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Petition, Prostration, and Tears: Painting and Prayer in Roman Catacombs

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Abstract: This article examines the evidence for performative prayer in early Roman catacomb painting from the perspective of an art historian. Praying (orant) figures are a dominant theme of third-century painting. Although the orant pose is generally regarded as symbolic, strong evidence connects at least one of the figures with the intercessory prayers offered by the order of widows. Following the "Constantinian turn" in the fourth century, a different form of performative prayer prevailed at the tombs of martyrs, with worshippers lying in prostration (proskynesis) pouring out copious tears. Two much-discussed poems by Prudentius (Peristephanon IX and XI) describe this form of prayer in conjunction with paintings of the gruesome martyrdoms of St. Cassian of Imola and St. Hippolytus. Arguments that the paintings inspired the weeping are incompatible with the nature of catacomb painting at the time, and with testimonies to the power of the tomb itself to compel such displays. The more fruitful suggestion that the ekphrasis in Peristephanon XI reflects a painting of the death of the mythical Hippolytus leads to a grove in the Temple of Diana at Nemi and the legend that the hero was resurrected by Aesculapius.

Keywords: orant; proskynesis; order of widows; Donna velata; Prudentius; St. Cassian; St. Hippolytus; Diana Nemorensis; Ovid

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1. Introduction

On the feast day of St. Lawrence, around the year 400, nearing the birth of her second child, the devout Roman aristocrat Melania the Younger went to the saint's martyrium in the cemetery of Cyriaca to ask for help. "With many tears she poured out prayers to the Lord that his benevolence might allow her [life] in the service of God, for she much desired a solitary life in the Lord" (Life of St. Melania 2002, p. 162; Krautheimer 1960, reprinted in 1969, pp. 41–42; Clark 2021, pp. 36–38, 202). By a remarkable coincidence, a poem by Aurelius Clemens Prudentius describes worshippers at the tomb of another martyr very close by, St. Hippolytus, at virtually the same time, in August in a year around 400. Like Melania, Prudentius's worshippers weep; they also kiss an altar and pour balsam on it (*Peristephanon* XI.189–194). A painting of Hippolytus's gruesome martyrdom on the wall above the tomb is described in ghastly detail. Much has been written about this painting, questioning whether it existed, what it may have looked like, and whether it played a role in promoting or intensifying the performance of prayer.

Written descriptions of the performance of prayer in Rome are rare, but visual evidence abounds in funerary painting and sculpture. This article examines depictions of prayer in one prominent form of this art, catacomb painting, before and after the so-called Constantinian turn at the beginning of the fourth century. The objective is to specify as far as possible how prayer was performed, including its postures, gestures, sounds, and the content of its petitions. The penultimate section confronts the question of the painting of St. Hippolytus, in an effort to determine whether it or paintings like it could have affected the performance of prayer at martyrs' shrines, as some scholars have suggested. Throughout the article, I have attempted to correlate established archaeological and literary analyses with recent research on prayer from other perspectives, notably revisionist studies

of women's prayer and the work of socio-religious historians like Peter Brown. The results sometimes challenge prevailing, strictly disciplinary arguments and conclusions.

2. Before 313

The second-century shrine over the tomb of St. Peter, discovered in the 1940s deep under the altar of the sixteenth-century basilica, stood in an open-air cemetery in the ancient Campus Vaticanus (Brandenburg 2005, pp. 92–94, fig. XI-5). A "densissimo" palimpsest of graffiti on an adjoining wall records the presence, and sometimes the wishes, of Christians who went to pray there (Bisconti 2000, pp. 365–66). Hundreds more graffiti were found on a wall under the early fourth-century church of S. Sebastiano on the via Appia, the site of a *memoria apostolorum* dedicated to Peter and Paul (Ferrua 1965). About half of these messages are formulaic requests that the apostles remember ("bear in mind") particular persons, normally households, but sometimes single pilgrims ("Primus, citizen of Benevento") or groups of them. Others are more original and even playful ("23 July. Peter and Paul, bear in mind Sozomenus and you who read [this]"). There are some drawings, including at least a dozen of horses that Antonio Ferrua attributed to racing fans praying that their horses might win (the Circus of Maxentius is nearby).

Graffiti at the tombs of martyrs instantiate the peculiarly Christian belief that the dead can be in two places at once (Brown 1981, pp. 1–12). The souls of all worthy Christians were thought to reside in a vaguely defined place (or state) of refreshment (*refrigerium*) while their bodies remained on earth to await the resurrection, when body and soul would be rejoined (Le Goff 1981, pp. 39–51). Exceptionally, the souls of the martyrs went directly to heaven and resided in the presence of the Lord. They literally had the Lord's ear, hence the requests to remember their earthly petitioners "in their prayers". Martyrs' bodies participated in their special status, and their tombs were liminal places where prayers and heavenly spirits might connect. Graffiti preserved the ephemeral performance of prayer before the tomb. They perpetuated, sometimes verbatim, the contents of individual prayers and kept them within the saint's view. Other pilgrims could read them as well; this too perpetuated the original act of praying, which was not, as it often is now, silent, whispered, or private.

In apostolic churches, prayer was accompanied by what St. Paul called "prophesying" (*orans aut prophetans*; 1 Corinthians 11.4–5; Vulgate 2013, p. 905). Prophesying was audible, even potentially cacophonous, as it might involve chanting, explicating, oraculating, or speaking in tongues: "When you come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a revelation, hath a tongue, hath an interpretation" (1 Corinthians 14.26; Vulgate 2013, p. 921). Prophesying was for mutual edification, so Paul encouraged the congregation not to speak all at once: "You may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be exhorted" (1 Corinthians 14.31). Congregants of both sexes prophesied, with the only difference that men had to bare their heads while women covered theirs. The contradictory assertion in 1 Corinthians 14 that women should be silent, "for it is a shame for a woman to speak in church", has been identified as an interpolation (1 Corinthians 14.34–35; Fee 1987, pp. 699–708; Osiek and Balch 1997, p. 117).

The suppression of women's speech and *charismata* (spiritual gifts) is characteristic of the post-Pauline Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus), which envision an orderly church of orthodox beliefs enforced by male priests (Spivey et al. 2019, pp. 263–71). Nevertheless, women continued to pray in church and voices continued to be loud. The third-century Carthaginian writer Tertullian, who advocated "worshipping with restraint and humility", deplored the noise: "What profit will those win who are praying aloud, except that they are shouting down the people next to them? By divulging their own petitions are they doing no less than if they were praying at street corners?" (Tertullian 1953, p. 23). Even in private, praying could be a spectacle. Tertullian's compatriot Perpetua, awaiting martyrdom in 203, prayed "wailing and crying" night and day for the soul of her brother Dinocrates (trans. Le Goff 1981, p. 49). Eventually she had a vision of him refreshed (*refrigerantem*), indicating that her prayers had been successful.

