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Spring 2021

### Perpetua and the Role of Women in the Third Century A.D

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#### Recommended Citation

Roberts, Brady, "Perpetua and the Role of Women in the Third Century A.D" (2021). *History*. 1.  
<https://pillars.taylor.edu/history/1>

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Perpetua and the Role of Women in the Third Century A.D.

Brady Roberts

Dr. Kevin Johnson

His 223: Greco-Roman

“Are you not entertained?” The familiar phrase comes from the movie *Gladiator*, set in 180 AD in the Roman Empire’s province of Germania. The fictional character, Maximus, routed the gladiatorial competition and in clear opposition to authority, screamed to the crowd this infamous line.<sup>1</sup> Now imagine a similar situation in which third century Roman crowds were again hoping for bloodshed. However, the scene was not in Germania, it was in Carthage. This situation was not an act of opposition, but an act of submission. In addition, the perpetrator was not a man, but a woman, holding fast to what she believed and not willing to let go.

The *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* is the martyrdom account of a Roman noblewoman and her servants. Based in the Roman Province of Carthage, North Africa, their martyrdom was part of the general Christian persecution under the emperor Septimius Severus. The document is partly written by Perpetua<sup>2</sup>, and partly by Saturnus, a prisoner companion who documents Perpetua’s execution.<sup>3</sup> Apart from being an inspirational account used by Christians throughout history, the *Passion* gives keen insight into the roles that women play in the Roman Empire. The historical literary work sheds light on the Roman family system, the lack of societal influence women possessed, and how a Christian woman disrupted public order.

The study of women and family history is particularly difficult in the Greco-Roman world. As Christine Schenk states, “Scholars seeking to discover women’s roles in late antiquity face formidable challenges. Like all history until the mid-twentieth century, Christian history was written by men with preconceived notions about women.”<sup>4</sup> One must be careful when reading historical primary sources about women and ask themselves, is this the actual truth, or is

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<sup>1</sup> Russel Crowe, *Gladiator*, directed by Ridley Scott (2000, Los Angeles: Dream Works/Universal Pictures).

<sup>2</sup> “The passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity,” in *A Medieval Omnibus, Sources in Medieval European History*, ed. Clifford R. Backman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Christine Schenk, *Crispina and her sisters: women and authority in early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017): 1.

the truth that earlier writers wanted us to know. When thinking about the family system in the Roman Empire, to our modern gaze and critique, it is “overtly patriarchal and hierarchal.”<sup>5</sup> Perpetua’s family name, Vibia, suggests that her family had been Roman Citizens for generations. It is suggested that her father was a high ranking official<sup>6</sup>, potentially hailing from Thuburbo Minus. The original text was written in Latin and gave no information of the Perpetua’s place of residence. The second account, the one in modern circulation, was written in Greek and adds information that was not originally there. Either the translator had independent knowledge of the events that took place, or there was misinformation added for reasons unknown.<sup>7</sup> The added information will create problems when reading and interpreting the visions of Perpetua.

Roman families were completely and utterly controlled by the father. He held this power as long as he was alive, and the father expected all of his children to submit to his authority. The obedience and submission the daughter gave to her father often resulted in a mutually loving relationship between them. Early on in Perpetua’s account she described her father’s intentions following her arrest, pleading with her to change her mind. “Some time after our arrest my father came to me, and out of his love he tried to persuade me to change my mind.”<sup>8</sup> When analyzing the history of women and the role that men played in the Greco-Roman world, it is surprising to hear the words, “out of his love” when talking about the head of the household. Men often wished for male children to carry on the family name and advance the household’s social status.

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<sup>5</sup> Deborah F. Sawyer, *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries* (London, Routledge, 1996): 19.

<sup>6</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (London, Routledge, 2007): 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>8</sup> “The passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity,” in *A Medieval Omnibus, Sources in Medieval European History*, ed. Clifford R. Backman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 23.

However, Perpetua and her father carried a bond that held high significance within their family network.

