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DEATH FOR CHRIST AS VICTORY IN THE LIGHT OF PRUDENTIUS' *PERISTEPHANON*

Death – the martyr's death at the hands of the enemies of Christ and the Christian faith, is one of the key motifs in Prudentius' collection *Peristephanon*. This is due in one way to the concept of the *Peristephanon* itself, which the poet wanted to be a laudation of the suffering and death of the martyrs, who are the *milites* or *athletae Christi*¹ and whose fortitude and unflinching loyalty to Christ has been rewarded with the victor's crown. One of Prudentius' best known works outside the *Peristephanon* is the hymn *Cathemerinon X (Hymnus Circa Exequias Defuncti)*, which was later used in the Spanish Church in the liturgy for funerals². In this hymn, however, the motif of death has quite a different meaning; it belongs as it were to a different world of ideas. In the *Peristephanon* death is a prevalent concept; the martyrs long for it, and they are always ready to accept it.

Prudentius puts across the main idea of the entire *Peristephanon* collection through his presentation of the martyrs' deaths as their victory in the struggle against Satan as represented by the emperor or his viceroys and officers, but he does this by a variety of means and shows a range of accompanying motives, depending on the situational context. Let us examine a few of the works in the *Peristephanon* from the point of view of his concept of death as the martyrs' victory. This will presumably allow us to arrive at a fuller idea of the essence of the Early Christian concept of martyrdom and the martyr's death.

In *Peristephanon I (In Honorem Sanctorum Martyrum Emeterii et Chelidonii)*, two Roman soldiers, Emeterius and Chelidonius, perhaps of Spanish origin, follow the voice of Christ (*milites quos ad perenne cingulum Christus vocat* – v. 32), and refuse to renounce their faith

¹ Cf. M. Brożek, [in:] Prudencjusz, *Poezje*, Warszawa 1987, p. 29 (*Wstęp*); cf. also F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry. From the Beginnings to the Close of the Middle Ages*, Oxford 1953, p. 53; J. Fontaine, *Les Chrétiens et le service militaire dans l'Antiquité*, „*Concilium*” 3:1965, p. 99 ff.

² Cf. B. M. Peeble, *The Poet Prudentius*, New York 1951, p. 83.

and offer sacrifice to the pagan gods. The narrator's commentary, which precedes the martyrdom scene, presents an introduction which explains the meaning of martyrdom:

nil suis bonus negavit Christus umquam testibus,

tertius quos nec catenae nec mors terruit
unicum deum fateri sanguinis dispendio
sed tale damnum lux rependit longior.

Hoc genus mortis decorum, hoc probis dignum viris,
membra morbis exedenda texta venis languidis
hostico donare ferro morte et hostem vincere.

Pulchra res ictum sub ense persecutoris pati,
nobilis per vulnus amplum, porta iustis panditur,
lota mens in fonte rubro sede cordis exilit³.

[*Peristephanon*, I 21–30]

Witnesses (*testes*) to the faith who are not afraid of imprisonment and torture (*catenae*) or death (*dura mors*) will be rewarded with perpetual light (*lux longior*)⁴ for their blood shed (*sanguinis dispendio*) for the sake of Christ. Thus, according to the narrator, the martyr's death is a special honour (*genus mortis decorum*), and their submission of their bodies to death is a victory over the enemy (*hostem vincere*). The terrible torture to which the two soldiers are put is the work of their satanic persecutor who, ravaged by hellfire, finally abandons his victims and flees (*Peristephanon*, I 109–111)⁵. Death denotes the victory of these martyrs and the defeat of their persecutors who are possessed by vicious demons:

Cerne quam palam feroces hic domentur daemones,
quam sacrum crudelis error immolarit sanguinem?
Credis in deum relatos hostiarum spiritus?

[*Peristephanon*, I 98–100]

In the *Passio Laurentii* (*Peristephanon*, II) we encounter only one remark referring to the attitude of Christians to death, and it is

³ All the quotations according to the Cunningham's edition, *Aurelii Prudentii Clementis Carmina*, cura et studio M. P. C u n n i n g h a m, Turnholti 1961 [Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina CXXVI].

⁴ Cf. V. E d d e n, *Prudentius*, [in:] *Latin Literature*, ed. J.W. B i n n s, London-Boston 1974, p. 176 f.

⁵ Cf. J. P e t r u c c i o n e, *The Persecutor's Envy and the Rise of the Martyr Cult: Peristephanon Hymns 1 and 4*, "Vigiliae Christianae" 45:1991, p. 326 ff.

uttered by their enemy, the Prefect of Rome, who wreaks vengeance on the pious Laurence and submits him to terrible tortures. Angry and full of contempt, he travesties the alleged words of Laurence:

Dicis: 'Libenter oppetam,
votiva mors est martyri'.
Est ista vobis, novimus,
persuasionis vanitas.

Sed non volenti inpertiam
praestetur ut mortis citae
conpendiosus exitus,
perire raptim non dabo.

