

CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE

Studies in His Life, Language, and Thought

edited by

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CHAPTER 2

ST CYPRIAN, A CHRISTIAN AND ROMAN GENTLEMAN

Vincent HUNINK

1. INTRODUCTION

On September 14th of the year 258 AD, Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage was sentenced to death and promptly executed. In the contemporary witness account, the so called *Acta proconsularia Cypriani*¹, this sad event is described in some detail. It may be worthwhile to start with a full quotation of this relevant piece of information.

‘After the sentence, the crowd of his fellow Christians said, “Let us also be beheaded with him!” The result was an uproar among the Christians, and he was followed along by a great throng. Then Cyprian was led out on to the grounds of Sextus’ estate behind the proconsular residence. There, after removing his outer cloak, he spread it on the ground so that he could kneel on it. Next he removed his dalmatic and gave it to his deacons; then he stood erect and began waiting for the executioner. When the executioner came, Cyprian told his friends to give the man twenty-five gold pieces. His brethren began spreading cloths and napkins in front of him. The blessed Cyprian then bound his eyes with his own hand, but when he could not tie the ends of the handkerchief himself, the priest Julian and Julian the sub-deacon fastened them for him. So the blessed Cyprian went to his death, and his body was laid out near by to satisfy the curiosity of the pagans. At nightfall, however, it was removed from there, and, accompanied by a cortège holding tapers and torches, was conducted with prayers in triumph to the cemetery of Macrobius Candidianus the procurator, which lies on the Mappalian Way near the fishponds and was there buried. A few days later the proconsul Galerius Maximus died’².

1. This short, but informative text has been composed shortly after the events took place. Although it has been attributed by Jerome (*De viris illustribus* 68) to Cyprian’s pupil and friend Pontius, it is now commonly printed as an anonymous text. For a critical edition that takes full account of the variant recensions in chs 2-3, see A. A. R. Bastiaensen (ed.), *Acti e passioni dei martiri* (Scrittori greci e latini, Vite dei santi, Milan, 1995), 3rd impr., pp. 193-231 (with notes on pp. 478-490).

2. *Acta Cypriani* 4 (5): ‘Post hanc uero sententiam turba fratrum dicebat: “Et nos cum ipso decollemur.” Propter hoc tumultus fratrum exortus est, et multa turba eum prosecuta est. Et ita idem Cyprianus in agrum Sexti productus est, et ibi se lacernobirro

Although the passage gives a vivid impression of the actual event, it is not by all means clear.

I will start discussing some questions that are raised by the *Acta* text. Then I will expand the perspective by bringing in the *Vita* of Cyprian by Pontius. In their combination these texts are essential for the 'external' image of Cyprian, in which, as I will try to argue, some traditional, non-Christian features may be distinguished: Cyprian can be seen as a Roman noble. Finally, I will add some general remarks about Cyprian's own writings, in an attempt to sketch a somewhat more 'internal' portrait of the bishop, which partly contrasts with the outer image. In the end, I will briefly raise the methodical issue of the various 'roles' in which Cyprian can be met.

2. RICH AND FAMOUS: THE *ACTA*

The passage from the *Acta* quoted above is the closing part of a short text, measuring only a few pages, which records the interrogation and condemnation of St Cyprian.

Its opening section contains a verbatim account of the examination by proconsul Paternus prior to Cyprian's banishment to Curubis in August 257. Cyprian's defiant but polite answers are duly recorded too (ch. 1). The second section describes how almost one year later, he returns to Carthage, where he awaits further trial. On September 13th, 258³, he is first brought to the estate of a certain Sextus, where the presiding proconsul Galerius Maximus, suffering from bad health, has retired, but is then lodged with a staff officer of Galerius Maximus on the Vicus Saturni⁴, where many

expoliauit, et ubi genua poneret in terra prostaruit. Et ita se dalmatica exspoliauit et diaconibus tradidit et ad lineam stetit et coepit speculatorem sustinere. Et cum uenisset speculator, iussit suis ut eidem speculatori aureos uiginti quinque darent. Linteamina et manualia multa ante eum a fratribus mittebantur. Et ita Cyprianus manu sua oculos sibi texit. Qui cum lacinias manuales ligare sibi non potuisset, Iulianus presbyter et Iulianus subdiaconus ei ligauerunt. Et ita Cyprianus passus est eiusque corpus propter gentilium curiositatem in proximo positum est. Per noctem autem corpus eius inde sublatum est; ad cereos et scolaces in areas Macrobbii Candidiani procuratoris (quae sunt uia Mappaliensi iuxta piscinas), cum uoto et triumpho magno deductum est. Post paucos autem dies Galerius Maximus proconsul decessit'. Translation: H. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs: Introduction, Texts and Translations* (Oxford, 1972, repr. 2000), pp. 173-175.

