

# THE DECREE OF DECIUS AND THE RELIGION OF EMPIRE\*

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In A.D. 249 the emperor Trajan Decius issued an edict requiring the inhabitants of the Roman Empire to sacrifice to the gods. With this decree, he also inaugurated the first empire-wide persecution of Christians. Previously, persecutions of Christians had always been local affairs determined by local conditions. Thereafter, persecutions were largely instigated by emperors and took place on an imperial scale. It has consequently become common to distinguish pre-Decian persecution, characterized by its local and *ad hoc* nature, from the centrally organized persecutions of Decius in A.D. 249–50, Valerian in A.D. 257–60, and Diocletian, Galerius, and Maximinus in A.D. 303–13.<sup>1</sup> The importance of the decree as a turning point in the history of Christian persecution is thus widely recognized. Beyond this, discussions of the decree have usually focused on its precise nature and the motivations behind it; given the limited evidence, however, these discussions have tended to be inconclusive. In this paper I will return to a consideration of the decree's effects, but in the context of traditional religion rather than that of Christianity. I will argue that, seen from this perspective, the decree was a highly innovative and important step towards a radical restructuring of religious organization in the Roman world.

One of the major differences between the religions of the ancient world and those of the Middle Ages is that the former were fundamentally local, while the latter were universalizing.<sup>2</sup> In explaining this shift from local to universal, scholars have typically focused on the objects of religious devotion, what we may loosely class as religious belief. Thus the conversion of Constantine is sometimes set in the context of earlier attempts to establish a universal cult: a line of development is traced from Elagabalus' promotion of his Syrian god to Aurelian's patronage of Sol Invictus to the vaguer solar monotheism that perhaps informed Constantine's own religious outlook.<sup>3</sup> There can be little doubt that the trend towards monotheism played an important role in the change from local cults to universalizing religions. But to appreciate the significance of Decius' decree on sacrifice, we need to consider not the content of religious belief, but rather the structures of religious organization, i.e. what actions people performed in what circumstances, who had the authority to regulate these actions, and how this authority was organized and expressed. These questions also deserve scrutiny, if only because in the Greek and Roman traditions more emphasis was placed on the performance of cult acts than on formal expressions of belief. If we focus on these questions of cult acts, we can trace a different line of development from the local to the universal, one that links rather than separates the imperial persecutors and patrons of Christianity. It is in this context that Decius' decree marks an important transition.

## I. DECIUS AND HIS DECREE

Our evidence for Decius' decree comes from four main sources. First are the so-called *libelli*, papyrus certificates from Egypt recording sacrifices performed in accordance with the decree. Forty-four of these are now known: thirty-four from Theadelphia

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<sup>1</sup> So for example G. E. M. de Ste. Croix in his

influential paper, 'Why were the early Christians persecuted?', *Past and Present* 26 (1963), 6–38 = M. I. Finley (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Society* (1974), 210–49.

<sup>2</sup> On this see especially G. Fowden, *Empire and Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (1993).

<sup>3</sup> So for example R. Turcan, 'Le culte impérial au IIIe siècle', *ANRW* II.16.2 (1978), 996–1084.

in the Fayum, three from Oxyrhynchus, and the rest from other villages.<sup>4</sup> Second are the writings of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, especially the letters that he wrote while in hiding during the persecution (*Epp.* 5–43), but also the treatise *De Lapsis* written shortly afterwards.<sup>5</sup> Third are Eusebius' extensive quotations from two contemporary letters of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria; in one of these, probably written in late spring or early summer of A.D. 251, Dionysius gives a general account of the persecution in Alexandria, while in the second, written in A.D. 259 or 260, he describes his own arrest and narrow escape.<sup>6</sup> Lastly, there is the *Passio Pionii*, an account of a martyrdom in Smyrna. Its value has been questioned, because Eusebius differs from the *Passio* itself in dating the martyrdom of Pionius to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (*HE* 4.15.46–7), while some scholars claim that, even if the martyrdom did occur under Decius, the *Passio* is a late and untrustworthy account.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, most accept a Decian date for the events portrayed, and many think that much of the text derives from Pionius himself.<sup>8</sup> There is also the thirteenth Sibylline Oracle, which refers briefly to Decius' rule (ll. 81–8) and death (ll. 100–2); although it does not mention the decree, it does seem to allude to the persecution of Christians.<sup>9</sup>

The virtues of these sources are obvious. They are all contemporary with the decree, and written by eyewitnesses. Moreover, since they come from widely scattered parts of the Empire, they provide a stereoscopic view of the events. On the other hand, their limitations are equally obvious. None of them attest the decree itself, with the partial exception of the papyrus certificates, but instead concern its effects. We must

<sup>4</sup> The most complete collection is J. R. Knipfing, 'The libelli of the Decian persecution', *HTR* 16 (1923), 345–90, which provides texts and translations of forty-one certificates; four of these have more recent editions (Knipfing nos 35–6 = *P. Mich.* III.157–8; Knipfing nos 38–9 = *P. Hamb.* 61 a and b), and three others have since been published (*PSI* VII.78, *SB* VI.9084, *P. Oxy.* XLI.2990).

<sup>5</sup> There is a new edition of the letters by G. F. Diercks (*Corpus Christianorum* 3B, 1994), while G. W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian* (4 vols, 1984–9) provides essential commentary; in my references I follow the numbering of Clarke. On the *De Lapsis*, see M. Bévenot, *Cyprian: De Lapsis and De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate* (1971).

<sup>6</sup> The first letter (*HE* 6.41–2 and 44) was written to Fabius of Antioch and dealt with the problem of the lapsed; its date is suggested by the roughly contemporary letter of Cornelius of Rome to Fabius (*HE* 6.43.3–22), written after the synods of Rome and Carthage in April–May A.D. 251 but before Fabius' death later that year (*HE* 6.46.4). See further P. Nautin, *Lettres et écrivains chrétiens des IIe et IIIe siècles* (1961), 143–56 and 163–5. The second (*HE* 6.40) was written in response to a certain Germanus; its date is indicated by the fact that the persecution of Valerian was underway (*HE* 6.40. 1), and had been for some time (*HE* 7.11.2–19); see further H. Pietras, 'Lettera pros Germanon di Dionigi Alessandrino', *Gregorianum* 71 (1990), 573–83.

<sup>7</sup> H. Grégoire, P. Orgels, and J. Moreau, 'Les martyres de Pionios et de Polycarpe', *Bulletin de l'Académie royale de Belgique, classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques* 47 (1961), 72–83, argue strongly for a date under Marcus Aurelius; H. Musur-

illo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (1972), xxviii–xxix and lvii, argues that the text is late and 'obviously embroidered'.

<sup>8</sup> See especially T. D. Barnes, 'Pre-Decian *Acta Martyrum*', *JTS* 19 (1968), 509–31, at 529–31; R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (1986), 460–8; and L. Robert, *Le Martyre de Pionios, prêtre de Smyrne* (1994), especially 1–9. Lane Fox argues that Pionius wrote most of the text while in prison, and that an editor shortly thereafter made short additions at the beginning and end (*ibid.*, 468–72); cf. Robert, *ibid.*, 49–50. Other martyr acts may also recount events under Decius, e.g. the *Acts of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathoniké*, but the difficulties in employing them as independent sources of evidence are such that I have not attempted to use them here.

<sup>9</sup> D. S. Potter, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire: A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (1990), 141–2, 147, and 258–9, argues that the main author of this text, working in Syria in A.D. 253, compiled ll. 1–88 from earlier material but composed ll. 89–154 himself. He was thus responsible for the brief and uninformative account of Decius' death (ll. 100–2), but for his reign combined two different texts, one positive (ll. 81–3) and the other negative (ll. 84–8); the latter contains the reference to persecution (ll. 87–8): 'and immediately there will be robberies and murders of the faithful [*pistôn*] on account of the former king'; the reading *pistôn* is Wilamowitz' emendation for the manuscript's *piptôn*. Because this is the only explicitly Christian reference in the poem, it has often been taken as a later interpolation, but Potter argues that these lines are more likely a contemporary Christian composition.

therefore deduce the contents of the decree from its results. Nevertheless, its main provisions seem certain enough.<sup>10</sup>

Decius issued the decree in fall or early winter of A.D. 249, shortly after becoming emperor.<sup>11</sup> It was apparently a formal edict, i.e. instructions issued directly to the public, rather than, for example, *mandata* directed towards officials.<sup>12</sup> Its central feature was an order that all the inhabitants of the Empire sacrifice to the gods, taste the sacrificial meat, and swear that they had always sacrificed.<sup>13</sup> It further arranged for a formal procedure to ensure universal compliance. At a minimum, it required local magistrates to oversee the proceedings and to issue official documents certifying that a given individual had sacrificed in their presence.<sup>14</sup> It is not clear whether it also included special provisions concerning the punishment of people who refused to comply. Certainly the local magistrates did not have authority to punish recusants themselves, since the evidence consistently shows them being turned over to higher authorities. Either way, refusal to sacrifice could lead to serious results, ranging from exile and loss of property to torture and death.<sup>15</sup> The edict seems to have applied to everyone,

<sup>10</sup> The best discussions are J. Molthagen, *Der römische Staat und die Christen im zweiten und dritten Jahrhundert* (1970), 61–84; Clarke, op. cit. (n. 5), 22–39, with his two earlier studies, ‘Some observations on the persecution of Decius’, *Antichthon* 3 (1969), 63–76, and ‘Two measures in the persecution of Decius? Two recent views’, *BICS* 20 (1973), 118–23; H. A. Pohlsander, ‘The religious policy of Decius’, *ANRW* II.16.3 (1986), 1826–42; and Potter, op. cit. (n. 9), 40–3 and 261–8. Also important are E. Lieserung, *Untersuchungen zur Christenverfolgung des Kaisers Decius* (1933); A. Alföldi, ‘Zu den Christenverfolgung in der Mitte des 3. Jahrhunderts’, *Klio* 31 (1938), 323–48 = *Studien zur Geschichte der Weltkrise des 3. Jahrhunderts nach Christus* (1967), 285–311; W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (1965), 404–13; M. Sordi, ‘La data dell’editto di Decio e il significato della persecuzione anticristiana’, *Rivista di storia della Chiesa in Italia* 34 (1980), 451–61 and *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (1986), 100–7; and Lane Fox, op. cit. (n. 8), 450–62. I shall also refer to P. Keresztes, ‘The Decian *libelli* and contemporary literature’, *Latomus* 34 (1975), 761–81, reprinted in his *Imperial Rome and the Christians* (2 vols, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Senatorial recognition of Decius occurred probably in September A.D. 249: M. Peachin, *Roman Imperial Titulature and Chronology, A.D. 235–284* (1990), 30–2. Among the first Christians to be martyred as a result of the decree were Fabian of Rome and Babylas of Antioch (Eus., *HE* 6.39.1 and 4), whose deaths according to Western tradition took place on 20 and 24 January respectively. In order for the edict to be known in Antioch by late January, it cannot have been issued much later than the beginning of that month. Most scholars favour a date in December or early January, although Potter, op. cit. (n. 9), 261–3, makes a good case for the autumn of A.D. 249.

