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ARTICLES

Crafting Mark's Martyrdom and Memory in the Early Coptic Church: *Martyrdom of Mark*

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This article examines the Martyrdom of Mark, a late antique account of Mark's martyrdom, as a cultural artifact that signals the emergence of martyrdom ideology in early Coptic memory. I argue that the composition of this text is an act of agency that serves as a paradigm for resilience and resistance in the Coptic community. After reviewing the elusive historicity of Mark's travels in Alexandria, I analyze Mark's embodiment of martyrdom ideology through a multitude of angles: his manifestation of uniquely Christian suffering, his death's parallels to the destruction of the Serapeum, and his martyrdom's consecration of the landscape and portrayal in the form of an *imitatio Christi*. The article concludes with a reflection on Mark's adoption into the Coptic people through Egyptian burial ritual.

Introduction

Coptic traditions about Mark the evangelist establish him as the communal founder of the Church of Alexandria. More importantly, these traditions establish him as a martyr—even a protomartyr of a Christian community that has faced persistent suffering throughout its sustained history. I argue that the *Martyrdom of Mark*, a classical account of Mark's martyrdom, is a cultural artifact that signals the emergence of martyrdom ideology in early Coptic memory. Understanding the way in which the protomartyr of the Coptic Church is constructed in this late-antique source helps us interpret the structure of that ideology in Coptic thought and practice. The *Martyrdom of Mark* uses Mark's death as a paradigm for the resilience and resistance of the entire Coptic community. The text carefully and intentionally naturalizes Mark to claim him, the apostolic heritage he represents, and his death for Egypt. In the *Martyrdom of Mark*, Mark's death consecrates the Egyptian landscape, and Mark is posthumously adopted into the Coptic people through Egyptian burial ritual. The text also portrays Mark as one enduring a uniquely Christian form of suffering, especially as one whose death is an *imitatio Christi*. In this way, the *Martyrdom of Mark* uses Mark's death to signify not only the sanctity of the martyr, but the sanctity of the entire the Coptic Church as a "Church of Martyrs."

Early Christian Martyrdom Memory Studies

The composition of the *Martyrdom of Mark* exists in the broader context of martyrdom literature creation in the early Christian movement. Accounts of Christian martyrdom are representative of extensive Christian culture and memory-making through textual composition. Elizabeth Castelli suggests that "one might even go so far as to argue that [martyrdom accounts] did not simply *preserve* the story of persecution and martyrdom, but, in fact, *created* it."[1] Martyrdom accounts are not just documentation of a martyrdom event; they are crafted narratives with content, structure, and language adapted to its specific context in order to relay a message and perpetuate its underlying ideology. In this way, individual martyrdom accounts become links to broader "cultural master narratives" and activities that have an audience, retelling, and interpretation.[2] Martyrdom accounts allow a community to produce the history it wants to tell, the messages it wants to portray, and the values it wants to solidify and remember. Groups are able to reclaim and quite literally rewrite their histories, making these texts acts of agency and resistance.

On the individual level, Candida Moss argues that martyrdom narratives (that is, dying heroically) destabilize political structures and act to reclaim agency amid persecution.[3] In scaling Moss's definition from the individual martyr to the broader narrative of Christian martyrdom and memory, we can see how constructing martyrdom accounts is integral in opposing domineering outside forces. Judith Perkins aptly defines martyrs as "cultural performers acting out dramatically the community's belief that to be a Christian was to suffer and die."[4] Since martyrdom accounts both exist in the sphere of collective memory beyond just the individual and are also acts of agency and reclamation of power, these accounts constitute a cultural performance. The idea of a cultural performance situates martyrs in a context of spectacle. Martyrs act out for the broader community what it means to be a member in said community.

These accounts fundamentally rest on the idea of an audience who is just as crucial as the martyr itself. While the martyr is the one actually engaging in the martyrdom act, the audience is who sees and interprets it. The community crafts its martyrdom texts as they seek to ground their memories and memorialize their identity through literature that is reflective of their communal persecution and suffering. It is this audience that determines

1 Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 25.

2 Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 30–34.

3 Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 47.

4 Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 2007), 25.

whether or not the martyrdom account is of value to the community and if it is written down for posterity. These acts of martyrdom are iconic because they are representative of broader communal values. Describing these martyrs as actors of communal values, therefore, shifts the idea of a "martyr" from an isolated event to a revered, imitated role.[5]

Considering the aforementioned idea of martyrdom and cultural performance, we can analyze Mark as an actor in the role of martyr as he is represented in the *Martyrdom of Mark*. Furthermore, we find that Mark is not just an actor, but the first actor of his sort in the Coptic community. I argue that Mark's performance as the legendary martyr in the text relays not only the narrative and messaging of suffering, but also the narrative of resistance that Coptic memory chooses to memorialize. Understanding this text from a point of construction rather than preservation reassigns agency to the Coptic community that has created and embraced the account. The text is not merely a story. It is a purposeful narrative of resistance that engages with and represents the suffering of the fourth-century Coptic Church. The *Martyrdom of Mark* is evidence that the Copts adopted Mark as the personified form of their emerging martyrdom ideology. Mark not only fulfills his role as a martyr, he does so to an exceptional degree as seen in his portrayal in the account. As a result, the *Martyrdom of Mark* presents a story of Coptic resilience amid the history of persecution they have faced from imperial rule and conflict with the broader dominant Egyptian culture as Christianity in Egypt emerged.

