

DID PERPETUA WRITE HER PRISON ACCOUNT?

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Modern scholarship on the famous *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (*Pass. Perp.*) is vast.¹ The text has attracted attention on account of many aspects, such as its complex composition, its relevance for social and religious history, its reports on visions, and above all as a lively portrait of two young Christian female martyrs from Carthage in A.D. 203. Notably, Perpetua's first person account of her stay in prison previous to her execution (chapters 3-10), and another first person account by Saturus (chs. 11-13) have solicited many scholarly comments. There is, how-

¹ Modern editions of the text are: JACQUELINE AMAT, *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité suivi des Actes*, introduction, texte critique, traduction, commentaire et index, Paris 1996 (*Sources Chrétiennes*, 417), and *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, testo critico a cura di ANTOON A. R. BASTIAENSEN, traduzione di GIOACHINO CHIARINI, in: *Atti e passioni dei martiri*, (a cura di) ANTOON A. R. BASTIAENSEN ET ALII, Milano 1995³, pp. 107-147, 412-452. The classical edition of the text is CORNELIUS I. M. I. VAN BEEK, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, Noviomagi 1936. This text is reproduced in a useful, new paperback edition: *La passione de Perpetua e Felicità*, prefazione di EVA CANTARELLA, introduzione, traduzione e note di MARCO FORMISANO, Milano 2008. For recent secondary literature, see also e.g. JOYCE E. SALISBURY, *Perpetua's Passion. The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman*, New York 1997; JAN N. BREMMER, *Perpetua and Her Diary: Authenticity, Family and Visions*, in: *Märtyrer und Märtyrerakten*, (Hrsg.) WALTER AMELING, Stuttgart 2002, pp. 77-120 with further references; further THOMAS J. HEFFERNAN – JAMES E. SHELTON, *Paradisus in carcere: The Vocabulary of Imprisonment and the Theology of Martyrdom in the Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, 2006, pp. 217-223; PETR KITZLER, *Passio Perpetuae and Acta Perpetuae: Between Tradition and Innovation*, in: *Listy filologické* 130, 2007, pp. 1-19 as well as studies mentioned in the notes below.

ever, broad agreement as to the question of authenticity: Perpetua probably did write her prison account, although her original text may have undergone some stylistic revision by another author.²

Questions

Recently, however, some dissenting voices have made themselves heard. In a survey article on the *Passio*, Ross S. Kraemer and Shira L. Lander have cast doubt on Perpetua's authorship.³ In their view, the ancient editor's claim that Perpetua wrote it in her own hand (*conscriptum manu sua*, *Pass. Perp.* 2,3) is not sufficient proof for the modern scholar. They argue that writing in someone else's name was actually a widespread practice in antiquity, and that a man could easily write like a woman, as is abundantly shown in many ancient plays and novels. Hence the allegedly "female" characteristics of Perpetua's text, such as her emotional, personal, and colloquial style cannot count as proofs that the writer really was a woman.⁴ Moreover, there is a testimony of Augustine expressing doubt as to Perpetua's authorship of part of the account.⁵ Finally, details of the whole *Passio* are said to conform closely to a biblical prophesy (*Joel* 2,28-29 / *Acts* 2,17-18, quoted in *Pass. Perp.* 1,4), and the text as we have it may be a conscious attempt to demonstrate its fulfillment in Perpetua and her companions.⁶

² On the question of authenticity see discussion in JACQUELINE AMAT, *Passion de Perpétue*, pp. 67-73 and ANTOON A. R. BASTIAENSEN, *Commento alla "Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis"*, in: *Atti e passioni dei martiri*, p. 415 ad 8. Further PETER HABERMEHL, *Perpetua und der Ägypter oder Bilder des Bösen im frühen afrikanischen Christentum. Ein Versuch zur Passio sanctarum Perpetua [sic!] et Felicitatis*, Berlin – New York 2004², pp. 267-275.

³ ROSS S. KRAEMER – SHIRA L. LANDER, *Perpetua and Felicitas*, in: PHILIP F. ESLER, *The Early Christian World*, London – New York 2000, pp.1048-1068, notably pp. 1054-1058. Doubts were also raised in: HEIDI VIEROW, *Feminine and Masculine Voices in the Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*, *Latomus* 58, 1999, pp. 600-619.

⁴ ROSS S. KRAEMER – SHIRA L. LANDER, *Perpetua and Felicitas*, pp. 1055-1056.