Christian paintings of prayer first appeared in Rome in the subterranean cemeteries known today as catacombs. Initially treated like other burials, Christian tombs began to be distinguished by symbols, tokens, and occasional figural paintings in the early third century. Prayer is the most common subject, appearing in scenes of Old Testament figures in mortal danger (e.g., Daniel among the lions; the three youths in the burning furnace) and in stand-alone figures like the so-called *Donna velata* ("veiled woman") in the catacomb of Priscilla, painted in the mid- or later third century (https://www.thehistoryblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Room-of-the-veiled-woman-restored.jpg (accessed on 2 June 2024); Bisconti and Nuzzo 2001, pp. 87–95; Zimmermann 2018, pp. 21–22). The posture of the *Donna velata*, standing with arms raised, palms visible, and eyes gazing upward, was the standard pose of prayer throughout the ancient Mediterranean. It is mentioned in the Old Testament (Psalm 27:2, 62:4–5, 140:2, etc.) and was prescribed for Christians as well (1 Timothy 2:8). Ancient Romans prayed in the same way; witness Vergil's description of Anchises, who "joyously raises his eyes to the skies and uplifts to heavens hand and voice" in a plea to Jupiter (Vergil 1974, p. 341), and Apuleius's dictum that "we pray with our hands extended to the heavens . . . [because] The celestial stars and the lights of the world, which everyone recognizes as the most exalted beings, occupy those heady regions" (Apuleius 2021, chap. 33).

The *Donna velata* appears in the center of a lunette under the vault of a *cubiculum* (chamber). Two smaller vignettes on either side of her are usually said to depict milestones in the life of the same woman, marriage on the left and motherhood on the right (Bisconti and Nuzzo 2001, pp. 55–61, 70–77; Bisconti et al. 2013, p. 16, Figs. 12, 40–41). While the denotation of her pose as prayer is indisputable, scholars have argued about what orant figures, in general, were meant to convey: the virtue of *pietas*, or obligation toward the gods, family, and society; religious devotion in general; prayer to the god of the Christians in particular; a post-resurrection state of beatitude; or the church (Otranto 1989, pp. 74–78; Torjesen 1998, p. 45; Jensen 2000, pp. 35–37; Cohick and Hughes 2017, pp. 76–81). Today there is considerable agreement that orants in catacombs are "funerary portraits", images of individuals in the tombs they decorate (Zimmermann 2007, pp. 161–63, 168–71). On this reading, the *Donna velata* represents the married mother's final milestone, her death (Bisconti et al. 2013, p. 15).

Karen Jo Torjesen argued for a different line of interpretation (Torjesen 1998). She maintained that anonymous female orants were evocations of the prophesying women of the New Testament and their successors, the order of widows. According to the author of 1 Timothy, "true widows" over 60 years of age, of good character, and lacking all family support should "trust in God [i.e., be cared for by the church] and continue in supplications and prayers night and day" (1 Timothy 5:9–10; Vulgate 2013, p. 1119). The third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* specifies that widows were supported by donations made to the bishop. The bishop vetted the donors for worthiness and dispensed their funds, and the widows prayed for the donors in exchange. Other duties included making clothes for the needy and visiting the sick, but the widow's primary obligation was prayer (Thurston 1989, pp. 96–104). It was thought that the Lord received her prayers with special favor: "A widow who wishes to please God sits at home and meditates upon the Lord day and night, and without ceasing at all times offers intercession and prays with purity before the Lord. And she receives whatever she asks. . ." (Didascalia Apostolorum XV, trans. R. Hugh Connolly, earlychristianwritings.com/text/didascalia.html (accessed on 2 June 2024; quoted by Thurston 1989, p. 99).

The *Didascalia Apostolorum* was a Greek text that may have originated in the Greek-speaking part of Syria. The so-called *Apostolic Tradition*, once attributed to the Roman presbyter Hippolytus, also has a provision for appointing widows: "Let the widow be appointed by the word . . . she does not receive ordination by the hand because she does not teach but is appointed only for prayer. . ." (Bradshaw 2023, p. 45). Whether the *Apostolic Tradition* reflects third-century Roman practice is now debated (Bradshaw 2017, pp. 20–22; Handl 2021, p. 61, nn. 37, 38), but an undisputed source confirms that widows played a

role there. A letter from Pope Cornelius (251–253) to the bishop of Antioch enumerates the many clerical orders supported by the church of Rome: presbyters, deacons, sub-deacons, acolytes, exorcists, readers, and doorkeepers, as well as 1500 widows and people in distress (quoted by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History VI.43.11–12; Eusebius 1932, pp. 118–19).

Éric Rebillard argued forcefully that the third-century church played no official role in the burial and commemoration of ordinary Christians, which remained the responsibility of the deceased's family or friends. Traditional Roman practices—commemorative visits and offerings at the tomb, banquets hosted by families on the anniversary of a person's death, and other holidays—continued, even as bishops insisted that only prayer and alms could help the soul (Rebillard 2003, pp. 123–75; Cohick and Hughes 2017, pp. 69–70). The banquets, called *refrigeria*, were rowdy affairs frequently depicted on the walls around Christian tombs (Jensen 2000, pp. 52–59). Provisions for them (masonry couches, tables, altars for offerings) have been found in several catacombs, including in the so-called Cappella Greca in the catacomb of Priscilla (Février 1978, pp. 214–41).

Like Perpetua of Carthage, Roman Christians also must have prayed for their dead. Prayer could be offered anywhere, at home, in church, even from prison, but prayer at the tomb might have been considered especially efficacious. Norbert Zimmermann observed that the majority of orant portraits look straight out at their viewers, as if to communicate with them (Zimmermann 2018, pp. 27–29, Fig. 2.5). These paintings offered a target, possibly even a conduit, for prayer. Even if the church had no formal role in offering such prayers, individual members of the clergy could be invited to funerary commemorations as intercessors (Rebillard 2003, p. 151). John Chrysostom (d. 407; active in Antioch and Constantinople) advised enlisting widows to pray for sinners: "widows standing around and weeping know how to rescue, not indeed from the present death, but from that which is to come" (Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles, trans. Rebillard 2003, p. 173). Although there is no comparable textual witness from Rome, it is more than likely that there, too, widows were invited to "stand around" and pray for the souls of the imperfect Christian dead.