Historicity of Mark in Alexandria

The unsettled relationship between the historicity of Mark's travels and his legendary presence in Alexandria complicates how to understand Mark's importance in Coptic memory. The Coptic Church claims that Mark first came to Alexandria in 42 CE and converted great numbers of people to Christianity there. Mark's journey from Rome to Alexandria is corroborated in Eusebius' *The Ecclesiastical History* where Eusebius writes:

> Τοσοῦτον δ'επέλαμψεν ταῖς τῶν ἀκροατῶν τοῦ Πέτρου διανοίαις εὐσεβείας φέγγος, ὡς μὴ εἰς ἅπαξ ἱκανῶς ἔχειν ἀρκεῖσθαι ἀκοῇ μηδὲ τῇ ἀγράφῳ τοῦ θείου κηρύγματος διδασκαλίᾳ, παρακλήσεσιν δὲ παντοίαις Μάρκον, οὗ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον φέρεται, ἀκόλουθον ὄντα Πέτρου, λιπαρῆσαι ὡς ἂν καὶ διὰ γραφῆς ὑπομνημα τῆς διὰ λόγου παραδοθείσης αὐτοῖς καταλείψοι διδασκαλιας. . .καὶ ταύτῃ αἰτίους γενέσθαι τῆς τοῦ λεγομένου κατὰ Μάρκον εὐαγγελίου γραφῆς.[6]

5 That is not to dismiss the importance of the individual acts, but rather to emphasize that there is a broader narrative in which martyrs participate; it is ultimately each martyrs' participation which perpetuates martyrdom as an ideology.

6 Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History,* 2:15. All the translations of Eusebius in this article are my own.

> To so great a degree, the light of religion spread light into the minds of hearers of Peter, that they were not content to be satisfied for hearing just one time nor by the unwritten teaching of the divine proclamation, but they called on Mark by all sorts of entreatments, of whom the gospel is said to be, being a follower of Peter, that he might leave to them, through writing, a record of the teachings having been given verbally... and for this, they became responsible for the writing of the gospel having been named according to Mark.

Eusebius' mention of Mark being in Rome provides a concrete starting point for his travels on his way to Alexandria. After Mark composed his gospel in Rome, Eusebius also writes that "τοῦτον... [Μάρκον] πρῶτόν φασιν ἐπὶ τῆς Αἰγύπτου στειλάμενον, ὃ δὴ καὶ συνεγράψατο, κῆρῦξαι, ἐκκλησίας τε πρῶτον ἐπ' αὐτῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας συστήσασθαι" (They say that this Mark [was] the first, having been sent to Egypt, to preach the gospel which also he wrote down and was the first to establish churches in Alexandria itself)."[7] Eusebius uses Mark's gospel writing as a tangible link to his missionary work in Alexandria. By establishing that Mark composed his gospel in Rome and then came to Alexandria with it in hand, Eusebius attempts to trace in detail Mark's travels, with the ultimate goal of establishing Mark's presence in Egypt.

The late date of Eusebius' writings, however, and the historical errors in his account have led Western scholars to doubt Mark's proclaimed role as founder of the Egyptian Church.[8] This ambiguous historical account is furthered by Eusebius' use of "φασιν" (they say). Eusebius, failing to clarify the subject of φασιν, does not make a claim as to where this story has come from—in not asserting a source, it is cause for speculation about whether this tracing of Mark's travels is an actual historical account or just a mythic origin story.[9] It does seem plausible that this story of Mark's presence in Alexandria could be a later revision by the church to cement its history as beginning with an established apostolic character.[10] While Mark's historical role, strictly speaking, is elusive when considering the foundations of the Coptic Church, the historicity of his travels is secondary to the self-definition Mark has provided for in the Coptic Church for two thousand years.[11] I argue that the symbolic importance of Mark's presence in Alexandria matters more than the historical reliability of these texts and that this symbolic importance is also

7 Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 2:16.

8 Stephen J. Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leaders in Late Antiquity* (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004), 7.

9 Nathan Hardy, "Mystery and Memory: St. Mark, Alexandrian Christianity, and the Evidence Shrouded in Mystery," *Lights: The MESSA Journal* 2, no. 1 (2012): 77.

10 Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy*, 7.

11 Hardy, "Mystery and Memory," 80.

extended to his martyrdom account. It does not matter so much whether or not accounts of his martyrdom are dramatized; what is most important is the messaging it conveys and the cultural values it represents in Coptic memory.

