The *Martys* and Spectacular Death: From Homer to the Roman Arena

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Abstract: The notion of a martyr, or *martys*, has undergone a significant conceptual shift since its first attestation in the Iliad, where the *martyroi* are those witnesses who punish oath-violators with gruesome deaths rather than those who suffer gruesome deaths, as in later usage. This essay traces the conceptual shift of the Greek term *martys* from the Homeric precedent through the Book of Revelation. Then it explores the visual focus on dying in the Iliad and in ancient martyr texts, as well as some rhetorical means for conveying it. It concludes with a glance at some common ritual features between the Iliad's oath-sacrifices and Christian martyr spectacles.

Keywords: martyrdom, witnessing, oath-rituals, Homer, the Roman arena, Christian hagiography

We tend to associate martyrdom with persecution, suffering, and above all with voluntary death. Characteristically it is a brave death with redemptive implications for the individual who dies, for his or her community, or for the vaster world. Examples can be drawn from a variety of religious traditions[1] but it is suffering Christians who arguably set the Western bar, as expressed sensationally by figures such as Ignatius of Antioch—"Let there come upon me fire and cross and encounters with beasts, mutilation, tearing apart, scattering of bones, mangling of limbs, grinding of the whole body, evil tortures of the devil, only that I may attain to Jesus Christ."[2] Or Origen

[1]See *Martyrdom, Self-Sacrifice, and Self-Immolation* (Kitts 2018) for a cross-cultural perspective.

[2]*Letter to the Romans* 5.2. Translation by Cobb 2008, 3.

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of Alexandria—"Bring wild beasts, bring crosses, bring fire, bring tortures. I know that as soon as I die, I come forth from the body, I rest with Christ."[3] Although there is dispute about the actual experience of acute suffering by Christian bodies (e.g., Cobb 2017; Cox Miller 2009 (1994); Tilley 1991), and contemporaneous Roman *devotio* traditions welcomed tortuous death with similar zeal (Barton 2002; Collins 1994; Droge and Tabor 1992, 113–165), it is the Christian model of martyrdom which typically is associated with praiseworthy dedication to a suffering death.[4]

It is perhaps surprising, then, to learn that the notion of a martyr, or *martys*, has undergone a significant conceptual shift since its first attestation in Greek, in the Iliad where the *martyroi* are those witnesses who punish oath-violators with gruesome deaths rather than those who suffer gruesome deaths. This essay will trace the conceptual shift of the Greek term *martys* from the Homeric precedent through the Book of Revelation, and will explore the associated visual focus on ritually induced suffering in Homer and the martyrologies. It will conclude with a glance at some shared features between Homeric oath-sacrificing rituals and spectacles of death in the Roman arena.

The Martys

Homer

First we must account for the history of the term, *martys*. The Greek word is not Indo-European in origin but rather a loan.[5] It migrates into Homeric epic

[3]*Dialogue with Heraclides*. From Droge and Tabor 1992, 149.

[4]Definitions of martyrdom vary, not surprisingly. Cormack borrows from Droge and Tabor (1992) to list features typical of the western understanding: martyrdom (1) reflects situations of opposition and persecution; (2) the choice to die is viewed by the authors who describe it as necessary, noble, and heroic; (3) the individuals are eager to die; indeed in many cases they end up killing themselves; (4) there is often the idea of vicarious benefit resulting from their sufferings and deaths; and (5) there is often a vindication or reward expected beyond death (2002, xii).

[5]Beekes and Beek observe that the tu-r suffix of martyr indicates the word's non-Indo-European origin, and that the word must be a loan into Homeric epic. Speculation about its Sanskrit root in *smer, remember, is untenable because the reconstruction from Sanskrit smarati (as a derivative of Greek *mermana*, care, making *martys* remembrance), would give instead *βρατυ-. They see the tu's or tu'r suffix to martyr as non-Indo-European in origin, thus making the Homeric *martys the first* such reference in any Indo-European language. There is quite a different history and trajectory for other terms in the Homeric oath-making lexicon, such as *homnumi*, I swear an oath, take a vow, *homoklē*, a threatening cry, a reprimand and *tamnō*, I cut [an oath], all of which do bear Indo-European roots. *Sphazdō*, I slaughter, cut the throat, a verb used in commensal sacrifices, also is original with Homer (Beekes and Beek 2010).

in association with a call for divine witnesses to enforce oath-making rituals and thus to compel participants to commit to the oath's terms. That is, in the Iliad *martyroi* are witnesses who punish oath-violators, not witnesses who suffer and die.[6] There are two oath-sacrificing rituals in the Iliad, in books 3 and 19, but the one in book 3 between the Achaians and Trojans is the more elaborate and consequential. There, Zeus and other gods are invoked as *martyroi* who "punish men, whosoever should swear a false oath":

> Zeus father counselor from Ida, greatest and best
> And Helios, who sees all and hears all
> And rivers and land, and those dwelling underneath
> Who punish men, whoever should swear a false oath
> You be witnesses (*martyroi*) and guard the trusted oaths. (3.276–280)[7]

By ritual analogy, punishments range from slitting throats to spilling brains to overpowering wives, with human witnesses, along with the gods, called to impose these upon oath-violators:

> So he said. And he cut the throats of the lambs with the pitiless bronze
> And put them on the earth, gasping,
> Deprived of life (*thumos*), for the bronze had taken away their might (*menos*).
> Then drawing wine from the vessel into cups
> They poured it out and prayed to the gods who always are.
> And so each of the Trojans and Achaians would say,[8]
> "Zeus greatest and best, and all the other immortal gods,
> Whoever is first to trample upon the sworn oaths,
> So may their brains run to the ground as does this wine
> And that of their children, and may their wives be overpowered (*dameien*) by others." (3.293–301)[9]

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[6] Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* lists associated meanings ranging from to bear witness, to testify (*martyreō*) to testimony (*martyria*) to call to witness (*martyromai*) to witness (*martys*) (1999, 1082).

[7] Ζεῦ πάτερ Ἰδηθεν μεδέων κύδιστε μέγιστε,
Ἠέλιός θ', ὃς πάντ' ἐφορᾷς καὶ πάντ' ἐπακούεις,
καὶ ποταμοὶ καὶ γαῖα, καὶ οἳ ὑπένερθε καμόντας
ἀνθρώπους τίνυσθον ὅτις κ' ἐπίορκον ὀμόσσῃ,
ὑμεῖς μάρτυροι ἔστε, φυλάσσετε δ' ὅρκια πιστά. (3.276–280)
[All Greek translations are the author's, except when otherwise noted.]

[8] The iterative *eipesken* arguably has distributive force.

[9] ἦ, καὶ ἀπὸ στομάχους ἀρνῶν τάμε νηλέϊ χαλκῷ:
καὶ τοὺς μὲν κατέθηκεν ἐπὶ χθονὸς ἀσπαίροντας
θυμοῦ δευομένους: ἀπὸ γὰρ μένος εἵλετο χαλκός.

The lethal repercussions for oath-violating are inferred as well in the use of the ominous phrase "whoever is first to trample upon the sworn oath,"[10] which recurs, with slight word order variations, five times outside of the precise oath-ritual of Book 3 (3.107; 4.67; 4.72; 4.236; 4.271). Given the orally performed nature of Homeric verse, the formulaic "whoever is first to trample upon the sworn oath" likely functioned as a poetic echo, conjuring for listeners the deadly repercussions for oath-violating expressed in the oath-sacrificing curse.[11] There are many other oaths in the Iliad,[12] but for purposes of tracing the lethal repercussions of oath-violating, this oath-ritual of Iliad 3 and its echoes illustrate the theme.

