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Wolves in Sheep's Clothing, or Minorca's Victimary Process: Deconstructing the *Epistula Seueri's* Discursive Violence

“We shall be call'd purgers, not murderers”
(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II 1)

“Er tyrannisiert mich indem er behauptet, ich tyrannisiere ihn”
(Franz Kafka, *Brief an den Vater*)

1. Introduction: Issues, Aim, and Method

In the first decades of the fifth century CE, the Jews living in Magona (modern-day Mahón), on the Mediterranean island of Minorca, were one of those communities where social power was *de facto* exercised by a group which was *de iure* unacceptable to the Catholic congregations, since the eastern part of the island had long been dominated by well-established Jewish families. The *Epistula Seueri* represents an idealistic narrative according to which supernatural forces – God, Christ, the spiritual power linked to the arrival of Saint Stephen's relics to the island – triggered the conversion of those Jews. However, a close reading belies the claims of its author, who contends that he will recount a story *non compto sed ueridico sermone*.¹ Although the core of the work – some kind of “conversion” of Minorcan Jews – is to be accepted as trustworthy, most aspects of the narrative are indeed more or less blatantly fictitious.

After the attention paid in the last decades to the *Epistula Seueri*, the somber episode of this striking conversion is now a well-known chapter of the much longer and more terrible history of anti-Jewish coercion and persecution, and I do not need to dwell extensively on many of its aspects.² According to the

¹ *Ep.* 1.2. For the Latin text and the occasional English translations of the *Epistula Seueri* BRADBURY (1996) is used. I am deeply grateful to Raúl González Salinero, Rodrigo Laham Cohen, and Tomeu Obrador Cursach for their helpful remarks on a first draft of this article, and to Henry MacAdam for the thorough revision of my English text. My heartfelt thanks go also to the reviewers of the journal for several perceptive corrections and suggestions.

² For a recent updated study of the history of the text, its transmission, codicology, chronology and editions, see ROMANO (2015). For these aspects, including a more detailed survey of the historical context, authorship, and date, see also AMENGUAL I BATLE (2001).

author, the arrival of Stephen's relics touched off a firestorm of Christian fervour on Minorca to such an extent that the previously cordial relations between Jews and Christians deteriorated. This tension reached a climax when Bishop Severus gathered his congregation and challenged the Jewish leaders to public debate. The synagogue leaders reject the challenge, but agree to let the Bishop inspect the synagogue, where – according to the narrator – weapons had been stockpiled. As Christians and Jews make their way through the streets, a riot breaks out during which the Christian crowd burns the synagogue to the ground. For the following eight days, the Christian throng wages a campaign of intimidation until they bring about the conversion of the whole Jewish community.

Despite the attempts of some scholars driven by apologetic concerns to validate it, the text is mainly unreliable as a description of facts, since it is riddled with signs of literary artifice: the abundance of references to miraculous episodes, hyperbolic claims, the gap between the narrative and psychological or historical verisimilitude, and the precision of the timing in eight days (corresponding to the liturgical octave),³ are just some features which betray a significant display of inventive skills, as well as an underlying agenda serving theological interests.

I would add that there is a certain oneiric atmosphere pervading the story. This is not only, or mainly, due to the fact that several dreams are related in the work, but rather because quite a few reports are located in rather unlikely scenarios or are devoid of internal logic. The portrayal of the journey of the Christian throng from Iamona to Magona, completed “with such speed that they flew over the thirty miles more light-heartedly than if they were being invited to a banquet at some beauty spot outside the town” (12.2), the huge stones allegedly thrown by Jewish women on the Christian throng which do not touch anyone (13.3-4), the claim that Christians removed the sacred books of the synagogue “so that they wouldn't suffer harm among the Jews” – as if the Jews were ready to desecrate their own *Scriptures!* – (13.13), or the sudden longing for conversion undergone by two of the most pious Jews (18.19-23), are only a sample of a string of unexpected and nonsensical things which are reported but are devoid of any verisimilitude. As in the realm of fantasy, in the *Epistula Seueri* anything goes: the author embraces the kinds of freedoms which allow him to use bizarre and surreal images, to such an extent that anything is possible at any moment, and a rigorous logic is lacking. An often radical disregard for consistence and rational thought introduces a preposterous and eccentric twist to the story, bursting, so to say, into the logic of cartoons.

³ HUNT (1982), p. 107: “Severus ... betrays a contrived ecclesiastical neatness in confining the series of incidents to eight days, with the last Jewish soul appropriately rescued to round off the liturgical octave”. This author notes several other suspect features, such as “the circularity of making the outcome of events conform to dreams and portents” and “the forcing of incidents into biblical moulds” (p. 113).

I accordingly agree with the scholarly opinion that in the *Epistula Seueri* only a minimal core – the existence of an episode of violent coercion on the Jewish community, and the ensuing outcome of a mass conversion – should be accepted as trustworthy.⁴ Of course, some further minor points can be reliable – such as the names of some outstanding Jews or the assertion that they had posts of relevance in Minorcan public life –, but the narrative is so contrived that there are serious reasons to infer that a substantial rewriting of the past has taken place.⁵

The wholesale rewriting of the past implies a high degree of distortion of the real facts. This might help explain the extent of discursive violence which characterizes the text, an aspect which should be carefully surveyed. Admittedly, even the most cursory reading of Severus' work makes plain that the events at Minorca involved a not inconsiderable amount of violence.⁶ A good exemplification is the fact that the vocabulary of warfare abounds: *exercitus*, *arma*, *bellum*, *certamen*, *proelium*, *pugna*, *contentio*, *spolia opima*, and *uictoria* are only some examples.⁷ Brown graphically described the episode as “a thoroughly dirty business, where violence and fear of yet greater violence played a decisive role”.⁸ Nevertheless, this respected historian emphasized the integration of Jews and Christians in a single community, not the human costs paid for it.⁹ In fact, as far as I know, the all-pervasiveness of that violence in Severus' discourse has not been yet sufficiently highlighted. After all, the explicit violence in his work is restricted to the brief and isolated sentence in which the burning of the synagogue is mentioned, and to the episode where a Christian servant hits not a Jew, but a Christian.

The aim of the present paper is to assess the extent of the violence which is embedded in Severus' discourse – an account obviously narrated from the point of view of the persecutors –, as the textual reflection of the actual violence having taken place against the Jewish community. The author of the work has done his best to deny, underplay or disguise any violence carried out by Christians, despite the fact that there are too many traces of its presence in the treatment of the Minorcan Jews and in the descriptions of their feelings. This tension creates a

⁴ That the *Epistle* was written by Severus is witnessed – *pace* Blumenkranz, who deems the work a 7th century fake – by one of Consentius' letters to Augustine; see e.g. WANKENNE / HAMBENNE (1987), p. 13-15.

⁵ With the overwhelming majority of scholars, however, I accept that the date and authenticity of Severus' letter is a settled question, and that the doubts concerning these issues stem from a hypercritical attitude; see e.g. DEMOUGEOT (1982), p. 16-24; LOTTER (1986), p. 299-306; BRADBURY (1996), p. 9-15. A rationale for an invention is hard to imagine; see LOTTER (2003), p. 337.

⁶ BLUMENKRANZ (1960), p. 89: “L'auteur de l'épître dite de Sévère n'apprécie pas beaucoup l'efficacité des discussions verbales et [...] d'autre part, c'est plutôt des solutions de force qu'il veut conseiller”.

⁷ For references, see BRADBURY (1996), p. 62 and n. 155.

⁸ BROWN (1982), p. 104.

⁹ GINZBURG (1996), p. 207-208.

discourse characterized by a striking inconsistency. Put otherwise, the rejection of the existence of violence in the Christian community's deeds performs, as we will see, a sort of violence of its own in the hermeneutical realm, which distorts virtually everything. It is that discursive violence, spread in a capillary way through the text, that I will systematically address here and examine at length.¹⁰

In order to identify and analyse the rhetorical strategies of the author in describing the events, I will make use of a theoretical framework in which close attention has been paid to the mechanisms at work when victimary processes take place. The phrase "victimary process" (or "scapegoating phenomenon") refers to devices for palming off upon someone else the trouble which a group shrinks from bearing itself. The main aspects of this phenomenon, which has been extensively treated in the works of Girard, are the following:¹¹

- a) In a critical situation where tensions and conflicts of all kinds arise, guilt is blamed onto a single person or a minority, whilst the persecutors claim that they are morally impeccable people;
- b) The transfer of guilt from the community to the victim is accompanied by the categorization of the victim as an "other" and alien being;
- c) Victims are neutralized through murder, physical expulsion or symbolic abolition;
- d) It is claimed that the elimination of the victim represents a catharsis which will allow the community to survive in a harmonious way. The process involves that the members of the persecuting group rewrite themselves as victims, thereby masking their own violent aggressions.

In the course of my analysis of Severus' rhetorical attempts to exonerate himself and the Christian throng for the violence exerted on the Jews I will also recur, as a subsidiary tool, to Sigmund Freud's survey of the so-called "kettle logic", an apologetic device using several arguments which, taken together, are inconsistent with each other. In this way it will be easier to make plain the conflicting and ultimately contradictory statements set forth by the narrator.

The usefulness of this theoretical framework based on Girard's and Freud's works in unveiling the degree of violence implicit in Severus' discourse in the *Epistula Seueri* will be made plain in the remainder of this article.

2. *The Epistula Seueri as a Persecution Text, or Victimary Logic at Work*

Every critical scholar has readily acknowledged that the actual victims of the events at Minorca were the Jews, and that the text somehow alters the historical truth. Modern authors have become increasingly sensitive to the distortions carried

¹⁰ After all, the first act of the critic "must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader": FETTERLEY (1978), p. XXII.