[*Peristephanon*, II 329–336]

In sending Laurence to his death, the cruel prefect gives confirmation himself of the Christian desire of the martyr's death (*votiva est mors martyri*), and of the pagans' awareness that all attempts at dissuasion will be fruitless (*persuasionis vanitas*). This is as if an acknowledgement of his respect *malgré lui* for the Christians, who want to endorse their loyalty to Christ by martyrdom and death. The *Passio Sancti Vincentii Martyris* (*Peristephanon*, V) begins with an apostrophe to St. Vincent⁶:

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.

[*Peristephanon*, V 1–8]

In which there is an explicit presentation of the idea that the day of the martyr's death marked the day of his final triumph (*dies triumphalis*). On that day he received the crown of victory (*corona*), the reward for the blood he shed (*sanguinis merces*). This was the victory Vincent won over his torturer (*tortore victo*) and his judge (*iudex*). On that day he was transported to heaven (*hic te... evexit ad*

⁶ The detailed analysis of *Peristephanon* V in: W. von Kennel, *Die Rolle des Sprechers in den Märtyrerhymnen des Prudentius*, Konstanz 1975, p. 4–87.

caelum deis) and experienced the joyous meeting with Christ (*Christoque ovantem reddidit*)⁷. Significantly, the name “Vincentius” itself is derived from the Latin verb “vincere” – to win, and it denotes a person who has won a victory.

Despite the attempts to coax him round, the appeals and the threats put to him by Datianus, the emperor’s viceroy in Spain, Vincent expresses his determination and devotion to the faith in the form of a challenge:

Vox nostra, quae sit, accipe.
Est Christus et pater et deus;
servi huius et testes sumus,
extorque, si potes, fidem!

Tormenta carcer unguulae
stridensque flammis lammina
atque ipsa poenarum ultima
mors christianis ludus est.

[*Peristephanon*, V 56–64].

According to him, for the Christian servants (*servi*) and witnesses (*testies*) of Christ all the various types of torture and the martyr’s death are but a trifle, they cannot shake their faith and bring them to worship the pagan gods (v. 65 ff.). In the latter part of the same work, oppressed by terrible tortures and overwhelmed with a great longing for death, the martyr is freed from his body and his spirit flies up to heaven⁸:

Victor relictis artubus
caelum capessit spirtus.

[*Peristephanon*, V 367–368]

The martyr’s death thus means victory for his spirit (*victor... spiritus*), and heaven is the reward for this victory. The narrator’s observation relating to the death of Vincent, which brings his spirit liberation from the prison of his body (*mentem... liberam*)⁹, returning the free spirit to his Divine Maker, provides a sort of commentary on the nature of the martyr’s death. This is also how the enraged Datianus, Vincent’s persecutor, sees the death – as victory for the martyr:

⁷ Cf. S. Stabryła, *The Concept of Martyrdom in Prudentius’ ‘Peristephanon’*, “*Analecta Cracoviensia*” 30–31:1998–1999, p. 564.

⁸ Cf. M. Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs. The Liber Peristephanon of Prudentius*, Ann Arbor 1993, p. 61.

⁹ Cf. M. Roberts, op. cit., p. 69; Ch. Petri, *La mort en Occident dans l’épigraphie latine*, [in:] “*La Maison-Dieu*” 144 (1980), p. 34–35, 44–48.

'Evasit exultans' ait
 'rebellis et palmam tulit'
 [*Peristephanon*, V 383–384].

While the verb "evasit" conveys Datianus' feelings of frustrated anger at Vincent's managing by death to evade all the further tortures his persecutor had laid up for him, in the phrase "palmam tulit" he expresses a mixture of admiration and anger at the martyr's victory in death over the embodiment of Satan, and his enjoyment of the reward, the fruit of victory¹⁰. The motif of Vincent's death seen as victory emerges again in the final section of *Peristephanon* V, following the description of the miraculous return of the martyr's body, which is weighed down with a millstone, taken out to sea and cast into the water, but is miraculously washed ashore. The narrator presents this incident as a double victory to Vincent, who is said to have obtained a double reward as well:

Tu solus, o bis inclyte,
 solus bravii duplicis
 palmam tulisti, tu duas
 simul parasti laureas.

In morte victor aspera
 tum deinde post mortem pari
 victor triumpho proteris
 solo latronem corpore.

[*Peristephanon*,. V 537–544]

The narrator makes a careful selection of words and phrases to emphasize the exceptional nature of Vincent's victory. He applies an anaphorical arrangement of the words *tu* and *solus* (*tu solus... solus tu* – v. 537–539). Vincent is a double victor: in death (*in morte victor*) and after death (*post mortem victor triumpho*). This double victor (*bravii duplicis palmam tulisti*) has won two laurel wreaths (*duas / simul parasti laureas*). The post-mortem victory is no lesser in value, no lesser a triumph (*pari triumpho*) over the enemy than the martyr's death itself.