3. The date ('idibus Septembris') is mistranslated in Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, as '1 September'.

4. Interestingly, the *Acta* even further specify the place: it is 'inter Veneriam et Salutarium': 'between the temple of Venus and the temple of Salus'. The place seems difficult

Christians gather, apparently in support of their bishop (ch. 2). Next day, September 14th, he is finally taken to Sextus' estate to appear before the proconsul⁵, where a brief exchange of questions and answers takes place. The proconsul consults with his staff and reads his decision from a written document: Cyprian is sentenced to death. Cyprian's answer to this is recorded too: *Deo gratias*, 'Thanks be to God' (ch. 3). Then follows the fourth and final section that has been quoted⁶.

As is well known, the genre of *Acta* originates in the practice of Roman courts to record examinations of accused persons and the formal decisions taken by the presiding officials. The genre was taken up and used by Christians for an entirely new purpose. In the hands of Christian writers, the 'neutral' documents were expanded with other elements, such as biographical details or explicitly praising terms. The resulting texts were meant to present the martyrs as shining examples of Christian glory, sources of pride and comfort for the common faithful, and even inspiring models of enduring, uncompromising Christian belief even at the price of death. In a later period, such *Acta* were regularly read even in church on special days, in remembrance of martyrs⁷.

to identify; cf. Bastiaensen, *Acti e passioni dei martiri*, p. 483 ad loc. But one wonders whether topographical precision is what really counts here. The detail may also underscore the dignity of the lodging, or, by contrast, the glory of the Christian martyr-to-be who is literally surrounded by places of pagan religion.

5. There is a curious textual problem here, involving the rare adjective *sauciolus*. The traditional reading at the beginning of *Acta* 3 is *Cyprianum sibi offerri praecepit in atrio Saucio sedenti* ('he ordered Cyprian to be brought before him, as he was sitting in the hall Sauciolus'). This would imply a hall in the house called *Sauciolus* ('Little wounded one'), possibly a reference to a specific room for executions, although Cyprian will be executed outside the house. Tentatively, one could imagine the name to be derived from a work of art decorating the room, e.g., a statue or painting of a wounded man.

Alternatively, Bastiaensen, *Acti e passioni dei martiri*, p. 220, takes the word with 'sibi... sedenti'. Now it is the proconsul himself who is 'sitting in a hall, slightly wounded'. This seems to be confirmed by the reading in a first recension of chapters 2 and 3 (Bastiaensen, *Acti e passioni dei martiri*, pp. 210-217), a text which according to Bastiaensen, *Acti e passioni dei martiri*, pp. 203-204, is much less spread but older and meant for the Carthaginian Christians only: 'secundum praeceptum... in atrio sedenti obuoluto et saucio oblatus est' ('according to the order of... he [Cyprian] was brought before him [the proconsul], as he was sitting in the hall, in bandages and slightly wounded'). For the proconsul's illness, cf. n. 10.

6. The division into sections differs in editions, counting either four or five sections. Here the edition of Bastiaensen, *Acti e passioni dei martiri*, is followed.

7. Cf. e.g. Augustine, *Sermo* 313A: 'Modo legebatur passio beati Cypriani; aure audiebamus, mente spectabamus...' ('just now the passion of the blessed Cyprian was read; we heard it with our ears, we viewed it in our minds...'). In addition, sections of *Acta* could also be resumed in following sermons. Thus, the *Acta Cypriani* are quoted and paraphrased extensively by Augustine in his *Sermo* 309. Some further quotations from it can be found in *Sermo* 313D (chs 2 and 4). Due to a recent find in Erfurt library, the number of Augustinian sermons delivered on the occasion of Cyprian's martyrdom

Indeed, the *Acta Cypriani* contain several specifically Christian touches. For instance, when Cyprian stays in the house in the Vicus Saturni and a Christian throng gathers outside, the text tells us that Cyprian gave orders that young girls should be guarded, since everyone was simply staying out in the street. That is, even in custody, the Christian bishop takes good care of his flock⁸. And when Cyprian is called *sanctus martyr electus a Deo* ('Holy martyr chosen by God') (2.1) or *beatus* (2.4), this certainly reflects a Christian view. Details about Cyprian's corpse (a motif originally not part of Roman judicial *acta*) confirm this: his body is laid out *propter gentiliū curiositatem* ('to satisfy the curiosity of the pagans'). Even the vocabulary is Christian here, *gentilis* being used in the negative sense of 'pagan'. Later, the body is conducted 'with prayers in great triumph' to a cemetery. Finally, the very last sentence of the text, on the death of Galerius Maximus⁹, as factual as it sounds, may also suggest some Christian resentment against the 'bad Roman official'¹⁰.

