

EUPHEMISTIC AND NON-EUPHEMISTIC CONTENT OF REFERENCES TO DEATH IN EARLY CHRISTIAN INSCRIPTIONS

It is intended in this study to distinguish between those euphemisms which Christian inscriptions contain in common with pagan ones and those which are typically Christian. The former group comprises euphemistic expressions suggested by social convention and manners, and aimed especially at a less crude presentation of certain disagreeable notions, as well as certain euphemisms of a superstitious nature that were either mechanically adopted by the early Christians in imitation of their pagan contemporaries, or else were the relics of superstitious belief that lingered in their minds from their pagan days. The second group embraces euphemisms of a purely or predominantly Christian bent, in that they are the product of a Christian outlook or belief. As will be shown at the appropriate place, there is much more to these Christian euphemistic expressions than the mere desire to avoid using what could be regarded as undesirable terminology.

A. *Non-Christian Euphemisms for Death*

One finds in Christian epitaphs several expressions for death, to die, etc., that present no specifically Christian connotation. So, for instance, *eo, oboeo, exeo, decedo, migro, defungor*, etc., with or without a complementary phrase like *de corpore*, which are so numerous in Christian funerary inscriptions. Sometimes, however, the nature of the added phrase imparts a Christian tone to the expression as a whole: IIT AD DEUM, D90, Romae; IVI IN ✠ PC., Silv. 3560; MIGRAVIT AD DOMINUM, D1054, and similarly 1552, 3454, etc.; PAVSAT ... IN CRISTO, 3301; IN SIGNO ✠ PAUSANTI, 1544; TRANSIERUNT AD VERAM ... VITA, 4827, apud Ambarros; etc. DEFUNCTO IN Xpo, ICR 1, p.451, prope Mediolanium, a.523; D(e)F(unctus) ... IN DEO, D3285 E, Romae; OBIT IN Xpo, D3280 ff; δisc. (essit) IN PACE δNI, D3275 ff., etc.

Defungor (vita) exemplifies one of the methods frequently adopted for tabuistic reasons, namely, the elliptical method, which is one of the simplest ways of solving the difficulties created by linguistic taboo, in that it does not call for a positive effort to substitute a noa-word for

the taboo-word, but entails simply the omission of that part of an expression which, if included, would vitiate the expression as a whole from the affective viewpoint. One may recall the use of *punire = morte, capite punire* (perhaps since Pliny the younger).¹

Ellipsis, however, is by no means the only way by which the problem of taboo can be resolved. Another, quite popular euphemistic device, euphemism 'per antiphrasin', is illustrated by a frequently recurring expression in pagan as well as Christian epitaphs: *dis manibus*, frequently abbreviated D.M. The element of merely mechanical adoption,² or else the mixture of pagan and Christian elements in Christian funerary epigraphy, is made evident by the introduction of Christian symbols in conjunction with the letters D.M.: D P M., D3889 C and 3889D; λ D.M. ω , 3913, prope Anagniam; α P ω D.M.S. α P ω 3085C, Madaurae; et passim. Probably underlying this euphemistic expression was the belief that the terror-inspiring spirits of the dead could be propitiated by being called *manes*, 'good', just as the morning could be humoured into ushering in a favourable day by the same appellation.³

An even clearer case of euphemism 'per antiphrasin' is the use of words expressing life, health, etc. to convey the notion of death. Such are *salutaris* and *vitalis*.⁴ The euphemistic force of the latter word seems to be fully exploited in a IV cent. inscription from N. Africa (D 2722A): P PUER INNOCENS, NOCENS NOMINE VITALIS VICISIT ANNIS SEX IN PACE ET IN REFRIGEU, in which the phrase *nomine Vitalis*, by reason of its close link with *nocens*, appears to be used as the specific reason for the fact that the boy of six, though *innocens* in other respects, was *nocens* only because of the name he bore, which in the popular mind was euphemistically associated with the notion of death. This expla-

¹ Löfstedt, *Late Latin*, p.186, including his quotations from the *Reichenau Glossary*.