Before Perpetua's hearing was to take place, her father, shrouded in worry, again tried to persuade his beloved daughter into rethinking her actions. "Have pity on my gray-haired head!" he cried. "As your father, don't I deserve your pity? Did I not raise you to adulthood? Did I not favor you over your brothers? Don't abandon me to the reproach of strangers."<sup>9</sup> When thinking of the context of the Roman family system, a few things stand out from this dialogue. First, her father does not command Perpetua to come to her senses. Earlier in the account, after her first refusal of her father's arguments in contrast to the Christian life, he walked towards her "as though he wanted to tear out my eyes, but he left at that and departed quickly, defeated along with his devilish arguments." It is clear that her father knew the authority he held. However, Perpetua refused to submit to patriarchal authority and identified with a new authority, the authority of Christ. When describing her hearing, she wrote, "Whatever happens at the tribunal, it will be God's will," I said. "Know this for certain: our lives are not our own to control. We belong to God."<sup>10</sup>

Perpetua highlighted the importance of a shift in thinking from worldly authority to the authority of her heavenly father. She did not throw away her feelings for her earthly father, and it pained her to see him in a state of grief over her present circumstances. "My father, meanwhile, kept crying out for me to change my mind, so Hilarianus ordered him to be knocked to the ground and beaten with a staff. I felt such pain for him, that it was as though I myself was being beaten. I was sorry for the sorrow that came with his old age."<sup>11</sup> Her father's deep grief reveals

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 24.

the loving relationship between a father and daughter in an age where great significance lies with the son. Her father acted contradictory to the social normality of women raising children . He also acted in a surprising way by making the claim that he loved Perpetua more than her brothers. Scholars know very little concerning her brothers. Really all that is known is one of them was arrested with Perpetua. Perhaps they were disappointments and did not live up to the standards of males at this time, the brother arrested with Perpetua most likely fitted this mold. However, a more likely solution is that Perpetua and her father just had a unique bond of love and affection that ran contrary to the family system of that time.

Women, from the beginning, were looked down upon in the early civilizations. Livy's mythical account of the creation of Rome involved the Rape of Sabines, in which the emperor Romulus forcibly removed women from surrounding areas in the hopes to bear legitimate Roman citizens. David Potter states, "women were passive vessels for transmission of citizenship by biological means-one could become a Roman citizen by being born one."<sup>12</sup> Building on the Greek-Hellenistic ideology of subjugation to the fathers, and then to their husbands, women were given little respect as capable individuals. Perpetua, however, seemed to uproot precedent set in place by society.

In her final vision that took place in a dream, Perpetua described a scene in which she was brought out in an amphitheater getting ready for a battle between an Egyptian and herself. In this vision, she was brought out into the open, prepared to take on her opponent. Surprisingly, the vision took a shift and Perpetua was morphed into a man. In her male form, she goes on to defeat the Egyptian. Upon awakening, Perpetua understood that her battle in the coming days were not

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<sup>12</sup> David Potter, *Ancient Rome: A New History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018): 24.

against the earthly beasts of Rome, but against the Devil himself.<sup>13</sup> In looking at the morphology, Scholars have suggested that outside sources have inserted the trans-gendering act as a way to keep the male hierarchy social norm in place.<sup>14</sup> Shannon Dunn states, “Female martyrdom destabilizes gender norms in a social context defined by gender hierarchy, and it appears that the acts of writing narratives and making laws are attempts at re-instating strict gender roles.”<sup>15</sup> Women were not be viewed as war hero’s, but subjects of the home. David Potter defends this argument, writing, “Ideal women tend to be thrifty, faithful, good at weaving, chaste, and to avoid quarrels.”<sup>16</sup> In contrast, the lack of influence given to women did not stop Perpetua from following her call to bear witness the Glory of God. She understood her place as a literate woman who could ignite change and disallowed her circumstances to define her. Both Perpetua and Felicity’s bravery was captured by Saturnus in his ending of the account, “O most valiant and blessed martyrs! You were truly called and chosen [to bear witness] to the Glory of Our Lord Jesus Christ! Any person who magnifies, honors, and worships Christ’s glory should read, for the edification of the Church, these examples of heroism which lose nothing in comparison with other tales of old.”<sup>17</sup> Perpetua’s influence was not handed to her by those who did not believe women capable of having it in the first place, it was earned through her unwavering commitment to the peaceful submission of obedience to Christ.

Moving forward, Perpetua and the description of the end of her life gives insight into the social disruption caused through her actions. For one, her submission to a new authority was

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<sup>13</sup> “The passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity,” in *A Medieval Omnibus, Sources in Medieval European History*, ed. Clifford R. Backman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 25.

<sup>14</sup> Shannon Dunn, “The Female Martyr and the Politics of Death: An Examination of the Martyr Discourses of Vibia Perpetua and Wafa Idris,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 1 (March 2010): 207.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid,

<sup>16</sup> David Potter, *Ancient Rome: A New History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018): 233.

