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Continuity of martyrological tradition in the works of st. Ambrose of Milan as witnessed by his accounts of the martyrdom of virgins

Kieleckie Studia Teologiczne 13, 27-38

2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

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CONTINUITY OF MARTYROLOGICAL TRADITION IN THE WORKS OF ST. AMBROSE OF MILAN AS WITNESSED BY HIS ACCOUNTS OF THE MARTYRDOM OF VIRGINS¹

St. Ambrose (c. 340–397) lived after the persecutions of Christians had already ended, therefore at a time when one could look at martyrdom from a perspective. Earlier literary witnesses dealing with the subject – *acta martyrum* and *passiones* – gave way to legends, *vitae*, and hagiographical cycles. Fathers of the Church often alluded to martyrdom in their homilies². It is also present in the works of the bishop of Milan. Many such passages are accounts of martyrdom, found especially in his treatises on virginity, but not only there. Among Ambrose's descriptions one can find both threads that appear in Christian literature for the first time³ and those that clearly draw

¹ The present paper refers to the issue of martyrdom in St. Ambrose's works as discussed several years ago in other papers of ours, esp. *Analiza funkcjonalna stylu opisów męczeństwa dziewic w «De virginibus» św. Ambrożego*, in: *Powołanie i służba. Księga jubileuszowa ku czci Biskupa Mieczysława w 70 rocznicę urodzin*, ed. K. Gurda, T. Gacia, (Kielce 2000), 421–438. However, this study takes a new, different perspective on the issue. Vide also *Reminiscencje z literatury klasycznej w opisach męczeństwa u św. Ambrożego*, „Vox Patrum”, 18 (1998) 34–35, 199–207; *Analiza hymnu «Agnes beatae virginis» św. Ambrożego*, Vox Patrum, 19 (1999) 36–37, 259–270.

² Cf. V. Saxer, *Martirio. III. Atti, Passioni, Leggende*, w: *Dizionario patristico e di antichità cristiane*, II, 2140–2149.

³ The first ever literary accounts of the martyrdom of St. Agnes are found in *De virginibus*, 1,2,5-9; 1,4,19; *De officiis ministrorum*, 1,41,203; of St. Lawrence's martyrdom in *De officiis ministrorum*, 1,41,205-207; 2,28,140; *Epistulae*, 7,38; of the martyrdom of St. Agricola and Vitalis in *Exhortatio virginittatis*, 1,1-2,9; cf. F. Gori, *Introduzione*, w: *San' Ambrogio. Opere morali II/I. Verginità e vedovanza. Introduzione, traduzione e indici*, Roma 1989, SAEMO 14/I, 11–93 (note 7); cf. G. D. Gordini,

on earlier literary tradition. It is the latter that are discussed in this paper. It addresses the question how St. Ambrose used earlier martyrdom testimonies in his work. The group of testimonies of our interest includes: the account of the martyrdom of Thecla in *De virginibus* 2,3,19-21, and passages mentioning her in *De virginitate* 7,40 and *Epistulae extra collectionem traditae* 14,34; description of the martyrdom of an Antiochian virgin in *De virginibus* 2,4,22-33; martyrdom of Pelagia in *Epistulae* 7,36-38 and *De virginibus* 3,7,32-34; description of the death of a mother and daughters defending their virginity connected with the account of Pelagia's martyrdom (description) in *De virginibus*, 3,7,34. The description of the martyrdom of Eleasar, Maccabean brothers and their mother in *De Iacob et vita beata* 2,10,43-12,57, which alludes to the descriptions of 2 and 4 Maccabees, is not included in our analysis.

1. Thecla and *virginitatis veneratio*

Ambrose must have drawn the information about Thecla⁴ from the apocryphal *Acta Pauli et Theclae*, included in the *Acta Pauli* of the second half of the second century⁵, mentioned already by Tertullian⁶. According to the apocryphon, Thecla met Paul while he was teaching in Iconium after he had fled from Antioch. Fascinated by the Apostle's words, she abandoned Thamaris, to whom she was engaged. As he could not come to terms with

Vitale e Agricola, *Bibliotheca sanctorum*, 12, 1225. Also the earliest mentions of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius are Ambrose's (at a letter to his sister Marcelline – *Epistulae* 77). In earlier literature there are neither any references to the martyrdom of Soteris (a relative of Ambrose's), mentioned in *De virginibus* 3,7,37-38 and in *Exhortatio virginitatis* 12,82-83. The authorship of the hymn about St. Agnes – *Agnes beatae virginis* – and St. Lawrence – *Apostolorum supparem*, ascribed to Ambrose, is difficult to establish, esp. considering the first one; cf. G. Banterle, *Introduzione*, in: *Opera omnia di Sant' Ambrogio. Inni, incrizioni, frammenti*, ed. G. Banterle, G. Biffi, L. Migliavacca, Milano-Roma 1994, 11–18.