In spite of these clearly Christian touches, Cyprian appears as more than just an ordinary, humble Christian. He is obviously well-known, a man of great renown and dignity, surrounded by numerous attendants and followers. Being the leader of the Christian community, he heads its formal hierarchy, with deacons, priests and others standing below him. He can issue orders, hand over his garments, all like a *grand seigneur*. Better still, he can donate a large sum of money, as the twenty-five gold pieces paid to the executioner attest. This was not a small gift but, on the contrary, a very large sum.

The detail about the gold pieces is often taken as a subtle indication of Cyprian's magnanimity and Christian ethics: even in the face of death he does not show hate towards his opponent, but rather rewards him. It can also count as an expression of thanks to the executioner, because it is he who makes it possible for him to finally die as a martyr¹¹. However,

has risen to twelve; cf. I. Schiller, D. Weber & C. Weidmann, 'Sechs neue Augustinus-predigten. Teil 1 mit Edition dreier Sermones', *Wiener Studien* 121 (2008), pp. 227-284.

8. Apparently, it was rather dangerous on the streets in Carthage. This tells us something about public safety in a major Roman town in the 3rd century AD.

9. There is some discussion about the authenticity of this line, but it definitely is a very early part of the text; see Bastiaensen, *Acti e passioni dei martiri*, p. 490, nn. 17-18.

10. His death is given as a simple fact, but the circumstance that it is mentioned right after the execution of Cyprian, as the final element in the text, would suggest some *causal* connection between his decision against Cyprian and his own death: to the reader or listener it may seem as if he is struck by the hand of God. Of course, it must be remembered that the proconsul already was seriously ill: 2.4: 'bonae ualeitudinis recuperandae gratia' ('in order to recover his health'). His illness probably also explains why the proconsul delivered his verdict 'uix aegre' ('with difficulty and reluctance', 4.1).

11. Cf. J. Gnifka, 'Ultima verba', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 22 (1979), pp. 1ff. (referred to by Bastiaensen, *Acti e passioni dei martiri*, p. 489, nn. 8-9).

it seems strange to see Cyprian spending so much money on a personal matter.

In fact, it is revealing that Cyprian can dispose of so much money in the first place. Apparently, the bishop, formerly a wealthy man, has regained some of his earlier wealth: he is a rich man. Perhaps the gold pieces are not his personal property, but that of the church. But in that case, the amount paid is no less extravagant and out of place for a Christian¹², though perhaps not for a rich man of the non-Christian élite. Cyprian's funeral too seems a costly affair, but here the whole Christian community may have contributed to honour their martyr. However, the richness of the dying Cyprian remains a disturbing detail, that is often left out of account in discussions about his person.

Perhaps there is even more to it. The element of a gift donated by a man on the brink of execution also clearly recalls the famous last moments of Socrates. Shortly before drinking his poison, the Greek philosopher reminds his friend Crito that he owes Asclepius a cock, and asks Crito to make the gift¹³. So Cyprian also appears to be part of a tradition of 'famous men', and subtly shows his literary erudition. Again, one would not expect this from a humble Christian in Cyprian's days.

In the *Acta* text, Cyprian appears almost suprahuman even while still alive. The cloths and napkins spread in front of him (5.4) are surely meant to collect some of his blood and so to become precious relics,¹⁴ as the blood of martyrs is considered to have special powers.

The final section of the *Acta* thus produces a complex portrait of Cyprian. He is not only a genuine, good Christian, but also a man of class, standing, and wealth, who receives a martyr's death amid great public interest and becomes something like a saint even before he dies.

The earlier parts of the *Acta* confirm this picture of Cyprian as a member of the élite. When he is first addressed by the Roman official, he is kindly and politely asked if he is willing to go into exile¹⁵. And on return from exile, a year later, he is allowed to await trial while staying at his

12. It is tempting to think of some connection with the *thirty pieces of silver* paid to Judas for his betrayal of Jesus and handed back by Judas to the Jews; cf. Matthew 26:15 and 27:3-9.

13. Plato, *Phaedo* 118A.

14. Cf. Bastiaensen, *Acti e passioni dei martiri*, p. 489, n. 9. Likewise in the *Vita*, when Cyprian is sweating during his trial, an officer offers him some dry clothes, in a manifest attempt to obtain a relic of the martyr, as Pontius explicitly notes.