⁵ ROSS S. KRAEMER – SHIRA L. LANDER, *Perpetua and Felicitas*, p. 1056 refer to AUGUSTINE, *De natura et origine animae* IV,10,12, obviously meaning *De anima et eius origine* I,10,12: *De fratre autem sanctae Perpetuae Dinocrate, nec scriptura ipsa canonica est, nec illa sic scripsit, vel quicumque illud scripsit, ut illum puerum qui septennis mortuus fuerat, sine baptismo diceret fuisse defunctum.*

⁶ ROSS S. KRAEMER – SHIRA L. LANDER, *Perpetua and Felicitas*, pp. 1056-1057.

In the view of Kraemer then, the Perpetua text is a “literary production” of the work’s author and represents the concerns and interests of this author. It is, briefly, “a deliberate construction of an exemplary female martyr.”⁷

More recently still, in a paper by Erin Ronsse the issue of the authorship of the text was discussed from a somewhat different perspective.⁸ Without explicitly denying the work’s authenticity, Ronsse highlights the entire *Passio* as a work in which Christian oratorical practices are emphasized. Many passages show rhetorical contests, notably between Perpetua and her father, and the work as a whole seems a rhetorical composition as well.

In the course of her argument, however, Ronsse does suggest that the Perpetua text as we have it is not the work of the author Perpetua but something “along the lines of revised early Christian lecture notes,” “surviving notes or basic speech transcript,” which would explain the obvious oral features of the account.⁹ The general idea would be that Perpetua had ample opportunity to address other Christians during her stay in prison, and that someone from the audience wrote down literally what she said.¹⁰

Augustine’s Hesitation

It may be exaggerated to suggest that the *Passio* poses “myriad challenges” to historical claims about Perpetua’s martyrdom and that the authenticity of the prison section involves “serious questions”,¹¹ but it is clear that some doubts are possible.

⁷ *Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World. A Sourcebook*, (ed.) ROSS SHEPARD KRAEMER, Oxford 2004, pp. 5-6 and 356-357. Here and in ROSS S. KRAEMER – SHIRA L. LANDER, *Perpetua and Felicitas*, p.1055, the widespread notion that what Perpetua wrote was “a diary” is rightly rejected, on the basis of THOMAS J. HEFFERNAN, *Philology and Authorship in the “Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis”*, in: *Traditio* 50, 1995, pp. 315-325. Heffernan analyses the prison narrative with the broader term of *hypomnema*.

⁸ ERIN RONSSE, *Rhetoric of Martyrs: Listening to Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, 2006, pp. 283-327.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 322-323.

¹⁰ This was already suggested by THOMAS J. HEFFERNAN, *Philology and Authorship*, pp. 323-324.

¹¹ This is argued by ROSS S. KRAEMER – SHIRA L. LANDER, *Perpetua and Felicitas*, p. 1058.

Indeed, most ancient texts are liable to similar epistemological uncertainty. If the argument is restricted to female authors, how do we know that it was Sappho herself who composed the fine Greek poems of which fragments have come down to us? Who can assure readers that the Latin elegies by Sulpicia have not, in fact, been written by a male poet? Was the Christian poet Proba really a woman or did later generations merely perceive her as such? Did the rich Christian woman Egeria ever exist, or was she “constructed” by an inventive male traveler of fourth century Palestine and Egypt?

Sometimes, as in the case of Sulpicia, whose works have been literally *included* in the poetical corpus of a male poet, doubt seems justified, but on the whole I would suggest that there should be grave, compelling reasons to make us reject the evidence from antiquity as far as authorship is concerned. The Latin prison text attributed to Perpetua shows many characteristics of an authentic text, if only its marked stylistic features and personal details. Why would any other Christian author take the trouble of empathizing with Perpetua’s worrying about the darkness and heat in prison (*Pass. Perp.* 3,5-6) or pain in her breasts (*Pass. Perp.* 6,8)? Surely, such personal details would more likely be skipped from a stylized ego text picturing an ideal, female martyr.