Another ancient source that traces Mark's role in the founding of the church in Alexandria is Clement of Alexandria's *Secret Mark*.[12] In this controversial letter, Clement also accounts Mark's journey into Egypt. He writes that Mark composed his first gospel in Rome and composed a "more spiritual gospel" there:

> παρῆλθεν εἰς Ἀλεξάνδρειαν ὁ Μᾶρκος, κομίζων καὶ τὰ [τ] αὐτοῦ καὶ τὰ τοῦ Πέτρου ὑπομνήματα ἐξ ὧν μεταφέρων εἰς τὸ πρῶτον αὐτοῦ βιβλίον τὰ τοῖς προκόπτουσι περὶ τὴν γνῶσιν κατάλληλα συνέταξε πνευματικώτερον εὐαγγέλιον εἰς τὴν τῶν τελειουμενων χρῆσιν. . .[13]
>
> Mark went into Alexandria, bringing both his writings and those of Peter from which, transferring to his first book the things suitable which make progress toward knowledge, he put together a more spiritual gospel for the use of those being perfected. . .

In this passage, an ideology of Egyptian exceptionalism begins to emerge; though Mark's initial gospel was composed in Rome, the elevated one was produced in Alexandria. While he may have composed his previous writings elsewhere, he writes a special one in Alexandria for those "being perfected." According to Clement, it seems that Alexandria was the home of Markan literature par excellence. Clement also writes that Mark composed a "more spiritual" gospel in Alexandria, and he adds that "ἀποθνήσκων κατέλιπε τὸ αὐτοῦ σύγγραμμα τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τῇ ἐν Ἀλεξάνδρειαν ὅπου εἰσέτι νῦν ἀσφαλῶς εὖ μάλα τηρεῖται" (dying, [Mark] left his writing to the church in Alexandria, where still now it is safely guarded exceedingly well).[14] Mark not only composed this "more spiritual gospel" in Alexandria, he entrusted the security of this text to the church there. The fact that Mark wrote this gospel in Alexandria, coupled with the claim that he left it in the hands of the church there, further establishes that the Coptic Church has a special relationship with Mark.

12 Though whether or not this letter is a forgery is an ongoing discussion, I defer to Scott G. Brown's judgment of the text as authentic. His book, *Mark's Other Gospel*, provides a thorough analysis of the matter and Morton Smith's discovery of the text.

13 Clement of Alexandria, *Secret Mark*, 1.18–1.22. The translations of *Secret Mark* in this article are my own.

14 Clement of Alexandria, *Secret Mark*, 1.28–2.1.

Though analyzing the historicity of Mark's travels in Alexandria can be beneficial in creating a historical record of an important figure's proselytizing journey, the real importance of Mark's journey in these ancient accounts is the production of a mythical narrative for the Coptic people—a narrative that establishes both Mark's presence in Alexandria as well as his deeds. As Nathan Hardy argues, though Mark's martyrdom could be a legend, it is crucial to study how the account marks the development of "self-consciousness" in the Coptic Church.[15] Mark is important since he is representative of Coptic self-actualization and self-definition. In the case of the *Martyrdom of Mark*, it is specifically Mark's martyrdom that heightens his development as a representative of Coptic identity and memory, and we can look to this text as a textual linkage to trace this process.

The Martyrdom of Mark: An Overview

Variations of the *Martyrdom of Mark* can likely be traced back to the reign of Theodosius I in the late fourth century CE; during this period the influence of Christianity was increasing rapidly, and as Tobias Nicklas points out, Christians were interested in conquering the demons of the past, even if it meant through the embrace of violence.[16] During the late-antique period, Alexandria was characterized by its religious heterogeneity—pagan philosophers, ascetics, and Christians lived and interacted with one another.[17] People were fiercely loyal to their schools of thought and found much of their primary social identity in them; these intellectuals were known to defend and affirm their beliefs adamantly.[18] The Copts existed within this dynamic social matrix and created their own group identity in the context of broader Greco-Egyptian culture and early Christian myth-making.

Part of forming group identity in the early Christian world also relied on creating links to important early Christian figures. These links between an important Christian leader and a particular people helped legitimize the emerging Christian groups throughout the broader Christian landscape. The creation of the *Martyrdom of Mark* proves that it was a Coptic priority to document a narrative that would more concretely establish Mark's link to their community. Therefore, the *Martyrdom of Mark* is evidence that it is difficult to understate the importance of the church's attempts to legitimize itself through Mark. Mark's martyrdom only intensifies the narrative's stakes

15 Hardy, "Mystery and Memory," 80–81.

16 Tobias Nicklas, "The Martyrdom of Mark in Late Antique Alexandria," in *Alexandria – Hub of the Hellenistic World*, eds. Jörg Frey, Benjamin Schliesser, Thomas J. Kraus, and Jan Rüggemeier (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 533.

