

Befriending the Living Martyr: Elite Patronage in Paulinus of Nola, *Epistle* 18

Paulinus of Nola's 18th epistle, a letter of self-introduction to the important bishop and later saint, Victricius of Rouen, is a subtle work of Roman elite-to-elite flattery in a Christian context. Scholars have mostly focused on Paulinus' references to Victricius' missionary activities (18.5: Guttilla 2001; Ampio 2014) or his striking description of the bishop as a "living martyr" (*martyr vivus*, 18.9: Fabre 1949, 231-5; Guttilla 2003; Beatrice 2016). I argue that Paulinus attempts in this letter to engage Victricius in an elite patronage relationship. The social and material benefits that would accrue to Paulinus from this relationship become clear when *Ep.* 18 is compared with certain letters from Paulinus to Sulpicius Severus.

Paulinus' flattery of Victricius appears via an intertext with Sulpicius' *Vita Sancti Martini* (*VSM*). In *Ep.* 18.7, Paulinus recalls a story he has heard about Victricius' military service in Gaul under Caesar Julian (354-360). This story has intertextual connections to *VSM* 4: Both Victricius and Martin refused to engage in battle due to their Christian beliefs, both are subsequently punished by their pagan superiors and then saved by divine intervention. While Martin is punished by Julian himself, who famously apostatized from Christianity, Victricius' superior is an unnamed *comes* who converts to Christianity after Victricius' miraculous escape. Paulinus thus subtly flatters Victricius by having him outdo the deeds of the already legendary Martin: While Martin merely survived Julian's wrath, Victricius did as much and then converted his oppressor. Part of this portrayal is also intended to prepare the reader for Paulinus' paradoxical description of Victricius as a living martyr, with Paulinus emphasizing Victricius' suffering (*passio*, a word closely associated with martyrs: e.g., 18.7: [*Deus*]...*passus* *est militare te Caesari... ut...spiralibus te proeliis roborares...passioni corpus indurans*).

Paulinus' attribution of living martyrdom to Victricius carries with it certain implications. Specifically, as scholars have noted, Paulinus' poems to St. Felix of Nola frequently use the interlocked language of *amicitia* and patronage (Fabre 1949, 339-86; White 1992, 161-3). Paulinus thus conceives of martyrs as Christian patrons, powerful figures who benefit their socially-lesser *clientes*. Appropriately, Paulinus says that Rouen has benefitted materially and socially from the "merit of [Victricius'] holiness" (*meritum tuae sanctitatis*, 18.5): in addition to making it famous, even in far-flung places (*peruulgatum in longinquis etiam prouinciis nominari uenerabiliter audimus*), Victricius has transformed Rouen into another Jerusalem (*totam illic...Hierusales faciem*), not least because of the relics introduced there (*apostolorum quoque praesentia*). By approaching him with a subtly flattering letter, Paulinus hopes to draw Victricius (and his patronage) into his wider social network.

Why would Paulinus, an elite Roman who renounced his secular wealth, want to imply that Victricius is his patron? Even though Paulinus portrays himself (and those in his social circle) as impoverished, he nevertheless continued to reap social and material benefits from his network of elite patronage. This can be seen clearly in his correspondence with Sulpicius Severus. Although Paulinus praises Severus' decision to give up his secular wealth (*Ep.* 1.1-4; 5.4-5), in *Ep.* 32.2 he reveals that Severus retained enough wealth to fund the construction of a *basilica*, in which a portrait of Paulinus would be hung across from one of Martin. Severus' gift to Paulinus is not material, but the social power that would come from being associated with a significant contemporary saint such as Martin was considerable. Even if Paulinus himself retained nothing of his previous wealth, however, another letter (29.5) describes an expensive lambswool tunic given to him by Melania the Elder, which he then passes on to Severus, along with an encomiastic biography of Melania (29.6-14). Paulinus thus benefits from his network,

even if he does not own the goods himself. By comparing Paulinus' correspondences with Severus and Victricius, I contribute to our understanding of how elite Christian Romans continued to maintain their high status in late antiquity, despite their apparent adherence to self-imposed poverty.

Bibliography

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