

Early Christians and the History of Incarceration

By Associate Professor, Ph.D Matthew Larsen



On the island of Sardinia, a late antique Christian sat inside an old cistern. This cistern had long ago lost its ability to store water. Since then, it had been outfitted with several new features, including holes for about thirty or forty stocks along the walls. The stocks were used to incarcerate prisoners, and this Christian was one of them. As was often the case in Antiquity, the cistern had been repurposed into a prison. There sat this Christian, underground, inside a Roman amphitheater in the city of Cagliari.

We know about this Christian because on the wall he or she scratched a graffito. It was not done by a trained artist, but by someone with lots of time and only a rudimentary tool for scratching into the stone walls. It was the handiwork of a Christian, who was perhaps illiterate (the graffito contains no words, only drawings), but was educated in the scriptures.

The graffito depicts a ship with a cross and Christogram on its mast, pointing to Jesus's crucifixion, so central to the gospel tradition and the letters of Paul. It shows an Alpha and Omega hanging from the ship's crossbeam, pointing to the claim in the Apocalypse of John of Jesus as the beginning and the end. On the

bottom left of the ship's hull are twelve oars coming out from the boat, and a net catching a large fish. These symbolize the twelve apostles, as "fishers of men," with the ship as the church. Above the boat is a large, inverted Chi-Rho, signifying the name of Christ. We do not know how long this person sat there, chained to the wall, but this graffito was perhaps the final, enduring memento of a Christian who died in that amphitheater in Cagliari.

This graffito raises several questions about both the histories of Christianity and of incarceration: What did ancient Roman sites of incarceration look like? What was it like to be a Roman prisoner? How did the experiences of incarceration inform expressions of Christian thought? And how did Christianity help prisoners cope with their incarceration? Together these questions open into a larger, more fundamental question: How are the histories of Christianity and incarceration interrelated?

Mapping ancient incarceration: Two book projects

In January 2021, I began my position at the University of Copenhagen as Associate Professor of New Testament in

the Faculty of Theology in the Section of Biblical Exegesis. Prior to Copenhagen, I served as a faculty member at Yale University and Princeton University, where I was in the Princeton Society of Fellows. My work focuses on the cultural and material histories of ancient Christian communities from the first to fifth centuries, with specialization in archaeology, material culture, and carceral studies.

My current research addresses the topic of incarceration through a series of publications, undergraduate courses (at Princeton, and in the spring 2022 at Copenhagen), research trips, and public-facing scholarship, generously funded by the Mellon Foundation, a Princeton Magic Grant, among others. In addition to a few publications identifying the archaeological remains of Roman prisons, I am completing two book projects: *Ancient Mediterranean Incarceration* (co-authored with Mark Letteney [University of Southern California]) and *Early Christians and Incarceration: A Cultural History*. In *Ancient Mediterranean Incarceration*, my collaborator and I provide an overview of the institution of incarceration across the Mediterranean from 300 B.C. to 600 A.D. My colleague is a Roman historian and archaeologist, and our book is one of ancient history, with the goal of putting the subject of incarceration “on the map” as a field of study, after having been largely overlooked for more than a century, thanks to the publications of Theodor Mommsen’s *Römisches Strafrecht* (1899) and Michel Foucault’s *Surveiller et Punir* (1975).

We are also publishing a companion website, built in Scalar, which will provide students and researchers access to

the complete body of evidence collected, which would be impossible to present in a printed book. Digital humanistic tools play a critical role in our work. We are, for instance, producing interactive 3D models of many archaeological remains of ancient prisons, which can be explored through Virtual Reality headsets. The website will invite readers to dive deeper into the material, with further examples and annotated visual sources adding texture and context to the book’s narrative account.

While our book presents hundreds of new sources, it is not a traditional sourcebook. The book synthesizes major themes, traces developments over time, as well as advances new arguments, such as the idea of penal incarceration was not “born” in the early modern world (such as the Foucauldian paradigm suggests) but had a much older history and was a central aspect of a variety of different cultures from Mediterranean antiquity, not least the Roman imperial context that Christianity emerged.

The incarceration experience of early Christians

My other current book project is a monograph called, *Early Christians and Incarceration: A Cultural History*. It offers a new vantage point on the emergence of Christianity. It is built on the observation that, from its origins into Late Antiquity, Christianity can be productively analyzed as a carceral religion, and that the history of incarceration can be productively analyzed in relation to the emergence of Christianity. It shows how many of the basic elements of Christian theology emerge from the real-and-imagined

lived experience of incarceration, and how the most basic form of punishment in modern Western society – limited-term incarceration – takes shape in part from developing Christian theology.

