

BIOARCHAEOLOGY OF SACRED BODIES: MARTYRS' IDENTITY IN THE ROMAN PROVINCE OF SCYTHIA

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Abstract: This study applies a bioarchaeological framework to interrogate the material, ritual, and institutional dimensions of early Christian martyrdom in the Roman province of Scythia, integrating osteological evidence, archaeological context, and historical sources to examine the construction of martyrial identity. The findings substantiate instances of *perimortem* violence, with the Halmyris case displaying evidence of decapitation and blunt-force trauma, while the Tropaeum Traiani assemblage reveals deliberate limb amputation and execution through beheading. However, the Niculițel assemblage, despite its strong epigraphic identification as martyrial, lacks osteological markers of violent death, placing under scrutiny the assumption that corporeal suffering was a prerequisite for martyrial designation. This discrepancy foregrounds the semiotic and institutional mechanisms through which martyrdom was inscribed onto bodies, reinforcing the role of posthumous interventions — translation, relic fragmentation, and ritual manipulation—in the social production of sanctity. The analysis also engages with the Weiss-Krejci model of mortuary deposition to trace the *postmortem* trajectory of martyr remains, while osteobiographical methodologies reconstruct individual profiles through skeletal morphology, trauma analysis, and burial context. By embedding bioarchaeological data within a theoretical discourse on material agency and posthumous subjectivation, this study reframes martyrdom not as an intrinsic, biologically verifiable condition, but as a dynamic and institutionally mediated construct. The analysis demonstrates that martyrial identity was not simply inscribed at the moment of execution, but was iteratively produced through a recursive process involving textual codification (hagiographic texts and epigraphic sources), ritual manipulation, and institutional validation. Furthermore, anthropological analysis plays a crucial role in this process by providing empirical evidence that can either support or challenge martyrial narratives—not only by shedding light on the biological profiles of individuals, but also by identifying signs of *perimortem* violence (or their absence) and traces of posthumous manipulation of remains.

Rezumat: Acest studiu are la bază abordarea bioarheologică, cu scopul de a investiga dimensiunile materială, ritualică și instituțională ale martiriului creștin timpuriu în provincia romană Scythia, îmbinând analiza osteologică, contextul arheologic și sursele istorice, în încercarea de a contura un discurs cu privire la construcția identității martirilor. Descoperirile confirmă cazurile de violență perimortem, cazul de la Halmyris prezentând dovezi de decapitare și alte traumatisme, în timp ce analiza materialelor de la Tropaeum Traiani indică atât amputarea

deliberată a membrilor, cât și execuția prin decapitare. Prin contrast, descoperirea de la Niculițel, în ciuda dovezilor epigrafice care atestă martiri ai lui Christos și care îi nominalizează, nu oferă dovezi osteologice care să susțină ipoteza unor morți violente. Această discrepanță relevă modul în care martiriul nu este în mod necesar rezultat al unei morți violente, ci o identitate conferită postmortem prin mecanisme semiotice și instituționale care transformă corpurile defuncte în relicve demne de venerație. Este utilizat modelul propus de Weiss-Krejci pentru a urmări traiectoria postmortem a rămășițelor martirilor, în timp ce metoda osteobiografiei permite conturarea profilurilor individuale pe baza analizei morfologiei scheletice, a traumelor și a contextului funerar. Prin integrarea datelor bioarheologice într-un cadru teoretic care privește construcția postumă a identității, precum și agentivitatea (*agency*) relicvelor, studiul argumentează că formarea identității martiriale reprezintă un proces dinamic care presupune codificare textuală (texte hagiografice și surse epigrafice), manipulare ritualică și validare instituțională. Totodată, analiza antropologică joacă un rol important în acest proces, oferind dovezi empirice care să susțină sau să nuanțeze narațiunea martiriului, atât despre profilul biologic al indivizilor, cât și despre existența unor urme de violență perimortem (sau lipsa acestora) sau despre manipularea postumă a osemintelor.

Keywords: Late Antiquity, martyrdom, osteobiography, perimortem trauma, relic agency, posthumous identity

Cuvinte cheie: Antichitate târzie, martiriu, osteobiografie, violență perimortem, agentivitatea relicvelor, identitate postumă

INTRODUCTION

The veneration of martyrs played a pivotal role in shaping Christian piety and identity in Late Antiquity, offering believers tangible exemplars of faithfulness and endurance amid persecution. Their narratives, often vividly preserved in hagiographical literature, reflect a complex interplay between divine will and human agency, underscoring the spiritual significance of their sacrifices. A central motif in martyrdom accounts is the act of public confession in the face of persecution—a testimony that not only reinforces their connection to Christ but also affirms their perceived spiritual worthiness. This defiance of worldly power subverts conventional notions of honor, replacing them with a new paradigm of spiritual nobility demonstrated through unwavering resilience. Within this framework, martyrdom is often interpreted through the lens of divine providence, elevating suffering as a means of attaining higher spiritual merit and contributing to the eschatological struggle against evil.

One of the earliest recorded Christian martyrs was Polycarp of Smyrna, executed in Asia Minor around AD 150¹. Estimates suggest that during the first three centuries, the number of Christians executed ranged from 10,000 to as many as 20,000. The period from 303 to 305 alone saw approximately 2,500 to 3,000 executions across the

¹ All dates are AD.

Roman Empire². The 4th century witnessed intensified persecution under various emperors, including Diocletian (303-304), whose policies were later extended by Galerius until 311. Further persecution occurred under Licinius in the Eastern provinces (319/320-323/324) and under Julian the Apostate (361-363), resulting in the martyrdom of numerous Christians, including significant figures from the Roman province of Scythia in the Lower Danube region³.

Christians were frequently accused of refusing to worship the traditional gods, abstaining from state-sanctioned festivals and public rituals, and demonstrating disloyalty to the Roman state and its emperor. Consequently, they were blamed for inciting civil unrest and disrupting societal order. In response to these allegations, many were arrested, imprisoned, and subjected to physical punishments, including beatings and whippings, as well as deprivation of basic necessities such as food and water. Ultimately, they faced execution through various brutal methods, including beheading by sword, burning at the stake, or being thrown into rivers or the sea⁴.

There are rare cases when both archaeological and anthropological data exist, coupled with inscriptions or historical sources (12 cases identified by us, three of which are from Romania, within the territory of the former Roman province of Scythia). The martyrdom dossier of Scythia contains numerous instances of Christians being executed in Tomi, Axiopolis, Halmyris, Noviodunum, and possibly Dinogetia. The names of these martyrs are documented in various historical sources, including the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*, the *Syriac Martyrology of 411*, and the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*, as well as in epigraphic inscriptions⁵.

The period spanning the 4th to 6th centuries witnessed significant changes in burial customs in the province of Scythia, due to shifting societal, ideological, and religious dynamics. One aspect of this evolution was the increased presence and veneration of martyrs' remains within city boundaries. Towards the end of the 6th century, intramural burial became more frequent, partly due to the recurrent attacks

² Mateo Donet 2016, 9-12.

³ For key references see Атанасов 2012; Madgearu 2014; Madgearu 2021; Popescu 1989a; Popescu 1989b; Zeiller 1918, 53-128.

⁴ Mateo Donet 2016.

⁵ For further references and bibliography, consult the *Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity* database, developed by the University of Oxford in collaboration with the University of Warsaw. It provides accessible and searchable evidence for the early Christian cult of saints (up to AD 700), including key texts in their original languages with English translations and commentary. Available at <http://cultofsaints.history.ox.ac.uk/>. (accessed 26.02.2025).

by Avars and Slavs, coupled with diminishing adherence to earlier prohibitions against burying within city confines⁶.

Of particular significance were the crypts dedicated to martyrs, constructed beneath churches to house the relics of saints who had been executed during imperial persecutions. The relocation of relics inside city boundaries, both for their protection and to safeguard urban centers, aligns with this rationale; in parallel, burial practices were also reshaped by the same concerns. The remains of martyrs came to breach the physical and conceptual barriers of city walls and challenge prevailing ideas about death and its place within inhabited spaces⁷. The work of Achim on martyrial tombs and tombs around urban churches provides valuable insights into these changes in the province of Scythia, enhancing our understanding of the relationship between death (and the dead) and the urban fabric, as well as how religious beliefs shaped the city's cultural landscape and topography⁸.

The discovery of several basilicas with empty crypts on the territory of the province, four at Tomi and Zaldapa, two at Histria and Tropaeum Traiani, and one at Capidava, underscores the significance and exceptional nature of finding preserved remains buried beneath such edifices⁹. The likelihood that the remains originally placed in the crypts were removed and relocated during the turbulent period of barbarian attacks at the turn of the 7th century suggests a deliberate effort to protect these sacred items from potential destruction or desecration. However, the subsequent history of the relics could not but remain speculative, as they may have been desecrated and stolen, moved for protective measures, or relocated for ceremonial or strategic/diplomatic purposes involved in the negotiation and networks of political and religious hierarchies¹⁰. One such instance is the case of the urn-sarcophagus containing relics of Dassius from Durostorum, now housed in the Italian city of Ancona. Following his execution on November 20, 303, Dassius' body was likely placed in a coffin and buried by Christians in Durostorum. The remains were eventually relocated to a church, probably in Constantinople, as many Christians left the city when faced with the Avar invasions at the end of the 6th century. Centuries later, given the close relationship between Ancona and Rome (Ancona being situated within territory directly administered by the Pope), it is plausible that as a

⁶ Crețu, Soficaru 2024.

⁷ Dagron 1977, 11-19; Cantino Wataghin 1992a; Cantino Wataghin 1992b; Cantino Wataghin 1999.

⁸ Achim 2015; Achim 2016a; Achim 2016b; Ruscu 2021.

⁹ Barnea 1981; Holubeanu 2024, 8.

¹⁰ Lafferty 2014; for similar phenomena, although observed in different chronological and geographical contexts, see Bozoky 2020; Craig 2021; Viermann 2024.

consequence of the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204), relics of Saint Dassius were among those taken from plundered Constantinople and transported to the Italian city¹¹.

While these empty crypts highlight how uncommon it is to find intact relics, there have been notable exceptions where remains were indeed discovered within crypts. These instances are significant because they highlight the efforts made to protect and preserve these sacred remains. The churches and crypts themselves, such as those from Halmyris, Niculițel, and Tropaeum Traiani, investigated through archaeological methods, provide context for the spatial and ritualistic dimensions of martyr worship. In addition, bioarchaeological analysis of the remains offers insights into their biological identity, physical conditions, health, and causes of death, enriching our understanding of their lives and their veneration while (re)constructing the narratives of the martyrs, the shaping and reshaping of their posthumous identities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS.

BIOARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO MARTYRIAL REMAINS

Within the province of Scythia, three rather exceptional cases of martyrs' relics have been discovered *in situ*, preserved in crypts beneath churches. These cases are the main focus of our study. Alongside the structures surrounding them, each set of remains has undergone excavation by archaeologists and detailed examination by anthropologists.

In the case of Halmyris, a hagiographical text titled *De SS. Epicteto presb. et Astione monacho, martyribus almiridensibus in Scythia*, included in the *Acta Sanctorum*, provides the name of the martyrs – Epictetus and Astion, together with a detailed account of their life, deeds, and passion¹². In 2000-2001, the episcopal basilica within the settlement was investigated, leading to the discovery of two bodies interred in the underground crypt. Moreover, two *martyrs of Christ* (MAP[TY]C [XPICTOY]) are recorded in the inscription on the eastern wall of the mortuary chamber, even though only the name of Astion is preserved¹³.

Several martyrs who perished in Noviodunum are briefly mentioned in the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* (in an entry titled *De SS. martyribus noviodunensibus*), Zotikos, Attalos, Kamasis, and Philippos among them. The last name also appears in the *Syriac Martyrology*¹⁴. In 1971, a sanctuary featuring a crypt with relics was

¹¹ Pillinger 1988; Atanassov, Dimitrov 2014.

¹² *AS Julii II*, 538-551.

¹³ Zahariade 2001-2003; Zahariade 2003; Zahariade 2009b.

¹⁴ Nau 1912, 17.

discovered in the present-day village of Niculițel, situated in the administrative territory of Noviodunum. Inside the crypt lay a common wooden coffin containing the intact remains of four individuals. On the upper parts of the walls, to the right and left of the coffin, two inscriptions written in Greek letters and painted in red; the inscription on the left reads *the martyrs of Christ*, while the one on the right names them: Zotikos, Attalos, Kamasis, and Philippos. The lower part of the crypt contained small bone fragments, some showing signs of burning, possibly from two other unknown martyrs. Their martyrdom is the sole detail acknowledged by another inscription reading: *Here and there lies the martyrs' blood*¹⁵.

The third discovery from the *intra muros* basilica at Tropaeum Traiani involves the remains of five unnamed and unknown martyrs, uncovered during excavations from 1971 to 1973¹⁶. Despite not being officially recognized or venerated by the Romanian Orthodox Church, the remains were first moved to the Derwent Monastery following the abbot's request and later relocated to the archiepiscopal cathedral in Constanța. Eventually, the remains were transported back to Adamclisi, at a newly founded monastery in proximity to the ancient city where they currently reside, interred in a specially constructed crypt within the monastery church.

In recent years, numerous studies have been published on the anthropological examination of relics from antiquity, the medieval period, and beyond. While standard anthropological analysis typically involves macroscopic visual examination of skeletal elements to estimate age, sex, and pathological conditions, including estimation of the minimum number of individuals and the use of individuation techniques for assemblages containing commingled remains¹⁷, the osteological material has also been subjected to advanced supplementary analyses such as radiographic imaging¹⁸ and multi-slice computed tomography¹⁹. It is essential to acknowledge that most studies are based on human remains that have been recognized as sacred relics with a known provenance and history. This situation contrasts with the cases from Scythia, where the analyzed remains were unknown prior to their discovery by archaeologists, highlighting the difference between studying relics with already-established religious significance and approaching newly discovered remains in context, whose identities and significance are determined post-excavation.

¹⁵ Baumann 2015, 132-133, 142-144.

¹⁶ Barnea 1978; Mirițoiu, Nicolăescu-Plopșor 1978; Mirițoiu[†], Soficaru 2022.

¹⁷ Bašić et al. 2022.

