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# Worlds drifting apart

## Notes on the *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum*

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Early Christian Latin Literature is chiefly known for some highly renowned prose authors such as Tertullian, Jerome, and Augustine, and to a much lesser extent for poets such as Prudentius<sup>1</sup>. But its beginnings were decidedly more modest. In fact, the earliest datable text comprises hardly more than a page of Latin and can barely count as an impressive literary work of art. The text in question, the *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum* (hence *AMS*), also known as *Passio Martyrum Scillitanorum*, was composed in Carthage in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.<sup>2</sup>.

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 *AMS* is of vital importance for the history of early Christianity in the Roman provinces. Although the text is limited in scope and presents relatively few textual problems<sup>3</sup> it raises a number of questions, mainly on the level of recorded facts and historical background. Furthermore, it shows some interesting features concerning (mis)communication between Christians and representatives of the non Christian world in which they lived.

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<sup>1</sup> Ever since the study of Early Christian Greek and Latin came up as an academic (sub)discipline in the years before the Second World War, biblical texts have been commonly excluded from the field. In recent scholarship, however, notably in the field of reception history, things seem to be gradually changing.

<sup>2</sup> The best editions with translation are Musurillo 1972 (English), Bastiaensen 1987 (Italian), and Ruggiero 1991 (Italian, with commentary). Among earlier translations I mention Hagemeyer 1961 (German) and Saxer 1979 (French). The *AMS* have of course been widely studied by other scholars. References to earlier scholarly contributions may be found in the critical works listed and quoted in this paper. In this paper references are generally made to scholarly contributions after 1960.

<sup>3</sup> For details on the MSS tradition and textual transmission, see Ruggiero 1991, 55-59.

## Dates and places

At the start of the document, the place and the time of 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 (his second time) and Condianus, on July, 17<sup>th</sup>, in Carthage, there were set in the judgment-hall<sup>4</sup> Speratus, Nartzalus and Cittinus, Donata, Secunda and Vestia.’)

Since consuls C. Bruttius Praesens and Sex. Quintilius Condianus<sup>5</sup> held office in 180<sup>6</sup>, this fixes the date of proceedings at July 17<sup>th</sup>, 180.

Although there is little doubt as to this historical fact, there appears to be a rather neglected chronological problem with events as they are narrated in the text: it does not necessarily follow that all events actually took place on that very day. At the end of his interrogation, Saturninus offers the Christians thirty days time to reflect. It is commonly assumed 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<sup>7</sup>. This seems to be confirmed by Nartzalus’ words: *Hodie martyres in caelis sumus* ‘Today, we will be martyrs in heaven’ (*AMS 15*)<sup>8</sup>.

However, a postponement of the verdict and the actual execution was not exceptional in trials of Christians<sup>9</sup> and the document may therefore also be taken to reflect a lapse in ‘real time’ of a full month at this point. Possibly, the procedure was halted for some time and resumed at a later stage, perhaps even thirty days later. It cannot be excluded, therefore, that the execution as

<sup>4</sup> *Secretarium* refers to a closed judicial hall in Carthage, where the inquiry took place. Normally, such proceedings would take place in the open air, but in this case the authorities may have been feared popular commotion; see Hanslik 1963, 166.

<sup>5</sup> The MSS erroneously read Claudianus here; cf. Bastiaensen 1987, 405.

<sup>6</sup> See *PIR*<sup>2</sup> I, 372-373, nr. 65, and VII.1, 14-15, nr. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Musurillo, 1972, xxii. Most scholars assume that Saturninus’ offer of thirty days of postponement was immediately withdrawn in reaction to the Christians’ refusal; cf. e. g. Ruggiero 1991, 63.

<sup>8</sup> The quotation contains the earliest datable use of *martyr* as a title of honor in early Christian Latin; cf. e. g. Baumeister 2009, 16; 69-70 and 99.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bastiaensen 1987, 410. A clear example of days between verdict and execution can be found in the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, where the death sentence (pronounced in 6,6) is executed at least several days later (cf. 7,1 *post dies paucos*; 8,1 *die quo in neruo mansimus*; 9,1 *deinde post paucos dies*; 10,1 *pridie quam pugnaremus* and 18,1 *illuxit dies victoriae illorum*).

formally narrated in *AMS* 17 took place as late as August, 17<sup>th</sup> 180<sup>10</sup>. It seems well documented that from antiquity onwards the saints of Scilli were liturgically remembered at July, 17<sup>th</sup>, but the evidence that they died on this very day is not entirely conclusive<sup>11</sup>.

Of course, there is still a third date concerning the text that needs to be established: the date of actual composition of the text in its present form. Here it is even more difficult to decide. While July 17<sup>th</sup>, 180 is obviously the *terminus post quem*, there is little to go by to establish a specific date. Some inconsistencies in the MSS, 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 re-edited at a later stage. Meanwhile, most scholars tacitly assume a date of composition fairly close to 180, on account of the plain, unadorned nature of the text, commonly taken to be the result of the document being a reasonably faithful copy of official court proceedings (see also below).

