Towards an ecology of suffering: How Late Antique martyrs' relationships with the natural environment shaped Christian religious identity: the Act of Shirin

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"Hagiographers were the anonymous architects of Christian communities in Iran"
(Payne, 2015, p. 19).

Introduction

To present the topic addressed in this contribution, I will first draw upon the Martyr Act of Polycarp,[1] an account written in the second half of the second century (Thompson, 2002, p. 27; Zwierlein, 2014, pp. 1-36) by a contemporary of the martyr (*Pass*. *Pol*. 22 [p. 18, 14/24]; Delehaye, 1921, p. 11) and considered to be the first Christian hagiographical text (Lake, 1992 [1913], p. 302). This story describes the capture, sentencing to death and execution by the Roman authorities of the Christian bishop Polycarp of Smyrna – modern Izmir, on the eastern coast of Asia Minor. Once Polycarp is captured, he is taken to the arena and condemned to death by fire (*Pass. Pol.* 11 [p. 10, 13/18]). As soon as the fire grows and the flames blaze up, an extraordinary event takes place (*Pass. Pol.* 15 [p. 14, 6/11]):

> [The flame] took the shape of a room, like a vessel's sail filled with wind, encircling the body of the martyr. He was inside not as burning flesh, but as bread that is being baked [οὐχ ὡς σάρξ καιομένη ἀλλ' ὡς ἄρτος ὀπτώμενος], or as gold and silver being melted in an oven. And we perceived such an aromatic scent, like the smell of incense or other valuable spices.

[1] Henceforth *Pass. Pol.* (ed. Musurillo, 1972, pp. 2-21). All translations are my own unless it is specified. The references are provided as in the Corpus Christianorum reference system, where the name of the text appears abbreviated in Latin, for example: *Pass. Sir.*, and it is followed by the number of the chapter. Then, the numbers in brackets correspond, first, to the number of the page and second, to the number of the line in the edition.

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The striking scene of Polycarp's death serves as a starting point for this contribution. The flame wraps around the body of the martyr, leaving it unharmed. The Roman authorities, seeing that his body could not be consumed by fire, finally commanded an executioner to stab him with a dagger (*Pass. Pol.* 16 [p. 14, 12/16]). The point here is how the fire leaves the body of the martyr undamaged and, ultimately, "even the entire crowd marvelled at such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect" (*Pass. Pol.* 16 [p. 14, 15/16]).

The relationship of the martyrs to the natural environment would later become a fundamental element of other hagiographical accounts. In these texts, martyrs and saints were said to be able to communicate with animals (among others, see Alakas & Bulger, 2020; Alexander, 2008; Crane, 2012; Hogbood-Oster, 2008; Obermeier, 2009; Salter, 2001, 2018), their power could bring protection – and, above all, pride and recognition – to entire geographical regions and features (among others, see Castelli, 2004; Molina Gómez, 2006, pp. 863-875; Payne 2011, 2015, pp. 59-92), and they could even control the natural elements and interact with weather phenomena (see Bieler, 1976 [1935], pp. 95-98; Kazhdan, 1995, pp. 75-76; Moorhead, 1981, p. 5; Pomer Monferrer, 2018; Pratsch 2005, pp. 270-289; Stathakopoulos, 2002).[2] On close examination, most of these scenes of interaction with nature occurred while the martyr was suffering, or recently dead. It is the interaction between the natural environment and suffering that this contribution aims to examine.

Description and objectives

This paper will present in a speculative way a perspective for studying literary representations of the nature-suffering mutuality. This approach will focus on how literary nature-human relations could display ideals and provocations to an audience's way of interpreting and experiencing their own natural environment. I will give examples of literary representations illustrating what I am calling "ecological interactions."[3] This notion will be used to bring forward the concept presented in the title of the paper: an *ecology of*

[2] See, for example, the well-known scene described by Prudentius after the death of Eulalia (*Perist.* 3, 176/179: "Inmediately the cold winter makes snow / fall and covers all the forum / at the same time it protects the body of Eulalia / that lies under the frozen sky / as a small linen blanket". Ed. Lavarenne (1963 [1951]).

[3] The concept of "ecological interactions" is taken from the metaphor used by Katrín Anna Lund and Karl Benediktsson (Lund & Benediktsson, 2010, p. 8) of "conversations with landscape" as a way of attending to the "mutuality of human-landscape encounters". This metaphor seeks to consider how natural environment and human beings both shape and articulate their relationship in a continuous interaction of recognition and affect. Thus, the notion of ecological interactions and the further notion of an ecology of suffering seek to acknowledge how the literary suffering of the martyrs both shaped and was shaped by its relation to environmental and non-human elements.

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suffering. An ecology of suffering allows us to understand early Christian hagiographic accounts, to examine how the range of literary interactions between martyrs' suffering and their natural environment was informed by early Christian understandings of nature, how they affected the way these communities identified, moved, and distributed themselves into their natural world and how these actions were informed by specific cultural, political, religious and natural contexts.

Approaching early Christian martyr texts: the *Passio* Shirin

This contribution aims to present a way not only of thinking *about* martyr texts, but also of *conceiving* martyr texts. However, although it is aimed at proposing a theoretical model of thinking about an ecology of suffering, it will apply its conceptualisations to a specific text: the *Passio* of Shirin.[4] This text (BHG 1637) was written around the beginning of the seventh century in Karka d-Beit Slok,[5] modern Kirkuk. The city of Karka was located in the plains of Northern Mesopotamia, approximately one hundred and eighty-six miles north of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sasanian Empire. This was the birthplace of Shirin, a noble young woman born into an aristocratic Zoroastrian family who, at the age of eighteen, announced publicly her conversion to Christianity. Her story is featured in a hagiographical text, written probably in the first decade of the seventh century. The Text (BHG 1637) narrates her birth, conversion to Christianity and her subsequent arrest and execution. This account is useful for the analysis of religious conflict between Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism during the end of the Sasanian Empire (fifth to seventh centuries).[6] The story, like all other hagiographical testimonies, uses various strategies to conduct the process of differentiating a Christian religious identity from others. One of the strategies this text employs, although subtle, allows us to present how an ecology of suffering works, and yet it has not been examined in the context of Christian hagiographical texts written in the Sasanian Empire more generally. These literary interactions, however, should not be interpreted from a modern perspective, as will be argued later. As Stephanie Cobb has clearly stated:

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[4] Henceforth *Pass. Sir.* (ed. Devos, 1946, pp. 112-131).