¹¹ For an illuminating summary of most of his main topics, see GIRARD (1987).

out by the persecutors, and this sensitivity usually surfaces in their works. Nevertheless, the scapegoating nature of those events has not been so far fully grasped. To what extent victimary logic underlies the text has been overlooked, either because most scholars have focused on other aspects (authenticity, date, authorship, gender issues...), or because they have assumed some claims made by Severus, who portrays the confrontation between Jews and Christians as a kind of war, carried out between seemingly equivalent rivals.¹²

A preliminary aspect which must be clarified is the place of the Jews within the Minorcan society. Prime candidates for scapegoating are the marginal and the weak people, namely, a minority group, but also those isolated by their very prominence. Significantly, the Minorcan Jewish community seems to have contained both kinds of potential victims. On the one hand, unlike some scholars assert, Jews were a (however conspicuous) minority on the island.¹³ When the conversion is finally narrated, the reader realizes that the whole Jewish neighborhood is composed of five hundred forty people; but a historian of Augustus' age asserted that the island had around thirty thousand inhabitants, and one can reasonably surmise that in the first quarter of the 5th century the overwhelming majority of them must have been Christians.¹⁴ Moreover, when the crowd which gathers together at the bishop's instigation for the departure to Magona is mentioned, it is described as "a throng of Christ's servants, greater than was thought to reside in that town (*maior ex Iamonensi ciuitate [...] famulorum Christi multitudo conuenit quam in ipso oppido putabatur consistere*)",¹⁵ and elsewhere the sizable number of the Christian multitude is remarked: *tanta Iamonensis populi multitudine* (*Ep.* 29.3).

Even in Magona – usually depicted as a Jewish stronghold –, there was a Christian community which was important enough to have one church (a second one would be later built out of the ruins of the synagogue), and one which was chosen by Orosius to deposit there some of Stephen's relics.¹⁶ Although we

¹² See e.g. *Ep.* 9.1: *Interea dum hi apparatus geruntur, magno quoque altrinsecus studio futurum instruitur bellum, utriusque exercitus*. There is, however, every indication that the only party which felt "ardour for the struggle" (*contentionis incendium: Ep.* 7.2) was the Christian one, which led the struggle in the first place. The imbalance between both communities seems to be obvious.

¹³ GIRARD (1987), p. 74-75: "The victim is often in the singular and the persecutors in the plural. Even when the victims, too, are plural, they are less numerous than their persecutors and, as a result, more or less defenseless. The persecutors are a majority and their victims a minority".

¹⁴ DIOD. SIC. V 17.2; see CARO BAROJA (1976²), p. 147.

¹⁵ *Ep.* 12.1. This description might suggest that inhabitants coming from other Minorcan villages joined the throng from Iamona. Even confessional scholars acknowledge that the exiguous number of Christians is just a theological construct aimed at showing Christ's power; see AMENGUAL I BATLE (2018), p. 34-35.

¹⁶ *Ep.* 4.1-2: *Presbyter quidam sanctitate praecipuus ab Hierosolyma ueniens, Magonae non longo tempore immoratus est [...]. Hic beati martyris Stephani reliquias [...] in memorati oppidi ecclesia collocauit*.

cannot be sure about the relative proportion of Christians and Jews at Magona, there is every indication that the total Christian population on the island greatly exceeded in size the Jewish one, which was – as elsewhere in the Roman Empire of the fifth century – just a minority, not to mention that Christians were strongly supported by imperial power, whose laws treated Jews in a rather vituperative way. On the other hand, the community had some outstanding members (*potentiores*), but the reported events make plain that those men, at troubled times, were not powerful enough to prevent Christians from compelling them to convert or from illegally burning a synagogue. Of course, victimary logic turns the world upside down, describing the real persecutors as harmless victims, and the actual powerless victims as a threatening multitude endowed with an extraordinary and overwhelming power.¹⁷

Once the liability of the Jewish community to become a victimized group is grasped, one can go on detecting in the reported events all the constitutive elements of a scapegoating process. First, we find the polarization or channeling of evil onto the Jewish community, which is considered the only guilty party in any negative event in the island's social life. Second, the typical strategy of turning the victim into an alien being (what can be labeled "estrangement") is patently at work: on the one hand, Jews are described as a sub-human and harmful group; on the other, physical separateness (at least regarding the Christian town of Iamona) is emphasized. Third, the neutralization of the Jews takes place, although this is not carried out in the usual form of murder or physical expulsion, but through a symbolic abolition (erasure of Jewish beliefs and practices, and destruction of the synagogue); in fact, according to the victimary standpoint of the author, the Jews as such cannot be reformed, but must cease being Jews and become Christians. Fourth, the final harmonious state of the community is proclaimed,¹⁸ which is conveyed through statements referring to the existence of a general atmosphere of joy and happiness,¹⁹ but also to the securing of an unwavering unanimity: all Jews, including the most recalcitrant among them, are reportedly converted.²⁰ In this way, each crucial dimension of the victimization mechanism is traceable within the *Epistula Seueri*.

¹⁷ Nevertheless, some scholars deem Severus' narrative reliable in this respect. See e.g. SEGÚI VIDAL (1937), p. 58.

¹⁸ BURKE (1969²), p. 407: "The alienating of iniquities from the self to the scapegoat amounts to a *rebirth* of the self".

¹⁹ See *Ep.* 28.8: *Quis non prae gaudio fleuit? Cui non extorsit lacrimas laetitiae magnitudo?* Interestingly, the author uses the metaphor of the fertility of the land in order to express the alleged spiritual and moral fruits of the Jews' conversion: *multiplicem fructum iustitiae germinare conspiciamus [...]. Nam unde insignem perfidiae eruimus siluam, illic laetissima fidei opera pullularunt* (*Ep.* 30.1-2).

²⁰ The author of the *Epistle* uses the Gospel image of the completion of the flock (28.9): *suscepi plane ouem quam ex omni numero solam errasse putabamus*. Nevertheless, his own discourse belies such thorough conversion: some Jews left the island, whereas others just made a false conversion.

This finding arouses the issue of the motives which gave rise to the repression of Judaism at Minorca. Scholarly literature usually takes for granted the claim made by the author of the *Epistle*, namely, that the arrival of Stephen's relics gave way to the missionary impulse and zeal of the Christian population. This view, however, not only assumes the reliability of the author's account, but does not seem to be very plausible. Firstly, we should consider the possibility that the relationship between Christians and Jews, sharing the same civic space, might have been maintained in a friendly way,²¹ and it is odd that this state of affairs would undergo sudden changes in the absence of great social and economic upheavals. Secondly, the arrival of Orosius and the relics on the island seem actually have taken place in 416, at least a year and a half before the events narrated by Severus, so there does not seem to be a direct relation between that fact and the Christian desire to effect the conversion of the Jews in 418. Thirdly, the arrival of relics is just an event that must be interpreted in a certain way to get significance; it ought to be explained as the story of a saint stoned by the Jews, and a close spiritual relationship, and even identification, between first-century Palestinian and fifth-century Minorcan Jews must be posited in order to arouse a deep animosity against contemporary neighbours. That interpretation obviously corresponded to the church hierarchy, acquainted with Scriptures and hermeneutical tools. After all, the boundaries between Jewish and Christian identities were clear (and intellectually relevant) not for the lay population, but only for religious elites. This last remark suggests that – unlike the author of the writing wants us to believe – the initiative against the Jews was not a spontaneous move caused by the arrival of relics, but an orchestrated campaign serving particular interests. Although the bishop portrays himself as the moderator of the crowd's rage, there is every indication that – perhaps with the support of Consentius, a theologian living on one of the Balearic Islands who wrote some letters to Augustine – he caused and fostered the disturbances, and it is he who, as the highest religious authority, organized the aggressive march of his congregation to Magona.²²

Certainly, the presence of cultivated Jews constituted a challenge for bishops. They were always an intellectual threat, since the Christian discourse was based

²¹ Let us recall that some canons of councils held in *Hispania* and Gaul during the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries forbade Christians, for instance, from sharing meals with Jews. Of course, councils could be simply repeating previous prohibitions, but it is possible that Christians and Jews had meals together, perhaps because they did not understand the difference or because they just did not attribute any importance to their neighbours' religion. On the possible cordial relationships between Jews and Christian and the attempts of the Church hierarchy to create an idiosyncratic religious identity, see e.g. GONZÁLEZ SALINERO (2018), p. 268-271. Nevertheless, it is not sure that those relations were actually that cordial; see KRAEMER 2020, p. 63-66.

²² On Consentius' possible participation on the redaction of Severus' work, see e.g. AMENGUAL I BATLE 2008, p. 76-78; KRAEMER 2020, p. 53-54.

on the prejudicially theological notion that the Hebrew Scriptures should be read as a messianic anticipation of Jesus, a claim whose implausible character had been already highlighted by some thoughtful Jews at the latest in the second century, as the one cited by Celsus and the Jew of Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* make plain.²³ The *Epistula Seueri* (18.15) indicates that there were several learned Jews in the community of Magona: Theodorus, but also Innocentius – who is called, besides a good scholar of the Law, *non solum Latinis uerum etiam Graecis litteris eruditus*. This situation, for the recently appointed bishop Severus, who does not seem to have been notable for his brilliant mind,²⁴ in all probability vexed him, and made him feel his spiritual authority permanently challenged. Severus himself is bound to admit that the Christian community and its bishop are incapable of vanquishing Theodorus by human arguments.²⁵ In these circumstances, the learning and social prestige attained by some Jewish leaders might have aroused in Severus, the person who had the duty of showing the superiority of Christianity regarding Judaism, an affront to his most cherished beliefs. A disturbing personal crisis could be at the origin of the events at Minorca, and the arrival of Stephen's relics could be the event which triggered – or rather was the alibi for – his anti-Jewish activities (this seems to be confirmed by the fact that, in most of the narrative, the relics are conspicuous by their absence).²⁶

Be that as it may, the fact that, as we have argued, in the reported events all the constitutive elements of a scapegoating process are traceable, means that

²³ For a sustained argument that the Jew mentioned in Origen's *Contra Celsum* was a real figure, see NIEHOFF (2013).

