

THE MARTYRDOM OF ST LAURENCE RECONSIDERED

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LAURENCE THE DEACON was martyred in Rome on 10 August 258. So much is certain. How he died is less certain. The main aim of this paper is to sift through the various early sources concerning his martyrdom in an attempt to determine what appears to have happened.

The motives for the persecution or toleration of Christians in the Roman Empire have been much discussed. It seems that before 250 persecution was local and sporadic, often occasioned by some regional dispute or crisis, and that the fate of Christians depended very much upon the attitude of magistrates and provincial governors. In 250, Decius¹ precipitated the Church into a world-wide persecution by demanding a grand reaffirmation of faith in the Roman gods, insisting that all citizens should offer sacrifice and obtain certificates to show that they had done so. Though vast numbers apostasised and many were imprisoned or executed for refusing to comply, the persecution was abandoned on Decius's death in battle in 251. After a brief civil war, Valerian came to power in 253 and offered a tolerant acceptance of Christianity until 257 when he launched a more direct attack on the Church by forbidding Christian assemblies or the visiting by Christians of their cemeteries. The following year, 258, he issued an edict ordering the immediate execution of bishops, priests and deacons, and it was following this order that the Bishop of Rome, Sixtus, and six of his deacons were martyred on 6 August and Laurence was martyred four days later. It seems that both Decius and Valerian were responding to a whole series of crises in the Empire – barbarian invasions, plague and the urgent threat of war on the eastern frontier with Sassanid Persia – by seeking to restore the divine favour previously enjoyed by Rome by massive acts of religious *supplicatio*, adoration. This was intended to appease the gods who seemed to have turned against the Empire and restore the *Pax Deorum*. In 250, the Christians were the unintended victims of this religious affirmation. Valerian by contrast targeted the Church directly and probably claimed more victims, among them Cyprian of Carthage as well as the central leadership of the Roman Church.

The most secure information about those events in Rome in August 258² comes from a contemporary letter of Cyprian of Carthage and the much later but often

¹ See for instance Christopher J. Haas 'Imperial Religious Policy and Valerian's Persecution of the Church, AD 257-60' *Church History* 52 (1983) 133-44

² The most careful discussion of the evidence is by G. W. Clarke 'Prosopographical Notes on the Epistles of Cyprian – III Rome in August, 258' *Latomus* 34 (1975) 437-48

reliable Liber Pontificalis. Cyprian reported (*Ep* 80.1) that he had sent people to Rome to establish what had happened and they had found out that:

Valerian, in a rescript to the Senate, had ordered that bishops, priests and deacons should be executed instantaneously; that senators, men of rank and Roman knights should be deprived of their dignity and goods and that if they continued, despite this, to say they were Christians, that they should be put to death; that matrons should be deprived of their goods and sent into exile; that members of the imperial household who had confessed Christ previously or confessed Christ now should have their goods confiscated and should themselves be put in irons and listed and sent to imperial possessions. The Emperor Valerian had added to his rescript a copy of the letter that he addressed concerning us to the provincial governors. We hope daily to see this letter arrive, standing in the firmness of our faith and ready to suffer, awaiting from the wealth and mercy of the Lord the crown of eternal life. Know that Sixtus was executed in the cemetery (catacomb of Callistus) on the 6 August with four deacons. The prefects in the city press this persecution more actively each day, executing those who are handed over to them and confiscating their goods into the treasury.³

The *Liber Pontificalis*,⁴ offers a different account, saying that Sixtus was arrested by Valerian and led away to offer sacrifice to the demons; when he refused, he was beheaded on 6 August along with six deacons, Felicissimus and Agapitus and Ianuarius, Magnus, Vincentius and Stephanus. The list could be read as dividing into two groups, the pair Felicissimus and Agapitus and the other four, which might be one way of reconciling this information with that of Cyprian. Sixtus was interred at the catacomb of Callistus and the six deacons at the catacomb of Praetextatus. It then goes on to say that on 10 August Laurence the Archdeacon, Claudius the subdeacon, Severus the priest, Crescentius the reader and Romanus the doorkeeper were executed, and that Laurence was buried at the Via Tiburtina, in the cemetery of Cyriaces, in the Veranus field, in the crypt, with many other martyrs. The fact that Laurence died four days after Sixtus was also attested in the earliest Church calendar, dating from 354, which records the feast days as 6 August and 10 August.⁵

Memory and legend added to this bald account and it is our task to sift the one from the other.⁶ Of our various early accounts, by far the most elaborate is the Passio Sancti Sixti, Laurentii et Hippolyti, which dates from the late fifth or early sixth century. It is likely that it is substantially the same as an earlier, lost *Passio* which must have been known by the early eulogists of Laurence, Ambrose and Prudentius. It survives as part of a series of martyr stories and was published in 1933 by the Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye.⁷

³ CSEL iii B3

⁴ Louis Duchesne, ed, *Le Liber Pontificalis: Texte, Introduction et Commentaire* vol 1 (Paris: Boccard, 1955)

