



Evaluations on the Diary of Vibia Perpetua, One of the First Female Martyrs of Christianity

Hıristiyanlığın İlk Kadın Şehitlerinden Vibia Perpetua'nın Günlüğü Üzerine Değerlendirmeler

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Abstract

This article focuses on the diary of Vibia Perpetua, one of the first female martyrs of Christianity and also the first female auto-biographer in history. Perpetua was martyred with her friends in the Carthage amphitheatre on March 7, 203, because she did not renounce Christianity and refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods for the sake of the well-being of the Roman emperor Septimus Severus. Perpetua kept a diary during her imprisonment and recorded all her experiences and dreams from the time she was detained until her martyrdom. We can access basic information about Perpetua and her experiences through the editor who published the diary. Many researchers from Antiquity to the present have examined this diary and made various comments. The inspiration for Perpetua's dreams has particularly caused controversy among researchers. Additionally, theories have been produced about why Perpetua never mentioned her friend and slave Felicitas and her husband in her diary. In our study, ancient and modern sources were analysed and it was concluded that Felicitas was included in the story by the editor and Perpetua's husband was removed from the diary as a result of the editor's intervention. Accordingly, we tried to bring a new and different perspective to the field.

Keywords: History of Christianity, Vibia Perpetua, Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis, Passion of Perpetua, Perpetua and Felicitas

Öz

Bu makale, Hıristiyanlığın ilk kadın şehitlerinden ve aynı zamanda tarihteki ilk kadın otobiyografi yazarı olan Vibia Perpetua'nın günlüğüne odaklanmaktadır. Perpetua Hıristiyanlıktan vazgeçmediği ve Roma imparatoru Septimus Severus'un esenliği adına pagan tanrılarına kurban sunmayı reddettiği için arkadaşları ile 7 Mart 203 tarihinde Kartaca amfi tiyatrosunda şehit edilmiştir. Perpetua mahkûmiyet günlerinde bir günlük tutmuş ve göz altına alınmasından şehit edilmesine kadar geçen sürede tüm yaşadıklarını ve gördüğü rüyaları bu günlüğe kaydetmiştir. Perpetua ile ilgili temel bilgilere ve onun yaşadıklarına, günlüğü yayımlayan editör aracılığıyla erişebiliyoruz. Antikçağdan günümüze birçok araştırmacı bu günlüğü incelemiş ve muhtelif yorumlarda bulunmuştur. Araştırmacılar arasında özellikle Perpetua'nın gördüğü rüyaların esin kaynağı tartışmalara neden olmuştur. İlaveten Perpetua'nın günlüğünde arkadaşı ve kölesi olan Felicitas'tan ve kocasından neden hiç bahsetmediği ile ilgili de teoriler üretilmiştir. Çalışmamızda antik ve modern kaynaklar tahlil edilmiş, neticesinde de Felicitas'ın hikâyeye editör tarafından dahil edildiği ve Perpetua'nın kocasının da editörün müdahalesi sonucu günlükten çıkarıldığı sonucuna varılmıştır. Buna bağlı olarak da alana yeni ve farklı bir bakış açısı kazandırmaya çalışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hıristiyanlık Tarihi, Vibia Perpetua, Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis, Perpetua'nın Çilesi, Perpetua ve Felicitas

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Introduction

In the first months of 203, two women named Vibia Perpetua and Felicitas and three men named Revocatus, Saturnius and Secundulus were detained in Carthage because they were Christians and refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods for the sake of the well-being of the Roman emperor Septimus Severus (193-211).¹ Saturus, the religious leader of the group, who was not with his students during the arrest, surrendered to the authorities as soon as he heard the news. The group was initially placed under house arrest and then transferred to prison. Shortly after, the group's trial was managed by the governor Hilarianus. In this court, each member of the group confessed that they were Christians and, despite all insistence, refused to sacrifice for the well-being of the emperor. As a result, members of the group were sentenced to death by being thrown to the wild animals. On March 7, 203, the group's punishment was implemented in the plays held in the Carthage amphitheatre for the birthday of Septimus Severus's youngest son, Geta Caesar. The story of the above-mentioned names is told in the work called *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*.² The work consists of XXI chapters: The first two chapters were written by someone whose identity is unknown but who is thought to be the editor of the work. It is worth noting that this uncertainty over the identity of the editor has led to some controversy. Some researchers wanted to make the identity of the editor clear and put forward some names about who the editor might be. Based on the similarities between the sections written by the editor in the *Passio* and the works of the famous Carthaginian theologian Tertullian, researchers have suggested that