The events took place in Carthago, a location explicitly mentioned in the text (*AMS* 1). The initial version of the text was obviously drafted in Carthage as well, but it remains uncertain where exactly the final version was composed and published. The place of origin of the martyrs, Scilli, seems a likely candidate. Unfortunately the exact location and identity of Scilli remain unknown<sup>12</sup>, and it cannot be established whether or not the text was composed there.

#### Persons involved in the trial

The Roman proconsul presiding over the trial was P. Vigellius Saturninus<sup>13</sup>. Some details of his career have been recorded: e.g. that he was governor

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<sup>10</sup> On closer scrutiny, there may be even more than two dates represented in the text. If *AMS* 1-13 refer to July, 17<sup>th</sup> 180 and *AMS* 17 is taken to refer to August, 17<sup>th</sup>, it is at least conceivable that the final judgment by Saturninus, given as a written statement, (*AMS* 14) and the ensuing reaction of the martyrs (*AMS* 15), as well as the formal announcement by the *praeco* (*AMS* 16) took place at some intermediate date. However, it seems more likely that the *AMS* 14-15 were part of the judicial proceedings at July, 18<sup>th</sup>, and that the public announcement in *AMS* 16 was made shortly before the actual execution, that is, at the same date as *AMS* 17.

<sup>11</sup> The date of July, 17<sup>th</sup> is commonly given for three extant sermons by Augustine on the martyrs of Scilli (*Serm.* 299D-E-F). However, in some ancient saints calendars other dates, such as July, 18<sup>th</sup>; July, 19<sup>th</sup>; July, 21<sup>th</sup> or even November, 16<sup>th</sup> are attested as well; see Ruggiero 1991, 63-64.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Bastiaensen 1987, 405; «a mystery», further Musurillo 1972, xxii and Freudenberger 1973, 199. A survey of possible identifications in scholarship is given by Ruggiero 1991, 48-49.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. further Freudenberger 1973, 196-197; Ruggiero 1991, 49-50.

of Moesia before coming to Africa. However, he is chiefly known for his role in the present trial, and in general terms, as the first persecutor of Christians in Africa<sup>14</sup>.

In the text, Saturninus is speaking eleven times. On the whole he seems scrupulous and precise, not appearing to be particularly cruel or impatient, but 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<sup>15</sup> and some of them may be slaves. Their names are fairly common, with the exception of Nartzalus, a name that sounds distinctly non-Roman<sup>16</sup>. All six martyrs are recorded as speaking Latin. Speratus is quoted nine times, and seems to be the spokesperson representing the entire group<sup>17</sup>. The five other ones are given a single line each: Cittinus and the three women are quoted 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' (*ceteros ritu christiano se uiuere confessos*; AMS 14). In the final declaration by the proconsul (AMS 16), the group has actually expanded to twelve, 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<sup>18</sup>, Januaria, and Generosa. Again, no biographical detail is known about these persons, except their names<sup>19</sup>. The exact number of martyrs is a matter of debate among scholars<sup>20</sup>. Given the Latin text of the AMS as it is, with six Christians directly speaking with the proconsul, it seems most likely that these six

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<sup>14</sup> He is mentioned by Tertullian in *Ad Scapulam* 3,4, where it is added that Saturninus was punished with blindness.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Lamirande 2007.

<sup>16</sup> It is reported to have been found several times in epigraphic texts from Numidia, as is the name of Cittinus; cf. Ruggiero 1991, 50 n. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ruggiero 1991, 50: «portavoce del piccolo gruppo».

<sup>18</sup> One wonders whether the form is correct. Perhaps it should be corrected to the more familiar name of Lactantius. The Greek version of AMS (see below) does not offer much help here, since it renders this name as Κελεστίνος.

<sup>19</sup> It may be observed that all six names are now clearly Roman, unlike some of the names of the first six martyrs.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Karpf 1961 and Bastiaensen 1987, 406; further Ruggiero 1988 and Ruggiero 1991, 112-113 (who leaves the problem unsolved).

persons were involved. The other names may have been inserted at a later stage, possibly after a later trial or, alternatively, a preceding trial<sup>21</sup>. It may be observed that the number may have been raised to twelve in order to reflect the number of apostles in the New Testament.

#### Law and language

The text does not specify when or where the martyrs were denounced, nor on account of which law or regulation they faced trial<sup>22</sup>. Possibly the initial denunciation took place in their home town 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)<sup>23</sup>. 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 and the cause of a capital punishment<sup>24</sup>. 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* (cf. AMS 5), points of controversy that are often central in other Christian martyr texts. The motif of *perseveratio* mentioned twice (AMS 10 and 14), and the Latin phrase *duci iussi* of the proconsul (AMS 16) both recall a well known phrase of Pliny the Younger<sup>25</sup>.

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 possessed this status. The proconsul may have decided on this 'easy' penalty for reasons of

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<sup>21</sup> The latter option is defended by Smarius 2009, 39 n. 25, who suggests that the second group of six had been condemned earlier but without a formal public announcement of the verdict. For the notion of a preceding trial (either on the same day or earlier), see also Barnes 1968, 520.

