

Barbara K. Gold: *Perpetua. Athlete of God*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2018 (Women in Antiquity). VIII, 261 p., 2 maps, 4 ill. £ 47.99. ISBN: 978-0-19-538545-8.

Perpetua is probably the most discussed woman martyr. Her personality and work have preoccupied both ancient and modern commentators, from the anonymous first editor of her prison diary to the eminent narratologist Mieke Bal.¹ As Barbara K. Gold eloquently phrases it in the book under review, “Perpetua’s story has inspired countless church fathers, writers, and scholars after her to retell her story in their own way: embellishing, overwriting, adapting, and re-creating the original narrative” (141).

Since the nineties, there is a growing scholarly interest in the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* that has only increased in the last decade. For example, within one year (2012) the same publishing house (Oxford University Press) printed two books devoted to Perpetua: *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* by Thomas J. Heffernan and an edited volume by Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano entitled *Perpetua’s Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the “Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis”*. The book under review, which has also been published by Oxford University Press as part of its series “Women in Antiquity” edited by Ronnie Ancona and Sarah B. Pomeroy, constitutes a further indication of Perpetua’s flourishing in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. In James B. Rives’ words, who has reviewed the first two Oxford volumes, “Perpetua, it seems, died in the fervent expectation of immortality. Whether she attained immortality of the sort that she expected is not something that we in this life can know, but that she achieved a more mundane immortality is beyond dispute. Indeed, if these two volumes are anything to go by, she is today flourishing more than ever”.²

Gold’s *Perpetua: Athlete of God*, which, due to lack of factual information cannot take the form of a biography, undertakes to “recreate the milieu in which a young Christian like Perpetua grew up, was educated, married, became a

1 Cf. M. Bal: Perpetual Contest. In: D. Jobling (ed.): *On Story-Telling. Essays in Narratology*. Sonoma, CA 1991, 227–241, which is reprinted with slight changes in: J. N. Bremmer/M. Formisano (eds): *Perpetua’s Passions. Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. Oxford/New York 2012, 134–149.

2 J.B. Rives: Review of: T. Heffernan (ed.): *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, and J. Bremmer/M. Formisano (eds): *Perpetua’s Passions*. In: *Speculum* 88, 2013, 1106–1108, quotation from p. 1108.

mother, converted to Christianity, and resolved to martyr herself” (1). In other words, Gold’s aim is to “illuminate the life and death of Perpetua by examining the social, political, literary, religious, and physical conditions under which a young Christian woman in the late second-early third centuries CE would have lived” (4). By placing *Perpetua’s Passio* in its proper chronological environment, the High Roman Empire, Gold treats it as a (literary) source to understand the martyr’s position and her social and cultural milieu. At the same time, Gold tries to further illuminate the *Passio* by examining it together with other contemporary texts.

The book under review consists of a short and accessible introduction followed by eight informative and well-written chapters with endnotes providing necessary documentation. There is also an appendix in which a new reader-friendly English translation of the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* is provided. A thorough bibliography and two useful indices (Index Locorum and Subject Index) are also provided. Furthermore, the volume includes two maps (one of Roman Africa and one of the territory of Roman Carthage), a photo of the Roman Amphitheatre in Carthage which provides a visual document for the discussions in chapters 4 and 7, and finally three photos of early Christian and early Byzantine mosaics representing Perpetua and her female fellow-martyr Felicity. In general, the volume is well-presented and well-written. There are only a few minor typographical errors. Thus, Gold succeeds excellently in the series’ aim to offer “compact and accessible introductions” to important ancient women.

The first chapter (“Perpetua’s *Passio*: Text, Authorship, Authenticity”, 9–21) is conceived as a foundational chapter. By focusing on the *Passio*, the text that preserves Perpetua’s (possibly original) voice, and consequently the source through which this important woman has “achieved mundane immortality”, Gold prepares Perpetua’s further examination that takes place in the following chapters. More specifically, Chapter 1 builds on existing research dealing with the Greek and Latin manuscripts of the *Passio*, its date, authenticity and authorship, the possible identity of its editor, and finally the later and shorter versions of the *Passio* known as *Acta*. The chapter concludes that both the *Passio* and the *Acta* are edifying texts with literary elements that offer examples of Christian women, who turn against their families and societies and undergo great sufferings in order to achieve holiness.

Chapter 2 entitled “And I Became Male: Gender and the Athlete” (23–45) deals with the *Passio*’s most frequently discussed theme: gender. The chapter

focuses on Perpetua's fourth 'dream vision' in which she sees herself being transformed into a man in order to fight against an Egyptian in the arena. Through a discussion of the theological, philosophical, literary, and social contexts of the dream's images, Gold attempts to understand Perpetua's double identity as a woman and a virile Christian athlete. In biological terms Perpetua is a woman, but in spiritual terms she is a man. The image of the athlete, a role that is by definition male, allowed Christian authors to represent powerful women who had triumphed over non-Christian men. At the same time, such women were seen as problematic, as attested by the framing text of Perpetua's editor and the work of later church fathers who provide the martyr's portrait with a femaleness and conventionality that are absent from her own diary.