⁴ It regards Thecla of Iconium mentioned in *Martyrologium S. Hieronymi* under the date September 23rd: „IX Kal. Oct. In Seleucia, natalis sanctae Teclae martyris; cf. *Vies des SS.*, vol. 1, Paris 1935, 477–481; cf. also U. M. Fasola, *Tecla*, *Bibliotheca sanctorum*, 12, 174.176–177.

⁵ *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, ed. R. A. Lipsius – M. Bonnet, Lipsiae 1891, 235–272.

⁶ *De baptismo* 17: „Quodsi quae acta Pauli quae perperam scripta sunt [exemplum Theclae] ad licentiam mulierum docendi tinguendique defendunt, sciant in Asia presbyterum qui eam scripturam construxit quasi titulo Pauli de suo cumulans convictum atque confessum id se amore Pauli fecisse loco decessisse”.

the loss of his bride, Thamaris caused Paul to stand trial before governor Castelios. Paul was accused of forbidding virgins to marry and imprisoned. Thecla managed to get to him anyway and kept listening to his teachings. Therefore Paul was brought to trial, and Thecla, proclaimed a strumpet who abandoned her fiancé was sentenced (at the urging of her own mother) to be burned at the stake in the theater. Miraculously rescued, she went in search of Paul, who had been expelled from the city. Paul sent her to Antioch, where – having rejected love of an Alexander, she was sentenced to be devoured by wild beasts. Several attempts to kill her in this manner during the games organized by Alexander, failed: no beast, neither lions, nor bears, nor bulls would as much as touch the girl. The games were closed and Thecla, having received baptism in a rather bizarre way (she jumped into a pit full of water), went off again to search for Paul. She found him in Myra, whence she went to Iconium (where she converted her mother), then she went to Seleucia where for several decades she lived a life of penance. Finally she went to Rome where she did not find Paul alive. After she died, she was buried near her teacher.

Compared to the apocryphal story, Ambrose's account is shorter and more dramatic, adding a few details which were not included in the ancient version⁷. The long story of how Thecla abandoned Thamaris (which according to *Acta* was the reason of her sentence), is summarized in one sentence:

Thecla doceat immolari, quae copulam fugiens nuptialem et sponsi furore damnata naturam bestiarum virginitatis veneratione mutavit (*De virginibus*, 2,3,19).

Next he remarks that men looking lecherously at the virgin thrown to (be eaten by) the beasts, started averting their eyes from her in shame. There is an effective antithesis in this sentence, formed by the words: *impudicos* – *pudicos*:

Namque parata ad praedas, cum aspectus quoque declinaret virorum ac vitalia ipsa saevo offerret leoni, fecit ut qui impudicos detulerant oculos pudicos referrent (*ibidem*, 2,3,19).

(After that there is an even more **shocking** motif included by Ambrose: even the lions avert their eyes, looking at the ground, in order not to see the naked virgin)

... demersis in terram oculis tamquam verecundantibus, ne mas aliquis vel bestia virginem nudam videret (*ibidem*, 2,3,20).

Ambrose develops this theme further in another text. Lions avert their eyes, because even looking at Thecla might violate the sanctity of her virginity:

⁷ Cf. F. Gori, 181.

Quo munere autem venerabilis Thecla etiam leonibus fuit ut ad pedes praedae suae stratae impastae bestiae sacrum deferrent ieiunium nec procaci oculo virginem nec ungue violarent aspero, quoniam et ipso aspectu virginitatis violatur sanctitas (*Epistulae extra collectionem traditae*, 14,34).

