesis of the soul, whose own fragility means that the body itself cannot be treated as a secure locus of spiritual power, but only as a potential, ephemeral, instrument for the formation of the inner self.

While each feeding strategy has its subsequent history—one in the cult of the saints and the other in the development of Christian asceticism—the afterlife of the ascetic strategy is particularly striking, not only in its resonance with monasticism and later fasting practices, but in its anticipation of the move to interiority identified in Foucault’s study of “modern” imprisonment. Tertullian’s use of fasting is indeed “an instrument or intermediary” for action upon the inner self, “a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions,” “an economy of suspended rights.” Monasticism would be the vehicle for an initial institutionalization of this view of using the control of food, space and other elements of bodily existence, before its further development and transformation in the modern prison, whose cells and controlled privations are thus more clearly descendants of ancient ones than may initially seem to be the case.

In Carthage around 200 C.E., however, this was not state correctional theory, but a strategy of resistance to empire. The privations and in particular the hunger of the imprisoned had to be defended as the symbolic center of sectarian self-understanding. How to feed a martyr, fragile exemplar of strange holiness, standing at the brink of death? Fast.

—Discipline and Punish, 11.