[5] I follow Richard Payne's (Payne, 2015) transliterations of Sasanian names.

[6] Paul Devos (1994, esp. pp. 11-13) has examined the ways this text presents the religious confrontations between Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Richard Payne (2015, esp, pp. 52-58) has shown how Shirin's conversion and following execution – along with other aristocratic converts of the period – is one sign of the integration that Christian communities experienced in imperial politics, challenging the notion of a strictly religiously-driven persecution among Christians.

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> Our reading [of the martyr texts] is dulled because we have no access to the ways our senses – sound, smell, sight – would have informed our understandings of the martyr stories […] The ancient audiences who listened to the martyr stories, therefore, are decidedly not us. They brought to their listening a cache of cultural experiences that we do not have access to but undoubtedly affected the ways they heard, responded to and imagined the martyr stories. As a group they were involved audibly and physically; they had something at stake in the texts they heard, interacting with and making meaning of them. When scholars, alone in their studies, read their critical editions, they in effect hit the mute button, surely dulling the dynamism of these stories in the early church and their emotional potential (Cobb, 2017, p. 11).

The scenes we are about to examine are not hard to see as continuous and bold attempts to describe a religious identity that was informed by an early Christian notion of nature: they served as a clear statement of the power that Christianity had over other religious identities and, above all, they asserted the competence that the Christian God had over the entire human experiential world.

Nevertheless, these are literary representations. Hagiographic studies have largely sought to separate historiographic "facts" from hagiographical "fantasy."[7] However, it is misleading to see in these texts the suffering bodies and, of course, the miracles they can achieve, as "a raw biological fact" (Bynum, 1991, p. 68).[8] Rather, in considering the complete variety of bodily representations – perceived and described pain, gender, emotions, and so on – as a set of literary dynamics more than irrefutable evidence of an historically true description of physical pain in Late Antiquity, the results we can achieve are far more compelling. I am here ascribing to Stephanie Cobb's (2017, p. 11) proposition of considering early Christian hagiographical accounts as separated from their alleged historical verisimilitude. By examining these texts' literary intentionality, rather than trying to dissect them in the search of historical truth: "These martyred bodies reveal ways early Christians constructed themselves vis-à-vis the world and their God" (Cobb, 2017, p. 12). Considering these texts in a literary realm means we can explore how the representations described in them were set and aimed for the audiences that later heard them.

To summarise, it would not be misleading to examine these texts as sources of recognition and frameworks of world building and experience-making. These texts

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[7] This perspective has mostly been encouraged by a scholarly line traced by the Bollandists. On this and bibliography, see: Cobb (2017, pp. 19-20).

[8] Cited in Cobb (2017, p. 11).

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prompted affective and sensory intensities in their audiences, intensities that both shaped and were shaped by the sociocultural, economic, and political constraints these accounts were written in. Regarding our text, clearly Shirin's story was composed to create an experiential response in the world of the community that heard it (*Pass. Sir.* 1, [p. 113, 1/7] *my own emphasis added*):

> But God, who, as a fellow of humans and in many ways, endows us with good judgment in the present moment, has considered well *to provoke our spirits* not only by means of written events, but also by the testimony of what has happened [εὐδόκησεν […] μὴ μόνον ἐκ τῆς τῶν γεγραμμένων ἱστορίας ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐξ αὐτῆς τῆς τῶν πεπραγμένων αὐτοψίας τὴν ἡμετέραν προθυμίαν ἀνακαλέσασθαι], so that past actions are made credible by new ones and new deeds are illustrated by old ones.

How literary representations were aimed at shaping a worldview and a response to current events in Christian communities is fundamental in the analysis of these texts, rather than the analytical effort to find historical verisimilitudes or separate "reality" from "fiction." My aim is not to propose a way of thinking *about* these stories, but a way of *thinking with* these stories, that is: a disposition of understanding and analysing these texts as having an intention and prompting answers and conceptions in particular experienced worlds and contexts.

The text (BHG 1637)

Shirin was born into an aristocratic house in Karka d-Beit Slok. Her death occurred in the twenty-eighth year of Husraw I's reign (*Pass. Sir.* 2 [p. 113, 20]), that is, between the 12th of July of 558 C.E. and the 11th of July of 559 C.E. (Devos, 1946, p. 113 n. 1). This text is now preserved in Greek, being a compilation of previous accounts[9] composed by a fellow citizen of the martyr (Devos, 1994, p. 13). This account is only preserved in the *Codex Laurentianus* IX, 14 (2r.- 18v.), inside the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence. Regarding its date, the text itself does not provide specific data. There is a reference to Husraw II (r. 590-628), Husraw I's grandson, as being "now king of Persia" (*Pass. Sir.* 1 [p. 112, 5/6]) at the opening of the text. So, this text was written around the first decade of the seventh century.

[9] See, esp.: "Moses, Elijah and Peter the apostle and the other saints clearly appeared to her, as is told at length in other writings about her" (*Pass. Sir.* 13, [p. 121, 11/14]: καθάπερ τοῖς κατὰ πλάτος περὶ ἀυτῆς συγγεγραμμένοις ἐμφέρεται).

