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**CHRISTIANI NOMINIS HOSTIS:
Images of the Persecutors
of Christians in Prudentius' *Peristephanon***

In the abundant literature relating to Prudentius' *Peristephanon* not much has been said about the persecutors of the Christians as presented in this work. In recent years some attention has been given to this issue by the American scholar J. Petruccione, but it has been limited to one aspect only: the motif of envy (*invidia*) in the oppressors' behaviour¹. In other studies of the *Peristephanon*, such as for example M. Kah's², the image of the prosecutors and torturers holds only a marginal position and receives merely occasional mentions. However the literary portrait of the persecutors of the Christians – an execrable counterbalance to the virtuous martyrs – seems to merit examination. A closer scrutiny of the text in respect of the figures of the tormentors may facilitate the understanding of the concept of martyrdom itself in this cycle of poems³: the opposition between the martyrs and their oppressors is a significant factor as regards the message conveyed by Prudentius' hymns. In this survey I shall restrict myself to a limited number of examples of the figures of persecutors which may serve as a basis for generalisation throughout the *Peristephanon*.

In the hymn in honour of the martyrs Emeterius and Chelidonium, two Spanish soldiers (*Perist.* I), the real persecutor of the Christians

¹ Cf. J. Petruccione, *The Persecutor's Envy and the Martyr's Death in 'Peristephanon' 13 and 7*, "Sacris Erudiri" 32:1991, p. 69–93 and Idem, *The Persecutor's Envy and the Rise of Martyr's Cult: 'Peristephanon 1 and 4, "Vigiliae Christianae"* 45:1991, p. 327–346.

² 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, pp. 206 ff.

³ For the concept of martyrdom in the ancient Christianity see the general works: 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; – in *Peristephanon*: S. Stabryła, *The Concept of Martyrdom in Prudentius' 'Peristephanon'*, "Analecta Cracoviensia" 30–31:1998–1999, pp. 564 ff.

is the emperor, who has ordered sacrifices to be made at the altars of the pagan gods:

Forte tunc atrox secundos Istrahelis posteros
 ductor aulae mundialis ire ad aram iusserat
 idolis litare nigris esse Christi defugas.

Liberam succincta ferro pestis urgebat fidem
 illa virgas et secures et bisulcas unguas
 ultro fortis expetebat Christi amore interrita.
 (*Perist.* I 40–45)⁴

The cruel imperial oppressor (“atrox... ductor aulae mundialis”), who has inflicted terrible punishment on the first Christians, has not succeeded in shaking their faith and love of Christ; neither has he filled them with fear. The two Spanish soldiers were among the victims of this wave of persecution, and they met a similar fate to other Christians who refused to perform such a dishonourable command and declined to serve Caesar, wishing to serve God only⁵. The narrator admits that he cannot provide the full details of Emeterius’ and Chelidonius’ martyrdom, as the official documents have been destroyed (“chartulas blasphemus olim nam satelles abstulit”, v. 75). The only thing that has survived is the memory of the miracles wrought at their death, which stupefied the executioner but did not stop him from inflicting the lethal blow:

Vidit hoc conventus adstans, ipse vidit carnifex
 et manum repressit haerens ac stupore oppalluit,
 sed tamen peregit ictum, ne periret gloria.
 (*Perist.* I 91–93)

The torturer (“carnifex”) is merely the executor of the torment, and what he inflicts is merely the physical suffering, culminating in death. But the real responsibility for the persecution of the Christian faith and the harrying of the Christians falls fairly and squarely on the magistrate, the “atrox imperator”, who has given the torturer a mandate for the execution.

⁴ All the quotations according the edition *Aurelii Prudentii Clementis ‘Carmina’*, cura et studio M. P. Cunningham, Turnholti MCMLVI [Corpus hristianorum. Series Latina CXXVI].

⁵ Cf. A.-M. Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, Oxford 1989, pp. 142 ff.; cf. also A. Harnack, *Militia Christi: Die christliche Religion und der Soldatenstand in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, Tübingen 1905, passim (reprint: Darmstadt 1963); J. Fontaine, *Les Chrétiens et le service militaire dans l’Antiquité*, “Concilium” 2:1965, p. 99–122; J. Auer, *Militia Christi*, [in:] *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 10:1980, col. 1210–1233.