² La notion des Manes s'étant obscurcie, Di Manes est devenu une sorte de cliché employé en parlant des morts, et même d'un seul individu. *Dis Manibus Coniugis* n'a guère d'autre sens que 'à la mémoire sacrée de mon épouse', Ernout — Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, s.v. Manes.

³ Cf. E. Benveniste, *Euphémismes anciens et modernes*, in *Die Sprache*, I, 120f., together with his reference to a Berber custom based on the same belief. Ernout — Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, holds the same view and quotes Bücheler, C.E.1164, I, *Di Manes, manes sitis*. This is the more generally accepted explanation. Cf. Ernout — Meillet, *o.c.*, s.v.

⁴ See Friedländer, *L. Petronii Cena Trimalchionis, mit deutscher Übersetzung und erklärenden Anmerkungen*, 1906², Leipzig, pp.252, 354.

nation does not, of course, exclude the possibility of *Vitalis* in this epitaph being taken in its natural etymological sense. It would then follow that the boy caused offence by his name because he was dead in spite of the fact that his name conveyed the idea of anything but death. On the other hand, it is clear that the writer wanted to pack as much effect as he could within the space of a short epitaph, and it is consequently not far-fetched to assume that he was aware of, and meant his readers to go beyond, the all too obvious connotation of *vitalis*.

B. Christian Expressions for Death

Before actually discussing the various terms used in Christian funerary inscriptions in connection with death, it is significant to recall that the direct nomenclature for death, *mors*, *morior*, received a new vitality with the introduction and spread of Christianity. A very plausible reason for this is put forward by Hey: '... möglich, dass erst christliche Weltanschauung und Litteratur dem ernsten Wort *mors* wieder zu seiner vollen Geltung verholfen haben.'⁵ The Christians' concept of death helped them to view the inevitable drama of it in a new light. This fresh attitude to death is reflected in St. Paul's words in *I Cor.* 15:55: κατεπύθη ὁ θάνατος εἰς νίκος. τοῦ σου, θάνατε, τῶνικόν νίκος; it inspired the notion of victory in death expressed in numerous Christian epitaphs: IN NOMINE Xpi VINCAS SEMPER!, D1626, Aostae, a.406; A DEO DATUR BICTORIA, 1628, prope Cirtam; MORTEM VICIT MERITIS ... CHRISTI POSSIDET IMPERIUM, 1043, a.475; MORTEM PERDEDIT, VITAM INVENIT, QUIA AUCTOREM VITE SOLUM DILEXIT, 1217, prope Vienne, circ. VI cent.; et passim.

This outlook on life and death and its implications for the Christian are even more forcibly borne out by a variety of epigraphical data that emphasise how different from that of the pagans was the Christian concept of death. Not only were the Christians careful to record, often in elaborate detail, the time of death – a practice only very rarely resorted to in pagan epitaphs –, but the day on which they departed from this life was graphically described by them as *dies natalis*: martyrs, and others, by their death, were born into a new life, the true life: AD VERAM REMEANS E CURPURE VITA, D4827.7; perhaps also 3425 [iam sedem ca] ELESTEM IN [iit] [vitaeg] ENUINAE. Eusebius refers to the day of death of a martyr as τοῦ μαρτυρίου αὐτοῦ ἡμέραν γενέθλιον, Migne,

⁵ *All II*, 521. Cf. also *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, 6/1966, p.959.

P.G. 20, 357. Augustine too speaks of *natalis*⁶ in its Christian sense and adds that its use became widespread even among non-Christians: 'Sic, inquam, hoc nomen frequentat ecclesia, ut etiam qui non sunt in illa, hoc dicant cum illa. Quis enim hodie, non dicam in hac nostra civitate, sed plane per Africam totam transmarinasque regiones, non christianus solum, sed paganus, aut judaeus, aut etiam haereticus poterit inveniri, qui non nobiscum dicat natalem martyris Cypriani? (310, 1, 2). The Christian use of *natalis* was in sharp contrast with the profane usage (natural birthday) which the Christians again started to adopt in the period following the Constantinian peace. The two senses in which the word could be used at this time by the Christians is alluded to by St. Augustine in his sermon on the proto-martyr St. Stephen (314.1): 'Natalem domini hesterna die celebravimus; servi hodie natalem celebramus: sed natalem Domini celebravimus quo nasci dignatus est; natalem servi celebramus, quo coronatus est.'

