

POMPONIA GRAECINA: HOW COULD SHE HAVE HEARD ABOUT  
CHRISTIANS AND WHAT DID ‘CHRISTIAN’ MEAN?

Michael J.G. Gray-Fow

Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee, WI, USA

Tacitus records that sometime in 57 CE a noble Roman lady named Pomponia Graecina was accused of involvement in ‘foreign superstition’ (*superstitionis externae rea*).<sup>1</sup> Since the Romans were uninterested in what people believed and only in what they did or refused to do, she was presumably accused of non-Roman practices. We are not told what these practices were or what the foreign superstition was and given the plethora of religions in Rome at this time, they could have been anything. Our only clue is that Tacitus employs *superstitio* for non-Roman beliefs and practices—all of which he loftily disapproved. Here, however, he uses *externa*, which almost certainly implies Eastern origin rather than just foreign, as Rome imported almost no religious ideas from the Western provinces.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps it is not surprising that some have claimed that Pomponia Graecina was a Christian. This claim assumes odd forms, however. One fanciful version, popular with English writers, can be traced back to 1807 and makes Pomponia Graecina a British princess (presumably married to Aulus Plautius during his time as governor of Britannia). This version is somehow connected with Caratacus, who fought Rome but was pardoned by the emperor Claudius (51 CE). It then associates the freed Caratacus (and by implication, Pomponia Graecina) with Rome’s Christian community and certain individuals mentioned in Paul’s letters. The underlying purpose of this version was

1. Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.32. Tacitus was a senator, consul and dour historian, and wrote the *Annals* around 120 CE.

2. J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), pp. 237-39.

to exalt the 'British' presence in Rome, and Pomponia Graecina is used as a serviceable adjunct.<sup>3</sup> A hagiographical alternative identifies her with the apocryphal saint Lucina, a disciple of Peter and Paul at Rome, who occupies herself with pious works (burying the martyrs) until her own martyrdom. In this version Lucina becomes her baptismal name.<sup>4</sup>

Both characterizations are totally at odds with what we know of the real Pomponia Graecina, who was neither a British princess nor a saint, but a Roman lady who moved in the highest social circles. She was probably born around 20–25 CE, based on the approximate age of her son at the time of his death and taking into account that Roman girls married early.<sup>5</sup> Her mother's name is unknown, but her father was Ovid's friend P. (or C.) Pomponius Graecinus, suffect consul in 16 CE and half-brother to Vipsania Agrippina, the beloved first wife of the emperor Tiberius (14–37 CE). Both were grandchildren of Cicero's friend T. Pomponius Atticus. Pomponia's uncle Graecinus's brother, L. Pomponius Flaccus, another favorite of Tiberius, was

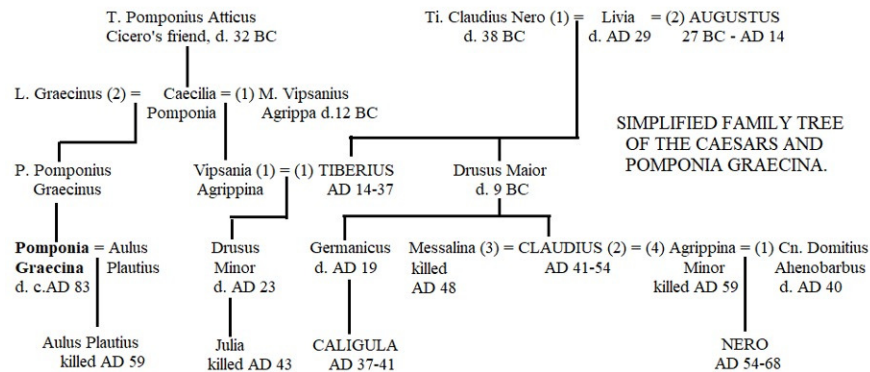
3. W. Williams, 'Collectanea of British Antiquities', *The Literary Panorama*. II (London: Cox, Son, & Bayliss, 1807), pp. 837-43 (839-40); Society for the Distribution of Tracts in Defence of the United Church of England and Ireland, *The Churchman Armed against the Errors of Time* (London: Printed for J.J. Stockdale, and F.C and J. Rivington, 1814), II, pp. 360-62; James Yeowell, *Chronicles of the Ancient British Church, previous to the Arrival of St. Augustine* (London: Wertheim & Macintosh, 2nd edn, 1851), pp. 32-34. On Caratacus, see Guy de la Bédoyere, *Defying Rome: The Rebels of Roman Britain* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003), pp. 29-41.

