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PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN ROME IN PRUDENTIUS' *PERISTEPHANON*

The opposition between pagan Rome and Christian Rome in the *Peristephanon* results, so to speak, from the very topic of Prudentius' cycle of poems on the martyrdom of Christians in the period of the persecutions of the Church. Pagan Rome was the Rome of the persecutors, whereas Christian Rome was the Rome of the persecuted. Telling about the martyrdom of selected characters, saint martyrs in the future, the poet never loses sight of this opposition, where the negative warring fraction is always paganism while the positive one is Christianity. Prudentius identifies pagan Rome with state authorities within the period of the persecutions of the Christians, and first of all with the emperor himself as well as with his assistants – prefects, representatives and executioners. He does not hesitate to show those enemies of Christianity as Satan and his servant, who, in spite of the greatest efforts, were unable to break the spirits of the martyrs and force them to renounce their faith in Christ. Building this opposition between paganism and Christianity the poet, as a pious and zealous Christian, obviously becomes involved emotionally and intellectually in the support of the Christian side and tries to present the other party as much pejoratively as possible.

Let us proceed from general remarks characterising Prudentius's attitude towards the opposition between pagan and Christian Rome to the analysis of selected part of the poems from the collection *Peristephanon*, where this issue was explicitly addressed.

In the *Peristephanon* II (*Passio Luarentii beatissimi martyris*) the prologue is constituted by an apostrophe to Christian Rome that under the leadership of Lawrence managed to defeat pagan rites (“ritum triumphas barbarum”, v. 4) and subjugate atrocious idols¹:

¹ Cf. V. Buchheit, *Prudentius über Gesittung durch Eroberung und Bekehrung*, “Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Alterumswissenschaft” 11:1985, p. 190 ff.

Nunc monstruosis idolis
 Inponis imperii iugum.
 (*Perist.* II 7–8)²

Pagan Rome, that “antiqua fanorum parens” (v. 1), once erected temples for their gods, defeated proud kings and subjugated their people, but neither the worship of pagan gods nor military victories can be the claim to fame³. It was not the deeds of past heroes who conquered barbarians that brought the glory; it was the martyrdom of Lawrence and his victory over the ignoble cult of Jove⁴:

Haec sola derat gloria
 Urbis togatae insignibus
 Feritate capta gentium
 Domaret ut spurcum Iovem,

Non turbulentae viribus
 Cossi Camilli aut Caesaris,
 sed martyris Laurentii
 non incruento proelio.
 (*Perist.* II 9–16)

Thus, the road to the triumph of Christian Rome over pagan Rome led through the bloody sacrifice of the martyr (“non incruento proelio”, v 16), who did not hesitate to put his life at stake⁵. Yet, before Lawrence’s faith and love for Christ was put to the test, pagan Rome in the person of its prefect (“praefectus urbi regiae”, v. 46) demanded that Lawrence should give away the money that where allegedly stored in the temple treasury (v. 45–56). The prefect himself, whose actions were guided by blind insatiable greed and atrocity (“exactor auri et sanguinis”), is a servant of an insane ruler – emperor (“minister insani ducis”, v. 47). The emperor and his servant, greedy for gold and cruel, make this “Roma pagana”, whose arms are violence and deceit.

When, by the prefect’s order, Lawrence was to collect the treasures of the Church in order to give them to the avaricious state, he gathered all sick and invalid people who lived on the charity of the Christian commu-

² All the quotations from the *Peristephanon* according to the edition: Aurelii Prudentii Clementis *Carmina*, cura et studio Mauricii P. Cunningham, Turnholt 1966 [*Corpus Christianorum*. Series Latina CXXVI].

³ Cf. M. Brożek, *Das Historische bei Prudentius*, „Studien zur Geschichte und Philosophie des Altertums” [Akademia Kiadó], Budapest 1968, p. 210.

