

Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome

AN ANTHOLOGY

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52. Proba (about AD 322–70)

Introduction

The author of a Christian Virgilian cento of over 690 lines, Proba is a significant author from the fourth century AD. She was the first writer to compose a substantial Christian cento, one of the first to use Virgil for a Christian purpose,¹ and the first Christian writer that we know for sure was a woman.²

She identifies herself simply as 'Proba' (line 12). Scholars have disagreed about which Proba she is: some thought that she was Anicia Faltonia Proba, who lived at the beginning of the fifth century AD, and is known in early Christian circles through the letters of Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Jerome.³ Karl Schenkl, however, has argued persuasively that we should accept the ancient testimony of Isidore of Seville, a seventh century bishop who knew Proba's work well and identified her as Faltonia Betitia Proba (the grandmother of Anicia).⁴ Isidore's identification was supported by a scholiast who noted in the margin of a tenth century manuscript (from the Benedictine abbey near Modena) that Proba was the wife of Adelphius, the grandfather of Anicia.⁵

We know a little about Faltonia Betitia Proba's family, and this helps to date her and her work. She was a member of an important and wealthy Roman family.⁶ Her husband, Clodius Celstinus Adelphius, was city prefect of Rome in AD 351, and later proconsul; her grandfather, Probus, was consul in 310; her father, Petronius Probianus, in 322; and her son, Olybrius, in 379. Her granddaughter Anicia Faltonia Proba married Sextus Petronius Probus, one of the richest business men of his day, and Prefect of Illyricum, Italy and Africa in the 380s. As her son should have been at least 41 in AD 379 (to become consul), Proba herself would have been born by about AD 320.⁷

We can further date her cento itself by Proba's reference to an earlier work she composed 'long ago' on a civil war (lines 1–8). The scholiast tells us that this work was on Constantius' war against Magnentius (AD 350–52).⁸ That poem is no longer extant, but if we accept the scholiast's opinion, we should date Proba's work 'long' after AD 352; line 46 implies that she is no longer young, as does the reference to grandchildren (line 694). Her work was known to Damasus, who imitated Proba. He died in 384, so publication must have been before then.⁹

Proba's remarks about her earlier martial poetry and her rejection of the Muses have been taken as evidence of a pagan past, her renunciation of those themes as a sign of her conversion to Christianity.¹⁰ She does introduce the Holy Spirit as a source of inspiration instead of the Muses, but still sees herself as 'soaked by the Castalian spring' (line 20); references to literary motifs, however, are not good evidence for biography. The argument that her husband was a pagan, but was converted to Christianity by Proba, is also speculative.¹¹ The work is, however, an early example of confessional literature. Proba apologises for earlier work late in life (see line 335), confessing her errors as she turns to a Christian theme.

The cento (or 'patchwork') was an artistic response to a literary education grounded in a canon of the classics. In Greek centones were written from Homer—Eudocia's is a good

example—in Latin they were written from Virgil from at least the second century AD.¹² Originally written just for fun, ‘rules’ were established for the proper composition of a cento: each line of the new poem had to be formed from a line or two half lines from the source; the repetition of two or more whole lines in succession was frowned upon as being very weak, and of course the centoist had to pay proper attention to the retention of an appropriate poetic metre. Some grammatical changes might need to be made, but otherwise the cento should be true to the verse of the original.¹³ Proba is successful in this and has produced a work which is recognised for the poetic skill with which she has adapted the original to its new purpose and is a fine example of the cento.¹⁴

Her cento opens with an introduction in which Proba rejects martial themes (the usual stuff of epic poetry) and instead takes up a Christian theme, inspired by the spirit of God (lines 1–55). She then retells episodes from Genesis and other Old Testament stories (lines 56–332), before offering a second introduction and turning to the New Testament and the story of Christ (lines 333ff.). Proba was the first Christian poet to focus attention on Genesis 1–8, but she was followed by many others, including Cyprian of Gaul, Avitus, Marius Victor, Hilary of Arles, Dracontius and Sedulius, an indication of the significance of her work.¹⁵ A further indication of the popularity of her work comes in a preface which includes a dedication to the Roman emperor Arcadius (AD 383–408) who had himself requested a copy of the text.¹⁶

In 362 the emperor Julian issued a decree forbidding Christian teachers from teaching pagan texts to their pupils, an attempt to deprive Christian children of an education based upon learning the classics, especially Virgil. Amatucci suggests that this decree prompted Proba to adapt Virgil for use in the class room: through her cento his poetry would remain the basis of a child’s education, but with a new Christian plot and no paganism.¹⁷ While we cannot rule out a didactic objective, we should not assume that Proba composed her cento to teach children, despite its apparent later use for that purpose,¹⁸ just as we would not assume that that was the purpose Virgil imagined for his poetry.

There were critics of the cento. Jerome in a letter to Paulinus of Nola (*Letter* 53.7) belittles them as pieces of literature; he refers to a ‘garrulous old woman’ as a typical author, singling out a passage in Proba to demonstrate his point. Yet the cento was popular as a literary form in the fourth century. Originality was not as highly prized then as it is now: Virgil himself drew heavily on Homer in composing his epic. It is not until the poetry of Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola and Prudentius that original Christian poetry was written.¹⁹

Proba

Long ago, I confess, I wrote of leaders
 who had violated sacred vows of peace,
 —wretched men caught by a dreadful desire to rule—
 and various killings, kings’ cruel wars
 and families in battle-lines, the illustrious shields
 stained by parents’ blood and trophies taken from no enemy,
 triumphs splattered with blood which fame had brought,
 cities widowed so often of countless citizens;
 it is enough to remember these evils.