Whereas in *Peristephanon* I the real perpetrator of the persecution is an unnamed emperor, in the *Passio Laurentii* (*Perist.* II) the figure of the emperor looms behind his plenipotentiary, the prefect of Rome. The motive accounting for the conduct of this anonymous "praefectus urbi regiae" is greed, an uncontrolled craving of gold, not hostility to Christianity itself:

Versat famem pecuniae
praefectus urbis regiae,
minister insani ducis,
exactor auri et sanguinis,

qua vi latentes eruat
nummos operta existimans
talenta sub sacrarüs
cumulosque congestos tegi.
(*Perist.* II 45–52)

The role of the emperor, the "insanus dux", is limited here with respect to that of his "minister". The grasping prefect wants to extort the alleged treasures kept in the Christian sanctuaries from Laurence, and admits that the official persecution being meted out to the Christians by the state authorities is exceptionally brutal:

"Soletis" – inquit – "conqueri
saevire nos iusto amplius
cum christiana corpora
plus quam cruento scindimus".
(*Perist.* II 56–60)

This magistrate does not want to resort to tortures, he merely wants the saintly deacon to deliver up the treasures that are so indispensable to the state, and in doing so he cites the words of Christ:

Sic dogma vestrum est, audio:
'suum quibusque reddito'⁶.
(*Perist.* II 93–94)

He cynically taunts them with Christ's poverty, urging Laurence's fellow-Christians and protégés to yield up all their treasures in their Master's name:

Inplete dictorum fidem,
qua vos per orbem venditis,
nummos libenter reddite,
estote verbis divites!
(*Perist.* II 105–108)

⁶ Cf. St. Matthew 22, 20 ff.

When, instead of the treasures the prefect expects, Laurence presents the sick, the disabled and the poor as the treasures of Christ and His Church, the prefect loses his patience at this disappointment and hands Laurence over to the executioners for the most elaborate tortures. But these fail to break the saintly deacon's faith and resolution. His martyr's death for the faith and his last prayer make the power of pagan Rome disintegrate and bring Christianity a great triumph⁷. Laurence's victory at the price of martyrdom is a victory of good over evil, and marks the ultimate ("aeternum") defeat of Satan ("daemon") in his struggle with Christ's witness⁸:

Sic dimicans Laurentius
non ense praecinxit latus,
hostile sed ferrum retro
torquens in auctorem tulit.

Dum daemon invictum dei
testem lacessit proelio'
perfossus ipse concidit
et stratus aeternum iacet.

(*Perist.* II 501–508)

In the hymn in honour of Eulalia (*Perist.* III), in her vehement defence of Christianity against the pagan religion before the praetor's court a young martyr lays the blame for the persecution of the Christians on the Emperor Maximian himself

Maximianus, opum dominus
et tamen ipse cliens lapidum,
prostituat voveatque suis
numinibus caput ipse suis
pectora cur generosa quatit?

Dux bonus, arbiter egregius,
sanguine pascitur innocuo
corporibusque piis inhians
viscera sobria dilacerat
gaudet et excruciare fidem.

(*Perist.* III 81–90)

Naturally the Emperor has the right to worship, or rather to sell himself to his idols ("prostituat voveatque suis numinibus") if he wishes to be an idolater ("cliens lapidum"), but he may not persecute

⁷ Cf. V. Buchheit, *Christliche Romideologie im Laurentius-Hymnus des Prudentius*, [in:] *Das frühe Christentum im römischen Staat*, hrsg. von R. Klein, Darmstadt 1971, p. 481.

⁸ Cf. A. Dihle, *Die griechische und römische Literatur der Kaiserzeit. Von Augustus bis Justinian*, München 1989, p. 596.