17 Edward Watts, *Riot in Alexandria* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 20.

18 Watts, *Riot in Alexandria*, 51.

in that the text portrays Mark not just as the founder of the church, but also as an extraordinary martyr who represents the political and social struggles of late-antique Copts.

The *Martyrdom of Mark* first begins with a chastisement of the people of Egypt. The whole country of Egypt is declared "ἀμερίτμητοι τῇ καρδίᾳ" (uncircumcised at heart[19]), full of idols, shrines, and magical practices. However, when Mark arrives in Cyrene of Pentapolis, he speaks about Christ and performs miracles (ranging from healing and purification to exorcisms), and as a result of his preaching and deeds, many of the Egyptians are brought to Christ and baptized. After this massive success, Mark travels to Alexandria where, when his sandal breaks, he finds a cobbler named Ananias. While fixing Mark's shoe, Ananias accidentally strikes his hand and cries out "Εἷς Θεός" (God is One![20]). Upon hearing this exclamation, Mark heals Ananias' hand, has dinner with him, and preaches the gospel. The other men of the city see that Mark's message of Christ has spread and that he has destroyed shrines and hindered native rituals, and they plot to kill him. When Mark realizes this plot is happening, he appoints Ananias as a bishop, and he flees back to Pentapolis; two years later, Mark returns to Alexandria. When Mark returns, the Alexandrians proceed to build a church for themselves in the Boukolou.[21] The entire second half of the text concerns Mark's martyrdom; here, we can begin to analyze how the text characterizes Mark as an idealized martyr and representative of the ideology of martyrdom in the late-antique Coptic Church. The *Martyrdom of Mark* gives a vivid account of when Mark was dragged through the city, imprisoned, and then once again, dragged to the Boukolou to his death.[22] The story concludes when the Greeks try to burn his body but are stopped by supernatural weather events. As a result, the Copts are able to bury Mark.

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19 This idea of circumcision of the heart is present in the Old Testament (Deut. 10:16) and adopted by Paul in Rom. 2:29. Circumcision of the heart is also noted in Acts 7:51.

20 This phrase is also found in Duet. 6:4.

21 While the exact location is unknown, the Boukolou is described as being next to the sea and under the crags. Though unclear, it is possible that it is in place of a previous shrine to Serapis, though this seems speculative given the close dating of the text and destruction of the Serapis. Livia Capponi, "Serapis, Boukoloi and Christians from Hadrian to Marcus Aurelius," in *Hadrian and the Christians*, ed. by Marco Rizzi (Berlin: Wallter de Gruyter, 2010), 130-31.

22 Otto Meinardus adds that according to Coptic lore, they buried him there in the Boukolou to preserve his memory. Therefore, the actual burial of Mark in the place of his martyrdom not only represents the assimilation of Mark into the Coptic people, but also provides a physical root to Mark's martyrdom. This point that martyrdom can be consecrated in the land itself will be addressed later in the article.

Physical Violence and Parallels to the Destruction of the Serapeum

A notable trait of the *Martyrdom of Mark* is the sheer violence with which Mark's death is described. As Niels Willert argues (concerning martyrdom in the synoptic Gospels), there is a tendency in martyrdom accounts to describe torture and execution graphically.[23] The composition of the *Martyrdom of Mark* represents a Coptic attempt to collect experiential data of violence in order to make their world comprehensible.[24] This explicit description of violence lends itself to reaffirming the corporeality of martyrdom accounts and, therefore, emphasizes the martyr's uniquely human suffering. In the *Martyrdom of Mark*, the Greeks torture and execute Mark in an excessively violent manner: "ἔβαλον κάλον εἰς τὸν τραχήλον αὐτοῦ καὶ οὕτως ἔσυρον αὐτὸν" (They threw a rope around his neck and thus they dragged him). The next morning, this same sentiment is repeated: "ἔβαλον πάλιν τὸ σχοινίον εἰς τὸν τραχήλον αὐτοῦ καὶ οὕτως ἔσυρον αὐτὸν" (They again threw a rope around his neck and dragged him); however this time "πάλιν" ("again") is added—an emphasis on the repeated nature of this extreme act of violence. Furthermore, the separation between the two dragging accounts by Mark's imprisonment prolongs Mark's martyrdom and once again stresses his suffering. As a result of these two draggings, Mark dies.

How does this emphasis on physical suffering impact the relationship between a martyr and their people? As Judith Perkins cogently describes, if a "culture's reality...is a product of its systems of representations," then the focus on pain, suffering, and death in early Christianity reveals that early Christians perceived their reality as one which is deeply painful and violent.[25] Mark serves as a representative of Coptic reality, and the *Martyrdom of Mark*'s emphasis on suffering illustrates the early Coptic Church's perception of their circumstances; the suffering of the church is reflected onto Mark, who plays the cultural role of a martyr and takes on the suffering of the people. Mark's extreme physical suffering in the *Martyrdom of Mark* and the text's repeated emphasis on violence, death, and suffering make martyrdom palpable in the human experience and forms it as an ideology of uniquely Christian suffering.