Prayer gatherings before the tomb would have been difficult in the narrow, dark and torturous catacomb galleries, with their shelf tombs (*loculi*) stacked five or more high, but *cubicula* like that of the *Donna velata* offered spaces where multiple relatives and friends might collect. The image of the *Donna velata*, painted on the rear wall of the *cubiculum* directly opposite the entrance, seems to announce the function of the space. Unlike most orant figures, she does not look out at the viewer. Soberly if richly dressed and properly veiled, she prays looking upward toward a figure of the Good Shepherd in the center of the vault overhead. In this context, the allegorical image of the shepherd, elsewhere a figure of God's love for humanity (*philanthropia*), must be understood in its New Testament sense as the image of Christ (Jensen 2000, pp. 37–41). The *Donna velata* prays to the Lord for *refrigerium* and ultimate salvation. On whose behalf?

Christine Schenk made a good case for identifying the *Donna velata* as a member of the order of widows (Schenk 2017, pp. 133–39). The woman's rich dress—purple dalmatic with gold *clavi*—initially seems to speak against this, but Schenk cited the epitaph of a woman named Regina, who held the position of widow for sixty years (she died at eighty) and "never burdened the church"; that is, contrary to the instruction of 1 Timothy and the letter of Pope Cornelius, Regina was financially independent. Now lost, the epitaph was found in the cemetery of Traso (Saturninus) in Rome. Its estimated date is the late fourth century, but it is not impossible that self-sustaining widows also were appointed before then. In any case, whether or not she was a member of the order herself, the solemn, dignified *Donna velata* would have signaled to viewers that widows' prayers were welcome in the space over which she presides.

3. From Constantine to Damasus

Christians did not only pray standing up. A late fourth-century painting in a private shrine under the church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo shows another pose: two people prostrate

at the feet of a male orant, their upper bodies bent so low that their hands touch the ground near his foot (https://corvinus.nl/2015/12/24/rome-santi-giovanni-e-paolo/ (accessed on 18 June 2024); Brandenburg 2005, p. 158, fig. 82a). This pose—proskynesis, or falling to the ground—was an ancient pre-Christian means of demonstrating submissiveness before a higher power. St. Jerome translated the Greek and Hebrew words for it as *adorare* (*adoratio*), and in English it similarly appears as "adore" or "worship" (Bowen 2013, pp. 64–65). In the Old Testament proskynesis is performed in the worship of gods, true and false (e.g., Exodus 20:5, the Second Commandment; Exodus 34:8, Moses before the Lord on Mt. Sinai); likewise in the New Testament it signals the recognition of Jesus as God (e.g., Matthew 2:11, the Magi prostrating themselves before the infant Jesus).

Supplicants prostrated themselves to beg favor, often with tears and kisses, like the woman in the house of the Pharisee who washed Jesus's feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, kissed his feet and anointed them (Luke 7:37–38; Bowen 2013, pp. 81–82). Later Christians begged help from martyrs in the same way; so in the fifth century Paulinus of Nola described a man approaching the shrine of St. Felix: "He prostrates himself before the door [of the tomb shrine] and kisses the doorposts, and waters the entire floor with tears, flooding the ground before the holy threshold" (Paulinus Carmen 18.248–251; quoted by Roberts 1993, p. 134, n. 9). Unlike the woman in Luke, who was confessing her spiritual unworthiness, this man had been robbed of his oxen and was pleading for their return. Martyrs entertained all sorts of requests for help, in this life as well as the next (Fux 2003, p. 391).

Prostration, weeping, and kisses at martyrs' tombs appear in many of the fourteen poems by Paulinus's contemporary, the Spanish poet and statesman Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, comprising the collection known in English as "Crowns of Martyrs" (*Peristephanon*). They describe the often gory deaths and fervent worship of primarily Spanish and Italian martyrs, including five who were buried in Rome. The "hymn" in honor of St. Lawrence was written before its author had been to Rome, when he could only imagine the "seven times blessed" inhabitant "who can kneel by [the saint's bones], who sprinkles the spot with his tears, bowing his breast to the ground and in a low voice pouring out his prayers" (*Pe*. II.1–2, 529–536; trans. Thomson, Prudentius 1961, pp. 109, 139–41; Klein 2003, pp. 94–95). Likewise the *passio* of St. Agnes contains only a single vague reference to topo-graphy ("laid within sight of their palaces"; *Pe*. XIV.3; trans. Thomson, Prudentius 1961, p. 339) and seems to have been composed without benefit of firsthand knowledge of her burial site (contra Klein 2003, p. 103). The three remaining odes, called "pilgrimage poems" by some modern scholars, form a "triptych" related in subject, rhetorical approach, and perhaps purpose (Roberts 1993, p. 132; Fux 2003, pp. 55–56). *Pe*. XI (St. Hippolytus) and XII (Sts. Peter and Paul) give vivid and archaeologically verifiable accounts of visits to the martyrs' shrines and grave sites in Rome, and *Pe*. IX presents the poet "as I trekked my way to Rome" (trans. Krisak, Prudentius 2020, p. 100), at the tomb of St. Cassian in Imola.

The Christian topography of Rome encountered by Prudentius around 400 was dramatically different from that known to Pope Cornelius and the *Donna velata* in the third century. Immediately after his conversion and the conquest of Rome in 312, Emperor Constantine erected a vast and splendid cathedral (S. Giovanni in Laterano) near the Porta Asinaria, in the southeast corner of the city. He and his sons subsequently built large basilicas outside the walls at the graves of three major saints: Lawrence on the via Tiburtina (S. Lorenzo fuori le mura), Agnes on the via Nomentana (S. Agnese), and Peter near the Circus Vaticanus (S. Pietro in Vaticano), as well as a smaller basilica over the tomb of St. Paul on the via Ostiensis (S. Paolo fuori le mura) and one in the lesser-known cemetery of Sts. Marcellinus and Peter on the via Labicana, where the emperor's mother would be buried (Krautheimer 1980, pp. 21–28). Similar, if less grand basilicas were added by Popes Mark (336) on the via Ardeatina, Julius (337–352) on the via Aurelia, and Damasus (366–384) on the via Ardeatina (Liber pontificalis 1989, pp. 26–30). These cemetery basilicas were used for burial, commemorative meals and other rituals, and the celebration of martyrs buried in the catacombs nearby.