⁵ Chronographus Anni CCCLIII in Monumenta Germaniae Historica Auctorum Antiquissimorum Tomus IX (Weidmann: Berlin, 1891) 72

⁶ A comprehensive but insufficiently critical review of the early sources is provided by X in A. Benvenuti *Papi II Diacono Lorenzo tra Storia e Leggenda* (Florence, 1998)

⁷ Hippolyte Delehaye 'Recherches sur le Légendier Romain' *Analecta Bollandiana* 51 (1933) 34-98

Any confidence in the historical worth of the account is undermined at once when we are told that the Emperor Decius summoned the bishop, Sixtus, and his deacons, Agapitus and Felicissimus, to his tribunal. Sixtus, Felicissimus and Agapitus were, according to the Liber Pontificalis, martyred on 6 August, but the Emperor Decius had died seven years earlier, in 251. The Emperor whose rescript caused the deaths of Sixtus and his deacons was Valerian. Both Decius and Valerian were great persecutors of the Christian Church, but to confuse them at the outset indicates that the text should not be treated as a reliable historical record. The story continues that Sixtus and his deacons refuse to offer sacrifice and Sixtus is led off to prison; the Archdeacon Laurence goes to meet him and laments that he is unable to follow him but Sixtus predicts his death three days later and entrusts to him the Church's treasury. Laurence goes and distributes the treasury to the poor and while engaged in this task heals the widow Cyriaca and the blind man Crescentius and encounters the priest Justin. Once again, the Liber Pontificalis confirms that Cyriaca and Crescentius were real people. Laurence was buried in the catacomb of Cyriaces in the Veranus field on the Via Tiburtina and when Constantine developed the sanctuary sixty or seventy years later he presented to it, 'in the same place, the farm Veranus, the property of a certain Cyriaces, a religious woman, which the imperial treasury had confiscated in the time of the persecution.'⁸ Though a late and puzzling source, the Liber Pontificalis is usually believed to be accurate in details of this kind. Crescentius, according to the Liber Pontificalis, was a reader executed on the same day as Laurence.⁹ It seems clear that historical figures have been transformed into beneficiaries of Laurence's miraculous power.

Meanwhile Sixtus and the two deacons are brought to the tribunal and then taken to the temple of Mars where Sixtus offers a lengthy prayer to God. Laurence goes to him again and announces that the Church's treasures have been distributed. Laurence is now arrested and Sixtus and the other two deacons are executed. Sixtus is buried at the catacomb of St Callistus and the deacons at the catacomb of Praetextatus. The two trials of Sixtus related in this story and the failure to arrest Laurence at his first meeting with Sixtus seem only to be necessary to allow a period during which Laurence can distribute the Church's treasury. In other words, we have an improbable and complicated version of an older tale, that Laurence distributed the Church's wealth, to make it fit with a scene required by the Passio of Sixtus, that he met his deacon and predicted his death after three days. The martyrdom of Sixtus and Felicissimus and Agapitus and their burials in the catacombs of St Callistus and Praetextatus are confirmed by the Liber Pontificalis which lists six deacons martyred that day – why the Passio only reports these two is obscure.

Laurence, placed under the guard of the vicarius Hippolytus, is then taken to prison with many others. There, he baptises and cures the blind man Lucillus and his warder Hippolytus along with nineteen members of Hippolytus's household.

⁸ Ibid p 181

⁹ Ibid

Interrogated about the Church's treasures, Laurence asks for three days leave; he gathers the poor, the lame and the blind and hides them in Hippolytus's house, then at the end of three days presents them to the Emperor saying, 'Here are the eternal treasures.' Here we are dealing with a difficult part of the Passio and there is an evident clumsiness about the way that the story unfolds. There is no independent evidence for the existence of Lucillus or Hippolytus. Hippolytus in fact belongs to a separate Passio which has been rolled up into this one. It is far from clear why the authorities should have trusted Laurence and released him for three days. He has already distributed the Church's treasury but now he gathers together the poor, the lame and the blind. The whole purpose of the charade, which takes far longer to accomplish than the initial distribution, seems to be simply to allow him to make a point to the Emperor which could, perhaps, have been made more economically by simply telling him he had already distributed the Church's goods. In other words, here we have elements that seem to be purely fictional – the characters Lucillus and Hippolytus – with a convoluted version of an older story, the distribution of the Church's goods and the pointing out of the poor of the city as its true wealth.

Told to sacrifice, Laurence refuses and is then subjected to a range of tortures. He baptises a soldier, Romanus, who is executed and buried on the Verano hill. Laurence is then subject to fresh interrogation and torture; Decius finally has a gridiron brought in and Laurence is burned slowly upon it; then Laurence makes his joke, 'Your meat is cooked on one side, turn it over and eat.' Laurence is then buried by the priest Justin and Hippolytus in the property of the widow Cyriaca on the Via Tiburtina. Hippolytus is then summoned to appear before the tribunal of Decius where he confesses his faith and accepts various torments; everyone in his household is arrested, among them the nurse Concordia, who is scourged to death. The others are decapitated. Hippolytus is tied to wild horses and dragged across rough ground till he dies. Hippolytus and his household are then all buried by the priest Justin. The Passio of Laurence here shifts into the overlapping Passio of the apparently fictitious Hippolytus but once again the Liber Pontificalis confirms that Laurence was buried in the property of the widow Cyriaca and that one of those martyred that same day was called Romanus, though it says he was a doorkeeper, an ostiarus.

