



[The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs](#)

The record of the trial of a group of Christians in Carthage

Date: 180 CE Jul 17th

Place: Carthage

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Legal text

Title of work: The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs

Reference:

1-17

Commentary:

The *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* take the form of a court proceedings (which have apparently been somehow acquired, copied, redacted, and preserved by other Christians) recording the questioning and sentencing of twelve martyrs in Carthage by the proconsul P. Vigellius Saturninus (who is referred to by Tertullian in his *To Scapula* 3.4 as the first to execute Christians in North Africa). The text is the earliest dated document which we possess from the Latin church, and the first to refer to a Latin Bible (section 12) (on this, see Gerald Bonner, "The Scillitan Saints"). The text was known for a long time in a Greek manuscript tradition, but was originally composed in Latin, and the Latin version was discovered in a ninth-century codex in the British Museum (Brit. Mus. 11, 880) by J. Armitage Robinson in 1890. The date of the court hearing is given in the document itself as the 17th July, during the second consulship of Praesens, which was in 180 CE. The manuscript tradition refers also to a Claudianus, which seems to be a mistake, as during Praesens's second term as consul his colleague was called Condianus. The precise location of the city is uncertain, but there is mention of a bishop of Scillium in 411. Most scholars have argued, despite the fact that the text represents some clear additions by Christian redactors (such as the description of the martyrs death at the very end of the text) that this text represents one of the closest things that we have amongst the early-Christian martyr acts to historical court records (see Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts*, p. xxii; Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs*, p. 200). There are, however, certain problems presented by the text as we have it.

Firstly, Herbert Musurillo argues that in sections 11 and 13 we are simply left to assume that the proconsul's offer of a thirty day reprieve for the Christians is refused by their apparent spokesperson, Speratus, without his answer being recorded explicitly (*The Acts*, p. xxii). However, I see no reason why Speratus's statement of "I am a Christian" cannot be understood as his clear refusal to accept the reprieve – his statement, which his fellow defendants readily support, is sufficient for the final sentence of execution to be given. Another problem presented by the text is the inconsistencies in the lists of the martyrs. This led H. Karpp to suggest that a second group of six martyrs was later added by a redactor to the original list ("Die Zahl der Scilitanischen Märtyrer"). Herbert Musurillo disagrees, as in section 16 all the twelve individuals are named in the final sentencing. As with every list of the martyrs' names in the text, Speratus is mentioned first, followed by Nartzalus and Cittinus, then six others not previously mentioned in the text, concluding with Vestia, Donata, and Secunda. However, in section 14, when the initial sentencing is stated, the extra six mentioned in section 16 are left out, with the phrase "et cetera" ("and others") following the final three names (Vestia, Donata, and Secunda). This might indicate that the other six martyrs mentioned at the very end of the text have simply been left out of other lists (*The Acts*, p. xxii). The first mention of the martyrs in section 1 has the abbreviated list of characters in all of the manuscripts, but for Herbert Musurillo, this merely represents an accidental shortening. Moreover, it is only the martyrs named in the abbreviated list who speak to the proconsul Saturninus during the interrogation. It could be that all twelve were originally arrested and executed, but that only a few were specifically questioned – this seems unlikely, however (see Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs*, p. 200). Perhaps the editor of the text has simply omitted their responses, which might have stood between what are now our sections 8 and 9. Once the reprieve has been refused by the defendants and their sentence is carried out there and then, Saturninus spares the Christians torture and humiliation in death, and we are told condemns them to beheading instead, the method of execution usually carried out on Roman citizens. This means that the defendants were either Roman citizens, or that the author



wishes to present them as Roman citizens.

The contrast between Caesar, whom Saturninus refers to as “our lord the emperor” (sections 2 and 5) and God/Jesus, whom Speratus names as “the lord who is the emperor of kings and of all nations” is particularly prominent. A direct competition is presented between the Roman emperor and the Christian saviour. Speratus is so fervent in his assertion of the incompatibility of the authority of Caesar and God that he goes so far as to state that he does not recognise the “empire/authority (imperium) of this world” (section 6). Speratus claims that while he makes sure to pay taxes, obey the law, and generally avoid wicked behaviour (sections 2, 6), this is purely out of honour for God, not so much a sense of duty to the Roman emperor and/or the Roman legal system. Speratus’s offer in section 4 to teach the proconsul Christian doctrines (“the mystery of simplicity”) stands in New Testament tradition of Christians teaching while in custody (see, for example, Matthew 10:18 and Acts 24:24-26, where Paul converses with the procurator Felix).