Such motifs are not to be found in *Acta Pauli et Theclae*. However, there are some elements common to both accounts. The ancient apocryphon reads that the beasts were led in a procession, that Thecla was tied to a dangerous lioness which licked her feet (*Acta Pauli et Theclae* 28), that the following day Thecla was thrown out on the stadium and lions and bears were set out on her, while a wild lioness lay down at her feet (*Acta Pauli et Theclae*, 33). All animals set on Thecla moved as if in a dream and did not touch the virgin (*Acta Pauli et Theclae*, 35). These vivid scenes described in the apocryphal document can also be found in Ambrose's work, who put them, however, more succinctly:

Cernere erat lingentem pedes bestiam cubitare humi, muto testificantem sono quod sacrum virginis corpus violare non posset [...]. Videres [...] bestiam exosculantem pedes virginis docere quid homines facere deberent. [...] Docuerunt castitatem dum virgini nihil aliud nisi plantas exosculantur (*De virginibus*, 2,3,20).

It is worth noting that Ambrose mentions three times that the lions licked, or even kissed, Thecla's feet, whereas the apocryphon refers to it only once (*Acta Pauli et Theclae*, 28). Moreover, the picture of the lioness lying at Thecla's feet is common to both accounts (*Acta Pauli et Theclae* 33 and *De virginibus* 2,3,20). Most importantly, we must note that Thecla's nakedness is mentioned in both documents. It appears twice in *Acta Pauli et Theclae* (33-34), but in the apocryphon Thecla's (nudity) nakedness is covered by a cloud of fire (34), while in Ambrose's (writing) text even animals dare not look at her being naked: „ne bestia virginem nudam videret” (*De virginibus* 2,3,20); „nec procaci oculo virginem ... violarent” (*Epistulae extra collectionem traditae*, 14,34). Ambrose also refers to an episode described in *Acta Pauli et Theclae*, in which bulls were stimulated by red-hot chains to tear apart Thecla who was tied in between them (35):

Non impastos cibus flexit, non citatos impetus rapuit, non stimulos ira exasperavit, non usus deceptit adsueto, non feros natura possedit (*De virginibus* 2,3,20).

The brief comparison of the two texts leads to the conclusion that Ambrose must have known *Acta Pauli et Theclae*. Out of a colorful and extensive apocryphal story Ambrose included in his account elements dealing with Thecla's persecution, emphasizing and developing the theme of chastity and virginal modesty. This practice is connected with the literary context in which

Ambrose placed allusions to the apocryphon as well as his objective for writing *De virginibus*. While *Acta Pauli et Theclae* emphasized rather the martyrdom of the title heroine, Ambrose underlined the bond between martyrdom and virginity, or rather the other way round – he presented virginity as the way which prepares someone to accept martyrdom. He expressed it concisely in another place:

Non enim ideo laudabilis virginitas, quia in martyribus repperitur, sed quia ipsa martyres faciat (*De virginibus* 1,3,10).

At a time when there was no longer an opportunity to shed one's blood in sacrifice, Ambrose argued that virginity representing *principalis virtus* (*De virginibus* 1,3,10) is the crowning achievement of a perfect life (said that the crowning achievement of a perfect life is virginity representing *principalis virtus* (*De virginibus* 1,3,10).) According to him, if there still was martyrdom, it would be virginity that would constitute the way to it and the strength to accept it. In the sentence quoted above this is expressed by the use of *modus coniunctivus* (quotation it is expressed by the usage of *modus coniunctivus*). For this reason telling the story of Thecla's persecution, Ambrose emphasizes virginitatis veneratio (*De virginibus* 2,3,19) more than her martyrdom as such.

2. Antiochian virgin – *aut sacrificare aut prostitui*

Let us take a closer look at another martyrdom account which is also included in *De virginibus* – the story of a virgin's martyrdom in Antioch (2,4, 22-33). Also in this case Ambrose draws on ancient sources. His story may be collated with the *passio* of Didymus and Theodora of Alexandria. The *passio* is well preserved in two editions, Greek and Latin, in the *Acta SS. Didymi et Theodora virginis*⁸. Ambrose's version exhibits many similarities to the earlier work, but there are also fundamental differences. Firstly, in *Acta* the protagonists are named (Didymus and Theodora). Secondly, the action takes place in Alexandria, and not in Antioch. In Ambrose's version the heroine is a virgin from Antioch and she, as well as the soldier rescuing her, remain anonymous. Ambrose passes over her questioning, which – according to *Acta*

⁸ Cf. A. Galuzzi, *Teodora i Didimo*, in: *Bibliotheca sanctorum*, 12, 227. This paper is based on the Latin version: *Acta SS. Didymi et Theodora virginis* published in *Acta martyrum P. Theodorici Ruinart opera ac studio collecta selecta atque illustrata*, Ratisbonae 1859, 428–432; cf. F. Gori, 183, note 61: „È quasi certo che si tratta, invece, di Teodora di Alessandria, la cui passione è narrata negli *Acta proconsularia* (AA.SS. *aprilis* 3, pp. 573)”.