To gauge the cultural weight of this theme, it is worth noting that the lethal repercussions for violating oaths is so pervasive a theme in the Iliad as to establish an additional aetiology for the fall of the Trojans, who are seen as culpable not only for the violating the convention of guestfriendship (*xenia*)—because Paris abducted Helen, wife of his guesthost—but for violating the oath to settle the dispute over Helen by duel in Iliad 3. By the Iliad's reckoning, both violations are equally grave in the eyes of the gods. Hence Menelaos prays that "a person in future generations will shudder before doing evil to a guesthost who provides friendship" (3.351–354),[13] and that the fury of Zeus be unleashed upon the Trojans as "evil dogs who disgraced me, and did not fear the wrath of loud-thundering Zeus, protector of guestfriendship" (13.622–625).[14] With equal gravitas, Agamemnon assures Menelaos after he

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οἶνον δ᾽ ἐκ κρητῆρος ἀφυσσόμενοι δεπάεσσιν
ἔκχεον, ἠδ᾽ εὔχοντο θεοῖς αἰειγενέτῃσιν.
ὧδε δέ τις εἴπεσκεν Ἀχαιῶν τε Τρώων τε:
'Ζεῦ κύδιστε μέγιστε καὶ ἀθάνατοι θεοὶ ἄλλοι
ὁππότεροι πρότεροι ὑπὲρ ὅρκια πημήνειαν
ὧδέ σφ᾽ ἐγκέφαλος χαμάδις ῥέοι ὡς ὅδε οἶνος
αὐτῶν καὶ τεκέων, ἄλοχοι δ᾽ ἄλλοισι δαμεῖεν.

[10]ὁππότεροι πρότεροι ὑπὲρ ὅρκια πημήνειαν.

[11]Nagy points out that the Homeric epithet, also formulaic, functions as "a small theme song that conjures up a thought-association with the traditional essence of an epic figure, thing, or concept" (1990, 23). Presumably this formula does the same.

[12]See Appendix A in Kitts 2005, 219–228.

[13]Ζεῦ ἄνα δὸς τίσασθαι ὅ με πρότερος κάκ᾽ ἔοργε
δῖον Ἀλέξανδρον, καὶ ἐμῇς ὑπὸ χερσὶ δάμασσον,
ὄφρα τις ἐρρίγῃσι καὶ ὀψιγόνων ἀνθρώπων
ξεινοδόκον κακὰ ῥέξαι, ὅ κεν φιλότητα παράσχῃ.

[14]ἄλλης μὲν λώβης τε καὶ αἴσχεος οὐκ ἐπιδευεῖς
ἦν ἐμὲ λωβήσασθε κακαὶ κύνες, οὐδέ τι θυμῷ
Ζηνὸς ἐριβρεμέτεω χαλεπὴν ἐδείσατε μῆνιν
ξεινίου.

is slightly wounded that lethal punishment is forthcoming to oath-violators, as "the oath, the blood of rams, the unmixed libations, and the right hands in which we trusted" were not empty rituals:

> Oh my brother, the oaths I cut for you were your death,[15]
> putting you alone before the Achaians to fight the Trojans,
> since the Trojans struck you, and trampled upon the trusty oaths.
> But in no way barren is the oath, the blood of rams,
> the unmixed libations and the right hands in which we trusted.
> For indeed, if the Olympian does not fulfill it at once,
> he certainly will fulfill it later, and with might he will avenge it,
> with their heads and their women and their children.
> For well I know this in my head and in my heart,
> there will be a day when sacred Ilion will be destroyed,
> and also Priam and the host of Priam of the ashen lance. (4:155–165)[16]

Thus, in the Homeric world where violating customs is sanctioned by divine wrath, the wrath of the *martyroi* is meant to be a powerful deterrent.

How, then, and when do *martyroi* transform from deadly punishers of oath-violators to those who suffer and die as witnesses to a certain truth? It is not with the early poet Hesiod, who sees *martyra* in legal, if purely human, terms. Both trust and distrust can ruin a man, he writes, so one should get a *martyra* when making a pact even with a friend or brother, to pose as a fence against deceit (*Works and Days* 370–372).[17] Nor is it in Euripides' *Medea*, where Jason would swear to the gods (*daimonas martyromai*) that he

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[15]Agamemnon's anxiety stems from the planning for the duel, which pit Menelaos against Paris and was preceded by the oath-ritual. Hence he frets, "the oaths I cut for you were your death," but Menelaos replies that the wound is slight.

[16]'φίλε κασίγνητε θάνατόν νύ τοι ὅρκι᾽ ἔταμνον
οἷον προστήσας πρὸ Ἀχαιῶν Τρωσὶ μάχεσθαι,
ὥς σ᾽ ἔβαλον Τρῶες, κατὰ δ᾽ ὅρκια πιστὰ πάτησαν.
οὐ μέν πως ἅλιον πέλει ὅρκιον αἷμά τε ἀρνῶν
σπονδαί τ᾽ ἄκρητοι καὶ δεξιαὶ ᾗς ἐπέπιθμεν.
εἴ περ γάρ τε καὶ αὐτίκ᾽ Ὀλύμπιος οὐκ ἐτέλεσσεν,
ἔκ τε καὶ ὀψὲ τελεῖ, σύν τε μεγάλῳ ἀπέτισαν
σὺν σφῆσιν κεφαλῆσι γυναιξί τε καὶ τεκέεσσιν.
εὖ γὰρ ἐγὼ τόδε οἶδα κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν:
ἔσσεται ἦμαρ ὅτ᾽ ἄν ποτ᾽ ὀλώλῃ Ἴλιος ἰρὴ
καὶ Πρίαμος καὶ λαὸς ἐϋμμελίω Πριάμοιο,

[17]μισθὸς δ᾽ ἀνδρὶ φίλῳ εἰρημένος ἄρκιος ἔστω.
καί τε κασιγνήτῳ γελάσας ἐπὶ μάρτυρα θέσθαι.
πίστεις γάρ τοι ὁμῶς καὶ ἀπιστίαι ὤλεσαν ἄνδρας.

is willing to help Medea and the children as much as he can, were she not so obstinate (*Medea* 619–622), and there are numerous other oaths in classical drama (Konstantinidou 2014, 24–37; Fletcher 2011). It is not quite with the classical sphere of law where one would call down a curse upon oneself, effected by gods, should one be swearing falsely (Konstantinidou 2014, 37–47). Although these are just a few examples, they demonstrate that the classical materials overall continue to see the word *martys* as referring to a witness committed to deterring deceit.[18]

The Gospels and Beyond

The twin notions of witnessing and commitment continue into the gospels, typically but inconsistently translated under the English umbrella term "testimony."[19] In Matthew 8.4,[20] as well as Mark 1.44[21] and Luke 5.14,[22] the word *martyrion* is used as testimony for the curing act of Jesus on a leper: Jesus instructs the leper to go to the priest with the offerings designated in Leviticus 14.4–7 for a cleansing ritual, but to tell no one of the curing: the cured man is to offer the gifts that Moses commanded, as a *martyrion* to the priests.[23] Similarly juridical, in Matthew 26.59 *pseudomartyrian* denotes the false testimony sought by arch-priests and the Sanhedrin against Jesus so they might put him to death.[24] Early on in John, the use of *martyria* is straightforwardly juridical when he represents himself as a bearer of the *martyria* that he is not the messiah to the priests and Levites in Jerusalem (1.19) and also when others point out that the one about whom he testified (*memartyrēkas*)

[18]Commitment is sealed often by ritualized acts. In the Iliad, such acts include not just cutting the throats of animals and pouring libations, but touching the earth, swearing by the River Styx, taking the right hand, swearing by a staff, nodding one's (divine) head, and more (see Kitts 2005, chapter 2 and appendix A).

[19]Notion based primarily on Perseus at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/collections and Strong's Interlinear at https://biblehub.com/interlinear/.

[20]καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς Ὅρα μηδενὶ εἴπῃς, ἀλλὰ ὕπαγεσεαυτὸν "δεῖξον τῷ ἱερεῖ," καὶ προσένεγκον τὸ δῶρον ὃπροσέταξεν Μωυσῆς εἰς μαρτύριον αὐτοῖς.

[21]καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ Ὅρα μηδενὶ μηδὲν εἴπῃς, ἀλλὰ ὕπαγεσεαυτὸν "δεῖξον τῷ ἱερεῖ" καὶ προσένεγκε περὶ τοῦκαθαρισμοῦ σου ἃ προσέταξεν Μωυσῆς εἰς μαρτύριον αὐτοῖς.