<sup>12</sup> Cyprian speaks of an *edictum* (*Laps.* 27) or *edicta* (*Ep.* 55.9.2), while Novatian refers more vaguely to *edicta vel leges* (ap. Cypr., *Ep.* 30.3.1) and the Roman confessors to *leges* (*Ep.* 31.3 and 5). The *Passio Pionii* uses the Greek word *diatagma* (3.2), while Dionysius of Alexandria uses *prostagma* (Eus., *HE* 6.41.1 and 10); both are regular translations of the Latin *edictum*: H. J. Mason, *Greek Terms for Roman Institutions: A Lexicon and Analysis* (1974), 36 and 81. The papyrus use the less technical phrases *ta prostechthenta* or *ta*

*keleusthenta*. On edicts in general, see F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (1977), 252–9; the fact that the Egyptian certificates have virtually identical wording suggests that it was posted in public for individuals to copy: Millar, *ibid.*, 255–6.

<sup>13</sup> All the extant papyrus certificates contain some variation on the phrase ‘I have always and without interruption sacrificed to the gods and now in your presence in accordance with the edict’s decree I have sacrificed, poured a libation, and tasted of the sacred victims’. Similarly, the confessors in Rome refer to lips defiled by accursed food (ap. Cypr., *Ep.* 31.7.1), and Cyprian himself praises those who refused to offer sacrifices or taste of them (*Laps.* 2 and 28); the *Passio Pionii* describes how the *neokoros* Polemon ‘sought out the Christians and summoned them to sacrifice and eat defiled food’ (3.1; cf. Robert at 2.4). Cyprian at one point mentions *thurificati* (*Ep.* 55.2.1), presumably people who had only offered incense; whether this was a special dispensation for the poor or simply a local variation is unknown.

<sup>14</sup> The papyrus petitions are addressed ‘to those chosen for the sacrifices’: twenty-five of the petitions from Theadelphia are certified by two individuals, presumably local commissioners, and signed by the town secretary, while one from Arsinoe is certified by a town councillor (Knipfing, op. cit. (n. 4), no. 25). Cyprian mentions in Carthage a board of five leading citizens in association with the magistrates (*Ep.* 43.3.1), but in Capsa only one magistrate (*Ep.* 56.1.1); an imprisoned confessor in Rome refers to magistrates (*Ep.* 21.1.1). In Smyrna, the commission consisted of ‘the *neokoros* Polemon and those associated with him’ (*Pass. Pion.* 3.1). This variation suggests that local authorities could either appoint a commission or assume the duties themselves.

<sup>15</sup> Pionius, after persisting in his refusal to sacrifice, is held in prison until the proconsul arrives; it is the latter who orders him burned alive (*Pass. Pion.* 19–20). In Carthage there were people who confessed once before the magistrates and a second time before the proconsul (Cypr., *Ep.* 38.1.2); others in Capsa withstood the first interrogation but not that before the proconsul (Cypr., *Ep.* 56.1). Dionysius mentions trials before the governor (ap. Eus., *HE* 6.41.18, 21, 23), although other instances of Christians being killed sound more like lynchings (e.g. *HE* 6.41.15 and 42.1). On punishments, see Clarke, op. cit. (n. 5), I, 35–6.

regardless of sex, age, or civic status; the only people likely to have been exempt were the Jews.<sup>16</sup>

Needless to say, some of these points are disputed: in particular, whether the requirements to sacrifice and acquire a certificate actually extended to all inhabitants of the Empire or were limited to Christians. In the next section I will discuss these questions in more detail, but would like first to turn from the decree itself to the man who issued it. The sources for Decius' career and reign are in general much worse than those for his decree. The only extant contemporary source is the thirteenth Sibylline Oracle, although the account of Decius' final battles and death written by P. Herennius Dexippus in the mid-270s A.D. survives in the epitome of George Syncellus (c. A.D. 800).<sup>17</sup> The longest accounts are those of Zosimus (c. A.D. 500) and Zonaras (twelfth century A.D.), but the former says nothing at all about Decius' reign between his accession and his final campaigns, while the latter fills this gap with an account of the persecution derived ultimately from Eusebius.<sup>18</sup> The other main tradition is represented by the Latin epitomes of Sextus Aurelius Victor (c. A.D. 361), Eutropius (c. A.D. 369), and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* (c. A.D. 395). All these are thought to follow a lost Latin work of the mid-fourth century A.D., conventionally known as the *Kaisergeschichte*. This tradition evidently contained more information about Decius' reign than did the sources of Zosimus and Zonaras, although it now exists only in extremely abbreviated form.<sup>19</sup>

The careful examination of this material together with the documentary sources has resulted in a fairly reliable account of the main features of Decius' career and reign.<sup>20</sup> He was born probably around A.D. 190, in a village near Sirmium in Pannonia Inferior.<sup>21</sup> He did well under the later Severans, since he held the suffect consulship probably in the early 230s A.D.<sup>22</sup> It was perhaps also about that time, or a few years earlier, that he married: his wife, Herennia Cupressenia Etruscilla, was apparently of Etruscan descent,

<sup>16</sup> On the universal applicability of the edict, see further Molthagen, op. cit. (n. 10), 62–3, and Clarke, op. cit. (n. 5), I, 26–8. There is no direct evidence for the Jews, but if they had been required to sacrifice, we would expect some trace of this in the record; in fact, there is none whatsoever. This silence is so striking that we must assume an exemption. The only explicit mention of Jews in any of the sources is in the *Passio Pionii*, which depicts them as part of the anti-Christian mob (3.6; cf. 4.2); although this text has an obvious anti-Jewish tendency, it would hardly have depicted them as allies of the gentiles if they were actually in the same plight as the Christians. As a parallel, a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud suggests that the Jews of Caesarea were specifically exempted from the requirements of Diocletian's fourth edict: Abodah Zarah 5.4, 44d; cf. S. Lieberman, 'The martyrs of Caesarea', *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves* 7 (1939–44), 395–446, at 403–4. It is likely that both Diocletian and Decius followed the long established principle of making allowances for the ancestral traditions of the Jews.

<sup>17</sup> *FGrH* 100 F 22; see also F 26. J. Schwartz, 'A propos des ch. 4 à 6 du "De Mortibus Persecutorum"', in J. Fontaine and M. Perrin (eds), *Lactance et son temps* (1978), 91–102, argues that the brief account of Lactantius also derives from Dexippus. For other historians who covered Decius' reign, see Potter, op. cit. (n. 9), 70–94.

<sup>18</sup> Zos. 1.21–3; Zon. 12.19–20. Since their accounts of Decius' accession, final battle, and death agree in several details with each other and against other accounts, they probably derive from the same source; since their version of Decius' death differs from that of George Syncellus, this source was probably not Dexippus.

<sup>19</sup> Vict. 28.10–29.5; Eutr. 9.4; *Epit. de Caes.* 29; on the *Kaisergeschichte*, see most recently R. W. Burgess, 'On the date of the *Kaisergeschichte*', *CP* 90 (1995), 111–28. All three works note the place of Decius' birth, record the elevation of his son as Caesar, and agree in their accounts of his death, while Victor and Eutropius both mention his building activities. Ammianus Marcellinus and the *Historia Augusta* may have provided fuller examples of this tradition, but unfortunately neither is extant for the reign of Decius; against the idea that this was a deliberate omission by the author of the *HA*, unwilling to handle the delicate topic of Christian persecutions, see R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography: Studies in the Historia Augusta* (1971), 200–2.

<sup>20</sup> For general studies, see F. S. Salisbury and H. B. Mattingly, 'The reign of Trajan Decius', *JRS* 14 (1924), 1–23; K. Wittig, *RE* 15 (1931), 1244–84; L. Fronza, 'Studi sull'imperatore Decio', *Annali Triestini* 21 (1951), 227–45 and 23 (1953), 311–33 (*non vidi*); *PIR*<sup>2</sup> M 520; and most recently the brief account of Potter, op. cit. (n. 9), 40–4.

<sup>21</sup> Eutropius (9.4) and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* (29.1) name the village, while Victor (29.1) simply says near Sirmium; note also *Sib. Or.* 13.83: 'emerging from the Dacians'. The *Chronicon Pascale* (505 Dindorf) says he was sixty when he died, the *Epitome de Caesaribus* (29.4) fifty; as Syme, op. cit. (n. 19), 197, observes, the former fits much better with his career.

<sup>22</sup> On his earliest coins and inscriptions he appears as 'Cos. II'; since he does not previously appear in the consular lists, his first consulship must have been suffect; its date is a guess based on his probable age and his known consular command in A.D. 234.

and may have belonged to an old consular family.<sup>23</sup> In A.D. 234 he served as governor of Moesia Inferior, an important military position, and in A.D. 238 as governor of Hispania Tarraconensis.<sup>24</sup>

There are various traditions about the circumstances in which he became emperor. According to that preserved by Zosimus and Zonaras, his predecessor Philip, worried about the loyalty of the Danubian legions, sent Decius to take charge. Decius restored discipline, only to have the legions proclaim him emperor; he then marched on Italy and defeated Philip in battle. Documentary sources lend some support to this story, and it is probably a reasonably reliable account.<sup>25</sup> Decius seems to have spent his first few months as emperor in Rome. Since this is the period in which he issued his decree on sacrifice, it would be interesting to know about his other activities, but all we know is that rescripts dealing with imposts and inheritance law were issued in his name in October and that he began the construction of new public baths on the Aventine.<sup>26</sup> At any rate, there were soon urgent matters elsewhere that required his attention. In A.D. 250 another aspirant to the throne caused serious disturbances in Syria and Cappadocia, while in Europe a large band of Goths crossed the Danube and penetrated as far as Macedonia. Decius engaged them, but perhaps after some initial successes was heavily defeated. The Goths resumed their plundering in the spring of A.D. 251; Decius pursued them north into Moesia Inferior, but in a battle at Abritus, a Roman fort near modern Razgrad in north eastern Bulgaria, the Romans were heavily defeated and Decius himself was killed.<sup>27</sup>

Decius apparently enjoyed a good reputation among non-Christians. A contemporary writer describes him as 'another great-hearted ruler, knowledgeable in war' (*Sib. Or.* 13.82), and the later historical record contains similarly positive evaluations. The *Kaisergeschichte* tradition was quite favourable: the author of the *Epitome de Caesaribus* (29.2) says that he was 'a man furnished with all skills and virtues, calm and congenial in civil affairs, well prepared in military ones', Victor (29.5) and Jordanes (*Get.* 103) preserve an inspirational anecdote about the death of his son, and the author of the *Historia Augusta* ranks him with Claudius Gothicus and Aurelian as the only good emperors after Severus Alexander (*Aurel.* 42.6). Zosimus also paints a noble portrait, and concludes by saying 'such was the end of an excellent emperor' (1.23.3). None of them, however, seem to have known much about Decius apart from his wars in the Balkans and his death, and are accordingly of very limited value in reconstructing his character and motivations. Since it is on these points that most discussions of Decius' decree have focused, it is to them that I now turn.