²⁴ WANKENNE / HAMBENNE (1987), p. 21: "L'évêque toutefois ne paraît pas être à la hauteur de la situation dans cette joute théologique". In fact, unless we interpret the letter 12 sent by Consentius to Augustine as proof of his proud, Consentius reveals that he does not consider Severus a valid interlocutor in theological issues: *Mihi insularum Balearium, in quibus non dicam doctum, sed uel fideliter Christianum inuenire rarissimum est, solitudine ante oculos collocata [...] cum... nullumque etiam nunc in insulis – non dicam qui magna doceat et nebulosa dilucidet, sed uel qui parua intelligat et serena consideret – inuenire possibile sit*, DIVJAK (1981), p. 72, respectively lines 8-10 and 22-26.

²⁵ Several passages indicate that the author of the letter – which clearly represents the bishop's standpoint – does not put much weight on the verbal discussions: *Christum uero cuius regnum non in sermone sed in uirtute est [1 Cor 4.20] nobis ne uerbum quidem proferentibus* (*Ep.* 8.3). Elsewhere (*Ep.* 21.5) it is asserted that Jews converted "without any verbal wrangling or dispute over the Scriptures": *inueterati illi legis doctores sine ulla altercatione uerborum, sine ullo scripturarum certamine*. In fact, the only reference to an actual dispute ends with an overwhelming victory of the Jewish ruler (*Ep.* 16.2-3): "(...) Theodorus debated boldly about the Law, and after he had mocked and twisted all of our objections, the Christian throng, seeing that he could not be vanquished by human arguments, prayed for assistance from heaven".

²⁶ One could also hazard another guess, namely, that Severus suffered from some kind of inferiority complex. Given the existing discursive violence against the Jews, however, coming up with some precise trigger (and particularly a highly psychologized and speculative reading) for the actions of Minorca's Christians seems unnecessary.

victimary logic is here at work. Moreover, as far as Severus underplays and disguises the violence carried out by Christians in this episode of persecution and coercion, his work can and should be deemed a persecution text, namely, an account of scapegoating in which the author participates as (s)he reproduces uncritically the viewpoint of the actual persecutors by projecting the responsibility for a crisis upon an obviously innocent victim or victims. Such a text distorts real events, “but it distorts them in a manner so characteristic of this kind of persecution everywhere that we find it relatively easy to see through the distortions and grasp the truth of what really happened, at least in a general way”.²⁷

3. *Exculpatory Strategies or the Kettle Logic*

Both in his *Die Traumdeutung* (1899) and his *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (1905), Freud evoked a “piece of sophistry” (*Sophisma*) which has been much laughed over, but whose right to be called a joke might be doubted. I refer to the scene in which a man who has borrowed a copper kettle is sued because he had returned it with a hole, in a damaged condition which made it unusable. The accused man engages in defensive tactics not to admit or accept his responsibility, but substituting instead a rhetorical device wherein he uses several different arguments to make a point and to safeguard himself: “First, I have never borrowed a kettle at all. Secondly, the kettle was already damaged when I got it from you. Third, I gave you back the kettle undamaged”. Each one of these defenses might be valid in itself, but taken together they exclude one another. The three arguments are blatantly inconsistent with each other, and Freud notes that it would have been better if the man had only used one.²⁸ Such an enumeration of inconsistent arguments confirms *per negationem* what it endeavors to deny, namely, that the man is accountable for the damage suffered by the borrowed object.

My point lies in the fact that this elementary “kettle logic” – as Derrida has called it –²⁹ is likewise found in the strategies displayed in Severus’ *Epistle*. The author is indeed clearly constructing an apologetic device in order to deny the violence inflicted on the Jews by his own Christian community.³⁰ In this regard, his discourse uses the following different and conflicting arguments: 1) There was no violence at all; 2) There was violence, but it was justified; 3) There was some violence, but it was exceptional and did not have Jews as victims; 4) There was violence, but it came from the Jews. These

²⁷ See GIRARD (1987), p. 114. For the concept of “persecution text”, see *ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁸ FREUD (1925), p. 66: “Jede einzelne Einrede ist für sich gut, zusammengenommen aber schließen sie einander aus. A behandelt isoliert, was im Zusammenhange betrachtet werden muß [...] Man kann auch sagen: A setzt das ‘und’ an die Stelle, an der nur ein ‘entweder – oder’ möglich ist”.

²⁹ DERRIDA (1998), p. 6, in the original French: “la logique du chaudron”.

³⁰ KRAEMER (2009), p. 648-649: “Severus’ evasive account is a pre-emptive defense against any claims that the actions of the Minorcan Christians were in any way illegal”.

claims, which concur in exonerating the Christians of blame for violence against the Jews, are not consistent with one another but, on the contrary, at least some of them are mutually exclusive and prove *e contrario* the failure of the apologetic attempt, thereby perhaps even betraying a kind of bad conscience in its author.

Before exemplifying and surveying these pseudo-arguments, we should recall the twofold context of Freud's example of that "kettle logic", namely, the interpretation of dreams and exculpatory devices. In both cases, contradictory opposites are yoked together: incompatible ideas are simultaneously admitted in the "exorbitant" logic of dreaming, where the logic itself lies close to illogical thought. Something similar happens when a person is compelled to make a desperate apology: she is forced to put together several separate arguments and present them collectively as if the contradictions themselves did not exist, despite the fact that those claims are definitely incompatible. This convergence is significant in understanding the *Epistula Seueri*, since this work is at the same time greatly characterized by an oneiric logic, and by the obvious aim to exonerate the Christians from their use of anti-Jewish violence.

It is advisable now to flesh out, however briefly, the above-mentioned statements. To start with, a great deal of the text amounts to a complete denial of violence. The author contends he and his co-religionists just want the salvation of the Jews. And the initiative of the Christian community of Iamona is portrayed in the brightest and most idyllic terms. They go to Magona just to talk to the Jews, who allegedly did not receive any harm and did not pretend even to have been touched: *Nemo Iudaeorum se contactum saltem fuisse, ne pro inuidia quidem, ut mos est, simulauit*.³¹ Furthermore, Christian harmlessness is put in the mouth of a distinguished Jew, who rhetorically asks if the merciful Christian people would desire their blood: *Numquid sanguinem nostrum plebs tam misericors quam pro nobis flere conspeximus concupiscit?*, and, likewise rhetorically, adds that Christians never harmed anyone, not even with a verbal blow: *Recordemur, obsecro, quem unquam laeserit, cui nostrorum uerbo saltem irrogarit iniuriam*.³² In the same passage, Christians are specifically labeled

³¹ *Ep.* 13.7. Elsewhere (18.24) the author asserts that, unlike some Jews presumed, Theodorus "had not suffered any violence from the Christian multitude": *nec ullam ... Christiani populi pertulisse uiolentiam*.

³² *Ep.* 18.14. The last statement is all the more ironic and incredible when one realizes of the many disparaging and vituperative words addressed by the narrator (and the character of the bishop) to the Jews, a fact which reflects their perversely equivocal treatment in the Roman legislation influenced by Christian doctrine. LAHAM COHEN (2018), p. 17: "Even in the laws that protect Judaism, Jews were called *nefaria secta* or *superstitio*, among other negative epithets". The author, who speaks everywhere about their *perfidia* (*Ep.* 14; 16.1.7; 20.15; 21.2; 24.1) and their "dark hearts" (*Ep.* 14), puts even in the mouth of the first Jewish convert, Reuben, the stereotypical description of Judaism as a superstition (*Ep.* 15.2): *absolui se a uinculis Iudaicae superstitionis*

“those blameless people” (*innocios*). In fact, the author states that the events took place because of supernatural grace and “without us even uttering a word” (*Ep.* 8.3).

In order to make the denial of the existence of anti-Jewish violence more credible, the author aims at giving the impression that Christians were the weak party, also from a quantitative standpoint. According to Severus, the Christians were “humble in heart as well as physical strength”: *corde ita etiam et uiribus humiles* (*Ep.* 6.4), whilst Magona “seethed with a great multitude of Jews”: *tantis Iudaeorum populis ... feruebat* (*Ep.* 3.6), thereby creating the impression that the Jewish community by far outnumbered the Christian congregation. This impression is, however, as argued above, false and misleading.

The presence of violence is, nonetheless, elsewhere reluctantly recognized. According to the second claim, violence did indeed occur, but it was not real violence, since it was inspired by religious zeal, which apparently justifies *any* action. It is Christ himself who, Severus states, “for a short while, took away the mildness from his lambs”:

Omnes siquidem frustra reclamantibus nobis saxa corripunt, et pastoris commotione posthabita, cum unum consilium cunctis zelus potius Christi quam ira suggereret, lupos cornibus impetendos censuerunt, quamuis hoc illius qui solus uerus et bonus pastor est nutu factum esse nulli dubium sit. (*Ep.* 13.6)

This paragraph involves conflicting and even contradictory claims. On the one hand, the fact that Christians take stones and make ready to attack is presented as a transgression of the bishop's injunctions and a (sinful) neglect of the churchman's (or Christ's?) warnings. On the other, the narrator – identified with the bishop himself – justifies and legitimizes that transgression by attributing it to the divine will, which obviously surpasses any ecclesiastical authority,³³ and to “zeal for Christ”. This proves that violent behaviour not only does not ultimately contradict the bishop's values, but it could have been triggered by the bishop himself. In fact, unlike what the narrator suggests – namely, that this outburst of violence is just an exception to the rule –, violence hovers over the island since the very beginning of these events.

