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## THE CONCEPT OF MARTYRDOM IN PRUDENTIUS' *PERISTEPHANON*

Recently the *Peristephanon* has come to be one of Prudentius' most frequently examined poetic works, and a fairly large bibliography has accumulated for it. Many of the key issues in this cycle of poems devoted to the Christian martyrs have already been resolved, either by the earlier scholars or by those who have worked on the subject more recently. Questions such the essence and objective of the *Peristephanon*<sup>1</sup>, its structure and the inspiration<sup>2</sup> behind it, Prudentius' treatment of religion, politics, ideology<sup>3</sup>, and the cult of the martyrs<sup>4</sup> have all been addressed. But relatively scant attention has been given to the idea of martyrdom itself as presented in the cycle, which seems to be one of the most important questions posed in the legends of the Christian martyrs. Apart from incidental mentions, there are virtually no extensive studies on the subject in the academic literature. The general works on the Christian protomartyrs devote no or very little attention to the concept of martyrdom in Prudentius' work, either<sup>5</sup>.

It seems, however, that an accurate description of the idea of martyrdom in Prudentius' cycle of poems could help in the understanding of the premises lying at the root of the fascination with martyrdom in

<sup>1</sup> Cf. M. P. Cunningham, *The Nature and Purpose of the 'Peristephanon' of Prudentius*, "Sacris Erudiri" 14:1963, p. 40–45.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Pellegrino, *Structure et inspiration des 'Peristephanon' de Prudence*, "Bulletin de la Faculté des Lettres de Strasbourg 39:1961, p. 437–450.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Kah, "Die Welt der Römer mit der Seele suchend"... *Die Religiosität des Prudentius im Spannungsfeld zwischen 'pietas christiana' und 'pietas Romana'*, Bonn 1990, chap.: *Politische Religiosität und Romideologie im 'Liber Peristephanon'* (p. 200 ff.); cf. also: V. Buchheit, *Christliche Romideologie im Laurentius-Hymnus des Prudentius*, [in:] *Das frühe Christentum im römischen Staat*, hrsg. von R. Klein, Darmstadt 1971, p. 455–485; D. Brodka, *Die Romideologie in der römischen Literatur der Spätantike*, Frankfurt am Mainz 1998, p. 163 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs*, Ann Arbor 1993, passim.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. H. F. von Campenhausen, *Die Idee des Martyriums in der alten Kirche*, Göttingen 1964; W. H. C. Freund, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, Oxford 1965; T. Baumeister, *Die Anfänge der Theologie des Martyriums*, Münster 1980.

the 4<sup>th</sup>-century literature and the cult of the martyrs which was growing rapidly at that time<sup>6</sup>. Such an endeavour to identify the essence of the idea of martyrdom in these poems would hopefully lead to a more precise interpretation of the „hymns of the *Peristephanon* collection, which is probably the best literary work in the writings of Antiquity on martyrdom. Finally there is the question of the originality of Prudentius' view of martyrdom, and of whether and to what degree his cycle of poetry re-echoes earlier opinions, including ones based on other literary works<sup>7</sup>. But this matter calls for a separate study.

In the hymn in honour of Emetrius and Chelidonium (*Peristeph. I*) the narrator presents the salvific consequence of the assistance and intercession of these two martyrs, who were Spanish soldiers, and he describes them as *testes*:

Nil suis bonus negavit Christus umquam testibus,  
testibus quos nec catenae dura nec mors terruit  
unicum deum fateri sanguinis dispendio,  
sanguinis sed tale damnum lux rependit longior.  
(*Perist. I* 21–14)<sup>8</sup>