<sup>23</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> H 136; cf. Syme, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 197: the Etruscan connection is indicated not only by the name 'Etruscilla' and her son's name 'Etruscus', but more reliably by her younger son Hostilianus' second name 'Perpenna' (*Epit. de Caes.* 30.3, if reliable) and the very rare *nomen* 'Cupressenia', elsewhere attested only for Cupressenus Gallus, suffect consul in A.D. 147.

<sup>24</sup> Moesia Inferior: *CIL* III.12519, 13724, and 13758; Tarraconensis: *PIR*<sup>2</sup> D 28 with *AE* 1951.9; see further B. Gerov, 'Zur Identität des Imperators Decius mit dem Statthalter C. Messius Q. Decius Valerinus', *Klio* 39 (1961), 222–6, and Syme, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 192 and 196.

<sup>25</sup> John of Antioch (*FHG* IV.597–8 F 148) presents a wildly different version: Philip, after a battle with 'Scythians', was marching with his army to Byzantium when Decius led a revolt in Rome and declared himself emperor; after Decius won over his envoys, Philip fled to Beroia where he was assassinated. Although defended by S. Dušanić, 'The end of the Philippi', *Chiron* 6 (1976), 427–39 and by Sordi, *op. cit.* (n. 10, 1986), 98–9, this account has been forcefully rejected by H. A. Pohlsander, 'Did Decius kill

the Philippi?', *Historia* 31 (1982), 214–22; see most recently Potter, *op. cit.* (n. 9), 254–8.

<sup>26</sup> Rescripts: *CJ* 4.16.2 and 10.16.3; for other laws in Decius' name, see *CJ* 6.30.4, 7.32.3, 8.53.3 (March–April 250); 5.12.9 (June 250); 3.22.2 and 6.58.3 (December 250). The baths are attested by Eutropius (9.4) and Victor (29.1); see now L. La Follette, 'The baths of Trajan Decius on the Aventine', in *Rome Papers, JRA Supplementary Series* 11 (1994), 6–88.

<sup>27</sup> So Dexippus, *FGrH* 100 F 22; on the location of Abritus, see T. Ivanov, 'Borne milliaire avec le nom d'Abritus', *Archéologie* (Sofia) 23.3 (1981), 48–53. Eusebius noted in his *Chronicle* that Decius died at Abritus (Schöne 180–1), whence Prosper Tiro, Cassiodorus, and Jordanes (*Get.* 103 with Mommsen ad loc.). Zosimus (1.23) and Zonaras (12.20), on the other hand, locate the battle on the Tanais (!), Victor (29.4) on the far side of the Danube, while Eutropius (9.4) and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* (29.3) simply in barbarian territory. The latter reports that his body was lost in the marshes, a fact also known to Ammianus (31.13.13; cf. 5.15); see further Potter, *op. cit.* (n. 9), 278–82.

## II. CHRISTIANITY AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Already in Antiquity, it seems, there were some Christians who wondered why Decius had raised a persecution. According to Eusebius, it was because of 'his enmity towards Philip' (*HE* 6.39.1). This interpretation is closely bound up with the traditions that Philip was himself a Christian and that Decius was personally hostile to him; since neither of these seem particularly well founded, the story is a more reliable guide to Christian perceptions than to Decius' motivations.<sup>28</sup> For the most part, however, Christian tradition simply saw him as an 'accursed beast' whose purpose was 'to harass the Church' (Lact., *Mort. Pers.* 4.1), and soon canonized him as the seventh of nine persecuting emperors (e.g. Sulp. Sev., *Chron.* 2.32.3, Oros. 7.21.2). Until the modern period few people inquired further; even those who rejected the hostile Christian view of Decius would have agreed with Gibbon that 'he was desirous of delivering the Empire from what he condemned as a recent and criminal superstition'.<sup>29</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, however, the discovery of the papyrus certificates from Egypt led to a re-evaluation of this tradition. Although it had always been assumed that Decius' measure affected Christians alone, there was little to suggest that the people who appeared in the papyri were Christians; one of them, Aurelia Ammonis, describes herself as 'priestess of the god Petesouchos, the great, the mighty, the immortal, and priestess of the gods in the Moeris quarter'.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, most scholars deduced that Decius' edict applied not just to Christians, but to all the inhabitants of the Empire. This now seems to be the *communis opinio*, although objections have been raised. Keresztes has proposed that we should interpret the papyri in the light of the literary sources, none of which implies that the edict affected non-Christians.<sup>31</sup> But since all of these were written by Christians for Christian audiences, the omission is not surprising: if their idolatrous neighbours were also obliged to sacrifice, that was a matter of little interest and no concern. Since there are obvious reasons to suspect bias in the Christian accounts but not in the papyri, it seems perverse to discount it in the one and search for it in the other.

More cogent objections centre on the certificates: some argue that it would have been 'a bureaucratic nightmare' to issue these to the entire population.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, neither Dionysius nor the *Passio Pionii* mentions them; the Cypriatic dossier and the papyrus certificates provide the only evidence, and even they do not attest to them before the summer of A.D. 250.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, some scholars believe that the certificates did not feature in Decius' original decree, but were a secondary feature,

<sup>28</sup> The tradition that Philip was a Christian is recorded by Eusebius (*HE* 6.34; cf. 36.3) and defended by some modern scholars, e.g. Sordi, op. cit. (n. 10), 96–9, but H. A. Pohlsander, 'Philip the Arab and Christianity', *Historia* 29 (1980), 463–73, has raised cogent objections to it; it is possible, however, that Philip had an interest in Christianity without actually being a Christian himself: G. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (1983), 125–7. Pohlsander, op. cit. (n. 25), has also shown that reports of Decius' hostility to Philip are unreliable, and so dismisses Eusebius' interpretation of his decree. Yet he overlooks the 'prediction' in the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle that immediately after Decius' accession 'there will be robberies and murders of the faithful on account of the former king' (ll. 87–8), which suggests that a version of Eusebius' story was current during or shortly after Decius' reign; hence it is possible that Philip's apparent interest in the Church may have led some Christians to interpret Decius' perceived hostility as a reaction to his predecessor: see Clarke, op. cit. (n. 5), I, 25, and Potter, op. cit. (n. 9), 267–8.

<sup>29</sup> *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (ed. J. B. Bury) vol. II (1909), 121.

<sup>30</sup> Knipfing, op. cit. (n. 4), no. 3. Petesouchos was one of the forms under which the crocodile god Sobek was worshipped in the Arsinoite nome: H.-J. Thissen, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* 4 (1982), 994; Moeris was a village that had been incorporated into the metropolis of Arsinoe: A. Calderini and S. Daris, *Dizionario dei nomi geografici e topografici dell'Egitto greco-romano*, s.v.; we may assume that the priestess of its chief deity was locally both well known and respectable. Knipfing, op. cit. (n. 4), 359–61, points out that a few of the names in the Oxyrhynchus papyri (nos 4 and 33) have possible Christian associations, although such cases are neither definite nor numerous.

<sup>31</sup> Keresztes, op. cit. (n. 10), II, 59; *contra*, Molthagen, op. cit. (n. 10), 64 and 70–2.

<sup>32</sup> Lane Fox, op. cit. (n. 8), 455; *contra*, Potter, op. cit. (n. 9), 262 n. 174.

<sup>33</sup> All the datable papyri were issued between 12 June and 14 July A.D. 250, while Cyprian's first explicit reference to *libelli* occurs in a letter written probably in July 250 (*Ep.* 20.2.2 with Clarke ad loc.); Clarke suggests there may also be an allusion in *Ep.* 15.3.1, dating to May 250.

adopted either locally or at a later date. That the issuing of certificates was a local measure applied in enforcing the decree is possible, although the use of so similar a system of certification in such diverse areas as Egypt, North Africa (Cypr., *Ep.* 55.14.1; cf. *Laps.* 27), and Rome (Cypr., *Ep.* 30.3.1) strongly suggests a uniform policy. It is also possible that the process of certification was introduced only at a later stage, although this is again unlikely. Those who advocate this interpretation see the certificates as a way to pin down those suspected of not having sacrificed earlier, i.e. Christians.<sup>34</sup> But against this is the fact that nothing in the papyri suggests that all the people who obtained them were suspected Christians, or anything other than a random cross-section of the population.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the very system of issuing individual certificates makes sense only if it was in place from the start: otherwise, all those who had sacrificed before certificates were issued could be challenged to do so again.<sup>36</sup> Lastly, as I shall argue at length in Section IV below, this sort of bureaucratic measure was not so unthinkable as is sometimes implied. It thus seems best to suppose that Decius' decree required all the inhabitants of the Empire both to sacrifice and to obtain certification from the proper authorities.

But while Decius may have formulated his decree in universal terms, it is possible that he intended it primarily as an anti-Christian measure. There is certainly much to be said for this view. Christian refusal to participate in sacrifices was notorious, so much so that the demand to sacrifice had long been a standard way of determining whether someone was truly a Christian. An emperor who required universal sacrifice in the mid-third century A.D. could hardly be oblivious of its implications for Christians, while the fact that Decius himself presided over the trial of a Christian recalcitrant early on in the edict's implementation suggests a particular interest in them.<sup>37</sup> There is also no doubt that persecution was one practical result of the decree: Christians in many parts of the Empire were imprisoned, sometimes tortured, and even killed, and both Cyprian and Dionysius of Alexandria consistently describe the situation as a persecution.<sup>38</sup> Lastly, it seems in two important respects to resemble the later persecutions of Valerian and the Tetrarchs. On the one hand, the very demand for universal sacrifice closely parallels the fourth edict of Diocletian. On the other, the leaders of the Church were apparently singled out for early and particular attention: the bishops in Rome and Antioch were executed in January, shortly after the edict was published, while in Alexandria the prefect sent a soldier after Dionysius immediately on receiving it (ap. Eus., *HE* 6.40.2). In Carthage, Cyprian was publicly proscribed (*Ep.* 66.4.1) and had fled Carthage by March at the latest. Since both Valerian and Diocletian issued edicts directed specifically against the clergy, it was long thought that Decius did the same, and that the decree on sacrifices was in fact the second of two anti-Christian decrees.

Nevertheless, the interpretation of Decius' decree as essentially an anti-Christian measure is less inescapable than it first appears. The view that he issued two edicts, the first in the winter directed at Church leaders and the second in the spring ordering the

<sup>34</sup> Keresztes, op. cit. (n. 10), II, 59–64, who believes that the decree from the start affected Christians alone, argues that the authorities, instead of continuing to insist that recalcitrant Christians sacrifice, decided to give them the option of receiving a document that falsely stated they had sacrificed; the point of these official fictions was 'to make the demoralization of the Christian Church even more deep'. Such a strategy assumes on the part of Decius a sophistication and a knowledge of Christian doctrine that I find unbelievable.

<sup>35</sup> See n. 30. Both Keresztes, op. cit. (n. 10), II, 61, and Lane Fox, op. cit. (n. 8), 456, suggest that the priestess of Petesouchos was a secret or former Christian, or had Christians in her family; although this hypothesis cannot be excluded, it seems strained.