Now, almighty god, receive my sacred song, I pray,
 unlock the mouths of your eternal sevenfold 10
 spirit and unlock the interior of my heart,
 so that I, Proba, prophet, can recall all mysteries.
 No more am I anxious to seek ambrosial nectar,
 nor do I like to lead the Muses from the Aonian peak,
 nor should an idle error persuade me that rocks speak 15
 and follow tripods crowned with laurel and empty prayers
 and quarrelling gods of noblemen and defeated Penates.
 For it is not my task to enhance my reputation with words
 and to look for some small praise from people's enjoyment,
 but soaked by the Castalian spring, imitating the blessed, 20
 I who thirsting have drunk from the offerings of the holy light,
 here I will begin to sing.

God be present, direct my mind;
 may I say that Virgil sang of the holy gifts of Christ;
 and repeating a theme obscure to no one I will proceed from the beginning,
 if there is any faith in my heart, if flowing through my joints 25
 the true mind moves my effort and the spirit mixes itself
 with my whole body and harmful elements do not slow me down
 and earthbound joints and mortal limbs not grow dull.
 O Father, O eternal power over people and all things
 give an easy course and flow into my spirit, 30
 and you be at hand so that together we may hurry through the work begun,
 O Son, you are the energy of the highest Father and heavenly beginning,
 whom we first worship and renew due honours,
 offspring now new, in whom every age believed.
 For I remember, reflecting on the records of ancient men 35
 that before all your Musaeus sang through the world
 of things that were, things that had been, and things that soon were going to be.
 And the young circle of the world itself will have taken shape completely.
 Happy is he who could know the explanations for things,
 where the race of people comes from and sheep and the lives of flying animals 40
 and what marvels the sea bears beneath the marbled water
 and at the same time fire and the fickle moisture of the liquid sky.
 Not otherwise first at the beginning of the growing world
 would I believe that the day became light or had another
 course. A greater arrangement of the universe is born to me 45
 if great age will bring truth to such a work.
 For, I will confess, I used to sing of spectacles of trivial things,
 always horses, arms of men and battles,
 and in vain I eagerly wanted to labour at my work.
 When I tried all those themes, a better purpose seemed to be 50
 to disclose profound themes buried in earth and mist.
 Day upon day, my mind moved me to seize something important
 nor was it content with peaceful quiet.
 Keep silent and all give me your cheerful attention,
 mothers and men, boys and unmarried girls. 55

- In the beginning, heaven and earth and the watery plains
and the bright globe of the moon and the sun's works
the Father himself set up, and you, O clearest lights of the world,
who lead the year as it sinks from heaven.
For neither the fires of the stars nor the clear sky existed 60
but black night drawn by a chariot held the pole,
and empty-space held as much in sheer descent to the shadows,
as looking up to the sky's heavenly Olympus.
Then the almighty Father, who holds supreme power over the universe,
moved apart the dark air and dispelled the shadows 65
and then divided the world, half to light, and half to shadows.
All the constellations he marked out sinking in the silent sky
turning watchful eyes, in which part he set the southern heat,
and which has its back turned to the pole.
When he saw everything was set up in a peaceful sky, 70
almighty, he numbered and named the stars
and made the year equal to four different seasons,
heat, and rains and winds that bring the cold.
And so that we could learn them by sure signs
the earth swells with spring and demands fruitful seed 75
and in mid-summer the threshing floor rubs the scorched fruits of the earth
and autumn lays out its various fruits and black
winter comes; Sicyonian olives are pressed in the olive-press;
and the year turns back on its own footprints.
Now from that time great heaven mixed with the 80
great body feeds with fertile rain its fruits.
- And then the first dawn began to sprinkle the earth with new light
and lead in the day after the stars had fled.
Then he began to harden the land and to separate Nereus with his sea
and gradually to choose the shapes of things, 85
and various figures from the sea, monstrous whales,
began to sweep the level sea with their tails and cut the surf.
In addition all around the huge sea's water species,
now when the sun spreads through, now when things are uncovered by light,
in joy it scattered the bitter salt-spray far and wide. 90
- Then at first dawn the day arose.
The earth poured out flowers and unfurled all its leaves
and wild haunts for birds blushed with blood-red berries,
not enslaved to hoes nor to any human care.
- The third light removed the chilly shadow from the sky. 95
Then pathless copses sang with melodious birds
and ravens gave liquid cries from their tightened throats
nor did the dove cease cooing from its airy elm.
- On the fourth day out of the woods and through the grass
suddenly the earth led marvellous animals of different kinds, 100

and all the flocks, with no shepherd, a miracle to see.
 Then at last the lion roused his arms, then the tiger so dangerous
 and the scaly snake and the lioness tawny-necked
 began to vent her fury and the bodies of massive wolves began to howl.
 Other oxen graze through the green grasses,
 neither springs of water nor plants are in short supply for the herds.