the Christians ("pectora generosa"). The tone of Eulalia's accusations of the Emperor becomes very much more severe: her ironic antithesis of the "dux bonus" and "arbiter egregius" and of the Emperor's conduct with respect to innocent people is to show the cruelty and blood-thirstiness of his persecution of the Christians. Maximian, who as Emperor should be a good and noble prince, oppresses the pious Christians in the cruellest manner; he takes a perverse pleasure in hounding down their religion ("gaudet et excruciare fidem"). Enraged by her bold enunciation, the praetor immediately hands her over to the lictor and addresses Eulalia with a long speech in which, resorting to false and devious arguments, he tries to deflect her from her chosen path (*Perist.* III 101–125). Pretending to be worried about her fate and lying that he wishes to save her from torture, the persecutor reminds her of her noble birth, deplors the fact that she is so young and pities her parents and herself in their misfortune, but nevertheless does not withdraw his threats⁹. On the contrary, he describes the gory details of the ordeal and death awaiting her if she does not listen to his advice (*Perist.* III 114–120). His aim is to make her renounce her faith and repudiate Christ, a sign of which would be her making a sacrifice to the pagan gods (*Perist.* III 121–124). In tempting Eulalia with a vision of her life saved and of future happiness, while at the same time describing the terrors of torture and death, the praetor in fact becomes an embodiment of Satan, the enemy of Christ, with a truly diabolical mendacity, deception, and cruelty. But at the sight of a dove – the martyr's soul flying to heaven – both Satan the persecutor and his fiendish assistant flee in terror.

Vidit et ipse satelles avem
feminae ab ore meare palam,
obstupefactus et attonitus
prosilit et sua gesta fugit,
lictor et ipse fugit pavidus.

(*Perist.* III 171–175)

A similar concept of the persecutor as the devil incarnate appears in the *Passio sancti Vincentii* (*Perist.* V). The "satelles idoli", the governor of Spain under Diocletian, wants to make Vincent pay a tribute to the pagan deities ("litare divis gentium"). Before he resorts to torture, he tries to win him over with pretty words:

Ac verba primum mollia
suadendo blande effuderat,
captator ut vitulum lupus
rapturus adludit prius.

(*Perist.* V 17–20)

⁹ Cf. J. Petruccione, *The Portrait of St Eulalia of Mérida in Prudentius' 'Peristephanon' 3*, "Analecta Bollandiana" 108:1990, pp. 103 f.

Here in the persecutor's speech all the arguments from *Perist.* III relating to the victim's well-being are omitted. The "satelles idoli" is interested only in the emperor's order, and demands Vincent make sacrifice to the pagan gods:

Vos, Nazareni, adsistite
 rudemque ritum spernite.
 Haec saxa quae princeps colit
 placato fumo et victima.
 (*Perist.* V 25–280)

Only later, furious at Vincent's refusal and the confession of his faith (*Perist.* V 33–40), does he tempt him by presenting the choice between sacrificing to the gods and death (*Perist.* V 49–52).

Gradually Datian, the cruel and tyrannical emperor's representative ("praecinctus atris legibus", v. 14), reveals his true, satanic nature. His sophisticated form of cruelty, spurred on by his rage at the martyr's intransigence, is expressed in the sequence of orders he issues to the torturers to increase the torture (*Perist.* V 95–116, 131–144, 206–208, and 329–332). His powerless fury reaches its maximum at the moment of Vincent's death:

At christiani nominis
 hostem coquebant inrita
 fellis venena et lividum
 cor efferata exusserant.

Saevire inermem crederes
 fractis draconem dentibus;
 "Evasit exultans" ait
 "rebellis et palmam tulit".
 (*Perist.* V 377–384)

The martyr's death means defeat for his persecutor, who thereby forfeits all possibility to taunt and harass the live victim¹⁰. Thereafter he can only wreak his revenge upon the corpse, he can only desecrate the mortal remains. But even that impious intent is frustrated: once again Satan proves powerless in the face of the power of God¹¹.

In the hymn in honour of Bishop Fructuosus and his two deacons, Augurius and Eulogius (*Persit.* VI), the figure of the persecutor, Aemilian, who was consul in 259, is delineated less distinctively than that of Datian in the hymn in honour of St. Vincent, but nevertheless his demoniacal features are clear enough for an observation to be

¹⁰ Cf. S. Stabryła, op. cit., p. 564 ff.