Certainly, it cannot be proved that Kraemer’s suggestion of a conscious “construction” of a “Perpetua” by the author is false. Ultimately, we cannot really know what happened before and after Perpetua’s execution, or indeed if she ever existed at all, even though Christian sources from antiquity take the existence of the martyrs for granted. But it seems a wise principle that the burden of proof rests on those who doubt or reject the textual data from antiquity, not on those who accept them. There is, in fact, no serious problem in reading Perpetua’s text just as it is presented in the sources, both manuscripts of the *Passio* and later references to it, namely as a text written by Perpetua herself.¹²

Perhaps only Augustine’s hesitation could inspire some disbelief. Indeed Augustine’s words *vel quicumque illud scripsit* in *De anima et eius origine* I,10,12 (quoted in the note 5) suggest that he considered the pos-

¹² Cfr. also JACQUELINE AMAT, *Passion de Perpétue*, p. 70: “Il n’y a aucune raison de refuser l’affirmation du rédacteur et de ne pas voir, en ce nouvel auteur, Perpétue elle-même.” Further e.g. JAN N. BREMMER, *Perpetua and Her Diary*, p. 83, and PETER HABERMEHL, *Perpetua und der Ägypter*, p. 274: “Das Tagebuch, das wir lesen, stammt also aus der Feder Perpetua’s.”

sibility that the vision about Dinocrates (*Pass. Perp.*, 7-8) was not recorded by Perpetua herself. However, it may be added that later in the same Augustinian treatise, no such doubt is voiced again.¹³ Moreover, elsewhere in his works, Augustine presents the whole account quite unproblematically as the work of Perpetua.¹⁴ Besides, even Augustine cannot be blindly trusted.¹⁵

Ronsse's Views

Likewise, Ronsse's notion of Perpetua delivering an oral account which was then taken down by others, cannot be proven false.

The idea may even seem attractive. Indeed it is easier to imagine Perpetua talking at length about her visions and expectations to an immediate audience, rather than writing them down for future generations,¹⁶ quite apart from practical questions (how did she obtain writing

¹³ Cf. II,10,14; III,9,12; IV,18,26: *Nempe sancta Perpetua visa sibi est in somnis cum quodam Aegyptio in virum conversa luctari*; and IV,18,27. Augustine's remarks in *De anima et eius origine* should be seen in a broader context of his polemic against Vincentius Victor; cfr. PETR KITZLER, *Passio Perpetuae and Acta Perpetuae*, pp. 15-16 with n. 53.

¹⁴ Cf. the clear testimony in *Sermo* 281,2: *Delectat autem piam mentem tale spectaculum contueri, quale sibi beata Perpetua de se ipsa revelatum esse narravit, virum se factam certasse cum diabolo*. In the newly found parts of *Sermo* 282 (ISABELLA SCHILLER – DOROTHEA WEBER – CLEMENS WEIDMANN, *Sechs neue Augustinuspredigten. Teil I mit Edition dreier Sermones*, in: Wiener Studien 121, 2008, pp. 227-284, esp. pp. 251-264), Augustine refers to the same passage without further reservation: *In hoc agone Perpetua, sicut ei per visionem revelatum fuerat, in virum conversa diabolum vicit*.

¹⁵ One only has to think of his famous remark on Apuleius in *De civitate Dei* 18,18, where he seems inclined to take the fictional novel *Metamorphoses*, with its magical elements, as a story about Apuleius himself. See VINCENT HUNINK, *Apuleius, qui nobis Afris Afer est notior. Augustine's Polemic against Apuleius in De Civitate Dei*, in: Scholia, New Series 12, 2003, pp. 82-95, esp. pp. 86-87.

¹⁶ A possible argument in favor of this theory might be a double reference in the so called *Acta Perpetuae*. See *Acta I* 3,1: *quadam nocte videns visum sancta Perpetua alia die retulit sanctis conmartiribus suis ita dicens: 'Vidi...'*; and *Acta II* 3,8 (at the end of the vision): *haec cum martyribus retulisset...* In both instances Perpetua is actually visualized as "relating" her vision to her fellow martyrs, rather than writing about them. However, the *Acta* are hagiographical texts reworking older material, mainly from the *Passio*, and dating from the fifth century or later (JACQUELINE AMAT, *Passion de Perpétue*, pp. 269-271). Given the practical, edifying aims of the hagio-

material? When did she find the time and space for writing? How was her text brought outside her prison cell?).¹⁷ Ronsse's fruitful concept of the *Passio* as a fundamentally rhetorical work, too, may seduce readers to consider the whole text as a literary composition by one, accomplished writer with a specific aim.

