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Passio Martyrum Scillitanorum

(2,003 words)

The *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum*, also known as *Passio Martyrum Scillitanorum*, is the earliest extant non-biblical Christian Latin text, composed in Carthage and dating from the early 2nd century CE.

The short text (counting merely 360 words) records the interrogation by the Roman proconsul Saturninus of a group of Christians from the African town of Scilli, apparently accused of adhering to the Christian religion. It ends with the formal death sentence as pronounced by the proconsul, a public announcement of this death sentence, and a succinct description of the actual execution.

Being among the very earliest examples of Christian martyr texts from antiquity, the *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum* is of vital importance for the history of early Christianity in the Roman provinces. Although the text is short and presents relatively few textual problems (full detail on the manuscript in Ruggiero, 1991, 55–59), it raises a number of questions, mainly on the level of recorded facts and historical background (for editions with translation, see Musurillo, 1972: English; Bastiaensen & Hilhorst et al., 1987: Italian; Ruggiero, 1991: Italian, with commentary).

Dates and Places

At the start of the document, place and time of the proceedings are clearly indicated, as well as the names of the persons involved: *AMS* 1:

Praesente bis et Claudiano consulibus, XVI Kalendas Augustas, Kartagine in secretario impositis Sperato, Nartzalo et Cittino, Donata, Secunda, Vestia, Saturninus proconsul dixit [...];

During the consulship of Praesens (for the second time) and Condianus, on the 17th day of July, in Carthage, the following persons were led to the governor's office: Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Secunda, and Vesta. Proconsul Saturninus said to them.

Since consuls Gaius Bruttius Praesens and Sextus Quintilius Condianus (the manuscript erroneously read Claudianus; see Bastiaensen & Hilhorst et al., 1987, 405) held office in 180 (see *PIR* iii, 434), this fixes the date of proceedings at Jul 17, 280 CE. There is a problem, however, concerning the date of narrated events. At the end of his interrogation, Saturninus offers the Christians 30 days to reflect. It is commonly assumed (see Musurillo, 1972, xxii) that their unanimous reaction *Christianus sum* "I am a Christian" (*AMS* 13) implies immediate and complete refusal, and that both the following death sentence (*AMS* 14 and 16) and the execution by beheading (*AMS* 17) took place on the same day. This seems to be confirmed by Nartzalus' words *Hodie martyres in caelis sumus* "Today, we will be martyrs in heaven" (*AMS* 15). However, a postponement of verdict and execution were not exceptional in trials of Christians (Bastiaensen & Hilhorst et al., 1987, 410), and the document may therefore also be taken to reflect a lapse in "real time" of a full month at this point. It cannot be excluded, therefore, that the execution took place in August 280 CE.

As to the date of composition of the text in its present form, it is difficult to decide. While July 17, 180 CE, is obviously the terminus post quem, there is little to go by to establish a specific date. Some inconsistencies in the manuscript, concerning not only the lists of martyrs' names (see below), but also the concluding lines of prayer at the end, may be interpreted as signs that the text was reedited at a later stage. Meanwhile, most scholars tacitly assume a date of composition fairly close to 180 CE, on account of the plain, unadorned nature of the text, commonly taken to be the result of the document being an almost literal copy of official court proceedings.

The events took place in Carthage, a location explicitly mentioned in the text. The initial version of the text was obviously drafted in Carthage as well, but it remains

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uncertain where exactly the final version was composed and published. The place of origin of the martyrs, Scilli, seems a likely candidate, but unfortunately the exact location and identity of Scilli remain unknown (Bastiaensen & Hilhorst et al., 1987, 405; “a mystery,” Musurillo, 1972, xxii).

Persons Involved in the Trial

The Roman proconsul presiding over the trial was Publius Vigellius Saturninus (see further Ruggiero, 1991, 49–50). Some details of his career have been recorded (he was governor of Moesia before coming to Africa), but he is chiefly known for his role in the present trial, and in general terms as the first persecutor of Christians in Africa; see Tert. *Scap.* 3.4, who adds that Saturninus was punished with blindness. In the text, Saturninus is quoted 11 times and seems scrupulous and precise. He does not appear to be particularly cruel or impatient, rather trying to persuade the Christians to give up their stubborn resistance in the interest of peace and quiet in the Roman province. He shows a vague interest in the books carried by the Christians (*AMS* 12), but quickly loses attention.

Among the six Christians initially named are three men and three women, about whom nothing is further known. Their social backgrounds and biographies must remain a matter of speculation, but it seems noteworthy that half of them are women (see Lamirande, 2007) and some of them may be slaves. Their names are fairly common, with the exception of Nartzalus, which sounds distinctly non-Roman. All six martyrs are recorded as speaking Latin. Speratus is quoted nine times and thus seems the spokesperson of the group. The five other ones are given a single line each (Cittinus and the three women in *AMS* 8–9; Nartzalus as late as *AMS* 15).