Following the legitimization of Christianity in 313, the character of the catacombs also changed. Once Christians' refusal to honor the pagan gods was officially tolerated, martyrdom became largely a thing of the past. Martyrs were remembered as heroes, whose sacrifice led their religion to triumph (Palmer 1989, pp. 227–29; Trout 2015, p. 46). Their tombs were sought out for veneration, and new graves clustered around them. The *Depositio martyrum*, a list of martyrs whose "birthdays" (death dates) were celebrated in Rome at their tombs, was drawn up in 336. It contains the names of 52 martyrs, many in pairs or larger groups, who were celebrated in 18 cemeteries (*Kalenderhandbuch* 2014, pp. 498–514). Since 52 is only a fraction of the martyrs whose deaths were commemorated in the fourth century, and some major cemeteries are not mentioned, Divjak and Wischmeyer concluded that the list reflects the factionalization of the Roman church at the time and lists only birthdays celebrated by the pope and those in communion with him. The notice that the body of St. Silanus, originally in the catacomb of Maximus, had been stolen by the followers of Novatus (Novatian, antipope 251–258) proves their point (*Kalenderhandbuch* 2014, pp. 500, 504–5).

Partly out of concern for the continuing appropriation of tombs and cemeteries by schismatics, and facing a rival claimant to the papacy himself, Pope Damasus (366–384) undertook a campaign to identify, renovate, and beautify the graves of martyrs whose worship was sanctioned by the papacy. Access to these tombs was improved by adding stairways and lightwells and enlarging underground galleries and *cubicula*. The tombs themselves were embellished with ornament in precious materials and marble plaques bearing verses composed by Damasus, inscribed in the style of the extraordinary calligrapher Filocalus. At some tombs altars for Eucharistic rites and *mensae* (tables) for offerings were installed (Jensen 2008, pp. 128–32; Trout 2015, pp. 42–52). Prudentius must have visited many of these sites, but he left poems about only three, the basilicas of St. Peter and of St. Paul (*Pe*. XII) and the tomb of Hippolytus in a catacomb on the via Tiburtina (*Pe*. XI).

4. The Pilgrimage Triptych

Pe. IX features a fourth site, the shrine of St. Cassian in Imola, where the poet stopped on his way to Rome in the hope of obtaining Christ's favor for his journey. Around 50 km from Ravenna, Imola is on the other side of the Apennines from the usual route to Rome from the west and north. Prudentius's stop there might be explained by curiosity, as Cassian was an unusually recent martyr and the conceit of the poem is that the author knew nothing about his martyrdom before seeing a painting of it above his tomb. Alternatively, if Prudentius held or had held an office at the imperial court, as argued by Palmer (Palmer 1989, pp. 26–29), the stop might have been due to the proximity of Ravenna, where the court took up residence in 402. Imola is on the way to Rome from Ravenna, and a charge from the court might account for the poet's anxiety about the outcome of his journey.

The poem opens with the author "flat on the ground, prostrate before the tomb, weeping" (*stratus humi tumulo advolvebar* . . . *lacrimans*) as he reflects upon his misfortunes, the burdens of his life, and the stings of his afflictions (*Pe*. IX.5–8). Looking up, he is confronted by a colorful painting that shows the martyr surrounded by innumerable boys stabbing him with their styluses, shredding his skin and puncturing it with a thousand tiny wounds. The sacristan assures him that the painting shows the true history of Cassian's martyrdom as recorded in books (*historiam pictura refert*). Cassian had been the master of a school where he taught shorthand, capturing speech with quick pricks on wax tablets. The boys found his lessons harsh and disliked him. When he was arrested for refusing to sacrifice at pagan altars, the magistrate turned him over to the boys to do with as they liked, and they enjoyed pricking his skin rather than wax. Their pricks tortured Cassian so horribly that Christ at last showed mercy and let him die. Having explained the painting, the sacristan urges the poet to tell Cassian his innermost hope and any "just and pleasing" wish he has, for the martyr always grants requests he deems commendable. The poet obeys, embraces the tomb, pours out tears, kisses the altar, and murmurs to the martyr his wishes and fears, "while praying for the home I'd left in jeopardy/And for my faltering hope of

joy to be" (*Pe*. IX.103–104; trans. Krisak, Prudentius 2020, p. 103). His prayer is heard; the visit to Rome is successful, and the poet sings Cassian's praises back home.

Pe. XII also begins in the voice of the poet, who seems to be newly arrived in Rome. He asks someone—seemingly a passer-by—to explain the unusual bustle: "Friend, why do joyous people . . . now congregate?/All over Rome, they run to celebrate" (*Pe*. XII.1–2; trans. Krisak, Prudentius 2020, p. 151). The rest of the poem is in the voice of the informant, who explains that the day is the festival of Sts. Peter and Paul. They share a birthday (29 June) because they were martyred by Nero one year apart, on opposite sides of the Tiber. He briefly describes their separate martyrdoms and their churches: Peter's "gilded dwelling" (*tectis aureis*) on the right bank of the Tiber, and on the left the citadel of Paul, which was consecrated by the "good prince" (*princeps bonus has sacravit arces*) and magnificently decorated with a golden ceiling supported by four rows of Parian marble columns and brilliantly colored glass on the arches (Fux 2003, p. 425). There are festivals in both places, and the informant urges the poet to accompany him first to St. Peter's and then back to St. Paul's, as the pope performs the holiday Masses in that order. Assuring the poet that this is all he needs to know, the informant leaves him with an injunction to celebrate the double festival in the same way when he gets home.

The six-line description of St. Paul's basilica effectively conveys its magnificence by citing the most impressive features of its nave: the gilded coffered ceiling and the colonnades of giant white marble columns carrying arches, an unusual feature at the time (https://fineartamerica.com/featured/interior-of-san-paolo-fuori-le-mura-giovanni-paolo-panini.html (accessed on 18 June 2024); Camerlenghi 2018, pp. 53–62). The basilica was brandnew when Prudentius saw it. A colossal replacement of Constantine's church, it was begun around 386 by the emperors Theodosius (d. 395), Valentinian II (d. 392), and Arcadius (d. 408). According to an inscription in the apse, it was completed by Honorius (393–423), Prudentius's "good prince" (Camerlenghi 2018, pp. 41–45). Prudentius could have attended its consecration (probably in 403–404), or if his visit occurred before then, he must have known of it when writing the poem in Spain.