In the subsequent works of the *Peristephanon* cycle the motif of death for Christ as a victory is somewhat reduced and modified, and rarely re-appears in its "pure strain," the simple formula of "martyr's

¹⁰ Cf. S. Stabryła, *Christiani nominis hostis: Images of the Persecutors of Christians in Prudentius' 'Peristephanon'*, "Analecta Cracoviensia" 32:2000, p. 385 f.

death equals victory over Satan, the enemy of Christ and Christianity"¹¹. Prudentius seems to have refrained from overusing a topos-like scheme he had already applied a good deal, which would have given the effect of monotony and repetitiveness. However, reduction and in modification does not mean that the motif of victory in death is absent altogether the latter part of the collection. In the hymn in honour of Bishop Fructuosus and his two deacons, Augurius and Eulogius (*Peristephanon*, VI), we find the Bishop exhorting the two deacons to be brave, as they are being taken to prison all three together:

Mecum state, viri; vocat cruentus
ad poenam coluber dei ministros.
Ne mors terreat! Est parata palma.

Carcer christicolis gradus coronae est,
carcer provehit ad superna caeli
carcer conciliat deum beatis'.

[*Peristephanon*, VI 22–27]

In the Bishop's opinion, death should not terrify Christians (*chris-ticolae*); on the contrary, death is the condition for and road to victory (*palma*), while imprisonment is a step forward on the road to victory. However, Prudentius does not pursue the subject of victory-in-death further in Fructuosus' speech beyond a simple mention. In the latter parts of this poem death is presented as a liberation from the shackles of life, and as a grace granted by Jesus to the martyrs dying for him (v. 94–96, 112–117).

Another instance of a modified and reduced version of the concept of death occurs in the hymn in honour of Quirinus (*Peristephanon*, VII). Here the martyr's death is perceived not as a punishment (v. 45), but as an inestimable grace (v. 84–85). Finally in *Peristephanon* XII (*Passio Apostolorum*) we encounter a mention of the victorious deaths of the Apostles Peter and Paul:

Unus utrumque dies, pleno tamen innovatus anno,
vidit superba morte laureatam.

[*Peristephanon*, XII 5–6]

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¹¹ Cf. Anne-Marie Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, Oxford 1989, p. 212 f.

The described, or merely enumerated examples of the occurrence in the *Peristephanon* of the motif of death for Christ as a victory give a deeper insight into Prudentius' concept for the entire collection of poems in honour of the martyrs. It appears that he did not intend to present the persecution and deaths of these *milites Christi* as disasters or defeats for them, which is what their persecutors – devils incarnate according to Prudentius – had hoped for. On the contrary, their deaths are shown as victories, and their resultant rewards eternal bliss in their heavenly home in perpetual joy in communion with Jesus. The *milites* or *athletae Christi* are not the victims of a persecuting Satan, but quite the opposite: they are the winners. Death for Christ is their ultimate triumph, the outcome of which is the crown of victory (*corona*).

On the other hand this concept of death for Christ, death as a victory, must have to a certain degree reflected the attitude of the Christians of those times to the question of the martyr's death for the faith. For the Christians of Prudentius' age, this kind of death was not a punishment, but an honour and distinction, and ultimately a victory which would be rewarded in heaven. It seems that this idea, which received special treatment in hymns I, II, V, and VI of the *Peristephanon*, came down to them as a legacy from the age of the martyrs, when the followers of Christ would be hunted down, imprisoned, tortured, thrown to the wild beasts, and killed in a variety of ways. It was the memory of those times, which would sometimes be obscure deliberately, and which survived above all in the Christian legends and in the not very numerous documents and mementoes, that provided the inspiration for the poet who composed the *Peristephanon*.

ŚMIERĆ ZA CHRYSYUSA JAKO ZWYCIĘSTWO W ŚWIETLE *PERISTEPHANON* PRUDENCJUSZA

Streszczenie

Przytoczone i omówione przykłady obecności w *Peristephanon* motywu śmierci za Chrystusa jako zwycięstwa i triumfu pozwoliły głębiej wnikać w samą strukturę poematów ku czci męczenników. Poeta przedstawił w swoich utworach męczeństwo i śmierć owych *milites Christi* jako zwycięstwo, którego owocem była nagroda – wieczne szczęście w niebiańskiej ojczyźnie i wieczna radość płynąca z oglądania oblicza Chrystusa. Męczennicy nie są więc tu ofiarami szatana-prześladowcy, ale prze-

ciwnie, zwycięzcami, a śmierć za Chrystusa jest ich ostatecznym triumfem, za który otrzymają wieniec zwycięstwa. Taka koncepcja śmierci męczeńskiej za Chrystusa w *Peristephanon* odzwierciedla stosunek ówczesnych chrześcijan do problemu męczeńskiej śmierci za wiarę, która w ich pojęciu nie była karą, ale wyróżnieniem i zaszczytem. Koncepcja ta, ze szczególną siłą wyeksponowana w *Perist.* I, II, V i VI, była dziedzictwem stuleci męczenników, kiedy wyznawców Chrystusa tropiono, więziono, torturowano, rzucano na pożarcie dzikim zwierzętom i w różny sposób zabijano.