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Then a day advanced and another day, and as the Father
 looked over all this work of excellence and draft of the divine mind
 when everything was completed in succession
 he was unable to satisfy his mind and he was inflamed by watching
 the lands and expanse of the sea and depth of the sky,
 the species of birds and flocks, and he turned over in his mind,
 who would hold the sea, who the land with full sovereignty,
 nor should the wheatfield lands lie neglected. He enjoyed delaying all the time.
 While reflecting on these matters, suddenly a decision was settled upon
 and he drew up lucky clay and moulded by kneading
 straightway the fertile soil from the first months of the year.
 And then unexpectedly the image of such holiness
 the new and most beautiful form of man first went forth,
 his face and shoulders resembling god, whose mind and soul
 a greater god drives and turns to greater works.
 Another is sought for him; but no one from such a large crowd
 dared approach man and be called his ally in the kingdom.
 Without delay immediately he gave quiet rest through the limbs
 of the young man and his eyes closed in sweet sleep.
 And then in the mid-time of shady night
 the almighty Father laid bare his ribs and entrails.
 He plucked out one of these from well-knit joints
 of the young man's side and suddenly a wonderful gift arose
 –substantial proof– and shone in the bright light,
 a virgin, conspicuous in her face and beautiful breast,
 now ready for a husband, now marriageable in age.
 A mighty terror breaks his sleep; he calls his bones and limbs
 his wife and amazed by the divine favour he squeezed her
 and took hold of her by the hand and folded his arms around
 her in embrace.

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When he had done this, at length he puzzled over who created
 the stars of heaven; as he was saying this the sea smoothed its tranquil surface
 and the foundation of the earth trembled, the lofty sky grew quiet.
 'Live happily among the splendid fields
 and happy seats of blessed open woods.
 This is your home, this is your native land, a sure rest from work.
 I place no finishing post for this, no limit of time.
 I have given rule without limit, and the ground
 will not suffer the hoe for many years, nor vineyard the sickle.
 But your species will stay immortal, nor will slow old age
 enfeeble men's minds nor change their strength.

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But now pay attention to what I say.

There is a tree in full view with fruitful branches;
divine law forbids you to level with fire or iron,
by holy religious scruple it is never allowed to be disturbed. 150
And whoever steals the holy fruit from this tree,
will pay the penalty of death deservedly; no argument has changed my mind.
Let no authority, however sensible, persuade you
to pollute your hands; you should be warned by a word—
woman, do not let the impetuosity of another defeat you, 155
if the proper glory of the divine fields awaits you.'

After the Father, whom the stars of heaven obey set out
everything, he gave laws and from above displayed
the shining plains, the glory of such a great world.
But look, at the rising of the first sun beneath its lintel 160
they came to a place where soft marjoram breathed upon them
and wrapped them with flowers and sweet shade.
Here spring is purple and summer in other months,
here there are springs of water, here at the time chosen by heaven
sweet honey squeezes out, here white poplar hangs over 165
the cave and supple vines weave together shady places.
Gardens breathing with saffron-coloured flowers attract
amid an open wood scented of laurel, and earth herself
kept bearing all freely without being asked.
Blessed pair, if the mind of the unspeakable wife had not been 170
stupid; afterwards the mighty exodus taught.
And now the unspeakable day was at hand; through the fields of flowers
look, a snake, abominable, hostile, with immeasurable circles,
seven huge coils, twisting with seven rolls
not easily seen nor courteous in speech to anyone, 175
it hung with hidden hatred from sprouting branch
breathing a viper's breath, in its heart sad wars
and anger and treachery and harmful crimes.
The Father himself hated it; it changed itself so many times in its face
and it bristled with its steep scales and, so as not to leave 180
neither wickedness nor trickery undared nor untried,
first it approached like this with words and showed itself of its own accord.
It said, 'Tell me, maiden—I live in the dark woods
and river banks and dwell in meadows refreshed by streams—
what great cowardice has come upon your courage? 185
Fruits lie scattered everywhere, each beneath its own tree
the cups are springs of water. It is wicked to touch
the heavenly gifts. That one thing the world lacks.
What prevents you testing reasons hidden far away?
It is empty superstition. The other part of the world has
been withdrawn. 190
Why did he give eternal life? Why have the arrangements for death
been withdrawn? If you think that what I said was not futile,
I the author of what should be dared annul the sacred laws.

You are his wife, it is right for you to test his soul by pleading.
 I shall be your leader. If your choice of me is sure, 195
 we will heap up the couches and feast on sumptuous banquets.
 It said this, and quicker than its speech, what was prohibited by law,
 the once hallowed tree they submitted to their banquets
 and began the meal, and defiled everything with their contact.
 The especially unlucky woman, devoted to future ruin, 200
 admired the new leaves and fruit that was not hers,
 the cause of such great wrong-doing, she touched with her lips.
 After venturing upon a very great crime, she rose to an even greater madness,
 alas, the wife pushed the fruit from the tree that was not theirs
 on the wretched man and moved his soul with sudden sweetness. 205
 At once a new light shone from their eyes; but
 they were frightened by their sudden vision and without delay
 they shaded their bodies beneath the spreading of leafy branches;
 they fastened together a covering. No hope of help was given.
 But the creator of the humankind and of the world watched
 these events 210
 with his eyes and foresaw murders and the tyrant's actions,
 and recognised what a woman in her madness could do.
 Immediately he attacked them, 'Far away, be far away you
 impious creatures',
 cried he who supports heaven and earth with his divine power.
 And they, when they saw him pacing far off and shouting 215
 dreadful things, turned in fear and rushing back
 fled off and searched for woods and hollow rocks anywhere
 in secret. They regretted the coming of the light, nor did they
 look upon the breezes; they hated to look upon the vault of heaven.
 It was not long after that the repeated sound of feet seemed
 to their ears 220
 to be present and on the winds the Father addressed him,
 hardly recognising him mournful in the shadows,
 with words like these, and he rebuked him besides.
 'Unhappy man, what mighty madness has taken your mind?
 What new madness is this? Where, where are you aiming
 to go now', he said. 225
 'Forgetting your kingdom, what insanity changes your minds?
 Tell me, what desire so dreadful for light, you wretched people?
 Hurry your flight and be gone from this whole place;
 nor is it lawful to recall your steps, even when misfortunes
 call upon you. A river encircles it with scorching flames, 230
 hissing through the middle and twists the roaring rocks
 and throws up balls of flames and licks the stars.'
 After this he said, 'Your sad image, Father, your image
 ...me...
 (they) have put me in this place. I deserve it nor do I pray to avert it.
 Almighty, I tremble at the sound of your feet and your voice 235
 knowing the guilt of my rash deed. And with bad advice
 the woman brought the bitter juice and slow taste.

