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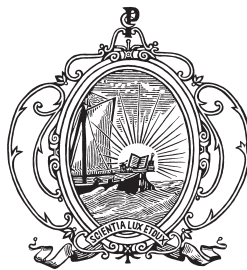
# STUDIA PATRISTICA

VOL. XCVII

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on Patristic Studies held  
in Oxford 2015

Edited by  
MARKUS VINZENT

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From the Fourth Century Onwards (Latin Writers)  
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# ‘Let him thus be a Hippolytus’ (*Perist.* 11.87): Horror and Rhetoric in Prudentius’ *Peristephanon* 11

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## ABSTRACT

The characterization of Hippolytus, the main protagonist of Prudentius’ *Peristephanon* 11, draws heavily on earlier literary traditions, most importantly Seneca’s *Phaedra*. Nevertheless, the Hippolytus-imagery is carefully adapted in order to develop a rhetoric of bodily fragmentation and reunion. This discourse makes the minds of the readers receptive for a proper veneration of the saint’s relics.

## Introduction

The 11<sup>th</sup> poem of Prudentius’ *Peristephanon* (*Perist.*), which was written around 400-405 AD, concentrates on the martyrdom of Hippolytus: a bishop who is put on trial, because he tries to convert other people.<sup>1</sup> The magistrate furiously orders him to be torn apart by horses, consequently to re-enact his own name (*hippo-lytos*): *ergo sit Hippolytus, quatiat turbetque iugales, / intereatque feris dilaceratus equis* (‘Hippolytus let him be then. Let him get a team frightened and agitated and be torn to death by wild horses’, *Perist.* 11.87-8).<sup>2</sup> The magistrate’s verdict explicitly connects the martyr Hippolytus to his mythological namesake, whose fate is recorded by among others Euripides, Seneca and Ovid.<sup>3</sup> The mythological Hippolytus rejects the advances of his stepmother *Phaedra*, after which he dies a cruel death, getting entangled in the reins of his chariot and then being torn apart by the horses.<sup>4</sup> Prudentius’ rhetoric of fragmentation in *Perist.* 11 is highly dependent on the use of imagery

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<sup>1</sup> *Perist.* 11.77-170 describes the subsequent trial, martyrdom, death and burial of Hippolytus.

<sup>2</sup> The text and translations from *Perist.* 11 are taken from *Prudentius Vol. II*, ed. Henry J. Thomson, Loeb Classical Library 398 (Cambridge and London, 1953).

<sup>3</sup> Eur., *Hipp.* 1173-254, Ovid., *Met.* 15.492-546, Sen., *Phaedr.* 991-1114.

<sup>4</sup> According to one version of the story, Hippolytus is restored to life by Asclepius; see Callim., *Fr.* 190 Pf. and Virg., *Aen.* 7.765-82.

related to the mythological figure of Hippolytus. Like his mythological namesake, the Christian Hippolytus is bound with his feet to a span of horses and then dragged around. His body is scattered on the rocks and in the thorny bushes. After the martyr's cruel death, his followers collect the bodily remains and put them in a shrine, which attracts large crowds of worshippers.<sup>5</sup>

This article focuses on the rhetoric which is exploited by Prudentius in order to describe the cruel fate of Hippolytus in *Perist.* 11. In the past thirty years, relatively much attention has been paid to the theme of bodily fragmentation in relation to the dispersed narrative structure of the poem and the cult of relics.<sup>6</sup> However, these studies have not fully taken into account Prudentius' remodelling of the mythological figure of Hippolytus. This article aims to fill this gap, firstly, by comparing *Perist.* 11 to other productions from the literary and artistic context; secondly, by discussing the connection between the contents and narrative structure of the poem; and thirdly, by providing a preliminary discussion of the function of the rhetoric of bodily fragmentation in the cult of relics. This might elucidate the ways in which the mythological figure of Hippolytus is transformed in order to create an effective rhetoric of corporeal dismemberment and unity in *Perist.* 11, which makes the minds of the readers receptive for a proper veneration of the saint's relics.