Three things seem to be striking about this narrative. First, it is studded with real names -Laurence, Sixtus, Felicissimus, Agapitus, Cyriaca, Crescentius, Romanus – the last three of whom, admittedly the most obscure figures in the historical record, are transformed into recipients of Laurence's wisdom and healing power. Secondly, the Passio of Laurence is sandwiched between two other passiones, those of Sixtus and Hippolytus. Hippolytus is chiefly drawn into the Laurence story to provide a house where the poor can be hidden before they are dramatically presented to the Emperor. Sixtus, of course, plays a more significant role in Laurence's story. He is presented as Christ-like, with several trials before his inevitable death and an encounter with his most important disciple whose death after three days he prophesies. The encounters between Laurence and Sixtus are thus a very Roman feature of the Sixtus story, with Laurence playing the part of

Peter and Sixtus in the role of Christ, but they are also a vital part of the Laurence story. It ties his death three days after Sixtus's firmly into that of his bishop. The interval between the two martyrdoms is thus explained and justified. Thirdly, one of the most distinctive features of Laurence's martyrdom, the distribution of the Church's wealth and the presentation of the poor as the Church's true wealth, is told in a very clumsy way: the money is distributed quickly between Sixtus's arrest and his execution, Laurence has two encounters with Sixtus but is only arrested at the second, he is then allowed three days leave from captivity to bring the Church's wealth to the Emperor. This awkward account is rendered necessary by making Laurence meet Sixtus to hear the prophecy of his own martyrdom.

This version of the Passio is probably an elaboration of an earlier account which must have existed by the middle years of the fourth century, a hundred years after Laurence's death. It clearly underlay the earliest narratives of Laurence's martyrdom, which come from the pen of Ambrose of Milan and the great poet Prudentius. Ambrose had been brought up in Rome and was thoroughly devoted to the cause and cults of the Roman Church. An early sign of devotion to Laurence can be found in his panegyric of his brother Satyrus who, he reported, had invoked Laurence when about to embark on a sea voyage.¹⁰ Ambrose gives us a substantial account of Laurence's arrest and death in two sections of his ambitious but unsatisfactory work, De Officiis, written in 386 and modelled on Cicero's book of the same name. Its aim was to show that Christianity expressed and completed the classical virtues and to offer a portrait of the Christian priest as the embodiment of the best in classical and Christian ideals. Discussing the virtue of courage, Ambrose sees Laurence as an obvious role-model. Here (1.41) Ambrose runs together two episodes found in the Passio, the conversation with Sixtus, where Laurence affirms his willingness to die and is promised that he will follow his bishop to martyrdom after three days, and the cruel death on the gridiron, where the joke about his body being roasted so turn it and eat is succinctly made.¹¹ The same emphasis on Laurence's courage which exceeds that of the philosophers or the naked holy men of India can be found in one of his letters where he refers to Laurence's slow death by fire and the joke about turning and eating his flesh.¹² The second passage in the De Officiis (2.28) sees Ambrose discussing the virtue of almsgiving and again Laurence is an obvious role-model. The story is very briefly told – ordered to produce the treasures of the Church, Laurence produces the poor the following day, saying, 'Here are the treasures of the Church.'¹³ Closely related to the accounts in the De Officiis is the hymn Apostolorum supparem,¹⁴ (Almost the equal of the Apostles) which was either written by Ambrose or a member of his close circle.¹⁵ It includes the encounter with Sixtus and the prophecy that he will follow to martyrdom after three days, the presentation of the poor to the avaricious

¹⁰ De Excessu Fratris 1.17 CSEL 73 p 218

¹¹ Ivor J. Davidson, ed, *Ambrose: De Officiis, Introduction, Text and Translation* vol 1 (Oxford: OUP, 2001) 236-9

¹² *Ep* 7.37 CSEL 82 pp 61-2

¹³ *Ibid* 346-7

¹⁴ Jacques Fontaine *Ambroise de Milan: Hymnes* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1992) 549-81

¹⁵ Gérard Narooy 'Le martyre de Laurent dans l'hymnodie et la prédication des IVe et Ve siècles et l'authenticité ambrosienne de l'hymne "Apostolorum supparem"' *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 35 (1989) 44-82

persecutor, the death on the gridiron and the joke about turning his body as it is partly cooked.