SS. Didymi and Theodora virginis is performed by the *curator civitatis* of Alexandria (1-3). In the story on which Ambrose draws, Theodora's conduct during the questioning causes her to be sentenced to a brothel (*meritorium*). The *Acta*'s story does not include the internal monologue of the protagonist; there is also no account of her return to the place where the soldier who rescued her was to be martyred; there is no rivalry for the palm of martyrdom between the two protagonists; what is there, is the description of the martyrdom itself. Despite the differences mentioned we can discern common features in both texts, especially in the use of (esp. when it comes to the occurrence) of the same images and metaphors. In both accounts the virgin is called ewe and dove, whereas those who threaten her chastity are hawks and wolves:

Turbae vero circumspiciebant sicut lupi, quis prior intraret ad agnam Dei, aut certe sicut accipiter circa columbam (*Acta SS. Didymi et Theodora* 4).

Clauditur intus columba, strepunt accipitres foris, certant singuli, qui praedam primus invadat (*De virginibus* 2,4,27).

Another common motif is the heroine's prayer. In *Acta SS. Didymi et Theodora* the imprisoned virgin's prayer is concise and mentions only Peter's miraculous liberation from prison:

Pater Domini nostri Iesu Christi, adiuva me et libera de meritorio hoc, qui adiuvisi Petrum cum esset in carcere, educ me sine macula hinc: ut omnes videant, quoniam tua sum ancilla (4).

In Ambrose's account the heroine also prays, but she mentions other examples of God's miraculous interventions in defense of the oppressed found in the Scriptures, and competes her prayer with these words: „Benedicatur et nunc nomen tuum, ut quae ad adulterium veni, virgo discedam” (*De virginibus* 2,4,27). However, the entrance of the soldier who wants to rescue the prisoner is described similarly in both texts:

Nam de timentibus Dominum fratribus unus [...] induit se militari habitu [...]. Intravit ad eam utpote unus de sceleratis. At illa cum vidisset, habitu peregrino turbata, circumfugiebat per angulos (*Acta* 4).

Vix compleverat precem, et ecce vir militis specie terribilis irrupit. Quae admodum eum virgo timuit, cui populus tremens cessit! (*De virginibus* 2,4,28).

The soldier explains to the frightened woman the aim of his coming. It is again similar in both accounts. He says:

Non sum quem vides; deforis, inquit, sum lupo, intrinsecus autem agnus ... Noli inspicere vestimenta mea adversa: frater enim voluntate cum sim tuus, in diabolicis vestimentis ingressus sum, ut te hinc possem liberare (4).

Ambrose's version reads as follows: „Potest et in hoc lupi habitu ovis latere” (these words belong to the inner monologue of the virgin). And later:

Cui miles: „Ne quaeso paveas, soror. Frater huc veni salvare animam, non perdere. Serva me, ut ipsa serveris. Quasi adulter ingressus, si vis, martyr egrediar” (*De virginibus* 2,4,28-29).

What strikes us most, is the similarity, indeed almost identity of the key words in the soldier's offer: „Mutemus vestem” (*Acta* 4) and „Vestimenta mutemus” (*De virginibus* 2,4,29). We find lexical resemblances also in the scene where the two exchange clothes:

Accipiens itaque virgo habitum militis capiti imposuit depresso pileum. Hoc enim antea providerat, ut quasi vereretur populum, quia prior ausus fuerat introire. Et praecepit ei ut deorsum respiceret et nulli loqueretur (*Acta* 5).

Sume pileum – mówi żołnierz u św. Ambrożego – qui tegat crines, abscondat ora: solent erubescere qui lupanar intraverint. Sane cum egressa fueris, ne respicias retro, memor uxoris Loth ... (*De virginibus* 2,4,29).

Another common feature is the image of the virgin floating as if on wings after she was freed from the brothel:

Accipiens itaque virgo habitum militis [...] cum exisset elevavit alas suas ad caelum ab ore accipitris liberata et ab ore leonis abstracta (*Acta* 5).