<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, Speratus' first words *numquam malefecimus* could be suggesting a charge of *maleficium* in a stricter sense as a charge of 'magic' (such as had been faced not too long before 180 by Apuleius). This might also explain the proconsul's question about the contents of the *capsa* in AMS 12; see Freudenberger 1973, 202-204, who, however, argues that *malefecimus* is probably used in a more general sense.

<sup>23</sup> For the concept of *bona mens*, see Den Boeft-Bremmer 1981, 44-45. In general on the proconsul's offer of *indulgentia* by the Emperor, see Freudenberger 1973, 199-202 and Lanata 1973, 141.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Freudenberger 1973, 212-214; Ruggiero 1991, 115-116.

<sup>25</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 10.96 *perseverantes duci iussi*. However, Lanata 1973, 144 rightly adds that the AMS probably does not directly echo Pliny's text, but is rather using what has meanwhile become stereotypic legal language.

military convenience or to maintain public order<sup>26</sup>, or, by contrast, as an personal act of mildness<sup>27</sup>.

The Latin of the *AMS* is, generally speaking, plain and straightforward, and remains focused on the actual dialogue of the interrogation. A number of linguistic features show the combined influences of spoken Latin of the day and of later Latin, e.g. the use of personal pronouns at a higher frequency than in classical Latin, as in *ego* (*AMS* 6) and *nos* (3, 8); pleonasm (*quod et uos quoque facere debetis*; *AMS* 3); and a predominantly paratactical style, as in *AMS* 2, 3, 13, and 17). Furthermore, one might point to word forms such as *domni* for *domini* and *domnum* for *dominum* (*AMS* 1, 3, 5, 6)<sup>28</sup>, although these may also be explained as variants in the *MSS* tradition.

Some phrases by Christians show other levels of style, recalling texts from the New Testament (see above) or Christian culture in general, whereas the final judicial formulae uttered by the proconsul and his herald (*AMS* 14 and 16) evoke formal Roman legal language, as does the opening formula in *AMS* 1<sup>29</sup>.

Scholars vary in their assessment of the literary qualities of *AMS* as a text. Most general readers and scholars seem inclined to take it as a relatively unadorned text<sup>30</sup> that may be considered to be fairly close to the original, Roman judicial record. Some specialists, by contrast, have recently suggested that there is a considerable degree of literary modeling, allowing us to read it as a

<sup>26</sup> Bastiaensen 1987, 411 suggests that death by the sword would be the most energetic and easiest means of execution. Furthermore, as Seeliger-Wischmeyer 2015, 98 argue, it may have been the common form of execution in Roman Africa.

<sup>27</sup> The last option has, to my knowledge, never been defended in scholarly literature (although it has of course been observed that Roman authorities are usually reluctant to pronounce the inevitable death sentence; e. g. Den Boeft-Bremmer 1981, 47). The words attributed to the proconsul portray him as a man who does not feel openly angry or particularly keen on harsh measures or revenge. Although he does show signs of irritation, his predominant sentiments towards the Christians seem to be commiseration and pity.

<sup>28</sup> All three cases of syncope have been normalized in Bastiaensen 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Further examples of both judicial and Christian phrases are listed by Ruggiero 1991, 65.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Freudenberger 1973, 214: «stilisierte[r] Protokoll vom Verhör», «ein schlichtes Beispiel altchristlicher Hagiographie, das sich in seiner erschließbaren ursprünglichen Form als durchaus historisch glaubwürdig erweist»; Lanata 1973, 140: «la redazione A (...) pur non essendo identica al protocollo, rimane una buona testimonianza di esso». Ruggiero 1991, 64: «Lo stile della PPS appare scevro di preoccupazioni letterarie particolarmente accentuate. L'intenzione essenzialmente "documentaria" fa sì che lo scritto si concentri sulla drammaticità dell'avvenimento e sul suo significato. La struttura contribuisce a dare un effetto di immediatezza e semplicità».

more developed, consciously Christian literary text, intended for a specific, Christian audience. For instance, the study of Gärtner highlights a dramatic structure ('Dramaturgie') in the text, and points to the higher style of Latin used by the proconsul, in contrast to the simple Latin of the Christians, as signs of conscious modeling to the higher aim of Christian parenthesis<sup>31</sup>.

However, this may be reading rather too much into this short text, particularly given its early date and simple structure. Any dramatic development in the text seems only natural and predictable, and may more simply be considered the result of proceedings, while different levels of style could be readily explained as a direct reflection of different live performances of speakers with widely diverging backgrounds and intentions. Furthermore, it is relevant to observe that the text is nearly exclusively made up of dialogue, with hardly any added authorial comment, except at the very end<sup>32</sup>. This is quite unlike other Christian martyr texts, which often add extended Christian elements, such as explicit comments, prayers, or benedictions<sup>33</sup>. It would seem more likely, then, that in the *AMS* not many authorial changes were made with respect to its original form. Indeed, it is easy to imagine the dialogue to have taken place in court just as we read it, or with only minor changes<sup>34</sup>. As it is, the *AMS* 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.