15. 'Poteris ergo secundum praeceptum Valeriani et Gallieni exul ad urbem Curubitanam proficisci?' ('Would you be willing then, in accord with the command of Valerian and Gallienus, to be exiled to the city of Curubis?'). Cyprian's answer is as polite: 'Proficisor' ('Yes, I would.') (1.4). Cf. Bastiaensen, *Acti e passioni dei martiri*, p. 480 ad loc. 'cortese domanda'.

own estate¹⁶. Normally, the mention of such *horti* would not be a problem. But from Pontius' *Vita* (to which I shall shortly return), it is known that Cyprian shortly after his conversion sold his 'gardens' and donated the proceeds to the church. The detail is obviously worrying to Pontius too:

‘...when, behold, at the bidding of the proconsul, the officer with his soldiers on a sudden came unexpectedly on him, – or rather, to speak more truly, thought that he had come unexpectedly on him, at his gardens, – at his gardens, I say, which at the beginning of his faith he had sold, and which, being restored by God’s mercy, he would assuredly have sold again for the use of the poor, if he had not wished to avoid ill-will on account of his persecution.’¹⁷

The last clause, which due to its vagueness allows for more than one interpretation¹⁸, seems added to justify Cyprian’s behaviour, but it is clear that even for Pontius, the regained possession of the *horti* by the bishop is something of a problem¹⁹.

Finally, Cyprian is treated with all due respect throughout the *Acta* by members of the non-Christian élite. He does not have to walk but is transported in a wagon (2.3) and allowed to stay in the house of a respectable official (2.4). No doubt this was thought a more fitting place for the gentleman Cyprian than a moist and dark dungeon such as the less respected Christian Perpetua had been confronted with a few decades earlier²⁰.

16. ‘In hortis suis manebat’ (‘he stayed at his estate’, *Acta* 2.1).

17. *Vita* 15: ‘...cum ecce, proconsulis iussu, ad hortos eius (ad hortos, inquam, quos inter initia fidei suae uenditos, et Dei indulgentia restitutos, pro certo iterum in usus pauperum uendidisset, nisi inuidiam de persecutione uitaret) cum militibus suis princeps repente subitauit, immo, ut uerius dixerim, subitasse se creditit’. The English translation is the old, but convenient one from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* series, made available online at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers.html> (> volume 5) and <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0505.htm>, with a change at the end (the original translation being ‘to avoid ill-will from the persecutors’. See also the next note.

18. Whose *inuidia* is meant, and on what grounds? Is it *inuidia* against Cyprian on the part of his benefactors, who had returned him his gardens and would resent resale? Or possibly *inuidia* against the poor who would profit from such a resale? Or, by contrast, *inuidia* against Cyprian from the poor themselves who would clearly be exposed as Christians? The last explanation seems best, because it accounts for the element of ‘persecution’ mentioned in the text.

19. Cf. Bastiaensen, *Acti e passioni dei martiri*, p. 270, n. 3, who speaks of ‘un certo imbarazzo’ of Pontius facing this detail that would suggest that Cyprian is not a perfect model of poverty.

20. Cf. *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 3.

3. STANDING AND PRESTIGE: THE *VITA*

Cyprian's fame no doubt resulted partly from his behaviour as a bishop in a turbulent period. After his enthronement as a bishop in 248, only two years after his sudden conversion to Christianity in 246²¹, Christians in Africa were faced not only with the great persecution under Decius (249-251) and the ensuing inner turmoil and conflicts within Christian ranks, but also with the outbreak of a fatal disease in 252, which made countless victims, and caused dismay and terror even among Christians²². During these major internal and external problems, Cyprian remained in charge of the Christian community, even if he was forced to go into hiding during the great persecution.

But his fame may also be due to his background. Little is known with certainty, but it does seem that Cyprian came from a noble, wealthy family, whose members partly belonged to the local council of Carthage²³. It would be reasonable to assume that Cyprian himself has fulfilled a role in local government, a function that allowed him to train the capacities as a manager that he so emphatically exhibited as soon as he became a bishop.

Cyprian's pupil and friend, Pontius, has written a full text in praise of his former teacher. From this hagiographic *Vita Cypriani*²⁴, for all its

21. For the data I follow S. Evers, 'Cyprianus van Carthago: bisschop, martelaar... Afer!', *Hermeneus* 78 (2006), pp. 138-147, an overview of Cyprian's life and work in Dutch, based on recent literature, such as J.P. Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (London - New York, 2002).

