

## Summary

### CIVITAS MERETRIX, OR TORTURE BY A WOMAN IN JEROME'S *VITA PAULI PRIMI EREMITAE*

The article attempts to shed light on the function of the bizarre martyrdom episode at the beginning of Jerome's *Life of Paul the First Hermit*, which, due to its indecency, causes embarrassment among scholars. It, at first glance, seems to be a superfluous and somewhat awkward attempt to make the narrative about the founder of the Egyptian eremitic movement more entertaining. Considering how much space the author devotes to this anecdote in this fairly short text and in what detail he describes the unusual sexual torture, it is apparent that this is not just a titillating interlude to amuse the reader. The "torture" by the woman therefore plays a much more important role in the structure of the text. In this scene, Jerome reverses the standard martyrological pattern of the female martyr being subjected to sexual torture by male persecutors, in an attempt to show the ethos of the new Eastern ascetic movements of which he became an enthusiastic advocate. The entire scene can thus be seen as an allegorical parable about the inner spiritual struggle of an adept at the ascetic life with sexual temptation. This can only be overcome at the cost of physical suffering, which the ascetic inflicts on himself by the strict suppression of his own bodily desires, and which can match the torture that the martyrs have to undergo. He thus makes a connection between martyrdom and the ascetic life, placing both forms of extraordinary faith on the same level. The fact that this struggle with carnal temptation is not thematized in the following narrative of the first hermit is the result of a specific narrative strategy based on the use of the isolated fragments of the story between which there are large narrative gaps. The link, however, between the seemingly unrelated opening martyrdom episode and the main narrative of Paul's eremitic career may not only be the symbolic meaning of the scene as a parable about the struggle with carnal temptation, but also the word *meretrix* (harlot) itself, which also appears in the main body of the text in the phrase *civitas meretrix* (harlot city), which Saint Anthony uses to refer to Alexandria. The martyr's radical break with

his female tormentor may prefigure the hermit's equally uncompromising break with depraved urban civilization and all its worldly temptations. The strange martyrdom episode can thus also be interpreted as a hidden message about the nature of radical eremitic asceticism.

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