⁴ Cf. V. Buchheit, *Christliche Romideologie*, [in:] *Das frühe Christentum im römischen Staat*, hrsg. von R. Klein, Darmstadt 1971, p. 464 f.

⁵ Cf. A.-M. Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, Oxford 1989, p. 126 f.

nity, and showed them to the disappointed civil servant. This Christian Rome, the sight of which made the prefect enrage, was, according to Lawrence, spiritually incomparably healthier than the pagan Rome, plagued by the illnesses of the soul, much more troublesome than body diseases:

Nostris per artus debiles
intus decoris integri
sensum venusti innoxium
langoris expertes gerunt.
(*Perist.* II 225–228)

Pagan Rome which is represented in this work by the prefect of the town, according to Lawrence, is a gathering of dressed in valuable clothes braggarts, money-grubbers, dirty lechers, betrayers of others' secrets, people overwhelmed by the lust for privileges, tormented by obsessive jealousy and envy (v. 237–260). The prefect, who rules Rome disdaining eternal God (“contemptor aeterni dei”, v. 262) and worshipping repugnant demons (“daemonum sordes colis), suffers from epilepsy (“morbus regius”, v. 264). What is especially suggestive that is the vision conjured by Lawrence picturing the posthumous life and the appearance of the sick and invalid Christians and of wealthy pagans, who spend their worldly lives in the lap of luxury and privilege (v. 265–292). While the former will take up residence in the palace of God, and decorated with golden wreaths and dressed in crimson robes will live a wonderful life, the latter will have to expiate their sins as repugnant ghastly and stinking apparitions. Lawrence used the contrast between the posthumous fortunes of Christians and pagans in his dispute with the prefect as an argument for the prefect's recognition of the sick and invalids as real treasures of Christ:

En ergo nummos aureos
quos proxime sponderam,
quos nec favillis obruat
ruina nec fur subtrahat.
...
Hoc est monile ecclesiae
his illa gemmis comitur,
dotata sic Christo placet
sic ornat altum, verticem.
(*Perist.* II 293–296; 305–312)

While being tortured by order of the prefect, Lawrence sends up a long prayer to Christ, begging him to make Rome, which united the whole world and nations under its power, a Christian state⁶:

⁶ Cf. V. Buchheit, *Christliche Romideologie...*, p. 480 ff.

Da, Christe, Romanis tuis
 sit christiana ut civitas
 per quam dedisti ut ceteris
 mens una sacrorum foret!
 (*Perist.* II 433–436)

Then the martyr asks Christ to make Rome, together with all subjugated nations united in one faith, moderate the established customs (“mansuescat”). He prayed that Romans should believe in one God and renounce, as a state and a nation, pagan cults (v. 437–472). Lawrence’s prayer ends with a kind of *vaticinium ex eventu* – a prediction of the rule of an emperor in Rome, who will liberate the state from the slavery of paganism, condemn old cults and forbid making bloody offerings (v. 473–484).

The martyr’s death of Lawrence became for some senators as well as for priests and peoples an impulse to abandon pagan religion and accept Christian faith (v. 489–528)⁷. Thus, due to the saint martyr pagan Rome changed into Christian Rome, where Lawrence’s mortal remains are venerated (l. 529–536) and are famous for numerous miracles⁸.

In the *Peristephanon V* (*Passio sancti Vincentii martyris*), devoted to a Spanish martyr, Vincent, pagan Rome is represented by the emperor’s governor, Datianus, who armed with sinister law (“praecinctus atris legibus”, v. 14), threatening with death or imprisonment (“ferro et catenis”), wants to force the Christian deacon to pay homage to pagan gods⁹. He invokes the emperor who ordered all his subjects to worship old gods (incidentally, it is a reference to emperor Diocletianus, 285–305, and his edicts against Christians):

‘Rex’ inquit ‘orbis maximus,
 qui sceptrum gestat Romula
 servire sanxit omnia
 priscis deorum cultibus’
 (*Perist.* V 21–24)

Vincent, refusing to make an offering, sharply criticises pagan idolatry, which, in his opinion, is a senseless and vicious superstition (v. 33–36; 66–84)¹⁰. Opposing the emperor’s order, Vincent incurs anger and

⁷ Cf. K. Thraede, *Rom und Martyr; ‘Peristephanon’ 2, 1–20*, [in:] *Romanitas und Christianitas. Studia J. H. Waszink oblata*, Amsterdam–London 1973, p. 323 f.