The attribution of violence to some kind of supernatural agency is a typical device of victimary processes and persecution texts, as Girard has compellingly argued.³⁴ Not surprisingly, it is a strategy used everywhere in Severus' epistle. Time and again, the events in Magona are ascribed to God's will, to Christ, to

deprecabatur, whilst other Jews refer to their beliefs as *religio* (*Ep.* 18.19; 19.9). On this terminology, see KAHLOS (2007).

³³ This is an example of what has been called “the grammar of intransitivity” whereby the great principles of Christian love and forgiveness “serve to celebrate the perfection of the one who prays forgiveness, without affecting those for whom the prayers are offered”: MATTHEWS (2010), p. 100.

³⁴ See e.g. GIRARD (1972).

the Holy Spirit, or to Saint Stephen.³⁵ Reportedly, it is the arrival of Stephen's relics on the island that allegedly unchains the series of events, as if some kind of spiritual (not to say magical) force had unleashed the ensuing conflict.³⁶ The impartial observer, however, can understand very well that all-too-human agents have given rise to the disturbances: without an intimidating Christian mob, nothing would have happened.

A third claim is that violence was insignificant, as far as it was restricted to just a single case (*Ep.* 13.8): *Sane quoniam omnimodis debemus uitare mendacium, unus ex omni Christianorum numero inuentus est, qui Achar illi similis esse uellet qui sub Iesu Naue quaedam de anathemate spolia concupiuit*. Violence is downplayed: there is just one exception to the rule, and, besides, the victim was not a Jew but *seruus cuiusdam Christiani*, who, in turn, *solus, dum aliquid a synagoga diripere concupiscit, in lapidem offensionis incurrit* (*Ep.* 13.9-10). In this way, the apparently singular act of violence, aimed at a Jew, strikes the only Christian who got what he deserved. Besides – so it is claimed –, violence had morally positive effects, insofar as the wound inflicted forced the slave to confess his greedy desire for theft (*Ep.* 13.11).

A further claim is that any Christian act of violence – if it can be labeled “violence” at all – is just the reaction to previous violence carried out by Jews. This is particularly significant, since it conveys the typical factor in processes dominated by the victimary logic, in which the victim is perversely transformed into the guilty party.³⁷ The distortion carried out by the victimizers turns the world upside down, and the violence inflicted on the victim(s) is offered as just the fair punishment of the “really violent” being. The fact that this aspect is all-pervasive in the *Epistula Seueri* deserves a separate and detailed treatment.

4. The “Violent” Jews: Depicting the Victim(s) as the Guilty Party

Victimary logic channels the responsibility toward the victims, attributing all conceivable evil to them and even turning them into sub-human and despicable creatures. This device is already perceived from the very beginning of the Letter, which gives the deceitful impression that Christians are a community threatened

³⁵ *Ep.* 1.2: *magnalia, quae apud nos Christus operatus est*; Christ “achieved everything with his own forces and without us even uttering a word”: *nobis ne uerbum quidem proferentibus, suis omnia uiribus consummasse* (8.3); *Christianorum aciem uirtute Sancti Spiritus praemunitam* (8.5).

³⁶ That ascription is also conveyed by the fact that some manuscripts bear the title *Epistula Seueri episcopi de conuersione Iudaeorum apud Minorcam insulam meritis sancti Stephani facta*. The conversion is, therefore, allegedly accomplished by the merit of St. Stephen, or, more specifically, of his relics.

³⁷ GIRARD (1987), p. 112: “A text structured by some kind of collective victimage will reflect the view of the victimizers [...] This text will present the victim as guilty [...] even though no evidence whatever is provided”.

by the evilness of Jews. Otherness is portrayed, as usual in victimary discourses, through the use of sub-human images. Jews are tantamount to noxious animals – “rightly compared with wolves and foxes for fierceness and villainy”: *qui lupis ac uulpibus feritate atque nequitia merito comparantur*, but also, what is even worse, with vermin as “vipers and scorpions”: *uelut colubris scorpionibusque*.³⁸

This initial, unrelenting de-humanization sets the tone of a discourse according to which Jews, as such, do not deserve to preserve their lives. Their evilness has an intrinsic, almost metaphysical character, as far as the author means that Jews are extremely harmful even if they are denied the possibility of any contact with the Christians living in Iamona, since *Iudaei habitare in ea nequaquam possint* (Ep. 3.1). But, even if they lack the possibility of living there – and accordingly harming its Christian inhabitants –, “Christ’s church was being wounded by them daily”: *quotidie ab his Christi ecclesia morderetur* (Ep. 3.6). The mere presence of those purportedly frightening and dreadful creatures allegedly arouses discomfort and uneasiness, to the extent that they are deemed as “polluting elements” which should be “cleansed”.³⁹ How and why, in these circumstances of physical distance and separateness, Jews would be nonetheless capable of harming Christians, remains unexplained. Of course, in a civilization where remote control devices and something like chemical warfare are lacking, there is no rational explanation for such a claim. And this means that only a theological rationale can account for it. Put otherwise, not historical, but just metaphysical, hermeneutical, or rhetorical Jews are envisaged here, namely, Jews as constructed within the discourse of Christian doctrine.⁴⁰

The theological nature of the discourse should make us wary. According to the author, it is the Christian congregation that is wounded and harmed, but this is highly suspect, since there are several traces that indicate Christians had pacifically coexisted in Minorca with Jews for a long time,⁴¹ and that Christians had accepted leading members of the Jewish community as secular leaders, holding posts such as *defensor ciuitatis* at Magona and having all the recognizable credentials of social status. This further suggests that not the Church as such, but its leader, the bishop himself, felt emotionally or theoretically wounded for some reason.

The next charge hinting at an alleged Jewish dangerousness consists in that the Jews gather all kinds of weapons into the synagogue (Ep. 8.5): *Itaque non solum libros reuoluere sed etiam sudes, saxa, iacula omniaque telorum genera*

³⁸ See respectively Ep. 3.5 and 3.6. For the possible influence of Augustine’s metaphorical language about Jews as animals on the Minorcan episode, see SHAW (2011), p. 303-304.

³⁹ SIVAN (2013), p. 132.

⁴⁰ For the formulation of a “hermeneutical Jew”, see COHEN (1999), p. 2-3.

⁴¹ Ep. 5.1: *familiaritatis consuetudo ... inueteratae speciei caritatis*.

ad synagogam conferre coepere, a claim which is repeated later in the work (12.8): *Aceruus saxorum omniquae armorum genera congregastis*. Although some scholars refer to this charge as reflecting a fact,⁴² there are several reasons to distrust it as a reliable report. First, the implausible character of previous charges makes this statement suspicious. Second, the Jews emphatically deny the fact of the matter, and they even resist with an oath (12.11). Third, and most importantly, although Severus proposes to go to the synagogue to confirm whether they or the Jews are right, the verification never takes place, not even when the synagogue is destroyed and the alleged presence of stored weapons could have been easily checked. Despite the fact that such checking would have had great apologetic advantages for Severus' discourse (who could have written: "Here is the proof! Jews are ill-disposed toward us!"), the issue of weapons is never tackled again. Fourth, the gathering of arms seems to be dictated by Scriptural passages in which the throng sent to arrest Jesus is heavily armed; in fact, this section contains several references to the Gospel scene of Jesus' arrest. Of course, it is entirely conceivable that the Jews, fearing physical attack by Christians, had amassed weapons to defend themselves, but, given the scape-goating nature of the events and the above-mentioned arguments, I deem by far more likely that the charge is nothing but slander, contrived to justify and explain away the actual violence carried out by Christians.

This suspicion increases when the report immediately attached to the former dialogue between Severus and the Jews is carefully surveyed, namely, the scene in which some Jewish women (*quaedam Iudaeae mulieres*) are said to throw stones on the Christian throng (13.1-4). The lack of reliability of this episode is, again, suggested by several elements. First, the alleged action does not fit well the previous statement that the throng of Jews goes along with the Christians, even singing with them; Severus describes a combined mass of Christians and Jews proceeding together to the Synagogue, so it is hardly credible that Jewish women would have attacked such people among whom were some of their own coreligionists. Second, the episode is intrinsically unlikely: although those stones are described as huge (*lapides ... immanissimos*), and are said to be thrown from some higher vantage point (*ex superiori loco*), they do not, as if by magic, touch anyone (13.3-4), a statement all the more incredible because the huge throng constitutes, as the author himself says, "a closely packed crowd", over which the stones "fell like hail"; the claim about the harmless stones is so obviously odd that the author feels compelled to make the point by expressing his surprise.⁴³ Third, an episode of Jewish women throwing stones becomes significant in a narrative that starts by evoking the proto-martyr Stephen, who had been presumably stoned by Jews (according to *Acts* 7:54-60),

⁴² See e.g. HUNT (1992), p. 109; GINZBURG (1996), p. 207.

