

Search this publication

[Advanced Search](#)

## Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online



### *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 Vestia. 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

#### Article Table of Contents

[Dates and Places](#)[Persons Involved in the Trial](#)[Some Judicial Aspects](#)[Communication and Background](#)[Language](#)[Reception](#)[Bibliography](#)

## 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.

Vincent Hunink

---

## Bibliography

Bastiaensen, A.A.R. & A. Hilhorst et al., eds., *Acti e Passioni dei Martiri*, Milan, 1987.

Gaertner, H.A., “Die Acta Scillitanorum in literarischer Interpretation,” *WSt* 102, 1989, 149–167.

Lamirande, É., “Des femmes aux origines de l’église nord-africaine: Le context martyrologique (180–225),” *Aug.* 47, 2007, 41–83.

Musurillo, H., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, vol. II, Oxford, 1972, 86–89.

Ruggiero, F., *Acti dei martiri Scilitani: Introduzione, testo, traduzione, testimonianze e commento*, Rome, 1991.

Smarius, A., “Rome versus de christenen: De zaak tegen de christenen uit Scilli,” *Lampas* 42, 2009, 26–41 (Dutch).

### Cite this page

Hunink, Vincent, “Passio Martyrum Scillitanorum”, in: *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*, General Editor David G. Hunter, Paul J.J. van Geest, Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte. Consulted online on 11 September 2020 <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2589-7993\\_EECO\\_SIM\\_036441](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2589-7993_EECO_SIM_036441)>  
First published online: 2018