She considered trickery and dreadful sin beneath her breast
 and a girl who in her madness is going to die, by unspeakable evidence,
 she destroyed an innocent and careless man with cruel death. 240
 For she persuaded me, you know, for nothing escapes your notice.
 As I saw, how I was destroyed, how a bad mistake mislead me,
 and we touched with our hands what the tree itself does not produce.'
 The almighty Father begins from his high throne,
 'So take to heart and fix there these my words: 245
 you first, your crime is larger than all others ,
 you whom neither long days nor any pity will soften,
 advisor of crimes, snake, feeding on bad grasses,
 dishonoured, dragging your belly wide with idleness,
 leave this place yourself, without the compulsion of people, 250
 where clay is shallow and thorny fields have stones.
 But your crime,' he said, 'for such great rashness
 your whole life is worn away by iron, and you will be first with the skill,
 alas wretched boy, to attack the earth with hoes
 and frighten birds with noise. In the fields 255
 the thistle will prickle and Christ's-thorn will rise up with sharp spikes,
 and goose-grass and star-thistles and grass deceptive with poison.
 But if you cultivate the ground for a wheat harvest
 and stout spelt, you will look at the heap in vain
 and be accustomed to hunger in the woods with a shaken oak. 260
 In addition to this, sad old age will befall you with illness
 and work and the severity of a hard death will carry you away.
 This will always be your lot, and you, most cruel wife,
 not unaware of wrong, the head and cause of these wrongs,
 you will atone for your great crimes. Alas, lost woman,
 you do not know 265
 nor do you notice the dangers which will now stand around you.
 Now die, as you have deserved, because you sought it with your mind.
 My judgment is not now changed and does not yield.'
 At first cruel dread surrounded the young man.
 His eyes stiffened, nor did he hide himself in the shade 270
 any longer nor hear familiar voices nor reply.
 Without delay they hurried as they had been ordered and
 carried themselves off
 on quick feet, and walking together through the shadows of the way
 they sped along the middle course and left the threshold
 weeping and fixed their steps with equal trouble. 275
 Then the branches gave them sustenance in the woods, berries
 and stony cherries and the plants fed them with roots pulled out.

 Meanwhile the sun turned the great year around.
 Ten months brought a long-term nausea to the mother,
 from whom people are born, a hard species. From that time
 through skill 280
 grasses grew on the plain or leaves on the tree,
 and grains dared to trust themselves to new suns safely.

And they began to hang the vine from pliant branches
 and teach it to grow in humid bark.
 Then, when twin brothers were burning offerings on altar-top
 with torches 285
 one envied the offering presented by the other—
 I shudder to tell it – he caught his incautious relation,
 who shared his blood, and cut him down at his father's altar
 staining with his blood the fire which he himself had consecrated.
 Then the Father added venom to dark snakes 290
 and struck honey from the leaves and took away fire
 and ordered wolves to prey and the sea to roll
 and everywhere he stopped the streams of flowing wine.
 Soon a disease was added to the grain, so that there would be
 an evil blight
 on the stalks and sick crops would not provide the means of life. 295
 Then snares to catch wild animals were invented, and birdlime
 to trick them, and the poverty which pinches when times are hard
 moved the fields, sharpening mortal hearts with cares,
 until gradually an inferior and discoloured, age
 offspring of iron, lifted its head from the hard fields 300
 and the madness of war and love of having followed.
 Justice made her footprints as she left the earth.
 Not long after, madness and anger removed reason.
 Soaked with the blood of their brothers they rejoiced.
 Another man hid his wealth and used to sit on his buried gold 305
 and with no pity for the poor he did not feel sorry nor offer
 his right hand.
 Then the almighty father was deeply angered and hurled himself
 from the upper sky. He poured the earth into the waves
 mixing in a flood, and loosed heaven into Tartarus.
 He levelled the fields, he levelled the joyful crops and washed away 310
 the oxen's work. The ditches were filled and the hollow river grew.
 He gave every kind of flock death, every kind of wild animal.
 Then the man respected for his piety and kindness
 —marvellous to relate—
 who on earth was most mindful of fairness,
 he snatched away from death when the waves were rising up
 to such great heights, 315
 to have the race from which a new lineage would be recalled.
 From out of that flood the Almighty gave laws to the elders
 who had been summoned; they lived their lives under the great laws.
 Why the memory of unspeakable murders, why the deeds of tyrants
 and the ignorant hearts tamed by people's prayers, 320
 the strength of Egypt and the distant wars of the east
 and leaders brave with respect to the rank of the whole race,
 by which direction he sought the deserts and the great race and tribe
 of men, not ever forgetting such great service,
 every holy priest next to the altars, 325
 every pious prophet falling for freedom,

the kings who were roused to war, the battlelines
 which filled the plains with red shore, with which arms
 a king, his lineage outstanding, burned with great burning madness,
 leading the column of cavalry and troops shining in bronze, 330
 other deeds and wars of our forefathers fought in succession
 I omit, and I leave to others after me what should be recorded.