⁸ About the origin and development of St. Lawrence’s cult wrote recently: L. Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, London 2004, p. 136–141.

⁹ Cf. C. De Santis, *Prudentius’ St. Vincent: A Study of ‘Peristephanon’*, “Collection Latomus”, vol. 254: *Studies in Latin and Roman History X*. Bruxelles 2000, p. 450.

¹⁰ Cf. S. Stabryła, *Criticism of the Pagan Religion in Prudentius’ ‘Peristephanon’*, “Analecta Cracoviensia” 34:2002, p. 437 f.

revenge of the emperor's governor, Datianus, who orders his oppressors to torture him. Yet, not only did the martyr show no fear during the most brutal torture, but also, miraculously supported by God's power, he preached Christ's glory.

Pagan Rome in *Passio sancti Vincentii martyris* is a state of intolerance and violence, a state, which respects neither the consciousness nor religious sensibilities of their citizens, demanding from them an absolute submission to ruthless orders. On the other side there is an apparently weak and defenceless Christian Rome, which, however, is able to find enough strength and courage to oppose this lawlessness disguised in the robes of false law, and issues a challenge both to the emperor and to his helper. For his faithfulness to Christ Vincent, similarly to many other Christians, had to pay with terrible suffering and martyr's death, which even in the eyes of his enemy, Datianus, was a victory.

Interestingly, the relation between pagan Rome and Christian Rome is presented by Prudentius in *Perist. IX (Passio Cassiani Forocorneliensis)* in a completely different way. The poem's narrator, who on his way to Rome entered Forum Corneli, became acquainted with the history of the martyrdom of St. Casian, who as a Christian teacher refused to make offerings to pagan gods and as a result of this was given over into the hands of his pupils and brutally tortured by them to death¹¹. The martyrdom and death of Casian, whose only fault was his faithfulness to Christ, was an act of spiteful revenge of the pagan state on a Christian for his refusal to renounce his faith. The crime committed by the state was not only a brutal violation of the law but also a deeply immoral act, especially because the judge used children, Casian's pupils, as executioners. Christian Rome in this poem by Prudentius is the Rome of innocent victims, who like St. Casian, paid their lives for their unwavering faith.

The martyrdom of a deacon from Caesarea, St. Roman, sentenced to death in Antioch in the first year of the 4th cent. during the period of the persecution of Christians under the rule of Galerius, is the subject of poem X, the longest of all pieces included in the collection named the *Peristephanon*. Here, Prudentius marked the opposition between the pagan and Christian states more clearly, possibly because of the dramatic and rhetorical way of presenting the plot. The starting point is a reference to the cruel emperor Galerius, who issued an edict ordering to persecute Christians:

¹¹ Prudentius' narrative on St. Cassian of Imola is the earliest surviving account on this martyr: cf. A.-M. Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, Oxford 1989, p. 242. On the historical value of the later testimonies concerning St. Cassian cf.: G. Gordini, *Cassiano d'Imola, santo, martire*, [in:] *Bibliotheca sanctorum*, vol. 3, Roma 1963, p. 999–1012; A. Amore, *Cassiano d'Imola, santo*, [in:] *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, vol. 3, Città del Vaticano 1949, p. 104.

