

The trial and martyrdom of Apollonius in the 2nd cent AD

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Until the late 19th cent. reference to the trial and execution of Apollonius, a Roman senator in the time of Commodus (180-192) for being a Christian, could be found only in Eusebius *HE* 5, 21:3ff (and the Latin work, based on Eusebius, by Rufinus¹) and Jerome *de viris illustribus* ch. 42. Then two texts of the 'monograph' variety containing some sort of account of the trial proceedings, culminating in the martyrdom of Apollonius, an Armenian text² and a Greek text,³ were published within a decade of each other. The internal differences are so substantial that one has to wonder about the material on which they were based. I wonder about it, but cannot provide an answer. But what I provide here is a relatively unadorned translation of the Greek with occasional reference to the Armenian via German. The differences between the two start in the proemium:

- a) the Armenian text calls the martyr Apollonius but changes the name of Perennius to Terentius, who is given the titles 'chiliarch' and 'prefect', and calls him an 'ascetic' only here;
- b) the Greek text calls him Apollōs, perhaps an alternative form of Apollonius, but describes him as an Alexandrian by birth and calls him Saccas, suggesting a certain amount of confusion, the former with the Alexandrian Apollōs of *Acts* 18, 24 and the latter, perhaps, with Ammonius Saccas. Perennius is correctly named but is given the title of 'proconsul (ἀνθύπατος) of Asia'.

The English translation presented below has been made from the Greek text in Klette's publication. I have mostly retained his division of the text and sparingly used his extraordinarily abundant notes where appropriate. I have used Latin spellings throughout, e.g. Commodus for the Greek form 'Komodos'. I have used titles only for the first occurrence.

One thing is clear: there were no advocates who spoke during the trial, unlike in some of the Egyptian Christian martyr trials.⁴

1 For an English version see R. Philip and S. Amidon *Church History of Rufinus* (1997)

2 First published in 1874 in Venice by the Mechitarists and translated into English by F. C. Conybeare in the church weekly *The Guardian* June 21 1893, a publication to which unfortunately I have no access.

3 Greek text and translation (of the Greek and Armenian texts) can be found in E. Th. Klette *Der Process und die Acta S. Apollonii* pp. 91-131. It was published in 1897 and was included in the Harnack-Gebhardt series *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* vol. 15 fasc. 2.

4 Anthony Alcock 'Did Coptic martyrs have lawyers?' *Discussions in Egyptology* 58 (2004) pp. 5ff.

There is extensive literature on the subject of Christianity and its legal status in the first two centuries. I do not cite any of it because I am not qualified to comment on it. I have not been able to consult Conybeare's translation, so I have made sparing use of the German translation of it.

First, a translation of the named texts.

Eusebius *H.E.* 5,21

§1. During the reign of Commodus things became milder for us, peace having settled by the grace of God on the churches of the whole world, when the word of salvation from all nations brought everyone to the worship of the God of all, so that many of the illustrious, by birth and wealth, at Rome came, together with their entire households and families, to their own salvation.

§2. But the ugly evil-natured demon, being unable to tolerate this, time and again devoted himself to devising various schemes against us. At Rome he brought a certain Apollonius, a Christian celebrated for his faith and learning, to court after having induced one of Apollonius' servants to bring a charge against him.

§3. The coward had brought his lawsuit at an inopportune time, and, according to the law, informers were not permitted to live, so his legs were broken because Perennius the judge had voted against him.

§4. The most God-loving martyr, after the judge had pleaded with him for some time and asked him to provide an account in the Senate, provided a most eloquent defence of the faith that he professed in every detail and was condemned to death in accordance with the decree of the senate to the effect that once they had been brought before the court they were not to be released and that there was no possibility of changing the prevailing law of long-standing among the Romans.

§5. The questions of the judge and replies made for the benefit of Perennius, the entire defence before the Senate, for those who wish to know, can be found in our copy made from the statements of witnesses.

Jerome *de viris illustribus* ch. 42

Apollonius, a Roman senator in the time of Commodus, was betrayed by a servant on the grounds that he was a Christian. Requested to provide an account of his faith, he wrote a remarkable text and read it aloud in the Senate, which nevertheless ordered him to be executed for his faith: there was an old law that required, without exception, that no Christian appearing before the court should be released.