But here too, the proof must be provided by those who question the ancient data. Moreover, the theory should stand the test of a confrontation with what the sources actually say. Quite rightly, Ronsse underscores the importance of paying attention to the language of the narrative.¹⁸

On this account, Ronsse does not always do justice to the Latin of the *Passio* text, and even makes a crucial passage say what it clearly does not say. The prison narrative is announced by the editor of the *Passio* as follows:

Haec ordinem totum martyrii sui iam hinc ipsa narravit, sicut conscriptum manu sua et suo sensu reliquit. (Pass. Perp. 2,3)

In Ronsse's rendering this runs:

"This very woman has already thus recounted the entire sequence of her testimony in the same way it was diligently recorded by hand and remains a memento of her sensibility"¹⁹

Leaving aside some *minutiae* of this rendering,²⁰ its most striking point is the mistranslation of *manu sua*. Ronsse goes as far as to claim some ambiguity here whether or not Perpetua actually wrote the work: "the

grapher(s), it seems perfectly reasonable if the complex structure of the *Passio* has been discarded; the highly unusual phenomenon of a female martyr author would easily be liable to normalization. For the latter notion, see also: PETR KITZLER, *Passio Perpetuae and Acta Perpetuae*, pp. 1-19, esp. pp. 12-17.

¹⁷ See, however, the sensible remarks in JAN N. BREMMER, *Perpetua and Her Diary*, p. 84, who observes that letters from imprisoned Christians are attested since Ignatius of Antioch, and gives two further parallels for writing martyrs: *Passio Sanctorum Montani et Lucii*, 12,1: *Haec omnes de carcere simul scripserunt...*, and *Martyrium Pionii*, 1,2.

¹⁸ ERIN RONSSE, *Rhetoric of Martyrs*, p. 307 and elsewhere.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 300.

²⁰ *Iam* here does not denote an event in the past, but rather introduces the new topic of the text that is to follow. Cf. the Italian translation in *Atti e passioni dei martiri*, p. 117: "*Questa che segue è la fedele cronica del suo martirio, così com' essa l' ha lasciata (...)*" (my italics). One may doubt if "testimony" is the proper rendering for *martyrium* rather than "martyrdom." *Conscriptum* is not necessarily *diligently*

work is in someone's handwriting."²¹ However, this runs counter to essential Latin grammar until well into the medieval period. Grammatically, *sua* will have to be connected with the subject of the main clause, here *ipsa*. There can be no doubt whatsoever about this point in the Latin text: "she (Perpetua)" has told her martyrdom as she left it "written in her own hand" and in her own ideas.²²

This is not to say that the sentence is entirely clear and unproblematic. The entire phrase (which seems textually sound, given the apparatuses of Amat and Bastiaensen) looks rather awkward, with *narravit* preceding *conscriptum*, rather than vice versa.²³ But given the syntactical context and the properties of *suus*, the phrase *conscriptum manu sua* can definitely only be taken as "written by her own hand". No wonder then, that the ancient Greek translation of the *Passio*²⁴ renders the phrase unequivocally as τῷ χειρὶ συγγράψασα. Therefore the Greek version does not leave any room for ambiguity either, a fact left out of account by Ronsse.

recorded. Finally, "remains a memento of her sensibility" renders *reliquit* twice, thereby introducing the notion of a "memento" remaining in the present rather than something she left in the past, and overemphasizes the emotional aspect of *sensus*, which rather refers to Perpetua's general ideas or intentions.

²¹ ERIN RONSSE, *The Rhetoric of Martyrs*, p. 301. This is further explained with the grammatical point that *sua* is feminine because of the noun *manus*. This is certainly true, but that does not imply that *sua* here does not refer to the female person Perpetua, as Ronsse seems to infer. For the critique of Ronsse's errors cfr. also FRANÇOIS DOLBEAU, *Chronica Tertulliana et Cypriana 2006* (nr. 50), in: *Revue des Études Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 53, 2007, pp. 347-348.

²² Curiously, Ronsse is pleading for "careful attention to linguistic and grammatical details in such a key sentence" in the very context of her discussion of *conscriptum manu sua* (ERIN RONSSE, *The Rhetoric of Martyrs*, p. 301).

²³ JACQUELINE AMAT, *Passion de Perpétue*, p. 194 is probably too confident in stating that the "double precision" excludes the possibility that Perpetua could have dictated her account or that it could have been changed in its form. The Latin construction rather seems to allow for some intermediate stage between an original text by Perpetua and the actual *Passio*, above all given the word *sicut*. But the Latin is too vague to be absolutely sure here.