4. Catholic Church, *Martyrologium Romanum* (Collezione Pietro Marietti, 54; Turin: Marietti, 6th edn, 1911); William Smith and Henry Wace (eds.), *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines* (4 vols.; London: Little, Brown & Company, 1887), IV, pp. 437-38; B.J. Kidd (ed.), *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church* (3 vols.; Translations of Christian Literature, Series VI Select Passages; London: SPCK, 1920), II, p. 48; Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the first Two Centuries* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 196-97.

5. Suetonius calls the son *iuvenis* at the time of his death (c. 59/60 CE). *Iuvenis* is somewhat vague but in this context suggests a young man of around twenty or even late teens; hence born around 39 CE. If his mother was in her mid-teens, she would have been born in the early twenties. Suetonius, *Nero* 35; J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* (London: The Bodley Head, 1962), p. 173; Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 38-41.

consul in 17 CE and later died in office as governor of Syria. Pomponia Graecina was thus born into not just a consular family of imperial favor but into one related by blood to the imperial family itself. Her half-sister Vipsania was the mother of Tiberius’s son Drusus Minor, who was poisoned by his wife in 23 CE (the story only came out later) but left a daughter Julia, who became Pomponia Graecina’s dearest friend.

Table 1: Pomponia Graecina Family Tree



This friendship led to a remarkable act of courage on Pomponia’s part, which tells us much about her character. In 43 CE, Julia got into trouble with Messalina, wife of the emperor Claudius (41–54 CE), and the empress had her banished and killed.<sup>6</sup> The year was significant and it may have served to protect Pomponia from Messalina’s wrath when she very publicly mourned for her deceased friend. In 43 CE, Pomponia’s husband Aulus Plautius, who stood high in Claudius’s patronage, led the Roman invasion of Britain and commanded four legions—a concentration of power that always made emperors nervous.<sup>7</sup> As the invasion was a great success (Claudius himself put in a brief appearance), Messalina was probably inhibited from expressing

6. Cassius Dio, *Hist. rom.* 60.8.5; Suetonius, *Claud.* 29; Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.32.  
 7. Barbara Levick, *Claudius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 141-43. Only a year earlier Scribonianus the governor of Dalmatia had raised a four-day failed revolt with only two legions. Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.52; Suetonius, *Claud.* 13.

her frustrations to Plautius's wife. The exact time frame is hard to nail down, but if Pomponia Graecina donned mourning garb while her husband was away, he took no steps to make her change when he returned in 47 CE after a four-year stint as governor of the new province. A year later Messalina herself was executed by Claudius.

Pomponia's husband Aulus Plautius also came from a consular family, though not an ancient one.<sup>8</sup> He was related to Plautia Urgulanilla Claudius's first wife before he became emperor. As governor of Pannonia in 42 CE, he probably had a hand in suppressing Scribonianus's brief bid for the throne in neighboring Dalmatia. He had been consul in 29 CE and if the age rules governing that office were followed (which was not always the case), he would have been forty-two by then, placing his birth somewhere around 15 BCE. He was certainly older, perhaps much older, than Pomponia Graecina, and she may not have been his first wife. His success in the conquest of Britain undoubtedly raised his standing even higher in Claudius's eyes (they would have known each other from the Urgulanilla days). On his return in 47 CE, he was awarded a public ovation, the last time this was permitted to a subject. Everything we know about Pomponia Graecina and her husband indicates they were high in favor with a succession of emperors and suggests they would have been frequent visitors to the palace.