Conversely, the poem's account of St. Peter's gives no sense of the building at all. It was similarly sumptuous and imposing, on the scale of its sixteenth-century successor. As the model for St. Paul's, it also boasted a gilded ceiling over the nave, four aisles defined by colonnades, and a transept containing the saint's tomb (https://www.wga.hu/html_m/t/tasselli/oldpete2.html (accessed on 3 June 2024); Brandenburg 2005, pp. 94–102, fig. XI-9). It famously had 100 columns: 22 in each of the four colonnades and 12 more in the transept. Except for the ceiling (*tectis aureis*, used synecdochally for the whole building), Prudentius's fourteen lines describing the site mention none of this. They are devoted to waterworks: water from a spring flows over precious marbles into a green basin; inside the tomb [i.e., in the transept], a stream falls into a cold pool, reflecting the colors of a painting overhead. There with the cold water, the shepherd nurtures his flock (Fux 2003, pp. 423–27).

The lyrical and remarkably uninformative character of these verses is disconcerting, especially since they are voiced by the poet's helpful cicerone. In fact, they are an embellishment of a well-known poem by Damasus, commemorating an ambitious project to rid the transept of water flowing down a hill on its north side, and to utilize one of the springs to feed a baptistery: "Springs used to surround the hill and with their delicate flow/dampen the bodies . . ./This Damasus did not permit . . ./He threw down the summit of the hill, an immense mound/. . . He dried out the area that the water had moistened/He discovered the spring that furnishes the gifts of salvation. /Mercurius the faithful deacon oversaw these tasks" (trans. Trout 2015, p. 84). Before it was reused in the sixteenth-century pavement, the marble slab on which these verses were inscribed was seen on the outer wall of the north transept arm. It may have faced into the baptistery, if Brandt and others are correct that the baptistery was attached to the transept's north wing (Brandt 2013, pp. 82–94; Trout 2015, pp. 85–87).

Prudentius must have visited the baptistery, as his own verses describe the coloristic play of the water in the font with the mosaic decoration overhead: (*Pe*. XII.37–39). To

reach the baptistery, he had to walk through the basilica and its atrium, enclosing a notable fountain described by Paulinus of Nola (Epistle 13.13), so he must have seen those too. Presumably, he stopped at the shrine of St. Peter in front of the apse, where it stood encased in marble and surrounded by four of the famous twisted columns that Constantine took "from Greece" (Liber pontificalis 1989, p. 18; Brandenburg 2005, p. 96, fig. XI-12; Kinney 2005, pp. 29–31). Perhaps he prayed at the tomb, like the couple shown under its canopy on a late fourth-century ivory casket found in Pola (https://www.flickr.com/photos/28433765@N07/5888101229 [accessed on 18 June 2024]). None of these experiences informed this part of his poem, which instead takes flight from an inscription. This may be because the poet's intended audience was eager to be told of inscriptions, as the opening of another poem makes plain.

Pe. XI, the "pivotal centerpiece" of the pilgrimage triptych (Roberts 1993, p. 132), is addressed to Bishop Valerianus of Calahorra, the poet's hometown. It is much longer than its companions (246 verses, compared to 106 [Cassian] and 66 [Peter and Paul]), more difficult to parse, and more complex. Unlike the other two, it is in the author's voice throughout, though the voice is mostly that of a narrator rather than of a participant. Like the *passio* of Cassian, it describes a painting of the martyr's hideous death and supplicants weeping and kissing his tomb. It begins, however, with a catalogue of reasons why the poet could not easily fulfill Valerianus's request for martyrs' inscriptions: many have been destroyed, many tell only the martyr's name, others give only the number of bodies in the tomb, but he did find "Hippolytus, an Elder who'd believed / Novatus' schism, claiming we were all deceived" (*Pe*. XI.17–18; trans. Krisak, Prudentius 2020, p. 140). The implication is that the following account of the martyr's life and martyrdom recapitulate the inscription, which is true to a point.

Prudentius had found the inscription of a poem by Damasus, installed when the pope improved a tomb in a catacomb on the north side of the via Tiburtina. Presumably it was the grave of "Ypoliti in Tiburtina," whose death is listed in the *Depositio martyrum* on the Ides (13th) of August, the same day as Pope Pontian (230–235) "in Calisti" (*Kalenderhandbuch* 2014, p. 500). According to a list of popes compiled under Damasus's predecessor Liberius (352–366), Pontian and "Yppolitus presbyter" were exiled together to the "noxious" island of Sardinia (*Kalenderhandbuch* 2014, p. 547), where Pontian died. This presbyter Hippolytus, the putative author of the *Apostolic Tradition*, was a well-known theologian and exegete who opposed several popes in the 220s and 230s, and even claimed to be bishop himself. He was a good candidate for Damasus's program of taking control of tombs associated with dissidents.

Damasus gave Hippolytus a new history as a presbyter in the schism of Novatus, probably because modern-day Novatianists gathered at Novatus's tomb nearby (Sághy 2012, pp. 251–52, 256–57). He converted in a time of persecution, and told his people to follow the Catholic faith as well. For confessing the true faith, Hippolytus deserved to be called a martyr, or so Damasus had "heard" (*haec audita refert Damasus;* Trout 2015, pp. 144–47). Prudentius retold this story (*Pe*. XI.19–38), seamlessly extending the fiction with his own account of the martyr's trial and hideous death (*Pe*. XI.39–122).

As with Cassian, the means of death is suggested by something in the victim's circumstances, in this case his name: "he shall *be* Hippolytus, and scare a team/Of spooked wild horses that shall tear him seam from seam" (*Pe*. XI.87–88; trans. Krisak, Prudentius 2020, p. 143). The horses; the way they are tied together and to Hippolytus; their blind and frantic rush through woods, rocks, rivers, and fences; and the body hanging in bits from parts of the landscape are graphically described. Then the poet abruptly introduces a painting: "the painted wall has an image (*exemplar*) of the crime" (*Pe*. XI.123; my translation), "a lifelike image of his bloody/Corpse" (*Pe*. XI:125–126; trans. Krisak, Prudentius 2020, p. 145). The narrator's voice turns personal: "Excellent Father (Valerianus), there I saw the bleeding tops/Of rocks . . . /And where a hand quite good at greenery had caught/Vermilion images of crimson blood, well-wrought" (*Pe*. XI.127–130; trans. Krisak, Prudentius 2020, p. 145). "One could see" the body parts strewn all over; the artist "added" the saint's loving