²⁴ The debate on the Latin and Greek versions seems to have subsided, with general agreement among scholars that the Latin version is the original, and the Greek a very early translation; see extensive discussion in JACQUELINE AMAT, *Passion de Perpétue*, pp. 51-66. For further discussion see: JAN N. BREMMER, *The Vision of Saturnus in the Passio Perpetuae*, in: *Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome. Studies in Ancient Cultural Interaction in Honour of Ton Hilhorst*, (eds.) FLORENTINO GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ – GERARD P. LUTTIKHUIZEN, Leiden 2003, pp. 55-73, esp. 57-58.

Other references in the Latin *Passio* to the ego accounts of Perpetua and Saturus also clearly state that these have been written by the martyrs personally.²⁵ And when Perpetua herself explicitly refers to writing at the end of her account, where she says that someone else should write down the final events during the games,²⁶ this does suggest that she herself has been writing until that point.

The evidence therefore of the Latin *Passio* and its Greek translation is clear: the editor wishes readers to know that the accounts have been written by the martyrs themselves,²⁷ and the *Passio* has been read as such from the earliest days.²⁸ Modern scholars may of course still question this statement, but the Latin text offers little or nothing to hold on to.²⁹

²⁵ Cf. *Pass. Perp.* 11,1: *Sed et Saturus benedictus hanc visionem suam edidit, quam ipse conscripsit* (the introduction of Saturus' vision); 14,1: *Hae visiones insigniores ipsorum martyrum beatissimorum Saturi et Perpetuae, quas ipsi conscriperunt* (concluding formula after the two ego accounts). In both cases too, the Greek translation is completely clear. One may further point to 1,6: *Et nos itaque quod audivimus et contrectavimus, annuntiamus et vobis, fratres et filioli*, an echo of *1 John* 1,1-3, where *contrectavimus* seems to refer to a material object, that is, a written text.

²⁶ *Pass. Perp.* 10,15: *Hoc usque in pridie muneris egi; ipsius autem muneris actum, si quis voluerit, scribat.*

²⁷ THOMAS J. HEFFERNAN, *Philology and Authorship*, p. 323, having made the point that the text should be seen as a *hypomnema*, goes on to argue that a third century reader would take *conscripsum manu sua* not literally, because of the numerous finite verbs in preterite tense. However, I fail to see why a *hypomnema* could not contain such verbal forms. Perpetua may have written her account during her last night or even her very last hours.

²⁸ Very soon after its composition, the *Passio* became the object of literary reflection in the early church. As scholars have observed (e.g. PETER HABERMEHL, *Perpetua und der Ägypter*, pp. 272-273), Tertullian refers to Perpetua without any question about the authenticity of the text. See TERTULLIANUS, *De anima*, 55: *Quomodo Perpetua, fortissima martyr, sub die passionis in revelatione paradisi solos illic martyras vidit, nisi quia nullis romphaea paradisi ianatrix cedit nisi qui in Christo decesserint, non in Adam?* The *Passio* is also used and quoted by Augustine, cfr. above, notes 13 and 14.

²⁹ Unfortunately, in some other instances too, Ronsse's argument is weakened by her use of Latin. Some of them are equally mentioned by FRANÇOIS DOLBEAU, *Chronica Tertulliana et Cyprianea 2006* (nr. 50), p. 248, such as the wrong association of Dinocrates with Latin *dinoscere* and *cratis* ("hurdle") (ERIN RONNSE, *The Rhetoric of Martyrs*, p. 304), which makes no sense and overlooks the Greek etymology of the name. To Dolbeau's points may be added Ronsse's explanation of the name Saturninus as "bright planet" or "mythical king" (*ibidem*), which does not seem relevant and is not supported (Ronsse refers to OLD 1695, and obviously uses its entry "Sa-

In any fundamental discussion on Perpetua, it is of paramount importance to read carefully what the Latin text about her is actually saying. In this sense, a continuous return to the ancient sources remains as necessary as ever.

Summary

Perpetua is well known for her lively first person account of her stay in prison before execution. In some recent papers, it has been doubted whether Perpetua actually composed this text herself. This paper argues that while we cannot be absolutely certain that Perpetua wrote “her” text, attempts to doubt her authorship cannot be based on the Latin text of the *Passio*, where it is clearly stated that Perpetua’s text was written *manu sua* “with her own hand”.

Key words: *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*; authenticity; St. Perpetua

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turnius”, where, however, these meanings are not given). Furthermore, the entire “alternative rendering” of *Pass. Perp.* 3,1-4 (ERIN RONSSÉ, *The Rhetoric of Martyrs*, pp. 319-321) leaves much to be desired.