Now I return to you and your great decrees, Father.
 I begin my greater work. I take up the predictions of the
 older prophets,
 although the end of a slender life awaits, 335
 I have to attempt the path by which I too could lift me
 from the ground and carry your name in fame through countless years,
 because your son came down from high heaven,
 the age brought to us as we prayed for something
 the help and advent of God, whom a woman first 340
 wearing the face and clothing of a virgin—marvellous to relate—
 gave birth to a boy not of our race nor blood.
 And alarming prophets sang the late omens
 that a magnificent man was coming to the people and to the earth
 from heavenly seed, who would seize the world by his might. 345
 And then the promised day was at hand, when for the first time
 the source of divine progeny revealed his holy face.
 He was sent for rule and came as virtue in body
 mixed with god. The image of his dear father came down.
 Without delay, in the peaceful area of heaven at once 350
 a star leading a flame of great light rushed.
 The princes recognised a god and suddenly with every
 gift they increased and worshipped the holy star.
 Then indeed faith was clear and the name of his
 father's virtue distinguished. And they themselves recognised the face 355
 and the signs of the divine beauty of brilliant God.
 Forthwith rushing with great passion the news flew
 to the king and sharpened his anger with the great rumour
 and inflamed his soul and also fell upon his mother's ears.
 She was not unaware of what was happening and foresaw his trickery 360
 and dreadful wickedness and she first caught his future impulses.
 With foreknowledge of what would come she ordered that he
 be reared in secret,
 while his cares were in doubt, while his mind was boiling with anger.
 But the worried king ordered them to throw away the offspring
 and all the future race and to light flames beneath and burn him. 365
 He set many things in motion, sending out men to report the facts.
 They did as they had been ordered, and carried on swift feet
 they filled the city with great terror.
 Immediately sounds were heard and mighty crying
 and the breath of babies sobbing. Before their parents' faces 370
 the bodies of their sons were strewn in the doorways.
 But the mother terrified at such great sobbing, and rightly so,

carrying her baby before her in her bosom, during the confused uproar
she fled and returned to the full mangers.

Here under the scanty sloping roof she began to nurse her son
milking her breasts with his delicate lips. 375

Here, boy, your cradle first will pour out flowers,
and everywhere earth mixed with laughing cyclamen
and little by little caladium will pour out tender acanthus.

And at that time the cycle of time was completed and came to an end. 380

As soon as his raving ceased and his raging lips became quiet,
displaying a spirit beyond his years the heavenly source
walked through the middle of the cities and the neighbouring peoples.

All the young people poured out from the houses and fields
and watched him as he went by, gaping with spirits inspired. 385

A crowd of mothers were amazed, 'What spirit he has,
what a face, and the sound of his voice or step as he goes past.'

At once a prophet—and he was a most reliable authority—
when he saw the Mystery at a distance by a cool river
he said, 'It is the time. Look, God, God; our greatest faith in deed
or word rests with him. You now will be second to him,
lucky boy, whom the stars of heaven obey. 390

Indeed I used to think like this and suppose what would happen.
You, the one awaited, do come, our hope and our comfort.'

When he had said this, he took him come to dip in the
health-giving river
and drew him from the soft waves. 395

The waters rejoiced and suddenly excited a dove
flew down and stopped above his head. From there it suddenly
swiftly skimmed the liquid way, nor did it move its wings.

Here the whole crowd pouring to the banks began to rush
splashing copious water from their shoulders in contest. 400

Then the Father addressed his son with friendly words,
'Son, my strength, my great power alone

and most sweet glory, you who will return to your father
the beginning is from you, and will end with you. Listen,
I am testifying, 405

my son: wherever the sun catches sight of the Ocean
and returns, joyful at the glory completed
you will see everything turned and ruled beneath your feet.

Rule your people with authority, mothers and men,
their spirits idle long ago and hearts unused, 410

and pitying with me the indolent who are unaware of the way
go out and become used to being called in prayer now.'

He had spoken. He began to prepare to obey his great Father's
authority, pressing on with the work and the kingdom to come.

Alas for piety! Alas for old-fashioned faith! What thanks
am I to begin to speak, if I may compare small things with great? 415

Then I had no hope of seeing my ancient fatherland
nor any hope of freedom nor care for salvation.

Here he first gave an answer to me when I sought one,

he removed the set stain and left pure 420
 heavenly understanding and sent me back into my kingdom.
 So I would follow him through flames, if I were to spend time
 as an exile in Sidra,
 through various reasons, through a thousand approaching missiles,
 where and whenever things may fall, the one, for his so great name,
 and I would pile high his altars with his own gifts. 425
 For his coming, for the rewards of such great glory
 the unshaven mountains themselves toss their voices
 to the joyful stars; the valleys echo everything.