¹⁸ Kristóf et al. 2015; Alterauge et al. 2016; Giuffra, Vitiello, Fornaciari 2021.

¹⁹ Dedouit et al. 2014.

Given that the archaeological context, as well as anthropological analyses, have already been published in newer or older articles, this study advocates for an integrative approach to known data in order to outline a fresh and new perspective aimed at addressing the interplay between martyrdom narratives and individual identity. By examining the skeletal remains and their surrounding funerary contexts, we intend to disentangle the bioarchaeological indicators of martyrdom while forging a stronger link between textual accounts and tangible evidence. Through this approach, we seek to present a more nuanced understanding of these individuals and their identity, bridging the often-gaping chasm between martyrdom narratives and empirical data.

Osteobiography has emerged as a well-known methodological tool in bioarchaeology, providing insights into past lives through skeletal remains. This approach, as developed over the past two decades, challenges the traditional reliance on textual records and instead centers on the materiality of the body to reconstruct individual life histories²⁰. Osteobiography extends beyond merely filling gaps in textual history — it constitutes a distinct and equally valid form of historical inquiry, particularly for marginalized populations whose lives were not well documented in written records. At its core, osteobiography integrates multiple lines of evidence — including skeletal morphology, pathology, isotopic data, and archaeological context — to trace an individual's journey from birth to death, and even into postmortem treatment²¹. Osteobiography transcends traditional biological profiling by integrating cultural, historical, and archaeological perspectives, making it a powerful tool for reconstructing past lives. A crucial aspect of this approach is its alignment with the Weiss-Krejci model²², which provides a structured framework for analyzing the manipulation of human remains, particularly in contexts of secondary burial, exhumation, and postmortem body treatment. When combined with ancient sources and inscriptions, osteobiography enriches our understanding of these practices.

Building upon Weiss-Krejci's schematic model of deposits formation processes²³, that delineates the stages from an individual's death (Process A) to the discovery of their remains by archaeologists (Process X), offers a structured approach to understanding the events surrounding martyrdom and the subsequent treatment of martyrs' remains. Following this model is useful in methodically tracing the various stages through which the bodies of the martyrs have passed, taking into account the

²⁰ Stodder, Palkovich 2012, 2-3.

²¹ Hosek, Robb 2019; Robb et al. 2019; Boutin 2022.

²² Weiss-Krejci 2011; see also Stodder 2018, 75-79.

²³ Weiss-Krejci 2011, 69.

complex scenarios involving violent deaths, bodies initially buried in certain places, subsequent exhumation and relocation, curation of body parts, post-depositional interventions disturbing the deposits, their discovery by archaeologists centuries later, the examination of remains by anthropologists, and finally the management of relics and the entire process of veneration within the Orthodox Church.

Geller's concept of *death history*²⁴ provides a valuable framework for expanding beyond Weiss-Krejci's Process X, emphasizing the active and ongoing nature of postmortem engagements with human remains, their subsequent manipulation and veneration. Through processes such as reburial, disarticulation, relic veneration, and scientific investigation, human remains become dynamic agents in identity construction, rather than passive vestiges of the past. The partibility of the body, as explored by Geller, illustrates how skeletal remains are not merely inert objects of study but symbols (of continuity, identity, and social power). In the case of Christian martyrs, the fragmentation and relocation of relics underscore the ritualized and performative aspect of their materiality — a process that reinforces their spiritual potency while simultaneously subjecting them to new analytical frameworks. Bioarchaeological research does not simply interpret martyrial remains but actively participates in their (re)construction — restoring fragmented identities, confirming historical narratives, and, at times, challenging ecclesiastical traditions²⁵.

The broader archaeological context of the skeletons is also considered, including the mortuary environment. The age at death and biological sex of the individual are determined. In addition, the health of the individual is assessed through palaeopathology, which examines possible health conditions and their effects, such as pain, suffering and disability. The processing, curation, circulation and/or deposition of the remains are also investigated, providing insights into the identity of the individual, the circumstances of their death and their postmortem significance. This

²⁴ Geller 2012.

²⁵ In cases where anthropological and forensic analysis contradicts hagiographical accounts — such as skeletal remains showing trauma inconsistent with recorded martyrdom methods (e.g., Apostle James Alphaeus, whose injuries align more with James the Greater) — scientific inquiry necessitates a re-evaluation of saintly identities (Serrulla 2022). Similarly, aDNA analysis has raised doubts about the provenance of relics, as seen in the case of St. John the Baptist from Sveti Ivan, where the Middle Eastern origin was only partially confirmed (Kostova et al. 2020). For broader context, see Yasin (2015), who discusses the material conditions of relic installations and their ritual framing in Late Antique churches emphasizing the interplay between visibility, architectural embedding, and the evolving social biography of relics.

method allows skeletal evidence to be juxtaposed with hagiographic (textual) sources, providing a multidimensional view of the martyrs' lives and identities.

EPICLETUS AND ASTION FROM HALMYRIS

The hagiographic texts preserve lists of over 40 named martyrs, along with many unnamed ones, grouped together from various cities in the province of Scythia, including major centers such as the provincial capital Tomis, Axiopolis, Noviodunum, Halmyris, and possibly Dinogetia. Bratož gathers and discusses the evidence for the entire region of the Lower Danube provinces and the Balkans: Noricum, Dalmatia, Pannonia, Moesia Prima, Moesia Secunda, and Scythia²⁶.

As previously mentioned, a lengthy text that has survived details the deeds and *passio* of Epictetus and Astion, the two martyrs from Halmyris. In the case of Noviodunum there is a list of 15 named martyrs along with 25 unnamed ones who perished in the city. This account is followed by the author's extensive and rather confusing explanations and discussions regarding variations in the names of the martyrs, as well as the different names and location of the settlements recorded in the source.

Engaging with hagiographic sources is a complex and interpretatively demanding process, as contemporary scholarship has emphasized the convoluted fabric of premodern martyr narratives. The concept of hagiographical discourse provides a valuable framework for comprehending the intentions and functions behind these texts, which often go beyond historical or biographical accounts to serve a performative and ideological role²⁷.

Rather than chronicles of past events, martyr narratives are enclosed in a literary tradition that fuses historical reality, religious beliefs, and literary conventions to shape communal identity and inspire devotion. Hagiography does not fit neatly within a singular literary genre but instead constitutes a fluid and adaptive form of storytelling. It functions as a discursive space where sanctity is constructed, reinforced, and contested. This is evident in Late Antiquity, where the boundaries between fact and fiction in historical writing were more permeable than modern historiographical expectations allow. The narratives of martyrs were not simply retrospective accounts but active instruments in theological, ecclesiastical, and even political debates. The polemical nature of these texts is particularly evident in the intra-Christian disputes of the third and fourth centuries, where different factions appropriated the memory of martyrs to legitimize their positions. A more productive

²⁶ Bratož 2004.

²⁷ Bremmer 2017; Gray, Corke-Webster 2020.

way to engage with these texts is not to treat them as either authentic eyewitness testimonies or as forgeries, but to understand them within their earliest contexts of use and reception. Many of these narratives were not composed immediately following the events they describe, but rather emerged in later, non-persecutory periods when internal ecclesiastical tensions and struggles for authority were dominant concerns²⁸. In this light, martyr texts serve less as records of suffering and more as strategic instruments for asserting theological positions or legitimizing communal identities. Although some texts assume the form of legal documents, it is now clear that none of the early martyr narratives simply reproduce official court proceedings. The pseudo-protocol format found in certain texts is a literary construct, not a transcript of historical events. These documents incorporate recurring literary motifs—or *topoi*—not to mislead, but to authenticate the narrative in the eyes of the intended audience. Their value lies in how they establish plausibility, not verifiability.

Ancient readers did not demand empirical precision from these narratives. They accepted the fundamental truth of martyrdom — that someone had died for their faith — without requiring that every detail of the account be historically exact. The texts operated as tools of instruction, commemoration, and persuasion. Their literary qualities — stylized dialogues, symmetrical structures, and miraculous episodes — reinforced their rhetorical and theological power rather than diminishing their perceived authority.

Moreover, martyr narratives should be seen as living texts rather than fixed documents. Their transmission history reveals substantial variation and recensional layering. Manuscripts were copied, abbreviated, expanded, or adapted for new contexts and audiences. Rather than striving to reconstruct an elusive original version, it is more fruitful to examine how these narratives evolved to meet the changing needs of Christian communities.

Some of the earliest extant martyr texts, including those traditionally attributed to figures like Polycarp or Perpetua, gained traction not because of their contemporaneity to the events they depict, but because of their utility in contemporary intra-Christian conflicts. Their narratives were mobilized to buttress claims of doctrinal orthodoxy, support ecclesiastical leadership, or contest rival factions within the church. As such, martyr texts are deeply embedded in processes of memory construction and institutional self-definition.

Rather than asking whether these texts are true or false, it is more insightful to examine how they function within the broader ecosystem of early Christian textual culture. Their mixture of historical reference and literary embellishment was not a

²⁸ Rebillard 2020; Van Pelt, Temmerman 2024.

deficiency, but a mechanism by which communities shaped and transmitted their values. The combination of plausible details, legalistic framing, and familiar tropes enabled audiences to inhabit a sacred narrative space where the memory of suffering became an instrument of collective formation.

Recent scholarly advances have highlighted the need for a critical, multidimensional engagement with hagiographic texts, both as literary artifacts and as instruments of religious, political, and communal formation. Hagiography in Late Antiquity is not simply a repository of embellished tales or pious exaggerations but a genre marked by complex narrative strategies and embedded truth claims. These authors emphasize the notion of *fictionality* not as a measure of historical falsehood, but as a narrative mode that shapes the reception and perceived authority of the text²⁹. The *Passio Epicteti et Astionis* exemplifies this model: it employs motifs such as divinely inspired resilience under torture, the conversion of persecutors, and symmetrical martyrdoms to fashion an account of sanctity that is both compelling and pedagogically effective.

Importantly, the genre of hagiography invites its audience into a world where historical realism is secondary to spiritual and communal truths. De Temmerman underscores how narrative structures and stylistic tropes — such as simplicity, eyewitness framing, and moral contrast — anchor the stories in plausibility while simultaneously drawing from a stock of literary conventions. The *Passio Epicteti et Astionis*, with its stylized dialogues and moral polarities, participates fully in this tradition. Yet it is also shaped by local concerns: its emphasis on friendship, monastic discipline, and missionary zeal reflects the theological and institutional priorities of the Christian community at Halmyris. Thus, fictionality in this context serves not to deceive, but to encode a particular vision of Christian identity.

The concept of the "hagiographical experiment" highlights how early Christian authors employed saintly narratives as tools for theological exploration and discursive negotiation. These narratives were not simply conservative retellings of sanctity but active sites of innovation, capable of challenging ecclesiastical norms and negotiating new models of spiritual authority. Authors consciously played with expectations, often staging tensions between familiar tropes and radical elements, such as alternative forms of community, gendered expressions of piety, or redefinitions of martyrdom. In doing so, they not only transmitted existing traditions, but reshaped what sanctity could mean within specific social and theological contexts. The experimental nature of hagiography lay in its capacity to engage contemporary debates — whether about orthodoxy, ascetic ideals, or the authority of local versus universal church structures — by embedding them within the recognizable yet

²⁹ Van Pelt, Temmerman 2024.

malleable frame of the saint's life. Such texts functioned as discursive laboratories, probing the edges of acceptable belief and practice, while also creating the imaginative space for new religious identities to crystallize. Rather than being static, derivative accounts, these texts often pushed the boundaries of genre and doctrine³⁰. The *Passio Epicteti et Astionis* reflects this experimental ethos. It tests models of ideal Christian conduct — asceticism, endurance, loyalty — and explores the spiritual meaning of friendship through the shared suffering of its protagonists. It also manipulates established topoi in new configurations, inviting readers to imagine Scythia Minor not as a marginal province, but as a theater of Christian heroism. The text becomes a site of theological creativity and narrative innovation.

The broader implications of this approach are illuminated by recent scholarship that dismantles the presumed synchronicity between cult and text³¹. Some hagiographies preceded the formation of a cult, others followed it, and still others circulated independently without fostering liturgical or institutional veneration. While the *Passio* claims to originate from a contemporaneous account — possibly an official court protocol — the version that survives is a redacted copy from the early 15th century, discovered in the Church of the Savior in Utrecht. Its textual transmission is therefore separated by over a millennium from the events it purports to describe. Zahariade has defended the possibility of an authentic juridical origin, citing the detailed topographical and architectural references in the text. However, such internal features may just as plausibly be understood as part of a broader literary strategy designed to enhance the narrative's plausibility and authority. The appearance of legal formality or geographic precision does not necessarily indicate documentary authenticity. Instead, these elements often function as literary conventions aimed at authenticating the sanctity of the protagonist and grounding the narrative within a recognizable spatial frame. Given the lack of external historical corroboration³¹, and in light of the late date of the extant manuscript, the *Passio* is best approached not as a transparent record but as a layered textual artifact — one shaped by processes of reception, redaction, and cultic utility across centuries. This aligns with the understanding that martyr narratives, particularly those transmitted through complex manuscript histories, are less about preserving events than about authorizing sanctity through narrative form. Such texts often privilege theological coherence and literary elegance over documentary accuracy. The saints are rendered morally transparent, their persecutors grotesquely evil, and their deaths symmetrical and glorious. This

³⁰ Gray, Corke-Webster 2020.

³¹ Ward-Perkin 2020.

stylization, while spiritually meaningful, obscures the lived complexity of Christian communities and the material realities of persecution and death.

Since no martyr text directly reproduces official court proceedings, material evidence becomes essential in evaluating the authenticity of these accounts. Archaeology provides the physical context for martyrial remains, illuminating burial practices, spatial distribution, and site-specific evidence of veneration, which can either support or complicate textual traditions. Bioarchaeology and osteoarchaeology further enhance this investigation by offering direct insights into the biological profiles of individuals identified as martyrs. The analysis of skeletal remains — age, sex, trauma, and pathology — allows for the assessment of perimortem injuries, which may correspond to historical accounts of execution methods. Additionally, evidence of chronic illness, nutritional stress, or healed trauma can refine our understanding of the lived experiences of these individuals, potentially distinguishing martyrs from non-martyr Christian populations. By juxtaposing textual sources with empirical bioarchaeological evidence, this approach transcends the limitations of hagiographical narratives, ensuring a critical yet constructive engagement with martyrdom traditions. It enables a multidimensional reconstruction of individual and collective identities, reinforcing the role of scientific validation in historical inquiry while respecting the cultural and theological significance of these remains.