¹¹ Cf. M. Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs. The 'Liber Peristephanon' of Prudentius*, Ann Arbor 1993, p. 61.

made that here, too, what we have is the concept of a persecutor who is the devil incarnate. Just like the ther persecutors, Aemilian, a "pastus sanguine carnifex" (*Perist.* VI 17) and a "cruentus coluber" (*Perist.* VI 22–23), commands obedience of Fructuosus and the deacons on the grounds of the emperor's order:

Iussum est Caesaris ore Gallieni
quod princeps colit, ut colamus omnes.
(*Perist.* VI 41–42)

On the face of it, he is proceeding quite legally when, threatening them with torture, he summons them to pay a tribute to the pagan deities:

Iudex Aemilianus imminebat
atrox turbidus insolens profanus
aras daemonicas coli iubebat.
(*Perist.* VI 34–36)

Aemilian appears in a triple role: as executor of the Emperor Gallien's order, as a cruel and impious persecutor of the Christians; and finally as a defender and adherent of the pagan religion, which is here identified with devil-worship ("arae daemonicae"). When he passes the death sentence on the Bishop and deacons he is impelled by the rage ("ira") and fury ("furor") unleashed by their refusal to worship at the 'fendish altars'. The stake on which the martyrs are to burn has been built on order from the consul by "hell's minister" ("ater minister"). The way the story of the martyrdom of Fructuosus and his companions has been presented seems to have been deliberately structured as Satan's act of revenge on the followers of Christ.

While in the *Passio Cassiani Forocorneliensis* (*Perist.* IX) the image of the perpetrator of the Christians' woe ("poenarum artifex") who delivers the victim – his own teacher – into the hands of savage tormentors who were once the victim's students, is only faintly delineated, in the next story, of St. Romanus, the persecutor is one of the main characters, alongside the martyr himself. In this piece, just as in *Peristephanon* I, the primary oppressor is the Roman emperor:

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)

But in the very next stanza the narrator observes that the Emperor Galerius was in the power of Satan, who had assumed the form of a serpent, when he issued the order for the Christians to renounce Christ:

Haec ille serpens ore dictat regio
 qui mortuorum de sepulcris exiens
 clamat: "Quid ante tempus adventu cito
 mea regna solvis? Parce, fili altissimi'
 vel possidere corda porcorum iube?"

(*Perist.* X 36–40)

This identification of the Emperor with Satan is absolutely explicit here. The words which Satan under the serpent's guise utters are almost a literal repetition of the text from the episode in St Matthew's Gospel¹² when two men possessed by the devil question Christ. The Emperor's faithful servant and the executor of his order here is a prefect called Asclepiades, who was so keen on carrying out his master's order that not only would he cast Christians who refused to obey the Emperor's order in prison and clap them in irons (*Perist.* X 41–45), but he also intended to break into their church ("templum cogitans irrumpere"), desecrate its sacred objects and destroy the altar and church entrance. When the holy and courageous Romanus and a company of other Christians try to defend the church, Asclepiades first accuses him of sedition (*Perist.* X 77–95), and subsequently hands him over to the torturers. He tries to break Romanus' resolution and force him to repudiate his faith by having a little Christian boy scourged and beheaded in the presence of Romanus and the mother. He has Romanus' tongue cut out, and finally the martyr is garrotted. The devil's minister, Asclepiades prefect of Rome, wreaks vengeance on the steadfast follower of Christ, but he cannot bring him to recant his faith and sacrifice to the pagan gods. Prudentius describes the martyrdom as only an apparent victory for the persecutors, the vicious prefect and his satanic master. Although the documentary records of this crime, which gave the Emperor a perverse satisfaction, later perished with the passage of time (*Perist.* X 111–118), Romanus' merits will certainly be rewarded in heaven.

In the *Passio Hippolyti* (*Perist.* XI) the persecutor is a prefect (or perhaps even the emperor himself? – "insanus rector", l. 39) blinded with hatred of the Christians, whose oppressive practices afflict recusant Christians near the port (Ostia?) on the estuary of the Tiber. But his procedure of interrogation coupled with savage torture turns out to be fruitless:

Ac iam lassatis iudex tortoribus ibat
 in furias cassa cognitione fremens,
 nullus enim Christi ex famulis per tanta repertus
 supplicia auderet qui vitiare animam.

(*Perist.* XI 59–62)

¹² Cf. St. Matthew 8, 29; cf. also St. Lucas 4, 41, St. Mark 1, 24.

As in the previously discussed poems, the persecutor, unable to break the faith of the brave Christians, sentences them to death. But this time he is extremely ingenious in devising special ways to butcher them. His plan for Hippolytus, the leader of the Christians, is a play on the Greek myth involving the victim's name. He has Hippolytus drawn apart by a team of horses.