It is against the background of the joyful Christian attitude to death that the pregnant use of *praecedo* (= *morio*) in Christian epitaphs⁷ must be considered. It expresses a sense of personal involvement on the part of the survivors, the hope inspired by the thought of following through death in the footsteps of their dear departed ones and joining them in afterlife. The condition of death is a transitional phase, a sleep to be followed by the great awakening. *Dormire, dormitio* emphasise this view in the many Christian inscriptions where they occur; cf., e.g., D 3197 ff. It is only very rarely that one finds *aeternus, aeternalis* qualifying the idea of sleep in Christian epitaphs, often, too, side by side with typically Christian elements.⁸ The notion of

⁶ The word seems to be used in an almost 'Christian' sense in Sen., *Ep.* 102, 26, 'Dies iste, quem tamquam extremum reformidas, aeterni natalis est.'

⁷ Praecessit (nos) in pace, in pace dominica, in somno (somnum) pacis. Cf. also St. Cyprian, *De Mortalitate*: 'Fratres nostros non esse lugendos accersitione dominica ... cum sciamus non eos amitti, sed praemitti, recedentes praecedere,' etc. S. Aug., *Sermo 110 de diversis*: 'Omnes enim homines filios suos, ex hac via migrando, praecedere volunt, non sequi; illa autem optavit posterior mori. Non enim amittebat filios, sed praemittebat.'

⁸ Cf. D2379 (*ibid.*, IN PACE), Romae; CIL VI 9280 (*ibid.* TU, QUI LEGES ET NON HORABERIS, ERIT TIBI DEUS TESTIMONIO) Romae; 3196A (*ibid.* IN PACE); CIL XIII 128 add. p. 2. (*ibid.* COMES ANXIA LUCEM AETERNAM SPERANS HANC CUPIT ESSE BREVEM). The last-mentioned inscription in verse contains several literary reminiscences.

The inclusion of obvious Christian elements in many of the Christian in-

death as sleep was evidently suggested by biblical usage. In John 11:11, Jesus refers to the dead Lazarus in these words: Λάζαρος ὁ φίλος ἡμῶν κεκοίμηται. It is only when the disciples could not understand that he was referring to Lazarus' death that he said clearly: Λάζαρος ἀπέθανεν. Mat. 9.24 is, perhaps, even more significant. Speaking of the dead daughter of Jairus, Jesus says: οὐ γὰρ ἀπέθανεν τὸ κοράσιον ἀλλὰ καθεύδει. In this text there can be no question of the use of καθεύδει for euphemistic reasons. The straightforward expression for death, ἀπέθανεν, is not avoided. The implication is that our Lord wanted to inculcate what death should mean for the Christian: It is not a lasting phenomenon, but a transitory condition, leading from temporal to eternal life, just as one opens one's eyes after a night's sleep to the light of a new day.⁹ It is this vision of death that suggested to the early Christians the word by which they normally referred to their burial-places, viz. κοιμητήριον, *coemeterium*, which received such wide acceptance in the Romance languages: It. *cemetero*, *cimitero*; Fr. *cimetière*; Sp. *cementerio*, *cimiterio*; Port. *cemiterio*. Examples of Christian inscriptions where this word occurs are: BENIT IN CIMITERO, D2119, Romae; also 1999A, 2149; 2000, Ostiae; 2163, Taracinae; PER SINGULA COEMETERIA, CIL XI 1700, Florentiae; Not. scav. 1922 p.250; CIL XII 5340 (κοιμητήριον), Narbone; cf. also D2731, Ostiae: ELPIDIUS COEMATE (= κοιμητάκι) ENTADE. As a result of frequent usage in the Christian era the need was felt to strengthen the verb by the addition of a prefix, cf. Huebner IHC 21, OBDORMIVIT IN PACE JESU, and Vulg. Act. 7, 60, Obdormivit in Domino (Gk. ἐκοιμήθη).