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23 Niels Willert, "Martyrology in the Passion Narratives of the Synoptic Gospels," in *Contextualizing Early Christian Martyrdom,* vol. 8, edited by David Brakke, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and Jorg Ulrich (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011), 38.

24 Thomas Sizgorich argues this idea of world understanding through collecting experiential data in the broader Roman Christian communities. This same understanding can be applied to the composition of martyrdom accounts that reflect Coptic reality. Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 48.

25 Perkins, *The Suffering Self,* 15.

The physical violence created in the *Martyrdom of Mark* is heightened when thinking about its relation to its social setting. When examined closely, the description of Mark's martyrdom in the *Martyrdom of Mark* appears to parallel the destruction of the Serapeum as documented in Rufinus of Aguileia's *Church History*. The composition of the *Martyrdom of Mark* and the destruction of the Serapeum would have been contemporaneous events, which makes it useful to analyze what parallels emerge and how that adds to the reading of physical violence in the emergence of martyrdom ideology. As Rufinus recounts, the Christians destroy the Serapis in a manner similar to how the Greeks kill Mark:

> After this the head [of Serapis] was wrenched from the neck and from the bushel, which was discarded, and dragged off; then the feet and the other members were chopped off with axes and dragged apart with ropes attached, and piece by piece, each in a different place, the decrepit dotard was burned to ashes before the eyes of the Alexandria which worshipped him. Last of all the torso which was left was put to the torch in the amphitheater, and that was the end of the vain superstition and ancient error of Serapis.[26]

The mirroring of the Serapis' destruction and Mark's death, both in the form of a violent dragging through the city, calls to mind how the composition of the *Martyrdom of Mark* would reflect the late fourth-century Greek-Christian relationship. This parallel between Mark's martyrdom and the destruction of the Serapeum is further established since in the *Martyrdom of Mark*, the Greeks attack and capture Mark on the same day of what would be the procession of Serapis.

In framing Mark's martyrdom account so closely to the destruction of the Serapeum, the text evokes a message of retribution on behalf of the Greeks—since the Christians treated the Greeks' native god, Serapis, with such contempt, what would stop them from doing the same to the Copts' founder? Such messaging adds to the Christian narrative of persecution and deepens it by adding an element of outrage, that is, that the Copts' founder would be treated in the same way in which a pagan idol was. Paralleling the act of physical violence which killed Mark with the destruction of Serapis characterizes Mark's martyrdom as a retributive act of persecution by the Greeks. This framing presents Mark's martyrdom as a power struggle between the pagan Greeks and the Copts. This struggle becomes integral in the development of martyrdom ideology as rooted in conflict between the Copts and the dominant society. The physical violence of Mark's martyrdom represents a larger narrative of conflict beyond just the martyrdom act;

26 Rufinus of Aguileia, *Church History*, 11.23.

instead, the *Martyrdom of Mark* becomes a crafted narrative to represent Copts' persecution in the power struggle with the dominant Greek culture. Mark becomes a significant figure in that he bears the brunt of these attacks against the Copts, and his thankfulness (as will be addressed later in this article) relays a triumphant message in the face of the greatest sacrifice.

Martyrdom and the Landscape

The physical landscape of Alexandria is deeply intertwined with the remarkable nature of Mark's martyrdom. This linkage between a martyr, in this case Mark, and the materiality of the ground and city provides yet another component of how a particular martyr becomes important to a specific group of people. The *Martyrdom of Mark* gives a vivid account Mark's execution via dragging through the city: "ἦσαν αἱ σάρκες αὐτοῦ πίπτουσαι εἰς τὴν γῆν, καὶ αἱ πέτραι ἐμολύνοντο τοῦ αἵματος αὐτοῦ" (His flesh was falling to the earth, and the stones were speckled with his blood). Aside from once again stressing the violence of martyrdom, Mark's flesh falls to the ground and his blood fills the street, quite literally making his body part of the city. Mark's martyrdom forges a concrete link between his body and the city itself, and this relationship between martyrdom and the land creates an ideology that, according to David Frankfurter, envisions a "terrestrial network" that traces, through martyr's tortures, a "route to 'this place there.'"[27] Mark's martyrdom creates a master narrative of suffering imbued in the land, and his repeated draggings through the street further intensify this link between land and martyrdom. His dragged blood and flesh trace the path of his martyrdom through the city itself, and his body becomes a "locus of sacrality" which in itself makes the streets of Alexandria holy.[28] Early Christian sacred landscape relied on construction of sacred places, and Mark's body represents how the martyr's body is a sacred space unto itself. Mark's dragging creates a map of sacred space that Copts walk and trace every day—to be a living and breathing Copt was to walk the path of Mark and his martyrdom literally and figuratively.