In the closing hymns of the *Peristephanon* (XIII and XIV) Prudentius reproduces the scheme used in the *Passio Hippolyti* for the character of the persecutor. Both in the *Passio Cypriani* (XIII) and *Passio Agnes* (XIV) the oppressor is an embittered enemy of Christianity and he demands recantation from the Christians. When the victims refuse to give up their religion he sends them to the torturers and death. The same model appears in all three hymns with only slight variations determined by the different circumstances of each case.

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The figure of the enemy of Christianity and persecutor of the Christians appears in the *Peristephanon* in either of two main versions, as the above outline shows. He may be just a cruel tyrant who in his hatred of Christianity endeavours to force the martyrs through torture and threats of death to abjure their faith and offer sacrifice to the pagan gods (as in *Perist.* XI, XIII, and XIV). Or he may be an embodiment of Satan acting directly or through his servant (cf. *Perist.* III, V, VI, and X¹³). In both cases the motive is identical: to snatch a faithful soul from Christ and throw it once more into the darkness of paganism. The methods applied by the respective harassers in these hymns are more or less the same: threats of torture and death, persuasion, temptation, flattery, then torture and finally, when torture proves ineffective, death. The culprits responsible for the persecution of the Christians are both the emperors and their appointed ministers and servants: praetors, consuls; magistrates, albeit Prudentius puts the blame for all of these crimes on the shoulders of the emperors. While the martyrs of Prudentius' hymns are presented as soldiers of Christ and Christian heroes, their persecutors are incarnations of Satan or his servants. The conflict between the martyrs and their oppressors is a reflection of the battle between Christ and Satan. Each martyrs' victory denotes a triumph for Christ. In contrast to the martyrs, their persecutors are not in fact endowed with any individual features in the *Peristephanon*. Instead they tend to be personality constructs that comply with the scheme defined in the oral tradition of early Christianity – in the numerous *passiones*, accounts of indi-

¹³ Cf. M. K a h, op. cit., pp. 205 ff.

vidual martyrdoms by eye-witnesses, in the *Acta Martyrum*, in the lives of the saints, and in the writings of the early Christian authors. It seems one may thus draw a general conclusion that in the *Peristephanon* Prudentius presented the figures of the persecutors in accordance with a particular model rooted in the Christian tradition, rather than as individually defined characters.

CHRISTIANI NOMINIS HOSTIS

Postacie prześladowców chrześcijan w *Peristephanon* Prudencjusza

Streszczenie

Postać wroga chrześcijan i prześladowcy wyznawców Chrystusa pojawia się w *Peristephanon* Prudencjusza w dwóch głównych formach: jest on albo okrutnym tyranem, który w swej nienawiści do chrześcijan stara się torturami i groźbami śmierci zmusić męczenników do wyrzeczenia się wiary i złożenia ofiar bożkom pogańskim (np. *Perist.* XI, XIII, XIV), albo wcielonym szatanem, który działa sam lub przez swego pomocnika (np. *Perist.* III, V, VI, X). W jednym i drugim przypadku motywacja działania jest taka sama: odebrać Chrystusowi wierną mu duszę i pogrążyć ją z powrotem w mrokach pogaństwa. O ile męczennicy w hymnach Prudencjusza zostali przedstawieni jako żołnierze Chrystusa i bohaterowie chrześcijaństwa, o tyle ich prześladowcy są tu wcieleniami szatana lub jego sługami. Konflikt między męczennikami a ich wrogami jest odwzorowaniem walki między szatanem a Chrystusem, zwycięstwa męczenników oznaczają zaś za każdym razem triumf Chrystusa. W przeciwieństwie do męczenników – postacie prześladowców w *Peristephanon* nie mają rysów indywidualnych; są to raczej konstrukcje osobowe odpowiadające pewnemu schematowi utrwalonemu w ustnym przekazie wczesnochrześcijańskim, w licznych *passiones*, w *Acta martyrum*, w utworach hagiograficznych, w pismach autorów chrześcijańskich tamtej epoki. Bliższa, oparta na analizie tekstu definicja postaci prześladowcy chrześcijan w *Peristephanon* ułatwia zrozumienie samej idei męczeństwa w tym utworze: opozycja między męczennikiem a jego prześladowcą jest elementem ważnym, jeśli idzie o przesłanie hymnów pomieszczonych w tym cyklu utworów.