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Right after she was born, her father introduced her to the Zoroastrian religion (*Pass. Sir.* 2 [p. 113-114]). Shirin kept her conversion secret until she was eighteen, the age at which she was able to "distinguish good from evil" (*Pass. Sir.* 3 [p. 114, 17]),[10] and then publicly converted to Christianity. After her public apostasy, she was imprisoned by the Sasanian authorities (*Pass. Sir.* 10-16 [p. 118-124]), who moved her to Holwan, in the Zagros mountains. From there, she was taken to Dastagerd, near Ctesiphon, where the palaces and court of Husraw I (r. 531-579 C.E.) were located (Morony, 2006). In the city of Dastagerd she was sentenced to death (*Pass. Sir.* 22-23 [p- 127-128]) and, following an attempted rape (*Pass. Sir.* 25 [p. 129]), she died by strangulation (*Pass. Sir.* 26 [p. 129-130]). Her remains were thrown to the dogs and, intact, were later collected by Christians (*Pass. Sir.* 27 [p. 130]). Finally, her carcass was collected and deposited in the region of Beit Arbaye, near Beit Garmai (*Pass. Sir.* 28 [p. 130-131]).

Nature as an imprint of the divine.

The way early Christians observed and experienced nature was chiefly informed by the notion that nature was a divine creation (Molina Gómez, 2006, pp. 878-879):[11]

> La naturaleza sigue siendo una fuente de misterio a través de la cual se puede llegar a intuir la presencia de lo sobrenatural. Los escritores cristianos seguirán viendo en ella la huella de Dios. En este sentido, la contemplación de la naturaleza puede elevar el espíritu, y al igual que la lectura de la Biblia, es también un ejercicio de verdadera exégesis. La experiencia de la naturaleza conduce a la emoción y a la sensación de estar contemplando una obra divina.

Nature was the clear statement of a divine imprint that could be interpreted, just like the pages of the Scriptures, in an exegetical way. This interpretation gave rise to a remarkable notion: that nature had meaning. Christian authors, of course, and Christian communities in general, could infer that meaning and make sense of it in everyday acts and experiences. As David Wallace-Hadrill stated about the Early Church Father John Chrysostom:

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[10]The importance of personal reflection is persistent: “each one has the ability to distinguish what is advantageous” (*Pass. Sir.* 12 [p. 120, 13/14]) and: “my ability to think enabled me to surrender myself along with the Christians” (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [p. 121, 1]). See Devos (1946, p. 89).

[11] On this relation, see Biese (1888) and Wallace-Hadrill (1968). More recently, see Jones (2013); Molina Gómez (2006, pp. 876-880) and Robertson (2017).

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> Chrysostom's experience of vertigo as he stood on the sea shore led him to believe that nature has a significance and a meaning beyond what is immediately apparent, a significance which may be apprehended, as Chrysostom apprehended it, with frightening emotional intensity but vague definition, as a sudden awareness of the divine. The experience can then be subjected to reasoned analysis, a process which leads the fathers to the conclusion that nature is an ordered system from which must be inferred an ordering mind, namely God (Wallae-Hadrill, 1968, p. 101).

Early Christian communities experienced a natural world that was infused with divine traces. Saints and martyrs, moreover, by controlling and making use of their natural environment in their miracles, were the unambiguous sign of an ability to understand – and, above all, participate – in a divine work.[12] Nature-human relations, however, had not yet been addressed in this way in the so-called Oriental Martyr Acts – a category that contains Shirin's text and corresponds to the eastern Syrian and Greek hagiographical accounts.[13] Phillippe Gignoux (2000) has examined the literary traces, specially concerning New Testament parallels, between all kinds of miracles – not only nature-related ones – described in the Syrian Martyr Acts. In a systematic and useful analysis, Thomas Pratsch (2005, pp. 270-289) compiled a collection of literary formulae – *topoi* – concerning nature related miracles in the lives of the Greek Byzantine saints and showed how they served as a narrative statement of the power Christian saints had over the natural world. Examining nature related miracles in a monographic way, Dyonisos Stathakopoulos (2002) has compiled a typology of rain miracles present in the lives of Greek Byzantine saints. Juan José Pomer Monferrer (2018) has also gathered a collection of Byzantine hagiographical accounts concerning miracles related with fire.

However, this work aims to consider how this literary representation contributed to create culturally-, politically-, and religiously-driven ways of articulating, first, a way of being-in-the-world, second, an experience of the natural environment and, lastly, how this meaning helped to shape the definition of a religious identity in Northern Mesopotamia during the end of the Sasanian Empire. By considering this interaction, some issues arise:

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[12] Although it is out of the paper's scope, this understanding of nature also underlies Christian monastic experience. The conception that Christian *vitae* and developments of ascetism attributed to caves (Molina Gómez, 2006) and the desert (Goehring, 1999; 2012) were informed by an understanding of nature as the book where God's trace could be understanded and conceived. See the classical study of Dewas Chitty (Chitty, 1966) about monasticism in Egypt and Palestine.

[13] Edited in seven volumes by Paul Bedjan (Bedjan 1890-1897). Henceforth AMS. A Latin translation of some of these is provided by Assemani (Assemani, 1784) and a French translation by Frédéric Lagrange (Lagrange, 1852).

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Regarding this notion of nature in early Christian thought, how can we consider suffering in hagiographical accounts? This question will be addressed in the following section.

Methods: Or, a world of suffering

This section does not seek to question the various theoretical considerations of pain. Rather, it aims to consider how the presentation of suffering in martyr literature impacted the way early Christian communities approached the natural world and how it shaped their political, cultural, and religious way of acting. In considering pain in hagiographical texts, one fundamental issue arises: how did people think about pain and suffering in Antiquity? The topic will be addressed to introduce a framework for an ecology of suffering. This section considers nature-human relationships as an effect of early Christian understandings of pain. Therefore, it will be argued that experiences of pain were a locus of meaning for early Christianity and, as such, they were also informed by the notion previously described of a natural world infused with divine imprints. In this lens, ecological interactions are one of the many meanings and consequences that arose from the experience of pain as well as one of the many meanings that could be extracted from the notion of a divinely ordered nature. To address this idea, I will present one perspective that delves into the distinction between pain and suffering and describe how it cannot be attributed to late antique considerations of pain. I will then outline the value that Christian communities gave to collective pain and, finally, explain how late antique understandings of pain and its public meaning can set the foundation for an ecology of suffering.