The narratives surrounding the martyrs can be substantiated by correlating written records with physical evidence. In light of the above considerations, there is a compelling rationale for an approach that selectively extracts particular details from hagiographic accounts to inform and augment both the archaeological findings and the bioarchaeological study of martyrs' remains. For this purpose, the Latin text, as preserved in the *Acta Sanctorum*, was used alongside the Romanian translation of Popescu and Zahariade's historical annotations and commentary³². Setting aside the rhetorical devices and stylistic traits inherent in hagiographical writings, this article is primarily interested in the recounting of the martyrs' final days, from the accusations and the trial to their execution and the actions that followed.

It was already established that persecution in the Roman Empire was often driven by a need to maintain political and social stability, with emperors like Decius and Diocletian seeking unity and conformity within the empire to prevent fragmentation and disorder. As with other martyrs of the time, Epictetus and Astion were not executed solely for their Christian faith but for their perceived defiance of Roman state laws and imperial authority. The Roman administration viewed Christian non-compliance with sacrificial rites as a direct challenge to the *pax deorum*,

³² Vornicescu 1990, 67-109; Zahariade 2009a.

the sacred relationship between the state and the gods, upon which the empire's stability depended. The refusal of Christians to participate in sacrifices, particularly in frontier provinces such as Scythia, was considered an act of civic and political disobedience rather than merely a religious offense. The imperial cult was a unifying mechanism across the empire, reinforcing loyalty to the emperor and demonstrating allegiance to Rome. From the perspective of imperial authorities, those who refused to sacrifice to the gods and the emperor were not just dissenters but threats to state security, especially in border regions where maintaining order was crucial. This legal and political context aligns with broader scholarly debates regarding the historical authenticity of early Christian persecution. As Moss argues, the notion that Christians were systematically persecuted for their faith alone has often been exaggerated; many were prosecuted under broader laws aimed at enforcing civic unity and discipline rather than as part of a targeted campaign against Christianity itself³³. The case of Epictetus and Astion exemplifies this reality — convicted not merely as Christians but as disruptors of the legally mandated religious and social order, a fate shared by others who resisted state-imposed religious duties. As recorded in the written source, the prosecution regarded the two men as malevolent men and sorcerers, as wrongdoers whose teachings treacherously diverted many from the sacrifices owed to the gods³⁴.

The text describes the tortures endured by the two following instructions given by the commander Latronianus. They were stripped, beaten, whipped, fastened to torture devices where they endured burning with torches. Incarcerated and deprived of food and water for many days, vinegar and salt were poured onto their wounds. Upon being brought back before the commander, he ordered their faces to be crushed with stones and finally decreed for the two men to be removed from the city for their execution by beheading. The final episode concerning the martyrs' remains unfolds as the newly converted Vigilantius, one of the investigators in the judicial process, arrived with his household and fellow Christians at the site and took the two bodies, anointing them with aromatic myrrh and solemnly laying them to rest in an adequate and worthy place (*in loco congruo et aptissimo*)³⁵.

Apart from the things mentioned in the previous paragraph concerning the last days of the martyrs, the written source provides very few details in relation to the identity of the main protagonists. From the outset, the title provides the reader with details of the positions held by the two men. The term *presbyter* is ascribed to

³³ Moss 2013; see also Madgearu 2012.

³⁴ *AS, Julii II*, III.19.

³⁵ *AS, Julii II*, IV.32.

Epictetus. In the early days of Christianity, this title was conferred upon senior members of the community, distinguished by their exemplary Christian character. In contrast to the more clearly defined roles of bishops and deacons, the duties and liturgical responsibilities of presbyters were not as clearly delineated. They exercised considerable influence, particularly in house churches, and functioned collectively in regional leadership roles rather than as individual officeholders³⁶. The later mention of Epictetus' age in the chapter on the arrest and sufferings of the martyrs provides additional insight into his status, given that he was almost sixty years old at the time. In the same paragraph, it is revealed that Astion is nearly thirty-five years of age³⁷.

The term *monachus*, used to describe Astion, is believed to have been added to the original text at a later period³⁸. However, even if this is true, it does not negate the possibility that Astion was considered a monk in the broader sense of being ascetic. Prior to the monastic movement becoming widespread, *monachus* was generically used to refer to Christians who had renounced family life and material goods, which aligns with the ascetic features of both Epictetus and Astion's way of life³⁹. There are clear indications in the text that Astion came from an upscale family, his father is regarded as the most prominent figure in the city and is also among the wealthiest individuals, while his mother is of illustrious lineage, the daughter of a senator⁴⁰.

It is also important to note that they were not natives of the Danubian provinces, but instead came from faraway lands, from the eastern provinces. Their origins remain uncertain. They might have hailed from Nicomedia in Bithynia, or perhaps from Phrygia, further to the south in Asia Minor⁴¹. This fact is corroborated by Astion's expressed desire that, after receiving baptism, they should journey to a distant land where no one knows of them or their homeland, as the source indicates⁴². Moreover, when Astion appeared before his parents, he welcomes his mother who has arrived from the eastern regions (*ex-Orientis partibus*). While Lowinger cites Zahariade's personal communication to claim that DNA analysis traced both individuals to Asia Minor⁴³, the validity of this claim is highly questionable due to the absence of any supporting evidence for such analysis performed on the skeletal material.

³⁶ Eurell 2023.

³⁷ *AS, Julii II*, III.20.

³⁸ Vornicescu 1990, 61.

³⁹ Holubeanu 2024, 213-218.

⁴⁰ *AS, Julii II*, I.5.

⁴¹ Popescu 1994, 94; Vornicescu 1990, 48.

⁴² *AS, Julii II*, I.9.

⁴³ Lowinger 2023, 101.

The identification and localization of the settlement of Halmyris in the province of Scythia have a history spanning more than a century. The hypothesis of a basilica at Halmyris that housed the remains of the martyrs has been proposed since 1928⁴⁴. It was not until another sixty years had passed that the location of the settlement was established⁴⁵. Finally, in the 2000s, the basilica and the crypt were discovered and investigated, fulfilling Delehayé's century-old prediction.

The initial layout of the Halmyris church featured a simple, compact design, consisting of an apse, a single nave, and a narthex, without any additional internal divisions. A Constantine-era coin, dated 324-330, was found on the clay bed that served as the platform for the original brick pavement. While this find offers a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the basilica, it does not provide definitive evidence that the church was built during Constantine's reign, as the coin could have circulated for some time afterward. Archaeological evidence about the church's end is speculative, but a circular building in the annex indicates that the basilica was no longer in use by the end of the 6th century⁴⁶.

The crypt located under the church's altar is a hypogaeum-type structure. Eight descending stairs under the pavement of the basilica provided access to a first room. On each side of the second room, representing the mortuary chamber, stood two brick-and-mortar platforms serving as secondary burial sites for the martyrs' caskets after their initial interment at an unknown location. An inscription written in Greek on the eastern wall preserves a text that acknowledges the crypt as resting place for Christ's martyrs (*Μαρθις Χρ*) who were treated despitely (*γβρισω*), as well as the name of one of them, Astio (*Ασθιο*)⁴⁷.

The existing bones were found scattered without anatomical connection. Anthropological studies were published in 2006 and 2009. Due to differences in dimensions, ages, and pathologies, it was possible to accurately separate and reassign all skeletal elements. The mixed bones belonged to two individuals, who were labelled Skeleton 1 and Skeleton 2⁴⁸.

The characteristics of the pelvic girdle confirmed the sex as male for the first skeleton. The innominate presented high and narrow wings with an S-shaped iliac crest and developed muscular relief. The greater sciatic notch was narrow and deep,

⁴⁴ Delehayé 1928.

⁴⁵ Suceveanu, Zahariade 1987.

⁴⁶ Zahariade 2001-2003; Zahariade 2009b.

⁴⁷ Zahariade 2009b, 145.

⁴⁸ For the detailed anthropological report see Mirițoiu, Soficaru 2003; Mirițoiu, Soficaru 2007; Mirițoiu, Soficaru 2009.

with no preauricular sulcus and an acute subpubic angle. The individual's age at death was estimated at approximately 64 years, which is consistent with the age of Epictetus as reported in the hagiographical source.

The skeletal remains exhibited extensive and chronic pathological changes, including a vertebral block caused by ossification of the anterior ligaments, indicative of ankylosing spondylitis, which resulted in severe chronic arthropathy, the shoulder girdle featuring significant arthrosis alongside the knees exhibiting advanced osteoarthritis.

The analysis did not reveal any evidence of incisions or cuts produced by sharp-edged objects. Most bone fractures appear older, suggesting fresh traumatic fractures were rare. Exceptions include fractures in the scapulae and the mandible (Fig. 1/a). It is probable that these injuries were caused by blunt objects striking the shoulders and face. The absence of post-fracture bone reactions suggests that death occurred shortly after the injury. Nevertheless, the precise cause remains uncertain.

The second skeleton belongs to a 30-40-year-old adult male, based on the same criteria observed on the previous set of remains. Again, the established age range aligns well with the information provided in the textual record, stating that Astion was 35 years old. In the postcranial skeleton, the first lumbar vertebra exhibits signs of collapse, with irregular bony appositions and exostosis development, indicative of healed trauma. This condition resulted in a pronounced posterior kyphosis affecting the general posture of the individual.

The individual exhibited multiple perimortem injuries, including an oblique cut on the right humerus, fractures on the left fibula and the left mandible. These injuries indicate violent trauma. Similar to the previous case, the absence of healing suggests that these injuries were inflicted shortly before death.

The cause of death was determined to be decapitation by a sharp object, probably a sword. The blade penetrated between the posterior arches of the atlas and axis without damaging the arches themselves (Fig. 1/b). It cut the lateral edges of the facets, which are sloping and lower from medial to lateral, near their anterior ends, where small tear lines were observed. The impact probably severed the axis, which was absent, and resulted in the rapid death of the individual due to the transection of the cervical spinal cord.

The form of execution employed provides additional insights into the social status and legal treatment of at least one of the martyrs. Decapitation, as a method of capital punishment, was typically reserved for the *honestiores* — the privileged classes, including Roman citizens and free individuals — due to its perceived honorability and efficiency. Unlike prolonged and humiliating punishments such as crucifixion, exposure to wild beasts, or burning at the stake, beheading was considered a swift

and comparatively merciful death, aligning with legal norms that sought to differentiate the fates of elite and lower-class criminals. This distinction underscores the legal and political framing of Christian executions, connecting their alleged crimes to the broader framework of Roman judicial customs⁴⁹.

In the Roman provinces, the governor (*praeses provinciae*) held jurisdiction over capital cases and was responsible for executing imperial decrees against nonconforming groups, including Christians⁵⁰. However, rather than being targeted solely for their faith, Christians were often prosecuted under broader legal frameworks related to *maleficium* (sorcery), sedition, and defiance of the imperial cult. Their refusal to participate in sacrificial rites and the imperial religious order was perceived as an act of political insubordination, challenging the *pax deorum*, the Roman ideal of religious and civic harmony. Those accused of crimes against the state were often subjected to preliminary imprisonment and interrogation under torture, as was standard for those facing high treason charges. Roman law sanctioned various forms of torture to extract confessions or compel submission, including flagellation, bone-breaking, and mutilation. These methods were designed not only to punish the accused but also to serve as public deterrents, reinforcing the authority of the state⁵¹. Before execution, condemned individuals were flogged, a form of public humiliation intended to strip them of any remaining dignity. This initial torment was both punitive and coercive, designed to extract confessions or force submission to Roman religious expectations.

Once imprisoned, the accused were subjected to interrogation under torture, a standard Roman judicial procedure designed to extract confessions, enforce compliance, or intensify suffering. The practice of *supplicium* (extended torment) was not merely punitive but aimed at breaking the will of the accused and demonstrating state authority. Judicial torture in the Roman world was systematized, with five primary methods identified: 1. Mutilations – These included cutting, burning, or branding, often used to permanently mark criminals or extract confessions; 2. Fractures and dislocations – Roman interrogators frequently employed bone-breaking techniques, such as the forced twisting or crushing of limbs, to inflict irreversible physical damage; 3. Whipping and lacerations – The *flagrum*, a multi-thonged whip reinforced with metal barbs or bone fragments⁵², was designed to tear skin and muscle, causing maximum pain and blood loss; 4. Immobilization on punitive devices

⁴⁹ Mateo Donet 2016, 103-115.

⁵⁰ See Garnsey 1968; Sloomjes 2006.

⁵¹ Mateo Donet 2016, 103-106; Moss 2017.

⁵² See Edwards, Gabel, Hosmer 1986 and especially Cook 2024.

– Victims were often tied to wooden structures, stretched on racks, or bound in iron restraints for prolonged periods; 5. Extreme bodily restraints and crushing techniques – These included pressing weights onto limbs or chests, restricting blood circulation, and leading to slow suffocation or internal damage.

The martyrdom of Epictetus and Astion followed this precise judicial framework. Accused of magic, they were chained, imprisoned, interrogated, tortured, and eventually executed. The hagiographical source describes how they endured whipping, burns from torches, and prolonged starvation. Further degradation involved salt and vinegar poured onto their open wounds, followed by their faces being crushed with stones before final sentencing⁵³. Ultimately, their decapitation by the gladius – *capita eorum gladio amputari*⁵⁴, though expedient, was not only related to legal protocol, but also acted as a symbolic reinforcement of imperial power. It underscored the principle that loyalty to Rome was inseparable from religious and civic compliance, and those who rejected this were eliminated as political dissidents rather than just religious outcasts.