In the third chapter ("A Matter of Genre and Influence: The *Passio* and Greco-Roman Pagan and Christian Narratives", 47–65), the *Passio* is discussed in light of other contemporary texts, which were either influenced by or exercised influence on it. These works, which, apart from their generic fluidity, intermingle fiction and reality, include the following: Gospels, apocryphal acts of the Apostles, martyr acts, Greco-Roman novels, and Christian novels. As Gold rightly maintains, early Christian texts, the *Passio* included, cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the non-Christian Greco-Roman tradition.

The next two complementary chapters ("Carthage: Pagan Culture, Religion, and Society in the High Roman Empire", 67–81, and "Carthage: The Early Christian Community", 83–102) concentrate on Perpetua's city, Carthage, examining both its pagan and early Christian cultures. Chapter 4 investigates the history of the city and its non-Christian character paying particular attention to the Roman emperor Septimius Severus, who was a native of Africa and reigned during most of Perpetua's life. Chapter 5 deals with the intersections of Christianity with other aspects of daily life in Carthage. The interrelationships between different religious communities: Christians, Jews, and pagans, along with the question of Christian identity are also discussed. In Perpetua's case, Christian identity defines her very existence.

The sixth chapter with the title "Perpetua's Life: Family (Natal and Christian), Education, and Social Status" (103–120) looks into the martyr's familial, educational, and social situation, including a discussion on her relationship with her father and her fellow-martyr Felicity. As Gold points out, "although it is difficult to have any certainty about most of these matters, we

can use both the text of the *Passio* and evidence from roughly contemporary sources to help us reach tentative conclusions” (6; cf. 104). However, some of these conclusions are not always cautious: A case in point is the assumption that “Perpetua’s father does not act in accordance with the behavior expected of a respectable Roman man, father, and head of household. *Such a man should have acted in a restrained and controlled manner*. Rather, he becomes violently angry, attacking her as if he were going to pluck her eyes out and *employing arguments of the devil*” (107; emphasis added by the reviewer). Leaving aside the fact that “respectable men” are not devoid of emotions, and that it was not unusual for a *paterfamilias* to express his anger towards members of his family (after all his anger was a sign of his absolute authority), Gold appears here to adopt the *Passio*’s religious ideology. In Christian narratives, including those examined by Gold in Chapter 3, the non-Christian enemies of the protagonists, who are otherwise respectable Roman men, are depicted in a similarly negative light: as violent and unrestrained men, who are controlled by their passions and mostly their excessive anger. Furthermore, with the above-quoted assumption, Gold seems to contradict her own approach to the *Passio* as a “constructed text, composed and embellished by authors who were interested in creating stories that would have the power to imbue other or potential Christians with the desire to become martyrs themselves” (121). In other words, the father’s behavior should be explained in relation to the text’s Christian ideology and purposes and not according to the idealized image of the noble man as promoted by contemporary philosophical and moralistic texts.

Chapter 7 (“The Conditions of Martyrdom in the High Roman Empire”, 121–139) moves to the social and bodily situation of the martyr. First, the term ‘martyr’ is defined by taking into consideration three co-existent (religious) traditions: Christian, Jewish, and pagan. Second, the voluntary martyrdom of Christians and its treatment by contemporary authors are discussed. Groups of martyrs that acted before Perpetua’s group, such as the martyrs of Lyons and the Scillitan martyrs are also mentioned. Lastly, there is an examination of the different types of punishments inflicted upon Christian martyrs with a focus on the interplay between spectacle and power in the amphitheater of Carthage where Perpetua was executed.

The last chapter (“The Nachleben of Perpetua: Her Unwitting Legacy”, 141–163) looks at the rich afterlife of Perpetua and her text. Special attention is given to four male figures, their interrelations, and their influence on the late

medieval and later reception of Perpetua: Augustine, Quodvultdeus, Notker, and Jacob de Voragine. The chapter concludes by discussing how these male authors have shaped Perpetua's story and subjectivity to serve their own purposes, and the ways through which contemporary feminist scholars have attempted to uncover the martyr's voice.

Gold does not give a clear answer to one of her first questions "whether Perpetua was a product of her environment and its influences or a register, who rejected and subverted most elements of her culture and created something new" (5), and those who have already worked on Perpetua and her *Passio* might find little new in *Perpetua: Athlete of God*. However, Gold admirably brings together all existing discussions about this much-discussed early Christian figure of whom we know very little. Undeniably, Gold's book constitutes an informative and useful starting point for any prospective student of Perpetua and her *Passio*. In addition, the book offers useful information to those interested in gender, society, and literature in High Roman Empire. All in all, Gold's attempt to "cover every important aspect of Perpetua's cultural milieu" (5) has been successful.

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