Mutato habitu evolat puella de laqueo, iam non suis alis, utpote quae spiritalibus ferebatur ... (*De virginibus* 2,4,30).

Finally, let us note the striking similarity of both texts as they describe the amazement of one of the lechers having designs on the virgin's chastity as he saw a man instead of a woman (who had left the house dressed (up) as a soldier):

Quidam ingressus est ex istis et invenit pro virgine virum et stupefactus intrare dixit: putas et virgines in viros demutat Iesus? Qui enim intraverat exivit et dixit: quis est qui sedet? Ubi est quae inclusa est virgo? Audiebam quoniam demutavi aquam in vinum et fabulam existimabam id quod facilius erat: nunc autem quod maius est video, quoniam in virum demutavi virginem, et timeo ne me demutet in mulierem (*Acta* 5).

Unus qui erat immodice districtior introivit. Sed ubi hausit oculis rei textum „quid hoc, inquit, est? Puella ingressa est, vir videtur [...]. At etiam audieram et non credideram, quod aquas Christus in vina convertit: iam mutare coepit et sexus. Recedamus hinc, dum adhuc qui fuimus sumus” (*De virginibus* 2,4,31).

The reference to Jesus turning water into wine made by the brothel's shocked client quoted in both accounts clearly shows that Ambrose makes use of *Acta SS. Didymi et Theodoraе virginis*.

To sum up, there are clear similarities (it needs to be pointed out that there are very clear similarities) between Ambrose's account and the second part of *Acta SS. Didymi et Theodoraë* (4-6). F. Gori is right to state that we do not know whether Ambrose had at his disposal only the second part of the acts and a short summary of the first one or whether he could use both parts, but used only the second one⁹. The element added by Ambrose is the virgin's monologue representing, from rhetorical perspective, an effective literary illustration of the difficult choice the woman faces, created with the use of many biblical motifs. Such monologues taking place in a protagonist's soul can be found also in other stories by Ambrose. *Acta* say nothing of the virgin's return to the place of the soldier's martyrdom and competing with him for death. Perhaps, as Gori claims, this element was taken by Ambrose from an oral tradition¹⁰. If so, Ambrose gives it a stylistic form of his own. However, it is difficult to rule out the possibility that the scene is Ambrose's own addition to the account.

The story of a virgin in a brothel should also be collated with a homily by Eusebius of Emesa¹¹. Entitled *De matre et duabus <filiabus> martyribus* was preserved in Latin¹². One part of it (19) tells the story of two people: a soldier and a virgin, which is almost identical with the story included in *De virginibus*. However, it is set in Alexandria – like in *Acta SS. Didymi et Theodoraë*, but it is restricted only to the happenings taking place in the brothel. Both texts agree when it comes to particular elements of the plot, i.e.: the coming of the soldier, the virgin's fear, exchanging clothes, as well as the metaphors used: *columba*, *ovis*, *lupi*, *accipitres*, and the resemblances between what the protagonists say, eventually to the last words of the homily, in which Eusebius expresses the shock of the client discovering a male in the brothel:

Ego quidem audiebam, sed non credebam quia praesens Christus aquam ad vinum transtulit; nunc autem et maiorem admirationem intueor: video enim virginem ad virum translatam et stupeo (*De matre et duabus filiabus martyribus*, 19).

One may suppose that both authors, Eusebius of Emesa and the bishop of Milan, knew *Acta* or at least their second part. There might have existed also other texts describing martyrdom of a virgin and a soldier, unknown to us. Ambrose could have had them at his disposal and might have used them freely

⁹ Cf. F. Gori, 85.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ On Eusebius of Emesa cf. M. Simonetti, *Eusebio di Emesa*, in: *Dizionario patristico e di antichità cristiane*, 1, 1294–1295.

¹² *Analecta Bollandiana*, 38, Bruxelles-Paris 1920, 263–284 together with the introduction by A. Wilmart, *Le souvenir souvenir d'Eusèbe d'Émèse*, 241–262.

when writing on virginity – as it was suggested by A. Wilmart in his comparison of the homily of Eusebius and the quoted fragment of *De virginibus*¹³.