The martyrdom of the holy and famous apostle Apollonius, the ascetic.⁵
God be praised.

In the time of Commodus the emperor, when there was a persecution of Christians,⁶ a certain Perennius⁷ was proconsul of Asia. Apollonius the apostle, a pious man, Alexandrian by birth and God-fearing, was arrested and brought before the court.⁸

§1. When he was brought before the court, Perennius said: "Apollonius, are you a Christian?"

§2. Apollonius said: "Yes, I am a Christian. For this reason I revere and fear the one who made heaven and earth and all things in them."

§3. Perennius said: "Repent. Be persuaded by me, Apollonius, and swear on the life of our lord emperor Commodus."

§4. Apollonius, the ascetic, said: "Listen to me attentively, Perennius, as I prepare to give an account of a sober and lawful defence.⁹ Anyone who repents of the just, good and wonderful

5 H. Liddell and R. Scott *Greek-English Lexicon* (LSJ) gives σακκῆς 'sack maker or carrier'. The only person with this name known from antiquity is Ammonius Saccas, a teacher of Plotinus: it is not known whether this name was given to him because of his job or because it is simply a Greek form of some other word. The Armenian text has 'ascetic', but it appears not to use the designation as often as the Greek text, where it appears several times after the name of Apollonius as ὁ καὶ Σακκέας.

6 There is no evidence of a Christian persecution under Commodus (cf. Eusebius quoted above), but his predecessor Marcus Aurelius became more aggressively anti-Christian during the course of his reign. Commodus' favourite concubine was in fact a Christian called Marcia, and he may well have been persuaded by her to show leniency to Christians sentenced to work in the silver mines of Sardinia, cf. Hippolytus *Philosophumena* 9.2.12 and A.K. Strong *Prostitutes and Matrons* (2014) ch. 4. for a more general appreciation of Marcia, as a woman and a Christian. The inaccuracies in this one sentence may be due to a later compiler who had not been supplied with accurate information, but that is only a guess on my part.

7 In Herodian *History* Bk. 1 ch. 8 it is said that Perennius was appointed Prefect of the Praetorian Guard by Commodus and, from that point on, tried to acquire more political power for himself by 'relieving' the emperor of the burden of government. He is not given a formal title by Herodian or in the *Life of Commodus* (*Historia Augusta*).

8 Details about being betrayed by a servant, whose legs are broken (for the same phrase in the Apollonius text cf. §45) for bringing his case against Apollonius παρὰ καιρόν are missing here.

9 A more accurate description might be 'statement of position': Perennius was not a Christian, so it is unlikely that he would have 'understood' the claims a Christian made about his beliefs as a 'defence'.

commands of God is unlawful, unholy and truly godless. The one who repents of all injustice, wrongdoing, idolatry and wicked debates and recoils from the onset of sinful acts and turns away from them completely, such a person is just.

§5. "Believe us, Perennius, from this defence, that we have learned the noble and illustrious commandments from the Logos of God who knows all the thoughts of men.

§6. Furthermore, we have been instructed by him not to swear at all¹⁰ but to be truthful in all things. For the greatest oath is the truth expressed in 'yes', and for this reason it is shameful for a Christian to swear.¹¹ Mistrust arises from falsehood, and in turn the oath arises from mistrust. You want me to swear that we honour the emperor and pray for his rule. I would gladly and truthfully swear to the one who is really God, the one before time, who was not made by the hands of man, but on the contrary is the one who appointed a man to ruler over men on earth."

§7. Perennius said: "Do what I say and repent, Apollonius. Sacrifice to the gods and the image of the emperor Commodus."

§8. Apollonius, smiling, said: "In the matter of repentance and oath, Perennius, I have given you my defence. In the matter of sacrifice, listen. I offer a bloodless and pure offering, I and all Christians, to the almighty, the one who rules over heaven, earth and all breath, an offering in prayer on behalf of the intelligent and reasonable images¹² appointed by the providence of God to reign on earth.

§9. So, each day in accordance with a just commandment we pray to God who lives in heaven on behalf of the one who reigns on earth, Commodus, in the secure knowledge that he rules on earth, as I said earlier, solely by the decree of God the invincible, who encompasses everything.