22. Cyprian wrote about the disease in his *De mortalitate*. On account of his painfully graphic description of symptoms, the disease is now commonly called *pestis Cypriani*, see e.g. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plague_of_Cyprian. In modern medical terms the disease has been identified as smallpox.

23. Cf. Evers, 'Cyprianus van Carthago: bisschop, martelaar... Afer!', p. 138.

24. I use the critical edition by A.A.R. Bastiaensen, *Vita di Cipriano. Vita di Ambrogio. Vita di Agostino*, intr. Christine Mohrmann, text A.A.R. Bastiaensen, trans. Luca Canali & Carlo Carena (Scrittori greci e latini, Vite dei santi, Milano, 1981), 2nd impr. For the English translation, see note 17. Secondary literature on Pontius' text as a whole is not abundant. Some comparatively recent contributions are Jaakko Aronen, 'Indebtedness to Passio Perpetuae in Pontius' *Vita Cypriani*', *VChr* 38 (1984), pp. 67-76; V. Saxer, 'La "Vita Cypriani" de Pontius "première biographie chrétienne"', in: François Baratte et al. (eds), *Orbis Romanus Christianusque ab Diocletiani aetate usque ad Heraclium: travaux sur l'antiquité tardive autour des recherches de Noël Duval* (Paris, 1995), pp. 237-251; H. Montgomery, 'Pontius' *Vita S. Cypriani* and the Making of a Saint', *Symbolae Osloenses* 71 (1996), pp. 195-215; and P.L. Schmidt, 'Die Cyprian-Vita des Presbyters Pontius: Biographie oder "laudatio funebris"?' in: L. Benz (ed.), *ScriptOralia Romana: die römische Literatur zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit* (Tübingen, 2001), pp. 305-318, further Ch. Bobertz, 'An Analysis of "Vita Cypriani" 3.6-10 and the Attribution of "Ad Quirinum" to Cyprian of Carthage', *VChr* 46 (1992), pp. 112-128; and earlier i.a. M.M. Sage, *Cyprian* (Patristic Monograph Series 1, Cambridge, Mass., 1975), pp. 385-394.

possible retouching of facts to produce a flattering portrait, some elements can be adduced to confirm the general image conveyed by the *Acta*. For instance, right at the start, Pontius refers to Cyprian's eloquence and education²⁵. These are familiar elements that are typical for male members of the élite in any Roman town during the empire. In addition to Cyprian's possible function in the local council, he probably pursued a career as an orator²⁶ and lawyer, much like Tertullian did before him, or as public teacher as Augustine would do much later.

It is a pity that Pontius has precious little to offer about Cyprian's life before his conversion, particularly since Cyprian himself remains nearly completely silent about it as well²⁷. Some details are provided in chapter four, which mentions Cyprian's association with a certain Caecilius, the *presbyter* who guided him in the process of conversion. Cyprian revered and loved this man, who finally, at his deathbed, entrusted his wife and children to Cyprian's care. We do not hear anything more about these persons, nor even their names and subsequent fate. The omission of such biographical information by Pontius is to be explained by his specific aim, which was not to compose a biography in modern (or even ancient) terms, but to edify his audience, to eulogize the bishop and defend his image, presenting him as a Christian model, whose glory even reflects on the city of Carthage²⁸.

25. 'Etsi eloquentiae eius ac Dei gratiae larga fecunditas ita se copia et ubertate sermonis extendit, ut usque in finem mundi fortasse non taceat...' ('although the profuse fertility of his eloquence and of God's grace so expands itself in the exuberance and richness of his discourse, that he will probably never cease to speak even to the end of the world...'; *Vita* 1.1). 'Fuerint licet studia, et bonae artes deuotum pectus imbuerint, tamen illa praetereo. Nondum enim ad utilitatem nisi saeculi pertinebant' ('He may have had pursuits previously, and liberal arts may have imbued his mind while engaged therein; but these things I pass over, for as yet they had nothing to do with anything but his secular advantage'; *Vita* 2.2).

26. Cf. Jerome, *Vir. Ill.* 67: 'Cyprianus Afer, primum gloriose rhetoricam docuit' ('Cyprianus from Africa first taught rhetoric with much success'); cf. also Augustine, *Sermo* 312.4.

27. The scanty details have been collected by e.g. Sage, *Cyprian*, pp. 101-113. Quite to the point is the term 'Informationsaskese', used by Schmidt, 'Die Cyprian-Vita des Presbyters Pontius: Biographie oder "laudatio funebris"?' , p. 306, to characterize the *Vita*.