## 1. Adaptation of the Hippolytus-paradigm

In *Perist.* 11, the traditional representation of the mythological Hippolytus is innovatively adapted in order to highlight the cruelties of Hippolytus' martyrdom. As is well known, the mythological Hippolytus is one of the stock models of chastity and beauty in ancient literature.<sup>7</sup> In Chariton's novel 'Callirhoe', to take but one example, the narrator compares the hero Chaireas to the tragic Hippolytus, characterizing him in terms of visual art: Χαίρεας γάρ τις ἦν μετράκιον

<sup>5</sup> Apart from the rather lengthy poem of Prudentius, there are not many other sources extant about the martyrdom of Hippolytus. A search in the BHL indicates the existence of at least three more martyr accounts on Hippolytus (BHL 3963-7). The tradition of these texts is rather complex, since they are all incorporated in other hagiographical *corpora*. Moreover, one of them describes a different version of the story, in which the martyr is boiled in a pit (BHL 3963).

<sup>6</sup> See Martha A. Malamud, *A Poetics of Transformation: Prudentius and Classical Mythology* (Ithaca and London, 1989); Michael Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs: The Liber Peristephanon of Prudentius* (Michigan, 1993); Christian A. Kaesser, 'Narrating *Disiecta Corpora*: The Rhetoric of Bodily Dismemberment in Prudentius *Peristephanon* 11', in Genevieve Liveley and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell (eds), *Latin Elegy and Narratology: Fragments of Story in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> There are several instances of the figure of Hippolytus being used as a model of chastity and beauty; see OCD s.v. Hippolytus (1). See also Koen De Temmerman, *Crafting Characters: Heroeas and Heroines in the Ancient Greek Novel* (Oxford, 2014), 47-9.

εὐμορφον, πάντων ὑπερέχον, οἶχον Ἀχιλλέα καὶ Νιρέα καὶ Ἴππόλυτον καὶ Ἀλκιβιάδην πλάσται καὶ γραφεῖς δεικνύουσι... ('He is surpassingly handsome, like Achilles and Nireus and Alcibiades and Hippolytus as sculptors and painters portray them...'; *Char.* 1.3).<sup>8</sup> Hippolytus is also a popular model of chastity and physical beauty on antique artworks, which usually depict *Phaedra*'s fruitless seduction of Hippolytus as a proof of the hero's chastity.<sup>9</sup>

Remarkably, unlike other literary and artistic traditions, *Perist.* 11 does not use the figure of the mythological Hippolytus as a paradigm of chastity or male beauty. The Christian Hippolytus is presented as an old man (*senior*, *Perist.* 11.78) with grey hair (*caput niveum*, *Perist.* 11.137), while the motif of chastity is left aside altogether. Instead, the figure of the mythological Hippolytus is employed as a model of physical dismemberment for the Christian hero. Interestingly, this focus on bodily fragmentation goes back to an earlier tragedy which recounts the story of the mythological Hippolytus, namely Seneca's *Phaedra*.

## 2. Adaptation of Seneca's *Phaedra*

Scholars have frequently pointed out narrative similarities between the *Phaedra* and *Perist.* 11.<sup>10</sup> Seneca's tragedy contains a description of Hippolytus' death (*Sen.*, *Phaedr.* 1000-14) whose particular gruesome nature has been characterized as a 'characteristically Senecan touch'.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, precisely the bloody and horrific details of Seneca's description of Hippolytus' death recur in *Perist.* 11. In both texts, the horses are agitated by their own fury (*furor*).<sup>12</sup> They rave unconsciously of their burden (*onus*).<sup>13</sup> The bodies of both

<sup>8</sup> Translation taken from *Chariton Aphrodisiensis. De Callirhoe narrationes amatoriae*, ed. Bryan Reardon (Munich, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> See Jean Ch. Balty (ed.), *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* 5,1 (Zürich, 1981-1999), 445-64, s.v. 'Hippolytos I'.