Furthermore, the singularity of Mark's martyrdom consecrates the city of Alexandria as particular to himself. Mark is not just any martyr; he is the martyr who is inextricably embedded in the land of Egypt. Sacred land is established not only through Mark's tortures, but also through his burial in the Boukolou. According to Coptic lore, the Copts proceeded to bury Mark in the Boukolou to preserve his memory, and it is this place which became the home of his subsequent relics.[29] Mark's burial and the collection

27 David Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 254.

28 Beatrice Caseau, "Sacred Landscapes," in *Interpreting Late Antiquity*, eds. Glen Warren Bowersock, Oleg Grabar, and Peter Brown (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 36.

29 Otto F.A. Meinardus, *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1999), 30.

of his relics once again are acts of "local religious self-determination"[30] as the Copts continue to self-represent themselves and their suffering in Mark and his martyrdom. The construction of the *Martyrdom of Mark*'s relationship between Mark and the land of Egypt cannot be understated when understanding Copts as an ethnoreligious group. Mark's martyrdom serves as an example of how a martyrdom account can paint a picture of specific churches and a geographical map of the diversity of the early Christian movement.[31] The text becomes all the more important in that it delineates how Copts create a memorialized self-portrait of the relationship between their church and land. The *Martyrdom of Mark* presents an image of the early church as one consecrated in Alexandria by the martyrdom of Mark. In Coptic memory, suffering is not something abstract, it is felt under their feet as they walk through the city or when they congregate at the Boukolou.

However, the streets the Copts walk are not just traced with suffering, but also sanctified by gratitude. As Mark is being dragged through the city, he thanks God for his suffering twice: "Εὐχαριστῶ σοι, κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστὲ ὅτι κατηξιώθην ὑπὲρ τοῦ ὀνόματός σου ταῦτα παθεῖν" (I give thanks to you, Lord Jesus Christ, that I was deemed worthy to suffer on behalf of your name), and later, "Ὁ δὲ μακάριος Μάρκος εὐχαριστείας μᾶλλον ἀνέπεμπεν τῷ παντοκράτορι κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ..." (And blessed Mark sent up more prayers of thanksgiving to the ruler of all things, the Lord Jesus Christ...). In the midst of having a rope thrown around his neck, his body being torn apart on the ground, and his blood draining, Mark's words of thankfulness sanctify this path of suffering.

Even in his second dragging, the prefix, ανα- (up), in the verb, αναπέμπω, creates a consecrated, vertical axis to Mark's gratitude. Though Mark's suffering exists in the ground and on the earthly realm, his thankfulness lifts him to the realm of the spiritual. In so much as the *Martyrdom of Mark* constructs Mark's martyrdom as a map of suffering, it also traces this suffering with unrelenting gratitude. Mark's martyrdom account roots Coptic memories of suffering with the necessity for gratitude for an otherworldliness. The *Martyrdom of Mark* portrays the message that to be a Copt is to walk the path of suffering, but gratefully and with intentions pointed upward from the ground to the heavens. Suffering on earth ultimately positions Copts in relation to the divine; thus, martyrdom ideology becomes simultaneously as grounded in the land of Alexandria as it is in the heavens. Mark's consecration of Alexandria through his death

30 David Frankfurter, *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 26.

31 Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

presents him as an idealized martyr with an almost supernatural resilience. Mark becomes representative that, even in the face of death, the Copts can feel the strength from his martyrdom in the ground and the heavens.

Mark's *Imitatio Christi*

Mark's martyrdom account also presents itself as an *imitatio Christi*—broadly described as how a martyr emulates Christ. The *Martyrdom of Mark* is rich in both explicit and implicit parallels and allusions which relate Mark's suffering to the suffering of Christ. Just as the corporeality of suffering and ties to the land elevate the martyrdom narrative as an ideology, so does the linking of martyrdom acts to Christ's crucifixion. It is important, though, not to oversimplify the *imitatio Christi* as Candida Moss has poignantly argued:

> To simply state that the martyrs imitate Christ does not exhaust what the imitation of Christ can tell us about either martyrdom or the history of ideas. Imitating something or someone involves an understanding of what that thing or person is, an interpretation of his or her significance. In the case of ancient communities presenting their martyrs as Christly imitators, this involves a particular reading of traditions about Jesus, his death, his significance, and his work. By presenting martyrs as Christly imitators, the authors of the early martyrdom accounts provide scholars with a window into early Christian understandings of scripture, Christology, and soteriology.[32]

Looking at martyrdom acts as solely *imitatio Christi* reduces these acts to one-dimensional acts outside of the rich context in which these acts exist and from which they emerge. The sociopolitical contexts of the *Martyrdom of Mark* must be taken into account when analyzing its ideological perspective in the development of a suffering church. Mark's martyrdom, when analyzed through the lens of the *imitatio Christi*, participates in the continuation of the prolific narrative of suffering as fundamentally part of Coptic Christian belief.