⁴³ *Ep.* 13.4: *Qui, mirum dictu, cum super confertissimam multitudinem grandinis instar deciderent, neminem nostrum non solum ictu sed nec tactu quidem uexauere.*

and might be nothing but a magnified reflection on the New Testament episode. Fourth, this episode fulfills a neatly exculpatory function in the narrative, because it is aimed to explain (and exonerate) the real violence carried out immediately afterwards by the Christian throng: when the author first refers to the women, he explains their action saying that it was carried out “doubtless to rouse our people from their gentleness” (*ut scilicet nostrorum lenitas incitaretur*); the previous purported Jewish violence downplays and somehow absolves and whitewashes the latter Christian violence. Fifth, the purpose ascribed to the Jewish women – namely, to rouse the Christians from their so far gentle behaviour – is intrinsically self-defeating: why would Jewish women adopt such a suicidal stance? Despite the fact that some modern scholars deem the episode as reliable (even accepting Severus’ contention that Christian violence is an answer to it),⁴⁴ the convergence of the former arguments allows us to draw the conclusion that, in all probability, it is untrustworthy as a description of actual facts, and is just an intentional fabrication.⁴⁵

Attribution to Jews of bloodthirsty intentions surface in other passages, in such a way that they are used as a bad foil for Christians, who are portrayed as a reasonable and mild people (*Ep.* 12.9-10):

Nos codices ad docendum detulimus, uos ad occidendum gladius ac uectes. Nos acquirere cupimus, uos perdere desideratis. Non est, quantum arbitror, aequum ut tam uaria lite alterutrum laboremus. Vos uero, ut uideo, sititis nostrum sanguinem, nos uestram salutem.

This passage is sobering insofar as it establishes a clear dichotomy among “us” and “them”, which corresponds to the utterly simplistic scapegoating discourse: persecutors present themselves as faultless and irreprehensible people, whilst the victims are blamed in any conceivable way and labeled as wicked and destructive beings. Even more tellingly, the text wholly distorts the truth, again putting the world upside down. To start with, the author does not use the word “persecution”, but the mystifying and euphemistic term “struggle”, thereby creating the misleading illusion of a balance of forces. Besides, although it is beyond doubt that the situation “is not on an equal footing” and “is very different on the two

⁴⁴ WANKENNE / HAMBENNE (1987), p. 24: “Si l’on fait exception de l’acte de violence qu’est l’incendie de la synagogue, commis par les Chrétiens en représailles de l’attaque à coups de pierres faite contre eux par des femmes juives [...], les armes qu’emploient les Chrétiens vis-à-vis de leurs adversaires sont avant tout la prière et les miracles que le Christ opère à leur demande”.

⁴⁵ The perverse nature of the passage becomes even clearer when one realizes that, on the way to the synagogue, Christians sing *Psalms* 9.7-8, “Their memory has perished with a crash...” (*Ep.* 13.2), which betrays a blatant hostility towards the Jews; see KRAEMER (2009), p. 639. That the passage lends itself to a sinister reading, insofar as the particular verse is a prophecy of doom (of the Jews), had been rightly remarked by BOYARIN (2004), p. 40, who labels this section “a singular moment of violence in the text”.

sides”, the description provided by the author inverts the actual state of affairs, since the initiative for aggressiveness and destruction corresponds to the Christian throng, guided and inspired by its bishop.⁴⁶ In fact, the perverse character of Severus’ discourse is made plain when one realizes that the Jewish “violence” (as the author himself unwillingly recognizes when he refers to the episode of the thrown stones) does not hurt anyone, whilst the alleged Christian mildness not only causes a great fear among the Jews, but immediately provokes the real destruction of their synagogue.⁴⁷

5. *An Atmosphere of Terror, or Who is Afraid of Whom*

According to the author’s (or the narrator’s) outlook, the events leading to the conversion of the Minorcan Jews were idyllic and pacific, and Jews could be only quiet and glad about their allegedly exemplary neighbors. Nevertheless, if a scapegoating process took place on the island of Minorca, the feelings of the victims must have been quite different, since they, as actual targets, must have intensely undergone the persecutors’ hostility and feared the triggering of violence. Close attention to the text of the *Epistula Seueri* confirms this, as it very often betrays the Jews feeling frightened and even terrified.

In the first occurrence within the work of a verb hinting at a feeling of fear (*metum*), Jews are already envisaged. Near the beginning of the narrative, the author establishes a neat distinction between the places where Christians and Jews make their living. The latter, apparently confined to the eastern part of the island, do not dare to go to the western town of Iamona. According to the author, they had been deterred from settling there by tales handed down by an ancient tradition, telling of the terrible fates which had met their ancestors, including sickness, expulsion, sudden death, or strikes by a thunderbolt.⁴⁸ From the start, Jewish fear is linked with several forms of violence. Although the exact causes of some forms of that violence remain (purposely?) indeterminate, the author interprets it anyway as a divine grace, as far as he asserts that it corresponds to *antiquum a Deo munus* (*Ep.* 3.1). God’s favour (to Christians, not to Jews!) is conveyed through multifarious violent acts.

⁴⁶ Some scholars, however, prefer to downplay Severus’ recourse to violence and to deny that he was “un fanatique enragé contre les infidèles”: WANKENNE / HAMBENNE (1987), p. 21.

⁴⁷ Admittedly, synagogues were protected by Roman law, but the Minorcan episode takes place in a time in which the legal status of Jews had greatly deteriorated; see e.g. GONZÁLEZ SALINERO (2000), p. 236-237. Anyway, the letter of Roman law meant little to a mob bent on destruction, particularly if they felt their actions would remain unpunished.

⁴⁸ *Ep.* 3.2: *Multos siquidem id temere audentes, aut aegritudine praeuentos ac repulsos aut morte subita extinctos aut etiam fulmine trucidatos tradit uetustas, adeo ut celebris huius rei fama ipsis quoque Iudaeis, ne id ultra temptare audeant, metum fecerit.*

Once more, however, the scapegoating logic distorts the true state of affairs, creating the false impression that a Jew is the cause of fear to Christians. The author states that Theodorus' return to the island – the prominent Jew, so it is reported, had gone to Majorca to inspect an estate – frightened many people (*scil.* Christians) by his authority.⁴⁹ The significance of this sentence should not be overestimated. On the one hand, it seems to mean only that Theodorus' presence temporarily restrains the fury of Severus' flock. On the other, this is the only case in the entire document where it is said that a Jew causes fear in Christians: we find here the single exception to the rule. The remainder of the text makes clear that, whenever someone is frightened, it is a member of the Jewish community in the face of the violence displayed by Christians that is the subject of such a discomforting feeling. In fact, just after the alleged fear caused by Theodorus, it is stated that “the flame of faith engulfed the neighboring town [of Iamona], blazing with greater ferocity”.⁵⁰

It is precisely the most illustrious Jew, Theodorus, who is later terrified by an apparently innocuous dream vision in which a lion and some monks are seen inside the synagogue.⁵¹ The fear and trembling of the powerful Jew is conveyed through several verbs and substantives (*Ep.* 11.4-9): “I had begun to tremble” (*trepidare coepissem*); “a greater terror was immediately aroused in me” (*maior ilico mihi terror adiectus est*); “the force of that deadly terror” (*uim mortiferi terroris*); “She... rescued me from both danger and fear” (*Illa ... me ... a discrimine pariter et metu eripuit*); “he was terrified by the Lion” (*a leone terretur*). In a few lines, a deep feeling of terror – to be examined later in this section – surfaces time and again.

If the mightiest and most influential Jew on the island might be terrified by mere dreams – and, irrespective of the reliability of the reports of those dreams, he surely might –, one can easily infer to what extent his co-religionists could feel a genuine fear when faced by belligerent real men. The bishop states that, when he dispatches some clerics to announce his arrival to the Jews and to invite them to hold a “thoroughly calm” dispute concerning the Law, the Jews “were in the end driven by terror of that Lion to gather” at a house: *illius leonis terrore compulsi* (*Ep.* 12.7). Such a terror could come as wholly irrational and unfounded, but the context accounts for it very well. The bishop is accompanied by a great “throng of Christ's servants” (*Ep.* 12.1), whose intentions are not precisely friendly: it is not Christ, but a hostile Christian multitude, spearheaded by a prejudiced cleric, that triggers the fear of the Jews. In fact, no debate over the Law takes place, but very serious charges are leveled at the Jews by the bishop, after which they “were a little frightened”: *paululum territi* (*Ep.* 12.11).

⁴⁹ *Ep.* 7.2: *auctoritate sua multos terruit*.

⁵⁰ *Ep.* 7.2: *maiore siquidem ilico exardescens uiolentia etiam uicinum oppidum fidei flamma corripuit*.

⁵¹ *Ep.* 11.3-5. For a more detailed analysis of this episode, see *infra*.

Elsewhere, a Jew makes explicit the danger the conversion of Theodorus entails for the whole community (*Ep.* 18.18): *Quod autem consilio inutili ad ciuitatem remeandum decernis, miror te prudentissimum uirum non animo praeuidere quid de nobis futurum censeas, si Theodorus columna synagogae nostrae, in quo omnem fiduciam reponebamus, apostatare compulsus est.* Therefore, Jews react to the prevailing circumstances with a sense of foreboding.

The next time the Jews' fear is mentioned comes after an intriguing misunderstanding scene in which the exhortatory sentence *Theodore, credas in Christum!* is, reportedly through a divine miracle, mistakenly understood by the Jewish bystanders as *Theodorus in Christum credidit*.⁵² Facing the alleged conversion, "they were all equally afraid, and where there was no cause for fear, they were terrified".⁵³ The interesting aspect of this passage is that it not only reflects the Jews' fear and attributes it to God's activity, but that it also states that any fear is unfounded. Of course, from the scapegoating discourse's standpoint there is no reason for fear, since the persecuting community portrays itself as deliciously fair and blameless. Nevertheless, the thought that the leader of the community converted to Christianity would be reason enough for anxiety and despair to surface among the (probably traumatized) Jews, since that would mean that the congregation is deprived of their main defender, who could act as the last stronghold against the Christians. Such is the terror overwhelming the Jews at this moment, that some of them scatter through the streets of the town whilst others flee to groves and ravines, all searching for a place where they could hide (*Ep.* 16.9). The author again denies the existence of violence by citing a biblical passage (*Ep.* 16.10): "The wicked man runs away with no one in pursuit" (*Prov.* 28:1;) – again, the victims are identified with evil people, whilst the existence of any persecution is erased – and adds that the one pursuing the Jews was "that terrible Lion", Christ.