[22]καὶ αὐτὸς παρήγγειλεν αὐτῷ μηδενὶ εἰπεῖν, ἀλλὰἀπελθὼν "δεῖξον" σεαυτὸν "τῷ ἱερεῖ," καὶ προσένεγκε περὶτοῦ καθαρισμοῦ σου καθὼς προσέταξεν Μωυσῆς εἰςμαρτύριον αὐτοῖς.

[23]The reasoning for this testimony to the priests apparently involves re-admission to the congregation of the formerly unclean man. The ambiguity rests in the instruction of Jesus to say nothing of the miracle, but simultaneously to require proof of it to the priests.

[24]οἱ δὲ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ τὸ συνέδριον ὅλον ἐζήτουνψευδομαρτυρίαν κατὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ὅπως αὐτὸν θανατώσωσιν.

is now baptizing on the other side of the River Jordan (3.26). But as one might expect for mystical John, other uses of the terms are bathed in light, as when it is said that a man named John was sent by God as a *martyrian*, in order to testify (*martyrēsē*) to the light, so that all might have faith through him (John 1.7–8). Similarly, he witnessed (*martyrei*) and cried out that the one coming after him was far greater than him, although also before him (John 1.15), and witnessed (*martyrēsen*) that he beheld a spirit descending as a dove from heaven and it remained on him (Jesus) (John 1.32).[25]

In Acts 4.33 *martyrion* is joyful. In describing the great love and cohesion among the apostles (4.32) it is said: "And with great power the apostles gave *martyrion* of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (4.33).[26] But in Acts 7, *martyrion* is again juridical. Before his stoning, Stephen in Acts 7.44 takes pains to claim to respect the Mosaic tabernacle of *martyrion*, which contained weighty testimonies of divine rule (e.g., the tables of law, Aaron's rod [Exodus 38.22]), made according to divine specifications.[27] In Acts 7.58, those who brought death to Stephen were designated *martyres* who chased him out of the city that they might stone him, and shed their outer garments in order freely to do so.[28] These usages are on a par with the Classical usage, referring primarily to witnessing and witnesses.

In the letters of Paul, most usages of *martyrion* refer to witnessing joy. First Corinthians 1.6 is a thanksgiving note, referring to the *martyrion* of Christ[29] being confirmed among his followers. Second Corinthians 1.12 is a boast about the "*martyrion* of our likemindedness" that we conduct ourselves not in the fleshly wisdom of the world but in sincerity and peace and grace of God.[30] "That our *martyrion* was believed among you" is redeeming in 2

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[25]Καὶ ἐμαρτύρησεν Ἰωάνης λέγων ὅτι Τεθέαμαι τὸ πνεῦμακαταβαῖνον ὡς περιστερὰν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ, καὶ ἔμεινεν ἐπ᾽ αὐτόν.

[26]καὶ δυνάμει μεγάλῃ ἀπεδίδουν τὸ μαρτύριον οἱἀπόστολοι τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ τῆς ἀναστάσεως, χάρις τεμεγάλη ἦν ἐπὶ πάντας αὐτούς.

[27]Η σκηνὴ τοῦ μαρτυρίου ἦν τοῖς πατράσιν ἡμῶν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, καθὼς διετάξατο "ὁ λαλῶν τῷ Μωυσῇ ποιῆσαι" αὐτὴν"κατὰ τὸν τύπον ὃν ἑωράκει." It is not clear to me whether he in fact respects the tabernacle and its mandates, given that he is arrested at the time.

[28]καὶ ἐκβαλόντες ἔξω τῆς πόλεως ἐλιθοβόλουν. καὶ οἱμάρτυρες ἀπέθεντο τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν παρὰ τοὺς πόδαςνεανίου καλουμένου Σαύλου. Surely there is something ritualized about the laying of garments at Saul's feet here. See the moral dimension of commitment for stone-throwers and accusers at Deuteronomy 17.7.

[29]καθὼς τὸ μαρτύριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐβεβαιώθη ἐν ὑμῖν.

[30]Η γὰρ καύχησις ἡμῶν αὕτη ἐστίν, τὸ μαρτύριον τῆς συνειδήσεως ἡμῶν, ὅτι ἐν ἁγιότητι καὶ εἰλικρινίᾳ τοῦ Θεοῦ, οὐκ ἐν σοφίᾳ σαρκικῇ ἀλλ᾽ ἐν χάριτι Θεοῦ, ἀνεστράφημεν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, περισσοτέρως δὲ πρὸς ὑμᾶς.

Thessalonians 1.10, part of a forecast of doom for those who didn't believe.[31] More focused on precedent, the letter to the Hebrews 3.5 attributes helping (*therapon*) status to Moses, who was trustworthy in all of his house, as a *martyrion* for those who would speak later.[32] Hebrews 11–12.3 lists an inspiring array of biblical heroes—a great cloud of witnesses[33]—who looked beyond immediate difficulties toward rewards to come, as a model for Christians in the present time. These usages are all comprehensible within the semantic range for *martyrion* as witness or testimony.

But there are other uses of *martyrion*, *martyra*, *martys*, etc., which do seem to equate the term with a victim who suffers while witnessing for truth. Although most narratives of suffering Christian martyrs are dated to the second and third centuries (van Henten and Avemarie 2002, 24), we can discern hints of adversity in association with *martyrion* earlier, in the following passages of the Gospels: An ominous if somewhat obscure use of *martyrion* occurs in Mark 6.11[34] and Luke 9.5,[35] when Jesus instructs his followers to go out and teach, but "as many as do not receive or hear you, as you go out from there/that city, shake the dust from your feet in *martyrion* against them." Whether ritual mimicry or figurative speech, to "shake the dust from your feet in witness" apparently reflects the severing of engagement. But it is in Luke, as part of a cataclysmic prediction (forthcoming earthquakes, famines, and fearsome sights from heaven), that Jesus is made explicitly to foresee persecution (*diōxousin*) for his followers as an occasion for their *martyrion*. This passage does equate suffering and oppression with *martyrion*: "Before all this, they will lay hands on you and pursue/persecute you, giving you over to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors, on account of my name: it will become a *martyrion* for you" (Luke 21.12–13).[36] In another ominous prophecy, Mark 13.9 makes Jesus warn followers to beware and to watch themselves, "for they will deliver you to councils, and will flog

[31]ὅταν ἔλθῃ ἐνδοξασθῆναι ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ" καὶ"θαυμασθῆναι" ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς πιστεύσασιν, ὅτι ἐπιστεύθη τὸμαρτύριον ἡμῶν ἐφ᾽ ὑμᾶς, "ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ."

[32]καὶ "Μωυσῆς" μὲν "πιστὸς ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ" ὡς"θεράπων" εἰς μαρτύριον τῶν λαληθησομένων.

[33]ἡμῖν νέφος μαρτύρων (12.1).

[34]καὶ ὃς ἂν τόπος μὴ δέξηται ὑμᾶς μηδὲ ἀκούσωσιν ὑμῶν, ἐκπορευόμενοι ἐκεῖθεν ἐκτινάξατε τὸν χοῦν τὸν ὑποκάτωτῶν ποδῶν ὑμῶν εἰς μαρτύριον αὐτοῖς.

[35]καὶ ὅσοι ἂν μὴ δέχωνται ὑμᾶς, ἐξερχόμενοι ἀπὸ τῆςπόλεως ἐκείνης τὸν κονιορτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ποδῶν ὑμῶν ἀποτινάσσετε εἰς μαρτύριον ἐπ᾽ αὐτούς.

