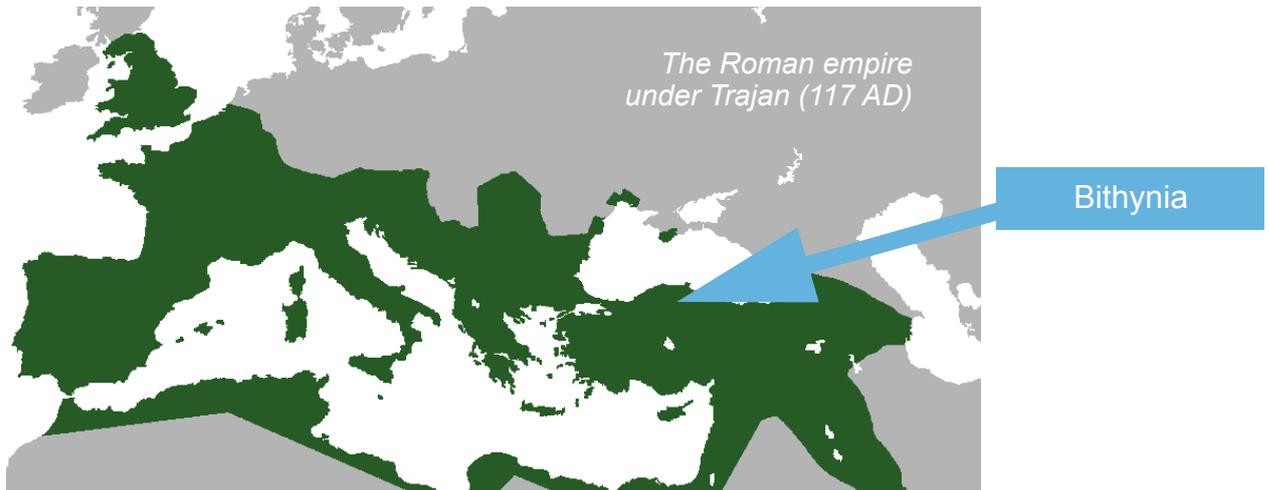


Religion: public display & private worship

The problems of monotheism

In general the Romans were very tolerant of other religions and traditions. As the Roman empire expanded the list of Roman deities also lengthened. However the monotheistic religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, were unacceptable; in worshipping only one god Jews and Christians rejected the Roman deities, and refused to take part in the public Roman rituals and worship of the Emperor. Nero already persecuted the Christians, whom Suetonius called a **genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae** - a sort of people who hold a new and impious superstition.



In 111 AD Pliny the Younger was sent by the Emperor Trajan to be the governor of the province of Bithynia. Roman governors had a lot of power. They could conduct a **cognitio extra ordinem**, a trial over which the governor alone would preside, giving them an unprecedented amount of discretion in deciding legal cases. Faced by Christians brought before him Pliny wrote to Trajan asking for guidance on how to conduct the trials and what is a punishable offence, to which the emperor replied:

Pliny to Trajan:

- Should he give a pardon to those who deny being Christians?
- Should he convict people just for being Christians i.e. on grounds of the name itself (**nomen ipsum**), or only if they have committed crimes (**flagitia**) 'associated with being a Christian'?

Trajan to Pliny:

- Don't seek out Christians; only put people to trial who are being accused
- If the accused is indeed guilty of being a Christian, they should be convicted
- If the accused denies being a Christian, and proves it by worshipping Roman gods, they should be pardoned

Pliny himself was unsure of what to convict Christians for.
What do you think the reasons were for the persecution of the Christians?

Further reading:

On the Roman persecution of the Christians; on Pliny's letters on the Christians