The Christian concept behind *depositio*, *depositus*, which occur so very often in Christian epitaphs in an absolute form, is revealed by those instances where fuller expressions are employed. These involve

scriptions that contain the pagan phrase *domus aeterna* (*aeternalis*), cf. e.g. D 3650 ff. *passim*, seems to be an argument in favour of the theory of mechanical adoption of pagan epigraphical terminology by the Christians. The pagan view of the tomb as a *domus aeterna* is strongly opposed in the New Testament and in the Fathers, cf. *Realexikon für Antike und Christentum* IV, Col.109-128. Cf. also II Cor. 5:1. See also Cumont, *Religions orientales* p.94 and note 113.

Cf. also the arguments adduced by H. Nordberg (*Sylloge Inscriptionum Christianarum Veterum Musei Vaticani*, II, p.228f.), some of which give the impression of being rather strained.

⁹ Cf. I Cor. 15, especially v. 20: Νυνὶ δὲ χριστὸς ἐγήγερται ἐκ νεκρῶν, ἀπαρχὴ τῶν κεκοιμημένων.

the body of the deceased or its equivalent: DEPONEN(s) CORPUS, D3478.2; similarly 838; — OSSA, ICR I, 843 add p.584 (ibid. VIVENTEMQUE DEO CREDITE FLERE NEFAS); DEPOSITUIT CORPUS TUMULO (ibid. PENETRANS REGNA BEATA ... MORTEM VICIT MERITIS), D104 3, Mediolanii; DEPONENS ... TERRIS MORTALIA MEMBRA, 3346 (interpolated?); CORPORA DEPOSITA, CIL V 1658, prope Aquileiam; DEPOSITAE SUNT RELIQUIAE, D2104, Sitifi, a.452; DEPOSITAM Xps QUAM TIBI REDDIT, CE 1436; DEPOSITIO CRUORIS ... MARTURUM, CIL VIII 6700, Africa; cf. 2 *Pet.* 1:14 'certus quod velox est depositio tabernaculi mei.'¹⁰ In all these cases the term is used in its juridical sense of a provisional placing, temporary custody, cf. Ulp., *Dig.* 16,3,1.

In D1507, PETENTE perhaps = appetente (= — ti), i.e. appetenti (caelestia regna, etc.), cf. 1982.3 (Damasian inscr.), 2921.

D4723 presents an interesting case. The sentence where *petitio* = *mors* occurs reads as follows: QUAM ABSTULIT NEFANDA DIES ET ATRA PETITIO SUA FUNERE MERSIT IMMERTAM ANTE TEMPUS. The use of *atra* qualifying *petitio* (*Dei*) may be indicative of the degree to which the idea of death as an *adpetitio Dei* had taken root in the minds of the early Christians, to the extent that *petitio* in this sense could even be unreflectingly qualified by *atra*, where the epithet obviously qualifies *adpetitio* (*Dei*) only in the syntactical sense, whereas on the conceptual plane it can only be qualifying here the crude notion of death considered merely under its unpleasant aspects.

Death is sometimes referred to as the act of returning to God, of giving one's life back to Him: RECEPTUS AD DEUM, CIL VI 8498b; RECEPTA IN PACE ✠, D3255, Romae; ACCEPTA APUT DEUM, ICR I 678, ibid., a.432; DECESSIT ... DIGNA ACCEPTA A DOMINO IN PACE, D3334, ibid., IV cent.; A DEO ET SANCTIS ACCETA, 3335, ibid.; ἀκσεπτα ἰν χρο, Silv.68, ibid.

By way of conclusion to our consideration of the expressions most commonly used by the early Christians in connection with death, we may state that the attitude revealed in epitaphs is one of realism, mingled with, and indeed very often superseded by, sublimation of the concept of death. Death had its frightful aspects inasmuch as it was the punishment for sin. And so one may see genuine euphemisms in certain elliptical allusions to death in Christian funerary inscriptions. For instance, in an inscription at Ostia (CE 563), in another at

¹⁰ Cf., perhaps, D2064.