<sup>36</sup> We do hear of people who sacrificed once but were then 'tested' again: Cypr., *Ep.* 24.1.1, *Laps.* 13. The circumstances are unknown, but presumably involved either bureaucratic confusion or a particular animosity towards Christians.

<sup>37</sup> Cypr., *Epp.* 22.1.1 and 39.2.1 with Clarke, op. cit. (n. 10, 1969), 63–8.

<sup>38</sup> Cypr., *Ep.* 10.2.2 (*incendium persecutionis*), 12.2.2 (*persecutionis tempestas*), and 17.1.1 (*infestatio persecutionis*); cf. *Epp.* 43.7.2, 55.6.1, 66.4.1, *Laps.* 5 and 15. Dionysius ap. Eus., *HE* 6.40.2 and 41.1 (*diôgmos*). There is no explicit mention of a persecution in the body of the *Passio Pionii*, but the redactor has dated it to the time of 'the persecution under Decius' (2.1).

sacrifice, was forcefully challenged by Clarke and now has few supporters.<sup>39</sup> The parallel with Valerian thus vanishes, while that with Diocletian is considerably weakened. Diocletian's edict on sacrifice capped a series of earlier measures that ordered the destruction of all Christian places of worship, the confiscation of all their scriptures, the prohibition of all their assemblies, the loss of legal privileges for individual Christians, and the arrest of all clergy.<sup>40</sup> Decius, in contrast, enacted no specific measures against the hierarchy or Church property, nor did he forbid Christians from meeting or even practising their rites in prison.<sup>41</sup> As for the evidence of contemporary Christian writers, it is understandable that they saw the order to sacrifice as tantamount to an order to apostatize, and interpreted the pressure put on them to comply as a persecution. Their views, however, were not necessarily those of Decius himself. There is in fact no convincing evidence that he was particularly hostile to Christianity *per se*.<sup>42</sup> Rather than wishing to wipe out Christianity, as seems to have been true of Diocletian and Galerius, Decius may simply have failed to understand why Christians could not offer a normal sacrifice in addition to worshipping their god in their own fashion.<sup>43</sup> Although Christians were undoubtedly a major focus of Decius' concerns, there is thus no compelling reason to see his decree as primarily an anti-Christian measure. A number of scholars now prefer instead to emphasize its positive goal of ensuring that everyone in the Empire, Christians included, perform a full and traditional sacrifice.

This change of focus has brought with it an increased emphasis on Decius' concern for traditional Roman religion.<sup>44</sup> That such a concern informed the decision to issue his decree is almost certainly the case. Alföldy has cogently argued that throughout the third century A.D., and especially in its middle years, the preservation and renewal of Roman religion had an important place in imperial policy. There was a widespread perception that the ancestral religion provided an answer to the problems of the time, by obtaining the good will of the gods who had guided and protected Rome throughout its history.<sup>45</sup> It is easy enough to fit Decius into this picture. Like most of the other Balkan emperors, he was apparently devoted to Roman tradition. The most striking evidence for this is found in his own self-presentation. Shortly after becoming emperor he added the name 'Traianus' to his nomenclature. Trajan was one of the great heroes of Rome, remembered not only as the *optimus princeps* but also as a great general and victor; hence the very name of the new emperor Trajan Decius promised the return of the good old days.<sup>46</sup> But if Trajan was the emperor Decius sought most to invoke, he was not the only one. The most striking coins issued during his reign are the so-called *divi* series, which feature on the obverse portraits of deified emperors, and on the reverse

<sup>39</sup> Clarke, *op. cit.* (n. 10, 1973); he shows that ordinary Christians as well as clergy were arrested from an early date and argues that the use of the plural *edicta* (see n. 12) is rhetorical; see also Molthagen, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 67. The earlier decree of Maximinus against the clergy (cf. Eus., *HE* 6.28), frequently alleged as a precedent for Decius, probably did not exist: see e.g. G. W. Clarke, 'Some victims of the persecution of Maximinus Thrax', *Historia* 15 (1966), 445–53 and Sordi, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 92.

<sup>40</sup> See especially G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, 'Aspects of the "Great" Persecution', *HTR* 47 (1954), 75–114.

<sup>41</sup> Cypr., *Ep.* 5.2.1; see further Molthagen, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 65, and Pohlsander, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 1839–40.

<sup>42</sup> Eusebius' view that Decius was hostile to Christianity because of his hatred of Philip is discussed at the beginning of this section. Cyprian says that Cornelius of Rome became bishop when there was an emperor who 'would receive with much greater patience and forbearance the news that a rival emperor was raised against him than that a bishop of God was established in Rome' (*Ep.* 55.9.1). Although Frend, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 405, takes this as an actual remark of Decius, it is clear that Cyprian meant it not as a quotation but as a characterization of Decius and the

menace that he posed to a new bishop: Clarke, *op. cit.* (n. 5), III, 178–9. The method of portraying character through invented thoughts or speech was highly developed in ancient rhetorical theory: see e.g. [Cic.], *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 4.63–5.

<sup>43</sup> For an example of this attitude in non-Christians, see Eus., *HE* 7.11.9.

<sup>44</sup> So, for example, Frend, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 405; Molthagen, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 73–8; Clarke, *op. cit.* (n. 5), I, 23, and especially Pohlsander, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 1829–31.

<sup>45</sup> G. Alföldy, 'Die Krise des Imperium Romanum und die Religion Roms', in W. Eck (ed.), *Religion und Gesellschaft in der römischen Kaiserzeit: Kolloquium . . . F. Vittinghoff* (1989), 53–102.

<sup>46</sup> Gerov, *op. cit.* (n. 24); cf. *PIR*<sup>2</sup> M 520 and Peachin, *op. cit.* (n. 11), 239–52. 'Traianus' is consistently found in the documentary evidence: of the ninety-one variations of his name listed by Peachin, only ten omit it; in contrast, it does not appear in any literary text except *Pass. Pion.* 23, and an allusion in *Sib. Or.* 13.83 (see Potter *ad loc.*). On Trajan's reputation, see Syme, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 220 and, in general, 89–113.



either eagles or altars, symbols of deification. The series thus constitutes a gallery of the glorious dead who had made Rome great and thereby won their divine reward.<sup>47</sup>

Some epigraphic evidence supports the idea that Decius had particular interest in a religious revival.<sup>48</sup> The most interesting example is an inscription from Oescus, an old Roman colony on the Danube in Moesia Inferior, that describes him as 'reparator disciplinae militaris, fundator sacr(orum) urbis, firmator sp[ei]' (*ILS* 8922). This was erected in late A.D. 249, within a few months of his senatorial recognition, and so at much the same time that he issued his edict. Although the first and third phrases are fairly standard, the second is more unusual, and suggests that Decius had taken some initiative in establishing or reviving rites of the civic cult in Rome. A similar inscription from the Tuscan town of Cosa dates to about a year and a half later, when Decius was back in the Balkans fighting the Goths. This is a statue base of very poor quality, dedicated by the 'Respublica Cosanorum', in which Decius is hailed as 'restitutor sacrorum et libertatis'.<sup>49</sup> Cosa was at this time so completely deserted that even its temples had been abandoned some thirty years before, but it was soon to enjoy a modest revival; we should perhaps see this dedication as the first hint of this. Since Decius' wife was apparently of old Etruscan stock, he possibly played some personal part in this revival.

Yet the evidence for Decius' devotion to traditional religion is scantier than one might expect. Although the similarity of the phrases in the inscriptions from Oescus and Cosa might suggest that he took care to advertise his role as a restorer of traditional religion, it is surprising that he neglected to do so in his coinage, the medium most suited to such advertisement. For the most part, its motifs are entirely conventional, alluding to his accession or depicting standard abstractions like Pax, Victoria, and Abundantia. The only types peculiar to Decius celebrate his Balkan origin and military support. No other deities appear, traditional or otherwise, although we find Juno Regina on coins of his wife and Mars Propugnator on those of his younger son Hostilianus. Nor is there any reference to religious sentiment, apart from an appropriate Pietas Augusta on the coinage of his elder son Etruscus; Decius did not even include his title of *pontifex maximus*. Only the *divi* series provides a possible indication of any religious concerns. Otherwise, there is surprisingly little evidence for any particular religious interests on the part of Decius, traditional or otherwise.

Of course, when dealing with a figure as poorly attested as Decius, the lack of extensive evidence need not be particularly significant, and it remains very likely that his motivations in issuing the decree were largely traditional. But reference to traditional religion does not account for the specific form that it took, which in fact was highly

<sup>47</sup> H. Mattingly, E. A. Sydenham, C. H. V. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage* IV.3 (1949), 107–50; the emperors depicted are Augustus, Vespasian, Titus, Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Severus, and Alexander. Mattingly's attempt to attribute this series to the mint of Milan is now rejected: K. J. J. Elks, 'Reattribution of the Milan coins of Trajan Decius to the Rome mint', *Numismatic Chronicle* 12 (1972), 111–15. K. E. T. Butcher has recently suggested that this series of portraits may have simply been a form of compensation to these emperors for the overstriking of their issues: 'Imagined emperors: personalities and failure in the third century', *JRA* 9 (1996), 514–27, at 522–3 n. 15; yet it must be more than coincidence that only deified emperors appear.

<sup>48</sup> There exists a letter from Decius and his son Herennius Etruscus to Aphrodisias in which they thank the city for honouring the establishment of their rule and making 'the proper sacrifice and prayers': J. Reynolds, *Aphrodisias and Rome* (1982), no. 25. Although some scholars have connected this with the decree on sacrifices, e.g. Frend, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 406, it instead records the long-established custom that a city would celebrate the accession of a

new emperor and send to him ambassadors to announce that fact in the hope of winning his favour: Millar, *op. cit.* (n. 12), 410–20; hence the confirmation of privileges and the mention of ambassadors at the end. More relevant is an inscription from Aquileia recording the public restoration of a statue of Neptune 'by order' of an emperor whose name has been erased but whom the editor identifies as Decius: J. B. Brusin, *Inscriptiones Aquileiae* I (1991), no. 326. If this identification is correct, the inscription would date to the very end of A.D. 250, and would further attest an interest in the cult of traditional gods.

<sup>49</sup> *AE* 1973.235; the designation of Decius as 'cos. III' dates it to the first half of A.D. 251, *pace* W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (1984), 319, who implies that it was erected near the beginning of his reign. See further C. L. Babcock, 'An inscription of Trajan Decius from Cosa', *AJP* 83 (1962), 147–58; U. Marelli, 'L'Epigrafe di Decio a Cosa et l'epiteto di "Restitutor Sacrorum"', *Aevum* 58 (1984), 52–6; and Lane Fox, *op. cit.* (n. 8), 453. Babcock plausibly suggests that Decius may have sponsored the rededication of the temple in which the inscription was found.

innovative.<sup>50</sup> In two important respects it constituted a radical departure from traditional religious organization. Public religion throughout the Mediterranean world had always been characteristically local on the one hand and collective on the other. Decius' decree, in contrast, implied a system that was both universal and individual. At this point some discussion of traditional religious organization is necessary in order to put Decius' measure into proper perspective.