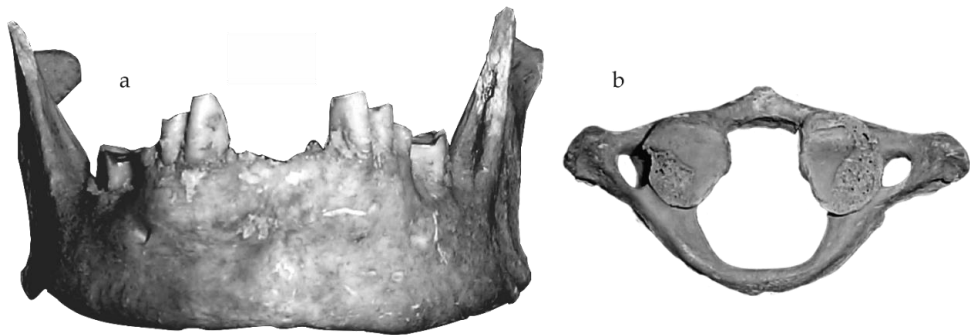


Fig. 1. a. anterior view of the mandible of skeleton 1 showing destruction of the incisor sockets and crowns; b. inferior view of the first cervical vertebra (atlas) of skeleton 2 revealing evidence of decapitation (photographs were taken in 2001 by A.D. Soficaru; no scale)

Epictetus & Astion

Site: basilica from ancient Halmyris, Murighiol, Tulcea County, Romania.

Feature: north-west area of the fort, Insula I, sanctuary of the Christian monument.

Excavation: 2001, conducted by Mihail Zahariade and Octavian Bounegru.

⁵³ *AS, Julii II, III.19-27.*

⁵⁴ *AS, Julii II, III.27.*

Location: hypogeum-type crypt, subfloor beneath the basilica's presbyterium.

Current location: since 2008, the relics have been placed in two wooden reliquaries at a new monastery dedicated to the two martyrs located less than a kilometer from the ancient settlement of Halmyris. Relic fragments have been gifted to at least 13 places of worship in Romania and abroad.

Burial and grave type: inhumation within a sealed crypt.

Orientation: west-east.

Associated materials: fragment of an amphora, hook from a votive light, fragment of a vase.

Skeletons position: commingled remains, post-depositional disturbances.

Skeletal Preservation and Integrity

Preservation and completeness: both skeletons are largely intact, with well-preserved postcranial remains, but the skulls are missing, except for the mandibles.

Evidence of disturbance: the crypt was robbed in antiquity, leading to disarticulation and scattering of bones.

Postdepositional context: the remains were found without anatomical connection, reinforcing evidence of historical interventions.

Skeleton 1

Age at death: ~65 years, based on humeral and femoral heads, and pubic symphysis morphology.

Sex: male, confirmed by pelvic morphology and metric analysis.

Stature: 166.51 cm, estimated using the Pearson method.

Pathological conditions: seronegative spondyloarthropathy, leading to spinal degeneration and arthritic changes; severe vertebral fusion (bamboo spine) indicative of long-term inflammation; extensive osteoarthritis, particularly in the ribs, elbows, and lower limbs, suggesting a life of physical strain; loss of multiple teeth during life, indicating dental infections and nutritional stress.

Trauma: possible perimortem trauma to the mandible and scapula, indicative of blunt force impact; potential decapitation, inferred from the absence of the cervical vertebrae.

Skeleton 2

Age at death: ~35 years, confirmed through cranial suture closure, pubic symphysis changes, and femoral head morphology.

Sex: male, confirmed by pelvic structure and overall robustness.

Stature: 170.02 cm, estimated using the Pearson method.

Trauma: fractured first lumbar vertebra, which healed over time, suggesting prior trauma; mandibular trauma leading to missing incisors, possibly linked to perimortem violence; decapitation confirmed by cut marks on the atlas vertebra,

indicating execution with a sharp blade; additional sharp force trauma to the mandible, humerus, and fibula, suggesting multiple injuries sustained at or near the time of death; lack of healing on wounds confirms these injuries were fatal.

Postmortem Manipulation and Weiss-Krejci Model Application

A (violent death): beheading in Halmyris.

C (temporary deposition): initial burial in an unknown location.

D (recovery and grave re-entry): their remains were exhumed and reburied.

F (final placement): reburied in the basilica crypt.

S (in-situ disturbance): the crypt was disturbed in the 4th and the 6th centuries.

X (recovery by archaeologists): discovered and excavated in 2001.

Historical and Epigraphic Evidence: *De SS. Epicteto presb. et Astione monacho, martyribus almiridensibus in Scythia*, in *Acta Sanctorum Julii II*, eds. Conrado Janningo, Joannes Baptista Sollerio, and Joannes Pinio, Antwerp, 1721; Greek inscription painted on the eastern wall of the crypt identifies the site as the resting place of Christ's martyrs (Μαρκθις Χρ), as well as the name of one of them, Astio (Ασθιο).

ZOTIKOS, ATTALOS, KAMASIS AND PHILIPPOS FROM NICULIȚEL

In a title dated June 4th, *Acta Sanctorum* commemorates the revered martyrs of Noviodunum, namely Dinocus, Zoticus, Attalus, Euticus, Camasus, Quirinus, Julia, Saturnina, Galdunus, Ninnita, Fortunio, and twenty-five others. They were probably martyred in the nearby city of Noviodunum during either Diocletian's persecution in the early 4th century, around 303-304, or during the reign of Emperor Licinius, who implemented various measures against Christians between 319 and 324.

Discovered in 1971⁵⁵, the basilica in Niculițel was constructed either at the end of the 4th century or at the beginning of the 5th century to shelter the remains of several Christian martyrs in a monumental crypt with hemispherical dome, resembling the architecture of heroic mausoleums. It seems this location was chosen due to the alleged existence of an older martyrion built earlier in the century on the territory of a villa rustica and containing the relics of two unknown individuals martyred by burning at the stake.

A large container made of thin fir wood planks with corners secured by copper sheeting was found inside the crypt, placed directly on the floor of the mortuary chamber, accommodating the remains of five individuals, each one lying on their back. No traces of clothing or other paraphernalia were found. Engraved and painted in red, two inscriptions written in Greek letters are located on the upper sections of

⁵⁵ See Baumann 1972a; Baumann 1972b; Baumann 1972c; Barnea 1973; Baumann 1977.

the walls to the right and left of the wooden container. The inscription on the left wall shows a depiction of the monogram of Christ, below which is written *martyrs of Christ* (*μαρτύρες Χριστού*). On the right wall, under a similar monogram, the names of the four martyrs are engraved: Zotikos, Attalos, Kamasis and Philippos. No anthropological study was published about the remains, but it seems that Nicolăescu-Ploșor from the Anthropology Cabinet of the Romanian Academy had performed an on-site examination of the bones and provided the archaeologists with a report noting that they all belong to adult males. The first three skeletons, from right to left, were around 50 years old, while the fourth one on the left was no older than 35. The arrangement of the four skeletons suggests a primary burial, although some disturbances were noted. However, these disturbances were regarded as ancient events occurring after the soft tissues had decomposed and prior to the crypt entrance being sealed. Despite the poor state of preservation, no signs of traumatic events were evident on the bones⁵⁶.

The elevated level of the burial chamber suggested the existence of a lower level. Two years later, in 1973 an underground entrance was unblocked by removing a limestone threshold with steps. This threshold supported two limestone slabs: one plastered on the outside, beneath which was a second one, inscribed in Greek, and painted red as well, that read *here and beyond lies the blood of the martyrs*. Upon the resumption of archaeological research in 1975, two compartments at the lower level of the crypt were emptied, resulting in the recovery of a substantial quantity of soil that was subsequently sifted. This process yielded 110 small, poorly preserved bone fragments, some of which exhibited burn marks. The remains belonged to two adult males and additionally noted the presence of two phalanges from the same finger, suggesting a reburial where the soil had been transported from a different location⁵⁷. No study has been published regarding these remains; only brief comments from a report are cited in Baumann's book⁵⁸. Upon the death of Nicolăescu-Ploșor these bones were lost and remain unrecovered, hence this topic must be approached with a degree of caution.

Zotikos, Attalos, Kamasis, and Philippos

Site: Niculițel, Tulcea County, Romania.

Feature: basilica with a *martyrion*-type crypt, located in the modern village center.

⁵⁶ Baumann 2015, 138-142.

⁵⁷ Baumann 1977, 246-247.

⁵⁸ Baumann 2015, 145-147.

Location: funeral chamber within a monumental crypt, beneath the basilica's presbyterium at Niculițel.

Excavation: 1971, conducted by Victor Baumann.

Date: Martyrdom: either 303-304 (Diocletian persecution) or 319-324 (Licinius' anti-Christian measures). Basilica and crypt construction: late 4th to early 5th century.

Current location: Since 1973, the reliquaries containing the remains of the martyrs have been preserved at Cocoș Monastery, located on the outskirts of Niculițel, approximately 6 km from the basilica where they were originally discovered.

Burial and grave type: Inhumation; four skeletons placed in a wooden box with reinforced copper corners.

Orientation: west-east.

Associated materials: a single coin found under the threshold of the crypt entrance.

Skeletons position: dorsal decubitus (lying on their backs), aligned in anatomical order.

Skeletal Preservation and Integrity, Condition: poor, with missing parts and significant damage due to the collapse of the crypt's vault.

Secondary burial evidence: In 1975, a lower level was discovered, containing 110 small, poorly preserved bone fragments, some with burn marks; these remains belonged to two additional adult males, likely earlier martyrs; the lower-level remains were lost after the death of Nicolăescu-Plopșor.

Ages at death: S1: 45-55 years; S2: 50-55 years; S3: 40-45 years; S4: ~35 years (estimation methods unknown, based on archaeological reports).

Sex: all four individuals were adult males, identified through on-site anthropological examination (methods unspecified).

Stature estimates: S1: 169 cm; S2: 175 cm; S3: 162 cm (estimation methods unknown).

Pathological conditions: all skeletons exhibit osteoporotic and osteophytic changes, consistent with long-term metabolic stress: these findings suggest that the individuals may have led an ascetic lifestyle. No evidence of violent trauma was observed on the remains.

Postmortem Manipulation and Weiss-Krejci Model Application

A (death): likely in Noviodunum, under Diocletian (303-304) or Licinius (319-324).

No clear evidence of temporary deposition (process C) before Niculițel; no evidence confirms their initial burial location before being transferred.

D (recovery, grave re-entry): not strongly supported for the four martyrs, but possible for the two burned individuals in the lower crypt.

F (final placement): the basilica crypt was purpose-built for the four martyrs, supporting a single final entombment.

X (archaeological recovery): upper crypt: 1971-1975 excavations; lower crypt (burned remains): discovered in 1975.



Fig. 2. The four skeletons placed in a wooden box discovered in the crypt from Niculițel (courtesy of ICEM Tulcea)

Historical and Epigraphic Evidence: The *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* commemorates, on 6 July, a feast that may refer to Zotikos, Attalos, Kamasis, and Philippos, the martyrs of Noviodunum; additionally, the early 5th-century Syriac *Martyrology*, preserved in a manuscript written in Edessa (northern Mesopotamia) in 411, records on 4 June the martyrdom of Philippos, a martyr of Noviodunum. Two Greek inscriptions painted on the walls of the crypt: one features a depiction of the Chi-Rho (XP) monogram of Christ, beneath which is written: "Μάρτυρες Χριστοῦ" (martyrs of Christ); the second inscription records the names of the four martyrs: Μάρτυρες Ζώτικος, Ἀτταλος, Καμάσις, Φίλιππος⁵⁹.

THE UNKNOWN MARTYRS FROM TROPAEUM TRAIANI

The basilica, discovered before 1900, is located approximately 50 meters west of the eastern gate and just north of the main street of the settlement and was most probably constructed around the year 500. During the 1971-1973 excavation campaigns, a crypt was unearthed containing human remains from multiple individuals. The crypt,

⁵⁹ Baumann 2015, 132-133.

situated under the pavement at the eastern end of the middle nave, was a rectangular room covered by a semi-cylindrical vault that had completely collapsed. The director of the excavations notes that the relatively large size of the crypt indicates it was intended from the beginning to house certain relics of Christian martyrs⁶⁰.

The bones were scattered throughout the crypt, mixed with debris from bricks, stones, and rubble, indicating that the site had been subject to ancient disturbances and robbery. The anthropological study, initially published in 1975 and recently revisited, established that the remains found inside belonged to five adult males aged 25 to 35⁶¹.

The trauma evidence shows that a second cervical vertebra (axis) was severed by a blow, likely from a sword, which struck perpendicular to the vertical axis of the bone at the midpoint of the articular faces, just above the axis, pointing towards execution by beheading. This blow was delivered from the right side, as confirmed by the shattering and crushing of the bone along the final part of its trajectory. The surface of the section exhibits a patina from antiquity and shows slight polish in areas where it pierced the compact laminae of the bone. Another small and shallow cut on the anterior facet of a lumbar vertebra, inflicted with a sharp object as well, suggests perimortem violence. Moreover, the transverse sectioning of both ulnae in their proximal region in one individual shows a smooth appearance and patina. Despite the absence of the corresponding fragments of the radii and the rest of the ulnar diaphysis, the nature of these injuries suggests that the limbs were cut as a punitive or persecutory act. These findings undeniably highlight a context of severe violence or judicial executions⁶².

An inscription was painted on the eastern wall of the crypt. However, due to the poor state of preservation, it was not possible to decipher the text. In light of these circumstances, the case of Tropaeum Traiani remains problematic. While the bones were found in a similar context to others and the anthropological study provided evidence supporting a scenario of violent deaths, no hagiographical or other written sources mention martyrs in this place or even relics being transferred to this settlement at a later date, nor has the inscription inside the crypt survived.

Unknown Martyrs

Site: Tropaeum Traiani.

Feature: Crypt beneath the presbyterium of Basilica A.

⁶⁰ Barnea 1978, 185.

⁶¹ Mirițoiu, Nicolăescu-Ploșor 1978; Mirițoiu[†], Soficaru 2022 for an updated report.

⁶² Mirițoiu[†], Soficaru 2022.

Location: Adamclisi (Constanța County, Romania).

Excavation: 1971-1973, conducted by Ion Barnea.

Date: The basilica was constructed around 500; no earlier church existed on this site before the construction of this basilica. Archaeological evidence confirms that the crypt was an integral part of the basilica from its initial construction.

Current location: Since 2012, the remains have been housed in five reliquaries at St. Philip the Apostle Monastery in Adamclisi, Constanța County, Romania.

Burial and grave type: inhumation; commingled skeletal remains found in disturbed context.

Orientation: the original orientation of the burials could not be determined.

