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Representations of The Emperor in The *Vita Martini*

This paper analyzes the complex historical and literary representation of the emperor in Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Saint Martin*. It argues that the holy man's spectacular confrontations with the sovereigns serve not only to advertise Sulpicius' ascetic propaganda, but also his political philosophy. Three episodes present the hero in the company of emperors and describe his victory over them. Emperor Julian challenges Martin's God, Magnus Maximus challenges Martin's priestly authority; the 'emperor of the world', Satan challenges Martin's faith. Martin's confrontations with the sovereigns serve not only to advertise Sulpicius Severus' ascetic propaganda, but also to formulate Christian disillusionment with secular power in the aftermath of the Arian struggle and of the Priscillianist crisis. The confrontation of the holy man with the emperor in the *Vita Martini* accentuates the break with the world, establishes the proper relationship between spiritual and secular power, and affirms the superiority of spiritual authority over earthly sovereignty.

Martin saw the rule of six emperors in the Western Empire, but only two of them play a significant role in the *Vita Martini*: Julian and the usurper emperor of Gaul, Magnus Maximus. The third imperial figure is the 'emperor of the world', Satan, who appears in full imperial regalia to Martin, introduces himself as Christ, and compels Martin to adore him. The image of Satan as Emperor condenses the ascetic spirituality and the millenarist expectations characteristic to Martin and Sulpicius who both believed that the end of the world was close. Presented in a crescendo of dramatic images, Sulpicius' stories emphasize the necessity to break with the world. His vivid prose lends a film-like quality to Martin's meetings with the ancient adversary, from emperor to devil. At each appointment, Martin has the upper hand: as soldier, as ascetic, as bishop. Each emperor is humiliated by Martin's superior God and by Martin's superior morals.

Sulpicius, the historian manipulates real historical events to construct Martin's meetings with the emperors. The paper examines the historical core of each story before interpreting its stylized, symbolic meaning. The emperors form a 'contrast group' in opposition to the achievement of the ascetic, wonder-working bishop. With its negative report on secular power, the *Vita Martini* creates a new image of the bishop and alters the image of the emperor in the Roman Empire for centuries to come.