The word *testis*, in the sense of '*testis Christi*', the equivalent of the Greek μαρτύς, defines the function of the martyrs. They are witnesses of Christ, who by their martyr's death testify to the truth of his teaching<sup>9</sup>. Their testimony (*Deum fateri*) in this case consists of fearlessness ('non terruit'), the suffering of imprisonment (*catenae*), and a death by execution (*mors*). An absolutely clear observation is made that the essence of martyrdom is the giving of witness through the forfeiture of one's own life for Christ. But the martyr who gives up his own life for Christ receives a reward for this loss (*damnum*): a longer life (*lux longior*)<sup>10</sup>. Such a death, an honour (*decorum*) for honest men (*viris probis*), allows them to vanquish the enemy by death ('morte... hostem vincere'). The martyr's death, which is reserved only for honest men, is thus a triumph over the persecuting

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. Starowieyski, *Męczeństwo*, [in:] *Męczennicy* (serie *Ojcowie żywi IX*), Kraków 1991, p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the remarks of P. Tino Alberto Sabbatini, *Storia e leggenda nei 'Peristephanon' di Prudenzi*, "Riv. di Studi Classici" 20:1972, fasc. 1, p. 32–53 (part I), 20:1972, 2, p. 187–221 (part II).

<sup>8</sup> All the quotations from the *Peristephanon* according to the edition of M. P. Cunningham, *Aurelii Prudentii Clementis Carmina*, "Corpus Christianorum" Series Latina CXXV (1966).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. Kah, op. cit., p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. V. Edden, *Prudentius*, in: *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century*, ed. J. W. Binns, London–Boston 1974, p. 176.

enemy, since it opens the gate to heaven (*porta panditur*, v. 30)<sup>11</sup>. Generally speaking, the problem of martyrdom is presented here in full agreement with the Gospel text relating to Jesus' disciples and apostles<sup>12</sup>, although in some of the details, such as the remark that a martyr's death is a triumph over the enemy or the idea of death as the gateway into eternity, it transcends the concept delineated in the Scriptures<sup>13</sup>.

In the hymn in honour of St. Laurence (*Peristeph. II*), this martyr's death marks a turning-point in the religious life of Rome, as foretold in the martyr's long speech prior to execution<sup>14</sup>, providing a new incentive for the people of Rome to abandon the worship of pagan idols:

Repens medullas indoles  
adflarat et cogerat  
amore sublimis dei  
odisse nugas pristinas.

Refrixit ex illo die  
cultus deorum turpium;  
plebs in sacellis rarior,  
Christi ad tribunal curritur.  
(*Perist. II* 493–500)

But the sudden change which occurs in the hearts of the pagan Romans upon Laurence's martyrdom cannot be seen as a supernatural phenomenon, since the motives leading up to it are presented by Prudentius in realistic categories:

Vexere corpus subditis  
cervicibus quidam patres  
quos mira libertas vivi  
ambire Christum suaserat.  
(*Perist. II* 489–492)

The immediate cause of the sudden change in attitude, first in the senators and later in the people of Rome, is Laurence's. Extraordinary freedom of spirit (*mira libertas*), which marks the birth of their love for the one true God (*cogemat amare... sublimis dei*) and a hatred of their former inappropriate worship (*odisse nugas pristinas*). According to Prudentius, the martyrdom of St. Laurence initiated the

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mat. 10, 16–39; Mar. 13, 9–13, Luc. 21, 12–19.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A.-M. Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, Oxford 1989, p. 142 f.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Perist. II* 412–484.

great process of transformation of pagan Rome into the Christian Rome<sup>15</sup>. This is most plainly said in the following couplet<sup>16</sup>:

Mors illa sancti martyris  
mors vera templorum fuit.  
(*Perist.* II 509–510)

The fullest presentation of the concept of martyrdom for Christ as a triumph over the persecuting Antichrist – the key motif in the entire *Peristephanon* collection – comes in Hymn V, in honour of St. Vincent. Such a formulation of the subject is anticipated in the opening apostrophe itself:

Beate martyr, prospera  
diem triumphalem tuum  
quo sanguinis merces tibi  
corona, Vincenti, datur.

