

How and why did the
martyr's body
become an emblem
of triumph for early
christian...



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The act of martyrdom represented a complete rejection of the physical body and absolute faith in Jesus Christ and survival after death. After the horrendous physical pain the body endured, leaving it torn apart, indistinguishable and even digested by wild animals the body left a representation of the possibility of resurrection, symbolising the dualistic belief in the separation of body and spirit. In particular the seemingly suicidal gesture of martyrdom pointed to the existence of a greater reality beyond the physical realm of the body and the bravery and courage of the martyr in giving up ones life strengthened the absolute faith that escape from the shackle of the body was something desirable. The rejection of components of the physical world including ones family and children as well as the confidence in facing the humiliation, terror and agony of death in the public arena instilled a sense of confidence in followers in belief in a perfect physical existence which was reward for faith in God after death. A great deal of early Christian belief involved aspects of asceticism for which the act of martyrdom was the ultimate statement, giving a sense of victory over the temptations which anchored the body in the physical world away from the truth of God. The body of the martyr was an emblem of triumph for early Christian communities as the martyr showed a sense of control, dignity and nobility arguably achieving a sense of victory over the persecuting Roman authority. Although the martyr was the victim of the persecuting force of the Rome the martyr in reality had complete determination over their own destiny this in many ways castrated the totalitarian use of violent torture and execution by Rome as it was willingly accepted by the martyr, rendering it's desired repression of the victim's self assertion useless. This essay will

attempt to show that the martyr's body became a particular emblem of <https://assignbuster.com/how-and-why-did-the-martyrs-body-become-an-emblem-of-triumph-for-early-christian-communities/>

triumph due to the display of endurance, faith and the very act of martyrdom which fought back at the repressive Roman regime threatening its very social order. This essay aims to explore the ways in which the body of the martyr came to symbolise a victory over the temptation of the physical world which had to be rejected to become closer to God, a victory over the Roman authority which sought to eliminate the Christians and a victory over death itself. The martyrdom of Vibia Perpetua in the arena of Carthage in the year 203 brings particular attention to the idea of the martyr's victory over the Roman authority and the social norms of the time. Perpetua was an African noble woman killed in the arena for refusing to reject the 'Christian superstition'. Her personal account gives a remarkable perspective on the martyr's experience especially as it is believed to have been personally written and the format leads us from her incarceration up until the day of her death. On the day of her death Brent D. Shaw draws attention to Perpetua's 'calm face' and 'intense gaze¹' with which she met the jeering crowds who had come to watch her brutal execution, it was through the action of relieved and defiant body language such as this, achieved through an intense faith in God that the martyr was able to defy 'the instrument of public terror'² of the arena. In general the gestures of martyrs in the arena were used to insult the authority of Rome by showing a total lack of fear and complete composure in the face of cruelty, through this the martyr was able to assent their control over their own death, so that it appeared not that Rome was putting them to death but that their death was on their own terms. It was not only the defiance shown to the crowds which gave the martyrs a sense of power within the arena but the act of dying itself. Maureen Tilley comments that martyrs 'in spite of danger, fire and sword rarely scream in agony' in <https://assignbuster.com/how-and-why-did-the-martyrs-body-become-an-emblem-of-triumph-for-early-christian-communities/>

Perpetua's own account it is revealed that she 'guided to her own throat the uncertain hand of the young gladiator³' the martyr Blandina was described as dying 'rapt in communion with Christ'⁴, in displaying the ascetic discipline necessary to endure the horrific and degrading executions implemented in the arena the martyrs displayed strength of will which impressed a variety of onlookers. Through their calmness in the face of mortification of their body the martyr was able to give greater authority to their message of existence without the body, this led to a power shift in the Roman authority's power to inflict pain being overridden by the martyr's power to endure it. Peter Brown argues that rather than being a day in which the Rome could celebrate the destruction of an enemy the day of martyrdom for Perpetua became 'her day of triumph in the Lord'⁵ it was precisely in the manner in which the martyr's conducted their executions which gave them control over the event and allowed their message to roar out in defiance of the persecutors. Through their endurance the martyr was able to gain a sense of victory that in despite their destruction they had held onto the meaning of their death making about the event more about the glory of God than the power of Rome.