### III. THE ORGANIZATION OF TRADITIONAL RELIGION

That traditional religious organization was local requires no lengthy demonstration. In the Greek world, public religion was always an aspect of the individual *polis* or *ethnos*: as Sourvinou-Inwood has argued, the *polis* 'assumed the responsibility and authority to set a religious system into place, to mediate human relationships with the divine world'.<sup>51</sup> Priests and priestesses were representatives not of a universal sacerdotal order, but rather of a particular city or people. Even the gods, for all practical purposes, were local. Although the Greeks saw their deities as forming a common pantheon, in terms of cult they remained distinct: the Artemis of Brauron was not identical with the Artemis of Ephesus. The Italic tradition was in its essentials much the same. Although deities like Jupiter or Juno received cult in a number of different places, these cults were sharply distinguished. It was above all, then, the individual political or ethnic unit that organized the relationships between the human and divine spheres.

This is not to deny that there were unifying factors, but these were matters more of sentiment than of organization. The Greeks from an early date could define 'Greek religion' by the poems of Homer and Hesiod, and the Panhellenic sanctuaries and festivals. Yet the texts of Homer and Hesiod, despite their tremendous prestige, were not closely integrated with actual cult practices, while in their organization the Panhellenic sanctuaries remained essentially local shrines, in whose cults other Greeks participated as guests.<sup>52</sup> In the Roman world, the prestige of Roman culture and the spread of citizenship encouraged the spread of Roman cults, but it is clear that Roman colonies and native towns alike could select and organize their own cults.<sup>53</sup> Lastly, although mystery cults and other voluntary cult associations were not so closely tied to particular cities and were celebrated by people throughout the Empire in similar ways, in actual organization they were no more universal than traditional civic cults. In none of these cases, then, was there any overarching organization that corresponded to the universalism of the sentiment.

The same is even true of ruler cult, which in the Roman world was never centrally organized. On the contrary, it existed as a conglomeration of independent local cults organized primarily on a traditional civic basis. Even the provincial cults, organized on a regional basis and celebrated by representatives from the cities or tribes within that region, did not function as umbrella organizations: there is little evidence that they had anything to do with the local civic cults of the emperor. Thus, while the imperial cult was universal in so far as it provided a universal focus for religious sentiment, it remained almost entirely local in organization. Cities arranged for their own sacrifices and ceremonies in honour of the emperor largely as they pleased.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, because imperial cults were everywhere concerned with the same figures, they naturally displayed a great deal of similarity. In particular, many of the same events took place all over the Empire at more or less the same time. These were

<sup>50</sup> As correctly noted by Sordi, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 104 and 107 n. 17.

<sup>51</sup> C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'What is *polis* religion?', in O. Murray and S. Price (eds), *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (1990), 295-322, at 302; see further eadem, 'Further aspects of *polis* religion', *Annali, Sezione di archeologia e storia antica: Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli* 10 (1988), 259-74.

<sup>52</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood, *op. cit.* (n. 51, 1990), 295-8.

<sup>53</sup> J. B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine* (1995), 5-12 and 28-51.

<sup>54</sup> S. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (1984), 62-77; D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West* (2 vols, 1987-92), II, 482-501; Rives, *op. cit.* (n. 53), 51-63 and 85-96.

either *ad hoc*, in honour of an accession or a notable victory, or annual, such as the anniversaries and birthdays of reigning and former emperors.<sup>55</sup> These dates were established by the authorities in Rome, who then employed the provincial administration to propagate them throughout the Empire. This sort of thing is well attested. There were for example the *vota pro salute Imperatoris*, the vows made every 3 January on behalf of the emperor's well-being. These are described in detail in the *acta* of the Arval Brothers in Rome, while fragmentary inscriptions from Cyrenaica indicate that virtually identical vows were made there.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, both Plutarch (*Cic.* 2.1) and Lucian (*Pseudolog.* 8) refer to them as something familiar to their Greek readers, and the younger Pliny, as governor of Bithynia, reports to Trajan that he, along with his fellow-soldiers and the provincials, had duly performed them.<sup>57</sup> We may thus assume that these rites took place simultaneously throughout the Empire, and that moreover governors had some responsibility for their performance.

Governors co-ordinated *ad hoc* celebrations as well. An inscription from Messene reveals that under Augustus the governor of Achaëa instructed the people to wear garlands and sacrifice in thanks for Gaius Caesar's escape from danger (*SEG XXIII.206*, ll. 13–14). Such instructions were particularly common when new emperors came to the throne. At the accession of Pertinax, for example, the prefect of Egypt sent an edict to the Alexandrians instructing them to celebrate this event with sacrifices and prayers and to wear garlands for fifteen days; he also sent copies of the order to officials in other parts of Egypt, thereby co-ordinating the celebrations throughout the province. Similar documents from Egypt concern the accessions of other emperors, and we may take it for granted that the governors of other provinces issued similar edicts.<sup>58</sup> To this extent, then, there were precedents for the co-ordinated observation of particular occasions throughout the Empire.

The second feature of Decius' edict on sacrifice that ran counter to traditional religious organization was its insistence on the active involvement of individuals.<sup>59</sup> In both the Greek and the Roman traditions, public cult was by definition collective: the important relationship was between the deity and the community as a whole, not individual citizens. This is particularly clear in Rome, where all the rites of public cult were entrusted to regularly appointed civic officials and the only positive obligation imposed on ordinary citizens was to abstain from business during festivals. This is not to say that people at large took no part in public cult. Religious festivals were holidays, providing opportunities for social interaction and entertainment; they also served as a focus for local pride and a means of affirming civic identity. But while many factors encouraged popular involvement, nothing suggests that it was mandatory.<sup>60</sup> The Greek

<sup>55</sup> For the latter, see W. F. Snyder, 'Public anniversaries in the Roman Empire', *YCS* 7 (1940), 225–317, and P. Herz, 'Kaiserfeste der Principatszeit', *ANRW* II.16.2 (1978), 1135–200.

<sup>56</sup> Arval rites: J. Scheid, *Romulus et ses frères. Le collège des Frères Arvales, modèle du culte public dans la Rome des empereurs* (1990), 290–383; Cyrenaican inscriptions: J. M. Reynolds, 'Vota pro salute Principis', *PBSR* NS 17 (1962), 33–6, and 'Notes on Cyrenaican inscriptions', *PBSR* NS 20 (1965), 52–4.

<sup>57</sup> *Epp.* 10.35, 36, 100, and 101; *Epp.* 10.52, 53, 102, and 103 deal similarly with the prayers and oaths made on the emperor's *dies imperii* (cf. Sherwin-White ad *Ep.* 10.35).

<sup>58</sup> Pertinax: *BGU* II.646 = A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar, *Select Papyri II: Non-Literary Papyri, Public Documents* (1934), no. 222; see also *P. Oxy.* VII.1021 = *Select Papyri* II no. 235, on Nero; *P. Oxy.* LV.3781, on Hadrian; P. Sijpesteijn, 'Edict of C. Calvisius Statianus', *ZPE* 8 (1971), 186–92 = *SB* XII.10991, on Avidius Cassius; *SB* I.421, on Maximus, the son of Maximinus Thrax; *P. Oxy.* LI.3607, on Gordian I and II. Note also *IG* II<sup>2</sup>.1077, a decree from Athens for celebrations in honour of Geta's accession to imperial status, prompted by the decree of an imperial legate.

<sup>59</sup> It is not clear whether the key unit was the person or the household. A number of the Egyptian certificates were filed by households: two brothers and their wives (Knipfing, op. cit. (n. 4), no. 2), a man with his son and daughter (no. 4), and women with one or more children (nos 7, 30–2, 34–6). In one case the petitioner explicitly states that he performed the sacrifice for his wife, two sons, and daughter (no. 33). According to Cyprian, some men made their entire families sacrifice, while others took it upon themselves to do so on their behalf (*Ep.* 55.13.2); he refers to parents who carried their infants and small children to the altar (*Laps.* 9) and to a man who forced his wife to sacrifice (*Ep.* 24.1.1), and relates an anecdote about a baby girl whose nurse fed her bread dipped in sacrificial wine (*Laps.* 25). It thus seems that although the head of a household could fulfill the terms of the edict on behalf of the entire family, it was relatively common for all members of the household to take part individually. In what follows, 'individual' means either the single person or the single household.

<sup>60</sup> See especially G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (2nd edn, 1912), 398–400; for the suspension of business, see Varr., *Ling.* 6.30 and 6.53, and ap. Macr., *Sat.* 1.16.19.

tradition tended to involve a higher level of participation on the part of its citizens, but more as representatives of the citizen body than as individuals; groups representing various population groups were particularly common in religious processions. But although the mass of citizens often took part in civic festivals, cult regulations generally neither stipulate nor even mention their participation. In both the Greek and the Roman traditions, then, public religion was primarily a collective phenomenon, in which the participation of individual citizens was traditional but not essential.<sup>61</sup>

Beginning in the Hellenistic period, however, some cult regulations do mandate popular participation. Already in the late fourth century B.C., Eretria decreed that all inhabitants should wear wreaths of ivy for the procession of Dionysos, while for a festival of Asklepios at Lampsacus in the second century B.C. public heralds ordered all citizens to wear garlands. Similar measures are known from several other cities.<sup>62</sup> People could also make individual offerings. In the Roman tradition this took the distinctive form of the *supplicatio*, an act of general worship decreed by the Senate as either a propitiation or a thanksgiving. On these occasions, all the temples of the city would be opened, and the entire population, wearing garlands, was called upon to offer wine and incense to the gods.<sup>63</sup> Under Augustus, *supplicationes* were incorporated into imperial cult. In the *feriale Cumanum*, all imperial anniversaries were celebrated by *supplicationes*.<sup>64</sup> The rite was also adopted in other cities of the Western Empire. In the civic cult of Augustus at Narbo, for example, the three *equites* and three *libertini* who were in charge of the cult were required on various occasions to supply incense and wine to the general population 'ad supplicandum numini eius' (*ILS* 112). We should note, however, that there is no mention here of visiting temples; instead, the rite seems to have been streamlined into a simple offering to the imperial *numen*.

In the Greek world we also hear about individual sacrifices in a public context. An early example occurs in a decree of Ilion, instituting a civic festival after the accession of Antiochus I in 281 B.C.: while the priests and prytaneis and ambassadors perform the main sacrifices, 'all the citizens and resident foreigners shall wear garlands, and gathering at their homes shall offer sacrifices to the gods'.<sup>65</sup> The best example comes from the regulations for the cult of Artemis Leukophryene in Magnesia, dating to the second century B.C., which require the sacred herald to summon 'all the inhabitants of the city and countryside . . . to celebrate an acceptable sacrifice to Artemis Leukophryene on this day, according to their means'; a later document adds that 'it would be good for those who own homes or shops to build altars in front of their doors, according to their means'.<sup>66</sup> Under the Empire this type of individual participation was incorporated into imperial festivals. In Athens, Sparta, Mytilene, and Pergamum, series of small altars dedicated to various emperors have been found, whose number and uniformity suggest that they were the result of civic decrees similar to that from Magnesia.<sup>67</sup> In some cases there was even financial assistance. A decree of Ephesus in A.D. 138 directed the secretary of the council to distribute to all the citizens one denarius each for sacrifices on the occasion of Antoninus Pius' birthday.<sup>68</sup>

Particularly within the context of imperial celebrations, then, there were precedents for individual participation in public festivals. Yet we should not overestimate the

<sup>61</sup> In both the Greek and the Italic traditions there was also extensive private worship by individuals, and Sourvinou-Inwood, *op. cit.* (n. 51, 1988), 264–7, has cogently argued that in Greek religion at least the individual was the basic cultic unit. But this was not a part of public cult as such.