Hic te ex tenebris saeculi  
tortore victo et iudice  
evexit ad caelum dies  
Christoque ovantem reddidit.  
(*Perist.* V 1–8)

The martyr's death was thus the *dies triumphalis* for Vincent, the day on which he won the *corona* or victor's crown, the reward for the blood he shed (*merces sanguinis*). This concept of martyrdom – a victory over the executioner (*tortor*) and persecuting judge (*iudex*) – appears in some way connected with the martyr's name, *Vincentius*, derived beyond all doubt from the Latin verb *vincere*, 'to win'. The day of Vincent's martyrdom and triumph marks the moment of his joyous meeting with Christ in heaven. The motif of Vincent's joy, a striking contrast to the sufferings inflicted on him by his cruel oppressor, Datianus, governor of Spain, recurs several times throughout the hymn, e.g. in vv.131–132 and 211–212. Certain of the reward awaiting him in heaven for the torture inflicted on his body, Vincent does not hide his joy from his torturer; neither does he experience any fear of torture (*Peristeph.* 221–224); he has an anxious and impatient longing for death, a freeing of the bonds of the body:

<sup>15</sup> Cf. K. Thraede, *Rom und Martyrer in Prudentius 'Peristephanon' II*, in: *Romanitas und Christianitas. Studia J. H. Waszink oblata*, Amsterdam–London 1973, p. 322 f.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. V. Buchheit, *op. cit.*, p. 480 f.

Aeger morarum taedio  
 et mortis incensus siti,  
 si mors habenda eius modi est  
 quae corporali ergastulo  
 mentem resolvit liberam  
 et reddit auctori deo.

(*Perist.* V 355–360)

Martyrdom seen as a triumph over the foe; martyrdom as the joy of a swift reward; and as liberation from the prison of the body<sup>17</sup> make this hymn with a well-balanced entity. The triple dimension of the notion of martyrdom in the poem on St. Vincent is underlined in the narrator's closing prayer to this martyr, who acceded to celestial glory soon after death (*Peristeph.* V 545–576)

In Hymn VI, in honour of St. Fructuosus, just before mounting the stake, in response to the laments and pleas of his fellow-Christians, the martyr promises them that when he is in heaven he will entreat Christ for mercy on his people:

Cur lamenta rigant gens madentes?  
 Cur vestri memox ut fiam rogatis?  
 Cunctis pro populis rogabo Christum.  
 (*Perist.* VI 84–86)

Thus Fructuosus undertakes to act as an intercedes between the people and Christ in the belief that as a martyr he will be able to win the necessary grace for them thanks to his merits. His hope and promise are confirmed from heaven even before the saintly priest and the two deacons accompanying him have mounted the stake. The voice of the Holy Ghost (*spiritus*) is heard, and all bystanders are overawed:

Non est, credite poena quam videtis,  
 quae puncto tenui, citata transit,  
 nec vitam rapit illa sed reformat.

Felices animae quibus per ignem  
 celsa scandere contigit Tonantis,  
 quas olim fugiet perennis ignis!  
 (*Perist.* VI 94–99)

A new concept of martyrdom emerges in the Holy Spirit's enunciation. It is the idea that martyrdom is a renewal of life, while the

<sup>17</sup> Cf. M. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 61 f.

tortures to which the martyrs submit are a blessing and a path to heaven<sup>18</sup>. Viewed from this perspective, martyrdom is thus an act of purification: souls purified by fire ascend to heaven (*animae quibus per ignem / celsa scandere contingit Tonantis*). At the same time it is soteriological, since it secures the avoidance of hellfire (*perennis ignis*). Prudentius gives a second explicit picture of the double, purifying and soteriological, sense of martyrdom, in the passion of St. Romanus (*Peristeph. X*). Submitting to terrible tortures, Romanus encourages his executioner to inflict even more pain on his body:

Luxus vorandi carnis arvinam foret  
carnis voluptas omne per nefas ruit.