<sup>10</sup> See Gustav Sixt, 'Des Prudentius' Abhängigkeit von Seneca und Lucan', *Philologus* 51 (1892), 501-6; Anne-Marie Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford, 1989), 188-93; M.A. Malamud, *A Poetics of Transformation* (1989), 83-93; R. Mayer, *Seneca: Phaedra* (2002); Pierre Y. Fux, *Les sept Passions de Prudence: Peristephanon 2. 5. 9. 11-14. Introduction générale et commentaire* (Freiburg, 2003) and Pierre Y. Fux, *Prudence et les martyrs: hymnes et tragédie (Peristephanon 1.3-4.6-8.10). Commentaire* (Freiburg, 2013) for further discussions of the intertextual connections between *Perist.* 11 and other literary works, such as Seneca's *Phaedra*.

<sup>11</sup> Rosanna Lauriola, 'Hippolytus', in Rosanna Lauriola and Kyriakos N. Demetriou (eds), *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Euripides* (Leiden and Boston, 2015), 443-504, 457.

<sup>12</sup> ...feruntur, / qua sonus atque tremor, qua furor exagitant (*Perist.* 11.111-2) and *quacumque rabidos pavidus evexit furor* (*Sen. Phaedr.* 1070). The text and translations from the *Phaedra* are taken from *Seneca: Hercules, Trojan Women, Phoenician women, Medea, Phaedra*, ed. John G. Fitch, Loeb Classical Library 62 (Cambridge and London, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> *Nec cursus uolucer mobile sentit onus* (*Perist.* 11.114) and *(currus) talis per auras non suum agnoscens onus* (*Sen. Phaedr.* 1090).



victims lie shattered on the bushes (*spinigeris stirpibus hirtus ager/dumi*) and the rocks (*scopulis*).<sup>14</sup> After the death of the heroes, the followers of both victims collect their bodies, simply tracing the bloody track of their bodily remains (*fractum ... iter/longum ... tramitem*).<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, *Perist.* 11 diverges from its literary model at a crucial point. Seneca mentions that the followers do not collect all remains of the ‘scattered parts of [Hippolytus’] torn body’ (*disiecta ... membra corporis laceri*, Sen., *Phaedr.* 1256), as a result of which the chorus at Hippolytus’ burial laments that a ‘large part is still lacking to our tears’ (*magna lacrimis pars adhuc nostris abest*, Sen., *Phaedr.* 1261).<sup>16</sup> Prudentius, on the other hand, emphasizes the integrity of the body of the martyr:

*cumque recensetis constaret partibus ille / corporis integri qui fuerat numerus, / nec purgata aliquid deberent avia toto / ex homine extersis frondibus et scopulis, / metando eligitur tumulo locus.* (*Perist.* 11.147-51)

The parts were reviewed and found to make the number belonging to the unmutilated body (*corpus integrum*); the pathless ground being cleared, and the boughs and rocks wiped dry, had nothing of the whole man still to give up; and now a site was chosen on which to set a tomb.

Unlike Seneca’s *Phaedra*, *Perist.* 11 tells that *all* bodily fragments are collected by the followers, including the stains of blood. Consequently, the story of Hippolytus’ martyrdom in *Perist.* 11 is characterized by a movement from bodily fragmentation to corporeal reunion. As we will see in the next paragraph, this movement is mirrored on the level of the narrative construction of the poem.

### 3. Contents and narrative structure

*Perist.* 11 is well-known for its painting *ekphrasis*, which meticulously describes how the bodily parts of Hippolytus are scattered and finally collected by his followers (*Perist.* 11.125-51).<sup>17</sup> The *ekphrasis* describes the events in explicitly painterly terms:

<sup>14</sup> *Scissa minuatim labefacto corpore frustra / carpit spinigeris stirpibus hirtus ager. / pars summis pendet scopulis...* (*Perist.* 11.119-21) and *late cruentat arva et inlimum caput scopulis resultat; auferunt dum comas* (Sen., *Phaedr.* 1094-5).

<sup>15</sup> *Addiderat caros gressu lacrimisque sequentes, / devia quo fractum semita monstrat iter. / maerore attoniti atque oculis rimantibus ibant, / inplebantque sinus visceribus laceris* (*Perist.* 11.133-6) and *Errant per agros funebris famuli manus, / per illa qua distractus Hippolytus loca / longum cruenta tramitem signat nota... passim ad supremos ille colligitur rogos / et funeri confertur* (Sen., *Phaedr.* 1105-7, 1113-4).