In 1979, the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) defined pain as "an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage."[14] The key here is the conflation of the sensory and emotional qualities of this experience. This working definition enabled a consideration of pain as a biopsychosocial experience, where various processes of cognition, affect, and culture were combined to form one cluster of human experience. However, some efforts have been made to create a distinction between pain and suffering by describing pain as operating in physical terms while, on the other hand, suffering works on the mental sphere. Eric Casell (1991, pp. 30-47) claimed that the relationship between pain and suffering was phenomenologically distinct. The key to this distinction lay in the ability of suffering to be "a threat to [the person's] continued existence – not merely to their lives but their integrity as persons" (Casell, 1991, p. 36). Suffering jeopardises a person's sense of wholeness and even the most salient features of

[14] Cited in Duffee (2019, p. 1). Van Dijkhuizen & Enenkel (2009, p. 1) ascribe to this definition.

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personhood are threatened by the experience of it. Casell (2011, p. 9) later developed this notion and pointed out that suffering was primarily a process that affected and emerged from persons, not bodies: "bodies do not suffer, only persons do […] Bodies have nociception and bodies may have neuroendocrine responses to emotional stimuli, but bodies do not have a sense of the future and bodies do not know meanings, only persons do."[15] This focus on the ability of persons – or the "mind" – to suffer can be readily understood as the distinction between physical and mental pain – a difference that David Morris dismissed and described as "the myth of two pains" (1991, p. 9ff). By making this distinction, Casell's perspective conceives a process of meaning-making following the physical signalling of the painful stimulus. In other words:

> Psychologists and trauma specialists describe pain as a sensation read by the brain, signalled by neurons (called nociceptors) firing in the body, called pain signalling. An individual's perception of this sensation, however – what psychologists call pain perception – is more complex, often dovetailing with emotional experiences, usually identified as suffering (Graham & Kilroy-Ewbank, 2018, p. 2).

However convenient this distinction may be, it is based on a dualistic conception of the body and a contemporary biological and medical approach to the body's experiences. Late Antique conceptions were obviously not informed by these perspectives. A distinction between a strictly physical response and a further mental interpretation rests on Cartesian informed ways of understanding the body that, simply, "the ancients knew nothing" about (Martin, 1995, p. 6). It would be deceptive to think that most of late antique communities, regardless of their religious identity, saw and thought about the experience of pain as being composed by two different parts that affected two discrete bodily entities, at least in the same way that we do.[16] Rather, what we find in early Christian thought is the soul's conflation with the body in painful experiences (Gonzalez, 2013).[17] As Antigone Samellas has noted: "it is indicative that from Hippocratic times till Late Antiquity the words that refer to bodily pain, ἀλγος, πόνος, ὀδύνη, λύπη, δῆξις, also denote psychic pain" (2015, p. 262). Medieval devotional writings, too, "made no

[15] But there are objections: Charlotte Dufee (Dufee, 2019) has argued namely against it and considers there is not a particular difference between both. Her critique is focused in the alleged need of noxious stimuli to create pain that Casell's theory defends –chronic pain or the case of "phantom limbs" dismantle this perspective and prove that pain can be created, still, without noxious stimuli–. However, this does not concern our analysis.

[16] For an examination of Aristotelian and Platonic dualism, see Bos (2002).

[17] Also, Tertullian *An.* 7,4; Augustine *Civ. Dei* 21, 3 and the detailed examination in Gonzalez (2013) of Tertullian's and Perpetua's conception of the soul and its corporeality.

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distinction between the physical and the spiritual anguish of Christ. All his pains are listed together as one total experience of the soul" (Cohen, 2000, p. 46). Therefore, there is no distinction between emotional and physical pain in early Christianity: together with what we currently interpret as suffering, it all formed part of one cluster of painful experience.

A fundamental concept stems from this explanation: the value that these communities attributed to pain. In her famous study, *The Suffering Self* (1995), Judith Perkins stated that "the discourse of the martyrs *Acts*, representing pain as empowering and death as victory, helped to construct a new understanding of human existence, a new 'mental set' toward the world that would have far-reaching consequences" (Perkins, 1995, p. 142). In spite of Elaine Scarry's well-known, and largely contested,[18] notion of the inability of pain to be expressed (Scarry, 1985, p. 25ff.), martyr texts depict a world in which suffering operated as a locus of meaning and an experience that could easily be transmitted. This ability of being expressed created new ways for the audience to get involved in the world they inhabited. Pain in Early Christianity also had an individual and private component, but "it was the experience of pain in its public, visible and common aspects that was deemed especially grievous" (Samellas, 2015, p. 261). It is this collective component of the depiction of suffering that is fundamental for the understanding of an ecology of suffering. In a more general way, "by establishing certain acceptable ways for Christians to interpret what they perceive," states Diane Fruchtman, "early Christian authors provided tools essential for the definition and maintenance of a community, and, therefore, essential to Christianization – by which I mean the development of a unique and bounded Christian identity" (Fruchtman, 2014, p. 131). Our text, indeed, is concerned with how the literary depictions of the events could spark future happenings (*Pass. Sir.* 1 [p. 113, 9/19]):

> As certain Christians are committed to the constant search for good, continually seeking the ideal of virtue, and have wished to have the struggles that have taken place before our eyes written down and generally adapted to the needs of all [πρὸς ὠφέλειαν τοῖς πᾶσι], with the aim of forming a proper memory as well as a knowledge of what is to come.
>
> However, we will not relate the deeds of a man [ἀνδρός], or the exploits of one who has been promoted by the divine commandments, but the achievements of the female nature [γυναικείας φύσεως κατορθώματα] and the exploits of a youth raised in heathen impiety [Ἑλλενική δυσσεβείᾳ], which are not at all inferior to the battles of the preceding ones. For neither has the

[18] See, more recently, Smadar Bustan's (Bustan, 2016) critique and references.

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> weakness of nature [ἀσθένεια φύσεως] harmed it, nor has youth volatilised her thoughts or triggered them in vain.