Medere, quaeso, carnifex, tantis malis,  
concide carpe fomitem peccaminum  
fac ut resecto debilis carnis situ  
dolore ab omni mens supersit libera  
nec gestet ultra quod tyrannus amputet.  
(*Perist. X 511–520*)

The tortures inflicted on Romanus' body will become a medicine for his soul, curing it of its great sins: the sinful body will be freed from its iniquity through martyrdom. Martyrdom, or rather the executioner administering it – will thus become the instrument of purification for the soul, washing it of corporal defilement, and thereby saving it from sin. Purification through torture will thus become the salvation of his soul. Life must inevitably end at some time for all; but those who accept this of their own free will are to receive a great and perpetual reward for this: salvation (*Peristeph. X 531–535*). Subsequently in this, the longest of hymns in the *Peristephanon*, the mother of the young Christian boy who is being scourged encourages him to persist in the face of suffering, reminding him of the examples of courage of Isaac (Gen. 22, 6 f.) and the Macchabees (Mach. II 7) and concluding her *adhortatio ad martyrium* with the following observation:

Inpendere ipsi cuius ortus munere es,  
bene in datorem quod dedit refunderis.  
(*Perist. X 789–790*)

The human body ('corpus') is a gift from the Enlivener and Creator (*animator et factor*), and it belongs to Him. Suffering, and even death, is merely a return of the gift received from the Maker. This concept of

<sup>18</sup> Cf. A.-M. Palmer, op. cit., p. 205 f.

martyrdom, corroborated by examples drawn from the Old Testament, is undoubtedly a new motif in the *Peristephanon*.

The predominant idea in the last four poems of Prudentius' cycle (XI, XII, XIII, and XIV) is the notion of martyrdom as a reward. In the *Passio* in honour of St. Hippolytus (*Peristeph.* XI) the narrator mentions his hero's connections with the Novatianist schism – a problematic affair from the historical point of view – and declares that in spite of his error he gained the martyr's reward (*sanguinei praemia supplicii*) and was enriched with the gift of the Catholic faith:

Usque ad martyri provectum insigne tulisse  
 lucida sanguinei praemia supplicii.  
 Nec mirere senem perversi dogmatis olim  
 munere dictatum catholicae fidei.

(*Perist.* XI 21–24)

In the *Passio Cypriani* (*Peristeph.* XIII) the motif of the reward of martyrdom appears first in the narrator's commentary on the saintly bishop teaching his flock in the light of the persecution of the Christians under Valerian and Gallienus:

Contra animos populi doctor Cyprianus incitabat  
 ne quis ab egregiae virtutis honore discreparet,  
 neu fidei pretium quis sumere degener timeret.

(*Perist.* XIII 38–40)

The prize awarded for faith (*pretium fidei*) is also a glorious distinction of virtue (*egregiae virtutis honor*) which no Christian should renounce. Torture is easy to bear when the reward promised by God to the valorous (*viris fortibus*) is recalled. That reward is the hope of an eternal life of light (*spem luminis et diem perennem*). In the poem's concluding section Cyprian gives confirmation of that truth which he preached to others by his conduct at the moment of martyrdom (*Peristeph.* XIII 95–106).

Finally in the Passion of St. Agnes (*Peristeph.* XIV) an undaunted virgin who is proud of her virginity, which she has managed to preserve for the greater glory of Christ, wishes to die for the faith and does not flinch from the sword:

Ibo inruentis gressibus obviam  
 nec demorabor vota calentia;  
 ferrum in papillas omne recepero  
 pectusque ad imum vim gladii traham.

(*Perist.* XIV 75–78)

For Agnes martyrdom means union with Christ; marriage-vows which will open up heaven for her:

Sic nupta Christo transilium poli  
 omnes tenebras aethere celsior.  
 Aeterne rector, divide ianuas  
 caeli observatas terrigenis prius  
 ac te sequentem, Christe, animam voca,  
 cum virginalem tum patris hostiam!  
 (*Perist.* XIV 79–84)

Just before she dies at the executioner's hands (*Peristeph.* XIV 79–84), Agnes beseeches God the Father (*aeterne rector*) to open the gates of heaven to her, the bride of Christ, and she begs Christ to call her, who has followed Him, unto himself as a virgin sacrifice offered to the Father (*virginalem... patris hostiam*). The poet thus attributes a double meaning to the martyrdom of St. Agnes: by her death this martyr enters a mystical union with Christ, and at the same time she is a virgin sacrifice to the Father.