followers tracing the course of the carnage, gathering the pieces of the body and sponging up every drop of blood (*Pe*. XI.131–144). When the body is complete, the followers carry it to Rome for burial in a place "not far outside the wall," "a cave which goes deep down into dark pits" (*Pe*. XI.145–154; trans. Thomson, Prudentius 1961, p. 315). The language of personal observation continues in an unnerving description of the catacomb: the winding steps into "hidden depths," the blackness of the corridors mysteriously pierced by brilliant "openings let into the roof far above," assuaging the doubt "you may feel" in "this fabric of narrow halls running back on either hand in darksome galleries" (*Pe*. XI.155–168; trans. Thomson, Prudentius 1961, pp. 315–17). Anyone who has been in a catacomb not yet lit by electricity will recognize the terrifying passageways the author describes. Near the tomb, there is an altar for the Eucharist, a place of wondrous kindness (*mira pietas*), "ever ready to receive its suppliants" with gentle favor (*Pe*. XI.170–176; trans. Thomson, Prudentius 1961, p. 317). The poet claims to have gone there often: "whenever I prayed prostrate (*oravi stratus*) here, a sick man diseased in soul and body both, I gained help" (*Pe*. XI.177–178; translation adapted from Thomson, Prudentius 1961, p. 317). His return to Spain and the opportunity to embrace Valerianus are due to Hippolytus, "to whom Christ our God has given power to grant one's request" (*Pe*. XI.181–182, trans. Thomson, Prudentius 1961, p. 317). The shrine (*aedicula*) is covered with plates of shining silver, and the approach to it is paved with marble. People visit from dawn to dusk, bowing down, pressing their lips against the metal, and weeping (*Pe*. XI.188–194).

The description of the tomb is a plausible account of the crypt renovated by Damasus, which was excavated in the 1880s and again in the 1970s by Gabriel Bertonière. The crypt was reconfigured and enlarged sometime after 528, possibly in the reign of Pope Vigilius (537–555), so it can no longer be seen, but Bertonière was able to ascertain the outlines of a previous phase (Bertonière 1985, pp. 134–44). It was an irregular L-shaped room measuring less than 10 m^2, with arcosolium tombs in the walls (one of which contained the remains of St. Hippolytus) and additional graves in the floor (Bertonière 1985, pp. 143–44, figs. 14–15). No painting, metalwork, or paving is preserved. Bertonière identified this space as the "house of the martyr" renovated in the fourth century by a man named Leo, probably a priest, according to a broken inscription found in the nineteenth century at the foot of the present entrance stair (Bertonière 1985, pp. 29–30, 175–76). The inscription probably mentioned Damasus in the third line, where the letters ASO are preserved. Damasus' own inscription was robbed in the fifteenth century and cut up for reuse in the pavement of the Lateran cathedral, where it was discovered in the 1930s (Trout 2015, p. 145).

Prudentius' poem does not end in the cramped but auratic crypt. Thirty-five more lines (*Pe*. XXI.195–230) are devoted to the saint's annual birthday, which was celebrated above ground because of the crowds, in a church "renowned for its princely decoration", with "towering walls", twin rows of columns supporting the gilded beams of the roof over the central space, lower aisles, and a *tribunal* (platform) for preaching (*Pe*. XI.215–226; Prudentius 1961, pp. 319–21). Other sources mention a basilica of Hippolytus in his cemetery, but nothing remains of it, and it probably was too small for great throngs of people. Fux is likely correct that these lines describe the grand Constantinian basilica of St. Lawrence about half a kilometer away, on the other side of the via Tiburtina (Krautheimer 1980, p. 55, fig. 51; Brandenburg 2005, pp. 87–89, fig. IX-1; Fux 2003, p. 43). The poem concludes with an exhortation to Valerianus to add the festival of St. Hippolytus to his calendar, and a wish that when his time comes, Valerianus might be taken up to join Hippolytus himself (*Pe*. XI.232–46).

5. Ekphrasis, Exegesis, and Tears

Peristephanon XI is the most vividly experiential of the Roman poems. Prudentius plausibly did search the catacombs for inscriptions to share with Valerianus; he did find Damasus's verses about Hippolytus; he did visit the crypt and pray there, perhaps multiple times; and he may have attended the saint's festival on 13 August. Yet the poem itself is a fiction, crafted in a language inspired by other poems, notably Vergil's *Aeneid* (Malamud

1989, pp. 104–9; O'Hogan 2016, pp. 48–51). Reading Vergil was also an element of Prudentius's experience, which was shared by at least some of his intended audience. The reader in Spain who had never seen Christian Rome could imagine it in Prudentius's echoes of Vergil, with all the intertextual historical and ideological implications that entailed (Witke 2004). Because of its mediation by poetic language, the reality of the poet's Roman experience can never be captured precisely. This is especially true of the paintings, which are presented as ekphrasis (Viscardi 1997, pp. 363–67; Hershkowitz 2017, pp. 142–47).

Ekphrasis is a descriptive technique that aims to produce *enargeia* (*demonstratio*) or vividness, as "when an event is so described in words that the business seems to be enacted and the subject to pass vividly before our eyes" (Ad Herennium IV.55.68; trans. Caplan Ad Herennium 1989, p. 405; quoted by Grig 2004, p. 111). Christian Kässer observed that the ekphrasis in *Pe*. IX is followed by an exegesis. After briefly describing the picture of St. Cassian "bearing a thousand wounds" from the styluses of the boys who surround him (*Pe*. IX.9–16; trans. Thomson, Prudentius 1961, p. 223), the poet calls on the sacristan, who recounts the history (*Pe*. IX.17–92). The much longer exegesis does not explain the painting in the ekphrasis but verifies it; it not only attests that the visual image is corroborated by a verbal authority but transforms the visual object into text, "precisely the sort of [text] which related martyr accounts" (Kässer 2002, pp. 165–67). The painting of the martyr with "all his parts torn . . . a pitiful sight!" (*Pe*. IX.11–13; trans. Thomson, Prudentius 1961, p. 223) provides *enargeia*, but it is also bizarre; the exegesis makes it credible as a martyrdom that merited the Lord's acceptance and grace.