[36]πρὸ δὲ τούτων πάντων ἐπιβαλοῦσιν ἐφ᾽ ὑμᾶς τὰς χεῖραςαὐτῶν καὶ διώξουσιν, παραδιδόντες εἰς τὰς συναγωγὰς καὶφυλακάς, ἀπαγομένους ἐπὶ βασιλεῖς καὶ ἡγεμόνας ἕνεκεν τοῦὀνόματός μου: ἀποβήσεται ὑμῖν εἰς μαρτύριον.

you before synagogues, and will make you stand before leaders and kings on account of me, as a *martyrion* to them."[37] Similar is Matthew 10.17–18: "Beware of men, for they will give you up to the Sanhedrin, and in their synagogues they will scourge you. You will be led to leaders and kings for my sake, as a *martyrion* to them and to the Gentiles."[38] In Matthew 24 a scenario of torture and enmity and death is presented as a bitter foretaste for an approaching time when, however, "this good message of the kingdom will be heralded over all the inhabited world as a *martyrion* to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24.14).[39] Even in John, typically a more optimistic gospel, there is a wistful tone when the one who comes from heaven *martyrei* to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his *martyrian* (3.32).[40]

Additional suggestive scriptures may be found in the letters to Timothy,[41] which do associate Christ's suffering with *martyrion*. First Timothy 2.5–6 does so by equating the "man Jesus Christ," who gave himself as a ransom for the sake of all, with a *to martyrion* in its own time,[42] while 2 Timothy 1.8 explicitly associates suffering with the "*martyrion* of our Lord" when the letter reassures followers that they should not be "ashamed of the *martyrion* of our Lord, nor of me, his prisoner, but join with me in suffering [from *sunkakopatheō*] for the Gospel by the power of God."[43] These unequivocally render martyrdom as suffering.

The Book of Revelation references martyrdom in a fevered stream of images, not surprisingly. The tamest reference is probably 3.14, *ho martys ho pistos kai alēthinos*, which denotes a faithful witness to the truth, describing the Lord, hence the preceding *Amēn* and the beginning (*archē*) of God's

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[37]βλέπετε δὲ ὑμεῖς ἑαυτούς: παραδώσουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰςσυνέδρια καὶ εἰς συναγωγὰς δαρήσεσθε καὶ ἐπὶ ἡγεμόνων καὶβασιλέων σταθήσεσθε ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ εἰς μαρτύριον αὐτοῖς. To whom the *martyrion* stands seems to be loose in these passages: is it for the disciples or outsiders or for Jesus?

[38]προσέχετε δὲ ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων: παραδώσουσιν γὰρὑμᾶς εἰς συνέδρια, καὶ ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς αὐτῶνμαστιγώσουσιν ὑμᾶς:καὶ ἐπὶ ἡγεμόνας δὲ καὶ βασιλεῖς ἀχθήσεσθε ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦεἰς μαρτύριον αὐτοῖς καὶ τοῖς ἔθνεσιν.

[39]καὶ κηρυχθήσεται τοῦτο τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας ἐνὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ εἰς μαρτύριον πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, καὶ τότεἥξει τὸ τέλος.

[40]ὃ ἑώρακεν καὶ ἤκουσεν τοῦτο μαρτυρεῖ, καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν αὐτοῦ οὐδεὶς λαμβάνει.

[41]Typically attributed to Paul.

[42]Εἷς γὰρ θεός, εἷς καὶ μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων ἄνθρωπος Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς, ὁ δοὺς ἑαυτὸν ἀντίλυτρον ὑπὲρ πάντων, τὸ μαρτύριον καιροῖς ἰδίοις.

[43]μὴ οὖν ἐπαισχυνθῇς τὸ μαρτύριον τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν μηδὲἐμὲ τὸν δέσμιον αὐτοῦ, ἀλλὰ συνκακοπάθησον τῷεὐαγγελίῳ κατὰ δύναμιν θεοῦ.

creation, all part of an elaborate nominal phrase.[44] Revelation 2.13 refers to Antipas, "my faithful *martys* who was killed among you" (*ho martys mou, ho pistos mou, hos apekthanthē par'hymin*),[45] which might seem to indicate suffering martyrdom, but Bowersock notes that the logic is ambiguous: was Antipas slain because he was a witness or was he a witness who happened to be slain? (1995). Revelation 19.10 follows a victory song, wherein the narrator falls forward at the feet of an angel to supplicate him, but the angel denies him, claiming to be a co-servant among the brothers who hold the *martyrian* of Jesus. Supplicate God, he says, for the *martyrian* of Jesus is the "spirit of prophecy,"[46] following which the "Word of God," with robes soaked in blood, leads a ferocious battle against the beast. It is hard to miss the tone of retribution here. Perhaps the most obviously violent use of the term is when the pregnant woman is harried by the red dragon who wants to eat her son. After the angels hurl him down to earth, there breaks out a song of triumph: "they defeated him by the blood of the lamb/and the word of their *martyrias*./ For they did not love their soul/life (*psychē*) even unto death."[47] (Note the familiar link of the blood of lambs with martyrdom and death, however reconfigured from Homer.[48]) Lastly, after the dragon is locked into the abyss for 1000 years, the narrator beholds thrones and those sitting on them rendering judgments, including those who were beheaded because of their *martyrian* for Jesus and because of the word of God (20.4).[49] *Martyrion*, *martyrian*, and *martyrias* unambiguously are tinged with violence in the last three of these passages.

It is impossible to gauge the semantic weight of all of these passages without taking into consideration others which address the looming prospect of death, but do not include the term martyr. The famous passion predictions in Mark and Luke do not use the term martyr, but predict persecution and death for Jesus and his disciples: "Then he began to teach them that the

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[44]Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Λαοδικίᾳ ἐκκλησίας γράψον

Τάδε λέγει ὁ Ἀμήν, "ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστὸς" καὶ [ὁ] ἀληθινός, "ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως" τοῦ θεοῦ.

[45]καὶκρατεῖς τὸ ὄνομά μου, καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὴν πίστιν μου καὶ ἐνταῖς ἡμέραις Ἀντίπας, ὁ μάρτυς μου, ὁ πιστός [μου], ὃςἀπεκτάνθη παρ᾽ ὑμῖν, ὅπου ὁ Σατανᾶς κατοικεῖ.

[46]καὶ ἔπεσα ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ποδῶν αὐτοῦ προσκυνῆσαι αὐτῷ. καὶ λέγει μοιὍρα μή: σύνδουλός σού εἰμι καὶ τῶν ἀδελφῶν σου τῶν ἐχόντων τὴν μαρτυρίαν᾽Ιησοῦ: τῷ θεῷ προσκύνησον: ἡ γὰρ μαρτυρία᾽Ιησοῦ ἐστὶν τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς προφητείας.

[47]καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐνίκησαν αὐτὸν διὰ τὸ αἷμα τοῦ ἀρνίου καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τῆς μαρτυρίας αὐτῶν, καὶ οὐκ ἠγάπησαν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτῶν ἄχρι θανάτου:

[48]Thought posed to author by Gail Streete.

[49]Καὶ "εἶδον θρόνους," καὶ "ἐκάθισαν" ἐπ᾽ αὐτούς, "καὶ κρίμια ἐδόθη" αὐτοῖς, καὶ τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν πεπελεκισμένων διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν᾽Ιησοῦ καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ.

Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31). "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8.34b–35); "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14.26–27) (translations by Streete 2018, 40).[50] These set a tone for Christian expectations.

Likewise, there are passages in the letters of Paul which anticipate death but do not use the term *martyr*. One enigmatic example is 1 Corinthians 15.55, where Paul, paraphrasing Hoseah, faces death squarely: "Where, o death, is your victory? Where, o death is your sting?"[51] In Philippians 1.21–23, he cryptically juggles the virtues of living to spread the word versus the appeal of dying: "For to me to live is Christ, to die is gain."[52] He seems rather more contemplative at 1 Corinthians 4.9: "For I think that God has designated us apostles as the last, as those condemned to death, so we may become a spectacle to the cosmos, to the angels, and to humankind."[53] The word *eschatous* (ἐσχάτους), here translated as last, in fact permits a range of interpretations, from the most debased to the most exalted, which seems to capture the ambivalence we typically ascribe to the cult of martyrdom: was dying for Christ a tragedy or a triumph?

Christian Virtus?

In sum, it would appear that the semantic range for *martys*, *martyra*, and *martyrion* has expanded by the time of these first-century writings, from a legalistic context where the *martys* witnesses oaths and is invited to punish violators, to one which includes the identification of the *martys* with the victim who suffers and dies in testimony to a perceived truth. This coincides with other well-studied cultural transformations attested in Roman representations of contests in the arena and upcoming in the Christian martyrologies. As

[50]See discussion in Streete 2018.