Prudentius's great poem in honour of the martyrs, the Peristephanon, (the Crowns of Martyrdom) is a very different piece of work. Written perhaps a decade after De Officiis, it shares with Ambrose the ambition to show how Christian saints have replaced the classical heroes and thus the Church is the fulfilment and successor of the pagan imperial past. Laurence is a new Roman consul, echoing the figure of Augustus in verses deliberately evoking the Aeneid.¹⁶ But it goes beyond that simple formulation of the relationship of Rome and Christ with a subversive humour that infects the whole account of Laurence's martyrdom and thereby undermines the whole idea of Roman heroism and suggesting that Christianity offers something very different.¹⁷ Prudentius reports the conversation between Laurence and Sixtus and the prophecy that he will follow to martyrdom in three days in the context of Sixtus himself being crucified with Laurence at the foot of the cross – presumably an image of the beginnings of Sixtus's passion rather than a literal claim that the pope was crucified. In line with Prudentius's interest in the Roman virtue of Laurence, both resembling and overturning Roman classical ideals, a surprising amount of space is devoted to discussing the avarice of the Urban Prefect (the first time that this official is identified as the persecutor in the literature) who also delivers a long speech against the Christians and their rituals. He awards Laurence three days to produce the treasures of the Church and there is a considerable description of Laurence hurrying around the city gathering together the poor. The scene where he produces them is heavy handed but intended to emphasise the element of trickery and surprise and is adorned with another lengthy speech, now from Laurence condemning avarice and eulogising the true treasures of the Church. Again, the death on the gridiron and Laurence's joke are told at greater length.

The details of Prudentius's account bears the marks of literary invention but the broad shape remains the same. It is clearly based on the same Passio as that informing Ambrose's account. It is interesting that the relationship between the conversation of Sixtus and Laurence and the dispersal of the funds and the gathering of the poor remains confused in these early accounts. Prudentius has Laurence arrested and given three days to collect the Church's treasure, which accords with the account in the Passio. The hymn Apostolorum supparem by contrast says that Laurence was ordered to raise the money three days after the death of Sixtus. In De Officiis, Ambrose says that Laurence fulfilled his promise to produce the Church's treasure the day after being ordered to do so, which was three days after Sixtus's death.

¹⁶ For instance, Anne-Marie Palmer *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 126-35; William McCarthy 'Prudentius, Peristephanon 2: Vapor and the Martyrdom of Lawrence' *Vigiliae Christianae* 36 (1982) 282-6

¹⁷ Catherine Conybeare 'The Ambiguous Laughter of Saint Laurence' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002) 175-202

Our other early witnesses have a rather different character and seem to owe little to the tradition of the Passio which starts the story with the conversation between Sixtus and Laurence. We have sermons from Augustine, Maximus of Turin and Leo the Great, all of which are economical in their presentation and focus on the two major features of the martyrdom, the distribution of the Church's goods among the poor and the death on the gridiron. Augustine preached several sermons in the early 400s for the feast of St Laurence in the early 400s which have survived (302, 303, 304, 305, 305A). Most of them say little about the martyr but two of them tell the core of the story briefly. Sermon 302¹⁸ refers to Laurence's being burned on a gridiron, his showing the persecutor the poor and the commonly quoted words, 'Here are the treasures of the Church.' It adds an interesting detail, that he brought the poor to the persecutor in carts to hide them from his view. Sermon 303¹⁹ adds a further detail which makes Laurence's trick more exquisite: he gets the carts from the persecutor and stresses the need for large numbers of them, which only inflames the avarice of the persecutor all the more. In this sermon, there is a longer description of the gridiron and the conversation before his death and Augustine introduces what will later be a major trope discussing the death of Laurence, the contrast between physical fire which kills him and spiritual fire which brings him eternal life. Augustine therefore focuses on the core component of the story – the dispersal of the Church's wealth among the poor and the death on the gridiron. In his commentary on John (27.12), he does refer to the conversation with Sixtus and the prophecy of his death after three days as evidence of the courage of the martyr which was nourished by the Eucharist, which is the main theme of that sermon.

The sermons of Maximus of Turin and Leo the Great add no further information. Maximus, preaching at the same time as Augustine in the early years of the fifth century, focuses on the pains of Laurence's death on the gridiron. Sermon 4 sets up a series of moralistic contrasts between physical and spiritual fire. Sermon 24 makes a similar point, likening the fire on the gridiron to the fiery taste of a mustard seed once it has been rubbed. The impression given by both sermons is that Maximus was confident his congregation would be familiar with the main lines of the story. Leo the Great's sermon, preached in the middle years of the fifth century, offers a simple account of the martyrdom – Laurence has been arrested and is ordered to produce the treasures of the Church; he points instead to the poor of the city for whose maintenance the treasures existed; he is then tortured in various ways by a persecutor who hopes to force him to abandon his faith; tortures having failed, he has Laurence roasted on a gridiron, turning the body repeatedly.²⁰

How much of this happened? It is now conventional wisdom that the story is a legend and that Laurence must have met his death by the sword, like Pope Sixtus

¹⁸ *PL* 38.1385

¹⁹ *PL* 38

²⁰ *Tractatus* 85, 2-3 *CC* 138A, 535-6

and the deacons who died with him.²¹ The authenticity of Laurence's death on the gridiron and of his joke before he died was first seriously challenged by Pio Franchi de'Cavalieri in two articles, in 1900 and 1915. His arguments were taken up and developed by Hippolyte Delehaye in a note on Franchi's first article in 1900 and in a longer article in 1933. Since then, their views have reigned as scholarly orthodoxy.