It has been suggested that this noble-born Roman lady was among Rome's early Christians, a believer, if not an actual member of the mixed Jewish and Gentile community that constituted the church at Rome. This idea received increased interest from the Italian archaeologist Giovanni Battista de Rossi's *La Roma Sotterranea Christiana* (1864–77), following his discovery of references to Christian Graecini in the catacombs. Although these were written two centuries later than our Pomponia Graecina, the catacomb inscriptions are still occasionally adduced in favor of Pomponia having been a Christian.<sup>9</sup>

8. Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 422-23 n. 3.

9. J. Spencer Northcote and W.E. Brownlow, *Roma Sotterranea or an Account of the Roman Catacombs* (2 vols.; London: Longmans & Green, 1879), I, pp. 82-83, 279-81; Rodolfo Amedeo Lanciani, *Pagan and Christian Rome* (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin, 1893), p. 9; Orazio Marucchi, *Christian Epigraphy: An Elementary Treatise, with a Collection of Ancient Christian Inscriptions mainly of Roman Origin* (trans. J. Armine Willis; Chicago: Ares, 1912), pp. 244-46; Robert

If we cannot solve the riddle of whether or not Pomponia Graecina was a Christian, we can at least address two related questions: how could she possibly have heard about Christians, and what would it mean to be a Christian in Rome in 57 CE? She may well have first become aware of them in 49 CE when Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome following disturbances attributed to a *Chrestus*, Suetonius's muddled term for problems caused by Christian proselytizing in the Jewish community.<sup>10</sup> There is no reason, then, why curiosity would have prompted her to inquire further, though this cannot be excluded. Even if she had inquired further, she hardly would have been attracted to a trouble-causing sect that apparently believed in a man crucified a couple of decades earlier in Judea by Pontius Pilate, who, like her husband, was a Roman governor. The crucifixion alone would have repelled her; it was a punishment reserved for non-citizens and slaves. If, however, she had heard that Christians believed in a life beyond this one, it might have aroused some interest, as traditional Roman visions of an afterlife were hardly encouraging.<sup>11</sup> Whether in 49 CE or later, Pomponia Graecina may have wanted to know something about these Christians; that she was later charged with 'foreign superstition' certainly suggests some level of curiosity about foreign beliefs. She was probably an educated lady, and Roman men were wary of 'learned females' (*doctae puellae*), but noble class Roman ladies were often taught at home by tutors and acquired a broad acquaintance with poets and other authors.<sup>12</sup> Like all members of Rome's elite classes, she undoubtedly would have paid due deference to the state religion. But like many others, she might have been interested in something that offered more personal reassurance. Belief in fate and the stars was

Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 21.

10. Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44 got the name right (*Christus*), while Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 4 played positively on the variant *Chrestus*.

11. Roger P.H. Green, 'Death, Attitudes to', in Simon Price and Emily Kearns (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 150-52 (151-52); Catharine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 13-18.

12. Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.434-56; Balsdon, *Roman Women*, pp. 56, 228, 273.

widespread but offered little emotional support, and more than a few Romans were increasingly attracted to belief in individual saviors.<sup>13</sup>

What still remains is the question of how Pomponia Graecina might have heard about Christians. One obvious answer would be from within her own household. The Roman household (*familia*) was a broad legal entity embracing all those within the father's power: his actual family, along with his domestic and estate slaves; while his freedmen and freedwomen still owed him a legally enforceable respect (*obsequium*). In such a large *familia* as that of Aulus Plautius, the total number could run into the hundreds. Constantly replenished with new slaves, such households contained many nationalities and many faiths.<sup>14</sup> Movement for domestic slaves was often restricted (sometimes with ferocious penalties); but even they inevitably must have mingled at times—on errands and missions, or at the many great public festivals—with members of other households, and freedmen had no limits on who they met. New ideas and new beliefs would find their way back to the household, and masters and mistresses would sooner or later hear gossip about odd beliefs among the *familia* from those immediately around them; and tradition provided a few times a year when even slaves could speak freely. Although slaves could legally own nothing, they were often given spending money (*peculium*), some of which might have become their contribution to a burial club. Despite the authorities' suspicion of popular associations (*collegia*), burial clubs were common and not necessarily confined to individual *familiae*. Given their purpose, they focused members' thoughts on death and what came after, something Christian members would have been happy to talk about.<sup>15</sup> Yet slaves were still slaves, and it is

13. Stanley F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 27-28; William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 252-53.