[51]ποῦ σου, θάνατε, τὸ νῖκος; ποῦ σου, θάνατε, τὸ κέντρον; Cf. Hoseah 13.14.

[52]Εμοὶ γὰρ τὸ ζῆν Χριστὸς καὶ τὸ ἀποθανεῖν κέρδος (1.21). See discussion of this puzzling phrase by Droge and Tabor (1992, 124).

[53]δοκῶ γάρ, ὁ θεὸς ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀποστόλους ἐσχάτους ἀπέδειξεν ὡς ἐπιθανατίους, ὅτι θέατρον ἐγενήθημεν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ ἀγγέλοις καὶ ἀνθρώποις.

many have observed about Greco-Roman influences on the martyrologies,[54] the Greco-Roman ideal of resolute heroic death will combine with the pathos undergirding the biblical expectation that the messiah had to suffer and to die (alluding to, e.g., Isaiah 53) to create an ethos establishing Christians who endured humiliating deaths in the arena as victorious warriors who won glory in the life to come. By simulating the Roman ideal of masculinity, a *virtus* comparable to that of the soldier and gladiator,[55] Christians in the arena and their hagiographers promoted a culture of valiant suffering. It is argued that during the Empire period disenfranchised gladiators came to be seen not as debased slaves, but as defiant heroes taking pleasure in the struggle up to the moment of death (Barton 1993, 20). Similarly, disenfranchised Christians subjected to torture in the arena inverted their stature, dying not as tepid, impotent victims, but as consecrated warriors committed to dying the good death (Collins 1994; Shaw 1996; Grig 2002, 328–329).

It is surely no coincidence that some freeborn gladiators in the first centuries of the Common Era undertook an oath (the *sacramentum gladiatorium*) to fight to the death in the arena,[56] thereby making of themselves at once oath-swearers, oath-victims and, when they died by choice, oath-enforcers, or *martyres* in the Homeric sense.[57] The same combination of testimonial, voluntary victimhood, and self-punisher may be said to have influenced the Christian self-conception of those who vowed to die as martyrs at Roman hands. Consider the oath of Tertullian: "We were called to be soldiers of the living God already when we responded to the words of the sacramental oath

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[54]Droge and Tabor (1992), van Henten and Avemarie (2002), Collins (1994), Shaw (1996), Grig (2002), Straw (2002), Cobb (2008, 2014), Streete (2018), to name a few.

[55]The two compared by, for instance, Seneca, although the comparison was not without controversy (Barton 1993, 16; Cobb 2008, 54–59).

[56]See discussion in Cobb 2008 and Barton 1993. Seneca's exhortation to the gladiator is on point:

> You have enlisted [in life] under oath. If any man should say that this is a soft or easy form of soldiering it will only be because he wishes to mock you. But I do not want you to be deceived: the words of this most honorable of compacts are the very same as those of that most foulest of compacts: "to be burned, to be bound, to be slain by the sword." . . . You must die erect and invincible. . . . We are born into a world in which no quarter is given. Epistulae 37.1–2 (translation in Barton 1993, 16)

[57]The gladiator's self-curse (*execratio*) is inextricably linked to the *sacramentum*, according to Barton (1993, 52 and 2002, 29). Barton explains how the oath elevated the honor and sacralized the gladiator, essentially erecting a fence around his commitment, which, Stoic ideals notwithstanding, was seen as deepened by any agony discerned in his ordeal (1993, 54).

(*sacramentum*)"[58] (Straw 2002, 45). And consider the vow of Justin Martyr: "Now through Jesus Christ, even under the threat of death, [we] hold these [pagan gods] in contempt, while we consecrate ourselves to the unbegotten and impassible God"[59] (Straw 2002, 45). Thus, while Christians ostensibly abhorred the Roman appetite for bloody spectacles in the arena (Edwards 2007, 214–216; Straw 2002, 47), they clearly also catered to it, and coopted some of its rhetoric.

Spectacular Death

Despite an apparent shift in agency for the martyr from the poems of Homer to the rhetoric of the martyrologies, attached to the notion of martyrdom at the start and end is the common theme of spectacular death. It is not the only theme attached to the martyr, but one notable in Homeric poetry and Roman spectacles in the arena. Here I will focus on two dimensions of spectacular death: the pleasure of the witnessing audience and the oratorical techniques for transporting audiences into visualized spectacles.

The Pleasure of Witnessing

As Droge and Tabor (1992), van Henten and Avemarie (2002), Grig (2004), and others have noted, the Christian sense of martyrdom predates the term for it and transcends the simple use of the term. It is asserted that the significance of the semantic history cannot be comprehended apart from the much older tradition of noble death, which Droge and Tabor trace back in classical literature before Eleazer and the mother and sons in 2 and 4 Maccabees and before the figure of Socrates in the Apology (and Phaedo and Crito) to the figure of Achilles in the Iliad (1992, 18).[60] Achilles' choice of a short life as a warrior who earns undying fame and glory, over his option to return home from the Trojan War to live a long, obscure life in Phthia, is held up as an example of the theme. But, while it is true that Achilles contrasts these options in Book 9 (9.410–416),[61] when he finally does make the choice to fight and

[58]Tert. mart. 3.1 (CCL 1, 5).

[59]Just. *1 apol.* 25.1–22 (SQ 1, 20).

[60]See Cobb for a fascinating reworking of the martyrdom of Polycarp in the model of Socrates, though (2014).

[61]His initial choice is explicitly anti-heroic: "The same share is to him who stays back and to him who may battle more. Both the bad man and the good are held in the same esteem. He dies just the same, the man of few deeds and the man of many."

ἴση μοῖρα μένοντι καὶ εἰ μάλα τις πολεμίζοι:
ἐν δὲ ἰῇ τιμῇ ἠμὲν κακὸς ἠδὲ καὶ ἐσθλός:
κάτθαν᾽ ὁμῶς ὅ τ᾽ ἀεργὸς ἀνὴρ ὅ τε πολλὰ ἐοργώς. (9.318–320)

die it is not due to a dispassionate stoicism, nor even primarily to a heroic embrace of beautiful death in battle—granted, an outstanding theme in the Iliad. Rather his choice is compelled by love, grief, and a desire for revenge, as he eloquently tells his mother in Book 18:

> Then let me die, since I was unable
> to protect my companion who was killed, who perished far from his fatherland,
> and he needed me to be his protector.
> So now I am not returning to my own fatherland,
> since I was no light to Patroclus nor to my other companions,
> the many subdued by godlike Hector.
> Rather I sat by the ships, a useless burden on the cultivated ground.
> (Il. 18.98–104)[62]

Rather than an emblem of stoic selflessness, then, Achilles' choice is richer, emotional, and emblematic of a singularly human passion.[63]

Regardless of popular misconceptions about Homeric stoicism,[64] one can argue easily that a fascination with death is very much at play in our earliest Greek epic, as it is in reports about the Roman arena. This theme is bigger than the focus on dying lambs in oath-sacrifices. The Iliad famously embraces the theme of beautiful death in battle—e.g., when Sarpedon falls as an oak tree, or a pine, in a multilayered simile at Iliad 16.482–491 (and Zeus will weep), or when the old king Priam contrasts his imminent bodily rending by his own dogs to the most beautiful death of a young warrior at the peak of his vitality, whose body is rent in battle (22.66–73). Further, the poem is resplendent in details of bodily mutilation and in reports of the vivid effects of loss on companions and even on gods, which bring the spectacle alive in the listener's eyes and emotions. An array of poetic devices helps to accomplish this, not only

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[62]'αὐτίκα τεθναίην, ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἄρ' ἔμελλον ἑταίρῳ
κτεινομένῳ ἐπαμῦναι: ὃ μὲν μάλα τηλόθι πάτρης
ἔφθιτ', ἐμεῖο δὲ δῆσεν ἀρῆς ἀλκτῆρα γενέσθαι.
νῦν δ' ἐπεὶ οὐ νέομαί γε φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν,
οὐδέ τι Πατρόκλῳ γενόμην φάος οὐδ' ἑτάροισι
τοῖς ἄλλοις, οἳ δὴ πολέες δάμεν Ἕκτορι δίῳ,
ἀλλ' ἧμαι παρὰ νηυσὶν ἐτώσιον ἄχθος ἀρούρης.