The ekphrasis in *Pe*. XI has no such exegesis, nor does it depart from a painting. It begins with the action: two wild horses harnessed by a dragging rope that binds Hippolytus on the ground behind them (*Pe*. XI.89–104). Only after he is dead, with pieces of his body hanging from rocks and bushes, does the poet introduce the painting and the aftermath: the martyr's loving followers picking up the pieces (*Pe*. XI.123–46). The ekphrasis has no exegesis because it is patently untrue; the poet announces this himself, in the words of the raging judge: "let him be Hippolytus . . . ripped apart by horses" (*Pe*. XI.87–88). Fourth-century readers knew that the other Hippolytus was a figure of myth: the son of Theseus, condemned to this dreadful death by his father after his stepmother Phaedra falsely accused him of rape. Some may have noted a particular resemblance to Seneca's similarly ekphrastic account of it in the tragedy *Phaedra* (*Phaedra*, Act IV).

Despite numerous claims to the contrary, it is extremely unlikely that there was a painting of this "abomination" on the catacomb wall. Fabrizio Bisconti, the greatest expert on catacomb painting of the last 40 years, considered the question at length in 1995. He observed a sharp divergence in the treatment of martyrdom in painting and in literature. The ekphrastic pain and gore of literature is not seen in the catacombs, where imagery was consistently non-violent and optimistic in tone, even as representations of martyrdom emerged in other contexts in the fifth century (Bisconti 1995, pp. 259–62). The example most often compared to Prudentius's painting of Hippolytus—a scene of three bound, crouching figures on a side wall of the oratory under SS. Giovanni e Paolo—is notably different from the poet's description (https://corvinus.nl/2015/12/24/rome-santi-giovanni-e-paolo/ (accessed on 18 June 2024); Bisconti 1995, pp. 279–80; Grig 2004, pp. 122–23; Hershkowitz 2017, pp. 156–57). Two executioners stand behind the victims but do not touch them; there is no violent action, no blood, no suffering, no *enargeia*. Like similar allusions to martyrdom in contemporary sculpture, the oratory painting refers to a murderous event without representing it. Bisconti concluded that if there was a painting of Hippolytus over his tomb, it would have been similarly restrained (Bisconti 1995, p. 264).

Géraldine Viscardi argued that the painting described in *Pe*. XI, so out of character with catacomb art of the period, was a poetic invention, "the fruit of an interior reverie . . . a vision born of pilgrimage to the tomb of the martyr . . . contemplation of a holy place that affects the sensibility of the visitor and feeds his imagination" (Viscardi 1997, p. 378; followed by Klein 2003, p. 100). Georgia Frank has discussed this form of visualization, which is best documented among fourth-century visitors to the Holy Land. When Prudentius's

contemporary Paula, a companion of St. Jerome, visited the site of Christ's crucifixion, "she fell down and worshipped the cross as if she could see the Lord hanging on it" (Jerome, Epistle 108.9.2; quoted by Frank 2000, p. 99); she also kissed the stone and licked the place where Christ's body had lain (Frank 2000, p. 110, n. 11). Seeing the place where a Biblical event once happened stimulated a vision of that event in the believer's inner eye, the eye of faith. The nun Egeria who recorded the sites of her pilgrimage through the Sinai peninsula and Palestine for the benefit of her sisters back home, believed that her diary might help them to "see more completely what happened in these places" when they read the Pentateuch (quoted by Frank 2000, p. 99).

Although we will never know what Prudentius really saw on the catacomb wall, Viscardi's reconstruction best accords with what we know from other sources and with the stated intention of his poem, to persuade his friend Valerianus to add Hippolytus to the calendar of the church of Calahorra (*Pe*. XI.231–46). To that end, as he did for St. Cassian, the poet provided a *passio* of "precisely the sort . . . which related martyr accounts," especially in Spain. In Spain, according to the first poem of the *Peristephanon*, the names of the martyrs were written in heaven in gold and on earth "in characters of blood" (*Pe*. I.2–3; trans. Thomson, Prudentius 1961, p. 99). The bloody paintings conjured in both poems are in the mold of the descriptions of other martyr poems in the collection—Eulalia, Vincent, the Eighteen Martyrs of Saragossa—and were part of an effort to make the two foreign saints persuasive to an audience accustomed to seeing the endurance of gruesome torture as a rite of sanctity.

Much less persuasive is the polar opposite theory advanced more recently by Paola Hershkowitz, that the paintings in *Pe*. IX and XI not only existed, but were the cause of Prudentius's "profound spiritual and emotional connection with the saints" (Hershkowitz 2017, p. 125; cf. Roberts 1993, pp. 136–40). The notion that the poet was "responding and communicating with the picture . . . rather than with the remains which are buried in the tomb" is not well supported by the poems and is art historically anachronistic, likewise the claim that through the picture, Prudentius "identif[ied] with the suffering of the saint . . . as the tears he sheds for Cassian seem also to be for himself" (Hershkowitz 2017, p. 132). Painting developed differently in the Greek East, where icons did become conduits for veneration and prayer by the sixth century, but in the West, empathetic identification of the kind Hershkowitz describes was not a function of painted imagery until much later. Her description evokes a late medieval *imago pietatis*, which was a development of the thirteenth century (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Geertgen_tot_Sint_Jans_-_Man_of_Sorrows_-_WGA08517.jpg (accessed on 18 June 2024); Belting 1990, pp. 1–27).

As I noted earlier apropos the posture of proskynesis, tears were the normal accompaniment of prayer at the tombs of martyrs. Prudentius imagined worshippers weeping over the bones of St. Lawrence before he had ever been to Rome (*Pe*. II.534). His poetic avatar was in tears "thinking of my sins and all my life's distresses" at the tomb of St. Cassian before he even noticed a painting (*Pe*. IX.7–8; trans. Thomson, Prudentius 1961, p. 223). His tears were not of compassion but of compunction—regret, contrition, self-reproach. In medical terms, tears were moist and hot, "like blood in the wounds of the soul," according to Gregory of Nyssa (d. ca. 394; quoted by Carruthers 2006, p. 7). They were cleansing and healing. The Greek monk Evagrius (d. 399) recommended "at the beginning of prayer, force yourself to tears and compunction, so that your prayer may become fruitful" (quoted by Carruthers 2006, p. 8). Tears were associated with proskynesis because both were signs of humility, but writers of the later middle ages noted that proskynesis could also produce tears by putting strain on the stomach and lungs (Carruthers 2006, p. 9).