Associated materials: none except for a single bronze nail, possibly from a wooden coffin or reliquary.

Skeletons position: the original position of the burials could not be determined.

Skeletal Preservation and Integrity: generally good condition but incomplete due to postdepositional crypt disturbance and prior looting.

Ages at death: S1: 25–35 y.o.; S2: ~30 y.o.; S3: ~30 y.o.; S4 and S5: 25–30 y.o. (estimated through cranial suture closure and dental wear).

Sex: all five individuals were male, determined through cranial morphology and pelvic characteristics.

Stature estimates: estimated from long bones, where available: 170.26 cm (right humerus); 167 cm and 172 cm (right tibiae).

Pathological conditions: two ulnae display cut marks, consistent with ritualized or punitive amputation; one axis vertebra (C2) exhibits a clean cut, indicative of decapitation with a sharp-edged weapon.

The Postmortem Manipulation and Weiss-Krejci Model Application: not possible to determine due to lack of clear archaeological sequences indicating body manipulation over time/postdepositional disturbances.

Historical and Epigraphic Evidence: none known.

Martyrdom hypothesis: The archaeological context, perimortem trauma, and burial location within the basilica crypt suggest that these individuals were executed, possibly as Christian martyrs. However, no inscriptions or historical records directly associate these individuals with named martyrs. The absence of grave goods, the ritualized nature of their injuries, and their burial in a crypt beneath a church reinforce their interpretation as victims of religious persecution, likely in the context of Diocletianic or Licinian anti-Christian campaigns in the early 4th century.

THE POSTMORTEM FATE OF MARTYRS' REMAINS

From the fourth century onward, Christian communities developed distinct attitudes toward the bodies of martyrs, diverging from Jewish and Greco-Roman norms that emphasized intact burial.⁶³ While early Christian funerary customs initially reflected broader Mediterranean practices, the veneration of martyrs gradually led to the exhumation, relocation, and even fragmentation of their remains. These practices enabled more direct access to sacred presence, allowing different communities to venerate the same individual through bodily fragments. In some cases, body parts were displayed unburied, reinforcing their role as devotional and theological focal points.⁶⁴

The theological foundation for these practices drew on the belief that the physical remains of saints carried divine power — capable of healing and miracle-working. Each fragment was thought to retain the full sanctity of the saint, a notion that paralleled Eucharistic theology: just as each part of the consecrated host contains the real presence of Christ, so too did each relic embody the presence of the holy. Relics, therefore, operated not merely as memorials but as active agents of divine grace.⁶⁵

The practice of interring relics beneath a dedicated perimeter or place within the sanctuary was driven by the conviction in the sanctity and potency of these sacred items. This integration of relics into the architectural and ritual fabric of Christian worship emphasized continuity with the martyrs and reinforced the communal sense of shared faith and identity.⁶⁶

Making use of the combined approach of Weiss-Krejci and Geller provides a structured framework to discuss the dynamic nature of postmortem interactions with the remains of martyrs. This is achieved by bringing together multiple layers of information, including hagiographical texts (when available and relevant), archaeological findings, and anthropological data.

At Halmyris, the hagiographic source recounts that Epictetus and Astion were executed outside the city by order of the commander Latronianus, a moment that aligns with Process A in Weiss-Krejci's model of postmortem treatment. At sunset, Vigilantius and fellow Christians retrieved the bodies, anointed them with spices and myrrh, and buried them in a location marked by reverence and secrecy, accompanied by psalms and mourning⁶⁷. While the text does not clarify whether the burial occurred

⁶³ Johnson 1997; Brand 2019.

⁶⁴ Lappin 2018; Wiśniewski 2018.

⁶⁵ Krueger 2010, 8; Kjellström 2017, 152; Wiśniewski 2018, 44-82.

⁶⁶ Brandenburg 1995.

⁶⁷ *AS, Julii II, IV.32.*

at the site of execution, as in the case of Demetrios of Thessalonica⁶⁸, it raises the possibility of an initial provisional burial (Process C) followed by later, more formal treatment (Process B), complicating the linearity of Weiss-Krejci's sequence.



Fig. 3. Severed second cervical vertebra (axis) of an individual from the crypt at Tropaeum Traiani. a. superior view; b. left lateral view [no scale] (Photographs by A.D. Soficaru)

A subsequent episode in the text describes Vigilantius and Astion's parents visiting the tomb, which was reportedly situated deep underground and far from the city. Vigilantius expresses uncertainty about relocating the bodies, suggesting the burial was meant to protect the remains from interference⁶⁹. Although these accounts provide narrative structure, they must be treated with caution; the most reliable data come from archaeological and anthropological analysis.

Scattered human bones found in both rooms, lacking anatomical connection, suggest deliberate disturbance after the remains were placed inside the crypt. This scenario is also supported by the archaeological evidence and interpretation. The post-depositional disturbances observed in this crypt are the outcome of a combination of intentional human actions and structural factors, which have resulted in the scattering and mixing of human remains.

⁶⁸ Migne 1864, 1182; Tóth 2010, 146.

⁶⁹ *AS, Julii II*, IV.43-44.

The crypt went through two significant episodes of such interventions⁷⁰. The first, possibly in the 4th century, during Julian the Apostate's persecutions, involved damage to the vault and the concealment of Christian symbols depicted on the walls. The second episode included looting and further destruction, eventually leading to the collapse of the crypt, which filled it with debris, and contributed to the disarray and scattering of the skeletal remains. Such structural disintegration can further crush, break, and scatter bones, making it difficult to maintain their anatomical connections.

The absence of skulls from the crypt might be explained by various plausible scenarios. The hypothesis that the heads were separated from the bodies at the moment of execution, as a result of beheading, cannot be ruled out. It can also be posited that the heads of martyrs, particularly those who were beheaded, were regarded as objects of greater sanctity by the early Christians, given the nature of their demise. Under the circumstances, the heads of martyrs might have been separated intentionally to preserve and distribute them among different Christian communities. Even with these considerations, the question still stands as to why Christians would separate the heads from the bodies when placing the martyrs in the crypt of the basilica. By separating the heads, they could be given a more prominent and visible place for display, maybe above the ground (as opposed to buried beneath the presbyterium in the crypt), or even relocated to more significant religious sites. In times of persecution or during other disruptive events, separating the heads from the bodies and placing them in different locations might have been a protective measure. This way, if the crypt was desecrated (as archaeological data suggests may have occurred), the most valuable relics would be less likely to face complete destruction.

Weiss-Krejci's schematic model ends with Process X — the archaeologist's discovery — but the fate of relics often continues beyond excavation. Due to their enduring spiritual potency, relics do not become inert archaeological objects but remain active agents, shaping religious practice, institutional identity, and cultural memory through curation, transfer, and veneration.

This dynamic was evident following the 1992 decision by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church to canonize 38 saints, including the martyrs of Niculițel and Halmyris. At that time, only the Niculițel crypt had been excavated⁷¹. After the Halmyris discovery, the remains of Epictetus and Astion were transferred — first to the Celic-Dere Monastery for anthropological analysis, then to the Archiepiscopal

⁷⁰ Zahariade 2001-2003, 149-154.

⁷¹ Rusu 1992.

Cathedral of Tomis, and ultimately, in 2008, to the monastery church bearing their names near Halmyris⁷².

Shortly after their official recognition, the relics were ritually disseminated. In 2010, fragments of the Halmyris martyrs were gifted to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Bucharest, symbolizing ecumenical respect and shared heritage of the undivided Church. Bishop Visarion of Tulcea facilitated the transfer in response to a request by Archbishop Ioan Robu. Over time, relics were distributed to other churches in Romania, and to a lesser extent, to communities abroad – including Moldova, Spain, Germany, and Canada⁷³.

The practice of relic giving can be regarded as a form of expressive or symbolic gift, which is morally acceptable within the church, as it avoids historical precedents of monetary contamination⁷⁴. This act embodies a *bonding value*, which transcends mere economic value, reinforcing social ties and fostering spiritual kinship between the donor and the recipient⁷⁵. Martyrs remains function as *tie-signs* (signals that create feelings of *we-ness*) and their gifting strengthens the relationship between the parties involved in the realm of ecclesiastical diplomacy. Joint veneration ceremonies involving relics act as public affirmations of shared beliefs. The wooden reliquaries containing the remains of the two martyrs of Halmyris become itinerant on the occasion of numerous feasts, traveling across the country to various churches. Such occasions enable Christians to engage in worship at these sites while serving as narrative moments to consolidate the martyrs' identity and stories within the larger community's spiritual life. The act of coming together to venerate the relics serves to solidify the bonds within the community and to empower the group as a collective entity, with shared beliefs and goals. This collective agency is expressed through communal rituals, joint pilgrimages and shared religious experiences, which serve to strengthen the community's cohesion.

The case of Tropaeum Traiani illustrates how the perceived sanctity of relics can transcend formal ecclesiastical recognition. Although the basilica and crypt were

⁷² <https://basilica.ro/sf-epictet-si-astion-au-fost-sarbatoriti-la-manastirea-halmyris-in-apropriere-de-locul-unde-au-fost-martirizati/> (accessed 28.02.2025; basilica.ro is the official website of the Basilica News Agency, which serves as the online news service of the Romanian Patriarchate).

⁷³ <https://ziarullumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/stiri/vecernie-ortodoxa-la-catedrala-patriarhala-incheierea-saptamanii-de-rugaciune-pentru-unitatea-crestinilor-34610.html> (accessed 28.02.2025; Ziarul Lumina is the official daily newspaper of the Romanian Patriarchate). The speech and the presentation of the relics can be viewed on YouTube as well (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhyhsoPJ_U&ab_channel=ChAlexandru; accessed 28.02.2025).

⁷⁴ For this phenomenon see Geary 1986; Mayr 2000, 71-92.

⁷⁵ Godbout 1998, 173-195.

identified, and anthropological analysis conducted as early as the 1970s, it was not until 2007 that the Romanian Orthodox Church, through Archbishop Teodosie of Tomis, formally requested custody of the remains. Initially transferred to the Cave of Saint Andrew the Apostle Monastery, the relics were soon moved to Derwent Monastery, and finally, in 2012, to a newly established monastery near their original discovery site, where they now rest in a dedicated crypt beneath the church.⁷⁶ These relocations serve to illustrate the ongoing and evolving significance of these remains, reflecting their powerful role within both the local and broader religious contexts. The relics attract a considerable number of pilgrims. This influx of believers occurs despite the fact that the martyrs have not been officially recognized or canonized by ecclesiastical authorities. Their ability to draw a large number of devotees highlights a phenomenon where the intrinsic sanctity of relics creates a sense of reverence and connection among the faithful, independent of formal church validation.

To reinforce the broader ritual logic of martyrial presence across the region in Late Antiquity, several sites from the Balkans provide indispensable comparative evidence. These case studies not only align with the material, spatial, and ritual treatment of martyrs' remains documented in Scythia, but also reveal the wider regional patterns in the handling, veneration, and spatial embedding of sacred bodies.

At Novae, the spatial arrangement and architectural evolution of the episcopal complex — especially in Basilica B — illustrate a deliberate liturgical strategy closely aligned with relic veneration, even in the absence of surviving relics *in situ*. In the aftermath of the earthquake of 518, a major reconstruction campaign was undertaken, leading to the demolition of the martyrion and the reconfiguration of the eastern section of the main basilica. The hindmost bays of the nave and aisles were reshaped into a square presbytery ending in a new apse and flanked by two lateral rooms: a prothesis in the north and a diaconicon in the south. A new altar partition was erected, enclosing the presbytery on three sides, while an ambo was installed along the axis of the nave. Crucially, part of the southern apse's foundation was constructed over the remnants of the demolished martyrion, signaling a conscious spatial and symbolic reuse of sacred ground⁷⁷. The liturgical program was thus preserved, reframed, and architecturally encoded in a more integrated basilical layout, continuing to sanctify the site of earlier relic deposition.

Even more directly relevant to the cult of relics is the discovery of an *in situ* reliquary embedded beneath the altar slab in another basilica (the so-called minor basilica) associated with the episcopal quarter. The reliquary — a small limestone

⁷⁶ Nedelcu 2016.

⁷⁷ Biernacki 2005; Czerner 2013.

container with a hollowed cavity – was set within a prepared recess in the altar’s base. Though the bone fragment it once contained was later identified as animal⁷⁸, the context of discovery – beneath a sanctified *mensa*, sealed with mortar, and equipped with a rectangular hole interpreted as a pouring channel for liturgical oils – confirms its function as a ritual installation aligned with relic cult practices.

The monastery church on Djanavara Hill near Varna (Odessos, middle of the 5th – early 7th century AD) offers an example of how liturgical space was structured to accommodate and commemorate relics within a fortified monastic church. Central to the liturgical program was a subterranean crypt for relics located beneath the presbyterium. Excavations revealed an underground chamber system carved into a natural cavern and then architecturally reinforced. Even more striking is the arrangement beneath the choir enclosure, where a *confession* – a ritualized sub-altar space – held a multi-nested reliquary ensemble: an alabaster sarcophagus, within which was a silver box wrapped in red cloth, which in turn enclosed a gold reliquary box decorated with precious stones and swastika motifs. This final innermost container held fragments of bone and dusted wood, the latter interpreted as a contact relic from the True Cross⁷⁹. At the heart of the nave stood a circular ambo constructed above a burial vault containing two coffins: one of an adult male, whose body was in a wooden coffin, and a younger male whose bones were in a smaller wooden casket wrapped in embroidered gold cloth (a secondary burial). The human remains found in the tomb are no longer preserved for further inspection⁸⁰.

The fortified nature of the monastery church on Djanavara Hill, with spiral staircases, defensive platforms, and enclosed galleries, suggests that the relics were not only sacred but required physical protection, likely due to the instability and raids along the frontier during the 5th-6th centuries. The basilica’s design, in which space for the baptistery, catechumenate, and reliquary vaults were all structurally integrated, reveals a liturgical choreography built around the presence of relics.

The martyrial cult during Late Antiquity was anchored in a material and ritual framework that fused theological doctrine with spatial and sensory experience. Recent published materials focusing on the discoveries from Niš (ancient Naissus) and Zaldapa illustrate that martyrial remains were not simply commemorated but materially embedded within the architectural, liturgical, and symbolic systems of Early Christian communities. Their postmortem manipulation—be it concealment, translation, or elevation—was fundamental to shaping Christian topography and sacred authority.