The important parallels between Mark and Christ are not solely a literary device; they enhance the martyrdom account's effect on the reader. For example, upon a first reading, Mark's final words, "εἰς χεῖρας σου, Κύριε, παρατίθημι τὸ πνεῦμά μου" (into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit) seem to be just a direct allusion to Jesus's final words in Luke 23:46, "Πάτερ, εἰς χεῖράς σου παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου" (Father, into your hands I commend my spirit); however, it is crucial to interpret the difference between Jesus's

32 Moss, *The Other Christs*, 4.

use of "Πάτερ" and Mark's use of "Κύριε."[33] Mark does not commend his spirit to the Father, but rather to the Lord—as if the imitation of Christ was not evident enough in the words themselves, the scribe makes note to emphasize Mark's relation to Jesus to accomplish a further emphatic link to the crucifixion. We see Mark, playing the role of the martyr, dedicating his martyrdom to Jesus.

How exactly, then, does this dedication further martyrdom as an ideology of resistance? In addressing Jesus, Mark invokes a message of resilience—after all, Jesus conquered death. This allusion is all the more evident in the timeframe of Mark's martyrdom, which also coincides with Passover (as did Jesus's crucifixion). Not only does this timing draw a parallel between Mark's martyrdom and Jesus's crucifixion, but it also draws to mind Easter, a holiday which is premised on Jesus's conquering of death.[34] This framing of the very day of Mark's martyrdom in allusion to Easter furthers this ideology of martyrdom as a means of resistance as it calls to mind not only the suffering of Jesus, but more importantly, his defeat over death. Because of this allusion to Easter, Mark's martyrdom can be reframed as death not being the final end, but rather as hope in the future of the resurrection Jesus models. This hope in the resurrection provides a source of comfort in the midst of suffering, a theme that is embraced in the Coptic Church.

This hopeful aspect to martyrdom can also be found in the *Martyrdom of Mark* as Mark plays the role not just of martyr, but of a thankful one. Paramount in the *Martyrdom of Mark* is the repeated attention given to Mark's thankfulness for his martyrdom; this attention also expands an initially limited conception of *imitatio Christi*. While being dragged (as addressed previously, he sanctifies the path), Mark says: "Εὐχαριστῶ σοι, κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστὲ ὅτι κατηξιώθην ὑπὲρ τοῦ ὀνόματός σου ταῦτα παθεῖν" (I give thanks to you, Lord Jesus Christ, that I was deemed worthy to suffer on behalf of your name); this sentiment is repeated when Mark is dragged a second time, and the text reads: Ὁ δὲ μακάριος Μάρκος εὐχαριστείας μᾶλλον ἀνέπεμπεν τῷ παντοκράτορι κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ..." (And blessed Mark sent up more prayers of thanksgiving to the ruler of all things, the Lord Jesus Christ...). This thankfulness further characterizes Mark not just as a

33 This intriguing semantic point is raised by Stefan Krauner when referencing the parallels between the martyrdom of Stephen and Jesus's crucifixion as described in Luke's gospel. I would argue that it is fair to extend this emphasis of the difference between Jesus's use of "Πάτερ" and Mark's use of "Κύριε" to emphasize the *imitatio Christi* of the martyr in general, and in this case, Mark. See Stefan Krauner, "The Martyrdom of Stephen," in *Contextualizing Early Christian Martyrdom,* vol. 8, edited by David Brakke, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and Jorg Ulrich, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011), 45–74.

34 The relationship between Passover and Easter in antiquity is firmly asserted by Alden A. Mosshamer. He argues that through both the gospel's allusion to Christ's Passion on Passover, as well as Paul's references to Christ as the Paschal lamb and that his crucifixion is the true Paschal sacrifice (1 Cor. 5:7), the observation of Christ's Passion should take place around the same time of Passover that the "Bible prescribes." Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40–1.

martyr, but an exceptional (and perhaps, a more willing) one. Mark fearlessly approaches death while even Jesus wavered in Gethsemane. The *Martyrdom of Mark* is elevating Mark to a level of the *imitatio Christi* that in some ways surpasses that of Christ's own Passion.

When considering Christians' understanding of the resurrection, Mark's thankfulness is well warranted. After all, if Christ was able to accomplish his martyrdom and conquer death, why should Mark not be grateful? Framing Mark's martyrdom as an enhancement of the *imitatio Christi* allows his martyrdom to be perceived as not just an act of suffering, but one of salvation. In this way, martyrdom acts out not just Christians' belief that to be a Christian is to suffer and die,[35] but is also representative of Christ's resurrection. To this end, Mark can be redefined not just as having a standard *imitatio Christi*, but as a revitalized martyr, one who has fully embraced Christ's suffering, but most importantly, Christ's true message—that of the resurrection.