14. James S. Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome: Social Order and Hierarchy in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 18-21; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 52-73; Seneca, *Clem.* 1.24; Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.44. The learned Varro, *Rust.* 1.17.5 had favored polyglot slave households as less prone to quarrels.

15. It is likely that house churches began as *collegia*. Meeks, *Urban Christians*, pp. 77-80.

very doubtful that a lady of Pomponia's rank would be attracted to whatever beliefs they might have held. We must look much higher in the life of Rome for someone who might know something of the Christians, and whom Pomponia would perhaps listen to. With this in mind, one name suggests itself: Narcissus.

His name occurs at the end of Paul's Letter to the Romans, where the apostle sends greetings to 'those of [the household of] Narcissus'.<sup>16</sup> Paul takes it for granted that the Christians in Rome would know whom he meant by Narcissus. Narcissus had to be so well-known at Rome that no further detail was necessary. Only one Narcissus fits this bill, the great freedman secretary of the emperor Claudius. Fawned on and detested by Rome's elite, Narcissus and the other palace freedmen effectively constituted the emperor's personal bureaucracy while accumulating great wealth and influence.<sup>17</sup>

In 48 CE, they united to bring about the Empress Messalina's downfall (even though Narcissus had earlier been her ally), but fell out over who would be Claudius's next wife. Here Narcissus lost out; Claudius married his niece Agrippina, who never forgave Narcissus for opposing this. When Agrippina poisoned Claudius in 54 CE and her son Nero became emperor, Narcissus was an early victim of the new regime; he was imprisoned, badly treated and forced to commit suicide.<sup>18</sup> His wife Claudia Dicaeosyne, a freed slave like himself, had predeceased him, commemorated by a monument praising her as the most devoted and frugal of wives.<sup>19</sup> No children are known, but in any event, everything he owned would have been absorbed into the great palace *familia*.

16. Τοὺς ἐκ τῶν Ναρκίσσου (Rom. 16.11). The Vulgate has *qui sunt ex Narcissi*.

17. H.H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome from 133 BC to AD 68* (London: Methuen, 3rd edn, 1970) pp. 302-303; Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 2nd edn, 1992), pp. 69-83. Narcissus was killed at the end of CE 54 and most scholars date Paul's Letter to the Romans around 55-57 CE, though some would place it earlier.

18. Tacitus, *Ann.* 11.29-38; 12.1-2, 57, 65; 13.1; Cassius Dio, *Hist. rom.* 60.14.3-4; 16.2-5; 61.30.6b-34.6; Suetonius, *Claud.* 28-29, 37.2; H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* (Chicago: Ares, 1979), p. 347.

19. Joannes Casparus Orellius, Joannes Casparus Hagenbuchius and Wilhelm Henzen, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* (3 vols.; Zurich: Orelli, 1828), I, p. 177. The inscription suggests she was freed at the same time as Narcissus.

From when Claudius became emperor in 41 CE, to his death in 54 CE, Narcissus would have known Aulus Plautius and Pomponia Graecina. Plautius stood high in Claudius's favor, so high that when his nephew Plautius Lateranus was involved with Messalina in her fall, his life was spared out of consideration for his uncle.<sup>20</sup> It was Plautius that Claudius commissioned to undertake the invasion of Britain (the only great military adventure of his reign) in 43 CE, but the invasion ran into an early obstacle: the legions refused to go beyond the known world and cross the Channel. Probably to Plautius's embarrassment, Claudius sent Narcissus to address the mutinous soldiers, but they were so upset at being harangued by a mere freedman that they catcalled Narcissus and then fell in and obeyed Plautius.<sup>21</sup> Why Claudius selected Narcissus for this job is unknown, but whatever Plautius felt about the choice, it establishes that Plautius and Narcissus knew each other. When Plautius got back to Rome after serving for four years in Britain, he and Pomponia Graecina would inevitably run into Narcissus at the palace.