Galerius orbis forte Romani statum
 ductor regebat, ut refert antiquitas,
 inmitis atrox asper inplacabilis.
 Edicta late mundum in omnem miserat:
 Christum negaret quisque mallet vivere.
 (*Perist. X 31–35*)

It seems that this not quite precise information refers not to the Galerius's new anti-Christian edicts, but to severe repressions the Christians were being subjected to under his rule after the abdication of Diocletian in 305. It is true, that Galerius as a new Augustus of the East in the company of new Caesar Maximinus Daia, conducted systematic persecutions of the Christians, and St. Roman was to be one of the victims.

The narrator in the poem by Prudentius makes prefect or governor Asclepiades an executor of Galerius's orders. Asclepiades, with the help of the army, arrested Christians in churches, sent them to prisons and planned to devastate the temple where Roman was deacon:

Praefectus istis inminens negotiis
 Asclepiades ire mandat milites
 ecclesiasten usque de sacrariis
 raptare plebem mancipandum vinculis,
 ni disciplinam Nazarenam respuat.

Mox ipse templum cogitans inrumpere
 Et dissipare sancta sanctorum studens
 Armis profanus praeparabat inpiis
 Altaris aram funditus pessum dare
 Foresque et ipsas in ruinam solvere.
 (*Perist. X 41–50*)

But the Christians, under the leadership of Roman decided to prevent the devastation of the temple and organised the defence of the sacred place, and fought back the enemies. Roman, accused by the authorities of rebelling and fomenting people to revolt, offered no resistance when arrested, and being put in front of the prefect's tribunal took all the blame. Thus, he was the first who by prefect's order was to be killed as a rabble-rouser of ignorant and illiterate common folk (v. 77–95).

Roman's rebellion or rather resistance was shown in *Perist. X* by the prefect as an act committed by Christians and directed against the violence of pagan authorities, whereas Roman was presented as the leader and rabble-rouser:

Infame monstrum, vilis, intestabilis,
 tu ventilator urbis et vulgi levis
 procella mentes inquietas mobiles,
 nec se inperita turba dedat legibus.
 (*Perist. X 77–80*)

So, for the authorities the most dangerous aspect of Roman's activities is his influence upon Christian masses, who instigated by him disobeyed the regulations ("mentes inquietas mobiles, / ne se inperita turba dedat legibus", v. 79–80). In this poem Christian Rome means not only the persecuted and defenceless followers of Christ, but also the people aware of their collective power, able to organise themselves under the leadership of an eminent individual and to effectively defend their faith. This Christian Rome is, in the eyes of the Roman governor, a serious threat to the pagan state and emperor's rule, therefore Asclepiades makes it clear that not only Roman but also the rebelling common people will pay their lives for the revolt:

Hoc tu parasti, perditte, spectaculum
 cladis cruentae de necandis civibus,
 quos ut profanos inpiati et saeculi
 reos necesse est te magistro interfici.
 Tu causa mortis, tu malorum signifer.
 (*Perist. X 86–90*)

Further in the *Peristephanon X*, one may find Roman's long speech, aimed at criticising pagan religion (v. 146–305)¹² and preceded by a comment on false and ridiculous ambitions which make pagan civil servants fight for short-lived success, distinctions and titles.

Haec ipsa vestra dignitatum culmina
 quid esse censes? Nonne cursim transeunt
 fasces secures sella praetexta et toga
 lictor tribunal et trecenta insignia,
 quibus tumetis moxque detumescitis?
 (*Perist. X 141–145*)

Deriding emperor's civil servants consumed by the greed for posts and privileges, Roman spares no scorn for different preposterous rites (such as feeding hens during auspices) connected with taking up and holding the highest posts (v. 146–150). Passing to the criticism of forms and objects of religious cult practised by dignitaries of Rome (*togati procures*), Roman states that they discredit themselves by participating in such primitive and uncivilised rites¹³. In the same part of his speech Roman deplores the whole of the political, social and religious life of contemporary Rome:

¹² Cf. M. Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of Martyrs. The Liber 'Peristephanon' of Prudentius*, Ann Arbor 1993, p. 54; the author considers *Peristephanon* to be "an antipagan polemic in the manner of *Contra Symmachum*"

¹³ Cf. S. Stabryła, op. cit., p. 438 ff.