Franchi's case was a strong one. In his 1900 article,²² he argued that Valerian's decree against the higher clergy, aristocracy and members of the imperial household reported by Cyprian (*Ep* 80.1) ordered that the clergy should be executed by beheading, that there was no provision for torture. He observed that though there were cases when Christians were burned to death in previous persecutions they were consumed in a bonfire rather than roasted slowly. He claimed that Valerian was not seeking to force the Christian leadership into apostasy but rather simply to liquidate them and though he did confiscate Christian cemeteries and meeting places this was to prevent the Christian Church functioning rather than to enjoy their property. The legend of Laurence's death therefore did not belong to the persecution of Valerian but fitted better the circumstances of Diocletian's persecution fifty years later, when atrocious tortures and the confiscation of the Church's goods were used as instruments to compromise the clergy and force them into apostasy. He offered a brief review of the earliest physical and literary evidence for the story of Laurence's death: the monumental inscription dating from the papacy of Damasus (366-84), which recorded a series of agonies but failed to mention the martyrdom's most distinctive features, a medallion apparently depicting Laurence on the gridiron which he suggested was not as old as had been thought, and Ambrose's accounts in the *De Officiis* which he dismissed because it was so late, dating from about 386. He concluded that Laurence was not martyred by a slow death on a gridiron but was probably beheaded like Sixtus and the other deacons.

While Franchi's case against the authenticity of the story seemed formidable, his proposals to explain its origin were less persuasive: he claimed that a combination of the fact that the Damasus inscription listed flames among the brutal assaults inflicted on Laurence, reinforced by a simple error in describing Laurence not as passus (deceased) but as assus (roasted), allowed memories of Laurence to be mingled with the story of the martyrdom of the deacon Vincent of Saragossa who was also said to have been burned on a gridiron as one of the tortures leading to his death. Vincent was martyred during the persecution of Diocletian, when tortures of that kind were certainly used against the Christians, and so Franchi believed that this story was genuine and influenced descriptions of his fellow deacon Laurence's death. Franchi also observed that the elaborate version of the story found in

²¹ For instance, David Farmer *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* 5th edition (Oxford: OUP, 2003) 311: 'details, including the famous roasting on the gridiron, are quite unhistorical as the contemporary instrument of capital punishment was the sword'

²² Pio Franchi de'Cavalieri 'San Lorenzo e il supplicio della graticola' *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Alterthumskunde und für Kirchengeschichte* 14 (1900) 159-76

Prudentius was aimed largely to explain the delay between the death of Sixtus on 6 August and Laurence on 10 August.

In a note reviewing this article,²³ the Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye accepted its broad conclusion that the story of the gridiron was legendary, though he expressed due caution about Franchi's idea that it owed much to the orthographic confusion of assus with passus. He went on to offer a further possible source for the familiar story of Laurence's joke on the gridiron: the historians Socrates (3.15) and Sozomen (5.11) both report the deaths of Phrygian martyrs under Julian the Apostate who were burned on a grill and advised their executioners, 'If you want cooked meat, turn us onto the other side.' Delehaye thought that it was more likely that recent stories from the East would have influenced the West rather than the other way around. He pointed to a further parallel between the western accounts of the martyrdom of St Cassian, stabbed to death by his pupils with their sharp pens, and the description of Sozomen of the death of Bishop Mark of Arethusa in the chapter preceding his account of the Phrygian martyrs (5.10).

Pio Franchi de'Cavalieri took up Delehaye's suggestion that Laurence's joke depended on this eastern story and, no doubt realising that an incident dating from the reign of Julian in 360-3 could scarcely be the basis of an anecdote widely reported of Laurence only twenty years later, traced the saying to another, perhaps earlier source, the Martyrdom of St Marinus, which he examined in detail and whose Greek text he printed in 1915.²⁴ There he found Marinus, in an entirely imaginary setting, refusing to sacrifice to the gods at the order of the tyrant Markianos and being condemned to burn on a gridiron. Praising God, Marinus told Markianos that his rib was ready and that he should start eating it until the other was cooked.²⁵

Delehaye revisited the whole question of Laurence's martyrdom in 1933, when he published the cycle of passiones which included those of Sixtus, Laurence and Hippolytus.²⁶ By now, Delehaye was very firm in his conclusions concerning its substantially legendary character: he ruled out as impossible the conversations reported by Ambrose,²⁷ Prudentius²⁸ and, in his tractates on John by Augustine²⁹ between Laurence and Sixtus after the Pope's arrest; he dismissed the story of Laurence and the poor of the city as incompatible with the decree of Valentinus which did not attempt to sequester the Church's property; he judged the burning on the grill as a fable, inconsistent with the decree that the higher clergy should be beheaded and unparalleled when other burnings such as the martyrs of Tarragona were a full conflagration rather than a slow torture.³⁰ Ambrose had drawn his

²³ *Analecta Bollandiana* 19 (1900) 452-3

²⁴ Pio Franchi de'Cavalieri 'Assum est, Versa et Manduca' *Note Agiografiche* 5 in *Studi e Testi* 27 (1915) 65-93

