

This paper investigates how the fourth-century Iberian Christian poet Prudentius's *Peristephanon* 13 draws on images and ideas from classical poetry to imbue the stories of Christian martyrs with an epic tone. The poem tells the story of the martyrdom of Cyprian, but adds many evocative details not found in earlier accounts of Cyprian's death. Prudentius is known for his highly sophisticated use of symbolism and allusion (Malamud 1989, 1-11), and a close examination of parallels in the poetic tradition will help make sense of his creative additions to the existing martyrdom story.

In my first section, I show how Prudentius casts Cyprian as an epic hero through the addition of details to the story and through direct allusions to Vergil. After Cyprian is arrested, Prudentius adds an episode not found in previous lives of Cyprian: Cyprian being imprisoned in a cave underground. This cave is described as "knowing the darkness of Tartarus," suggesting that Cyprian's imprisonment can be seen as an epic katabasis (line 52). While in prison, Cyprian calls out to God with the address *omnipotens genitor*, an allusion to *Aeneid* 10, where Turnus addresses Jupiter with the same phrase (55; Vergil, *Aeneid* 10.668). This allusion strengthens Cyprian's portrayal as an epic hero, as does subsequent focus on the glory to be won through martyrdom. In answer to his prayer to God to strengthen his people in the hour of persecution, Prudentius says that the Holy Spirit causes the Carthagian Christians *laudis amore rapi*, "to be seized by the love of praise" (75). In the *Aeneid*, Ascanius is *eximiae laudis succensus amore*, "inflamed by the love of uncommon praise" hunting a stag (Vergil, *Aeneid* 7.496) and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a soldier takes the wall of a besieged city *laudisque accensus amore* "fired by the love of praise" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.527). Moreover, when Cyprian exhorts his

followers to martyrdom for Christ, he is said to prepare *corda uirum Christo calefacta praeparauit*, “hearts of men grown hot for Christ,” (49) echoing *Aeneid* 12, where the Rutulians have *calefactaque corda tumultu*, “hearts grown hot at the tumult” (Vergil, *Aeneid* 12.69). Thus Prudentius adapts the language of battle and martial glory to describe the zeal of the martyrs.

In the second section, I argue that the story of the *Candida Massa* being martyred in a lime-pit was an invention of Prudentius that allows him to add classical resonance to the poem. The *Candida Massa* is a separate group of North African martyrs that Prudentius adds to the story of Cyprian, saying that they were followers of his who were martyred by being forced to jump into a pit of burning lime. I argue from archaeological and historical evidence that the lime-pit martyrdom, not attested in earlier sources, is highly implausible and that Prudentius invented the story for symbolic and literary reasons. Prudentius says that the pit “vomits fire,” a phrase used by Vergil to describe Cacus (78; Vergil, *Aeneid* 8.199), and this and other phrases connect the pit to monsters of epic. I also discuss classical stories of immolation conferring or intended to confer immortality—Empedocles, Demophöon in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, Achilles in Apollonius’s *Argonautica*, and Hercules in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—and show connections to Prudentius’s narrative. I suggest that this theme may explain why Prudentius adds death by fire to the story. Just as Hercules’s mortal part is burned away and his divine part becomes a god, the martyrs of the *Candida Massa* are consumed by a fiery pit of lime and through this process they are made immortal. Thus Prudentius adapts an ancient mythological idea to illustrate the Christian idea of both immortality and glory coming through a martyr’s death.

In the third section, I contest Martha Malamud’s thesis that the symbolism of the poem and the disturbing eagerness of Cyprian and the *Candida Massa* for death reveal a subversive

questioning of martyrdom (Malamud 1989, 147-148). While the poem's language of seeking glory is startling, particularly when Prudentius makes it echo epic heroes desiring glory in battle, it is in accord with the earlier accounts of Cyprian's martyrdom. Moreover, I use the discussion of immortality through fire in section two to argue that the *Candida Massa's* death in the pit is not pointless annihilation, but a destruction of the mortal nature that ushers them into immortality in heaven.

In conclusion, I argue that Prudentius's desire to frame martyrs as epic heroes and to incorporate classical traditions helps illuminate mysterious sections of this poem such as the focus on glory and the episode of the lime-pit.

Works Cited

Mahoney, Albertus. *Vergil in the Works of Prudentius*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1934.

Malamud, Martha A. *A Poetics of Transformation: Prudentius and Classical Mythology*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989.