Speratus’s attitude to the emperor stands in contrast to the more accommodating outlooks of the authors of texts such as [1 Clement 60.4-61.3](#), [Romans 13:1-7](#), and [1 Peter 2:12-17](#), where honour and respect for the Roman authorities is endorsed and promoted to Christians to varying degrees. Moreover, when Speratus states in section 7 that it is forbidden to bear false witness and to murder (two of the Ten Commandments), he effectively implies the breaking of these holy laws by the proconsul. This latter is interesting in light of Saturninus’s statement that “We too (i.e. the Romans) are religious” in section 3; first of all, it suggests that the proconsul acknowledges the piety of the Christians, but secondly, it stands in line with the notion that the Romans are a particularly pious people, something which the Christians (especially Speratus) seem to be implicitly questioning here. In this connection, it is also noteworthy that the proconsul refers to Christianity with the term *ritus* (“rites, religious observance”) in section 14, thus in one sense paralleling it to Roman religion, which consisted mainly of the observance of rites, such as the oath to the Genius (guardian spirit) of the emperor (which Saturninus himself specifically mentions). Earlier on, he has used a much more general term (*persuasio*, “conviction, opinion”). It could be that a Christian editor has adapted some of the language in order to place in the Roman proconsul’s mouth words which suggest he understands there to be certain parallels with Christianity and his own belief system, thereby implying that he recognises it as having some legitimacy.

Donata’s response to the proconsul’s interrogation is slightly more moderate than that of Speratus (alluding to the line of argument presented in the famous “render to Caesar” pericope found in Mark 12:13-17, [Matthew 22:15-22](#), and Luke 20:20-26), as she is seemingly happy enough to give an appropriate level of respect to the emperor (she does not overtly reject him and his authority as Speratus does), but is yet unwilling to do anything which suggests that Caesar is to be feared or venerated above God. The consequences of denying God his proper honour are seemingly perceived to be much worse than any punishment for shunning Caesar.

Keywords in the original language:

- [caelum](#)
- [Caesar](#)
- [Christianus](#)
- [Christus](#)
- [confiteor](#)
- [decretum](#)
- [deus](#)
- [dominus](#)
- [epistula](#)
- [genius](#)
- [gens](#)
- [gladius](#)
- [honoro](#)
- [imperator](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [iuro](#)
- [iustus](#)
- [liber](#)



- [martyr](#)
- [mora](#)
- [mos](#)
- [mysterium](#)
- [proconsul](#)
- [religio](#)
- [religiosus](#)
- [rex](#)
- [ritus](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [sacrum](#)
- [saeculum](#)
- [salus](#)
- [supplico](#)
- [testimonium](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Genius of the emperor](#)
- [martyrdom](#)
- [proconsul](#)
- [Roman citizenship](#)
- [Roman court](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman justice](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman piety](#)
- [Roman religion](#)
- [trial](#)

Bibliographical references:

[The Acts of the Christian Martyrs](#)

Musurillo, Herbert book *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* Oxford Clarendon 1972

[“Rome versus de christenen: de zaak tegen de christenen uit Scilli”](#)

Smarius, Alexander article-in-a-journal 26-4142.1 “Rome versus de christenen: de zaak tegen de christenen uit Scilli” Lampas 2009

[“Die Zahl der Scilitanischen Märtyrer”](#)

Karpp, H. article-in-a-journal 165-17215 “Die Zahl der Scilitanischen Märtyrer” *Vigiliae Christianae* 1961

[The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom](#)

Moss, Candida R. book *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* Oxford Oxford University Press 2010

[The Passion of S. Perpetua. Newly Edited from the Mss. with an Introduction and Notes. Together with an Appendix Containing the Original Latin Text of the Scillitan Martyrdom](#)



Robinson, J. Armitagebook *The Passion of S. Perpetua. Newly Edited from the Mss. with an Introduction and Notes. Together with an Appendix Containing the Original Latin Text of the Scillitan Martyrdom* CambridgeCambridge University Press1891

[“The Scillitan Saints and the Pauline Epistles”](#)

Bonner, Geraldarticle-in-a-journal141-1467“The Scillitan Saints and the Pauline Epistles”*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*1956

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Romans 13:1-7](#)

Paul instructs the Christians in Rome to respect the ruling authorities

- [Read more about Romans 13:1-7](#)

Text

[Matthew 22:15-22](#)

Paying taxes to Caesar

- [Read more about Matthew 22:15-22](#)

Text

[1 Peter 2:12-17](#)

Christians urged to honour the emperor

- [Read more about 1 Peter 2:12-17](#)

Text

[1 Clement 60.4 – 61.3](#)

God's sanctioning of Roman authorities

- [Read more about 1 Clement 60.4 – 61.3](#)

Realized by:



[Kimberley Fowler](#)



Source URL: <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/acts-scillitan-martyrs>