Miseret tuorum me sacrorum et principum
 Morumque, Roma, saeculi summum caput.
 (*Perist.* X 166–167)

As a whole, pagan gods, according to Roman, make a world of evil, lust, adultery, treachery, unfaithfulness, deceit, jealousy, anger and hatred.

Nubunt puellae, saepe luduntur dolis,
 amasionum conprimuntur fraudibus,
 incesta fervent, furta moechorum calent,
 deos catenae colligant adulteros.
 (*Perist.* X 181–185)

The martyr provides many examples of gods who are worshipped by pagans and given offerings, and proves that there is no god or goddess among them who should deserve this because of his or her life or conduct. Provided that uneducated people can be forgiven the primitive and absurd idolatry, it is completely inexplicable in educated and learned people who in their lives are guided by common sense and reason, yet they do not know the truth about God, the creator and ruler of everything:

Vos eruditos miror et doctos viros,
 perpensa vitae quos gubernat regula,
 nesicre vel divina vel mortalia
 quo iure constant, quanta maiestas regat
 quidquid creatum est, quae creavit omnia.
 (*Perist.* X 306–310)

The praise of Christian virtues in the further part of the hymn (v. 350–365) leads to another Roman's attack on paganism that does not allow Christ's teaching to develop but it wallows in ignorance and falsity, completely devoured by worldly concerns and earthly possessions (v. 366–375). This opposition between Christian Rome and pagan Rome proves absolute moral superiority of the former.

In his next speech addressed to Asclepiades Roman challenges the prefect's belief that Rome and its gods are considerably older than Christ and the symbol of his Passion – the cross. Similarly to many earlier kingdoms, also pagan Rome will pass away, and Christ's cross, foretold in prefigurations and in holy books, by numerous miracles and prophets' words, has lasted from the beginning of the world and will last till its end (v. 610–648). Pagan Rome together with its crimes, violence, false religion and immoral gods, is doomed to fall, it will be replaced by new Rome, strong with the faith in Christ and victorious thanks to martyrs who spilt their blood.

In the *Peristephanon* XI (*Ad Velerianum episcopum de passione Hippolyti beatissimi martyris*) the opposition between pagan and Christian Rome is presented by Prudentius on two temporal planes. The poet was undoubtedly inspired by the picture which is found in a Roman sepulchral crypt and which shows St. Hippolytus limbs torn apart by horses and scattered on the rocks in the wilderness. St. Hippolytus was sentenced to death by the prefect and executed as presented in the picture during the period of the persecutions of Christians¹⁴. Since this version of St. Hippolytus's death is of legendary character, it is difficult to establish the date of the persecutions, which are described by the poet in lines 39–122. This description, whose second part makes a typical *ekfrasis* of a work of art¹⁵ – the picture of Hippolytus's martyrdom, shows the extend of the persecutions as well as inhuman cruelty of the prefect who directs the actions. Pagan Rome in this poem means not only the insane prefect, a man mad with hatred to Christians (“*insanus rector*”), and his cruel servants, but also young people who are hostile to Christians and who recognise Hippolytus as the leader of Christians and demand special tortures for him in order to take the heart out of his followers:

Haec persultanti celsum subito ante tribunal
offertur senior nexibus inPLICITUS.
Stipati circum iuvenes clamore fremebant
ipsum chisticolis esse caput populis:
si foret extinctum propere caput, omnia vulgi
pectora Romanis sponte speranda deis.
Insolitum leti poscunt genus et nova poenae
inventae, exemplo quo trepident alii.