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

<sup>31</sup> See Gärtner 1989. For the position that the *AMS* shows literary modeling, see further e. g. Berschin 1986, 41-42; Wlossock 1997; Seeliger-Wischmeyer 2015 96: «ein kunstvoll literarisch gestaltetes Produkt»; Kitzler 2015, 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> The only words not attributed to a character (apart from the repeated speech announcements such as *Saturninus proconsul dixit*) are the opening judicial formula (*AMS* 1); *et cum eo omnes consenserunt* (13); and the closing words *Et ita omnes simul martyrio coronati sunt, et regnant cum Patre en Filio et Spiritu Sancto per omnia secula seculorum. Amen.* (17). Thus, it is only at the very end that the text shows a clearly Christian authorial intention. Of course, such a final sentence may easily have been added at a later stage.

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the later, Greek version of *AMS*, discussed shortly below, shows clear signs of such Christian literary styling, with some ten lines of added text at the end (perhaps written by two or three different subsequent writers): a jubilant prayer of the martyrs themselves, some details on the dates and places, a traditional doxology of Jesus Christ, and a recapitulation of the four most important names.

<sup>34</sup> Of course, while the text may be close to a court document, it is not the exact 'carbon copy' of such a legal document with all relevant judicial detail. For some of the factual elements that may seem lacking, such as the names of any other Roman official taking part in the trial, or signatures at the end, see Gärtner 1989, 156-157.



one MS in 1881. This Greek text involves various problems and seems intended for liturgical use<sup>35</sup>. 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.

Being the earliest of Christian Latin martyr texts, the *AMS* 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. Chiefest among those are a set of sermons by Augustine held on the annual church feast of the martyrs<sup>36</sup>.

#### Communication and background

As short as the *AMS* is, it shows the proconsul and the Christians as living almost in two different worlds, which seem to have little or nothing in common. The proconsul obviously represents the Roman state, with its culture of law, traditional religion, and esteem of education and erudition, and its explicit or tacit assumptions about how citizens should properly behave. The Christians, on the other hand, clearly reject all this and seem to cherish an entirely different notion of religious belief.

More concretely, they are even carrying a book case (*capsa*) with special Christian texts: *libri et epistulae Pauli uiri 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 thirteen New Testament letters or a smaller group, whether authentically Pauline or not<sup>37</sup>. 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. It is not clear either whether the Christians are carrying these Pauline texts by chance or habit, or for a specific purpose in their trial<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> For further discussion of the Greek text, see Ruggiero 1991, 58-62.

<sup>36</sup> See Aug. *Serm.* 299D; 299E (c. 2 quoting *AMS* 9); 299F (c. 2 quoting *AMS* 7); further s. 37 (c. 23 quoting likewise *AMS* 7). For all testimonies, see Ruggiero 1991, 81-83.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Ruggiero 1991, 120 and earlier scholars, such as e. g. Bonner 1956. Alternatively, Bastiaensen 1987, 410 argues that *libri* in isolation would cause doubt here, particularly when used in a discussion with a pagan, and the phrase *libri et epistulae* should best be taken as the equivalent of *libri epistularum* «books containing (the) letters». However, the argument of «clear communication» does not seem relevant here, since the text shows the Christians deliberately spreading confusion at a number of places in the text; see discussion below in this paragraph. On a material note, the passage shows that Speratus and his fellow Christians probably still read the Bible from book-rolls, not yet in codex form; see Den Boeft-Bremmer 1991, 117.

<sup>38</sup> Bastiaensen 1987, 41 opts for the latter explanation, on account of the added *uiri*

Not only do these Pauline texts literally show the Christians as being a distinct group with texts of their own, it seems even impossible to communicate about them. The proconsul does show a form of attention for these texts<sup>39</sup>, but his cautious question as to their nature is answered by the Christians in such a way as to make him lose interest straight away<sup>40</sup>. The very mention of 'Paulus', possibly known by then as the author of Christian texts and as a source of inspiration for Christians, may have been enough to deter the proconsul to ask any further.

Much in the same vein is a phrase used somewhat earlier by Speratus in *AMS* 4. At the proconsul's demand that the Christians comply to the rules of the emperor cult, Speratus expresses what must have sounded as a defiant and arrogant statement, implying that the proconsul should listen attentively to a *mysterium simplicitatis*, 'a mystery of simplicity'. The very notion of a *mysterium simplicitatis*<sup>41</sup> must have sounded paradoxical or even plainly absurd to Roman ears<sup>42</sup>.

The entire dialogue between the Roman magistrate and the group's spokesperson Speratus shows how their worlds are drifting apart: both men hardly seem able to understand the other one's basic notions<sup>43</sup>.

*iusti*. He thinks that the letters were brought along to show to the proconsul that they contained lists of honorable virtues to be pursued or vices to be shunned, as e. g. *Ep. Rom.* 12,9; 1 *Ep. Cor.* 6,9 ff.; *Ep. Gal.* 5,19 ff.

<sup>39</sup> The proconsul seems to have been curious as to the contents of the *capsa* only in a general way. Alternatively, the thought might have crossed his mind that the Christians were possibly carrying prohibited 'magical' texts (cf. above, note 22); cf. Bonner 1956, 143-144; Lanata 1973, 143, and Freudenberger 1973, 210-211.