§10. Perennius said: "I give you a day, Apollonius, to consult with yourself about your life."¹³

§11. Three days later he ordered him to be brought before a large number of senators, councillors and great scholars. Having ordered him to be called, he said: "Let the charge against Apollonius be read out." After the reading, Perennius said: "What have you decided, Apollonius?"

§12. "To remain pious, as you reasonably established in the proceedings."¹⁴

10 Matth. 5, 34

11 Swearing seems to be equated with not telling the truth.

12 Gen. 1, 26

13 Presumably the period in which Apollonius has time to prepare his defence

14 The Armenian: ' I am and remain God-revering, as I said earlier (*Ich bin und bleibe gottverehrend, wie ich vorher gesagt habe*).

§13. Perennius said: "In accordance with the decree of the senate I advise you to repent and honour and worship the gods that we all honour and worship and to remain alive with us."

§14. Apollonius said: "I acknowledge the decree of the senate, Perennius, but I have become pious so that I may not honour idols created by human hands, which means that I will not worship falsely named gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood or stone, which neither see nor hear, because they are made by craftsmen, goldsmiths and artists and woodturners,¹⁵ carved by human hand and unable to move by themselves.

§15. "I serve God in heaven and worship him alone, the one who planted a living soul in us all and provides us with life from day to day.

§16. "I will not demean myself, Perennius, or throw myself under the rubble.¹⁶ It is shameful to worship what is of equal worth to humans or even lower than demons. The meanest men sin whenever they worship what comes under the heading of substance:¹⁷ a cold section of stone, dry wood, inert metal or dead bones. What is the meaning of this futile deceit ?

§17. "Similarly¹⁸ Egyptians worship a bowl known to many as a footwash bowl along with many other unclean things.¹⁹ What is the meaning of this futile nonsense ?

§18. "Athenians even now also worship the bronze head of a bull, which they call 'Good Fortune of Athenians',²⁰ the result of which is that they are unable to worship their own gods, which must be damaging to the soul of those who believe.

§19. "How are they different from burned clay and crumbling potsherds ? They pray to statues of demons which do not hear as we hear and which do not demand or offer anything. Their form is quite misleading: they have ears but do not hear; they have eyes but do not see; they have hands but do not move them, they have feet but do not walk. The form does not change

15 Gk. τὸρνεύτης . LSJ give the meaning 'turner', that is, someone who works with a lathe, at that time probably who worked mostly with wood.

16 Translation of Klette's term: *Schutt*. The Gk word is κυλλότερα, which I have been unable to find in LSJ, Lampe or Moulton-Milligan, all standard Greek-English dictionaries. It may be a derivative of κυλλόω 'maim'. I cannot say why he has used the term. The word γυλλός means 'block of stone' (perhaps in the sense of statue). Armenian: 'throw myself into the abyss' (*in den Abgrund stürzen*).

17 The speaker repeats a certain formulation, as is almost demanded by a certain sort of rhetoric when talking about the mistaken forms of worship and I have laboriously employed the same device: ταῦτα ἅ τῃ NN συνέχεται 'what comes under the heading of NN'

18 This adverb would be better placed at the beginning of §18.

19 See the story in Herodotus II, 172.

20 Donated by Herodes Atticus in 161 AD. See Philostratus *Lives of Sophists* 2, 1:5

the substance. I think that Socrates was making fun of Athenians when he swore by a plane tree and wild wood.²¹

§20. "Men make a second error when they worship what comes under the heading of nature: the gods of the inhabitants Pelusium worship are the onion and leek, which enter their stomach and are discharged from their bowels.

§21. "A third error is to worship what comes under the heading of perception: fish, pigeons. Egyptians worship a dog, a dog-headed creature, crocodile, bull, snake, wolf, a reflection of their own psychological dispositions.

§22. "A fourth error is to worship what comes under the heading of reason: human beings who are actually demons, whom they characterize as pre-human, as their stories demonstrate. They say that Dionysus was torn out²² and that Hercules threw himself alive into a fire²³ and that Zeus was buried in Crete,²⁴ onto which later generations have been grafted in stories, and it is from these stories that their names are known. In view of this impiety I strongly reject them."

