Prior to Decius, that is before the Roman Empire had launched state persecution of Christians, the repressive measures victimising followers of Christianity were usually local and spontaneous outbursts of the heathen mob, or they were the result of the policy of provincial governors heed- ing popular incriminations at most. This was the reason why the popular image of Christians among pagans was of extreme importance. We should appreciate some additional factors which made accusations of this kind more dangerous than ever in the times of Emperor Severus, at the turn of the second century, inciting the persecution in which popular enmity and official repression went hand in hand.

Septimus Severus himself was ruthless towards magicians, astrologers and prophetic dreams. The Severan lawyer Julius Paulus has left us an outline of legislation afflicting them severely at this time. Even those who merely possessed magic handbooks were threatened with the death sentence. Hitherto, not the magic knowledge as such, but its public display and practice by giving advice were punishable. With Severus, the very scientia huius artis was liable to be punished. The range of repression of those accused of magic was extended. There was, of course, no extermination of all involved in magic. Additional circumstances were required to persecute a person as a sorcerer. Apuleius was accused not only of magic doings but of other crimes as well. In the case of Christians, the counterpart of this “additional” crime would be professing a forbidden religion or some other alleged offences such as, for example, contumacia. In cases of such “composite” crime, Imperial officials could be relentless, especially when an agitated heathen mob was raging against the Christian wizards. In 1931 a document was found, a circular directed to the σπαστηγοί of two Egyptian nomes, probably Heptonomia and Arsinoite, which condemned περιγγίας applied to acquire supernatural knowledge by appeal-
ing to μαντείας τρόποις, divination and related artifices (παραγγελίας, as hapax, corrected by the editor to μαντεία, sorcery). The document was issued by the prefect's office. In the same year Severus paid a visit to Egypt and, in all likelihood, ordered some doctrines of magic and astrology to be removed from the temples.

A new form of Christian faith, Montanism reached ascendancy in the second half of the 2nd century bringing Christians closer to the world of those superstitiones magicae in pagan eyes. During this time Montanism reached its climax and owing to fervent believers became conspicuous to its pagan enemies. Pneumatic inspiration, mediumistic enhancements and prophetic trances were experienced not only by Montanus and his prophetesses. Apart from them, and after their time, there were many Montanist seers and visionaries yielding to their μαντία. Montanists called themselves πνευματικοί to emphasise the importance and intensity of their spiritual gifts. This was also, it seems, the spiritual environment of Perpetua's group.

Tertullian's visionaries were reminiscent of the Montanist trances. According to Priscilla, sexual continence allows one to see visions and hear voices which are as salutares as oculatas. Ecstatic trances constituted the main reason for dissension between Montanists and Catholics. There are multiple indications that the nature of Montanism made this heresy much more akin to the most dangerous superstitions of the time. Even if it was possible to perceive the faith of Clement of Alexandria, Origen or Valentinus in an unbiased way, the performances of the New Prophecy just could not avoid such associations.

For pagans, superstition was the sign of delirium, deliramentum. Cicero saw the menace of superstition in the influence it exercised over the minds of imbecilli, who chanced losing their mental balance. To some extent superstitosus means insanus, insaniens. In the Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs (8) the Roman official appeals: nolite huius dementiae esse participes. Montanism perfectly fitted this definition. Tertullian himself spoke of the Montanist ecstasy as resembling madness. Moreover, pagans could easily associate elements of the heretics' conduct with the most dangerous forms of superstition, that is magic and soothsaying. Characteristic terminology of Montanism (χάρις, δύναμις, πνεῦμα) is ubiquitous in the magical papyri. The Spirit spoke through Maximilla: "I am word, and spirit, and power." Montanus' prophecy is explicit at this point: "Neither angel nor envoy, but I the Lord God the Father have come." It was God who spoke, the prophet was only his porte-parole. Meanwhile, sorcerers pretended to have so close a relationship to the gods that they were able to achieve full unification with