(*Perist.* XI 77–84)

Encouraged by the young people's demand, the prefect sentenced the hapless old man to death by tearing his body apart by wild and frightened horses:

Hippolytus fiat ergo, agitet turbetque iugales
intereatque feris dilaceratus equis.
Vix hae ille, duo cogunt animalia freni
ignara insueto subdere colla iugo,
non stabulis blandive manu palpata magistri
imperiumque equitis ante subacta pati,
sed campestre vago nuper pecus e grege captum,
quod pavor indomito corde ferinus agit.

(*Perist.* XI 87–94).

¹⁴ Cf. J. Ross, *Dynamic Writing and Martyr's Bodies in Prudentius' 'Peristephanon'*, “*Journal of Early Christian Studies*” 3:1995, p. 344 f.

¹⁵ G. Viscardi, *La vision du martyre de saint Hippolyte ou la mortification transfigurée: Prudence, 'Peristephanon' 11*, “*Latomus*” 56:1997, p. 361–381 analyses this poem from the aesthetic point of view.

The second temporal plane in *Perist.* XI is the present, which is shown by the poem's narrator as a Christian period, when the ceremonies in Hippolytus's honour are celebrated annually in Rome on 13 August¹⁶. The martyr has here not only a special sepulchral crypt, but also a marvellous temple visited by crowds of his followers, who on the day of his festival arrive from different parts of Italy in order to take part in a ceremonious service together with the inhabitants of Rome. In this way Christian Rome worships Hippolytus, who once made an offering of his life to Christ.

An original vision of pagan Rome is included by Prudentius in the last poem of *Peristephanon* devoted to the martyrdom of St. Agnes (*Perist.* XIV – *Passio Agnes*)¹⁷. When the spirit (*spiritus*) of the young martyr, freed from the body, rose into the space, from the above she saw the spinning universe, celestial bodies and the Earth (v. 91–99), kings and tyrants, people fighting for distinctions and privileges, and furthermore senseless glamour, anger, fear, desires, sadness, joy and envy that overshadow human hope and dignity, and the worst evil of all – paganism:

Reges tyrannos imperia et gradus
pompaque honorum stulta tumentium,
argenti et auri vim rabida siti
cunctis petitam per varium nefas,
splendore multo structa habitacula,
inclusa pictae vestis inania,
iram timorem vota pericula,
nunc triste longum nunc breve gaudium,
livoris atri fumificas faces
nigrescit unde spes hominum et decus,
et quod malorum taetrius omnium est
gentilitatis sordida nubila.

(*Perist.* XIV 100–111)

As may be assumed, this bleak vision of the Earth observed from the space by Agnes is, as a matter of fact, a picture of pagan Rome, tormented by immoral desires and stained with deadly sins. The cause of this great evil is a dragon (*draco*) – Satan, who poisons the world with his venom and plunges it into hell. The young martyr girl, who will be soon decorated with a double wreath by God in Heaven, was able to tame Satan and deprive him of the poisonous venom (v. 112–118)¹⁸.

¹⁶ Cf. S. Stabryła, *Picta imago martyris: obrazy jako źródło inspiracji 'Peristephanon IX i XI*, „Folia Historica Cracoviensia” 10:2004, p. 342 f.; A. Amore, *Note su Ippolito martire*, „Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana” 30:1954, p. 96 f.

¹⁷ L. Grig (op. cit., p. 84) writes: “Agnes seems to have provided the archetype of the virgin martyr, especially in a Roman aristocratic context”.

¹⁸ M. Roberts (op. cit., p. 101 f.) compares *Perist.* XIV with *Perist.* III (Eulalia) and points out the common features of the both poems.