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My attempt to obtain a precise definition of the concept of martyrdom in Prudentius' *Peristephanon* has been restricted to a few examples only, but ones which I believe best depict the essence of the poet's attitude in this work to martyrdom. Significantly, in none of the poems discussed (I, II, V, VI, X, XIII, and XIV) does Prudentius limit his attention to a presentation of martyrdom as an act with an individual meaning only. In *Peristeph.* I he interprets the martyrdom of the soldiers Emetrius and Chelidonius as a testimony of faith for Christ and as a victory over the persecuting enemy. In *Peristeph.* II the martyrdom of St. Laurence causes the fall of the old pagan religion on the one hand, and initiates the conversion of the Romans to Christianity on the other. In *Peristeph.* V through his martyrdom St. Vincent wins a victory over the enemy, Antichrist, liberates himself from the shackles of a sinful body and accedes to joy through his immediate reunion with Christ. The martyrdom of St. Fructuosus and the two deacons accompanying him in *Peristeph.* VI has a double sense: as a purification from the sins of the body and as a road to the soul's salvation. The soteriological motif appears in the *Passio* in honour of St. Romanus (*Peristeph.* X) as well: here martyrdom is a path to salvation and a reward; but at the same time the poet also sees the death and suffering of the Christian martyrs as a return of the gift of life to the Creator. In the *Passio* of St. Cyprian (*Peristeph.* XIII) the



hope of eternal life is the martyr's reward. Finally in the martyrdom of St. Agnes (*Peristeph.* XIV) the concept of martyrdom is equated with mystical union with Christ and with the sacrifice of a victim for God.

This overview shows that the idea of martyrdom in the *Peristephanon* entails a complex of meanings subject to the overriding, general motif of the martyrs' victory over the persecuting Antichrist through their suffering and death for Christ, as indicated in the collection's title. By using a range of variants of this general motif, not only did the poet manage to avoid the monotony which would have resulted from a repetition of the same motif, but he also achieved a certain kind of *varietas*: the diverse forms of the idea of martyrdom that he depicts allow him to make endow the martyrs with individual psychological characteristics. In each case the martyr concerned undergoes suffering and death for the sake of Christ, but the particular motives behind their decisions are different, although they all lie within the compass of the main concept. Prudentius appears to have tried to harmonise the individual forms of the concept of martyrdom with the ethos of the given character, as, for example, in the case of St. Vincent or St. Agnes – as far as this was possible in view of the difficulty with access to source materials.

## IDEA MĘCZEŃSTWA W *PERISTEPHANON* PRUDENCJUSZA

### Streszczenie

Idea męczeństwa pojawia się w *Peristephanon* jako pewien kompleks znaczeniowy podporządkowany głównemu, zaznaczonemu w tytule zbioru motywowi zwycięstwa męczenników nad Antychrystem – prześladowcą przez cierpienie i śmierć dla Chrystusa. Poeta, wprowadzając różne warianty owej idei męczeństwa, zdołał nie tylko uniknąć niepożądanego monotonii, która powstałaby jako rezultat powtarzania tego samego motywu, ale osiągnął pewnego rodzaju *varietas*; różne formy idei męczeństwa pozwoliły Prudencjuszowi na zindywidualizowanie psychologiczne poszczególnych bohaterów. Próba zdefiniowania idei męczeństwa w *Peristephanon* została tu ograniczona do kilku przykładów, które zdaniem autora najwyraźniej obrazują w tym utworze stosunek poety do męczeństwa (I, II, V, VI, X, XIII, XIV). Wszyscy ci męczennicy znoszą cierpienia i śmierć dla Chrystusa, ale konkretne motywacje ich decyzji znacznie się różnią od siebie, jakkolwiek wszystkie mieszczą się w obrębie owej nadrzędnej idei.