At this time—a great and memorable story—
 it is necessary to remember the fearful evil of the snake. 430
 Indeed the snake even dared—the story is rather obscured by time—
 to address the man and ask the reasons for his coming.
 When it saw him making for him through the grass
 the stricken snake stayed and fiercely growled and
 with proud speech addressed the powerful lord: 435
 'Is your appearance true? Do you bring news to me as a true messenger?
 What is your birth? What home do you come from, you who make
 your way to our threshold?
 Come on now, tell me why you come. For they say you give laws.
 Or who, most presumptuous young man, told you to come
 to our home and impose the custom of peace? 440
 Of course, I do not envy, I am all the more amazed. In turn, hear
 what doubt and what thought now rises in my mind.
 There is a high home. Call the west winds and glide with wings
 and seek the steep roof, daring to trust yourself to heaven,
 if whom you recall is really your Father, whom the stars obey.' 445
 Smiling with heart calm he spoke to him
 not unaware of the prophets and knowing of the age to come:
 'Did you expect to deceive me, treacherous snake?
 Do not doubt. For you will see the truth. Choose to follow
 the high stars with wings and hide yourself shut in the hollow earth. 450
 Where do you fall, doomed creature, and do you dare things
 greater than your strength?
 Yield to God, after you have thrown your whole body to the earth.'
 No more than this. It was amazed at the respected gift
 and pressed its forehead to the earth and forced bloody froth
 from its mouth
 and set on flight it mixed itself with the invisible shadows. 455

Meanwhile the story flew as it went through the great cities.
 Men came together. They were all of one mind, to follow him
 to whichever lands he wanted to lead them by sea.
 Many moreover, whom dark fame hid away,
 ran with great noise and crowded around pressing together 460
 and rejoiced in their hearts. For the massive crowd
 held him in its midst and they admired the width of his high shoulders.

- When he reached the high mountains, the eternal power
 began to give justice and laws to men, mysteries of his Father,
 and he gave hope to doubtful minds and freed them of their cares. 465
 Look, he saw others crowding left and right.
 When he saw they were crowded together and were venturing to fight
 he began and breathed with words a divine love.
 'Be advised: learn justice. Help the tired,
 each for his own sake, men, whatever wealth you each have, 470
 and joyful call your universal God. Let us follow what is best
 and whatever way the journey calls let us turn. The first road
 of salvation
 is pure faith and a mind aware of right.
 Your share will be rest when the cycle of time is completed.
 For who sit alone upon their wealth procured 475
 and did not share a part with his family, while life remains,
 or a parent is beaten and fraud contrived against a client,
 then, when cold death has divided limb from soul,
 they await the penalty imprisoned—the crowd of them is the largest—
 and call out from dark underworld and suffer punishments 480
 for old evils. For others beneath a vast abyss
 the tainted crime is washed away or burned out by fire.
 Here muddy with filth an abyss of vast depth
 boils and throws up sand from its deepest chasm.
 From here a groaning is heard and with cruel sound 485
 floggings, then the clanking of iron and dragging chains,
 and always the shadows are thickened by night drawn over.
 Meanwhile, turn to what I say with your souls.
 May I hear that in the future you are not still guarding sanctuaries with bullocks
 duly slaughtered according to ancestral ceremony, 490
 and a statue made from trunks and oak by mortal hand.
 And I will warn you, repeating this again and again.
 But to die once is sufficient, and it will benefit you more
 to remember son and father, if it is worthwhile to believe.
 But meanwhile time flees, flees irretrievable, 495
 and the day of flames and enemy power approaches.'
 They were at a loss, their courage terrified. Delaying no longer
 he sang another greater judgment for the poor weak
 mortals, and he gave them notice saddened with anger.
 It would come to destruction and everything destroyed 500
 by a huge disaster, then both the stars wandering from the axis
 and the downfall of heaven would be equally mixed with red fire.
 Then indeed terror slipped new terrors into the trembling
 hearts of all, and they saw what was going to come in silence.
 When he was warning about the coming of these many terrors, 505
 a boy whose face was unshaven marked with the first down of youth,
 rich in wealth, flourishing with enthusiasm for low-born idleness,
 (five bleating flocks returned to him, and five herds, and
 he loaded his table with feasts unbought)
 immediately he eagerly held out both hands 510

grasping his knees with a friendly face he said:

'O virtue, O part most deserved of our reputation,

I flee for help to you and a suppliant I beg your divine favour.

I have anticipated everything, I have passed through everything with my soul.

Take me from these sins, unconquerable. What now remains,

515

or following what am I able to overcome such great labours?

Accept and return my faith. It is right for me to seize on

your commands.'

And with this brief response the hero replied:

'O young man outstanding in your soul, cease your praying,

and do not be sorry. My friend, there is nothing left for you to do.

520

I will even add to these prayers, if your goodwill towards me is sure.

Learn, boy, to despise wealth and also make yourself worthy

of God, and you will be able to understand what virtue is.

Give your right arm to the poor and as a brother do not desert

your brother.

If he is eager to join in friendship, join willingly.

525

Let a chaste home keep its chastity. Come on, interrupt

your lazy delays and come not bitter to the affairs of the destitute.'

He said this. And at these words, sadder, he turned his footsteps

lifting his face pale by a wondrous amount,

groaning deeply he turned himself from his eyes and took

himself away.

530

From the time when there was first confidence in the sea,

over the tranquil deep

allies launched their ships and with a master's skill

while one man transfixed the broad stream with his net

seeking the deep, another dragged his wet line in the sea.

When the boats held the deep and no longer met any land,

535

the air flickered with frequent fire,

suddenly the clouds snatched away the sky and the day,

the winds rose up and raised the waves to the stars.

But companions' blood grew stiff with sudden fear, frozen;

their spirits fell, and all suddenly began

540

to watch the sea weeping—one voice to them all—

vacillating between hope and fear, whether they could believe they were alive

or suffering the final moment, the thin line which separates off death:

many events like these the sailors suffer in the deep.

Look! God perceived that sea was mixed up with mighty rumbling

545

and a storm of very great power had been sent.

Like light winds and swifter than winged lightning

he sought the curling sea and hastened across the open sea.

He was not separated by far from a passing keel.

From afar the exposed companions recognised the king

550

and his strong right arm and greeted him with a great shouting.

When he touched the high waves and came to the sea-surface,

it was reported that it was indeed dreadful and an amazing sight.