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The picture of pagan Rome that emerges from the *Peristephanon* by Prudentius is definitely negative, particularly due to the fact that the poet contrasts it with the image of Christian Rome. Thus, in the *Perisephanon* II the military successes of pagan Rome and deeds of famous heroes cannot make any claim to fame, in opposition to the martyrdom of St. Lawrence, who by his suffering and heroic death gained victory over the ignoble cult of Jove in Rome: it is thanks to Lawrence that pagan and cruel Rome changed into Christian Rome. In *Perist.* V pagan Rome was presented as a state of intolerance and violence, the state that respects neither human consciousness nor religious beliefs, but using its strength tries to subdue Christians and to make them obey tyrannical orders. Christian Rome, represented in this poem by deacon Vincent, is seemingly weak and defenceless, yet he derives its power from his faith in order to oppose lawlessness and through the martyr's death wins a victory over the cruel and envious enemy. The pagan state, violating the law and moral principles, does not refrain from the most despicable crimes, which may be proved by the martyrdom and death of St. Casian described in *Perist.* IX: Christian Rome makes in this poem a world of innocent, helpless victims, whose suffering is noticed and rewarded by Christ only. A relatively full description of pagan Rome is given in *Peristephanon* X, where it is shown as a world of false and ridiculous human ambitions, quests after posts and privileges, total submission to worldly matters. This world, where the political, social and religious downfall can clearly be seen, is doomed to imminent destruction, similarly to pagan gods who promote lust, unfaithfulness, deceit, anger and hatred. And what about Christian Rome whose supporter and defender is Roman? Here Christians are not victims only, but they can rebel against unjust authorities and defend their temple from pagans, since they are aware of their power as well as of moral nothingness of their enemies. The martyr's death of Roman is the victory of Christ, is a harbinger of new Christian Rome. In *Peristephanon* XI Prudentius showed the hostility of pagan Rome towards Christians, its callous wanton cruelty, to which hapless Hippolytus fell victim. Christian Rome in this poem is a city of temples, the place of the cult of martyrs, ceremonial rites in which countless crowds of believers participate. And there is also Agnes's vision in *Perisephanon* XIV, who is observing the world from the heights of the skies and is looking at the picture of pagan Rome, where Satan rules.

RZYM POGAŃSKI I RZYM CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKI
W *PERISTEPHANON* PRUDENCJUSZA

Streszczenie

W kilku poematach cyklu *Peristephanon* Prudencjusz w bardzo wyraźny sposób przedstawił opozycję między Rzymem pogańskim a Rzymem chrześcijańskim (zob. *Perist.* II, V, IX, X, XI i XIV). W pierwszym z tych utworów (*Perist.* II) dzięki cierpieniom i męczeńskiej śmierci św. Wawrzyńca pogański, okrutny Rzym z haniebnym kultem Jowisza zmienił się w Rzym chrześcijański. W *Peristephanon* V Rzym pogański został ukazany jako państwo nietolerancji i przemocy, które stara się siłą podporządkować chrześcijan swoim tyrańskim nakazom. Pogańskie państwo w *Perist.* IX gwałci prawa i zasady moralne, nie cofając się przed najbardziej wyrafinowanymi zbrodniami. W *Perist.* X Rzym pogański to świat skazany na zagładę, w którym dokonał się już upadek życia politycznego, obyczajowego i religijnego; chrześcijanie są tu już nie tylko ofiarami, ale potrafią zbuntować się przeciwko niesprawiedliwej władzy, mają świadomość własnej siły i nicości moralnej przeciwników. Wrogi chrześcijanom Rzym pogański, jego bezwzględne i wyrafinowane okrucieństwo, i Rzym chrześcijański jako miasto świątyń i kultu męczenników to kontrastujące ze sobą obrazy przedstawione w *Perist.* XI. Wreszcie w *Perist.* XIV zawarł Prudencjusz wizję Rzymu pogańskiego targanego występny miętnościami i splamionego ciężkimi grzechami. Budując w *Peristephanon* opozycję pogaństwo-chrześcijaństwo, poeta angażuje się emocjonalnie i intelektualnie po stronie chrześcijańskiej i stara się ukazać drugą stronę w najbardziej niekorzystnym świetle.