<sup>40</sup> A more 'inviting' and communicative answer might have been something like: «We have brought good books that advocate virtue and obedience, much according to Greek and Roman tradition. Would you allow us to read some key passages aloud?».

<sup>41</sup> One may note how *simplicitatis* on a lexical level takes up the word *simplex* used by Saturninus in the previous sentence, but seems to develop in an entirely different direction. Meanwhile, what exactly Speratus is suggesting remains unclear; scholars have come up with a wide range of Christian notions, e. g. monotheism, the creed, the double command of love for God and men; cf. Ruggiero 1991, 99-100 with references. Den Boeft-Bremmer 1981, 45-47 after discussing the phrase render it as «a simple (and true) religious doctrine»; cf. also Pizzolato 1976, 511-513 and Maraval 2010, 101-2 n. 7.

<sup>42</sup> According to Rossi 2004, 250 the verb *initior*, used by Saturninus in his reaction, implies that the Roman magistrate recognizes the specific sense of *mysterium* as related to 'initiation'. Even if this is accepted, it does not follow that the proconsul knew what exactly Speratus was talking about.

<sup>43</sup> The point was already made by Ruggiero 1991, 88, who suggests the debate seems like «un dialogo tra sordi» in which there is no real communication, but merely an exchange of statements, and in which both parties are unable to understand each

The proconsul at least tries to reach out in some way to the defendants, even right from the start: he says they may obtain the emperor's pardon (AMS 1) and suggests that in terms of 'religiosity', there is no irreconcilable discrepancy between Roman state religion and Christianity (AMS 3)<sup>44</sup>.

But on their part, the Christians deliberately spread confusion by appearing unable or even unwilling to choose language that can be intelligible to the proconsul presiding their trial. They do seem prepared to formally explain what is most important to them, but they are obviously not attempting seriously to make themselves understood by the Roman magistrate<sup>45</sup>.

Thus in AMS 2 Speratus takes up the word *imperator* from Saturninus' words in AMS 1, but clearly uses it in a different sense which the magistrate cannot be expected to understand<sup>46</sup>. Speratus later resumes *imperator*, along with *dominus* (cf. AMS 1) in AMS 6, but at this point the magistrate does not respond anymore<sup>47</sup>. Another case of deliberate confusion may be *persuasio* in

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other. Likewise, Berschin 1986, 41-42 suggests: «Man redet bewußt an einander vorbei» (although he also argues that the Christians consciously pick up some of the proconsul's words and give them a new, Christian sense; Berschin relates this to the origin of 'Christian Latin' in general; p. 42-45). By contrast, Rossi 2004, 234 argues that both parties knew very well what the other side meant. I would suggest that Speratus and his fellow Christians probably knew what the proconsul meant, but not vice versa.

<sup>44</sup> Saturninus' words *Et nos religiosi sumus* («We too are religious») do not show him on the defensive, as Seeliger-Wischmeyer 2015, 96 argue (taking this as an argument for a Christian styling of the AMS). The proconsul is rather trying to speak words of moderation and seems to be looking for some common ground, clearly to avoid having to pronounce a death sentence. In historical terms, Saturninus is aptly summarizing basic religious elements considered vital by the Roman authorities: swearing by the genius of the emperor, and bringing a sacrifice (to the gods) for the emperor's wellbeing; see Freudenberger 1973, 204-205; further Frend 1965, 313-314.

<sup>45</sup> Some scholars try to defend the attitude of the Christians. It has e. g. been argued that Speratus even in his hopeless situation tries to do «missionary work», and that the Christians repeatedly try to show they have committed no crimes (AMS 2 and 6); see Lendle 1975, 214 n. 40 and 217-218. To the Roman magistrate, the latter issue would of course have seemed irrelevant, given the fact that the Christians were charged on one specific point.

<sup>46</sup> That is, it is not used as a reference to the Roman emperor, as the proconsul had obviously intended it, but to God. Rossi, 2004, 245 states that the proconsul immediately understands Speratus' answer, but Saturninus' reaction implies hardly more than a general notion that he is dealing with a group of religious fanatics.

<sup>47</sup> In his reaction (AMS 7) Saturninus turns to the other Christians. This does not prove that he has clearly understood Speratus' words, as Rossi, 2004, 256 argues, but rather suggests that he has lost interest or has simply given up hope to have a meaningful conversation with Speratus.

AMS 7-8. Saturninus' call to Speratus to give up his 'ideology' is met with a defiant reply that *mala persuasio* would be rather to commit murder or perjury. In the latter combination the word seems to be used in a more vague sense of 'mentality, attitude', which was clearly not what Saturninus had meant. The difference in sense is not as great as in the case of words *imperator*, but great enough to create misunderstanding.

Some further details may be briefly added here. The Christian martyrs in spe repeatedly utter words and phrases that must have sounded strange, incomprehensible, or even disconcerting to the Roman magistrate.