Mainz (CE793), and in a third at Rome (Diehl, *Inscriptiones Latinae*, tab. 32,18, a.345), the subject *mors* of *rapuit*, *evenit* and *eripuit* respectively is omitted, and direct reference to death is otherwise sedulously guarded against (CASOS INIQUOS; OBIIT; HORA SUPPREMA). In another inscription from Carthage (*Comptes – rendus de L'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles – Lettres* 1916, p.163f.), DIRA (v.7) = *dira mors* (but *mors*, *moriens* also occur in the same inscription). Where *mors* is mentioned, it is often accompanied by epithets such as *saeva*, *vorax*, *dura*, etc., cf. D III p.369f. and p.556. But these harsh epithets are often to be found side by side with expressions of triumph over death and all the fear normally associated with it, cf. D III p.369f. This was the early Christian's position in the face of death attested in early funerary inscriptions.

One realises immediately that the substitutes for the crude expressions for death, to die, etc., found in Christian epitaphs are not mere euphemisms in the commonly accepted sense of the term. Euphemistic techniques are in reality negative processes whereby the disagreeableness of the unmitigated expression is avoided without any special preoccupation on the part of the speaker to include positive conceptual values in the indirect means of expression which he may employ; indeed, if the speaker or writer is not content with simply avoiding the unpleasant term but makes use of a noa-expression in its place, the idea suggested by the noa-expression often runs counter to the speaker's feelings or convictions in the matter (so, for instance, in the euphemism 'per antiphrasin'). This definition does not fit into the Christian use of certain terminology connected with death, the aim of which is to sublimate the notion of death and not to gloss over the disagreeable side of it, or, rather, such terminology is directed towards, and is the fruit of, the balanced Christian mentality regarding death, whereby the natural fearfulness of death is overshadowed by belief in the resurrection.¹¹ The pagan outlook, as shown in the euphemisms they used, was basically unrealistic and evasive; they confined themselves to an unwilling acceptance of a phenomenon with respect to the implications of which they adopted an attitude either of doubt or of utter rejection.¹²

¹¹ In a 5th cent. inscription from Gaul (D3488): ACCIPE, QUI LACR(i)MIS PER-FUNDIS IUGETER ORA: MORS NIHIL EST, VITAM RESPICE PERPETUAM.

¹² 'Allein der Verzicht auf den Fortbestand des Leibes bleibt doch das Grundmerkmal der antiken Auffassung. Die Philosophie sucht damit zu versöhnen, und mag es in der Theorie bei manchen erreicht haben,' K.Prümm, *Der christliche*



The Christians' view, again as reflected in their methods of describing death, was a realistic one: they did not, like the Stoics, indulge in a kind of supercilious self-illusion and pretend that the normally forbidding elements of death were non-existent, but they placed these in their proper perspective and raised their minds to higher things, to the thought of the resurrection and the glory that was to follow.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ALL, Archiv für lateinische Lexikographie und Grammatik, 1-15, Leipzig 1884-1908.
- CE, Bücheler. Carmina Epigraphica, Leipzig, 1895, 1897.
- CIL, Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, Berlin, 1863 ff.
- D, Diehl E., Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres, Vols. I-III, Berlin 1961².
- ICR, De Rossi, Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae.
- IHC, Huebner, Inscriptiones Hispaniae Christianae.
- NOT. SCAVI, Notizie degli scavi di antichità, Rome, 1879 ff.
- SILV., Silvagni A.-Ferrua A., Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores, colligare coepit J.B. De Rossi, compleverunt et ediderunt A. Silvagni et A. Ferrua, nova series vol. III, in civitate Vaticana, 1956.

Glaube und die altheidnische Welt, p.325. The pagans' relentless and continuing opposition to the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body was a clear indication of the novelty of this doctrine and helped besides to strengthen the early Christians' faith with regard to it, cf. *ibid.* p.337. Cf. also Tert., *De resurr. carnis* 39: 'Nationes praeconium resurrectionis, inauditae retro novitate concussit.'