²⁵ *Ibid* 87, lines 26-7

²⁶ Hippolyte Delehaye 'Recherches sur le Légendier Romain' *Analecta Bollandiana* 51 (1933) 34-98

²⁷ De Officiis 1.41

²⁸ Peristephanon II, 21-8

²⁹ In Euangelium Iohannis 27.12

³⁰ Delehaye 'Légendier Romain' 49-50

stories of Laurence from the earlier version of the *Passio* and the later version, which he printed in the article, was in turn influenced by Ambrose; Damasus was quite innocent of any knowledge of the *Passio* but Prudentius based his lengthy account partly on the *Passio* while substantially adding to it.³¹ As for Laurence's joke, Delehaye endorsed Franchi's attribution of it to earlier sources, notably the *Martyrium Sancti Marini*, and pointed to its widespread currency in martyr stories.³² Finally, he lightly dismissed³³ Laurence's words when presenting the poor as the Church's treasure as being based on an anecdote recorded by a moralist who wrote in the reign of Tiberius, Valerius Maximus, in his *Facta et Dicta Mirabilia* (4.4),³⁴ where Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, responds to a guest who showed her her beautiful jewellery by remarking that her jewellery was her sons.

By 1933, the combined efforts of these two eminent scholars, Franchi de' Cavalieri and Delehaye, had thus established a view which has remained the consensus since: that the story of Laurence's martyrdom, not only in the complex and detailed version recorded by Prudentius but even in the stark and unadorned version of Leo's sermon, is wholly legendary. Is it time to revise that judgment?

There is one overpowering consideration, which the whole legend accounts for but which Franchi and Delehaye do not address: the enormous popularity of the cult of Laurence in Rome. The *Liber Pontificalis* records³⁵ that Constantine built a basilica³⁶ dedicated to Laurence on the Via Tiburtina on the Verano, upon the arenarium of the catacomb of Cyriacus, and he built stairs going up and down into the catacomb to the tomb of the saint. At the tomb, he built an apse which he decorated with porphyry slabs, covering the tomb on top with silver and surrounding it with a heavy silver grill or railings. He donated a number of lighting fixtures for the tomb chamber – a golden lamp, a silver chandelier with fifty wicks, two huge bronze candelabra and two lamps - and medallions decorated with scenes of the saint's martyrdom.

This catacomb is still inadequately excavated but it consists of two main systems, one of which, the A complex, is orientated towards the tomb. This might or might not have predated Constantine's intervention at the site: archaeology has not yet yielded an answer.³⁷ Given that Constantine developed shrines already venerated by the Christians, whether in Rome or in Jerusalem, it is more than likely that the catacomb complex had already been focused on Laurence's tomb. Constantine's aim was plainly to facilitate and encourage pilgrims to visit the tomb by

³¹ Ibid 50-53

³² Ibid 55-8

³³ Ibid 58

³⁴ Ed John Briscoe *Valeri Maximi Facta et Dicta Mirabilia* vol 1 (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1998) 256

³⁵ *LP* 1.181

³⁶ The fullest account of the history of the site and its buildings is by Richard Krautheimer and Wolfgang Frankl in Richard Krautheimer, Wolfgang Frankl and Spencer Corbett, edd, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae* vol 2 (Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana: Città del Vaticano, 1959) 1-144

³⁷ Ibid 113-5

constructing the double staircase down to it and the ornamented assembly area in front of it.

Archaeology reveals that the basilica attributed by the Liber Pontificalis to Constantine stood to the south of the present basilica which contains Laurence's apparently undisturbed tomb. It was an impressive edifice, 35.5 metres at its widest and 81.59 metres at its longest, and richly decorated inside. Though the archaeological evidence cannot confirm that it was a Constantinian structure, it was certainly built in the first half of the fourth century. What was its purpose, standing next to the entrance to the catacomb and the martyr's shrine? It was a basilica cemetery, crowded with graves, not only in the nave but in the side aisles and the ambulatory.³⁸ In other words, it is further evidence of the pressing desire of Roman Christians to be buried near Laurence, evidence of the popularity of his cult and probably evidence that the A complex in the catacomb pre-dated Constantine's work on Laurence's tomb and had already begun to fill up.

There are four other churches in Rome dedicated to Laurence. Two date from later periods: S Lorenzo in Panisperna which probably stands on the site of the more ancient Sancti Laurentii in Formosum, which was venerated as the site of his martyrdom in the eighth century,³⁹ and S Lorenzo in Fonte, of which there is also evidence from the eighth or ninth century.⁴⁰ The other two are of greater interest for tracing the early development of the cult. S Lorenzo in Lucina, where Damasus was elected in 366 but which was reconstructed as a basilica by Sixtus III in the early fifth century:⁴¹ it is not known when it acquired its dedication to St Laurence, but it was certainly listed as such by the sixth century.⁴² The most interesting is S Lorenzo in Damaso, founded by Damasus between 366-81,⁴³ which bore the inscription: Haec Damasus tibi, Xpe deus, nova tecta dicavi Laurenti saeptus martyris auxilio.⁴⁴ (I Damasus, covered with the help of the martyr Laurence, dedicated this new building to you, Christ, God). This must lead us to review the argument of Franchi and Delehaye that Damasus's monumental inscription at Laurence's shrine on the Verano⁴⁵ is so vague in its record of his martyrdom that it teaches us nothing secure about it; what it does show is the scale of Damasus's devotion to the martyr. The inscription reads:

Verbera carnifices flammas tormenta catenas
Vincere Laurenti sola fides potuit.
Haec Damasus cumulat supplex altaria donis
Martyris egregii suspiciens meritum.