At the end, these six persons appear to be condemned along with “other persons who have confessed living according to the Christian rite” (*AMS* 14). In the final declaration by the proconsul (*AMS* 16), the group has expanded to 12, with six new names (four male, two female) added right in the middle between the earlier three male and three female names: Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Januaria, and Generosa. Again, nothing is known about these persons. The exact number of martyrs is a matter of debate among scholars (see Bastiaensen & Hilhorst et al., 1987, 406). Given the Latin text as it is, with six Christians speaking with the proconsul, it seems most likely that these six persons were involved. The other names may have been inserted at a later stage, possibly after a later trial or, alternatively, a preceding trial. It may be observed that the number may have been raised to 12 in order to reflect the number of apostles in the New Testament.

Some Judicial Aspects

The text does not specify when or where the martyrs were denounced, nor on account of which law or regulation. Possibly the denunciation took place in their home town of Scilli, and their case was transferred to the main city of Carthage. The proconsul offers the emperor’s pardon if the accused “return to good ideas” (*si ad bonam mentem redeatis*, *AMS* 2). He also calls their mentality “insane” (*AMS* 8). In the course of the dialogue, the fact of their being Christians seems to be the point at stake. At the end, the proconsul’s verdict notes that they have confessed to live according to Christian rite and have refused to return to Roman ways (*AMS* 14). All of this suggests that the martyrs’ identity as Christians was the main judicial point (see also Ruggiero, 1991, 115). In addition, they may have refused to bring an offering for the emperor or to swear an oath of allegiance to the emperor’s *genius* (see *AMS* 5), points of controversy that are often central in other Christian martyr texts. The motif of perseverance (*perseveratio*) mentioned twice (*AMS* 10 and 14), and the Latin phrase *duci iussi* (“I ordered to lead forth to execution”) of the proconsul (*AMS* 16) both recall the well-known phrase of [Pliny the Younger](#) (*Ep.* 10.96 *perseverantes duci iussi*).

The Christians are condemned to death by means of the sword (*gladio animadverti placet*, *AMS* 14). Although this would be the normal punishment for Roman citizens, it does not necessarily mean they actually had this status. The proconsul may have decided on this “easy” penalty for reasons of military convenience or to maintain public order, or as a personal act of mildness.

Communication and Background

In this short text, the proconsul and the Christians seem to be living in two different worlds, with little or nothing in common. The proconsul obviously represents the Roman state, with its laws and culture, and its explicit or tacit assumptions about how citizens should behave. The Christians, on the other hand, clearly reject this and seem to cherish an entirely different notion of religious belief. More concretely, they are even carrying a bookcase (*capsa*) with special Christian texts: *libri et epistulae Pauli viri iusti* “books and letters by Paul, a righteous man” (*AMS* 12), an obvious reference to New Testament writings. The exact reference here remains impossible to determine with “books” possibly, but not necessarily, referring to the Gospels and “letters” denoting either all 13 New Testament letters or a smaller group, whether authentically Pauline or not. Speratus’ words seem to echo phrases from Rom 12:14 and 1 Tim 6:16 (*AMS* 2 and 6), so these letters at least seem to have been included.

The dialogue between the Roman proconsul and the spokesperson Speratus shows how their worlds are drifting apart: both men hardly seem able to understand the other one’s basic notions. The Christians do seem prepared to explain what is most important to them, but at times appear unable or even unwilling to choose language that can be intelligible to the proconsul (notably *AMS* 4 and 6). Their common expressions of joy and thanks (*AMS* 15 and 17) may likewise have appeared entirely strange and insane to him.

Language

The [Latin](#) of the *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum* is, on the whole, plain and straightforward, and it remains focused on the actual dialogue of the interrogation. There are word forms that show the influence of spoken Latin of the day, for example *domni* for *domini* and *domnum* for *dominum* (“Lord”; *AMS* 1; 3; 5; 6, all three cases of syncope being normalized in Bastiaensen & Hilhorst et al. 1987), or *seculi* for *saeculi* (“world”; *AMS* 6). Some phrases by Christians show other levels of style, recalling texts from the New Testament (see above), whereas the final judicial formulas uttered by the proconsul and his herald (*AMS* 14 and 16) evoke formal Roman legal language.

All in all, the *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum* seems to reflect the earliest and simplest form of Roman court records that are commonly seen as the basis of all Christian martyr acts and passions. Some, though, take the *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum* to have been consciously stylized for a Christian audience (see Gaertner, 1989).

There exists a Greek version of the text (as with other early Christian martyr documents, such as the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*), discovered in one manuscript in 1881. The Greek text involves various problems (see Ruggiero, 1991, 58–62) and seems intended for liturgical use. It obviously does not represent the original form of the text, which, being a Roman judicial document from Roman Africa, no doubt was originally written and published in Latin.

Reception

Being the earliest of Christian Latin martyr texts, the *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum* might be expected to have been widely circulated and quoted in later Christian texts from antiquity. As a matter of fact, there are only a few clear references to it. Chief among those are a set of sermons by [Augustine of Hippo](#) held on the annual church feast of the martyrs: *Serm.* 299D; 299E (ch. 2 quoting *AMS* 9); 299F (ch. 2 quoting *AMS* 7); further *Serm.* 37 (ch. 23 quoting likewise *AMS* 7). For all testimonies, see F. Ruggiero, 1991, 81–83.

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