The archaeological remains of ancient prisons show how late antique Christians interacted with sites of incarceration from a material perspective. One of the key conclusions of the book is that sites of incarceration were often dark, subterranean structures. This insight provides a framework for understanding how prisons often were regarded not only as underground but were a part of the underworld: a liminal space between the living and the dead. The physical structure of ancient prisons, for instance, gives insight into how Christians imagined the architecture of hell. Prisons were underworldly, infernal places of death, and this idea serves as an essential foundation for the rest of the book.

Ideas about incarceration relate to early Christian thought, and vice versa. It is striking how people who have never personally been to prison talked about how incarceration worked and why it mattered. The conceived experience of incarceration informs the development of Christian thought, and how early Christian thought ultimately informs what became (and still are) normative carceral practices. The practice of incarceration was one of the elemental building blocks of early Christian thought. I trace the development of how Christians described prisons as a kind of hell, and how hell was described as a kind of prison. From the narratives of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection in gospel tradition to the developing late antique patron saints of the

prison break, the imagined experience of incarceration was used to make sense of the public execution of Jesus. Jesus's crucifixion is used to make sense of people's carceral experiences, and his resurrection as a kind of prison break.

Considering the "real-and-imagined" experience of early Christian prisoners, I give the "final word" on incarceration not to lawmakers or theologians discussing incarceration, but to the voices of those experiencing it. I discuss well known examples, such as Paul's letter to Philippi, as well as lesser-known prison letters. One short Coptic letter concludes simply, "I am dying in prison, and I don't know why" (*BKU* 1.144). These letters show incarcerated people grasping for tactics of resistance, such as the closing of a letter to two monks from two incarcerated Christian women, who are in prison seemingly due to the monks' debts. If the monks don't pay their debts to get them released, these women threaten to "take six soldiers and come north and ... hand you over and all your affairs, until they are paid" (*O. Mon. Epiph.* 177 – a threat which I take not to be an idle one. Section three concludes by analyzing Christian prison graffiti from Corinth, Caesarea Maritima, Cagliari, and Chemtou. These graffiti offer surprising and diverse perspectives on what it was like to be a Christian prisoner. Far from the graceful words associated with Paul's letters, they echo with words like "God, give the people who threw me in here an awful death" and "God, curse the person who threw me in this lawless place" (*IG IV*² 3, no. 1273, 1277). Offering a different perspective on their experience of incarceration, these graffiti provide an oppor-

tunity to get as close to the “everyday” experience of early Christian prisoners as we are likely to find.

Only an early modern concept?

What are the outcomes this research? First, it offers an alternative history of the emergence of Christianity through a carceral lens. One could argue that it is difficult to understand Christianity without carcerality in an analogous way that it is difficult to understand Judaism without the concept of exile. I show how many of the basic building blocks of Christian theology emerge from the experience of incarceration, and how what came to be the normative mode of punishment in the modern world emerged from developing Christian ideas of hell, punishment, and redemption.

Second, I historicize a previously misunderstood element of the relationship between Christians and the prison. Mamiya Abu-Jamal in his book *Death Blossoms* offers the following words:

Isn't it odd that Christendom – that huge body of humankind that claims spiritual descent from the Jewish carpenter of Nazareth – claims to pray to and adore a being who was a prisoner of Roman power, an inmate of the empire's death row? ... That the majority of its adherents strenuously support the state's execution of thousands of imprisoned citizens? That the overwhelming majority of its judges, prosecutors, and lawyers – those who condemn, prosecute, and sell out the condemned – claim to be fol-

lowers of the fettered, spat-upon, naked God?"

Abu-Jamal gives powerful expression to a contradiction that is perceived by many: the disconnect between the Christian-as-prisoner discourse and the Christian-as-incarcerator discourse prevalent today. I show not only how the Christian-as-prisoner discourse emerged, but also how in Late Antiquity the contradiction had already been internalized and normalized. In this way, my research points to how Christian tradition has supported the modern prison industrial complex, but also how it contains the tools to resist and undo it.

Third, and more generally, my research is disruptive to the prevailing ways of thinking about the history of the prison. My research has the goal of troubling the assumed chronology of the field of carceral studies, renders its overall conceptual framework flawed, and offers a different narrative for how we became modern. It makes strange a practice that has become thoroughly normalized by showing its long, complicated, and, perhaps, unexpected history.

The prevailing orthodoxy, that prisons are an early-modern innovation, has led scholars and policymakers alike to a false and ultimately dangerous proposal: that the problems faced by inmates, by jailers, and by society are novel. The problem is not one of modernity but rather than one of humanity. While looking for the future, we must understand the past.