³⁸ Ibid 116-21

³⁹ Ibid 185; Henri Leclercq 'Laurent' *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie* vol 8, col 1931 (1928)

⁴⁰ Krautheimer *Corpus Basilicarum* 152-8

⁴¹ Ibid 159-84

⁴² Leclercq 'Laurent' col 1955

⁴³ Krautheimer *Corpus Basilicarum* 145-51

⁴⁴ Leclercq 'Laurent' col 1953

⁴⁵ Antonius Ferrua (ed) *Epigrammata Damasiana* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1942) no 33, pp 166-7

(Only Laurence's faith could triumph over whips, executioners, flames, tortures, chains. Damasus, kneeling looking up at the merit (or good action or service) of the outstanding martyr, with gifts, perfected (or heightened) this altar.) At least this demonstrates that Damasus's devotion to Laurence went further than erecting one of his many monumental inscriptions: he also elevated an altar in the basilica as well as dedicating his new church near Pompey's Theatre to the martyr.

What we have then is a puzzle. Laurence was killed along with the whole leadership of the Roman Church in the summer of 258 but, alone among them, was singled out for particular veneration. It seems likely that by the time of Constantine the catacomb where he had been buried had been developed with a system of tombs orientated towards his. Constantine acknowledged his popularity by converting the tomb into a pilgrimage shrine, with staircases allowing easy access for pilgrims to an apsidal space illuminated with various impressive candelabra. He marked out the tomb itself with a silver grill or railings. Constantine also, or shortly afterwards someone else, constructed a big basilica adjacent to the shrine as a further cemetery for people who wanted to be buried near Laurence. About thirty or forty years later, Damasus not only constructed a high altar at the basilica but dedicated a new church in the centre of the city to Laurence. Why did Laurence attract so much more attention than his bishop, Sixtus, or the other six deacons who were martyred at the same time?

The core of the familiar story of Laurence, that he distributed the Church's goods among the poor and paid for his insolence to the authorities with a particularly painful death, would of course provide an answer. Such a gesture would have made him a considerable hero in the memory of the Roman Church. But how plausible is it? We know from the celebrated letter of Cornelius recorded by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* that the Roman Church maintained XXX. It was plainly the function of the deacons to administer the Church's property and especially the poor relief. For all their enormous learning in hagiographical literature, neither Franchi nor Delehaye suggested that this gesture of rapidly disbursing the Church's property among the poor before it fell into the hands of the authorities was in any way a commonplace or even had a parallel. Instead, they argued that since the decree of Valerian in 257 merely banned Christian assemblies and forbade them from entering their cemeteries, while the edict of 258 had ordered the immediate execution of bishops, priests and deacons and the confiscation of the property of Christians belonging to the senatorial or equestrian classes, then the authorities would not have sought to impound the Church's disposable goods. This presumes too much.

It has been argued that the real motive of the persecutions of Decius in 250-1 and Valerian in 257-60 was economic.⁴⁶ Without accepting that argument, it would scarcely be unlikely that the authorities would gladly take the opportunity of adding the wealth of the Christian Church to the imperial treasury at a time of rampant

⁴⁶ Eg by George T. Oborn 'Why did Decius and Valerian proscribe Christianity?' *Church History* 2 (1933) 67-77

inflation and dire financial need. The reticence of the 258 rescript concerning the Church's goods is not inconsistent with the seizure of its property by the authorities acting either officially or unofficially. If the official policy was to dismantle the leadership of the Church, it would make equally good sense to expropriate their movable goods if these were an instrument by which they had gained the support of their followers. Despite the silence of the contemporary sources about the seizure of Church property, it had become standard practice to confiscate the goods of executed criminals for the public treasury and the attempt to expropriate the Church's funds after the death of Sixtus might not have been inconsistent with that practice.⁴⁷ What of unofficial venality and brutality? For all of the majesty of Roman jurisprudence, it would be a great mistake of the imagination to suppose that Roman power was exercised fairly and with restraint. The system lent itself to corruption and intimidation.⁴⁸ It is not impossible or even unlikely that Laurence was the victim of a corrupt official who saw his opportunity to lay his hands on the significant funds the Church had at its disposal and then tortured the Church's chief administrator to death either hoping to extract further information about the whereabouts of those funds or in revenge for his having dispersed the resources rather than handing them over.