<sup>17</sup> “The passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity,” in *A Medieval Omnibus, Sources in Medieval European History*, ed. Clifford R. Backman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 25.

looked down upon by those in power. In a letter to Trajan, Pliny the Younger struggled with how to deal with the Christian movement growing in the Roman Empire. “First I questioned them as to whether or not they were Christians. Those who acknowledged it I then questioned a second and third time, threatening them with punishment. Those who persisted in their ways, I had executed. Whatever the nature of their beliefs, I decided, they deserved punishment simply for being so stubborn and obstinate.”<sup>18</sup> A little over a hundred and fifty years later, Perpetua lived into the stereotype given by Pliny the Younger.

In her and her fellow believers hearing, she began to be interrogated and questioned by Hilarianus. “One by one they all confessed their guilt [ie, the fact that they were Christians and would not participate in emperor-worship] when asked.” Perpetua, likewise refused emperor-worship, “Are you a Christian?” asked Hilarianus. “I am,” responded Perpetua, knowing full well the consequences of her reply.<sup>19</sup> Perpetua described this scene as gazed upon by a crowd. People gathered to watch these crazy individuals wish their lives away for a deity that was not accepted by those in power.

In addition to the public declaration of their faith in opposition to authority, Christianity gave women the opportunity to step into new roles of identification. For the most-part, this is where a large part of the social disruption came from. Michael Renee says, “In emphasizing the role of family in spreading Christianity among aristocratic women I would not deny that Christianity’s emphasis on the individual and his or her salvation might have appealed to women.” Furthermore, he states, “Christianity gave a woman a claim to a spiritual state ‘of her own.’” It isn’t a fair assumption to say that women’s roles changed entirely as soon as they

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<sup>18</sup> “Pliny the Younger, Letters to Tacitus and to Trajan,” in *A Medieval Omnibus, Sources in Medieval European History*, ed. Clifford R. Backman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 20.

<sup>19</sup> “The passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity,” in *A Medieval Omnibus, Sources in Medieval European History*, ed. Clifford R. Backman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 24.



underwent conversion. Renee goes on to state that the aristocratic women's individual salvation took place largely in the context of the household.<sup>20</sup> It would be brash to say that the women sprinted out into the streets and violently disrupted all social norms that were in place. However, that does not negate the fact that women began to see their spirituality and individuality in a new and fresh way that was offered to them through the promises of scripture.

Such a newfound identity led some women to act differently. Perpetua stayed true to her newfound identity, disrupting social order through the adoption of new practices given by the Bible. In perhaps her most public moment, the end of her life, she continued to break social norms through her commitment to Biblical principles. Saturnus finished off the account Perpetua started, saying, "Perpetua screamed aloud because the executioner's blade struck her breastbone, and she had to guide his trembling hand to her throat. So great a woman was she that the unclean spirit [of the Executioner] feared her, and she could not be killed unless she willed it on herself." Her execution was viewed by many. Thus, many viewed a man, full of fear, struggle to the simple task of ending a Christian's life. Perpetua was the one who guided him to complete the task. A woman, a Christian woman, willfully guided a man to end her own life; is it wishful thinking to know what thoughts were going through the minds of their observers?

It is clear that Perpetua was very important for understanding the early Christian woman. Sara Davis describes this importance, "But perhaps most importantly of all, she provides us in her diary with the first example of Christian autobiography; sketchy though it is, she gives us the sort of glimpse of her private life and the way she constructs her Christian identity that we will not see again until Augustine."<sup>21</sup> Building upon this, Perpetua gave a keen insight into the familial system through her interaction with her father. The loving relationship displayed through

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<sup>20</sup> Micheal Renee, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002): 164.

<sup>21</sup> Sara Parvis, "Perpetua," *The Expository Times* 120, no. 8 (May 2009).

their dialogue goes slightly against what classical studies suggest with the neglect of women and cherishing of men. In addition, Perpetua's narrative gives information on the lack of societal influence women possessed. From the beginning of the Roman empire based on Livy's account, to the second century aristocratic woman that represented Perpetua, they were given very little influence. Through her visions and interaction with her father and other males, it is easy to see that women were viewed as inferior to men. However, the irony of this story both highlights and contradicts this notion. Lastly, Perpetua's account most importantly shows that her actions disrupted social order. From her refusal of her father's request, to the final authority of her own execution, Perpetua's obedience to her Christian calling ran contradictory to the social norms of the third century Greco-Roman world.

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