

Within a generation of Constantine's public affirmation of Christianity and the advent of the imperially-sponsored Church, Christians were faced with a new challenge: how to respond to an emperor who was unwilling to embrace orthodoxy (itself a disputed term). Previously, when all emperors were undeniably pagans, and especially when they were persecutors, Christian criticism, as exemplified by Lactantius' *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, could be framed as a straightforward attack on an easily-identifiable enemy. This paper will explore the direction that Christian criticism took when the emperor Constantius II was denounced by three bishops - Athanasius of Alexandria, Lucifer of Cagliari, and Hilary of Poitiers - all opposed to his alleged Arian sympathies. It will also examine the antecedents - both Christian and classical - for invective of this kind. These polemics against Constantius were deployed both to undermine the authority of the emperor and his episcopal entourage, and to bolster the authority of the authors, who found themselves perilously out of kilter with imperial orthodoxy.

This paper will place these largely neglected works within the contexts of ancient rhetorical training and modern treatments of late-antique panegyric and ceremonial. It will examine how the traditional methods for judging and legitimising an emperor were reshaped for a Christian audience. The stock classical *exempla* of the rhetorical handbooks were here replaced with the notable and the notorious from the pages of 'Christian history'. Constantius and his 'Arian' bishops were presented as persecutors and heretics, disqualified from taking decisions about orthodox Christian theology. Piety was also assigned a new place as the primary virtue required for imperial rule. By contrast, Lucifer, Athanasius, and Hilary all employed standard descriptions of martyrdom to portray their own circumstances as analogous to the imperial persecutions of the pre-Constantinian empire. In this replayed narrative of the 'Church of the Martyrs', Constantius and the Arians fulfilled the role of state persecutors, while Lucifer and his allies became fearless confessors.

Importantly too, all three authors wrote as exiles: Athanasius hiding out in the Egyptian hinterland, Hilary peripatetic in the East, Lucifer residing in Palestine and the Thebaid. Whatever their particular circumstances, what mattered was their ability in their texts to turn an exile enforced by a Christian emperor into a badge of their own orthodox authority. Although they had been cast out of communion with the most influential bishops of their time, they presented themselves as the true representatives of the apostolic Church, suffering at the hands of a tyrannical emperor with a genealogy of Biblical villainy. In these artfully constructed narratives of isolation and persecution, these three embattled Nicene bishops claimed a superior authority not in spite of - but because of - their exile.