<sup>62</sup> Eretria: *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 323 = F. Sokolowski, *Lois sacrées des cités grecques, supplément* (1962), no. 46, ll. 6–7; Lampsacus: F. Sokolowski, *Lois sacrées de l'Asie Mineure* (1955), no. 8, ll. 18–19 and 23–4, with further references *ad loc.*; see also *LSAM* no. 81 and *OGIS* 6 and 219.

<sup>63</sup> See Wissowa, *op. cit.* (n. 60), 423–6, and at *RE* IV A (1931), 942–51.

<sup>64</sup> *ILS* 108; cf. *Fasti Amiternini* (Degrassi no. 25) on 3 September, and especially *Res Gestae* 9.2: 'privatim

etiam et municipatim universi cives unanimiter continenter apud omnia pulvinaria pro valetudine mea supplicaverunt'.

<sup>65</sup> *OGIS* 219 = *I. Ilion* 32, with the emendation of L. Robert, 'Un décret d'Ilion et un papyrus concernant des cultes royaux', in *Essays in Honor of C. Bradford Welles*, *American Studies in Papyrology* 1 (1966), 175–211, at 183–92.

<sup>66</sup> *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 695 = *LSAM* no. 33, ll. 43–5 and 86–90; see also ll. 7–10.

<sup>67</sup> P. Veyne, 'Les honneurs posthumes de Flavia Domitilla et les dédicaces grecques et latines', *Latomus* 21 (1962), 49–98, at 71–5; see further Price, *op. cit.* (n. 54), 112.

<sup>68</sup> *OGIS* 493 = *I. Ephesos* 1a. 21.

evidence. The practice of individual sacrifices was apparently restricted to the Greek parts of the Empire, and even there seems to have been infrequent: the cult of Artemis Leukophryene provides almost the only clear-cut example. In the context of imperial cult, most of the archaeological evidence for individual altars concerns Hadrian and a few earlier figures, although one series of altars in Sparta was dedicated to Antoninus Pius. As for the imperial *vota*, although Pliny's reference to 'provincials' could mean that everyone took part, the fact that he associates them with his staff suggests instead that he meant a particular group, probably local magistrates or other members of the provincial élite.<sup>69</sup> We may also note that Plutarch (*Cic.* 2.1) specifies the *archontes* as the ones who pray and sacrifice for the ruler on this occasion. As for *supplicationes*, we know that they long continued to be a part of imperial cult, since the *Feriale Duranum* shows that in the army they marked imperial anniversaries as late as the 220s A.D. Yet, as Hoey has argued, it is likely that only the officers actually offered wine and incense, while the rank and file simply looked on as passive participants.<sup>70</sup>

By and large, the participation of individuals in the public festivals of the imperial period does not seem to have extended much beyond what had always been traditional.<sup>71</sup> People were expected to observe the occasion by dressing in festive attire, attending the sacrifices, and observing the spectacles. And as always, most people would have wanted to do so, out of loyalty to the emperor and pride in their city, or simply because it was a chance to have some fun. Yet there seem to have been no legal requirements even for this degree of participation.<sup>72</sup> Conspicuous refusal to observe a civic festival would no doubt have drawn the unfavourable attention of neighbours and provoked suspicions of disloyalty and misanthropy; if the occasion concerned imperial cult, it might even have led to charges before a Roman official. But those who were simply uninterested could no doubt quietly absent themselves without anyone caring, and some people presumably did just that: such events were not to everyone's taste.

#### IV. THE NATURE OF DECIUS' DECREE

Decius' edict on universal sacrifice was thus not without precedents, both in its universal scope and in its emphasis on individual participation. It nevertheless differed significantly from what had gone before. One aspect of its distinctiveness lies in its apparent lack of context: unlike the Empire-wide celebrations noted above, Decius' decree does not seem to have been attached to any particular event. None of the evidence, not even the certificates of sacrifice, provides any hint about the reason for the sacrifice. Some scholars have associated it with his accession or with the annual vows for the emperor on 3 January; given the unusually low profile of the emperor in the evidence, however, neither proposal is very persuasive.<sup>73</sup> A more plausible context is the

<sup>69</sup> Plin., *Ep.* 10.100: 'nova [vota] certante commilitonum et provincialium pietate suscepimus'; cf. *Epp.* 10.35, 36 and 101.

<sup>70</sup> In R. O. Fink, A. S. Hoey, and W. F. Snyder, 'The Feriale Duranum', *YCS* 7 (1940), 1-222, at 190-202.

<sup>71</sup> See in general Herz, *op. cit.* (n. 55), 1189-93; Price, *op. cit.* (n. 54), 110-14; Fishwick, *op. cit.* (n. 54), II, 528-32.

<sup>72</sup> Since the officials who tried Christians often demanded that they make an offering to the emperor, it has often been thought that such offerings were legally required. Yet the first and most detailed account of this practice shows that it was simply a way of proving that the accused was not a Christian: Plin., *Ep.* 10.96.5-9 with F. Millar, 'The imperial cult and the persecutions', in W. den Boer (ed.), *Le culte des souverains dans l'empire romain*, Fondation Hardt, Entretiens 19 (1973), 145-65, at 152-5; see further D. Fishwick, 'Pliny and the Christians: the rites ad

*imaginem principis*', *AJAH* 9 (1984), 123-30, and *op. cit.* (n. 54), II, 533 with n. 352.

<sup>73</sup> Clarke, *op. cit.* (n. 5), I, 25, tentatively connects it with the imperial *vota*; the suggestion of Alföldi, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 333, that the occasion was a *dies Imperii* is rightly criticized by Frensdorff, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 407. The only reference to the emperor is in the *Passio Pionii* (8.4), where the *neokoros* Polemon, after his other attempts have failed, suggests to Pionius to 'sacrifice at least to the emperor'; the concessive phrasing of this remark hardly suggests that the emperor was the chief focus of the decree. Robert, *op. cit.* (n. 8), sees the whole thing as 'a matter of loyalty', and considers Polemon as the *neokoros* of an imperial temple in which the emperor was associated with the Nemeseis (at *Pass. Pion.* 3.1 and 8.4). But none of the imperial temples in Smyrna seems to have been jointly dedicated to the Nemeseis: Price, *op. cit.* (n. 54), 258; nor does *neokoros*, when used as a personal rather than a civic title, necessarily imply imperial cult.

celebration of Rome's first millennium, which the emperor Philip had marked just the year before with a splendid set of games in Rome and coins proclaiming a *novum saeculum*.<sup>74</sup> It is possible that Decius felt that something more was required, and that the entire population of the Empire should celebrate the anniversary with offerings to the gods. Yet there is not the slightest scrap of evidence to suggest that interest in Rome's millennium carried over into his reign.<sup>75</sup> More importantly, none of these suggestions account for the lengthy period of time involved: implementation of the edict took six months at the very least, since by late January there were already martyrs in Rome, while in central Egypt people were still obtaining certificates in the middle of July. It is difficult to see this cumbersome and long-drawn-out process as any kind of thanksgiving or celebration. Although something of this sort may have provided the initial motivation for the decree, it must inevitably have faded from view during its lengthy implementation. Regardless of the beginning, in the end it was the mere act of sacrifice, rather than its occasion, that became the important thing.

Even more significant is the fact that no previous imperial decree actually mandated individual participation in an Empire-wide religious celebration. Emperors had certainly decreed such celebrations; the most famous example occurs in Caracalla's grant of universal citizenship, in which he apparently urged some sort of empire-wide thanksgiving to the gods.<sup>76</sup> Yet there is no evidence that earlier decrees addressed the precise enactment of the celebrations, much less their enforcement. That was left to the provincial governors and even more to the civic authorities; in this connection we may note that virtually all the measures requiring individual cult acts for a public festival were civic decrees. Lastly, it is not at all clear to what extent even these measures included legal constraints. It is possible that people who ostentatiously refused to perform the specified cult acts may have been liable to prosecution for impiety or disloyalty, although we hear nothing about this. There is certainly no evidence that any earlier measure included mechanisms to enforce compliance, as did the decree of Decius with its system of certification. This is true regardless of how one interprets the certificates: even if they were not actually issued to everyone, the very fact that people could be required to prove that they had sacrificed shows the unusual importance that Decius attached to individual participation.

We thus have an imperial edict that did not simply enjoin the general observance of a particular occasion, but instead required a particular cult act of all the inhabitants of the Empire and established a mechanism to ensure its performance on an individual basis. In these respects Decius' decree on sacrifice was unprecedented, and marked a fundamental innovation. Yet its innovative aspects stand out most sharply when we view it in the context of traditional religious organization. If we view it against a different background, it takes on quite a different appearance. Here is the text of one of the certificates issued in Oxyrhynchus in June A.D. 250:

To the commission in charge of the sacred victims and sacrifices of the city. From Aurelius L[. . .]thion, son of Theodore and Pantonymis, his mother, of the same city. I have always

<sup>74</sup> The only contemporary evidence for Philip's millennial celebrations is his coinage: Mattingly *et al.*, *op. cit.* (n. 47), 70–89. One common type has on the reverse the legend 'Saeculares Augg.', with images of wild animals; variants show the she-wolf and the twins, and a column inscribed 'Cos. III'. Another series has on the reverse 'Saeculum Novum' with the depiction of a temple and a cult statue, probably that of Roma. Some bronze medallions with the same legend show a similar temple, with a scene of sacrifice before it, while others show chariot races: H. Cohen, *Description historique des monnaies* 5 (1885), 139–9 nos 12–14, and 170 no. 82. Later references occur in the *Chronicle* of Eusebius (Schöne 180–1), Aurelius Victor (28.1), Eutropius (9.3), *HA Gordiani* (33.1), and Orosius (7.20.2), most of whom say only that Philip celebrated the anniversary with splendid games. The evidence thus does not suggest that Philip's millennial

celebrations had a significant cultic component, although they no doubt involved prayers and sacrifices.

<sup>75</sup> It is significant that Decius' coinage does not continue the theme of a *saeculum novum*.