The waves subsided, so there was no struggling with an oar,
 and he caused the gathered clouds to fly away and then
 walked through 555
 the middle of the sea-surface, and yet it did not wet the high sides of his body.
 But coming aboard amidships among the companions themselves
 he took over the helm as pilot himself, himself the master.
 The mast shook, the skiff groaned beneath the weight,
 the sails fell, and god sat down in the high stern, 560
 and at last the joyful men turned towards the well-known sands.

Then too the driver sat, shining from his cloud, on the ribs
 of a little slow donkey. For him a crowd all around,
 mothers, men and boys, threw down their customary garments
 and rejoiced to take the rope with their hands. 565

And now they approached the gates; and the aged temple
 of ancient cedar, lofty with one hundred columns,
 he entered in the midst of a large accompanying troop.
 This temple, dreaded with its woods, was the senate-house,
 this the sacred seat, which they used to care for with
 astonishing respect. 570

For while he was examining every single thing beneath
 the huge temple,
 he suddenly shuddered at the sight and cracked a whip
 and gestured with his hand while he thundered with his great voice:
 'What forms of sin, what shining bronze and name of Caesar,
 do I see? What madness changes your mind? 575

This is our own seat; here at the time appointed
 they have been accustomed to sit at their ancestors' unbroken tables.'
 They were paralysed in their souls and a cold trembling ran
 through their innermost bones, and the forefathers left the tables in fear.

Meanwhile the evening star came closer to steep Olympus. 580

Then men recovered with food and spread out on the grass
 they burdened the tables with a banquet and put down the cups.
 After the first rest from feasting and the removal of the tables,
 he himself with the leaders celebrated honours to the Father,
 looking up at heaven. Then silence came upon their tongues. 585

He put in their hands fruits of the earth and sweet water from springs
 and filled a dish with wine and taught the rites of worship
 and mixed in prayers and said things like this:
 'Listen noble men,' he said, 'and learn your hopes.

No one from this number will leave me unrewarded, 590
 and because of your Father's promises,' he said, 'definite rewards
 wait for you, boys, and no one moves the victory-prize from
 its set-place.

And when tomorrow's light first returns to the earth
 there will be one man who sets himself so greatly against me, for the destruction
 of my people, while in the midst of our body and for peace. 595
 Now unless I err the day is here. Shut off your cares.

That labour will be mine, unless my judgment deceives me.
One head will be given for many.' When he had said this
he fell silent and gave his limbs to late rest.

Meanwhile the dawn rose up and left the ocean. 600

And now the priest along with the people filled the elders
far and wide with complaints, and the mumbling was passed
along the line.

What was the ancestry of the man, and what homeland is so barbaric
that it allows such a custom? They demanded he pay the
penalty with blood

and from all sides they gathered and with great shouting follow 605
the innocent man, and the crowd of insignificants are ferocious
in their souls.

The fiery sun had climbed to the mid-circle of the heaven,
when suddenly everyone, elders and the people, demanded
that he be summoned and ordered him to say from whose blood he was fathered,
what he was seeking and what he was offering himself. Deceit
mixed with 610

stupidity drove the lazy men who watched his famous deeds
—the mind of man is ignorant—and they competed to ridicule
the prisoner.

Then indeed they took their weapons and charged from all sides.

The shouting rose to heaven and suddenly they all 615
seized the holy image and with blood-stained hands

they positioned a huge oak after cutting off its branches on all sides
and tied him up with huge twisted bands,

and they stretched out his hands and pressed his feet together, one on the other
—a sad service—those whom the other young men followed,

all dared a savage sin and mastered what they dared. 620

But fearless he said, 'Why do you fasten bonds?

Has such great confidence in your race got hold of you?

Later you will atone with a punishment unlike the one inflicted on me.'

He mentioned these things and stood fast and remained affixed.

Meanwhile the heaven began to be confused with a great rumbling 625
and a black night took colour from the world

and impious generations feared an eternal night.

The earth shook, wild animals fled and low terror

threw to the ground mortal hearts, family by family. After that
the earth suddenly gave a groan and the whole heaven rang with noise. 630

Immediately excited the thin shades began to go from the deepest
seats of Erebus. The earth too and the surface of the sea

gave signs; the streams stopped and the lands yawned open.

Then Tartarus itself, home and intimate of Death, was stunned
and shadowy caves were opened deep within. 635

The sun too as it rose—all said that they knew this—

then covered its shining head with dark gloom.

The companions dispersed and were hidden by dark night
and turned in their sad hearts many hard facts.