After the flight of their coreligionists, Theodorus himself remains *cum horribili formidine adprehensum, et non solum colore uultus uerum etiam uocis officio destitutum*, to the extent that he can be described as *trementem* (*Ep.* 16.12). Even when the first Jewish convert, Reuben, approaches him and offers the example of his own faith *pro suffragio metus*, and even after Theodorus agrees and receives many signs of affection by Christians, he was *tamen anxietate non penitus carens* (*Ep.* 16.19). This fear of the Minorcan Jews is still hinted at elsewhere in the accounts of the vicissitudes of those Jews in flight.

It is precisely this fear of further violence that triggers the ensuing conversions. After the burning of the synagogue, "a good-sized crowd of Jews had gathered to meet us".⁵⁴ The alternative would be to accept the life of exiles out

⁵² *Ep.* 16.4-7. The verbal form *credit* appears in other manuscripts; see MIGNE, *PL* 20, 737C.

⁵³ *Ep.* 16.7: *cuncti pariter trepidi; ubi timor non erat, terrebantur.*

⁵⁴ *Ep.* 17.1. After initial resistance, the demoralizing effect of the destruction of the synagogue upon Jews should not be underestimated (as it happened to the Jews of Clermont-Ferrand in 576).

in the wild, in a terrible solitude, far from civilized places and deprived of every recognition, property, and human dignity. In these circumstances, bodies and souls of the Jews on the run are seriously damaged: *corpus suum longis foedauere uulneribus, ad tantam primo quidem anxietatem deinde etiam desperationem atque formidinem uenere* (Ep. 18.22). As a cousin of Theodorus, by the name of Galilaeus, says:

'Contestor', inquit, 'uos omnes, me Iudaeum esse non posse. In possessione siquidem mea Christianos consortes habeo, quorum odiis, si in Iudaismo perseuerare uoluero, forsitan perimendus sum. Ego igitur uitae meae periculo consulens, ad ecclesiam iam nunc pergam, ut necem quae mihi praeparatur effugiam'.⁵⁵

In fact, this panic-stricken young man apostatizes in fear for his life. Although, according to Severus' official account, Christians display the most gentle behaviour towards their fellow countrymen, it is almost evident that Galilaeus' statements faithfully reflect what the Minorcan Jews actually felt after the bishop unleashes Christian rage on their neighbours: hatred and extreme physical violence are the results envisaged by Jews if they do not yield to the will of the ecclesiastical dignitaries. And there is every indication that those feelings were not caused by hypochondria, but were solidly and empirically based. Another Jew, Caecilianus, confirms "that Galilaeus spoke the truth and that he himself had a similar motive and feared a similar fate" (Ep. 19.6). Christian hatred underlies and explains the events (Ep. 18.19):

Hoc ergo sanius est, ut eamus potius ad agrum meum, nec nos ultro Christianorum oculis ingeramus. Possumus autem illic interim delitescere, donec oportuno tempore ad peregrina emigremus, quoniam quidem in hac insula ita apud cunctos odium nostrae religionis increuit, ut, qui patriam non reliquerit, fidem patrum tenere non possit. Cur itaque non uoluntarium suscipiamus exilium ad quod, sicut res indicat, odiis ciuium etiam si nolumus extrudendi sumus.

The repeated hints at the hatred (*odium nostrae religionis, odiis ciuium*) which is displayed by Christians is all the more credible because they are underpinned by real facts, as the speaker himself says (*sicut res indicat*), and also because this state of affairs is confirmed by the narrator himself.⁵⁶ The passage does not specify those sobering facts betraying hatred, but they have been mentioned throughout the work: a march of an enraged Christian throng to Magona, psychological and verbal pressure by the bishop, serious (and unfair) charges, and arbitrary burning of a synagogue. That these facts form the core of the actual events which occurred in Minorca can be ascertained beyond doubt, not only because they clarify in the most natural way a (reluctant) mass conversion, but also because they successfully explain the birth of the far-fetched account

⁵⁵ Ep. 19.4-5. Let us notice that the four occurrences of the term *odium* in the *Epistula Seuerti* refer to the hatred felt by Christians toward the Jews.

⁵⁶ The author refers elsewhere to the *odium temporale* felt by Christians, although he tries to justify it by interpreting it as something felt *pro aeternae salutis amore* (Ep. 4.5).

contained in the *Epistula Seueri*. Despite the literary efforts of the author of this work to posit that divine management governed the whole course of events, what occurred is an all-too-human episode. And despite his emphasis that harmlessness and gentleness were the most distinctive features of Christian communities, at least they were not characteristic of the Minorcan populace under the guidance of Severus.

Fear (and its understandable outcome, mass conversion) becomes even more understandable when one realizes that this episode of coercion and persecution takes place on an island, from which it is hard to flee. On the one hand, the Iberian Peninsula was no longer a safe place to run, considering the situation then as Vandals, Sueves or Visigoths ravaged the country. On the other, if the events took place when Severus situates them, namely, at the beginning of February (417 or 418), it means that there existed what Romans called the *mare clausum*, when the sea was closed to regular sailing because of winter storms. The work does indeed contain several references to the great difficulty of crossing the Mediterranean at that season.⁵⁷ In these historical, geographical, and chronological circumstances, Minorca was an isolated place, where victims were trapped and had no possibilities of being rescued by outsiders. The situation of the Minorcan Jews can be described as an insular captivity, for which there was no way out.⁵⁸

Once the many references to Jews' fears have been surveyed, the terror experienced by Theodorus in his dream might become fully understandable. That this worthy man begins to tremble at hearing the word "lion" does not offer any exegetical problem, since the ferocity of lions was proverbial, but the following statement presents a serious puzzle. The author asserts that Theodorus searches out a spot from which he might peer into the synagogue. The text goes on:

*et uidi monachos illic mira suauitate psallentes. Maior ilico terror adiectus est, et nisi in cuiusdam Iudaei nomine Ruben ingressus fuissem domum, et inde ad matrem propinquam cursu praepeti conuolasse, nequaquam uim mortiferi terrores euasissem.*⁵⁹

Why should the vision of sweetly singing monks arouse such fear in a reasonable and powerful man as Theodorus? At first sight, this seems to be absurd, but only if the readers have in their minds the modern image of monks as innocuous and venerable men exclusively giving thought to the faith and devoted to work

⁵⁷ *Ep.* 18.17: *hiemis inclementia*; 23: *fuere quidam Iudaei qui, praetereuntes illuc appulsi, opportunitatem temporis atque uentorum aucupabantur*; 28.3: *affinis siquidem Innocentii illa uidua de pelago reducta est*.

⁵⁸ One can compare the events at Clermont-Ferrand in the sixth century, where some Jews were able to migrate to Marseille.

⁵⁹ *Ep.* 11.4-5. This scene is again recalled in 16.11: *nullam illic, sicut uerebatur, feritatem uidens, tantum psallentes monachos intuebatur*.

and prayer. Nonetheless, in the light of the former survey and of a wider context, it becomes meaningful. An extensive literature has made plain that monks were involved in a host of violent episodes. In 388, Callinicum's local synagogue was destroyed by monks. Libanius' *Oratio* 30, addressed to Theodosius, assigned responsibility for the attacks on pagan holy sites to a cabal of roving monks, a particularly militant brand of Christians. The fearsome image of the violent monk became accordingly a stereotype which stood out as a popular symbol and embodiment of the violence intimately associated with the zeal of the vanguard of the "soldiers of Christ". According to another oration of Libanius (*Oratio* 45.26), the chanting of the monks terrified even the governor of Antioch, causing him to flee the city. The intimate relationship between monks and violence was established to the extent that further cases of people interpreting voices of singing monks as an omen that temples would soon fall are attested in the available sources for the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth.⁶⁰ In fact, the presence of monks in the *Letter* is not restricted to dreams: when the author refers to some prodigies which purportedly took place when Jews were arriving to confess faith in Christ, he mentions two monks (*duo ... monachi*) as witnesses of such miracles (*Ep.* 20.4); monks were indeed integrated in the religious landscape of the western Mediterranean at the latest since the last decades of the fourth century.⁶¹

The dream scene of Theodorus terrified by the vision of singing monks might be considered a kind of unconscious *mise en abîme* for the whole series of events portrayed in the work. Theodorus sees an apparently calm scene in which some churchmen carry out an innocuous and holy action, namely, singing hymns; however, for some reason such a scene terrifies the observer, and it is indeed the prelude to the unleashing of anti-Jewish violence. According to Severus' report, the Minorcan Jews – and the readers of the *Epistula Seueri* – contemplate a Christian throng, spearheaded by churchmen (the bishop and its clerics),⁶² who apparently make such harmless actions as singing hymns and being anxious for the Jews' salvation, but whose activities culminate in the burning of the synagogue and the ensuing terror and flight of the Jewish community.⁶³ Theodorus' contrived dream unwillingly expresses a deep truth.

The former reflections allow us to distinguish real from fictitious violence. Jewish women and men are attributed as exhibiting savage behaviour and malevolent aims, but no Christian is ultimately harmed by them. On the contrary, Christians are depicted as good-tempered and quiet people, but their actions are

⁶⁰ See GADDIS (2005), p. 249-250.

⁶¹ See AMENGUAL I BATLE (2008), p. 197-198. The ravages carried out by Barsauma and a host of monks in Palestine ca. 419-422 are well known; see e.g. NAU (1927).