3. Pelagia – *si nolunt licere, moriamur*

The martyrdom of Pelagia is another account by Ambrose containing references to earlier literature. The bishop tells its story twice. In an extended notice in *Epistula* 7,36-38 he gives only general information – Pelagia dies voluntarily, defending her virginity from persecutors. More can be found in *De virginibus* 3,7,32-34. According to it, Pelagia was nearly 15 years old, living in Antioch, and her sisters were virgins like her. When the persecution started, her mother and sisters were absent, and she locked herself at home, ready to defend her chastity. After a terrible spiritual fight, narrated by Ambrose in the form of an inner monologue of the virgin, Pelagia decided consciously and out of her free will to kill herself – being convinced that the faith she was guided by will wipe out her offence. For the moment of her death she adorned her hair and put on a wedding dress as if she (were going to meet her bride-groom. We can guess the manner of her death only from Ambrose's introduction to the story where he states that some virgins threw themselves down from a mountain in order not to be caught by persecutors – „qui se praecipitare ex alto” (*De virginibus* 3,7,32) – and from vague words Pelagia addresses to herself in the soul: „Iam enim sacrilegas aras praecipitata subvertam” (3,7,33). Ambrose connected the account about Pelagia with a longer story of the death of a mother and daughters who were defending their chastity. From *De virginibus* 3,7,34 one can infer that it were the mother and sisters of Pelagia. It seems that Ambrose used short information included by Eusebius of Cesarea in his *Historia ecclesiastica*:

Iam vero ea quae apud Antiochiam gesta sunt, quid opus est in memoriam revocare? ... Ex quibus nonnulli periculum vitantes, priusquam caperentur, et in insidiatorum manus inciderent, ex sublimibus tabulatis praecipites se dederunt, propter impiorum malitiam mortem lucro deputantes (8,12,2).

This information is followed directly by the account of the mother and daughters who in defense of their chastity drowned themselves in a river. Neither of the authors gives their names. Eusebius claims they lived in Antioch, while Ambrose writes about Antioch as the birthplace of Pelagia. The direct proximity of the account on the same topic in the writings of both authors suggests that Eusebius of Cesarea is the bishop of Milan's source. In the homily of Eusebius of Emesa there is only a brief notice about Pelagia:

¹³ Cf. idem, 256–258.

„Ita igitur beata Pelagia fuit ipsa sibi ovis et sacerdos, offerens utpote semetipsam” (*De matre ed duabus <filiabus> martyribus*, 282). It is placed between a fragment about an imprisoned virgin and the conclusion that tells the story of the death in the river of a mother and her daughters. Also this neighbouring position of the story makes us conclude that it is Eusebius of Cesarea that all the later authors draw on regarding this account.

4. Mother and her daughters – *aqua, quae virgines facit*

As mentioned above, the story of Pelagia in *De virginibus* is connected to the account of the death of the mother and her daughters – thought to be Pelagia’s sisters (3,7,34-36):

Ast ubi detestandi persecutores ereptam sibi viderunt praedam pudoris, matrem et sorores coeperunt quaerere (3,7,34).

Eusebius of Cesarea connects the two episodes by (the) information about the mother’s noble origin, beauty of her daughters and the rules of Christian upbringing instilled in them:

Quaedam etiam sanctissima femina, et ob animi fortitudinem admirabilis, opibus ac splendore generis, bonaque in primis fama Antiochiae percelebris, quae duas filias virgines, corporis forma et aetatis flore praestantes, Christianae religionis praeceptis instituerat (8,12,3).

Next he passes to (the) an account of their death. When the circle of soldiers lying in wait against Christian women’s purity closed about them, the mother presented her daughters with the only option left to them, which according to her was the escape to the Lord, that is – in this case – killing themselves in defense of their virginity. Thus, the mother and daughters walk into the river and drown themselves voluntarily:

Idem omnes consilium amplexae, cum ad medium itineris pervenissent, veniam a militibus petunt, ut tantisper de via deflectere sibi liceret. Quo impetrato, compositis honeste ac decenter vestibus, in prae fluentem se fluvium coniecerunt. Et hae quidem semetipsas submerserunt (8,12,4).