[63]This is not to say that he is not acutely aware of his imminent death. His stark self-reflection to Lykaon at 21.106–114 shows that he does accept his fate.

[64]Correctives to the portrayal of the Homeric tradition as rooted in a "shame culture" are offered by, e.g., Zanker (1994), Hammer (2002), Cairns (2003), Stocking (2007), and Kitts (2010).

graphic dying scenes but similes, heart-wrenching laments, cruel boasts, and the bird's eye view of the gods, who ponder the action from above.[65] There is no shrinking from the battlefield violence, which is conveyed as poetic art.

Similarly complex and imaginative were public spectacles in the Roman arena, where architecture, décor, and costuming radiated both social and religious themes, at least during the Empire period (Coleman 1990, 2012b). As will be discussed below, Roman spectacles were thoroughly ritualized and performed according to rules of decorum. Audiences were riveted to them and participated vocally with apparent enthusiasm (Coleman 2012; Edwards 2007, 46–55). Scholars have gone to great lengths to argue that the Roman love of bloody spectacle was not simply sadistic pleasure, but rather enthrallment with terror, with theater, and with blurred boundaries between the real and unreal (e.g., Barton 1993, 62–72, 85–90). Contemporary tastes notwithstanding, the taste of ancient audiences was honed to dying spectacles. Great spectacles demanded a witness, as did martyr spectacles—a martyr (witness) for a martyr (witness) (Barton 1994, 43; Cobb 2017, 48). Not only staged death in the arena, but, later, martyrological reports about it, gripped Christian audiences especially. As Grig observes about the martyrological reports, the Christian relish for scenes of violence and suffering was "a highly particular distillation of a very Roman predilection" (2002, 323). According to her, Christian hagiographers exceeded Roman tastes by representing Christian torture and endurance in such a way as to create uniquely Christian fictions of power (2002, 327–328).

Rendering Text as Spectacle

Such fictions were conveyed with consummate rhetorical skill, as also of course were the Homeric poems. Indeed, Homeric poetic recitations across the Aegean demonstrate a certain continuity with the martyr-tales in their techniques for engaging audiences and for eliciting visual reconstructions of particular scenes.

First, on engaging audiences, Homerists tell us frequently that ancient listening, particularly for epic poems, was an interactive matter. Not only did an audience clamor for specific songs (e.g., of Phemius and Demodocus in Odyssey 1 and 8), but the performance is thought to have been dynamic between the singer-poet and audience, who allowed itself to be mesmerized by a resonant field of familiar stories, personalities, themes, scenes, and formulae. Traditional referentiality is the coinage by which John Miles Foley described this resonant field, which the poet elicited by synecdoche, poetic

[65]On this last, see especially Heiden (1997), but also Kitts (2013).

extension, and other verbal art to transport the listeners into bygone worlds, reconstructed in concert by the imaginations of the poet and audience (1997). Although traditional referentiality has special applicability to oral traditional performances, orators of any ilk might be thought to exploit it. It is the realm conjured by orators to induce the audience to recognize the familiar in the unfamiliar.

But second, there is a visual dimension to this conjuring. Homeric techniques for conjuring visual imagination from poetic representation are well-discussed by Egbert Bakker, who notes that:

> [A]ny reader of Homer can testify to the graphic, concrete images in which Homeric narrative proceeds. Images as aggregates of visual information are easier to remember than verbal, sequential information. . . . Verbalizing the image, in fact, is like looking at a picture: the consciousness of the speaker resembles that of the observer, who can focus only on one detail at a time, the area of foveal vision. (1997, 54–85)

In battle scenes, for instance, the conversion of narrative sequencing to visualization is accomplished in part by presenting an overview of the battlefield before the poet narrows the listener's eye to a specific struggle, to a close-up of one-on-one fighting. The constraints of verbalization require that an action be presented in linear, temporal order, but an accomplished poet must elicit a visual field in order to render the spatialization of the scene.

To appreciate this technique of transforming the heard to the seen, we might glance at oratory in the broader Greek-speaking world. With not exactly the same sensibility as Homeric poets, who performed in poetic meters and presumably in song, ancient orators did cultivate a talent for enabling listeners to reconstruct narrative scenes in their own imaginations, as detailed in rhetorical manuals under the categories of *ekphrasis* and *enargeia* (Webb 1999; 2009). By ancient standards, *ekphrasis* was not a mere verbal description of a work of art but more richly "a speech which leads one around (*periegematikos*), bringing the subject matter vividly (*enargos*) before the eyes" (Webb 2009, 51). It was thus a speech which conjured a visual imagination and transported the audience into it. *Enargeia*, in turn, was created when

> the orator uses his own power of imagination to conjure up a scene in his mind. This exercise in visualization ensures that his language will spark a mental impression in the mind of his audience. . . . A successful orator must move his audience, must make them feel as if they were present at the events described, this is the purpose of *enargeia*. (Webb 1999, 13)[66]

[66]Even some contemporary oral poets claim to visualize the image in advance, before their extemporaneous oral performance recounting the image (Rubin 1995, 59–63).

These artistic techniques reach back to the Homeric poems. Bakker sees Homeric narrative on the whole as ekphrastic (1997, 54–85) and Francis notes that even an actual description of art in the Iliad, such as the shield of Achilles, transcends simple description to become "a dialectic on the nature of representation and reality, as the poem simultaneously insists on the objective reality and constructed plasticity of the images it describes" (2009, 17). It is as if the tradition were self-conscious about visual imagination and illusion and the oral means of eliciting them.

Both traditional referentiality and *ekphrasis* are discernible in martyr reports. On *ekphrasis*, although the performative sensibility of the epic poem, with its musical dimensions, presumably differed from the martyrological narrative, which was inscribed in prose, one can detect a similar sophistication in the matter of conjuring visual imagination, particularly of struggle and death. As pointed out by Cobb, Christian martyr stories, regardless of genre, were designed to be heard, to be visualized, and to generate response by Christian audiences.

> [They] demand an audience in order to confirm the witness given. Whatever their genre, these texts foster emotions that transport audiences into the narrative action and offer opportunities for them to identify with the actors, all of which confirms anew the witness, the martyrdom. (Cobb 2017, 48)

Grig adds that the later Christian narratives, performed and reperformed with each retelling and hearing, renewed the miracles told, inspiring and instructing the Christian listener by joining the narrative of events of old to his or her own experiences (2004, 4–5).

Some martyr-tales make use of the same Homeric technique discussed by Bakker, of leading the listener into a specific setting before focusing on narrative events. Cobb discusses the Acts of the Scillitan martyrs, which begins by orienting listeners to the temporal and spatial circumstances for the trials, before focusing on the trial itself:

> The *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* transports its listeners by providing a map whose focus becomes increasingly detailed as hearers travel toward the location of the trial. The audience does not have to imagine Carthage in its vast totality but instead they are guided carefully to the specific location of the interrogation: the governor's chambers. It is only when they arrive there—creating an image of that particular locale in the mind's eye—that they see the arrested Christians and learn their names. (Cobb 2017, 36)

Establishing familiarity with a spatialized field, then, was a cultivated technique in different kinds of narrative performance, from Homer to the martyrologies.

As for the traditional referentiality (Foley's term) of a listening audience, according to Cobb it was cultural memory that martyr-narratives sought to evoke in Christian listeners. They grasped narrative events, particularly torturous events, by reference to memories of events which they actually witnessed, or they built upon those memories via visual imagination.