Narcissus had a house in Rome's District IX next to the Tiber, just across the river from the Transtiberine area that was home to most of Rome's Jewish community, and quite possibly many of Rome's Jewish Christians; though there were also Jews living in District IX.<sup>22</sup> His wife Dicaeosyne (Δικαιοσύνη) was likely given a slave name, similar to Narcissus's.<sup>23</sup> It had a good classical background, appearing in Herodotus and Plato, but to Jews and Christians it would echo primarily the Septuagint with its connotations

20. Nearly three centuries later, Lateranus's house was given by Constantine as the start of the basilica of St. John Lateran. John Curran, *Pagan City to Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century* (Oxford Classical Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 93-96.

21. Cassius Dio, *Hist. rom.* 60.19.1-3.

22. Ludwig Friedländer, *Roman Life and Manners under the Early Empire* (trans. L.A. Magnus; London: Routledge, 1913), pp. 4, 41; Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome*, p. 10; Philo, *Leg. Gai.* 155; Andrew D. Clarke, 'Rome and Italy', in David J.W. Gill and Conrad Gempf (eds.), *The Book of Acts in its First-Century Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 455-82 (466).

23. The claim that Greek (as opposed to Latin) slave names indicate an Eastern-derived origin is suspect. R.H. Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire* (London: Methuen, 1928), p. 210.



of God's righteousness and justice.<sup>24</sup> Such would have been the main echoes of their mistress's name for those Christians in the *familia*, Jewish or Gentile, to whom Paul sent his greetings in Romans 16.

It should be pointed out that Paul expected his greetings to be delivered, which means that he believed Christians in the household of Narcissus to be in contact with other Christians at Rome. Since he did not know them personally, he must have been relying on information he had received, which suggests that this particular group of believers was free to meet with others and was not under any compulsion to hide their faith. Like all members of a *familia*, they would be expected to show due deference to the shrine of the household gods (the *Lares* and *Penates*), but their beliefs were their own, provided they did not involve anything overtly un-Roman. Persecution of Christians still lay in the future, and as far as the authorities were concerned, Christians were still viewed as a Jewish sect and Judaism (though despised) enjoyed state protection.

The Christian community at Rome in 57 CE, when Pomponia was accused of 'foreign superstition', comprised both Jews and Gentiles. Whether the Gentile believers had been expelled by Claudius in 49 CE along with their fellow Jewish brethren is unclear, but unlikely. In any case, the Jews were allowed to return after Claudius died. In some ways what being a Christian meant for the two groups varied. Jewish Christians understood Jesus in messianic terms and would have used *Christos* (Messiah) as a title, while Gentile believers would have seen it more as a proper name and may have pronounced it *Chrestus*.<sup>25</sup> Both groups had major adjustments to make. Though a long way from the high Christology of John's Gospel, Jewish Christians would have continued struggling with Christ's identity and its implications for the absolute oneness of their God. Likewise, Gentile Christians would have to reconcile belief in the divine role (and origin?) of Christ with their prior acceptance of many gods and goddesses.

It is tempting to understand Rome's early Gentile Christians as uniform in faith and belief, but this would be a mistake. Apart from diverse backgrounds (some literate, some not), it is questionable whether Gentile

24. LSJ, p. 429; Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (trans. J.D. Ernest; 4 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), I, pp. 326-36; BAGD, pp. 247-49; Alfredi Schmoller (ed.), *Handkonkordanz zum Griechischen Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Wurttembergische Bibelanstalt, 1973), pp. 124-25.

25. BAGD, p. 1091.

converts at this stage thought belief in Christ had to be exclusive. Syncretism was universal, and it is quite possible that some who would have identified themselves as Christians simply added Christ to those they already worshiped; they might make him the primary one to whom they prayed but not necessarily the only one.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, at this stage we cannot really talk about Christianity as it came to be understood; dogmas and doctrines came later. We can only speak of an early Christology and cannot be certain that what was believed about Christ at Rome was the same as elsewhere. No Gospels existed, only Paul's letters and only one of these would have been at Rome.<sup>27</sup> To ask if Pomponia Graecina was a Christian risks misunderstanding what she was, even if she was one. If she was interested, perhaps it would have been in the light of stories about Jesus the wonderworker. In the classical world the distinction between human and divine was often blurred, and marvelous wonderworkers obtained fame and followers. This would be similar to Jesus' near-contemporary Apollonius of Tyana, or the Simon Magus rebuked by Peter.<sup>28</sup>