As for the death on the gridiron: Franchi and Delehayé devoted a good deal of effort to tracing parallels for the joke attributed to Laurence as he was being roasted – proposing his tormentor should turn him over and eat as he was cooked on one side – though they could not prove that they had found a source significantly earlier than the mid-fourth century which might have been known in Rome. Where they were less successful was their two-pronged attack on the possibility that Laurence might have met his death on a grill. Their main case was a simple assertion that martyrdoms of that kind belong appropriately to the era of Diocletian, not before. This treats the death on the gridiron as an execution. If one reads it instead not as a legitimate execution but as an act of revenge or possibly a stage in further interrogation, then it is simply death by torture which has no inherent improbability about it.

Furthermore, two vital pieces of evidence must be considered. When Constantine adorned the tomb, according to the Liber Pontificalis, he not only covered it with silver but ornamented it with railings, which might be interpreted as some kind of grill echoing the mode of the martyr's death, (desuper loci conclusit de argento et cancellos de argento purissimo ornavit) but also that he set up depictions of his passio on medallions.⁴⁹ This is a particularly obscure passage in the text with considerable variation in the MSS about exactly how the passio was set up and one

⁴⁷ Clarke 'Prosopographical Notes III' *Latomus* 34 (1975) 443-4

⁴⁸ See for instance Ramsey MacMullen *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 84-96

⁴⁹ LP 34.24 Duchesne's text reads: ante corpus beati Laurenti martyris [posuit] argentoclasas sigillis passionem ipsius, suggesting that there was an object or objects called the argenoclasas on which the medallions were fixed. Guglielmo's text omits entirely the reference to the railings and concerning the passio reads: ante corpus beati Laurenti argento clausis sigillis fecit passionem, which makes much better grammatical sense, 'he constructed his passion on medallions enclosed in silver'

MS tradition omits all reference to the railings or grill ornamenting the tomb.. Either way, we have clear evidence here that there was a depiction of the mode of Laurence's death officially set up at the grave as early as the 320s or early 330s which could not have been ignored or contradicted in later written accounts and which must have been seen by thousands of pilgrims, including presumably the principal writers who described his martyrdom – the anonymous author of the original *passio*, Ambrose, Prudentius, Augustine and Leo. By pushing the story of the gridiron back to the 320s or early 330s, we have made it far harder for it to be considered a legend which arose in the aftermath of the persecution of Diocletian.

The second piece of evidence is a closer look at the wording of Damasus's monumental inscription at the basilica set up about forty years later. The editor of his inscriptions, Antonio Ferrua, speculated⁵⁰ that the inscription might imply that there was a painting or engraving of the martyr at the site. This would certainly make sense if we translated *Damasus...suspiciens meritum* as Damasus, looking up at the worthy deed. But whether there was originally a picture above the inscription or not, the order of the list of Laurence's torments – whips, executioners, flames, tortures and chains - might be significant. Damasus always aspired to artistic effect and placing flames in the central place, with whips and chains at the opposite ends, and executioners and tortures flanking the flames, was plainly not random. It suggests that flames were the most important feature of the martyrdom, the work of executioners who were torturing him, having already used whips and chains. If the inscription did illustrate some kind of picture, then it would suggest that the heart of the scene was Laurence on the gridiron.

Can we attempt to marshal a conclusion? The primary consideration is that we need to account for the popularity of the cult of Laurence, which must significantly pre-date Constantine and any of the evidence we have. Nothing can explain it better than the core content of the story, that he distributed the Church's goods among the poor and was tortured to death as a result. There is nothing implausible about that and, once that is accepted, then a slow death by burning on a gridiron need cause no surprise. What complicates the story more than anything else is the idea that Laurence was arrested before the distribution of the Church's property. No plausible reason, apart from something dark and disreputable, can be imagined for the authorities releasing him to bring the Church's property to them and thereby allowing him to disburse the money. But that initial arrest is bound up with the story of Laurence's meeting or meetings with Sixtus, which clearly play a double role in the early accounts – to allow Sixtus to play a Christ-like prophetic role and to justify Laurence's not having been executed with him on 6 August. If that element in the story is dropped as legendary, we are left with a wholly plausible picture of Laurence, for whatever reason, evading the bloodbath on 6 August, using the time available to him to distribute the Church's goods among the poor to avoid its seizure by the authorities, and then finally being captured and tortured to death, either to extract further information about the Church's property or as an act

⁵⁰ Ferrua *Epigrammata Damasiana* 167

of revenge for his having dispersed the funds, as part of a second roundup of Church officials on 10 August. There are three haunting statements associated with Laurence. We must surrender the first, Sixtus's words to him – sequere me post triduum; we can regard the second, hi sunt thesauri ecclesiae as a statement summarising the meaning of Laurence's action whether he said anything like it or not; and sadly we must abandon the joke for who after all was there to record it? This effectively gives us the story as Leo reports it, apart from his believing in the initial arrest and attributing to the persecutor the motive of trying to force Laurence to apostasise. Perhaps Franchi de'Cavallieri and Delehayé were keen, against the backdrop of the obscurantism following the modernist crisis, to demonstrate their fearless critical credentials by dismissing as legend the popular story of one of Rome's greatest saints. Perhaps they were too keen.