For instance, one may point to Speratus' reference to Christians being grateful for being badly treated (AMS 2), or his refusal to accept *imperium huius seculi* (AMS 6, with *seculum* almost certainly used in the Christian sense of 'this earthly life')<sup>48</sup>; to Cittinus' and Nartzalus use of the plural form *in caelis* (AMS 8 and 15) which must have startled the average Roman, or to the very fact that various women raise their voice without having been asked first (AMS 8-9). Secunda's words 'What I am, that is what I want to be' may be interpreted correctly after Vestia's 'I am a Christian!', but in fact they look more like a riddle than a clear statement. Finally, Nartzalus' closing statement 'Today we are martyrs in the heavens' (AMS 15) must have equally puzzled the magistrate, if only for the unclassical use of the present tense or the Christian use of the plural 'heavens'. Even the proconsul's generous offer of time to reconsider the matter (AMS 11)<sup>49</sup> is met with blunt refusal<sup>50</sup>. Their shared expressions of joy and thanks (AMS 15 and 17)<sup>51</sup> may likewise have appeared so strange to him that all hope of entering into real communication was lost.

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<sup>48</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, Speratus' rebellious statement does not lead to a violent reaction of the proconsul. Instead, he simply ignores it and resumes his initial plea to return to normality; cf. Freudenberger 1973, 208.

<sup>49</sup> The use of *numquid* in AMS 11 does not presuppose a negative answer, given what follows in AMS 13. Cf. Den Boeft-Bremmer 1981, 48, who rather paraphrase Saturninus' question as follows: «I am afraid you will disregard my advice, but would it not be wise to take some time for reflection?», and rightly comment that this adds «a nice touch to the portrait of Saturninus». Interestingly, the position of Den Boeft-Bremmer is incorrectly interpreted by Seeliger-Wischmeyer 2015, 95n20 and 96, who argue that the proconsul is expecting a negative answer, and take this as further evidence of a conscious, Christian styling of the AMS as a whole.

<sup>50</sup> The offer is nonetheless repeated and specified by Saturninus in AMS 13 as an interval of 'thirty days'. One may discuss whether the Latin form *habete* as used by the proconsul is to be interpreted as indicative (stating a fact) or imperative (containing an invitation). Translators are mostly vague here, but Ruggiero 1991, 112 explicitly calls it an imperative, probably rightly. The following verb *recordemini* is, by all means, conjunctive expressing an invitation.

<sup>51</sup> The expressions of thanks by Speratus and Nartzalus take up one of Speratus' in-

It remains possible, of course, that the instances of miscommunication in the *AMS* are deliberate changes made by the editor to please and delight a Christian target audience. That is, they may be taken as arguments for a conscious, Christian modeling of the *AMS* into something more ambitious than a judicial court record. But this is not necessary to explain the text as we have it. For one thing, if a truly Christian color had really been added, one might expect a far more negative type casting of the Roman magistrate, and perhaps some edifying moral and theological digressions by the martyrs, e.g. on the books in their *capsa* (*AMS* 12).

As it is, the succinct altercation may well have taken place in court more or less in the written form which has been transmitted: it presents a fundamentally moderate and rather lenient Roman magistrate faced with defiant Christians, who refuse any compromise and effectively reject all communication. This may actually reflect such proceedings as left Roman magistrates no other choice than pronouncing the death sentence. There is no need to invoke Christian literary modeling here. Taken as a whole, therefore, the *AMS* seem to reproduce rather faithfully words that may well have been spoken during the court session, and so to remain close to the original Roman judicial document. It shows a markedly wide gap between the world of the Roman state and the world of the small group of the Christians, a gap that proves impossible to be bridged by words.

The striking display of deliberate miscommunication as observed in the *AMS* is by no means limited to this early text. A number of subsequent martyr acts show much the same phenomenon, particularly in dialogues between Roman officials and Christians expecting to die as martyrs. If Christian literary styling is to be looked for, it is surely in such later texts rather than the *AMS*<sup>52</sup>.

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ital points in *AMS* 3 *male accepti gratias egimus*, as Rossi 2004, 267 rightly observes. However, the Christians do not merely repeat the phrase, but are concretely applying it to their own situation. Their implicit message is, therefore, that they have been 'badly treated' by the proconsul. In view of his calmness and lenience during the interrogation, this may be called unjust. In communicative terms, it might also be seen as provocative, but at this stage the martyrs no longer attempt to communicate with the magistrate at all.

<sup>52</sup> As an example of lack of communication, I refer to the closing scene in *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 15. When Felicitas gives birth to a child and suffers great pain, she is confronted by a prison servant, who says: «You who now have such pains, what will you do when you will be thrown before the beasts? You showed contempt for them by refusing to sacrifice!». She replies: «Now I suffer what I suffer. But yonder there will be another one (*alius*) in me, who will suffer for me, because I too will suffer

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for him». Felicitas' words reflect Christian theology, but seem impossible for the non-Christian servant to understand. Some other examples can be found in Berschin 1986, 42-46.

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Appendix: *Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum*  
Text and translation<sup>53</sup>

Latin text

1. Praesente bis et Condiano consulibus, XVI Kalendas Augustas, Kartagine in secretario inpositis Sperato, Nartzalo et Cittino, Donata, Secunda, Vestia, Saturninus proconsul dixit: 'Potestis indulgentiam domni nostri imperatoris promereri, si ad bonam mentem redeatis.'