⁶² These clerics are mentioned as envoys dispatched by the bishop to announce his arrival to the Jews in Magona (*Ep.* 12.3).

⁶³ Let us realize that this flight is ascribed by the author of the writing to a misunderstanding, which is in turn seen as a divine miraculous intervention (*Ep.* 16.3-9).

anything but innocuous: such actions result in not only the devastating burning of a synagogue, but also in a permanent state of terror within the Jewish community.⁶⁴ If the apothegm “by (the effects of) their works you will know them” is to be granted some kind of truthfulness, Minorcan Christians at this time – and particularly their leading churchmen – happen to have been truly dangerous people.

6. *Discursive Legitimization: The Underlining Myths of Christian Origins*

In the light of the former reflections, the portrayal of Jews as a violent people in the *Epistula Seueri* can be unmasked as a biased and unwarranted narrative, serving the needs of Christian churchmen to justify their aggressiveness and to reassert their social hegemony. This seems to be another case of the use of “hermeneutical” Jews. Christian culture crafted Jews in keeping with the needs of its doctrine, just as churchmen crafted them in keeping with their psychological and doctrinal needs, and as an instructive antithesis. Christian self-portrayal as paragons of virtue and goodness⁶⁵ had as a foil the image of Jews as violent and harmful people.

This dichotomic representation is a key constituent of the guiding narratives in which Christians have imagined themselves emplotted. Research carried out in the social sciences suggests that human communities construct identities by locating themselves within a repertoire of available stories, through which people make sense of what has happened or is happening to them by integrating those events within such stories. This is so to the extent that members of the communities interpret contemporary events in the wake of those narratives, as new episodes within them. In turn, this means that experience and behaviour are constituted through narratives: people are guided to act in certain ways on the basis of their memories and expectations, which have accordingly powerful effects upon the tenor of intercommunal relations with other groups.⁶⁶ And it happens that, as in many further cases of societies which emerged as small and threatened communities, the primordial narratives of self-fashioning elaborated and used by early Christian groups when they talked about their communal past are stories about persecution.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ LOTTER (1986), p. 306, refers to a “Beschreibung einer von einer Christengemeinde unter Führung ihres Bischofs durch psychischen Terror bewirkten Bekehrung einer Judengemeinde” (my emphasis).

⁶⁵ Such self-portrayal is self-defeating: for instance, Severus claims that there “should be no stirring up quarrels, but rather a sharing of views in discussion” (*Ep.* 12.6), but such well-disposed character is blatantly contradicted by the ill will displayed by the bishop towards the Jews. Any cordial relations which could have taken place previously between individual Christians and Jews would have been ruptured as a result of the Christian hierarchy.

⁶⁶ See SOMERS (1994), p. 613-614.

⁶⁷ This is a point thoroughly made by SIZGORICH (2009), p. 46-80.

However simplistic and gruesome, the above-mentioned dichotomic portrayal has been maintained through the centuries. Such narrative not only persisted because it greatly flattered Christian ears through the construction of a binary scheme of Good versus Evil. It obtained verisimilitude for ancient believers because it was supported by the reliability granted to some central accounts embedded in the foundational texts of the new religion, the New Testament writings. Ascribing violence to the Jews is a tactic deeply entrenched in early Christian literature, where Jews are depicted as aggressive and murderous people, ready for any violent action. The main narratives of this kind are Stephen's account in *Acts*, and, far more decisively, the Gospels' stories about Jesus of Nazareth's fate.⁶⁸ According to the authors of these writings, both Stephen and Jesus were victims of the malevolence of the Jews. Stephen was stoned to death in Jerusalem by his audience, after a speech riddled with serious charges. As to Jesus, he was crucified outside Jerusalem at the instigation of the Jews, just because of envy and/or hatred; in fact, the Lukan and Johannine formulations (Luke 23:13-33 and John 19:6-16a) make the reader think that Jesus was physically crucified not by Romans but by Jews⁶⁹ – a tendency which was consecrated in the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* and reached a climax in the second century literature (Melito's *De Pascha*) with the notion that the Jews killed the godly Jesus and accordingly committed "deicide".

It is sobering that both canonical narratives are evoked in the *Epistula Seueri*. A passing reference to the relics of Stephen (*beati martyris Stephani reliquias*), who is also called *patronus* of the Christians, may have been enough to conjure in the audience the Jews' responsibility in Stephen's death, all the more so because another reference to Stephen's relics and its triggering *fidei ... zelus* is found elsewhere in this work.⁷⁰ Moreover, the stone-throwing riot which breaks out at *Ep.* 13.3 could be a hint at the death of Stephen as it is portrayed in *Acts*. The fact that the arrival of Stephen's relics on the island is described by the author as a turning-point in the Christians' behaviour, to the extent that good relations are transformed into hatred,⁷¹ makes one think that he is pointing at the conscience of the Christian throng – conveniently conveyed through ecclesiastical preaching and indoctrination – about the narrative of *Acts* on Stephen's

⁶⁸ The notion of Jews as Christ-killers already appears in Paul; see 1 Thess. 2:14-15.

⁶⁹ Justin Martyr often complains of the Jews' alleged hatred and anger against the Christians, and asserts that they "consider us as their enemies ... they kill us and punish us whenever they have the power to do so" (*Apology I* 31). See LIEU (1998).

⁷⁰ See respectively *Ep.* 4.2-4; 6.4; 20.4.

⁷¹ The existence of good relationships before Severus' access to the bishopric is witnessed by the fact that several outstanding Jews held high civic offices, which was only possible with Christian acquiescence; see LOTTER (1986), p. 314-315. Despite the angry rhetoric of the *Aduersus Iudaeos* literature, Jews and Christians in the ancient world did not always live in enmity. See e.g. MEEKS / WILKEN (1978); BOYARIN (1999), p. 22-41.

violent death at the Jews' hands.⁷² Of course, such recourse to the saint's intervention appears to be no more than an alibi for the campaign of intimidation by the Christian minority.

But even clearer and more fateful is the explicit reference to Jews as Christ-killers. When the author refers to his dream and to a noble widow representing the Synagogue, he identifies her by saying that she is *illa quae Christum impie perimendo semetipsam crudelissime uiduauit* (Ep. 10.5). This means that the attribution of violence to the Jews goes far beyond the contemporary situation. A theological contention is at work: one cannot tell those Jews who (allegedly) were involved in Jesus' death from all the others, so that "the Synagogue" becomes a murderous collective entity. Accordingly, one could not tell Palestinian Jews of the first century from Minorcan Jews of the fifth century: they are all of the same evil lineage.

The identification of contemporary Jews with the (allegedly murderous) Jews at the time of Jesus is further enhanced in several ways. Theodorus, who is otherwise called *defensor* and *patronus* of his fellow citizens, is referred to as *summus sacerdos* of the Jews;⁷³ irrespective of whether this label is patently anachronistic or not,⁷⁴ it serves the goal of identifying the Jewish leader with the high priest who, according to the Passion accounts, declared Jesus guilty and condemned him to death (Mark 14:53-64). In Ep. 12.8 Severus blames the Jews for behaving *quasi aduersum latrones*, which recalls Mark 14:48 (*tamquam ad latrones existis*) and, even more precisely, Luke 22:52 (*quasi ad latronem*). In Ep. 12.9 the Jews are described as bringing *gladios ac uectes*, thereby using similar words to those put into Jesus' mouth in the Gospels' accounts of the arrest in Mark 14:48 (*cum gladiis et lignis*), Matt 26:55 and Luke 22:52 (*cum gladiis et fustibus*). In this way, the Gospels' biased rendition, in which Jesus is often opposed to Judaism, is fully assumed.⁷⁵

Jews are thus ascribed with a considerable degree of violence and murderous behaviour, whilst some of the most important referents of Christianity are offered

⁷² SIVAN (2013), p. 304, n. 32: "Sermons like Augustine's twenty eighth, which berates an impious and murderous synagogue for stoning God-loving Stephen, who, in turn, prays for them, could inspire an exegesis that called not for mercy but for retaliation". The "discovery" of Stephen's relics aroused anti-Jewish outbursts; see DEMOUGEOT (1982), p. 21. HUNT (1982), p. 113: "With his relics installed in the Christian church at Mago surrounded by the Jewish population, Stephen was poised for a re-enactment, or rather a reversal, of the New Testament conflict between himself and the Jews which had led to his martyrdom".

⁷³ The derogatory and sheer vituperative usage of this designation becomes clear when the whole text is taken into account: Theodorus is described as *summus sacerdos perfidi populi* (Ep. 11.2).

⁷⁴ Epigraphical material attests to the continuing usage of priestly titles; see KRAEMER (2009), p. 645, n. 19.

⁷⁵ This can be seen at the end of the work, where the author refers to *zelum Christi aduersus Iudaeos* (Ep. 31.2).

as their victims. The fact that such portrayal is enshrined in the canonical writings gives to it an authoritative value and unobjectionable credibility. The narratives of remembrance with which Christian communities recalled their formative past can be accordingly labeled as narratives of victimization:⁷⁶ among the most commonly recurring tropes, we encounter that of violent oppression at the hands of a malevolent and much stronger enemy. The memory of this narrative becomes a prism through which contemporary conflicts are interpreted, and an imaginative framework in which actual confrontations are emplotted. That narrative recalling dark moments of cruelty and suffering seems to have paradoxically authorized greater policies of aggression toward the Jewish community.