Early Christians did not go to the tombs of the martyrs to weep for their suffering. They went in the conviction that martyrs' souls had a privileged place by the side of the Lord, that prayers properly delivered would be answered, and that in the "wondrous grace of the tomb site" (*mira loci pietas*, *Pe*. XI.175) prayers were especially efficacious (Klein 2003, p. 100). The tomb was the one place on Earth where the saint was most accessible. The intermediary of a painting was unnecessary when the body itself was right

there. The mystery and intensity of these catacomb encounters were dissipated in the vast, well-lighted basilicas of the Apostles, which may be why Prudentius chose to ignore the tombs of Peter and Paul in *Pe*. XII.

Painting aside, Hershkowitz's claim that *Pe*. IX and XI express a "profound spiritual and emotional connection with the saints" is wellfounded. Fux observed that these poems seem like votive offerings to martyrs who had succored the poet and granted his wishes (Fux 2003, p. 393). Both had only regional cults. Prudentius sought them out, traveling to out-of-the-way Imola to visit one and repeatedly braving the fearsome dark tunnels to find the other. It is a remarkable coincidence that both saints are celebrated on August 13, the Ides, which was a major holiday in the Roman calendar.

6. The Ides of August

Although he did not see it in a catacomb, Prudentius very likely did see a painting of Hippolytus's story elsewhere. He mentioned one in the treatise *Against the Oration of Symmachus*, written possibly in 402 and thus during or very close in date to his pilgrimage. "Why are horn-footed horses barred from the temple and sacred groves of the goddess of the crossroads (*templo Triviae*), when the Muse has captured the chaste youth in his chariot as it flies along the shore, and there is even a color painting on the wall to show it to you?" (Contra orationem Symmachi II.53–56; trans. Malamud 1989, p. 88). The temple of Diana Trivia and its groves were not in Rome; they were in Nemi, near Ariccia, 11 miles to the southeast (Viscardi 1997, pp. 369–70). Prudentius may have made the effort to go there. He surely was familiar with the temple of Diana on the Aventine hill, where there was a major annual festival on the anniversary of its dedication, the Ides of August (Richardson 1992, p. 108).

Horses were not allowed in the groves at Nemi because their memory was painful to Hippolytus, who lived there. In an ancient version of the myth retold by Vergil and Ovid, the dismembered Hippolytus was brought back to life by Aesculapius. This angered Jupiter, so Diana Trivia took him in, hiding the resurrected hero in the grove of the nymph Egeria by her temple, "that there alone, amid Italian woods, he might live out his inglorious days, and take the altered name of Virbius" (Aeneid VII.774–777; trans. Fairclough, Vergil 1969, p. 57; Waldner 2017, pp. 359–61). In the *Metamorphosis*, Ovid has Hippolytus describe, with a vividness that Prudentius must have admired, his own dismemberment, his descent to the "rayless world of death," and his cure and rescue by Diana, who gave him a different appearance ("the look of age") and a new name. "From that time I have dwelt within this grove and, one of the lesser deities, I hide beneath my mistress' deity and am accepted as her follower" (Metamorphosis XV.539, 545–546; trans. Miller, Ovid 1976, p. 403; Waldner 2017, pp. 363–64).

The final book of Ovid's epic poem, Book XV juxtaposes the physical resurrection of Hippolytus to the Pythagorean theory of metempsychosis and the recent Roman innovation of deifying deceased rulers (apotheosis), whereby they were transformed into stars. These were three possible, mutually exclusive outcomes for the soul when the body has died (Waldner 2017, pp. 364–67). The near parallels and contradictions to Christian thinking among these alternatives are striking, and it is easy to imagine that they struck Prudentius too as he contemplated Christian teaching about bodily resurrection, the fate of his own soul in the interim, and the special status of souls who are taken up immediately to the realm of God. His decision to appropriate the myth of Hippolytus for the *passio* of his unheroic Christian namesake may have been the result of long deliberation, or it may have come to him in a flash, in a vision inspired as much by words as by a picture. *Peristephanon* XI challenges the reader to make sense of Prudentius's poetic act, and perhaps to follow his meditations on the nature of the soul, how it survives the body, and where it resides when it leaves. The *passio* and its many reverberations give this poem a depth that modern readers have yet to explore.

7. Conclusion

Paintings in catacombs are relatively rare in comparison to the hundreds of thousands of graves cut into the walls of their labyrinthine galleries. Many of them are found in *cubicula*, small rooms dug out to accommodate the gathering of family members on the occasion or anniversary of a death. Painted figures often mirrored the prayer of the survivors for the departed souls' well-being, standing in the pose adopted in many ancient Mediterranean cultures for addressing deities: looking upward, arms raised, palms exposed. Images of the dead in this pose generally signified that they had, in fact, attained the peace of *refrigerium*, but some early examples may also recall the intercessory powers accorded to widowed women and their order in the early church.

After the legitimization of Christianity in 313, commemorative celebrations tended to occur in the larger and safer spaces of new cemetery basilicas, and many people opted to be interred under their pavements. Burial and painting in the catacombs continued, but some graves—those of the "very special dead", the heroic victims of past persecutions–were recognized as channels of communication to souls who had bypassed *refrigerium* and were already in the presence of the Lord (Brown 1981, pp. 69–85). Rather than praying *for* these souls, Christians prayed *to* them, adopting the humiliating pose of proskynesis that signified their impotence and dependence on the mercy of a protector. The relationship was modeled on the real-world power of clemency held by secular rulers (Brown 2000, pp. 42–43). Too weak to approach God directly, Christians from the late fourth century onward turned to martyrs to intercede for them. This is the context in which the poet Prudentius found his way to the tomb of St. Hippolytus.

The poem Prudentius wrote about his visit, like the similar poem about his stop at the tomb of St. Cassian in Imola, tells the story of a horrifying death that he saw pictured on a wall over the grave. The poems are the first extant descriptions of both martyrdoms, and some scholars maintain that both were inspired by real paintings. After reviewing the evidence, I have argued in favor of the position that both paintings were products of Prudentius's ekphrastic imagination. The poetic self-portraits of the author prostrate, weeping and lamenting his pains, fears, and failings before the tombs conform to independent evidence that this is how petitioners approached the saints in the liminal spaces of their graves. Circumstantial evidence suggests that Prudentius felt a special devotion for these two saints and that their common feast day, 13 August, may have had special significance for him. Perhaps it inspired him to visit the temple of Diana on the Aventine, whose festival also was held on 13 August, and to explore the legend of her protégé Hippolytus, who lived in the groves of the temple of Diana at Nemi. The influence of Ovid's account of Hippolytus's death and resurrection may explain the poet's bold decision to appropriate his myth for the Christian *passio* in *Peristephanon* XI.

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