2. Speratus dixit: 'Numquam malefecimus, iniquitati nullam operam praebuimus: numquam malediximus, sed male accepti gratias egimus propter quod imperatorem nostrum obseruamus.'

3. Saturninus proconsul dixit: 'Et nos religiosi sumus et simplex est religio nostra, et iuramus per genium domni nostri imperatoris et pro salute eius supplicamus, quod et uos quoque facere debetis.'

4. Speratus dixit: 'Si tranquillas praebueris aures tuas, dico mysterium simplicitatis.'

5. Saturninus dixit: 'Initianti tibi mala de sacris nostris aures non praeebo; sed potius iura per genium domni nostri imperatoris.'

6. Speratus dixit: 'Ego imperium huius seculi non agnosco;<sup>54</sup> sed magis illi Deo seruio quem nemo hominum uidit nec uidere his oculis potest. Furtum non feci, sed siquid emero teloneum reddo quia cognosco domnum meum et imperatorem regum omnium gentium.'<sup>55</sup>

7. Saturninus proconsul dixit ceteris: 'Desinite huius esse persuasionis.'

Speratus dixit: 'Mala est persuasio homicidium facere, falsum testimonium dicere.'

8. Saturninus proconsul dixit: 'Nolite huius dementiae esse participes.'

Cittinus dixit: 'Nos non habemus alium quem timeamus nisi domnum Deum nostrum qui est in caelis.'

9. Donata dixit: 'Honorem Caesari quasi Caesari; timorem autem Deo.'

Vestia dixit: 'Christiana sum.'

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<sup>53</sup> The Latin text is based on Bastiaensen 1987, with minor changes in punctuation and layout, and one or two major changes as explained in the notes. The English translation added here attempts to bring out the text, more than is commonly done, as a record of a live altercation.

<sup>54</sup> The reading *agnosco* of MS A is preferred with Ruggiero 1991, 72; Den Boeft-Bremmer 1995, 158, and Seeliger-Wischmeyer 2015, 92 to *cognosco* of BCD as printed by Bastiaensen.

<sup>55</sup> The reading *et imperatorem regum omnium gentium* of MS A is preferred with Ruggiero 1991, 72 to the conjecture *regem regum et imperatorem omnium gentium* as printed by Bastiaensen. Musurillo 1972, 86 prints *imperatorum regum et omnium gentium* of BCD, followed by Seeliger-Wischmeyer 2015, 92,



Secunda dixit: 'Quod sum, ipsud uolo esse.'

10. Saturninus proconsul Sperato dixit: 'Perseueras Christianus?'

Speratus dixit: 'Christianus sum' et cum eo omnes consenserunt.

11. Saturninus proconsul dixit: 'Numquid ad deliberandum spatium uultis?'

Speratus dixit: 'In re tam iusta nulla est commutatio.'<sup>56</sup>

12. Saturninus proconsul dixit: 'Quae sunt res in capsula uestra?'

Speratus dixit: 'Libri et epistulae Pauli uiri iusti.'

13. Saturninus proconsul dixit: 'Moram XXX dierum habete et recorderimini.'

Speratus iterum dixit: 'Christianus sum' et cum eo omnes consenserunt.

14. Saturninus proconsul decretum ex tabella recitauit: 'Speratum, Nartzalum, Cittinum, Donatam, Vestiam, Secundam, et ceteros ritu Christiano se uiuere confessos, quoniam oblata sibi facultate ad Romanorum morem redeundi obstinanter perseuerauerunt, gladio animaduerti placet.'

15. Speratus dixit: 'Deo gratias agimus.'

Nartzalus dixit: 'Hodie martyres in caelis sumus. Deo gratias.'

16. Saturninus proconsul per praeconem dici iussit: 'Speratum, Nartzalum, Cittinum, Veturium, Felicem, Aquilinum, Laetantium, Ianuariam, Generosam, Vestiam, Donatam, Secundam duci iussi.'

17. Vniuersi dixerunt: 'Deo gratias'<sup>57</sup>.

Et ita omnes simul martyrio coronati sunt, et regnant cum Patre et Filio et Spiritu Sancto per omnia secula seculorum. Amen.

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<sup>56</sup> The reading *commutatio* of MS A is preferred with Ruggiero 1991, 73; Den Boeft-Bremmer 1995, 158, and Seeliger-Wischmeyer 2015, 94 to *deliberatio* of BCD as printed by Bastiaensen.

<sup>57</sup> The text by Musurillo 1972, here continues and ends according to MSS BC: *Et statim decollati sunt pro nomine Christi. Amen.* («And straightway they were beheaded for the sake of Christ. Amen»). By contrast, Bastiaensen 1987 (followed here and also by Ruggiero 1991) accepts the reading of MS A. (For a longer list of variants in the MSS, see Delehay 1966, 283). In the text as printed by Rossi 2004, 269, it seems to be defended that *both* endings should be combined, with the short sentence (from BC) on beheading first, followed by the prayer (from A) and ending with the concluding *amen* (from ABC). Palaeographically however, this seems difficult to defend.