> The Christian audience that has been emotionally engaged with the narrative events by any of the means discussed above becomes even more so as it witnesses—through hearing but also through visual imaginations—the horrific tortures applied to Christian bodies. Sometimes the physical effects of torture are explicitly described and thus easily connected to audiences' memories of seeing the application of similar types of corporal punishment. At other times it is the listener's imagination—still aided of course by cultural knowledge—that fills in the literary gaps. (Cobb 2017, 47)

Multiple sensory modalities of remembering could be added to the Cobb's visual. In Roman times, new spectacles of torture as well as reports about them would have elicited not only seen memories, but also heard memories (cries, shouts, jeers) and probably smelled ones as well (blood, sweat, excrement, of both humans and animals), in the same way that audiences would have recognized these in reports of animal sacrifice (Weddle 2017). However difficult to reconstruct only through texts,[67] multisensory memories must have been richly informative for ancient audiences encountering reports of martyr-spectacles, and for that matter for Homeric audiences hearing reports of ritual scenes.

Death in Oath-Sacrifice vs. Death in the Arena

Oratorical techniques aside, though, there is a more direct line of influence between the Homeric poems and the martyrologies, which is germane to their representations of spectacular death. Although Greco-Roman literature was not the only literature to render death as art,[68] it has been argued convincingly that the Homeric epics were foundational reading for ancient literati and that their narrative scenes and emotionality were mimicked in later literature, not only in Latin poems such as Virgil's Aeneid, but in Greek prose texts such as the Gospel of Mark and Lukan Acts (MacDonald 2003; 2016). There is no reason to segregate reports of martyrdom or gladiatorial spectacles from this epic legacy. We know that Roman self-identity was self-consciously in tension with its Greek counterpart, and that Roman authors imitated Greek, albeit

[67]Difficulties addressed by Betts 2017, Howes 2010, and Classen 2012.

[68]On ancient Near Eastern death spectacles in art, see Collon (2003), Reade (2005), and Bahrani (2008).

ambivalently, in assimilating classical texts and cultural themes (Whitmarsh 2001). It is not inconceivable that an enduring cultural taste informs dying scenes in Greco-Roman texts from the Iliad all the way to the martyrologies.

One of these enduring cultural tastes was for the spectacle of death. Homeric rituals of oath-sacrifice and rituals of martyrdom share a riveting focus which accounts for their sensational appeal in the ancient world, despite the fact that oath-rituals were meant to deter crimes and the contests in the arena were designed to entertain. Let us describe the first and then compare relevant aspects of the second. The rituals are obviously not identical in purpose or form, but features do overlap and indicate a continuity of cultural interest.

Homeric Oath-Sacrifice

As alluded above, oath-sacrifice is lethal to the victims and meant to infer the same lethality for prospective oath-violators. Book 3's oath-sacrifice begins with a show of group unity. Both leaders, Hector and Agamemnon, cause the fighting to stop and the Trojans and Achaians to be seated silently on the ground to witness the oath (3.77–83; cf. 19.255–256). The men cluster their weapons together, a remarkable show of unity for two armies in the heat of battle just moments before (3.113–115). There is some pomp: animal victims are led in by trusted heralds (3.268–269; cf. 19:250–251) who purify the hands of the king with water (3.269–270). The king displays his iconic killing tool, his *machaira*, "which always hung by the great sheath of his sword" (3.271–272; cf. 19.252–253),[69] which he uses initially to cut hairs from the victims (3.273, cf. 19.254) and distribute them to the "best of the Achaians and Trojans" (3.274). He prays, hands held up to Zeus (3.275–276; cf. 19.254–255), invokes a series of divine witnesses to protect the oath, including the deadly subterranean goddesses who punish oath-violators (3.276–280; cf. 19:259–260), and enjoins participants to be witnesses too. He gives the terms of the oath (3.281–291; 19.261–263) and then, with some variation on sequence, slits the throats of victims with the *machaira*. The dying is highlighted in Book 3: "And so he said, and he cut the throats of the lambs with the pitiless bronze" (3.292; cf. the boar at 19.266) and "put them on the ground, gasping, and deprived of life (of *thumos*), for the bronze had stripped them[70] of strength (*menos*, or vigor or force)" (3.293–294). Then witnesses pour libations and collectively intone (iteratively and distributively they *eipesken*) another curse: "Zeus greatest and

[69]A tool associated with adulthood or near-adulthood, apparently, based on the scene on Achilles' great shield, where young men and dowry-earning maidens dance in festive apparel—girls wearing fine garments and garlands and boys wearing glistening tunics and bearing *machairas* in their belts (18.593–598) (discussed in Kitts 2005, 138–139).

[70]The verb is from *'aireō*; seize: *'eileto*; seized

best, and all the other immortal gods, whoever is first to violate the oaths, so may their brains fall to the ground as does this wine, and those of their children, and may their wives be overpowered by others" (3.297–301).[71] The mood is unrelenting.

The scene of oath-sacrifice is sparse in figurative language—a feature of Homeric ritual scenes per se (Kitts 2011)—but some aspects are revealing precisely because the language is so concrete. The most germane of these is the close focus on the dying lambs, who are laid on the ground, "gasping [*aspaironta*], deprived of *thumos*[72] for the bronze had stripped them of strength."[73] As noted earlier, the gasping of the lambs, along with the spilled wine mimicking oath-violators' brains, is meant to conjure vividly the spectacle of dying, of both lambs and oath-violators.[74] Just as the gasping or panting of the lambs depicts their last breaths vividly, so too does the gasping or panting of many humans on the battlefield, as we see in the common family of breathing verbs applied to these deaths: Asteropaios exhaled (*asthmainonta*) his *thumos* when Achilles killed him during Achilles' fight with the rivergod (21.182); also killed by Achilles, Hippodamas exhaled (*aisthe*) his *thumos* like a bull being sacrificed for Poseidon (20.403); Thracians gasped (*aspairontas*) when Diomedes and Odysseus slaughtered them in the night (10.521); Adamas gasped (*aspair'*) like an ox dying by human blows (13.571); Medon exhaled (*aisthmainon*) as he was struck in the temple and fell from his chariot (5.585); and Asios's charioteer did the very same thing (13.399). These gasping and panting verbs in verses for dying on the battlefield give an assiduous view of the human victims' last breaths,[75] not unlike the lambs' last breaths. A metaphorical transference is implied between animals dying in oath-sacrifice and humans dying in battle.

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[71]The curse is minimalist in Iliad 19: "Praying, . . . 'if I have sworn any of these things falsely, may the gods give to me pains, exceedingly many, as many as they give to anyone who transgresses against them in swearing'" (19.264–266).

[72]ἀσπαίροντας/ θυμοῦ δευομένους.

[73]*Thumos* and *menos* are both slippery to English but generally translated as life (*thumos*) and strength, vigor, or might (*menos*).

[74]This vivid dying of oath-victims contrasts notably with the detailed description of animals being slaughtered in *thysia* sacrifices, where the victims are not even noted to die, really, but simply to be slaughtered (*esphaxan*, from *sphazdō*), flayed, their thighs cut out, wrapped in fat, braised with wine libations, and tasted, after which the rest is cut into bits, skewered, roasted over a fire, pulled off and eaten (1.459–470; 2.410–432; Kitts 2011). The mood to these is happy, commensal.

[75]It is intriguing that these victims who die gasping and panting like sacrificial lambs are on the Trojan side, given the Trojan culpability as violators of the oath of Book 3. But I think the comment on gasping and dying is bigger.

The humanization of oath-victims in Homer continues a tradition well-established all over the ancient Near East. Our most plentiful evidence is Assyrian. The ritualized fiction of identity between the sacrificial victim and the oath-violator is apparent in these Assyrian oath-curses:

> This shoulder is not the shoulder of a spring lamb, it is the shoulder of Mati'ilu, it is the shoulder of his sons, his magnates, and the people of his land. If Mati'ilu should sin against this treaty, so may, just as the shoulder of this spring lamb is torn out . . . the shoulder of Mati'ilu, of his sons, [his magnates] and the people of his land be torn out. (Arnold and Beyer 2002, 101)

> [J]ust as [thi]s ewe has been cut open and the flesh of [her] young has been placed in her mouth, may they make you eat in your hunger the flesh of your brothers, your sons and your daughters. (Luckenbill 1968, section 69)

That oath-curses have deadly repercussions is evident in this battle boast by Assurbanipal:

> Every curse, written down in the oath which they took, was instantly visited upon them by Assur, Sin, Shamash, Adad, Bel, Nabu, Ishtar of Nineveh, the queen of Kidmuri, Ishtar of Arbela, Urta, Nergal (and Nusku). The young of camels, asses, cattle and sheep, sucked at seven udders and could not satisfy their bellies with the milk. The people of Arabia asked questions, the one of the other, saying: "Why is it that such evil has befallen Arabia?" . . . saying "Because we did not keep the solemn oaths sworn to Assur." (Luckenbill 1968, section 828)

Examples could be multiplied.[76] The point of these is to show that dying animal victims in oath-sacrifices are intentionally humanized, in Homeric narratives of oath-sacrifice as in ritual reports further east.

