

Roman rite of devotio and Early Christian martyrdom: a comparative study

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The rite of the self-devotion of a Roman together with the enemy's army to the infernal gods for the sake of victory occurred twice in the Roman history and both times was connected with the Decii family. The religious meaning of this rite is still discussed. Some historians consider it as one of the typical vows (votum), a sort of a promise to bring the gods one's life instead of the victory over the enemy. Others think it was a self-consecration (consecratio) of a Roman general. The author represents some contemporary interpretations of the rite. He also marks out some details that might help to comprehend this ritual as a particular and individual one and make it impossible to attribute it to one of the known types of Roman religious rites. Besides, the paper deals with some features in the ancient authors' descriptions of this rite that draw it together with the phenomenon of the Early Christian martyrdom, well-known from the hagiographic literature and other Christian writings of the 1st-3rd centuries. The ideas of sacrifice and glory which is attained through the sacrifice are present in the descriptions of the both forms of the death with dignity. Both phenomena can be characterized by accompanying afflatus and the transformation of the person influenced by the forthcoming voluntary death. Aristocratic character of the devotio ritual wasn't an obstacle for the use of its image by the Christian writers. This may prove that the Early Christian community was quite familiar with the ancient culture. Comparing two forms of self-sacrifice the author concludes that they were characterized by the common motive of the individual choice which was usual for different forms of "noble death" in antiquity.



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