28. For discussion on the nature of Pontius' text, see notably Montgomery, 'Pontius' *Vita S. Cypriani* and the Making of a Saint', pp. 205-215, who rightly highlights Pontius' use of rhetorical techniques. Schmidt, 'Die Cyprian-Vita des Presbyters Pontius: Biographie oder "laudatio funebris"?' , at pp. 314-315 actually analyses the text as a published speech, originally perhaps a *laudatio funebris*. Its eulogizing aim partly explains the presence of some echoes from the *Passio Perpetuae*, for which see Aronen, 'Indebtedness to *Passio Perpetuae* in Pontius' *Vita Cypriani*' (see n. 24), and Saxer, 'La "Vita Cypriani" de Pontius "première biographie chrétienne"' (see n. 24).

Still, even in this consciously one-sided text, Pontius almost accidentally shows how Cyprian remained a man of great prestige and high social standing, even as a Christian. To briefly mention some examples, his enthronement as a bishop attracts massive public attention (*Vita* 5.3-5), and he magnanimously forgives his opponents *beniuolenter* and *clementer*, much like a Roman emperor (5.6).²⁹ When Cyprian is forced to leave Carthage, Pontius presents him as a man of great merits for his *respublica* and *patria* (11.2). Taken together, such terms produce a portrait that evokes traditional values of the Roman élite. Furthermore, the bishop is said to imitate the best examples, thereby becoming a model to be imitated himself³⁰.

One such example is Job, whom Cyprian follows in several virtues. In a short sermon or paraphrase put into Cyprian's mouth (3.7-9), the speaker pays the following tribute to Job: 'His house was open to every comer'³¹, some examples of visitors being specified: widows, the blind, the sick. Almost imperceptibly Job, and thereby indirectly Cyprian himself, are described in terms of a *patronus* receiving his many *clientes* for a morning *salutatio*. This is a traditional Roman portrait indeed.

Interestingly, Cyprian's prestige is even underscored by his form of dress:

'And his dress was not out of harmony with his countenance, being itself also subdued to a fitting mean. The pride of the world did not inflame him, nor yet did an excessively affected penury make him sordid, because this latter kind of attire arises no less from boastfulness, than does such an ambitious frugality from ostentation'³².

It is perhaps not surprising to find Cyprian presented as a harmonious man, but it does attract notice that Pontius suggests that the bishop certainly did not look shabby. Apparently, some degree of dignified appearance seemed due even for a Christian gentleman.

29. He is further credited with such laudable virtues as *pietas*, *uigor*, *misericordia*, *censura*, *sanctitas*, and *gratia*. His countenance maintains a good balance between seriousness and friendliness, by which he earns great respect and love (*uereri et diligi*, 6.1-2).

30. 'Ipse se fecit imitandum' ('he made himself also worthy of imitation', *Vita* 3.10).

31. 'Domus eius patuit cuicumque uenienti' (*Vita* 3.9). The quotation is part of a long paraphrase of Job 29:12, on which see Bobertz, 'An Analysis of "Vita Cypriani" 3.6-10' (see n. 24). Significantly, the element of opening one's house is absent in the Bible passage.

32. 'Sed nec cultus fuit dispar a uultu, temperatus et ipse de medio. Non illum superbia saecularis inflauerat, nec tamen prorsus affectata penuria sordiderat: quia et hoc uestitus genus a iactantia minus non est, quam ostentata taliter ambitiosa frugalitas' (*Vita* 6.3).

In the rest of Pontius' text, Cyprian is further described as a man who gained renown among the pagans (7.1) and who maintained relations with people in high places, even shortly before his execution (14.3). Interestingly, Cyprian refuses to flee his imminent execution, although senatorial and equestrian friends urge him to move to a secret place and even offer him a refuge (14.3). Once more, Cyprian's behaviour recalls the famous example of Socrates, who decidedly refused to escape from the prison where he waited for death³³.

During the entire year of exile preceding his trial and execution, it seems that Cyprian enjoyed much freedom to receive visitors and lived in convenient circumstances, as the locals provided him with everything he needed (12.2). The coastal town Curubis, modern Kourba (60 kilometres south-east of Carthage), must have been a rather pleasant resort, as Pontius' elaborate defence shows (11.7-8)³⁴.

Finally, the execution scene (15-19) seems dramatized and reworked to make it an even more impressive, public spectacle than in the *Acta*³⁵. In fact, the whole interrogation as recorded in the *Acta* is condensed to a single sentence (16.8). Instead, many details are added in honour of Cyprian. Here too, many people from all classes attend his trial (15.4 and 16.2) and again, the bishop is treated with much respect as a man who seems well above the average of all those who attend. For instance, he is described as sitting on a seat covered with linen 'so that even in the very moment of his passion he might enjoy the honour of the episcopate'³⁶. The final chapter (18) paints Cyprian's last walk from the proconsul's hall to the place of execution in terms properly recalling a *triumphus*.