<sup>16</sup> See Roland Mayer, *Seneca: Phaedra*, Duckworth Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy (London, 2002), 76-7.

<sup>17</sup> See M. Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs* (1993), 136-7 and P. Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination* (2009), 91-2 on the *ekphrasis* in *Perist.* 11. See for more general information

*Rorantes saxorum apices vidi, optime papa, / purpureasque notas vepribus inpositas. / docta manus virides imitando effingere dumos / luserat et minio russeolam saniem. / cernere erat ruptis compagibus ordine nullo / membra per incertos sparsa iacere situs. ... Palliolis etiam bibulae siccantur harenae, / ne quis in infecto pulvere ros maneat. / se quis et in sudibus ... sanguis / insidet, hunc omnem spongia pressit rapit. (Perist. 11.141-4)*

I saw the tips of rocks dripping (*rorantes*), most excellent Father, and scarlet stains (*purpeas notas*) imprinted on the briars, where a hand that was skilled in portraying green (*virides*) bushes had also figured the red blood in vermillion (*mineo*). ... One could see the parts (*membra*) torn asunder and lying scattered (*sparsa*) in disorder up and down at random. ... With their garments [the followers, K.S.] wipe dry (*siccantur*) the soaking sand, so that no drop (*ros*) shall remain to dye (*infecto*) the dust; and wherever blood adheres to the spikes ... they press a sponge (*spongia*) on it and carry it all away. (*Perist.* 11.127-33, 141-4)

The *ekphrasis* ends with the passage cited earlier, in which the followers reconstitute the *corpus integrum* of the martyr (*Perist.* 11.147-51).

The painting metaphors in the *ekphrasis* tailor the movement of bodily dismemberment and reunion to the narrative structure of the text. Scholars have often suggested that the *ekphrasis* in *Perist.* 11 does not have a proper ending, but is gradually dissolved in the poem.<sup>18</sup> In my opinion, however, the painting metaphors mark the boundary of the *ekphrasis*, since the narrator stops using painting metaphors at the very moment when the followers have collected all bodily remains of Hippolytus and have reconstituted the *corpus integrum* (*Perist.* 11.148). As a result, the end of the story of bodily dismemberment, as it is told in the *ekphrasis* in all its detail, coincides with the closure of the painting *ekphrasis*. The movement from corporeal fragmentation towards reunion is thus mirrored on a structural level by the insertion of the *ekphrasis* and its closure. This confirms the importance of the theme of fragmentation and reunion in *Perist.* 11.<sup>19</sup> The question is then raised as to *why* this theme is so important in the poem.

about the function of *ekphrasis* in early Christian literature: Liz James and Ruth Webb, 'To understand Ultimate Things and enter Secret Places: Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium', *Art History* 14 (1991), 1-17; and Ruth Webb, 'Accomplishing the Picture: Ekphrasis, Mimesis and Martyrdom in Asterios of Amaseia', in Liz James (ed.), *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture* (Cambridge, 2007), 13-32.

<sup>18</sup> See M.A. Malamud, *A Poetics of Transformation* (1989), 96; P. Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination* (2009), 70 and Ian Fielding, 'Elegiac memorial and the martyr as medium in Prudentius' *Peristephanon*', *CQ* 62 (2014), 808-20.

<sup>19</sup> See Jill Ross, 'Dynamic Writing and Martyr's Bodies in Prudentius' *Peristephanon*', *J ECS* 3 (1995), 325-55 for a discussion of similar aesthetics in *Perist.* 9, which describes the martyrdom of Cassian.