This becomes all the more understandable when one realizes that the speeches ascribed to those authoritative figures of the primordial past contain assertions about the Jewish people which are liable to be applied to contemporary Jews, precisely because they hint at a kind of essentialist approach. In his speech in *Acts*, Stephen, who is given a privileged place in later Christian tradition, asserts that his audience is involved in persecution of prophets, thereby offering a harsh portrayal of the crowd.⁷⁷ As to Jesus, he is depicted as blaming his adversaries with ruthless words, a tendency which reaches its climax in the *Fourth Gospel*, that had a lasting impact on the Christian theology and piety, and that presents Jesus as distancing himself from his own co-religionists and labeling them as “devil’s children”.⁷⁸ Given that such definition conveys the notion that the Jews are somehow genealogically or intrinsically related to the realm of Evil, or at least that their murderous instincts are deep-rooted in their essence, the most revered figures of the past legitimize the depiction of Late Ancient Jews as heinous and violent.

Significantly, the historical plausibility of those New Testament accounts has been called into question. As to the Stephen narrative, against a broad consensus on the historical reality of this figure and his violent death, Shelly Matthews has argued that the fact that it perfectly suits the overarching rhetorical aims of Luke-Acts, the author’s propensity for symbolic characters, the lack of attestation of a martyr tradition for Stephen outside of *Acts* before Irenaeus, and the partial overlapping of the pericope (*Acts* 7:54-60) with Hegesippus’ narrative of the martyrdom of James, are all features which suggest that Stephen’s story might be nothing but the fictional creation of its author.⁷⁹ The Christian proto-martyr

⁷⁶ See SIZGORICH (2009), p. 69.

⁷⁷ Let us recall that Eusebius (*HE* 2.1.8) reinforced the Stephen narrative by asserting that it ignited the “first and great” persecution of the Jerusalem group of Jesus’ followers by “the Jews”.

⁷⁸ See e.g. John 8:44: ὁμηϊς ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστέ.

⁷⁹ MATTHEWS (2010), p. 131-132. Critical scholarship has readily recognized that the recovery of Stephen’s relics by a certain priest named Lucian in 415, allegedly revealed in waking visions, is nothing but pious fraud and a cleverly crafted device of ecclesiastical policy; see VAN ESBROECK (1984). In fact, the discovery took place only two months

is allegedly stoned by Jews in a way that tars all of them as rabid and murderous people. Even more telling is the fact that quite a few aspects in the Passion accounts have been unveiled through century-long research as sheer fiction,⁸⁰ to the extent that the notion of Jews taking part in the arrest and condemnation of Jesus has been called into question with textual and historical arguments.⁸¹ Irrespective of whether the most debunking hypotheses are accepted or not, it should be clear that the Gospels' negative view of Jews is the outcome of religious polemics, and that, if the notion that Jewish authorities were somehow involved in Jesus' fate deserves any credit, that involvement should be explained in a more credible and plausible way than the Christian tradition has done along the centuries.

Interestingly, there is another feature which joins the figures of Jesus and Stephen together whose reliability is highly unlikely. I refer to the fact that they both are ascribed a forgiving sentence at their respective deaths. Whilst Luke (23:34) puts in Jesus' mouth on the cross the well-known words: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do", the author of *Acts* (perhaps the same person?) attributes to Stephen a dying forgiveness prayer for his persecutors: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (*Acts* 7:60). In both cases, dying words allow the reader to identify the respective saint/hero as a paragon of mercy at the same time that portrays the Jews as callous and merciless people.⁸² Both victims pray for mercy upon their tormentors, and in this way, both characters are marked as bound by an outstanding morality. It is, however, likewise significant that the historicity of both statements as pronounced by Jesus and Stephen has also been called into question.⁸³

after the Jewish Patriarch was deprived of his traditional title of *praefectus honorarius*. Incidentally, the *Revelatio Sancti Stephani* or *Epistula Luciani* contains a reference to Stephen as that martyr "who was the first to wage the Lord's wars against the Jews": *primum aduersus Iudaeos dominica bella bellauit* (*De reuelatione corporis Stephani martyris*, MIGNE, *PL* XLI 815-816). On this aspect and the weakened position of the Jews, see GINZBURG (1996), p. 213-214.

⁸⁰ For detailed surveys of incongruities in these accounts, see e. g. KAUTSKY (1908), p. 384-392; 418-432; WINTER (1974²); HELMS (1989).

⁸¹ See e.g. GOGUEL (1910); BERMEJO-RUBIO (2016); (2019); (2021⁴), p. 283-322.

⁸² In this light, it might be significant that, in the *Epistula Seueri*, the bishop is, however briefly, portrayed as not only renouncing retaliation (13.6) but also as a forgiving man (28.2-9). These intimations of non-retaliation and forgiveness are significant because, "As expressions of self-mastery and the ability to refrain from retaliating in the face of undeserved violence inflicted by Jews, the prayers [...] assert the ethical superiority of Christianity over Judaism": MATTHEWS (2010), p. 100.

⁸³ As to Jesus' case, the disparity of the words attributed to him in the different Gospels make all of them suspect. Moreover, vocabulary and style are typical of Luke; see BOVON (2009), p. 368. Let us realize that Jesus' prayer makes sense only if it envisages the Jews, so it reflects the biased – and historically unlikely – Christian notion that Jews were responsible of Jesus' crucifixion, since the collective execution was carried out by Romans.

7. *Conclusions and Further Reflections*

After a survey in which so many inaccurate, deceitful and untenable statements have been detected and unveiled, one could be tempted to rule out the whole *Epistula Seueri* as a reliable source. Should we not admit that all historical knowledge is uncertain and that nothing assured can be taken from such a text? This question must be answered categorically in the negative. If a modern reader cannot be credulous, s(he) should not hastily fall prey to wholesale skepticism. The *Epistula Seueri* has its roots in a real persecution, described from the perspective of the persecutors. The text is true insofar as there really were victims – and victims who were unjustly harassed –, but false since it claims that the victims were guilty. The perspective of the persecutor is inevitably deceptive and misleading, since the persecutors present their violence as justified behaviour. At the same time, however, their accounts contain some reliable material, either because the certainty of being right encourages them to hide nothing of their violence,⁸⁴ or because bad faith and distortion necessarily leaves some kind of remnants in the text; they cannot completely cover the traces of their abuses and vilification. After all, the victimary version represses the truth, to such an extent that it brings about an exemplification of the ‘return of the repressed’ phenomenon: evidence of repressed violence surfaces and becomes perceptible in the contradictions and inconsistencies we have surveyed above.

When one understands the far-fetched claims of the persecutors – who simplify and distort the real world through a binary, Manichaean scheme –, one can account for the ludicrous and inconsistent statements with which their discourse is teeming. In fact, the absurdity of their accusations and the implausible portrayal of themselves strengthen, rather than compromise, the informational value of the text, but only in reference to the violence it echoes.⁸⁵ The fact that the text left behind by Severus has a kernel of truth and says much more than he meant allows us to demystify his apologetic discourse and the arbitrariness of the behaviour it reflects.⁸⁶

The persecutors’ fallacies are indeed everywhere. Whilst salvation of the Jews is depicted as acceptance of Christ’s salvification, it is rather unveiled as the promotion and legitimizing of the bishop’s power within the ancient Minorcan social order. Whilst agency of salvation is ceaselessly ascribed to supernatural

⁸⁴ This is the explanation offered by Girard, according to whom the conscience of ancient authors prevented them from deceiving their readers systematically, so they presented people and events as they perceived them: “Ils ne se doutent pas qu’en rédigeant leurs comptes rendus ils donnent des armes contre eux-mêmes à la postérité”: GIRARD (1982), p. 16.

⁸⁵ See GIRARD (1982), p. 14.

⁸⁶ In this light, I find the judgment of a French Latinist on Severus intellectually disappointing and ethically troubling: “Le sérieux et la conviction que ce pasteur apporte à son récit, mais d’abord à l’expression théorique de son projet religieux, et aux règles formelles qu’il croit devoir en déduire, imposent certainement le respect”: FONTAINE (1991), p. 134.

forces and miraculous events (God, Christ, St. Stephen's relics), it is the expedition of a huge Christian crowd across the island to the town of Magona which exerts an overwhelming pressure on the Jews and triggers the surrender of the Jewish community. Whilst conversion is portrayed as a voluntary act of the Jews, the whole narrative conveys the impression that it is just a survival strategy only reluctantly accepted.⁸⁷

Admittedly, the text does not report either the actual murder or expulsion of the Jews, or physical violence exerted on them, and after their conversion they seem to be accepted as full Christians. Nevertheless, it does not justify an idyllic rendition of the narrated events.⁸⁸ Physical injury of several kinds is evoked when the reasons why there are no Jews in Iamona are set forth, and the Jews themselves express their fear of being killed. Clearly, psychological violence hovers over the whole text. The victim-like nature of the Jews is again confirmed near the end of the work, when the author mentions that they not only bear the expense for levelling the foundations of their synagogue and for constructing a new basilica, but also that they carry the stones on their shoulders.⁸⁹ This is an unmistakable proof that, behind the apparent harmony set out in the *Epistula Seueri*, suffering and oppression, as so often in human history, prevailed.

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⁸⁷ See, in this regard, the sobering words addressed by Reuben to Theodorus (*Ep.* 16.14-15): *Quid times, domine Theodore? Si uis certe et securus et honoratus et diues esse, in Christum crede, sicut et ego credidi. Modo tu stas et ego cum episcopis sedeo. Si credideris, tu sedebis et ego ante te stabo.*

⁸⁸ While I was correcting the first proofs of the present article, I read the chapter devoted to the *Epistula Seueri* in a most recent book, whose author makes some perceptive comments on the violence of this text; see KRAEMER 2020, p. 54-62.

⁸⁹ *Ep.* 30.2: *Primum enim ipsa synagogae fundamenta uertere, deinde ad nouam basilicam construendam non solum impendia conferunt, sed etiam humeris saxa comportant.*

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