⁷⁸ Biernacki 2013, 36.

⁷⁹ Bojadjiev 1995.

⁸⁰ Tenekedjiev 2022, 242-243.

The martyrium complex of Jagodin Mala in Niš preserves a complete liturgical and spatial sequence centered on the veneration of a martyr — likely Syneros or Irenaeus. The architectural ensemble includes a hypogeum tomb complex, later subsumed into a 5th-6th century basilica, with well-preserved ritual furnishings. These include a *fenestella*—a narrow window allowing symbolic access to the relics—a ciborium pedestal, and a *mensa martyrum* placed before the entrance to the martyr's chamber. Of particular interest is the geometric and theological integration between the martyrium and basilica: the longitudinal axis of the tomb aligns precisely with the altar apse of the overlying church. The space above the martyr's grave functioned as the liturgical and architectural nucleus of the entire complex. The presence of burned glass fragments, oil lamps, and colored tesserae from an overhead chandelier suggest an active cult with lighting rituals and possibly Eucharistic celebration directly over the relics⁸¹.

An equally revealing case is the cathedral at Zaldapa, where recent excavations have redefined our understanding of the basilica's crypt and its ritual choreography. In Basilica No. 1, a newly discovered pit-crypt beneath the mosaic bema suggests a deliberate placement of relics directly under the altar table. The crypt, carved into natural loess without masonry casing, was concealed beneath a polychrome mosaic featuring geometric and Christological symbols — most notably Solomon's knots, X-crosses, and interlacing circles — which echo martyrdom and Eucharistic sacrifice. The absence of access stairs suggests a ritually inaccessible sanctity, where relics were hidden but ritually activated through their spatial position beneath the altar table⁸². The dimensions and location suggest intentionality consistent with relic deposition. Yet, the absence of skeletal material introduces an interpretive ambiguity: Was the pit never used? Were relics once present and later removed? Or was the very architectural mimicry of a crypt sufficient to invoke sanctity and authority?

Further evidence from Early Christian Macedonia expands the understanding of how relics were embedded—both materially and symbolically — into ecclesiastical landscapes. Particularly striking is the evidence from Bargala, where at least five reliquaries — crafted from marble, ivory, and andesite — have been recovered. These include a marble sarcophagus-shaped casket, an ivory box, and a stone container bearing fishbone decoration—a motif echoed in the liturgical furniture of the basilica's interior. Some of these caskets were discovered in rooms adjacent to the episcopal residence, one of which contained human cranial fragments, reinforcing the interpretation of a martyrial or episcopal cultic function. Additional altar-focused structures, including recesses beneath altar tables (both cross-shaped and rectangular),

⁸¹ Rakocija 2022.

⁸² Atanassov, Valeriev 2021.

have been uncovered at multiple sites such as Stobi, Ohrid, and Prilep, where anthropological traces—including burnt human bones — were recorded. At St. Erasmus in Ohrid, for example, traces of cremated human bones beneath the altar table strongly suggest a locally maintained relic cult, further supported by the construction of a basilica dedicated to the missionary saint at the site of his presumed activity. These recesses and “crypt-reliquaries” formed part of a spatial grammar of sanctity, where architectural embedding beneath the altar functioned as a marker of divine intercession and ecclesiastical legitimacy. Moreover, pectoral reliquary crosses (*encolpia*) — portable containers of relics, typically worn by clergy or devout laity such as those found at sites like Demir Kapija, and Strumica, attest to a mobile relic cult that complemented fixed architectural relic installations. Their widespread distribution suggests the interaction between institutionalized relic placement and personal devotional practices, reinforcing the notion that relics operated across multiple scales of Christian religious life⁸³.

This material embedding of martyrial remains into the architectural and liturgical core of Christian space — whether through in situ burial, crypt deposition, or altar concealment — was not the only mode through which sanctity was structured. The case of Sirmium reveals another dimension of the postmortem fate of martyrs: that of translation, absence, and textual substitution⁸⁴. While martyrdom narratives such as the *Passio Irenaei*, *Passio Sereni*, *Passio Anastasiae*, and *Passio Demetrii* survive only in later literary redactions, archaeological evidence of cemeterial basilicas and funerary inscriptions confirm a material cult presence in the 4th to 6th centuries. Dedicated basilicas were constructed near necropoleis, with elite patrons supporting their development.

What is particularly notable in Sirmium is the posthumous trajectory of relics. The remains of St. Anastasia were transferred first to Constantinople and later to Zadar, while those of St. Demetrius were likely relocated to Thessaloniki, where his cult was assimilated into the urban and liturgical identity of the city. These transfers were not mere logistical acts but were often accompanied by liturgical reframing and hagiographic adaptation, showing that martyrial identity could be reshaped through movement. Yet even when relics were removed — or never enshrined in the first place — veneration persisted through textual and ritual means. As in the Romanian cases of Halmyris and Tropaeum Traiani, where relics were only later recovered and incorporated into institutional liturgies, Sirmium demonstrates how martyrial sanctity could survive and even expand without physical presence. Oral traditions, later fixed in martyrological texts, acted as vehicles of sanctification and collective memory. In

⁸³ Filipova 2012.

⁸⁴ Smirnov-Brkić 2024.

this sense, Sirmium complements the spatial and material cults discussed previously by highlighting an equally powerful process: the ritual efficacy of relic absence, mediated through narrative continuity, liturgical practice, and institutional memory. The martyrial body, in this broader context, was not a fixed or passive object but a mobile and adaptive agent of ecclesial, civic, and spiritual identity.

The case of Sirmium brings into focus a key dimension in the construction of martyrial identity: the fact that relics and the narratives surrounding them are not fixed, but mobile and mutable. Their sanctity may endure in the absence of physical remains, preserved instead through textual continuity and ritual commemoration. Whether enshrined in basilicas, transferred across the empire, or invoked in liturgy without bodily presence, martyrs' identities were shaped as much by the stories told about them as by their bones. These commemorative and institutional practices not only sustained but redefined martyrdom across time and space. It is in this context of relational sanctity, institutional reinterpretation, and narrative reconfiguration that one must turn to the deeper question of what martyrdom represents: not merely death in faith, but a confrontation with structures of violence and power.

The identity of early Christian martyrs must be viewed not merely through the lens of passive suffering, but as acts of autonomous resistance within contexts of institutionalized violence. As Recla argues, traditional portrayals obscure the deeper agency exercised by martyrs, who actively chose to confront systems of oppression. Drawing on Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* — a figure excluded from legal protection yet subjected to sovereign violence — Recla identifies martyrs as similarly marginalized. However, unlike *homo sacer*, the martyr's defiance marks a deliberate act of self-assertion, not dispossession. Recla introduces the concept of *homo profanus*, a figure who refuses institutional control and redefines the terms of death. In this view, martyrdom becomes a form of *autothanatos* — a self-determined death that asserts and completes identity. The martyr's body becomes the medium through which the state inscribes its authority, but also the space where that authority is challenged. Institutions — including religious ones — must control how violence is interpreted to preserve legitimacy. By reframing voluntary death as martyrdom, the Church co-opted potentially subversive actions into narratives that reinforced its moral authority⁸⁵.

This transformation becomes evident after Constantine's conversion, when martyrdom evolved from a radical act of defiance into a state-sanctioned ideal. Martyrs were no longer outside the institution — they became central to it. Their stories were retold to serve imperial agendas, and their physical remains — relics —

⁸⁵ Атанасов 2012; Recla 2014a; Recla 2014b.

became anchors of identity, continuity, and legitimacy for emerging Christian communities.

Martyrdom, therefore, serves dual roles: as a symbol of resistance and as a tool of institutional consolidation⁸⁶. Early Christian leaders, as reputational entrepreneurs⁸⁷, actively shaped martyr narratives and their material legacy to construct cohesive identities and doctrines. The embodied martyr thus becomes both a site of personal transcendence and a resource for institutional power, where death affirms not only the self but also the structures that narrate and preserve it.

As it has been highlighted in the current study, the martyrial bodies, through their physicality and the narratives surrounding them, played a crucial role in the process of identity (re)construction of such revered figures in both ancient and modern times. The figures of the martyrs represent a convergence of historical narratives, material culture, and human experience, as evidenced by their role as witnesses to the faith through their suffering and ultimate sacrifice. Consequently, martyrs' identity (or identities) exhibits a polysemous nature, encompassing a multitude of dimensions that reflect the interaction between individual agency and the broader structures of institutional power, whether secular or religious.

THE AGENCY OF MARTYR REMAINS: THEOLOGICAL RECOGNITION, SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY, AND INSTITUTIONAL POWER

The question of martyr agency is central to understanding how human remains become embedded within religious, historical, and scientific frameworks⁸⁸.

⁸⁶ Recla 2022.

⁸⁷ The term *reputational entrepreneurs*, introduced by Fine, refers to individuals or groups who actively shape, manage, and propagate narratives about people, events, or institutions to control public perception and historical memory. These actors work to enhance, diminish, or reshape reputations according to their interests, using various rhetorical and institutional strategies to ensure that their interpretation prevails as the dominant narrative. A reputational entrepreneur operates within a contested discursive space, where multiple interpretations of the past compete for legitimacy. Their ability to establish a lasting reputation depends on three key factors: 1. motivation: the entrepreneur has a vested interest in promoting or discrediting a particular reputation, often tied to political, ideological, or institutional goals; 2. narrative facility: the entrepreneur possesses the skill to construct and disseminate a compelling, coherent, and emotionally resonant narrative. This involves selecting specific *memory anchors*, evocative symbols, or key events that simplify complex histories into digestible forms. 3. institutional placement: the entrepreneur operates within a position of influence, allowing their narrative to gain credibility and widespread acceptance (Fine 1996).

⁸⁸ For agency and the dead see Cantwell 1990; Harper 2010; Crandall, Martin 2014; Nafte 2015; Penfold-Mounce 2018; Guhin 2024.

Martyrdom has long been a foundational element of Christian identity, both in the past and present, serving as a theological cornerstone for the Church while simultaneously becoming a subject of interest for anthropologists, historians, and bioarcheologists. Each field — whether theological, historical, or anthropological — constructs and interprets martyrs differently, contributing to a multiplicity of martyr identities rather than a single, unified status.

Martyrdom is not an inherent state of the body; rather, it is a socially constructed and institutionally mediated status, shaped by religious, historical, and sometimes, scientific interpretations. The remains of a martyr, once interred in a grave or crypt, do not automatically retain their martyr status over time. Instead, they are continuously reaffirmed as martyrs through rituals, textual affirmations, social engagement, and, at times, anthropological/forensic analysis⁸⁹. Their posthumous significance is not intrinsic to their bones but is activated by the institutions that claim, interpret, and display them. The dead do not act alone but are made to act through *agentification*, a process in which relics, remains, and historical figures are given agency through institutional validation⁹⁰. The dead only retain meaning when institutions actively invoke them — whether through theological canonization, forensic identification, or historical narration. In this sense, martyr relics do not inherently “speak” or “confirm” anything; they are interpreted and framed by those who engage with them. Their perceived agency is not self-contained but is shaped by the ways they are positioned within theological, cultural, and scientific frameworks.

This activation occurs within specific institutional structures, each with its own epistemological logic. The Church confers sanctity through canonization, relic authentication, and liturgical use. Historians and archeologists locate martyr remains within documented persecutions and burial contexts, reinforcing historical plausibility. Bioarcheologists analyze skeletal trauma and burial conditions to establish violent death but cannot define spiritual martyrdom. These domains, while interrelated, operate in parallel rather than in unison, constructing distinct but intersecting martyr identities. Thus, rather than assuming that martyrs possess agency inherently, it is more precise to say that agency is conferred upon them by those who interpret and mobilize their remains.

⁸⁹ This aspect seems to be significant at times, as the expertise of anthropologists has been sought in multiple instances by ecclesiastical institutions that either possess relics or lay claim to them — such as in the cases from Dobruja, but not limited to them (see for example Dedouit et al. 2014, 9: *the priests of the church of Santa Maria in Silvis in Serracapriola, Italy, asked the University of Foggia to study skeletal remains which they believed to be those of San Fortunato*).

⁹⁰ Guhin 2024.

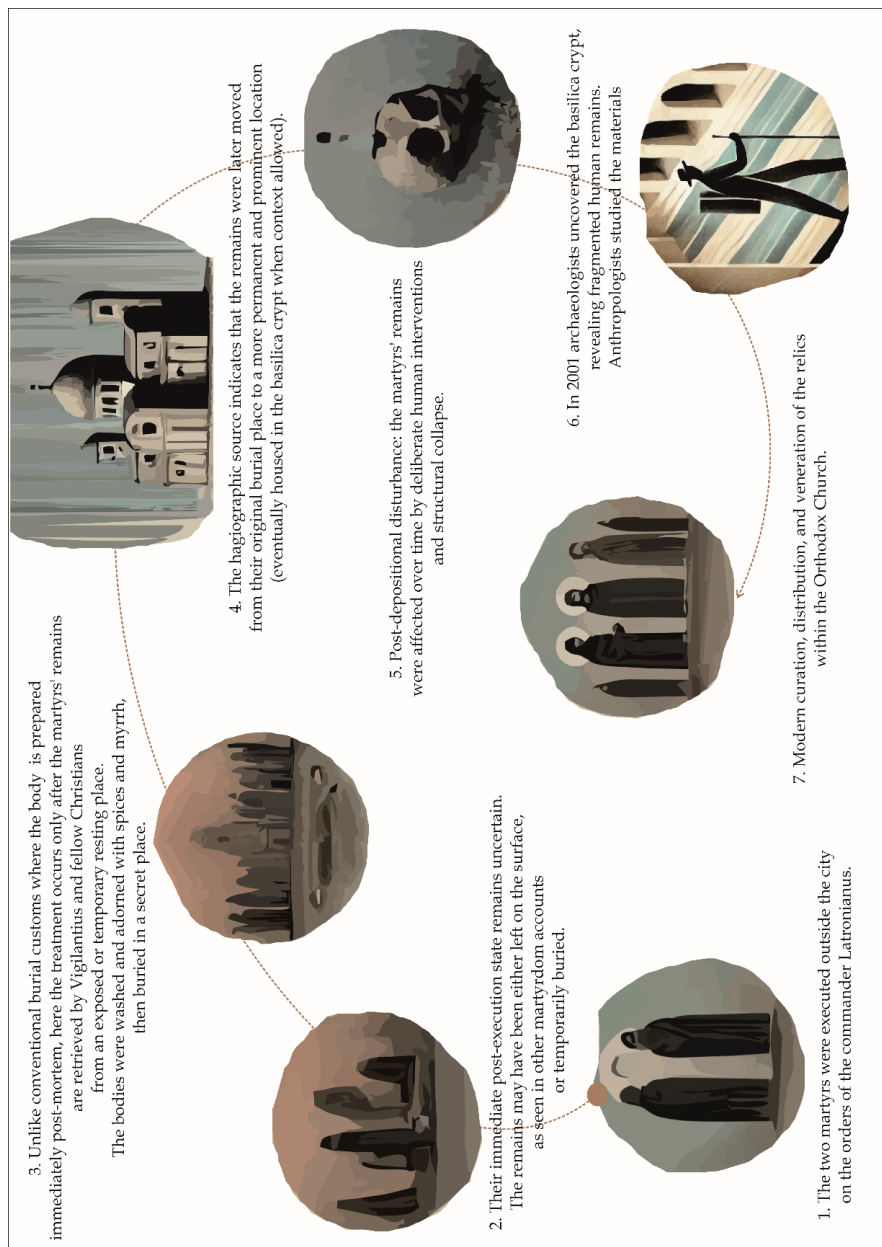


Fig. 4. Diagram based on the Weiss-Krejci model illustrating the trajectory of the remains of Epictetus and Astion from their execution to contemporary veneration within the Orthodox Church.