Translation

1. *During the consulship of Praesens (his second time) and Condianus<sup>58</sup>, on July, 17<sup>th</sup>, in Carthage, there were set in the judgment-hall Speratus, Nartzalus and Cittinus, Donata, Secunda and Vestia.*

*Proconsul Saturninus*

You can earn the indulgence of our Lord the Emperor, if you return to a sound mind.

2. *Speratus*

We have never done wrong, we have not supported iniquity in any way, we have never spoken ill, but when ill-treated we have given thanks, because we respect our Emperor.

3. *Proconsul Saturninus*

We too are religious and our religion is straightforward. We swear by the genius of our Lord the Emperor and pray for his wellbeing, which is what you ought to do as well.

4. *Speratus*

If you lend me your ears in peace, I will tell you a mystery of simplicity.

5. *Saturninus*

If you start with evil things about our sacred rites, I will not lend my ears! But do you rather swear by the genius of our Lord the Emperor.

6. *Speratus*

I do not acknowledge the empire of this world. But rather I serve the God whom no man has seen nor can see with these eyes. I have committed no theft, but if I have bought anything I pay the tax, because I know my Lord and the Emperor of the kings of all nations.

7. *Proconsul<sup>59</sup> Saturninus (to the rest)*

Stop being of this persuasion.

*Speratus*

A bad persuasion is to commit murder, to speak false witness!

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. above, note 5. Bastiaensen's correction has also been printed in the above Latin text.

<sup>59</sup> Having been introduced as proconsul in *AMS* 1 and 3, Saturninus was next named without reference to his official function in *AMS* 5. Here the function is added again, perhaps because he now addresses other persons. It seems less clear why he will consistently be mentioned proconsul at every later instance in the text. It may be simply a matter of Roman legal procedure. In addition, I suggest that from a Christian point of view, it marks Saturninus as being fundamentally different from the martyrs. In this sense, the repeated *proconsul* underscores and visualizes the gap between the Christians and the Roman magistrate.

8. *Proconsul Saturninus* <(to the rest)><sup>60</sup>

Do not take part in this madness.

*Cittinus*

We have none other to fear, apart from our Lord God, who is in the heavens.

9. *Donata*

Honour to Caesar as Caesar: but fear to God!

*Vestia*

I am a Christian!

*Secunda*

What I am, that is what I want to be!

10. *Proconsul Saturninus* (to *Speratus*)

Do you persist as Christian?

*Speratus*

I am a Christian.

*And all agreed with him.*

11. *Proconsul Saturninus*

Do you want to have some time to reconsider the matter?

*Speratus*

In such a right cause there is no change of opinion.

12. *Proconsul Saturninus*

What is in your bookcase?

*Speratus*

Books and epistles of Paul, a righteous man.

13. *Proconsul Saturninus*

Have a delay of thirty days, and think about it.

*Speratus* (for a second time)

I am a Christian.

*And all agreed with him.*

14. *Proconsul Saturninus* read out his decree from a tablet

*Speratus*, *Nartzalus*, *Cittinus*, *Donata*, *Vestia*, *Secunda* and the rest who have confessed to be living according to the Christian rite, since after opportunity offered to them of returning to Roman tradition they have obstinately persisted, are hereby condemned to death by the sword.

15. *Speratus*

We give thanks to God.

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<sup>60</sup> *Saturninus* ignores the intervention by *Speratus*, and continues to address the others. In Latin, this can be clearly seen in his continued use of the 2nd person plural *nolite* (after *desinite* in 7).

*Nartzalus*

Today we are martyrs in heaven! Thanks be to God.

16. *A herald proclaimed on behalf of proconsul Saturninus*

Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Januaria, Generosa, Vestia, Donata and Secunda, I have ordered to be executed.

17. *All <six martyrs>*<sup>61</sup>

Thanks be to God.

*And so they all together have been crowned with martyrdom, and they reign with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, unto all ages of ages. Amen.*

*Abstract.* This paper deals with the earliest Christian Latin text, a short martyr act recording the interrogation of a group of African Christians, in Carthage in 180 A.D. First, it discusses some detailed questions concerning the dates and places involved in the document, as well as the vexed question of the number of persons put on trial. Most importantly, however, the paper highlights some aspects of communication, or miscommunication, between the Roman proconsul and the Christian defendants. The Christian martyrs seem keen on spreading confusion by deliberately using words and phrases in such a way as to obstruct being properly understood. A full Latin text and English translation are added in an appendix.

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<sup>61</sup> According to Bastiaensen 1987, 411 *uniuersi* refers to the audience. But this would make the concluding prayer incongruent, which does not seem natural. Moreover, if spectators were to applaud the martyrs, they would probably put themselves in danger. In a text as early as this, the audience can hardly have been predominantly Christian. As I argued above, it seems most likely that the trial involved the six persons mentioned at the beginning. So it seems best to take *uniuersi* as referring to «all those who spoke out in the foregoing», that is: Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Secunda, and Vestia.