The Cesarean historian’s account is very concise. It does not include the names of the mother and daughters. The text is simple, lacking rhetorical decorations. A more elaborated version can be found in the panegyric homily by Eusebius of Emesa, mentioned above. Reading it, one encounters a fragment very distinctly corresponding with the story by the bishop of Milan, especially the theme of baptism encountered there. Therefore let us compare the two texts. Ambrose writes:

Quid veremur?, inquit, ecce aqua: quis nos baptizari prohibet? Et hoc baptisma est, quo peccata donantur, regna quaeruntur. Et hoc baptisma est, post quod nemo delinquit. Excipiat nos aqua, quae regenerare consuevit, excipiat nos aqua, quae virgines facit, excipiat nos aqua, quae caelum aperit, infirmos tegit, mortem abscondit, martyres reddit (*De virginibus* 3,7,34).

Whereas Eusebius of Emesa describes it in following words:

Et dixit mater ad filias secundum vocem boni illius eunuchi: „Filiae, ecce aqua: quis prohibet nos coronari? Haec est aqua per quam liberatae sumus a peccatis. Reddamus ei qui donavit gratiam. Gratiam per aquam accepimus; sit gratia pro gratia. Per aquam salvatae sumus; per aquam et coronemur” (*De matre ed duabus <filiabus> martyribus*, s. 16).

On the basis of the quoted passages it is impossible to reach a definite conclusion that Ambrose drew on Eusebius of Emesa, but it is also difficult to rule out such a possibility. It is however indisputable that a common background for both of them was the story of the Acts of the Apostles 8:25-39 about the Ethiopian courtier who was baptized in some water by the road. The sentence: „Ecce aqua; quid prohibet me baptizari?” is cited by Ambrose almost word for word – he changes only the personal pronoun *me* to *nos*. Eusebius of Emesa paraphrases the sentence changing *baptizari* into *coronari*. Both Eusebius of Emesa and Ambrose develop Eusebius of Cesarea’s account, adorning it and adding some panegyric features to it – which is probably the effect of an oral tradition always leading in such a direction¹⁴.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that Ambrose sees no problem with the kind of death chosen by the Christian women in order to save their chastity. On the contrary, recalling the story of the young virgins who caused their own death, the author of *De virginibus* presents it as an example of martyrdom: „cum martyrii exstet exemplum” (3,7,32); „quas ad martyrium iunxerat” (3,7,36). Augustine will be of a different opinion, strongly objecting to the sanctioning of voluntary suicide, claiming that those who committed it, perhaps deserve admiration, but the greater power of the spirit is manifested by those who do not run away from life, but are capable of enduring the hardships of it¹⁵.

(trans. Agnieszka Piskozub-Piwosz)

¹⁴ Cf. *Vies des SS.*, vol. 1, Paris 1935, 78–79.

¹⁵ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* I 22,1. On suicide cf. also e.g. Idem, *Epistulae* 4; 185,12; 204; *De patientia* 11,9-10; *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus* 51,10. The issue is discussed in T. Gacia, *Lukrecja – „dux Romanae pudicitiae” czy „mulier laudis avida”?*, „Roczniki Humanistyczne”, 57 (2009) 3, 117–130.

Streszczenie

CIĄGŁOŚĆ TRADYCJI MARTYROLOGICZNEJ U ŚW. AMBROŻEGO Z MEDIOLANU NA PRZYKŁADZIE OPISÓW MĘCZEŃSTWA DZIEWIC

Motyw męczeństwa jest obecny w bardzo wielu utworach św. Ambrożego. Najwięcej tego rodzaju treści znajduje się w pismach podejmujących tematykę dziewictwa. Są to rozbudowane literacko opisy męczeństwa dziewic, w zamierzeniu biskupa Mediolanu stanowiące zachętę do ubiegania się o męczeństwo duchowe w epoce, gdy ustały już prześladowania. Wśród tych opisów można znaleźć wątki, które u św. Ambrożego spotyka się pierwszy raz w historii literatury chrześcijańskiej oraz takie, które wyraźnie nawiązują do wcześniejszych świadectw literackich. W opracowaniu mówi się o tych drugich. Aby odpowiedzieć na pytanie, w jaki sposób biskup Mediolanu z owych świadectw korzysta, autor artykułu poddaje szczegółowej analizie kilka opisów męczeństwa, zawartych głównie w traktatach o dziewictwie. Z analizy wyciąga wniosek o ciągłości tradycji martyrologicznej w starożytnej literaturze chrześcijańskiej.

Key words: martyrdom, St. Ambrose of Milan, virgin

Słowa kluczowe: św. Ambroży, męczeństwo, dziewictwo

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