Although Pontius hastens to underscore Cyprian's dignity as a Christian bishop, the overall impression one gets from this *Vita* is that Cyprian's fame and high prestige were not merely due to his behaviour as a bishop, but also to his social origin and environment. It seems that he could not entirely escape his past as being one of the noblest men in town. His roots in non-Christian, Roman élite culture may simply have proved too strong for that.

33. Cf. Plato, *Crito*, 46B-54D.

34. The detail was, of course, most unwelcome for Pontius, as e.g. H. Dessau, 'Pontius, der Biograph Cyprians', *Hermes* 51 (1916), pp. 65-72, at pp. 68-69 rightly observes.

35. For example, in 18.2 the place of Cyprian's execution is explicitly said to be suitable for a noble spectacle, and people are described as climbing trees to witness the event, thus recalling the biblical example of Zacchaeus.

36. 'Ut et sub ictu passionis episcopatus honore frueretur' (16.6).

4. EVIL WORLD

Taken along some general lines, Cyprian's character may also be considered as fundamentally Roman. At numerous places, notably in his letters, the Bishop of Carthage pleads for peace and unity in the Christian community, for firmness in belief even in times of repression and persecution, while he is also well-versed in the written tradition, notably the Bible, from which countless quotations are interspersed in his writings. Furthermore, he provides his people with practical explanation of relevant phenomena, as in his treatise *De oratione Dominica* on prayer, and gives moralizing criticism of evil practices such as theatre shows, as in his *De spectaculis*. In brief, he pleads for orderly, pious behaviour in accordance with tradition. All of this seems thoroughly Roman, although it is of course presented in a Christian light. As a pious leader taking good care of his people, Cyprian seems as much a traditional Roman noble as he is a Christian bishop.

There is, however, a marked contrast between this glorious, dignified, general image of Cyprian the man and his inner convictions as regards the terrestrial world. His writings show several passages where the world is evoked in the darkest possible terms. In *Ad Demetrianum* the world is pictured as having grown old and exhausted, bound to go down.

‘In winter there is not as great an abundance of rain storms for nourishing seeds as before, in summer the temperature does not reach normal oven heat for preparing the crops for ripening, nor in the mild season of spring do the crops flourish as they did once, nor are the autumn crops so abundant as before with trees bearing fruit. There are less marble slabs brought forth from mountains that have been mined out and are exhausted. Their mines, hollowed out, now supply less wealth in silver and in gold, and their impoverished veins of metals run short as each day proceeds. The farm laborer grows less in number in the field, and ceases to be available. The sailor at sea, similarly, has vanished, like the soldier in the barracks, integrity in the Forum, justice in the court, concord between friends in alliance, skill in practicing the arts, and moral order in practicing ethics.’³⁷

Certainly, the third century AD was an age with many problems, but the situation can hardly have been that desperate³⁸.

37. *Ad Demetr.* 3. ET: A. Brent, *St. Cyprian of Carthage: On the Church, Selected Treatises* (New York, 2006), p. 71.

38. Among historians, Cyprian's passage is commonly treated with scepticism as regards its value as a historical source; cf. e.g. G. Alföldy, ‘Der heilige Cyprian und die Krise des römischen Reiches’, in: idem, *Die Krise des römischen Reiches* (Stuttgart, 1989), pp. 295-318, at pp. 306-310; further K. Ruffing, ‘Die Wirtschaft’, in: K.-P. Johne et al. (eds), *Die Zeit der Soldatenkaiser* (Berlin, 2008), vol. 2, p. 826. I owe the references to Prof. Dr. Lucas de Blois.

An even gloomier and darker picture emerges from *Ad Donatum*, the early work in which Cyprian describes his conversion. The text is best known for its focus on the light of faith and heaven, but as a matter of fact, it is largely taken by a panoramic, sombre picture of all the evils in the world, varying from robbery and piracy at sea and in the countryside, public excesses in towns, lack of morals in private, and corruption in justice to the pitfalls of wealth, avarice, public functions, and spiritual poverty. In this world, so it seems, there is no hope for Christians³⁹.