§23. Perennius said: "Apollonius, it is the decree of the senate that there are no Christians."²⁵

§24. Apollonius replied: "The decree of God cannot give way to a human decree. The more believers in God are unjustly put to death, though they have committed no crime, the more their number will be increased by God.

§25. "I want you to know, Perennius, that God has decreed one²⁶ death for kings, senators, the very powerful, the rich, the poor, the free, the enslaved, the great, the small, the wise and the simple and that after death there will be justice for all.

§26. "But there are different types of death. Those among us who are disciples of the Logos each day are dead to pleasure, chastizing our desires through abstinence because we wish to live in accordance with the commandments of God. Believe me truly, Perennius, we are not"²⁷

21 According to the story in Philostratus *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 6, 19 Socrates is said to have sworn by a plane tree, geese and a dog to avoid swearing by the gods.

22 That is, from his mother's (Semele) womb by Zeus, the father.

23 Aristides *Apology*, 10

24 Lactantius *Divine Institutions* 1, 11 even reproduces the grave inscription !

25 That is, 'there should be no Christians'. The Armenian: 'Christians should not be seen anywhere' (*nirgends ein Christ blicken lassen soll*).

26 The numeral ἓνα is perhaps emphatic about the number of times one dies but not, of course, how many different ways there are to die.

27 μή with the indicative indicates an oath cf. LSJ meaning A6.

lying. For there is not a single portion of pleasure among us that is unpunished. Indeed, we banish from our eyes all that is disgraceful to look at just as we banish from our ears all words of flatterers, so that our heart may remain intact.

§27. "This is the life we choose. We do not think it irksome to die for the one who is truly God. We are what we are through God. For this reason we will endure everything so that we do not die badly."²⁸

§28. "Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Dysentery and fever can often kill, so I will consider that I am being taken off by one of these."

§29. Perennius said: "So, having decided, are you happy to die?"

§30. Apollonius replied: "I am happy to live, Perennius, but I am not afraid to die because of my fondness for life. There is nothing more valuable than life, but eternal life, which is immortality for the soul that has lived well in this life."²⁹

§31. Perennius said: "I do not know what to say nor do I understand, legally speaking,³⁰ what you are saying."

§32. Apollonius said: "How can I sympathize with someone who so genuinely does not understand the beauty of grace? Part of a seeing heart,³¹ Perennius, is the Logos of the Lord, as light is part of seeing eyes, for no-one benefits from speaking to the unintelligent, as the blind do not benefit from light."

§33. A Cynic philosopher³² said: "Apollonius, you are insulting yourself. You are much mistaken, even if you believe you are an abstruse thinker."³³

§34. Apollonius replied: "I have learned to pray, not to insult. If you proceed to make a fulsome defence, your reply will demonstrate the blindness of your heart. For the genuinely unintelligent truth is to be considered an insult."

§35. Perennius said: "We too know that the word of god is the generator of soul and body of

28 κακῶς (contrasted with καλῶς in §30), in the sense presumably of the words of Tertullian *ad Scapulam* 1 : *ea quae diversae vitae (deus) comminatur pati timentes* (ref. provided by Klette in note on §27)

29 Two words for 'life': βίος and ζωή . The former usually seems to refer to an activity and the latter to a state.

30 νομιμῶς. Not in the Armenian.

31 The same sentiment, expressed by Saint-Exupéry in *Le petit prince*, has become almost proverbial: *On ne voit bien qu'avec le coeur.*

32 The first contribution by anyone else in this interrogation.

33 σκοτεινόλογος . Attested only in this text, according to G. Lampe *Patristic Greek Lexicon* (1961) p.1241b

the just, which reasons and teaches what is pleasing to god."

§36. Apollonius said: "This Saviour of ours, Jesus Christ, became man in Judaea. In every respect he was just and full of divine wisdom and taught us who the God of all is and why he made virtue the ultimate goal of a holy state³⁴ for the souls of men. Through suffering he put an end to the dominion of sin.

§37. "He taught us to curb anger, moderate desire, chastize pleasure, drive out grief, be sociable, increase love, expunge vainglory, eschew the defence of wrongdoers, despise death through the institution of justice not by doing injustice but by supporting those who suffer injustice. He also taught us to obey the law handed down by him, honour the monarch, worship only immortal God,³⁵ trust that the soul is immortal, believe that there is justice after death, hope for a reward of the labours of virtue after the Resurrection that will be granted by God to those who live devoutly.