That Pomponia Graecina gave any attention to the religious chatter of her household slaves is possible but unlikely. She might, however, have listened to conversations about Christians at the palace. Narcissus certainly had Christians in his household, and his wife Dicaeosyne could have invited them to talk about their beliefs to her. Perhaps this could have happened during the Saturnalia feast in December, the time when tradition allowed slaves to speak freely to their masters. Apart from Narcissus, someone else at the palace who knew Aulus Plautius and would have met his wife was T. Claudius Balbillus, Claudius's friend and astrologer. Balbillus had served briefly under Plautius in Britain in 43 CE but had spent most of his life at Alexandria in Egypt. The city had a large Jewish community whose relations with the majority Greek population were invariably fractious, and

26. John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 211-43; Lesley Adkins and Roy A. Adkins, *Dictionary of Roman Religion* (New York: Facts on File, 1996), pp. xiv-xv.

27. J.G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965), pp. 56-67; J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longman, 3rd edn, 1972), pp. 14-23.

28. A century and a half later, according to Tertullian, *Apol.* 21.4, the common people still thought of Jesus as just a man.

Claudius had to intervene with a rebuke after one major riot.<sup>29</sup> It is very likely that Christians had lived there in the Jewish community since earlier times. It is also likely that Balbillus, who was apparently deeply interested in religion, would have known something about them.<sup>30</sup> Balbillus was in Egypt as governor (55–59 CE) at the time of Pomponia Graecina's trial. Previously, however, he would have attended the palace frequently when he served as Claudius's astrologer in Rome. Others at least curious about Jewish beliefs reputedly included Poppaea Sabina, who was Nero's mistress by 58 CE, but was also wife of Nero's boon companion Salvius Otho.<sup>31</sup> Two other high-ranking Romans who may well have been at the palace occasionally and might have known something about Christians were Sergius Paulus, the governor of Cyprus whom Paul met (and according to Acts 13.4-12 converted) around 46 CE, and Seneca's brother L. Junius Gallio, governor of Achaia in 52 CE, when Paul appeared briefly before him at Corinth (Acts 18.12-17). However, Sergius Paulus may have been dead by 57 CE, as there is no record of him beyond Cyprus, and Gallio at Corinth had refused to investigate Paul's beliefs. Finally, we must not forget that only seven years after Pomponia's trial the authorities at Rome had no trouble identifying and arresting Christians following the Great Fire (64 CE). At that time there were high ranking people at the palace who can be presumed to have known something about Rome's Christians and their beliefs in the years surrounding the trial of Pomponia Graecina, and it may well have been here that she first heard about them.<sup>32</sup>

29. Justin Pollard and Howard Reid, *The Rise and Fall of Alexandria: Birthplace of the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. 198-200; David Braund, *Augustus to Nero: A Sourcebook on Roman History 31 BC–AD 68* (Totowa: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 201-204.

30. Later tradition connected Alexandrian Christianity with St Mark. See Theodore Hall Patrick, *Traditional Egyptian Christianity: A History of the Coptic Orthodox Church* (Greensboro, NC: Fisher Park Press, 1996), pp. 1-10; Aziz S. Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 25-28; Braund, *Augustus to Nero*, p. 154.

31. Joseph, *Ant.* 20.195.

32. Michael J.G. Gray-Fow, 'From Proconsul to Saint: Sergius Paullus to *St. Paul-Serge*', *Classica et Mediaevalia* 57 (2006), pp. 157-72; *idem*, 'Why the Christians? Nero and the Great Fire', *Latomus* 57 (1998), pp. 595-616.

We do not know who leveled the charge of foreign superstition against Pomponia Graecina in 57 CE, nor do we know their motives. However, informers flourished under most emperors and the charge may have been a way of obliquely attacking Aulus Plautius. His patron, the Emperor Claudius, had been dead for three years and the young Nero was emperor. But at this period Nero's worst vices remained somewhat concealed and he was still being guided by the restraining hands of the philosopher Seneca and the Praetorian Prefect Afranius Burrus.<sup>33</sup> It was probably Seneca and Burrus who persuaded Nero that the charge against Aulus Plautius's wife should be addressed by invoking the traditional powers of a Roman husband and letting Plautius himself, in conjunction with the (male) family council, determine her guilt or innocence. It may be that they had great faith in Plautius's integrity or, more likely, they wanted the whole affair to go away.