The notion of *abducted agency* helps to explain why martyrs are continuously reactivated as significant historical and religious figures rather than passively retaining their identity over time. Harper argues that dead bodies do not act autonomously; instead, their agency is abducted by the living, who assign meaning, purpose, and authority to their remains⁹¹. In this framework, martyr relics are not inherently powerful, nor do they possess intrinsic meaning — rather, their significance is produced through the ways they are engaged with by institutions, scholars, and worshippers. This means that the agency of a martyr's body is contingent upon its interaction with external forces (such as religious institutions, historical and political discourses, and scientific engagement).

Under such circumstances, one central ambiguity in martyr studies is whether their remains actively create identity or whether they receive identity through institutional processes. The body of a martyr is both a material object and an agentic entity, yet its power and significance are not inherent — they depend entirely on how the remains are interpreted, mobilized, and authenticated within different epistemic frameworks. Theological recognition of martyrdom does not emerge from scientific verification alone. The Orthodox Church, for example, recognizes figures as martyrs through hagiographic traditions, ecclesiastical rulings, and sustained popular veneration — a process that operates independently from the methodologies of archaeology or anthropology. The scientific study of human remains, on the other hand, is concerned with biological sex, age, health conditions, and evidence of violent death — seeking to establish historical plausibility rather than theological sanctity. These two epistemic frameworks do not necessarily overlap, and while they may reinforce one another, they function in parallel rather than in unison. A set of remains exhibiting signs of decapitation, for example, may align with martyr narratives, but this does not automatically confer the status of a religious martyr.

The case of Epictetus and Astion at Halmyris presents an example of how martyr identity is not simply inherited from religious tradition but is actively constructed, negotiated, and reaffirmed through a recursive process between history, (bio)archaeology, and religious institutions. Epictetus and Astion were canonized as saints by the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1992⁹², nearly a decade before the discovery of the crypt at Halmyris in 2001 that introduced a new material dimension to their veneration. This instance highlights how martyrdom is not a self-evident status derived from physical evidence alone, but an institutionally constructed identity. The remains found at Halmyris did not create the martyrdom

⁹¹ Harper 2010.

⁹² Rusu 1992.

of Epictetus and Astion; rather, they were incorporated into an already existing framework of recognition.

The recognition and formalization of Epictetus and Astion's status as martyrs by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church back in 1992 was not prompted by the discovery of their remains; rather, it reflected a broader ecclesiastical effort to strengthen connections between historical martyrdom and contemporary Orthodox identity. In this sense, the decision of the Holy Synod was an act of institutional validation rather than discovery — it solidified their place within Orthodox veneration, ensuring that their names and memory would be formally commemorated in liturgical practice. Thus, the sequence of recognition in the case of Epictetus and Astion is distinct from cases where martyr relics are discovered and subsequently canonized. Here, sainthood preceded the remains, and the material discovery became an additional layer of authentication rather than the foundational basis for recognition.

The excavation at Halmyris, which unearthed two skeletons believed to belong to Epictetus and Astion, provided a new material framework within which their martyrdom could be understood. Bioarchaeological analysis of the remains revealed the following key findings: both skeletons belonged to adult males, consistent with the historical records of Epictetus (a priest) and Astion (a monastic disciple); one individual exhibited clear signs of decapitation, which aligns with the narrative of their execution under Roman persecution; both individuals had peri-mortem trauma, suggesting they were subjected to violent death; evidence of chronic illness was found in both skeletons, which could indicate long-term suffering prior to their deaths.

On the surface, these findings appeared to confirm elements of the martyrdom narrative. However, bioarchaeological evidence alone does not establish sainthood — it only provides historical plausibility. The skeletal remains suggest violent death, but they do not inherently reveal why these individuals were executed or whether their deaths were motivated by religious persecution. The Church canonizes based on faith, tradition, and historical continuity — not anthropological/forensic results alone. The discovery of the remains at Halmyris did not transform Epictetus and Astion into martyrs — rather, it added a physical dimension to their already established status, reinforcing their presence within Orthodox memory.

This process forms what can be called a loop of recognition, where different domains of knowledge — religious tradition, historical documentation, archaeological excavation, and bioarchaeological analysis — interact to shape the perception of martyr identity.

The sequence unfolds as follows:

1. Religious tradition precedes discovery: Epictetus and Astion were already venerated within the Orthodox Church. Their names were recorded in Christian texts, and their martyrdom was commemorated in liturgical practice, securing their place in ecclesiastical memory.
2. Archaeological findings offer material support: the excavation at Halmyris provided physical remains that fit the historical period and context of their recorded deaths, linking textual tradition to a tangible burial site.
3. Scientific analysis provides plausibility, not proof: anthropological examinations confirmed the remains belonged to two adult males who had suffered violent deaths, including decapitation — injuries consistent with the known narrative of their execution.
4. Historical correlation strengthens the narrative: scholars compared the forensic findings with ancient sources, reinforcing the plausibility of the identification and situating it within the broader history of Roman persecution of Christians.
5. Ecclesiastical recognition is reaffirmed: the Orthodox Church, having already canonized Epictetus and Astion, now had physical remains that could be incorporated into their veneration, further solidifying their presence in Orthodox religious life.

The loop is self-reinforcing because it operates within distinct yet overlapping epistemic regimes, each with its own methods of validation and truth-making⁹³. Archaeology and bioarchaeology function within an empirical, evidence-based epistemology, where material remains are analyzed through forensic methods, stratigraphy, and comparative studies to establish historical plausibility. However, these disciplines do not — and cannot — confirm martyrdom in a theological sense, as martyrdom is fundamentally a category of meaning embedded in a doctrinal and hagiographic epistemology, governed by ecclesiastical authority, sacred tradition, and theological discourse. Similarly, canonization does not necessarily require

⁹³ The concept of epistemic regimes refers to structured systems of knowledge production, validation, and dissemination, governed by rules, norms, and institutional frameworks that define what counts as legitimate knowledge within a particular domain. Epistemic regimes emphasize the broader regulatory and authoritative structures that shape how knowledge is generated, assessed, and applied (Gläser et al. 2018; Feldbacher-Escamilla 2020). Epistemic regimes are not uniform or static; they vary depending on the field of inquiry, the institutions involved, and the socio-political environment in which they operate.

physical remains, as sainthood is conferred through an institutional-religious epistemic framework, which prioritizes historical accounts, oral tradition, and theological significance over material verification.

Thus, rather than asking whether martyrs produce identities, it is more accurate to ask: Who is interpreting them, and for what purpose? Martyr identity is not a stable, biologically verifiable condition — it is a layered construct, shaped by intersecting systems of theological recognition, historical continuity, and scientific plausibility. The same set of remains can function differently depending on their institutional context: in a church reliquary, they serve as sacred objects of veneration; in an anthropology laboratory, they become skeletal evidence to be analyzed; in a historical text, they are part of a larger narrative of persecution and faith. Rather than assuming that martyrs possess agency inherently, it is more precise to argue that agency is abducted, assigned, and sustained through the continuous processes of institutional validation and social reactivation.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the analysis of skeletal remains and funerary contexts, this study aims at reconstructing the bioarchaeological signatures of martyrdom, considering both the physical trauma endured and the elements embedded in the burial practices and how these elements contribute to the martyrs' narratives and identities. Contextual analysis of the human remains, combined with a scrutiny of martyrdom accounts and that of modern canonization processes and the subsequent veneration of the remains by the Christian communities, highlights the interplay between religious practices and identity (re)construction in both ancient and modern settings.

The study of Christian martyrial remains has advanced significantly through the integration of bioarchaeological, forensic, and imaging techniques, allowing for a more critical assessment of relic authenticity. While historical sources and hagiographic accounts have long shaped the identification of martyr remains, modern methods — including osteological analysis, perimortem trauma assessment, radiocarbon dating (AMS), ancient DNA (aDNA) analysis, and multislice computed tomography (MSCT) — have refined our understanding of the biological profiles, causes of death, and postmortem modifications of these remains.

The analyzed remains come from two distinct categories:

1. *In situ* burials with archaeological integrity, such as the martyrs of Halmyris (Epictet and Astion), Niculițel, and Tropaeum Traiani, where skeletal remains were discovered within their funerary contexts. These cases provide strong

archaeological association, allowing for more reliable bioarchaeological analysis⁹⁴.

2. Translated relics and curated remains, such as St. Nazarius, St. Attinia and St. Greciniana, Vodnjan Monastery relics, and catacomb saints (e.g., St. Candidus and St. Clare), which were exhumed centuries after death and often modified for veneration. These cases frequently present challenges related to postmortem reconstruction, misattribution, and chronological discrepancies⁹⁵.

The degree of preservation varies considerably across cases. In situ burials generally retain more forensic integrity, though some, like Tropaeum Traiani, were disturbed postmortem. In contrast, translated relics were often modified to enhance their visual and structural integrity for veneration. The relics of St. Candidus and St. Clare, analyzed through radiographic imaging, exemplify these alterations. Both skeletons were arranged in anatomically correct positions, but a metal rod-and-frame construction was used to hold the bones together. An iron rod connected the skull to the thorax, with wires securing the bones at the joints, ensuring a stable and visually coherent presentation. Additionally, textiles, jewelry, and ornamental elements overlapped parts of the skeletons, further complicating forensic assessment. These structural reinforcements, while facilitating public display and religious veneration, obscure the natural anatomical relationships of the remains, making it difficult to assess their original integrity or potential perimortem trauma⁹⁶.

A fundamental step in the examination of relics involves establishing the biological profile of individuals, including sex, age-at-death, and stature. These assessments usually rely on cranial and pelvic morphology⁹⁷ (where available) and postcranial measurements for stature estimation⁹⁸. Most of the examined cases confirm adult males, consistent with the historical targeting of Christian men under Roman persecution. Exceptions include St. Attinia and St. Greciniana (Volterra). However, despite historical sources arguing that Attinia was beheaded while Greciniana was stabbed in the chest, the paleopathological examination of the remains did not provide osteological confirmation of these executions. The radiographic and macroscopic examination of the cervical vertebrae and ribs revealed no perimortem

⁹⁴ Mirițoiu, Soficaru 2007; Mirițoiu, Soficaru 2009; Mirițoiu[†], Soficaru 2022.

⁹⁵ Alterauge et al. 2016; Biehler-Gomez et al. 2021; Giuffra, Vitiello, Fornaciari 2021.

⁹⁶ Alterauge et al. 2016.

⁹⁷ Buikstra, Ubelaker 1994; Walker 2008.

⁹⁸ Pearson 1899.

trauma, contradicting the expected injuries for beheading or chest stabbing⁹⁹. In the case of Vodnjan Monastery (Croatia), the minimum number of individuals (MNI) was 22, including 9 males, 3 females, and 7 children, suggesting that these relics were assembled rather than representing a singular event of martyrdom¹⁰⁰.

A key aspect of anthropological/forensic analysis in martyrial studies is the examination of trauma, focusing on sharp-force injuries, blunt-force impacts, and skeletal fractures that may align with historically documented execution practices. The methods used in such analyses include macroscopic examination of skeletal trauma, radiographic imaging (X-ray and CT scans) to detect fractures not visible to the naked eye, and histological or microscopic analysis to differentiate perimortem injuries from postmortem damage.

Some cases have yielded strong osteological evidence of execution, aligning with historical accounts of persecution. Among all the cases analyzed, excluding the younger individual from Halmyris, who exhibited clear evidence of decapitation at the level of the atlas vertebra, and the individuals from Tropaeum Traiani, where some displayed perimortem forearm amputations and one had a sharp, well-defined cut through the axis vertebra, definitive signs of perimortem trauma were confirmed in only two additional instances among all the analyzed cases. The first concerns the alleged remains of Apostle James Alphaeus, housed in the Chapel of the Relics of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, Spain. The skull exhibits two sharp-force injuries localized in the frontal and parietal regions, consistent with wounds inflicted by a cutting blunt instrument, such as a sword. The trauma pattern aligns with the "death by three strikes" execution method, in which an initial blow incapacitates, a second strike delivers a fatal wound, and a third ensures decapitation. This execution style contradicts traditional accounts of James Alphaeus' death, which describe stoning or blunt force trauma, and instead bears striking similarities to the execution method attributed to James the Greater. The findings raise questions about the authenticity of the relic's attribution and its historical context¹⁰¹.