Having presented these notions, how can we think of an ecology of suffering in hagiographical accounts? The representation of suffering martyrs and their interaction with the natural environment, informed by the Christian understanding of nature, created and shaped the ways that Christian communities approached and experienced their own natural environments. Just as our text stated that Shirin's acts, in a general way, provided tools for Christians to act in their cultural contexts, the literary depictions of suffering martyrs and the natural environment prompted in the audience a particular ideal of how they should understand and experience the natural world around them. An ecology of suffering, by its focus on the inextricability of pain and suffering, the emphasis on the collective component of martyrs' deaths, and the notion that early Christian relations with nature were permeated by a divine imprints, helps to understand how martyr texts could trigger a way of experiencing a specific cultural, political, natural, and religious milieu.

From text to context

I have stressed that an ecology of suffering is a culturally informed way of perceiving the world. As such, it responds to the political, cultural, chronological, and religious milieu in which it is embedded. This section will highlight certain features of the ways that Christian communities lived and developed their religious identity at the end of the Sasanian Empire.

Ardashir I proclaimed himself king of kings of the new empire, the last of pre-Islamic Iran, after the fall of the Arsacids in 224 (Dignas & Winter, 2012 [2007]. P. 18ff; Payne, 2015, pp. 6-10). The new power, *Eranshahr* "Empire of Iran," extended over the territories in the east of the Arabian Peninsula, from Egypt, the Levant, and the Caucasus to Bactria (Mackenzie, 2011). The Sasanians continuously held and lost these geographic areas until 622 (Dignas & Winter, 2012 [2007], p. 118), and the Empire's fall in 650 at the hands of the Arabs (Shahbazi, 2005). The vast territories and cultural variety were agglutinated under the figure of the king of kings and a single religion: Zoroastrianism. However, the religious landscape seems to be far from homogeneous. The beginnings of Christianity in Sassanid territory and its implications are still subject to discussion due to the lack of evidence. In a general frame, what seems initially to be evident is the alleged religious intolerance of power structures towards foreign religions: in the relief of Naqsh-e Rajab, about three kilometres north of Persepolis, carved in the 3rd century, the priest Kardir, under King Shapur I, proudly proclaims the subjugation of the non-Zoroastrian

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communities to the Empire (ed. Skjaervø 2012: lines 11/12).[19] Another nearby relief, in Naqsh-e Rustam, depicts King Ardashir I riding a horse and receiving a diadem directly from the hands of Ahura Mazda in human form. Matthew Canepa (Canepa 2013: 863), about this and other reliefs, states:

> In this and later reliefs the primary symbol of authority and power is a diadem […] Relief 1 at Naqsh-e Rustam was likely the last relief that Ardashir I carved and it presents a highly innovative and powerful composition that elegantly and forcefully proclaims the early, developing Sasanian ideology of divinely inspired kingship and irresistible victory.

However, these early depictions of a persecutor "state" that tried to oppress and destroy other religious identities, such as Judaism or Christianity, must be examined with some caveats. Later evidences, such as the *Synodicon Orientale* – an important compilation of the synods and canons held by the Church of the East between the year 410 and the end of the eight century[20] - show the complete integration into imperial politics that Christian communities experienced. Lee Patterson emphasizes the political dimensions of these persecutions and defends: "Whatever personal piety the kings may have felt, their use of religion was informed by the realities arising from their relations with the nobility and from their frontiers, especially the Roman," and continues: "Both Zoroastrianism and Christianity served the kings well, and when they did not the kings took measures that one should hesitate to regard as indications of their religiosity" (Patterson, 2017, p. 193). In general, we should hesitate to regard these alleged persecutions as direct signs of religious oppression. Rather, they implied the integration of Christians into imperial politics and how they implied a threat to the exertion of power in the Sasanian court. It is interesting to note how hagiography became a useful tool for Christian communities in this context (Payne, 2015, p. 55):

> Purges, assassinations, and other extrajudicial killings were basic instruments of rule for the Sasanians throughout their history […] Zoroastrians were if anything more likely to fall victim to violence than adherents of other religions, simply because the more power they accrued, the more likely they were to threaten royal authority. The difference between Christian and Zoroastrian victims was the former's access to literary specialists well versed in the arts of martyrology, who could transform executed nobles into valiant aristocratic martyrs […] Although

[19] See also Mackenzie (1989).

[20] Ed. Chabot (1902).

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> anti-Christian language doubtless colored these executions, they should not be extracted from the political context in which the hagiographers placed them.

Our text is not alien to its chronological and political context. Between 561 and 562 Sassanian and Byzantine ambassadors signed a peace treaty after a period of territorial disputes (Blockley, 1985, pp. 54-75; Bonner, 2019, pp. 207-212; Dignas & Winter, 2007 [2007], pp. 138-148; Panaino, 2012,p. 69).[21] The surviving document in Greek is given by Menander the Guardsman – a Greek and Christian author.[22] According to him, thirteen clauses were made, that were especially aimed at containing territorial disputes. After a detailed explanation of the terms, "apart [ἐκτὸς]," a brief appendix was written "concerning the situation of the Christians in Persia [τὰ περὶ τῶν ἐν Περσίδι Χριστιανῶν]" (fr. 6. 1, 398). The terms imposed on the Sasanians are surprisingly scarce and loose if we consider the situation described by hagiographical testimonies of that period – as in that of Shirin, who had to die only two years before this treaty was signed – freedom of worship, freedom in the construction of temples and, above all, abstention from proselytist action on both sides (fr. 6. 1399-1407). The fact that these demands form an appendix may give a hint of the condition of Christian communities in the context in which our text was written. The vagueness of the terms seems to respond to an almost propagandistic use by both parts, where a moral commitment on behalf of the leaders was expected rather than a behaviour regulated by legal dictates (Panaino, 2012, p. 84). Nor does the security of Christians in Sasanian territory seem to occupy a prominent place on the Roman diplomatic agenda, at least concerning Justinian's control of the Church of the East (Blockley, 1985, p. 259 n. 67). On the other hand, the fact that the variety of Christian doctrines is not specified, and that no reference is made to the Church of Persia, gives the impression that, for the Church of the West, "only one form of Christianity was acceptable, and that the other variants were simply heresies" (Panaino, 2012, p. 84). Shirin's text, probably, refers to the conditions that preceded this treaty and points out how the Zoroastrian authorities deported the martyr so as not to break the agreement (*Pass. Sir.* 17 [p. 124, 15/18] *my own emphasis*):[23]

> After Saint Shirin spent no short time in prison and with the departure of the Roman ambassador to her own land, the *Magi,*[24] fearing that a royal order would appear to free her [δεδιότες οἱ μάγοι μήπως βασιλικήν ἀνοίσῃ κέλευσιν ἀπολῦσαι

[21] I would like to thank Dr. Álvarez-Pedrosa for making this available to me.