The Roman Arena

The humanization of dying victims is obviously featured too in Roman spectacles, first because there are in fact human victims, but secondly because witnessing the struggle against death inevitably was deeply engaging to spectators. There are differences as well as commonalities between Homeric oath-spectacles and Roman contests in the arena.

One of the conspicuous differences between oath-sacrifices in the Iliad and contests in the Roman arena was of course context. Despite the oaths sworn by gladiators in the Empire period, Roman contests began not as oath-sacrifices but as aristocratic funeral games, traceable to the third century BCE (Edwards

[76]See Kitz 2013.

2007).[77] Adapted from the Etruscans and Samnites, gladiatorial contests to the death once were conceived as human offerings to the shades of the dead (Barton 1993, 13; Edwards 2007, 59; Coleman 2012a; 2012b), corresponding to Homeric oath-sacrifices only to the extent that the offering was felt as a human sacrifice. Over the next five centuries gladiatorial contests grew into enormous public spectacles (*munera*), but retained some of their ritualized character. If not staged down to the religious minutiae of Homeric ritual scenes, Roman contests nonetheless were full of pomp and religious iconography. Contests were preceded by festive parades (Barton 1993, 18–19), including, by the Empire period, the ceremonious procession into the arena of images of gods and deceased luminaries as well as of the reigning emperor and his wife and various personifications of the Empire (Coleman 2012a). As did Zeus and other oath-enforcing gods in the Homeric milieu, these too were to witness the killing ritual, or at least by their presence to sanction it.

If not enjoying the same sense of unity as the Homeric witnesses, who collectively beheld the sacrifice and intoned the same curse on oath-violators, the Roman audience was certainly engaged, as already observed. Architecture was designed so that all the spectators could see the show (Coleman 2012a), and, according to a character in Tacitus, the show was all anyone could talk about (Edwards 2007, 49). Whereas Homeric oath-sacrifice scenes stress the collective unity of warriors behind the kings, in Rome seating at contests was socially tiered and costuming ensured that social hierarchy was upheld. Nonetheless, unity might be inferred by occasional collective acclamation by the crowd (Edwards 2007, 54–55; Cobb 2017), for instance, when the audience called to clothe the martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas, young mothers who emerged into the arena naked, with the breasts of Felicitas leaking milk (*Passion of Perpetua* 20). But social hierarchy apparently did not restrict public enthusiasm for the games, which came to be seen as inspirational. Their representations in art were ubiquitous, on wall-paintings, mosaics, oil lamps, graffiti, and more (Edwards 2007, 49).

The feature most pertinent for our discussion is, of course, spectacular death. Victims were of a variety. Not only Christians, but other condemned criminals, captives in battle, humiliated aristocrats and political conspirators, as well as professional gladiators died in the arena, fighting against humans or beasts. Barton notes that by the early Empire, approximately half of the gladiators were free born men who reveled in the ordeal (1993, 13–14). A

[77]It seems patent that vowing and oath-making are not incompatible with funerals, especially when funerals are heroic and call for revenge, as in the Greek archaic period (Seaford 1999).

certain virtue came to be associated with fighting in the arena, but virtue was measured not only by how someone fought but by how s/he died.

Roman reports of gladiator deaths are texturized differently than the Christian deaths reported in the martyrologies, despite the Christian cooptation of Roman themes. For the gladiator, death and the route to it were their own truths. The skill and bravery of the combatant, his oath to fight to the death (Seneca: "You must die erect and invincible," without expectation of quarter [Barton 1993, 16]), his ability to endure pain and defeat, and the commission of his fate ultimately to the game's editor who signaled life or death by hand gesture: all this established the honor of the combatant, free born or not. It cannot be accidental that a number of artistic representations portray the moment when a recumbent gladiator, finger raised to signal defeat, awaited the decisive signal of the editor (see images in Edwards 2007, 56–57). These were moments of exquisite tension. Audiences beheld this moment when life and death hung in the balance, which was seen as beautiful in its own right (not unlike death in the Iliad). The idolization of the gladiator during the Empire period must have been at least partly due to a romance with fighting against futile odds.[78] "In warfare, in the gladiatorial arena, in all the perils of human existence, it was not victory that mattered so much as that the struggle be 'from the marrow' (*summis medullitas viribus*), to borrow an expression from Apuleius (Florida 18.32)" (Barton 2001, 53).

For the Christian, we are told, the odds were not futile; rather the sure rewards were death and the glory beyond death when the martyr would be with Christ. As indicated above, Christians in the arena, or reports about them, inverted virtue and status in the same way as did the lowborn but heroic gladiator, but the Christian celebration of torturous death was more luxuriant. Reports of bodily rending delighted not only Christian audiences, who relished the martyr's show of faith and endurance, but, according to one late report, delighted too God's angel, who carefully measured and recorded injuries to the martyr's body:

> He took down not only the words of his discourse but with his pen drew the same wounds he had in his sides, in his cheeks, on his breast, on his throat. The quantity of blood from each was noted and how each wound was gouged out by the gash, whether it was deep or gaping, a graze, long or short, the strength of the pain, the extent of the cut. No drop of blood went unobserved by him. (Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber* 10.1123–30; translated in Edwards 2007, 213)

[78]"'Nothing is more formidable than despair,' the Roman general Vespasian declares (Josephus, Bellum Iudaicum 3.209)" (Barton 2001, 53).

It is hard to miss the veneration of suffering here, although a specter of supernatural retribution also looms over the angel's list: at the end of time the torturer is to endure even worse treatment than the tortured (Grig 2002, 328; Cobb 2017, 103), seemingly wound per wound, bloody drop per bloody drop. It is not insignificant that later martyr reports make the martyr him or herself grow ever more powerful here on earth, coinciding with the aforementioned Christian "fiction of power" (Grig 2002, 327, 333). While martyrs with torn, bloody bodies remained impassive, able to endure, those who tortured them came to be represented as emotionally distraught or physically exhausted, thereby reversing the burden of suffering from the persecuted to the persecutors (Cobb 2017, 103–107). Some tortured martyrs were so powerful as, reputedly, to exorcise demons (Grig 2002, 333).

In spite of the Christian rhetoric of power, it is the tortured body which remains the brute fact, fascinating Roman and Christian audiences as it did those of ancient oath spectacles. What these rituals share is the sensational depiction of a victim's last moments. Death and the moment of dying are the ritual's truths, for witnesses to oath-spectacles and for witnesses to the arena. Rappaport once observed that ritualized scarring and maiming communicate their own force by being observable, visceral (for the subject), and irreversible.[79] Suffering and death in these spectacles are observable, presumably visceral, irreversible, and, as he saw it, more persuasive than words.

Conclusion

The significance of the *martys* shifted from the Homeric epics to the Gospels, from the divine agent who punished oath-violators to the persecuted Christian who witnessed to a truth. The term continued to take on new nuances into the Christian martyrologies in association with Roman virtue and a cultural appetite for spectacles of suffering and death. Rhetorical techniques for absorbing a listening audience into the spectacle of suffering were well-established, from the time of the Homeric bards to that of the martyrological prose writers. There was a fascination with visual spectacles and how to render them in prose. Although the meaning of the term *martyr* shifted over centuries, attached to it continued to be a fixation on spectacular death.

[79]"Corporeal representation gives weight to the incorporeal and gives visible substance to the aspects which are themselves impalpable, but of great importance in the ordering of social life" (Rappaport 1999, 141).

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