The nature of the foreign superstition remains unknown. Although one bizarre suggestion is Druidism (presumably from her husband's time in Britain), Druidism was suppressed by Claudius, and the main candidates have been Judaism and Christianity.<sup>34</sup> Both terms are misleading. Judaism before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE was different from later Judaism, and 'Christianity' assumes a coherence of belief and doctrine that in 57 CE still lies in the future. Additionally, Christians were still seen as a Jewish sect. To posit a choice for Pomponia Graecina between Judaism and Christianity is anachronistic. She would not have seen a difference.

Chaired by Aulus Plautius, the family *consilium* duly met and pronounced Pomponia innocent of the accusation of foreign superstition. What that means is just as opaque as the original accusation, but it can hardly have been an unexpected outcome. We know that Aulus Plautius respected his wife, as she was still wearing the public mourning attire for her dead friend Julia, which he could have forbidden at any time. Elite Roman marriages were normally family alliances, and Plautius was much older than

33. Scullard, *Grachi to Nero*, pp. 317-18.

34. Anthony Birley, *The People of Roman Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 36. Although wives were permitted to join or visit their husbands governing provinces (cf. *Matt.* 27.19), there is no evidence that Pomponia Graecina ever visited Britain. The propriety of wives in provinces had been debated in the Senate in 21 CE: Tacitus, *Ann.* 3.33-34. Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), p. 25. Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.5.

Pomponia Graecina, but genuine attachment and affection cannot be ruled out, and he did not take the usual easy Roman way out of divorce.

Pomponia Graecina soon had new reasons to wear her mourning attire. Two years after the family trial, her son by Aulus Plautius, also named Aulus Plautius, was raped and executed by Nero, who claimed that his mother (whom he had just murdered) had loved the young man and offered him hopes of the throne.<sup>35</sup> Her husband may have been dead by this time, as there is no further mention of him.

Pomponia Graecina continued living in mourning for forty years after the trial, eventually dying in 83 CE. For Roman women, mourning meant wearing only white and with no ornaments or jewels. The normal period after the death of a loved one was one year, and Pomponia's persistence beyond this time could hardly go unnoticed.<sup>36</sup> Tacitus says her public mourning later became for her a title to glory, and he would have known her himself as a pillar of Rome's elite ladies.<sup>37</sup> There is no evidence that she remarried. She lived through Nero's persecution of the Christians (64–68 CE) and on through the tumultuous year of the Four Emperors into the reign of the Flavian emperors, dying early in the reign of Domitian. She would have been aware of, and probably greatly interested in, the revolt against Roman rule in her husband's old province of Britannia in 61 CE, and after the revolt she would have approved of the appointment of her husband's nephew, P. Petronius Turpilianus as governor. The Plauttii, Petronii and Vitellii formed a close political nexus, but how she responded to Petronius's brother-in-law Aulus Vitellius being emperor in 69 CE for a brief period would be interesting to know.<sup>38</sup>

Pomponia Graecina remains a mystery in the issue of her 'foreign superstition'. That she was interested in Christian beliefs certainly cannot be excluded entirely, but it remains unlikely. This study has been concerned not with this unanswerable question, but with how she might have heard about Christianity, from whom she might have heard it and what Christian beliefs

35. Suetonius, *Ner.* 35.4.

36. Terence, *Haut.* 2.286-288; Ovid, *Fast.* 3.134; Seneca, *Ep.* 63.12; *idem*, *Helv.* 16; Juvenal, *Sat.* 10.245; Herodian, *Hist.* 4.2.3-4.

37. Tacitus was in Rome by 75 CE, beginning his move up the scale of honors.

38. Birley, *Roman Britain*, p. 36; Ronald Syme, *Roman Papers* (7 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), III, p. 1363.

would have amounted to in Rome in 57 CE. These questions can at least produce plausible answers. These at least can be essayed an answer.