[22] Ed. Blockley (1985).

[23] Devos (1994, p. 26 n. 22) also connects this scene to the Peace Treaty of the year 561.

[24] The name given to Zoroastrians.

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> αὐτήν], resolved to send her to the king's residence before the ambassador's arrival.

Also, regarding the time of the composition, the hagiographer states that "it is convenient for me to omit [how the martyr was baptised] due to the current situation" (*Pass. Sir.* 16 [p. 124, 8]: χρ̣ε̣σιμως παρέρχομαι διὰ τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν κατάστασιν).

Karka, the city where Shirin was born, was the capital of the region of Beit Garmai, a geographic area in Northern Mesopotamia surrounded by and in close contact with the cities of Arbela and Nisibis. This region, although not having the same economical and cultural weigh as the southern metropolis of Ctesiphon, or the province of Khuzestan, had religious significance in the shaping of Christian communities in Sasanian territory (Wood, 2013, p. 27). All over the region, martyr shrines[25] and martyr stories were created to help the definition of a religious identity. Most importantly: "In places such as Nisibis, Arbela, and Karka de Beth Slouq [*sic*], the ruins of antiquity may have encouraged imagined connections with the extinct empires of the past" (Wood, 2013, p. 27). Texts as *The History of Karka*[26] – written around the year 600 (Payne, 2012, p. 205), the same period as Shirin's story was composed – connected the foundation of the city to Assyrian, Seleucid and Achaemenid kings, and helped to position Karka as the predominant centre of political, cultural, and religious identification for Christian communities in Northern Mesopotamia. In the city of Arbela, *The History of Mar Qardagh,*[27] another hagiographical account, traced the origin of its saint to Assyrian kings and nobility. This kind of historical imagination helped to define and legitimise a Christian presence in these territories and support Christian aristocratic positions of power. As Richard Payne has stated:

> These hagiographers enlisted physical vestiges of the past they evoked to underpin their historical claims […] The *History of Karka* and the *History of Mar Qardagh* […] harnessed the power of a ruinous landscape –the tell, wall and civic monuments of Karka and a fortress on the outskirts of Arbela – spatially to support their narrative claims on behalf of the antique grandeur of their cities and their noble inhabitants, an application of the ancient past to the representation of Christian community with significant implications for discussions of social identity in the Late Sasanian Empire (Payne, 2012, pp. 205-206).

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[25] For a recent archaeological survey of a church near Karka, see Amen Ali (2008).

[26] AMS II, ed. Bedjan (1891, pp. 507-535). Tr. Hoffmann (1880, pp. 43-60). A classical study of this text is offered by Jean Maurice Fiey (Fiey 1964).

[27] Ed. Abbeloos (1890). Tr. Walker (2006).

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Finally, Shirin's aristocratic descent is well attested in our text (*Pass. Sir.* 2 [p. 113, 24/29]), and Karka also appeared in Christian imagination as "subject to the last (alleged) mass persecution commemorated in hagiography, in the reign of Yazdegard II" (Wood, 2013, p. 27), that took part between the years 438-458. As such, a vast number of Christian worshippers gathered annually at the outskirts of Karka to commemorate the executions (*Pass. Sir.* 16 [123, 29/36; 124, 1/4]). This process similarly took place in Arbela, where Christian communities congregated outside the city, around of the tell of Melqi, where the saint Mar Qardagh was executed (see Walker, 2006-2007). Christian communities appropriated physical remnants of the past and geographical regions to later imbue them with Christian significance. This historical process can also be relevant to our understanding of an ecology of suffering, as it reveals a specific appreciation of natural environments and shows how Christian perspectives on nature informed this act by attributing a collective meaning to physical places as the vestiges of suffering.[28]

Of pits, light, and divine signs: towards an ecology of suffering

Nature-human relations in early Christianity, as has been previously argued, were prompted by an understanding of nature being a by-product of divine intervention in the world. Martyrs and saints were, from this perspective, the ones who could interact with and understand the divine traces of their environment. After laying the framework for thinking of an ecology of suffering when approaching martyr texts, this last section will serve as a case study for applying it.

Before expanding on the notion of how Shirin's account can reflect an ecology of suffering, it is important to understand how our text conceives of the natural environment. In the scene before her execution, the main priest [τὸν ἀρχίμαγον], asked the martyr about the reasons she abandoned the Zoroastrian religion (*Pass. Sir.* 20 [p. 126, 8/11]). Shirin's answer is quite self-explanatory (*Pass. Sir.* 20 [p. 126, 11/23]):

> But she answered him confidently [ἑτοιμώς], saying, "Where is the crown of the former kings and the glory of the rulers? All these disappear with the one who has achieved them, and like the garden that blooms for a short time, they disappear and suffer an unworthy death, because they have not recognised the true

[28] Due to the extension of this work, I cannot refer at length to how this process was conducted in other geographical regions of the Sasanian Empire. Equally interesting is how the death of Pethion and Anahid (AMS 2, ed. Bedjan [1891, pp. 559-631]) contributed to create a significant shrine for the cult of the martyrs in Mount Behistun, a mountain with a long stablished sacred and political meaning for Zoroastrians. For an extensive examination, see Richard Payne's analysis (Payne 2015, pp. 59-92). For an English translation of Anahid's death, see Harvey & Brock (1987, pp. 82-99).

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> demiurge [τὸν ἀληθινόν δημιουργὸν ἀγνοήσαντες], nor have they obeyed the master of life and death [τὸν τῆς ζωῆς καὶ θανάτου δεσπότην]. Instead, they have worshipped created things [κτίσματα],[29] and have estimated the fire, the water, the moon, and the sun together with the other stars. While Christians, though unfortunate in the present world [ἐν τῳ παρόντι κοσμῳ], will enjoy eternal life in the future, and by depriving them of earthly glory, you will offer them heavenly life.