What were they to do? His face and words stayed stamped 640
 in their hearts; care gave limbs no quiet rest.
 Then an older man reported such words with his heart,
 thinking greatly: 'Where now for us is God, that master?
 Whom do we follow? Where do you order us to go, where to place our home?
 O sorrow and honour, glory of such great deeds! 645
 Now, now there is no delay. Seize us, we pray, in everyway
 and don't take yourself from our sight.'
 During this emotion and in the midst of such words
 the light had dispersed from heaven cold shadow,
 and now retracing its step it was going up to the winds, 650
 when suddenly before their eyes was the massive tomb
 where lifeless his body had been placed—neither the bars nor the guards themselves
 were strong enough to endure—and they saw
 rocks from rocks pulled apart, the tight joins of the sides loosened.
 There was a sound; the earth was struck by its huge weight. 655
 Everywhere souls had terror and the silence itself was frightening.
 But look—the first singing of birds beneath the roofs!
 He walks, leaving the cave, proud of its spoils and rejoicing
 he began to go, and the earth, encouraged, trembled at the striking
 of his feet.
 Wearing those wounds he took himself to the high entrance. 660
 And here, amazed, he found a huge number of new
 companions had flowed in, and unexpected, suddenly
 to them all he said, 'I am here, the one whom you seek, in person.
 Piety has defeated the hard journey and lively virtue.
 Men, throw yourselves into keeping watch; let all fear be gone. 665
 This is my return and triumph awaited,
 this is my great faith. O three and four times blessed,
 what rewards, what rewards are worthy, am I to suppose,
 to be able to pay back your glories, what gifts to be provided?
 So take this to your souls; earth, who first bore you from 670
 your parents' stock, she will receive you with joyful breast.
 Recall your spirit and send away gloomy fear
 and save yourselves for the future to come.
 For what is left, joyful at the things accomplished well and in order,
 pray with your hands for peace, praise peace while you sit, 675
 great men; your pledge of peace alone is inviolable.'
 While he said this he showed his visage and face,
 his face and hands both and chest ravaged by iron.
 And they joined hand in hand and rejoiced in seeing him.
 Nor was it enough to have seen him once; they enjoyed both delaying 680
 and walking beside him and holding his hand with theirs.
 When at last he completed his work, he parted the breathing winds.
 Carried through the thin air and open heaven
 he left mortal sight in mid-speech,
 and the kingdom of starry heaven received him to his throne 685
 and keeps his name eternal through the ages.
 From that day his honour has been celebrated, and joyful

younger generations

have kept the day as year after year has slipped away.

Go, O our virtue, go, the glory of such great events,
and come to us favourable and to your annual holy rites,
which it is sinful to delay, with favourable step. Support
and celebrate this custom of holy rites, companions; keep it yourself,
O sweet husband, and if we deserve it through piety,
may our pure grandchildren stay in the religion.

690

Notes

1. See E.A. Clark and D.F. Hatch, *The Golden Bough, The Oaken Cross: The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1981), 103; C. Schenkl (ed.), *Cento Virgilianus de laudibus Christi: Poetae Christiani Minores*, I. Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 16 (Vienna: F. Tempisky, 1888), 609-27.
2. The authorship of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua* is in some doubt (see the text above), while the suggestion that the Epistle to the Hebrews had a female author is fanciful: see R. Hopkins, *Priscilla, Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Exposition Press, 1969).
3. Augustine, *Letters* 130, 131; John Chrysostom, *Letters* 168; Jerome, *Letters* 130.
4. *De Viris Illustribus* 22.18 (J.-P. Migne, *Patrologie cursus completus. Series Latina* [Paris: Garnier Frères, 1844-64], 83.1093); *Etymologiarum (De Originibus)* 1.39.26 (Migne, *Patrologie cursus completus*, 82.121).
5. Schenkl, *Cento Virgilianus de laudibus Christi*; the manuscript was reported by B. de Montfaucon, *Diarium Italicum* (Paris: J. Arisson, 1702), but is now lost: see Schenkl, 13. For discussion of Proba's life, see Clark and Hatch, *The Golden Bough, The Oaken Cross*, 97-102; and G.R. Kastner and A. Millin, 'Proba', in P. Wilson-Kastner et al. (eds), *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of the Early Church* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1981), 33-35.
6. For her wealthy aristocratic status, see the advice to the rich, lines 469-81.
7. The minimum age for a consul was fixed in the second century BC, but this was often disregarded in the imperial period. For Proba's family see A.H.M. Jones et al., *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 1144; M.T.W. Arnheim, *The Senatorial Aristocracy in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 113-14.
8. Schenkl, *Cento Virgilianus de laudibus Christi*, 13; for the civil war, see Zosimus, 2.45-53.
9. For recent discussion of the cento's date, see R.P.H. Green, 'Proba's cento: its date, purpose, and reception', *Classical Quarterly* 45 (1995), 551-63. We do not know the date of Proba's death; her husband inscribed a dedication on her tomb, see E. Borman (ed.), *CIL* 6.1712.
10. See J. Balmer, *Classical Women Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1996), 111; Clark and Hatch, *The Golden Bough, The Oaken Cross*, 98.
11. The identification of Adelphius as a pagan rests upon the determination that Clodius Hermogenianus Caesarius (a pagan) was his son (ibid, 101), but this is not securely established; see *CIL* 6.499.
12. Tertullian, *On the Prescription of Heretics* 39.3-4; see F. Ermini, *Il Centone di Proba e la Poesia Centonaria Latina* (Rome, 1909), 42.
13. Ausonius, *Wedding Cento*: see H.G. Evelyn-White (trans.), *Ausonius*, I (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1919), 373-75. Schenkl, *Cento Virgilianus de laudibus Christi*, established where each line of Proba comes from in Virgil; Clark and Hatch, *The Golden Bough, The Oaken Cross*, conveniently repeat this information with their text.

14. See R. Herzog, *Die Biblepik der Lateinischen Spätantike*, I (Munich: Fink, 1975), xlix-li, 3-51; Clark and Hatch, *The Golden Bough, The Oaken Cross*, 97-181.
15. See *ibid*, 6.
16. The preface was not written by Proba; for text and translation see *ibid*, 12-13.
17. A.G. Amatuucci, *Storia della Letteratura Latina Cristiana* (Bari: G. Laterza and Figli, 1955), 131; see also Green, 'Proba's cento', 554-60.
18. For its later use as a school text, see Kastner and Millin, 'Proba', 37.
19. Clark and Hatch, *The Golden Bough, The Oaken Cross*, 104-105.