§38. "Having taught us these things effectively and persuaded us with many commendable examples, he himself acquired a great reputation for virtue but incurred the envy of the uneducated, as the just and the wise before him had done. The just are of no value³⁶ to the unjust.

§39. "Accordingly, it is said that the foolish say: 'Let us bind the just man, for we find him intractable.'³⁷

§40. "A certain Greek, we understand, once said: 'The just man will be whipped, tortured, bound and blinded and, having suffered every evil, will finally be crucified.'³⁸

§41. "As Athenian informants³⁹ unjustly condemned Socrates, having managed to persuade the people, certain mischievous elements condemned our teacher and saviour. They bound him

§42. "like the prophets before him, who had prophesied many glorious things about the man,

34 πολιτεία can and in ascetic biographies often does refer to 'conduct, way of life'.

35 From St Paul (*Romans* 13, 1) onwards a distinction was made between honouring and worshipping the highest worldly authority

36 ἄχρηστος

37 δύσχρηστος. For text cf. Is. 3, 10 (LXX)

38 ἀνασκολοπίζω. Plato *Republic* 2, 362a has ἀνασχινδυλεύομαι. It is difficult to imagine that a well-read man, as I imagine Apollonius to have been, did not know that the Greek in question was Plato, so he is probably using 'Hellene' in the sense of 'non-Christian' cf. Lampe *Lexicon* p. 451b

39 συκοφάντης. Used in classical Athens of an insincere litigant. Maximus Tyrius, a Greek writer of 2nd-3rd cent. AD, uses the term to describe Anytus and Meletus, two of Socrates' accusers, cf. Thomas Taylor *Dissertations of Maximus Tyrius* (1804) vol. 1 p. 89

that such a one was to arrive, just and virtuous in every respect, for the good of all, and was to persuade people to virtuously worship the God of all, whom we were to honour above all, because we learned sacred commandments that we had not known, and we have not erred.

§42. "If our belief is mistaken that the soul is immortal and there is justice after death and the reward of virtue is in the Resurrection and that God is the judge, we gladly accept such deceit. which has taught us in particular to live well, eagerly putting our hope in the future, even if we suffer reversals."

§43. Perennius said: "Apollonius, I thought you had rid yourself of this doctrine of yours and were now worshipping the gods, as we do."

§44. Apollonius replied: "I was hoping that this pious exchange would have an effect on you and that the eyes of your soul had been enlightened by my defence and that your fruitful heart would worship God the creator of all and you would pray each day for mercy to this one alone, a bloodless and pure sacrifice to God."

§45. Perennius said: "I want to release you, Apollonius, but I am prevented by the decree of Commodus. But I will be kind to you in death." He then gave a sign against him that the martyr's legs were to be broken.⁴⁰

§46. Apollonius said: "I thank my God, Perennius, and all those who confess the Almighty and his only-begotten son Jesus and the Holy Spirit and your sentence, which will bring me salvation."

§47. The most holy athlete and ascetic achieved a glorious end with sober soul and eager heart. Today is the day⁴¹ on which he wrestled with the evil one and carried off the prize of victory. So, brothers, come and let us strengthen our soul with his good deeds and make ourselves lovers of such grace through the charity and grace of Jesus Christ, who together with Father and Holy Spirit is eternally powerful and glorious. Amen.

§48. The thrice-blessed Apollonius was martyred, on the 11th of the Kalends of May⁴² according to the Romans, in the 8th month according to the Asians and. according to us, during the reign of Jesus Christ, to whom is eternal glory. Amen.

40 Later form of κατάγνυμι (not in Klette's index of Greek words). See also Eusebius *HE* 5, 21 §3.

41 A simplified version of the Greek, which does not lend itself easily to smooth translation.

42 According to Klette's note, the trial was initiated on April 11 and resumed after its three-day break on April 18. The Armenian text finishes at §47: "The executioners immediately led him away and decapitated him . . . (*Die Henker führten ihn sofort ab and enthaupteten ihn . . .*).