The opposition is made clear by Shirin: Zoroastrians worship [σεβασθέντες] "created things," and estimate [τιμήσαντες] natural elements such as "the fire, the water, the moon, and the sun together with other stars." Contrary to this, appears the "true demiurge," the Christian God, "master of life and death." The distinction is clear: Zoroastrians have established a relation of veneration with their experiential environment.[30] This relation is hierarchical and, therefore, in Shirin's conception, less esteemed. Being an almost material conception, Zoroastrians lack the future reward that Christians would get. On the other hand, Shirin presents an abstract view of Christianity, where its relation to the natural environment is completely horizontal.

This notion is fundamental for understanding this section. Here, the scenes that will be examined present a notion of nature where its relation with the martyr is completely horizontal and helpful. After Shirin's public apostasy, the *rad* – a political office that held judicial power at a provincial level (Brock & Harvey, 1987, p. 96; Devos, 1946, p. 97)[31] – outraged, sends some of his people over to the martyr asking the reasons for her conversion (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [p. 121, 23/25]). They also warned her that "if she [continued] pursuing this belief [Christianity], she will expose herself to numerous tortures, while if she [embraced] again the previous conditions of the *Magi*, she will be rewarded with royal honours" (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [p. 121, 26/29]). After Shirin's eloquent and bold refusal to re-adopt Zoroastrianism (*Pass. Sir.* 14, [p. 121, 31/34; p. 122, 1/9]), she was imprisoned, chained at her feet and hands, and deprived of food and drink for three days and three nights (*Pass. Sir* 14 [p. 122, 9/14]). Shirin is then thrown to a pit (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [p. 122, 17/19]: λάκκος) with her hands and feet tied, and even more weigh on her chains. After

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[29] *Cfr.* 3Mac 15, 11; Mc 10, 6.

[30] On the understanding of their natural world, specially their understanding of animals, see Macuch (2003) and Moazami (2005).

[31] The text also explains this figure: "Since the *rad* –that was the name of an important authority among the Persians– had returned from his travels…" (*Pass. Sir.* 13, [p. 121, 18/20]). Nevertheless, in the Greek text appears *dar* [δάρ], a graphic mistake, according to Devos (1946: 97; 121 n. 2), because of the similarity of the letter r [ܕ] and the letter d [ܕ] in the Syriac script. It is also necessary to question the reason of this explanation, since such an important political position could not go unnoticed by the inhabitants within the borders of the Empire. Perhaps, the author was writing to address an audience outside the Sassanian sphere?

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that, the guards decide to dig another pit, even narrower this time, and "filled with humidity and pestilent fumes" (*Pass. Sir.* 15 [p. 122, 29/30]). The scene, quoted at length, is this (*Pass. Sir.* 15 [p. 122, 31/35; p. 123, 1/14]):

> Thrown there and left to die by the fumes emanating from it, she had a divine vision, as the Babylonian children in the furnace. Immediately the heat of the pit turned into freshness,[32] and a divine light shone throughout the hole, and the chains on her hands and feet suddenly collapsed.

So dangerous was the pit that the Christians were worried that she would not be able to recover. So the bishop of the region, together with his clergy and all the people, offered prayers and supplications to God for her reassurance, so that she would carry out the struggle without complaints. At dawn, when some of those belonging to the church approached the grave and perceived light instead of darkness, instead of the pestilential fumes, a growing breeze of roses, and again the complete liberation from the chains, they let the congregation know that, instead of the previous unrest, [there was] tranquillity, and everyone was filled with joy and happiness instead of pain [ἀντὶ λύπης].

All the dangerous elements are transformed into positive, non-harmful aspects related to nature: the heat is replaced by freshness, the deadly fumes become a pleasant breeze of roses, and the darkness of the pit is now a divine light. Another extraordinary event occurs after Shirin is taken out of the cave (*Pass. Sir.* 16 [p. 123, 20/24]): "on that very day, a heavy rain fell and mitigated the stifling sun, and all those whose souls had not been blinded recognized the way in which God had honoured his servant."[33]

Of course, these transformations were informed by a specific Christian understanding of nature, as the association of God with light and Godlessness with darkness is ubiquitous in Christian thinking.[34] At the beginning of the story, after describing her birth in a Zoroastrian family, the hagiographer also states (*Pass. Sir.* 2 [p. 114, 9/13]):

> We have exposed this about her, not in an effort to lengthen the story, but because we want to show in what darkness and in what way she was imprisoned and

[32] A biblical reference to Dn (3, 49-50).

[33] On rain miracles, see Stathakopoulos (2002), and Pratsch (2005: 275-276).

[34] See, for example, in the Hebrew Bible Ex 13, 21-22 as a column of light guides the people of Israel through the desert. In the New Testament, light is also attributed to Christ through God: "For God, who said: 'let light shine out of darkness' made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4, 6) or the words of Jesus: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (Jn 8, 12). Ed. Alan, Karavidopoulos, Martini & Metzger (2012)

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> captured and how she approached the light of truth by her own and escaped the devil's wiles.

My purpose, however, is not to explain how these symbols appear in other accounts. Rather, I am addressing how the literary representation of these natural elements was intentionally aimed at embracing an experiential understanding of natural elements for the audiences that first heard these stories. These scenes were informed by cultural parameters, but they impressed upon them too: hagiographers created a culturally acquainted way to talk about and perceive their surroundings. By doing this, they demarcated a Christian identity from others. Literary representations of light and darkness were not mere literary symbols or *topoi*, they were ways of prompting ideals and provocations that could later be used by the audiences to express themselves and act in their own cultural, political, natural and religious context.

