

Source: *Medieval Sourcebook: St. Perpetua: The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity* 203

The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity is a firsthand historical account of the events preceding the execution of Vibia Perpetua in the arena of Carthage on March 7th, 203. It is written as a diary from the perspective of Perpetua, and is one of the earliest firsthand accounts of martyrdom ever preserved along with being one of the earliest pieces of writing by a Christian woman (Perez, *Vibia Perpetua's Diary*, p. 3). These attributes make it a crucial text for understanding and documenting Christian history. The source consists of three main parts that recount the persecution, imprisonment, and execution of a group of Christians including martyrs Perpetua, Saturus, and Felicity. It was likely written in order for Perpetua to document their trials and for others to understand and become emboldened by the martyrdom of this Christian group. As Perpetua is clearly a devout Christian, one must take into account the bias that is present in her retelling of historical facts of the event. However, this bias is implicit as the source is a diary entry and is an important component to understanding the thoughts and emotions of Perpetua during this time. The Christian bias is therefore important for understanding the context under which this is written.

The first major section of the source is also the longest, it documents Perpetua's account of the series of events that happen before their execution. It begins with Vibia Perpetua under surveillance and imprisonment of the Roman state. She writes about her father who comes to her multiple times before the trial in a pleading attempt to have her reject her Christian faith. Perpetua acknowledges that he does it out of his love for her but must refuse him, leading to a vexing argument between the two. This interaction is a significant indicator of the way Christianity is changing Roman society. Before the rise of this religion, the father was deemed the most important member of the household while all other family members obey him without question. Perpetua choosing to deny him points to a shift in the traditional family power structures when Christianity is

involved. During the trial, her father appears one last time to cast down Perpetua's faith himself. He is smitten by a rod and sent away with her child, whom she has been breastfeeding and caring for in prison, refusing to return the child to her. This section of the source brings Perpetua's female perspective of Roman family dynamics (Perez, *Vibia Perpetua's Diary*, p. 59-60), offering readers insight between the relationship between father and daughter from the daughter's point of view. A rarity from this period. Once more, this focus on Perpetua instead of her father, and her refusal to cast down her faith at her father's request is evidence of the changes Christianity has brought to Roman society.

The second important section of the source concerns the martyr Saturus and his account of a religious vision before their execution. Within this vision, the martyrs are carried to the east by four angels. They are brought to a garden of angels and other martyrs previously executed as part of the same persecution. They meet with God and other Christians that Saturus had known from before, making peace with and embracing those that they had left behind to be killed by the Romans. This passage of the source is significant to understanding Christian history, as it is representative of Christian forgiveness of the period. Saturus is able to make peace with himself and his upcoming death as he is given the opportunity to put away his dissension with people from his past.

The final component of the source concerns the narrative of martyrdom, and begins with discussing the martyr Felicity. Felicity is eight months pregnant, and under Roman law she cannot be executed until she gives birth. She is sorrowful that she may be kept back and die "among strangers and malefactors," while her fellow martyrs despair at leaving behind their good friend and fellow traveller. They pray together several days before the execution, and Felicity suddenly delivers a daughter, to be raised under her sister. The Christians are granted a final feast before their execution under Roman law, which they use to celebrate an Agape. This is a Christian love-feast, a simple communal meal and religious service that promotes fellowship and unity. They invite the guards to

be "friends today, foes tomorrow" as a demonstration of Christian love. This section, from the despair of Felicity dying without her friends and the martyrs' love-feast, displays the sense of Christian community and togetherness of the period during their persecutions.

Secondary Sources:

Perez, Melissa. "*Vibia Perpetua's Diary: A Women's Writing In A Roman Text Of Its Own*".

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