<sup>76</sup> *P. Giss.* 40; among the numerous studies, see especially E. Bickerman, *Das Edikt des Kaisers Caracalla in P. Giss 40* (1926); J. Stroux, 'Die Constitutio Antoniniana', *Philologus* NS 42 (1933), 272–95; A. Wilhelm, 'Die Constitutio Antoniniana', *AJA* 38 (1934), 178–80; A. d'Ors, 'Estudios sobre la "Constitutio Antoniniana"', V: *Caracalla y la unificación del imperio*, *Emerita* 24 (1956), 1–26; H. Wolff, *Die Constitutio Antoniniana und P. Giss. 40* (1976); K. Buraselis, *Theia Dôrea: Studies on the Policy of the Severans and the Constitutio Antoniniana* (1989, in Greek).

and without interruption sacrificed and poured libations to the gods, and now in your presence in accordance with the decree I have poured a libation, and sacrificed, and partaken of the sacred victims, together with my son Aurelius Dioscorus and my daughter Aurelia Lais. I request you to certify this for me below. Year one of Emperor Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Traianus Decius Pius Felix Augustus.<sup>77</sup>

With this we may compare the text of another document written in the same town five years earlier:

To the census officers of Isieum Panga from Aurelius Anicetus son of Plutarchus, ex-magistrate in charge of the conveyance of oxen, councillor of the city of the Oxyrhynchites. In accordance with the orders issued by Aurelius Basileus the ex-prefect, I register for the house-by-house census . . . the quarter share of vacant lots belonging to me in the village of Isieum Panga . . . And I swear the oath customary among the Romans that I have not made a false declaration. Year two of Emperor Caesar Marcus Iulius Philippus Pius Felix . . . I, Aurelius Anicetus son of Plutarchus, have submitted the return and sworn the oath.<sup>78</sup>

Seen in the context of the Roman imperial bureaucracy, the aspects of Decius' decree which otherwise appear bizarre and non-traditional begin to look much more ordinary. It is in this context, I would argue, that we should place it.<sup>79</sup>

Although there was no doubt some local variation, the general procedure followed in the edict's implementation is clear enough.<sup>80</sup> When the officials of a particular region received it, they arranged for local magistrates to oversee the proceedings and set a date by which everyone would be required to have sacrificed. These dates, it seems, were set locally, and not by the central administration. During this time, people would perform their sacrifices before the officials and present their petitions, which the officials would duly sign. The certificates may have been filled out in duplicate, with one copy retained by the individual as a sort of receipt and the other placed in an official file. We may compare this procedure with those used in Egypt for taking the census and collecting taxes.

The census in Egypt was conducted on a fourteen-year cycle for a period of over two hundred years, from at least A.D. 33 to 257. The entire population was required to register, and failure to comply was liable to punishment. Although an edict of the prefect initiated the new census, local officials handled its enactment and set the dates for filing. In small villages this could take place within a short period, although in larger towns it might extend over a period of months. People prepared formal declarations like that quoted above, which they signed under oath and submitted to the appropriate officials; a few examples have official subscriptions. There were apparently multiple copies of each declaration that went to different offices and were used to produce accurate records of the population.<sup>81</sup> These records were kept up-to-date by supplementary documents recording births and deaths. Here is an example of the former, written in Oxyrhynchus in A.D. 284:

To the administrators of the affairs of the phylarchy of the glorious and most glorious city of the Oxyrhynchites . . . from Marcus Aurelius Eudaemon . . . I wish to have registered for the first time in the district in which I am myself registered . . . the son born to me from my wife who lives with me, Aurelia Nice or Taias, from the same city, Aurelius Eudaemon, who is liable to the twelve-drachma poll-tax and of the gymnasial class and is in the present first

<sup>77</sup> *P. Oxy.* IV.658 = Knipfing, op. cit. (n. 4), no. 4, in Knipfing's translation.

<sup>78</sup> *P. Oxy.* L.3565, in the translation of J. R. Rea.

<sup>79</sup> I am here developing an observation first made by Potter, op. cit. (n. 9), 43: 'when they sacrificed they would obtain a certificate . . . just as they received a receipt from the tax-collectors whenever they paid

their taxes: indeed, the procedure in this edict appears to parallel the process of tax collection very closely'.

<sup>80</sup> See especially Knipfing, op. cit. (n. 4), 346-54, and Clarke, op. cit. (n. 5), I, 30-2.

<sup>81</sup> R. S. Bagnall and B. W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (1994), 1-30.

year eleven(?) years old. Therefore I submit the application . . . and I swear the oath customary among the Romans that I have made no false declaration.<sup>82</sup>

The collection of taxes was closely bound up with these population records; in Egypt the *laographia*, a type of poll-tax, was so closely associated with the census that it took its name from it. When people paid their taxes they were given official receipts, like this one for the payment of the *laographia* issued just two years before the Decian edict:

Year 5 of the Imperatores Caesares Marci Iulii Philippi Pii Felices Augusti, Tybi 11 for the account of Choiak. Paid by Artemidorus, son of Diodorus, by means of his daughter Kroniaina for the poll-tax of the fourth year for Exo Pseyr: forty drachms, which makes 40 dr.<sup>83</sup>

Numerous examples of such receipts are extant.

This evidence for census-taking, record-keeping, and tax collection comes almost entirely from Egypt, and particular details of the system it reveals may have been peculiar to that province. Nevertheless, in general outline it must have existed throughout the Empire.<sup>84</sup> Although the Decian *libelli* do not parallel any of these documents exactly, there are significant similarities. We find the same local implementation of a general order, the same submission of documents to appropriate officials, and the same process of certifying submissions and issuing receipts. Above all, we find the same intrusion of the imperial government into the lives of individuals, the same monitoring of their property and behaviour. The comparison of these documents thus lets us see Decius' edict on sacrifices as the application of well-established bureaucratic procedures to a new area, that of cult. Just as all the inhabitants of the Empire were required to submit an account of their persons and property to the government, so now they also had to register their performance of the specified cult act. And just as they were given receipts to prove fulfilment of their financial obligations, so now they were given certificates to prove fulfilment of their religious obligations.<sup>85</sup>

That someone with Decius' extensive military and administrative experience should have applied familiar bureaucratic methods to a new area is not surprising. Yet he must have had some reason to do so. Imperial authorities traditionally maintained a *laissez-faire* religious policy, in which the organization of public cult remained largely in the hands of local élites. Decius, in contrast, deliberately adopted a more active programme. It is precisely because of his untraditional approach that appeals to his devotion to traditional religion do not sufficiently account for his decree. For example, several scholars have connected his edict with the traditional *supplicatio*, seeing his call to sacrifice as an appeal to the gods for aid in unsettled times.<sup>86</sup> Even though the rituals mandated by Decius bear little resemblance to the traditional *supplicatio* and even less

<sup>82</sup> *P. Oxy.* XLVI.3295, in the translation of J. R. Rea; see further L. Montevocchi, 'Ricerche di sociologia nei documenti dell'Egitto greco-romano. VI: Denunce di nascita dei greco-egizi', *Aegyptus* 27 (1947), 3–24, and F. Schulz, 'Roman registers of birth and birth certificates', *JRS* 32 (1942), 78–91 and 33 (1943), 55–64. On death certificates, see P. J. Sijpesteijn, 'A document concerning registration of deaths', *ZPE* 52 (1983), 282–4 and L. Casarico, *Il controllo della popolazione nell'Egitto romano I: Le denunce di morte* (1985).

<sup>83</sup> *P. Batav.* I.14, in the translation of P. J. Sijpesteijn. On the *laographia*, see further S. L. Wallace, *Taxation in Egypt from Augustus to Diocletian* (1938), 116–34.

<sup>84</sup> See in general P. A. Brunt, *Roman Imperial Themes* (1990), 324–46. There is a land-declaration made during a census in Arabia: N. Lewis, *The Documents from the Bar Kochba Period in the Cave of Letters: Greek Papyri* (1989), no. 16, with H. M. Cotton, 'Another fragment of the declaration of landed property from the province of Arabia', *ZPE* 99 (1993), 115–21; the census in Judaea is attested by Luke

(2:1–5), while Ulpian's discussion of what should be included in census returns (*Digest* 50.15.3–4) is clearly meant to have general application.

<sup>85</sup> Oaths of loyalty constitute another parallel, although more partial. Although everyone in the Empire was required to swear such an oath, the process seems to have been a collective one: one inscription is headed 'senatus et populus Go[nobariensium] in ea ver[ba] iuraverunt': J. González, 'The first oath pro salute Augusti found in Baetica', *ZPE* 72 (1988), 113–27. The text of an oath of allegiance to Augustus from Gangra in Paphlagonia (*ILS* 8781) is put in the first person singular ('I swear by Zeus'), but the heading is again collective, 'the oath taken by the inhabitants of Paphlagonia'. There is certainly no evidence of a procedure for individual certification.

<sup>86</sup> Notably Molthagen, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 63 and 73–5, following Lieserung, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 37–43; see further Pohlsander, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 1838. Both Knipfing, *op. cit.* (n. 4), 354, and Alföldi, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 329, pointed out problems with this interpretation.



to those of his own day, it is easy to see a similarity in intent: as with the old *supplicatio*, Decius wished through an unusual and dramatic rite to win the particular favour of the gods.<sup>87</sup> That a desire for divine favour was a major factor in his decision to issue the decree is highly likely; nevertheless, it does not explain the specific form that he gave it. Earlier emperors, and the Senate before them, had also sought to win divine favour but had not considered it necessary to apply the procedures of imperial bureaucracy to public cult in order to achieve this.

It is for this same reason that the older interpretation of the edict as an anti-Christian measure remains so attractive: an unusual decree can best be explained as a response to an unusual problem. Although Christians were hardly novel in the mid-third century A.D., they had perhaps acquired such importance that they seemed to a tradition-minded emperor like Decius to require a more organized and comprehensive response than had hitherto been adopted. Yet as I argued above, the interpretation of the decree as an essentially anti-Christian measure has its own problems. A more general analysis along the same lines, on the other hand, seems rather more satisfactory. Perhaps Decius believed that people were neglecting the proper worship of the gods to such an extent that radical steps were needed to reassert the importance of traditional cult acts; although he may have considered Christianity a major cause of this neglect, it need not have been the only one. Religious competition had long been on the increase, and the traditional civic cults no longer enjoyed the near-monopoly that once was standard. Not only were there numerous private cult-associations, but personal devotions of the most varied sort seem to have become more common.<sup>88</sup> In some of these sacrifice played a minor role or was even abandoned entirely, as in the Neopythagorean piety that only a generation before Philostratus had admired in Apollonius of Tyana (e.g. *V. Apoll.* 1.1 and 8.7.12). For all these reasons Decius may well have thought it necessary to call people back to traditional forms of piety by ensuring that everyone in the Empire at least acknowledge the importance of sacrifice. The application of existing bureaucratic procedures would no doubt have seemed to someone of his background an obvious way to achieve this goal.

In the end, of course, we can only speculate on Decius' motivations. We should also remember that the edict on sacrifices probably did not loom nearly so large in his mind as it has in modern scholarship. Decius was a busy man: he came to the throne in difficult circumstances, and within a year of his accession was faced with a serious barbarian invasion. It is unlikely that he had much time to devote to long-term statesmanship. Moreover, the very obscurity of the measure is perhaps significant. The fact that the documentary evidence reveals so little about his religious concerns may indicate that he had no large-scale and coherent programme. Similarly, the fact that neither the decree itself nor the consequent persecutions of Christians left any trace in the non-Christian historical tradition suggests that it did not create a lasting impression. Even contemporary historians may not have bothered to record it, although we can hardly be certain.<sup>89</sup> In short, it is possible that the edict on universal sacrifice was a relatively spontaneous measure, and perhaps not very well thought out: Decius' decision to require some kind of certification may in fact have simply been a whim.