#### 4. The importance of bodily fragmentation and reunion

Scholars have frequently pointed out the often highly violent contents of late antique martyr accounts<sup>20</sup> and considered it as a means to stimulate the Christianization of the late antique world.<sup>21</sup> This seems also to pertain to *Perist.* 11, in which the movement of bodily fragmentation and reunion is presented as highly significant for the cult of relics.<sup>22</sup> After the bodily remains have been put in a shrine, they start to perform miracles: *Mira loci pietas et prompta precantibus ara / spes hominum placida prosperitate iuvat* ('Wonderful is the grace that attaches to the spot, and the altar, ever ready to receive its supplicants, fosters the hopes of men with kindly favour'; *Perist.* 11.175-6). The relics attract large crowds of worshippers, among whom the narrator of the poem who pretends to have visited *in propria persona* the shrine of the martyr during his pilgrimage to Rome.<sup>23</sup> At the end of the poem, the narrator begs the addressee of the poem, Valerianus bishop of Calahorra, to include the martyr on his liturgical calendar, finally guaranteeing the cultic veneration of the martyr:<sup>24</sup> *Quem te quoque, sancte magister, / annua festa inter dinumerare velim* ('I should like you too, holy teacher, to count [Hippolytus' feast day, K.S.] among your yearly festivals'; *Perist.* 11.233-4). This gradual converging of the literary world with the contemporary social reality of Prudentius stresses the importance of the discourse of fragmentation and reunion of Hippolytus for the production of his relics and the establishment of his cult.

This discourse seems to have been successful for the promotion of Hippolytus' cult in Spain. Anne-Marie Palmer has drawn attention to the attestation of Hippolytus' feast day in the *Libellus orationum* of Verona, which provides information about the liturgical calendar of Tarragona, the area where Calahorra is located, at the end of the 7th century.<sup>25</sup> From a more general perspective, the poem might have appealed a broader Christian readership, as has recently been

<sup>20</sup> See Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les Passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires* (Brussels, 1966), 171-3.

<sup>21</sup> See Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London, 2004), 65-6 and Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York, 2004), 126-32.

<sup>22</sup> Inspired by Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 2014/1981), scholars have read the diverse narrative origins of the poem as a symbol of the dispersion of the martyrs' relics; see for example, M. Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs* (1993), 148-67 and P. Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination* (2009), 69-73. See C.A. Kaesser, 'Narrating *Disiecta Corpora*' (2008) and I. Fielding, 'Elegiac memorial' (2014) for the relationship between the fragmented narrative structure of the poem and the shattered body of the martyr. A discussion of the aesthetic dimensions of the rhetoric of fragmentation in late antique literature in general is provided in Marco Formisano, 'Towards an Aesthetic Paradigm of Late Antiquity', *Antiquité Tardive* 15 (2007), 277-84; 282-4.

<sup>23</sup> See *Perist.* 11.174-6, 195-230.

<sup>24</sup> See A.M. Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (1989), 256-8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

argued.<sup>26</sup> The highly visual descriptions of Hippolytus' martyrdom, as well as the painting *ekphrasis*, create a certain visual aesthetics of bodily dismemberment and reunion which stirs the readers' imagination, making their minds receptive for a proper veneration of the saint's relics.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusions

To conclude, this article suggests that Prudentius develops an innovative rhetoric of fragmentation in *Perist.* 11, presenting the figure of the mythological Hippolytus as a model of bodily dismemberment and corporeal unity instead of chastity and beauty. The move from dismemberment to bodily integrity is mirrored on a structural level by the painting *ekphrasis*, which confirms the importance of the discourse of fragmentation and reunion. Exploiting the horrific details of the Hippolytus-story in Seneca's *Phaedra*, Prudentius creates a hero whose bodily fragmentation meets the ideal of Christian martyrdom as it is often gruesomely expressed in the late antique martyr accounts. However, Prudentius goes beyond his literary model by developing the concept of corporeal unity. As a result, the fragmented body is invested with crucial potential for the cult of relics. Moreover, the minds of the readers are made receptive for a proper veneration of the saint's relics. The tragic hero Hippolytus has become a Christian martyr after all.

<sup>26</sup> See P. Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination* (2009), 72; C.A. Kaesser, 'Narrating *Disiecta Corpora*' (2008) and I. Fielding 'Elegiac memorial' (2014).

<sup>27</sup> It has been argued that the emphasis laid on the themes of fragmentation and reunion reflects contemporary debates about the legitimacy of the cult of relics and the complex material and spiritual nature of the saintly remains. See for further discussions C.A. Kaesser, 'Narrating *Disiecta Corpora*' (2008), P. Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination* (2009), 62-73 and I. Fielding, 'Elegiac memorial' (2014).

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