The second case pertains to the alleged remains of Saint Nazarius from San Nazaro in Brolo, Milan. Osteological analysis revealed perimortem cut marks on the left mastoid process and both occipital condyles, indicating decapitation in an erect position, a finding consistent with hagiographical records of his martyrdom. Additionally, postmortem manipulation was evident, as the cranium had been improperly reassembled, likely by *fossores*—members of the gravedigger guild

⁹⁹ Giuffra, Vitiello, Fornaciari 2021, 338-339.

¹⁰⁰ Bašić et al. 2022, 17.

¹⁰¹ Serulla 2022.

responsible for exhumations—who lacked anatomical expertise. This resulted in several misplacements, including an occipital condyle positioned as a zygomatic bone and teeth inserted into incorrect sockets¹⁰².

By contrast, in other cases, despite strong historical traditions asserting execution, forensic assessments have failed to identify perimortem injuries consistent with known methods of capital punishment. The lack of such evidence for the remains of St. Attinia and St. Greciniana in Volterra was mentioned earlier. For San Fortunato, a presumed 3rd century martyr from Italy, forensic examination failed to reveal any skeletal trauma indicative of violent execution, despite historical accounts suggesting he suffered martyrdom¹⁰³. The study of St. Christine and St. Augustine relics from St. Gotthard Parish Church of Mosonmagyaróvár, Hungary, recorded no perimortem trauma or skeletal damage, casting doubt on their traditional identification as martyrs¹⁰⁴.

Table 1 structures and contextualizes all these findings reported in anthropological literature, offering a comparative framework that highlights the disparities in forensic evidence across different martyrial relics. As already stated, the three instances from Scythia differ significantly from other relics, particularly those that were translated, curated, or artificially reinforced over the centuries, representing some of the most archaeologically secure cases of Christian persecution in Late Antiquity.

Table 1. Anthropological Evidence and Assessment of Early Christian Martyr Relics

Case	Age and sex	Cause of death	Validation of attribution (or lack thereof)
Epictet and Astion (Murighiol, Romania); discovered <i>in situ</i> (Mirițoiu, Soficaru 2007; 2009)	M, ~65 y.o. (Epictet), 30-40 y.o. (Astion)	Evidence of blunt-force trauma to the scapulae and mandible, consistent with historical accounts of torture for skeleton 1 (Epictetus); evidence of decapitation for skeleton 2 (Astion): the atlas vertebra exhibits a clean cut through the inferior articular facets, indicating a perimortem beheading with a sharp weapon.	Strongly supported attribution as Christian martyrs. Historical sources (<i>Acta Sanctorum</i>) describe their arrest, torture, and execution by beheading under Diocletian’s persecution, aligning with forensic evidence. The skeletons were found <i>in situ</i> in a crypt beneath the altar of the Late Roman Basilica at Halmyris, reinforcing their association with early Christian veneration.

¹⁰² Biehler-Gomez et al. 2021.

¹⁰³ Dedouit et al. 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Kristóf et al. 2015.

<p>Zoticos, Attalos, Kamasis, Philippos (Niculițel, Romania) – discovered <i>in situ</i> (briefly discussed in Mirițoiu, Nicolăescu-Plopșor 1978).</p>	<p>M, 45-55 y.o. (S1), 50-55 y.o. (S2), 40-45 y.o. (S3), ≤35 y.o. (S4).</p>	<p>Unknown</p>	<p>Confirmed as martyrs based on epigraphic evidence and burial context. The Niculițel crypt contains an inscription identifying the individuals as martyrs of Christ.</p>
<p>Five anonymous martyrs (Adamclisi, Romania); discovered <i>in situ</i> (Mirițoiu, Nicolăescu-Plopșor 1978; Mirițoiu, Soficaru 2022)</p>	<p>M, from 25 to 35 y.o.</p>	<p>Perimortem sharp-force trauma; individuals exhibit evidence of forearm amputations, with at least one confirmed decapitation. Sectioning marks on the axis (C2) indicate a fatal beheading. Additional cut marks suggest limb dismemberment, possibly as a punitive measure or ritualized execution.</p>	<p>Attribution as Christian martyrs is plausible but remains unconfirmed. Designated as martyrs based on the context of the discovery (in the crypt of a basilica located <i>intra urbem</i>) and the forensic evidence of perimortem trauma, though no epigraphic or historical inscriptions confirm their identity. Not officially recognized as martyrs by the Romanian Orthodox Church.</p>
<p>Apostle James Alphaeus, Chapel of the Relics of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, Spain (Serulla 2022)</p>	<p>M, >35 y.o.</p>	<p>Perimortem sharp-force trauma to the skull, consistent with blows from a cutting blunt instrument.</p>	<p>Attribution to James Alphaeus is highly uncertain. Skeletal analysis suggests a violent execution, which is more consistent with historical accounts of James the Greater, who was beheaded in 44, rather than James Alphaeus, who was traditionally stoned or clubbed to death.</p>
<p>Saint Nazarius, Basilica di San Nazaro Maggiore, Milan, Italy (Biehler-Gomez et al. 2021)</p>	<p>M, ~54-70 y.o.</p>	<p>Cut marks identified on the left mastoid process and both occipital condyles suggest the use of a bladed weapon while the individual was in an upright position.</p>	<p>Radiocarbon dating (1610 BP ± 40 years) places the remains in the 3rd-4th century AD, aligning with one tradition that attributes Nazarius' martyrdom to Diocletian's persecution rather than the 1st-century execution under Nero. The dating discrepancy does not definitively disprove the earlier tradition, as younger carbon contamination from postmortem interventions (exhumations, reassembly, resin coatings) may have affected the results. While skeletal evidence supports</p>

			decapitation, postmortem modifications and misassemblies complicate forensic interpretation.
Saint Attinia and Saint Greciniana, Cathedral of Volterra, Italy (Giuffra, Vitiello, Fornaciari 2021)	F, 25-30 y.o. (Attinia), 50-55 y.o. (Greciniana)	No skeletal evidence of perimortem trauma. Historical sources describe execution by beheading and chest impalement, but forensic analysis found no injuries consistent with these methods. Some missing skeletal elements prevent a definitive exclusion of trauma.	Attribution remains uncertain. The hagiographic tradition describing their martyrdom by sword and spear is contradicted by the forensic findings, which reveal no trauma in the cervical vertebrae or ribs. The discovery of an inscription naming the saints supports their historical existence, but multiple postmortem modifications, including artificial restoration of the skeletons and repositioning of teeth, complicate forensic assessment. The difference in age-at-death also contradicts their traditional depiction as young sisters. While their veneration dates back centuries, forensic confirmation of martyrdom is lacking.
St. John the Baptist, Sveti Ivan Monastery, Sozopol, Bulgaria (Kostova et al. 2020; Popkonstantinov, Kostova 2020)	M, adult (exact age unknown)	Not assessable—skeletal remains too fragmentary. Includes a metacarpal, rib fragment, and tooth.	Radiocarbon dating of the metacarpal yielded a 1 st -century date (5-75 cal), aligning with John the Baptist's traditional timeframe. However, ancient DNA (aDNA) analysis was inconclusive due to contamination, and skeletal remains are too limited to confirm identity or cause of death. The presence of an inscribed tufa reliquary referring to St. John and his nativity date (June 24) supports attribution but does not provide definitive proof. The remains were likely brought to the island via Constantinople in the 4 th -5 th

			century. While historical and archaeological context supports the claim, scientific confirmation remains uncertain.
Various Saints, Vodnjan Monastery, Vodnjan, Croatia (Bašić et al. 2022)	M & F, adults and subadults (MNI = 19: 9 males, 3 females, 7 children)	No direct skeletal evidence of martyrdom. No perimortem trauma observed. (Some individuals exhibited osteoarthritis and habitual activity markers, while others had signs of childhood stress.)	Attribution to specific saints remains inconclusive. The relics, originally housed in Venice and transferred to Vodnjan in 1818, are associated with a list of 31 named saints. However, forensic analysis revealed severe co-mingling of remains, poor preservation, and lack of trauma evidence. While osteobiographical data does not exclude the possibility that some remains belong to the named saints, the absence of definitive antemortem records and restrictions on destructive testing (DNA and radiocarbon dating) prevent individual identification.
Saint Paul the Confessor, Vodnjan, Croatia (Mihanović et al. 2017)	M, ~35-57 y.o.	No skeletal trauma detected. Historical records describe his death by strangulation, but the hyoid bone was missing, preventing forensic confirmation. (Moderate osteoarthritis observed, particularly in the spine. Occupational stress markers suggest habitual kneeling and equestrian activity.)	Attribution remains probable but unconfirmed. Osteobiographical data (sex, ancestry, age-at-death, and social status) align with historical descriptions of St. Paul the Confessor, but no definitive markers of strangulation were found. The remains were artificially reassembled for display, complicating forensic interpretation. While historical records document the transportation of his relics from Constantinople to Venice and later to Vodnjan, the absence of direct forensic confirmation limits certainty.
St. Christine & St. Augustine, St. Gotthard Parish Church,	Adult individuals (sex and precise age	No skeletal trauma indicative of violent death. The remains exhibit postmortem fractures and	Attribution to St. Christine and St. Augustine remains uncertain. The relics were donated by Pope Pius VI in

<p>Mosonmagyaróvár, Hungary (Kristóf et al. 2015)</p>	<p>undetermined due to postmortem modifications and preservation conditions).</p>	<p>extensive modifications, including skeletal reassembly, artificial reinforcement, and decorative additions such as gemstones and textiles.</p>	<p>1776 and are recorded as originating from the catacombs of San Lorenzo Fuori le Mura in Rome. The remains underwent significant Baroque-era reconstruction, obscuring forensic analysis. Paleoradiological examination revealed that the skeletons were incomplete, with bones arranged non-anatomically and reinforced with artificial materials. The absence of perimortem injuries contradicts martyrdom claims. While historical documentation supports their veneration, forensic evidence does not confirm violent death or specific individual attribution.</p>
<p>St. Candidus & St. Clare, Historical Museum Blumenstein, Solothurn, Switzerland (Alterauge et al. 2016)</p>	<p>M, 20-40 y.o. (St. Candidus); F, 20-40 y.o. (St. Clare)</p>	<p>No perimortem trauma detected. The remains exhibit significant postmortem modifications, including skeletal reassembly with a metal rod-and-frame construction for display. No forensic evidence of martyrdom.</p>	<p>Attribution to St. Candidus and St. Clare is historically constructed rather than forensically verified. Radiocarbon dating places the remains in Late Antiquity (St. Candidus: 259-415; St. Clare: 128-315), confirming that they originated from the Roman catacombs. However, no direct link exists between these individuals and the historical saints of the same names. The remains were artificially articulated, dressed, and adorned for veneration in the 18th century. The catacomb origin is confirmed, but the assumption that these individuals were martyrs is unsubstantiated.</p>
<p>San Fortunato, Basilica Santa Maria in Silvis, Serracapriola, Italy (Dedouit et al. 2014)</p>	<p>M, ~20-40 y.o.</p>	<p>No skeletal evidence of perimortem trauma. Large defect on the right fronto-temporo-parietal area of the skull, but no indications of weapon-</p>	<p>Attribution remains uncertain. The remains were exhumed from the catacombs of the Pontianus family in Rome and later transferred to Serracapriola in 1726. The</p>

		<p>related injuries. (No evidence of pathological conditions or occupational stress markers.)</p>	<p>tomb inscription identified the individual as 'Fortunatus, a martyr of Christ,' but no direct forensic confirmation of martyrdom exists. The skull exhibited postmortem modifications, including restoration attempts. The absence of radiocarbon dating and DNA analysis limits further verification. While the historical context supports Christian veneration, forensic evidence does not confirm violent death.</p>
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The use of scientific methods specific to anthropology and bioarchaeology involving the detailed examination to determine age, sex, health, and cause of death introduces an element of empirical investigation to the study of martyrs remains and their identities. Identifying particular markers of perimortem violence or the cause of death serves as (forensic) evidence by offering physical corroboration of historical accounts, they operate as signifiers within the semiotic realm of martyrdom. The denotative meaning of a relic, that is to say, its physical characteristics, is enhanced by this forensic evidence. A bone fragment is not simply a bone fragment; it is identified as belonging to a specific individual who suffered particular types of injuries that are consistent with martyrdom. Moreover, the circumstances (context) surrounding the burial and curation of these remains offer further insights. This detailed information lends support to the material authenticity of the relics. Their connotative meaning, their cultural and religious significance, is enhanced when scientific findings are corroborated by hagiographic texts, as well as by other lines of evidence, including the nature of the archaeological context and epigraphic data. The combination of physical remains showing signs of violent death, which serve as signifiers, and the associated concepts, which act as signified, creates a powerful unified sign that convey meanings within its historical, cultural, and religious context¹⁰⁵. Practices of veneration, liturgical uses, and the narratives surrounding the relics all contribute to their significance.

The nature of martyrs' identity is ultimately a matter that extends beyond the institutional control and management of the remains and associated cult. Relics require an audience and are also authenticated by virtue of the attention they

¹⁰⁵ Barthes 1972.

receive¹⁰⁶. This active engagement is based on a reciprocal relationship that exists between the relics and the devotees, whereby each party authenticates the other. The relics are acknowledged as holy objects through the attention and reverence of the faithful, while the latter's faith and piety are validated and strengthened through their interaction with the relics. They are both acted upon and act upon.

As this study has sought to illustrate, establishing martyrs' identity involves a *creation* process that demands careful understanding. Hahn describes this process (*relic-ing*) through three phases¹⁰⁷. In the cases where remains from past times are involved, the entire process occurred twice: once in ancient times and again following the archaeological discovery of the remains. The first step involves gathering the physical remains or artifacts linked to a martyr. Once the objects have been collected, they must be authenticated in order to ascertain their connection to a martyr and the act of martyrdom. This process involves historical and theological research, and sometimes even scientific analysis to confirm the origins and authenticity of the items; the process of identification is not merely an act of verifying the nature of a relic, but also an endeavor to establish its religious and cultural significance. The final phase involves framing the relics in a carefully curated place in a way that highlights their sacred nature while facilitating worship. Understanding context is of paramount importance, because removed from the cultural matrix and environment within which relics were created, they become inert objects devoid of significance, items that carry no fixed code or sign of their meaning¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰⁶ Hahn 2010, 291.

¹⁰⁷ Hahn 2011, 9.

¹⁰⁸ Geary 1990, 5-9; Walsham 2010, 14.

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