Finally, I would like to mention Cyprian's *De mortalitate*, written during the great plague of 252⁴⁰. This world, Cyprian argues, has nothing to offer for Christians, and so we must simply hold out until we may reach Christ and come to where we belong, in heaven. If Christians happen to be struck by mortal disease, they have no reason to complain, as many of them do, but they should rejoice for being allowed to depart earlier from this world, all the more because the end of the world is near:

'If the walls of your house were tottering from decay, if the roof above were shaking, if the house now worn out, now weary, were threatening imminent ruin with its framework collapsing through age, would you not leave with all speed? If, while you were sailing, a wind a furious storm with waves violently agitated were presaging future shipwreck, would you not more quickly seek port? Behold, the world is tottering and collapsing and is bearing witness to its ruin, not now through age, but through the end of things, and you are not thanking God, you are not congratulating yourself that, rescued by an earlier departure, you are being freed from ruin and shipwrecks and threatening disasters!⁴¹

Indeed, Cyprian's view of the world is anything but positive. For present-day readers looking for inspiration in the writings of the Carthaginian Church Father, this element remains difficult to accept⁴². It is rather as a prudent manager and wise pastor that Cyprian continues to convince and encourage readers.

39. The gloomy picture no doubt also reflects Cyprian's familiarity with ancient philosophy and diatribe, satire and other moralizing genres, where many of such motifs can be found. Still, I would contend, this text does tell us something about Cyprian's personal view of the world.

40. For a study of the treatise in the context of the ancient, philosophical *consolatio*, see J.H.D. Scourfield, 'The "De Mortalitate" of Cyprian: Consolation and Context', *VChr* 50 (1996), pp. 12-41.

41. *De mort.* 25. ET: Mary Hannan Mahoney, in R.J. Deferrari et al., *Saint Cyprian: Treatises, Translated and Edited* (New York, 1958), p. 219.

42. In terms of consolation, Cyprian speaks 'to the head, not the heart', as Scourfield, 'The "De Mortalitate" of Cyprian', p. 18, aptly puts it, since as a writer he does not show sympathy here and remains uncompromising in his rejection of grief. Of course, as Scourfield, *ibid.*, p. 32 adds, this does not imply that Cyprian personally was insensitive in normal circumstances of bereavement.

5. TWO FACES, MORE FACES

In conclusion, the external image of Cyprian, as results from the *Acta* and the *Vita*, shows him to be firmly rooted in the Roman world, of which he seems a high-class representative even after his conversion to Christianity and appointment as a bishop. The manner in which he is addressed and treated by others, his behaviour and prestige, his wealth and relations with authorities all concur to create the impression of a Roman *dominus* and *patronus* in a Christianized form. The general outlook and character which appear in his own writings do not conflict with this. His pitch-black view of the world, however, is so radically negative and dismissive, that it is tempting to call him a man of two faces, two *personae*⁴³.

In overviewing his life and writings, still more *personae* can be identified. Apart from Cyprian the Roman noble (which was the main subject in this paper) and the bishop disengaged from the earthly sphere, one can also meet Cyprian as a clement pastor or a stubborn fanatic, as a reconciling intermediary or a strict authority or even a polemicist, as an erudite intellectual and a practical manager; or to sum up the paradox, as a man of the world who wishes to leave this world and detests it⁴⁴.

Who is the real Cyprian? Is there a real Cyprian in the first place? Perhaps not for us, since there are only the texts with which to reconstruct an image of the man⁴⁵. But these texts certainly produce an exciting mixture of *personae*, which makes Cyprian a fascinating Church Father even in the 21st century.

43. The term *persona* has been coined in Roman satire studies by Susannah Braund to distinguish more clearly between the authorial voice of the poet and the specific roles of the satirical 'I' in his texts (for which one may compare the well-known concept of the lyrical 'I' in poetry, or the 'I' in prose narrative). Meanwhile, it has found wider application. For instance, it has been used in the study of such authors as Pliny, Martial, and Apuleius. See further e.g. V. Hunink, 'The persona in Apuleius' Florida' in: M. Zimmerman & R. van der Paardt (eds), *Metamorphic Reflections: Essays Presented to Ben Hijmans at His 75th Birthday* (Leuven – Dudley, MA, 2004), pp. 174-187.

44. Reasons of space do not allow me to document each of these various roles. In the present contribution I have focused on the *persona* of Cyprian the Roman and Christian noble and gentleman, a role that has remained rather neglected in studies of Cyprian. Of course, this is not the only possible approach, as this brief list shows. I trust that the other characterizations will sound familiar to all readers familiar with Cyprian.

45. Cf. J. O'Donnell, *Augustine, a New Biography* (New York etc., 2006), pp. 315-330, in his final chapter called 'Who was Augustine?'