This notion is obvious and does not provide much deeper understanding of early Christian nature-human relations. However, it is important to address a richer level of understanding by noting that these events took place because God was willing to help the martyr. In Shirin's story, the supernatural phenomena do not occur by the martyr's willing. Rather, she is always a passive recipient for God's tests. This idea is important to note because these supernatural phenomena are described as *signs* [σημεῖα] (*Pass. Sir.* 16 [p. 123, 24]). As Thomas Pratsch has noted, although in a general way in the New Testament Jesus' actions are mostly perceived as *miracles* [δυνάμεις] (ex. Mt 13, 58), these supernatural phenomena are distinguished from divine signs [σημεῖα] in the way that they do not depend upon the agency of the saint or martyr, rather, they are completely dependent on God's action upon the human world:[35]

> Im engeren Sinne sind Zeichen der Heiligkeit jedoch wunderbare Erscheinungen bzw. übernatürliche Phänomene, die aber - im Unterschied etwa zu den Wundern - nicht auf eine Aktivität, einen Wunsch oder Willen des Heiligen zurückgehen, sondern direkt von Gott bewirkt werden, der selbst diese Zeichen setzt und damit die Heiligkeit des betreffenden Menschen anzeigt (Pratsch, 2005, p. 213).

This notion of divine agency is fundamental for understanding Shirin's account. The text reminds us that "God showed that it was not out of weakness that He allowed those who feared Him to be tested, but that He wanted the love for Him to be verified" (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [p. 122, 20/22]). The entire account is filled with references to God's orchestrated plan to verify Shirin's faith. In a previous scene, the Devil [ὁ διάβολος] appears to Shirin and

[35] See also Pratsch (2005: 216 n. 12) for an account of examples concerning divine signs of light.

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blames her for rejecting the family tradition and asking the Christian priest of the city to baptise her (*Pass. Sir.* 6 [p. 116, 20/26]). Shirin's spirit is strong, and "recognizing the diabolic energy [διαβολικὴν ἐνεργείαν]" (*Pass. Sir.* 6 [p. 116, 26/27]), she endures the other's rhetorical trickery. The Devil even declares to be God himself (*Pass. Sir.* 6 [p. 116, 30/31]) in an attempt to mislead the martyr. This striking scene, as the hagiographer later admits, was fully devised to assess Shirin's steadiness (*Pass. Sir.* 6 [p. 117, 3/7]):

> God permitted this to happen, wanting to test her spirit and attempting to present her with the evil and knavery of the other, and to make her immune to his wiles, so that she would never again fall prey to his deceitful words.

Hence, it is God's will to transform the harmful situations and help the martyr. As the experiential world existed as a book to be read and comprehended by the faithful, it is inferred, then, that by these tests, the ones more closely related to God – martyrs and saints – could obtain a better knowledge of and relation to the world surrounding them. These literary depictions of the aid provided by God served to encourage a particular way of being-in-the world and understanding nature-human relations for Christian communities.

One last point: the recurrent encounters with the Devil (*Pass. Sir.* 6 [p. 116]; 16 [p. 124, 1/4]; 25 [p. 129]) as means of putting to a test the conviction and faith of the martyr are the evidence of Shirin's steadiness and strength obtained through faith. Shirin is also thrown into a pestilent, dark, and mortal cave, but she endures the suffering for three days and three nights. The point I am trying to make here is that the emphasis on Shirin's discovery of light and endurance might also be a reference to an ascetic ideal that the hagiographer tried to invoke. The references to caves or close natural cavities have predominance in ascetic Christian writings (Benz, 1954). As Origen wrote (*Con. Cel.* 51), it was believed that Jesus was conceived in a cave. The cave symbolized something unknown and dangerous, and it also served as a trial for saints to demonstrate their spiritual strength (Athanasius *Vita Ant.* 61. 73, 89; Rufinus *Hist. Mon.* 17). Sometimes, as in Shirin's account, these places were malign and unknown, evil and dangerous – see, for example, Nicephorus's *Vita* (BHG 1335. 148, 4/9) – but they also served as the prelude and preparatory stage for the return of light and safety (BHG 1335. 148, 14/23). Shirin's efforts are also described in her insistence on ascetic ideals. By (*Pass. Sir.* 3 [p. 114, 21/25]):

> [Abandoning] the group of important women, she distanced herself from the company of young and well-groomed men [πλουτοκομῶντας]. Instead, she

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> appreciated the company of those who, albeit being poor in life [πρὸς τὰς εὐτελεῖς μὲν τῷ βιῷ], cared for the customs, and she endeavoured to make them her family and friends.

The hagiographer insists in her sexual abstinence (*Pass. Sir.* [p. 115, 2/3]) and tells how Shirin decided:

> Not to give herself to a man or to worry about earthly cares [ταῖς βιωτικαῖς […] μερίμναις], to the extent of avoiding people's gaze and hiding the beauty of her body, weakening herself in fasting and other torments, and sometimes throwing dust in her eyes.

This insistence on Shirin's attitudes, together with the ideas previously described, could be a sign of the author's intention to represent ascetic ideals and provocations for the audience.

Conclusion

How can these events be related to the notion of an ecology of suffering? To sum up, the scenes described in Shirin's story were driven by a culturally informed way of understanding and experiencing nature: in their efforts to differentiate Christianity from other religious identities, Christian communities created an understanding of nature in which every natural element was infused with an imprint of the divine. Saints and martyrs, by their closeness to God, could understand and, above all obtain benefit and help from these elements.

By examining Shirin's account, we can observe how supernatural events were all understood as signs of God's willing to help His martyr at times of suffering and distress. An ecology of suffering, therefore, tries to conceive a way of examining these stories by understanding the notion of suffering in Late Antiquity and its relation to nature. Pain was a locus of meaning: martyr texts presented literary bodies that informed and provoked the ways Christians identified themselves and moved in certain chronological, political, cultural, and religious contexts. As a meaning-making device, pain could be attached to other culturally informed notions, such as nature. By associating suffering to nature, martyr texts were presenting specific ideals and provocations to their audience that they could later use in their self-understanding as communities and in their experience of the natural environment. Finally, some more questions arise, as these texts were specific to their contexts, how is this notion going to be presented in other accounts? Moreover, is

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the understanding of nature going to change alongside changes in the understanding of pain, or vice versa?

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