Martyr Burial and Peoplehood

As shown above, Mark's martyrdom account is distinctively Coptic: his physical violence is presented as retribution for the destruction of the Serapeum, his martyrdom traces through Alexandria itself, and Mark's *imitatio Christi* is an elevated martyrdom. Mark represents the merging of martyr and church. In the case of the Copts, Mark is formally adopted into the Coptic people through his burial at the end of the text. This merging of Mark with the Copts builds on ancient theories of ethnicity as both fluid and fixed, meaning that race is a constructed category with core elements and preconditions, but also one with porous boundaries.[36] These two categories of looking at ethnicity—fixed and fluid—lend themselves to the analysis of what exactly it means to be and become an Egyptian. In the case of the *Martyrdom of Mark*, this duality is present in his burial. In the text, the Greeks attempt to cremate Mark's body[37]—a practice that is completely unacceptable and a distinct rejection of Egyptian culture.[38] In response to this attempt, a supernatural weather event ensues which

35 Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 25.

36 Denise Kimber Buell, "Race and Universalism in Early Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10, no. 4 (2002): 435. https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2002.0061.

37 Here, another key parallel to Rufinus' account of the destruction of the Serapeum emerges when considering the burning of the Serapis. While the Christians are able to burn the Serapis, Mark's body is saved from this disgrace. This inversion becomes a possible reclamation aspect of the *Martyrdom of Mark*'s in that while the Egyptians may have retributively treated Mark the same way as the Christians did the Serapis, ultimately the Christians have the final word. Therefore, Mark's burial would also serve as a triumph over Greek retribution.

38 Thomas Peter Landvatter, "Identity, Burial Practice, and Social Change in Ptolemaic Egypt" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2013), 106–17. This is not to say that Egyptians were not cremated. As Thomas Peter Landvatter argues, it is possible that cremation is also adapted as a marker of socioeconomic status of the ruling elite; however, when speaking about ethnicity, it can be firmly asserted that cremation is distinctively not Egyptian.

precludes the Greeks from accomplishing their task. The Egyptians take Mark's body and "ἐκήδευσαν αὐτὸν καθὼς ἔθος τῇ πόλει. . .καὶ εἰς τὸ ἀνατολικὸν μέρος ἀπέθεντο" (they buried him in accordance with the city's custom. . .and they laid him in the direction of the East). In regard to ethnic fixity, the Egyptian burial practices are a concrete and important component of their culture. In the case of fluidity, a foreign man, Mark, becomes a part of the Coptic people through his martyrdom and death. To the Copts, Mark is not just a martyr that is associated with their land, he is one of them now.

This merging represents how Mark is grafted into the Egyptian people and truly becomes one of them. Prior to his burial, there is no mention of him being a part of the Egyptian people;[39] this acceptance only occurs posthumously. It is his very type of death, that is, his martyrdom, that results in his official adoption into the Coptic people. This association between membership and martyrdom in the early church returns back to the definition of a martyr as a cultural performer. Mark conveys the relationship between Coptic identity and the importance of a martyr, and he becomes representative of the idea that to be a Copt is to be a part of a martyred people.

Conclusion

Judith Perkins writes that the emergence of martyr discourse reflected a "representational revolution" in early Christianity—one that allowed Christians to reclaim their present through past memories of suffering.[40] In the case of the Copts, one can trace this revolution through the *Martyrdom of Mark*. As portrayed in the text, Mark's suffering forged a link between the earthly and the divine, consecrating the land of Egypt. Mark became part of the Coptic people through his burial, and this ritual adoption into the Coptic people served as a reminder of the roots of martyrdom in the Coptic people. In Mark's martyrdom, though, one can also trace the idea of martyrdom as a form of resilience and resistance for the Coptic community. Mark's death, which occurs in *imitatio Christi*, is punctuated by a thankfulness that casts martyrdom as an act of hope in the midst of suffering. In this way, Mark did not merely become a symbol of the suffering, but also a symbol of resilience and courage.[41]

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39 Mark is associated with the people through his travels into Egypt and the fact that he is the first to preach the gospel there; however, this association does not confer membership in the community—this only occurs by the ritual adoption in his burial.

40 Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 17.

41 Thomas Sizgorich makes the point that in Roman Christian communities, to disregard "primordial traumas" in Christianity, in particular those related to the martyrs, is to side with the persecutors. I have argued that the construction of martyrdom accounts represent a reclaiming of these primordial traumas, and we can see this phenomenon in the *Martyrdom of Mark* and how it is significant to the Coptic community. Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*, 52.

The *Martyrdom of Mark*, then, is emblematic of the collective martyr ideology that took shape in Coptic Christianity. In that way, though, the text also anticipates the continuing role and shape of that ideology in subsequent centuries, as Copts confronted new episodes of violent suppression and persecution. In accounts like the *Martyrdom of Mark*, contemporary Coptic Christians recognize their own contemporary challenges as part of a broader, historical experience of suffering, present even at the foundations of their community. Importantly, the *Martyrdom of Mark* also gestures toward the resilience and agency the Copts have retained amid this suffering through to the present day.

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