<sup>87</sup> On *supplicationes*, see above at n. 63.

<sup>88</sup> On religious competition, see J. North, 'The development of religious pluralism', in J. Lieu, J. North, and T. Rajak (eds), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians* (1992), 174–93; on the relative decline in importance of civic cults, see Rives, *op. cit.* (n. 53), 173–249. I do not mean by this that civic cults lost meaning and importance, only that they suffered from unrestricted competition; for their continued vitality, see e.g. R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (1981), 126–30 and Lane Fox, *op. cit.* (n. 8), 574–85.

<sup>89</sup> We may assume that Dexippus did not report it, since there is nothing in George Syncellus that could

have come from him: George took from Eusebius his account of the persecution (683–704 Dindorf; cf. *Eus.*, *HE* 6.39–44), and then followed Dexippus for Decius' death and the beginning of Gallus' reign; if Dexippus provided any information on the persecutions, we might expect George to have made some use of it. We have no way of knowing about other third-century historians, although we may note that Zosimus, who probably used a source other than Dexippus (above at n. 18), is also silent: cf. Syme, *op. cit.* (n. 19), 200. But since Zosimus also passes over the persecutions of Valerian and the Tetrarchs, his silence may be due more to policy than ignorance.

## V. THE RELIGION OF EMPIRE

It is perhaps best at this point to stop speculating on the motivations behind the decree, which can no longer be recovered, and are not in the end as important as its effects. These we may see as two-fold. On the one hand, Decius' decree established a precedent for the displacement of the city from its central position in religious life. This was an inevitable result of applying the procedures of imperial bureaucracy to matters of cult, even though it was in all probability not intended. We have seen that Decius entrusted the implementation of his edict to local authorities, who were thus in charge of the proceedings. Furthermore, the recipients of the sacrifices were in some cases the chief gods of the local civic cults, such as the Capitoline Triad in Carthage and the Nemeseis in Smyrna.<sup>90</sup> In a certain sense, then, the decree actually encouraged local élites to promote traditional civic cults. If Decius was indeed old-fashioned in his religious tastes, this is what we would expect, and the inscriptions from Oescus and Cosa discussed above tend to corroborate this hypothesis.

Nevertheless, the very fact that it was the emperor and his representatives who now promoted these local cults altered the balance between imperial and local. Decius' decree in effect established a requirement that all Romans, i.e. all those living in the Roman Empire, had to sacrifice to their local gods in a manner approved by the imperial authorities. It thus created a religious obligation between the individual and the Empire; the city merely functioned as the religious agent of the imperial administration, just as in taxation it functioned as its financial agent. Consequently, Decius' decree helped to weaken the old tradition of collective local cults that linked the individual with his or her city, and put an increased emphasis on the ties between the individual and the Roman Empire. To a certain extent this was the result of Caracalla's decree of universal citizenship. The homogeneity of citizenship that resulted from this no doubt made it much more natural to emphasize such ties, so that the imperial government could begin to take over from the local community as the chief source of religious authority.

The second effect of the decree was the positive side of the first. Just as it tended to reduce the importance of local religious organization, so at the same time it helped establish a new type of Roman religion, one linked not to the city of Rome but to the Roman Empire. As we have seen, there were no cults of the Empire as a whole, only cults of particular cities, temples, or groups. Although some of these were quite widespread, notably cults of the emperor, their unity was one of sentiment rather than organization. In contrast, the decree of Decius, by insisting that every inhabitant of the Roman Empire had a specific and immediate religious obligation to the imperial government, defined at least one aspect of what we may reasonably call 'the religion of the Roman Empire'. This religion, however, was defined not merely by sentiment, nor yet by a particular deity (e.g. Sol Invictus or Christ) or doctrine (e.g. Nicene Christianity); it was defined instead by a particular cult act.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Capitoline Triad in Carthage: Cypr., *Laps.* 24: 'Unus ex his qui sponte Capitolium negaturus ascendit'; *Ep.* 59.13.3: 'compelluntur adhuc insuper lapsi ut linguis atque ore quo in Capitolio ante deliquerant sacerdotibus convicium faciant'. In Rome too the Capitol may have been the scene of the sacrifices: see Cypr., *Ep.* 8.2.3 and 21.3.2 with Clarke ad loc., while a remark of Pacian (*Ep.* 2.3) suggests that in the fourth century Novatianists used *Capitolini* as a derogatory term for Catholics. Nemeseis in Smyrna: *Pass. Pion.* 6.3 and 7.2.

<sup>91</sup> Some scholars have suggested that Decius insisted on the traditional state gods of Rome: Friend, op. cit. (n. 49), 320, claims that 'sacrifice was made on the capitols to the specifically Roman gods and the emperor's genius, rather than to local gods'; this is

clearly untrue in the case of the Nemeseis, who were important in Smyrna but never received public cult in Rome; as for the emperor's genius, see above at n. 73. There is also a striking passage in the *Passio Pionii* where the proconsul, frustrated with Pionius' insistence on praying to God, says 'we all honour the gods and heaven and the gods in heaven; do you look to the air? Sacrifice to it' (*Pass. Pion.* 19.10). His suggestion implies very strongly that any deity would do, even the god of the Christians, just so long as a sacrifice was performed. It thus seems best to accept at face value the texts of the Egyptian papyri, which refer simply to 'the gods': so already Knipping, op. cit. (n. 4), 353, and rightly stressed by Millar, op. cit. (n. 72), 159-60, and Clarke, op. cit. (n. 5), I, 25-6.

As I have suggested, this approach was in effect highly traditional, since in both the Greek and the Roman traditions public cult had always been more a matter of ritual than of doctrine. It was also highly effective, since sacrifice was an acceptable and even customary religious practice for the vast majority of the Empire's inhabitants, apart from Jews, Christians, and a few eccentric philosophers. As Gordon has argued, 'the institution of sacrifice was one of the key means whereby some kind of synthesis was effected between the religion of Rome, in the narrow sense, and the religion of the Empire taken very broadly. It became a sort of code for membership in this unwieldy congeries of disparate cultures'.<sup>92</sup> Decius' decree on universal sacrifice gave that code official sanction. It was in some ways the religious analogue to Caracalla's citizenship decree: while the latter replaced the mishmash of local citizenships with a universal and theoretically homogeneous citizenship, the former summarized the huge range of local cults in a single religious act that signalled membership in the Roman Empire. By defining the minimal cult behaviour expected of all Romans, Decius was in effect establishing a kind of orthopraxy. This inevitably resulted in the identification and punishment of deviants, just as the definition of orthodoxy by later Christian leaders led to the identification and punishment of heretics. It is thus not surprising that before Decius' decree on universal sacrifice, there had been no centrally organized persecutions of Christians: it was only when a 'religion of the Empire' had been defined and its boundaries set that there could be a systematic persecution of people who transgressed those boundaries.

Our concern with belief as the essential element of religion should therefore not cause us to underestimate the significance of Decius' edict. Even though it still allowed for a multiplicity of local cults and did not touch on the issue of religious belief, it nevertheless constituted an important step towards establishing a 'religion of the Empire' by creating a structure in which religious deviants could be defined and punished. We need not assume, however, that all this was intentional, and that Decius had some grand vision of this new 'imperial religion'. I think it more likely that his decree reflects a sea change in ideas about religion and its role in the Empire, a gradual transformation that had for the most part been taking place below the level of the surviving evidence but that began to manifest itself in the mid- and late third century A.D. Just as the Empire itself became more of a conceptual unity, so too the idea developed that it had its own distinctive religion. Yet it is hard not to believe that the precedent set by Decius in defining a sort of orthopraxy had no influence on this development. Just a few years later, for example, the emperor Valerian issued an edict to the effect that 'all those who do not practise Roman religion ought to acknowledge Roman rites', expressing much more forcefully the idea of a 'religion of the Roman Empire' defined not by belief but by cult acts.<sup>93</sup> At the end of the century, Diocletian again placed heavy emphasis on the performance of traditional cult acts, sacrifice above all. Well before he launched his persecution of the Church, he issued an order that everyone who served in the palace or in the army had to sacrifice; sacrifice later figured largely in the persecution itself, both in the third decree, which required the imprisoned clergy to sacrifice before their release, and in the fourth decree, which mandated universal sacrifice. Again, it was the act itself and not the specific deities involved that was important. As Galerius said in the letter with which he ended the persecution, the

<sup>92</sup> R. Gordon, 'The veil of power: emperors, sacrificers, and benefactors', in M. Beard and J. North (eds), *Pagan Priests* (1990), 199–231, at 207; since Gordon sees the sacrificial system as deeply implicated in the social control exercised by local élites, it is interesting to note that Decius' edict effectively levelled out distinctions of status in favour of cultic homogeneity.

<sup>93</sup> *Acta Cypriani* 1: 'eos qui Romanam religionem non colunt, debere Romanas caeremonias recognoscere'; that something like this was in the actual edict is suggested by the fact that the prefect of Egypt used a broadly similar phrase to Dionysius of Alexandria: Eus., *HE* 7.11.7.

purpose of the Tetrarchs had been to recall the Christians to 'the practices of the ancients'.<sup>94</sup>

It is perhaps one of the ironies of history that what eventually came to be the defining religion of the Roman Empire was not the traditional form of cult enforced by Decius, but instead that whose adherents had suffered so much under his decree. And yet in another respect it is hardly surprising. Despite the attempt of emperors like Maximin Daia to endow traditional religion with a more formal and universal organization, the old cults were unavoidably local.<sup>95</sup> Decius had been right to identify the act of sacrifice as practically the only unifying element, and that in the end may simply have not been enough. In contrast, Christianity had by the early fourth century A.D. developed a large-scale and highly effective hierarchic organization that provided a much more suitable structure for a universal religion. Constantine understood this, and attempted throughout his reign to promote the Church as the partner of the Empire.<sup>96</sup> Yet it was the decree of Decius, whether or not Decius himself was clearly aware of it, that first addressed the problem of defining the religion of the Empire.

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<sup>94</sup> Lact., *Mort. Pers.* 34.3: 'nostra iussio extitisset, ut ad veterum se instituta conferrent'; cf. 34.2: 'tanta eosdem Christianos voluntas invasisset . . . ut non illa veterum instituta sequerentur'. Palace and army: Lact., *Mort. Pers.* 10 and *Div. Inst.* 4.27.4-5; third edict: Eus., *HE* 8.6.10 and *MP praef.* 2; fourth edict: Eus., *MP* 3.1. See in general de Ste. Croix, op. cit.

(n. 40); on the importance of traditional cult acts in the policy advocated by Porphyry, see E. D. Digeser, 'Lactantius, Porphyry and the debate over religious toleration', *JRS* 88 (1998), 129-46.

<sup>95</sup> Eus., *HE* 8.14.8-9 and 9.4.2-3; Lact., *Mort. Pers.* 36.4-5.

<sup>96</sup> See, e.g., Fowden, op. cit. (n. 2), 80-90.