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- 1 In fact, according to Roman law of the period, Christianity was not a criminal offence. Although there were some trials against Christians in the early years of Septimus Severus' reign and before, these were actions taken on the initiative of some local rulers who listened to the complaints of the local population who were disturbed by the spread of Christianity. However, upon the rapid spread of Christianity in Roman territory, Emperor Septimus Severus banned the conversion of pagans to Christianity and started massacres against Christians, especially in North Africa. Perpetua and her friends were also victims of this wave of massacres initiated during the reign of Septimus Severus. For detailed information, see *Historia Augusta, Septimus Severus*, 17.1, trans. Samet Özgüler, vol. 1. (İstanbul: Kronik Kitap, 2021).
 - 2 There are different versions of the work written in Latin and Greek. Some editions based on these versions and translations into modern languages have been made by researchers. The most prominent of these are; Joseph Armitage Robinson, *The Passion of S. Perpetua*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891); W.H. Shewring, *The Passion of SS. Perpetua and Felicity: A New Edition and Translation of the Latin Text, Together with the Sermons of St. Augustine Upon These Saints* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1931); Herbert Anthony Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford, 1972). The work will be used in the form of *Passio* in the next part of our study.

the editor may have been Tertullian.³ Some other researchers have opposed the theory that the similarities in the work point to Tertullian. Because almost all of the 3rd century North African writers benefited from a single source, that is, the Bible. In a period when everyone draws from the same source, it is perfectly normal for there to be stylistic similarities between authors, and therefore these similarities are not sufficient evidence to identify the editor.⁴ Although it is difficult to determine the identity of the editor with the available data, some recent studies have drawn a profile of the editor by analysing the passages he wrote. Accordingly, the editor is a well-educated, rhetorically sophisticated prose writer, not a member of the clergy but a convert to Christianity, a supporter of the New Prophecy movement, and a middle-aged man by 200 AD.⁵

In first two sections, which serves as an introduction to the work, the editor has drawn the theological framework of the work by quoting from the Scripture. He also gave basic information about the martyrs,⁶ especially Perpetua. Chapters III-X were written by Perpetua herself. In this section, Perpetua wrote down the events that happened to her and the dreams she had during her imprisonment. Chapters XI- XIII were written by Saturus, the religious leader of the group who was martyred in the same amphitheatre with Perpetua. In this section, Saturus described a dream in which he and Perpetua were taken to heaven by angels after their martyrdom. Chapters XIV- XXI were also written by the editor. Here, the editor put an end to the work after telling the story of the other martyr Felicitas and how the martyrs were killed in the arena.

Passio is one of the most interesting works that have survived from antiquity. In addition to being one of the oldest texts of Christianity, the work also contains the

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- 3 Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1950), 181; Alvyn Pettersen, "Perpetua: Prisoner of Conscience," *Vigiliae Christianae* 41/2 (1987): 139, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1584106>; Kenneth B. Steinhauser, "Augustine's Reading of the *Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*", *Studia Patristica* 33 (1997): 244.
 - 4 Timothy D. Barnes, "Pre-Decian 'Acta Martyrum'," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 19/2 (1968): 522; Maureen A. Tilley, "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity," in *Searching the Scriptures, Vol 2: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 832.
 - 5 Thomas J. Heffernan, "Ius conubii or concubina: The Marital and Social Class of Perpetua in the *Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*", *Analecta Bollandiana* 136/1 (2018): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.ABOL.4.2018023>.
 - 6 The term martyr was used in the early periods of Christianity for the apostles who witnessed the existence of Christ. However, in the following years, this situation changed and the term began to be used to describe those who remained loyal to their faith at the expense of their lives. For detailed information, see V. K. McCarty, *From Their Lips: Voices of Early Christian Women*. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2021), 69.

first autobiography⁷ written by a woman in history. Due to these features, the work has been the subject of studies by researchers from different disciplines. Theologians⁸, philologists⁹, psychologists¹⁰, and classicists¹¹ have especially examined Perpetua's diary and made various comments about it. In our study, we first included Perpetua's diary and then the comments and evaluations about Perpetua's dreams. In the last chapter, we found it suspicious that Perpetua did not mention her husband and Felicitas in her diary, so we opened the authenticity of the diary to discussion and ultimately concluded that the diary was falsified by the editor.

1. Perpetua's Diary

We mentioned above that the two chapters written before Perpetua's diary were written by the editor. In this section, the editor objects to the preference of those who were martyred a long time ago over those who were martyred recently. He stated that the purpose of publishing the work was to convey to the reader the story of the recently martyred Christians named Perpetua, Felicitas, Revocatus, Saturnius and Secundulus. These names are catechumens who have accepted Christianity but have not yet been baptised. The editor reserved a special place for Perpetua, one of these names, and gave more comprehensive information than the others. Accordingly, Perpetua is a 22-year-old young woman who belongs to a wealthy family, is well-educated and has a respectable marriage. She also has a baby who is not yet weaned and two brothers, one of whom is a catechumen like herself. Felicitas and Revocatus, among the names mentioned, are her slaves. The editor did not provide any information about the status of the other names mentioned, Saturnius and Secundulus.¹²

After introducing Perpetua to the reader, the editor handed the floor over to her, saying that everything written from now on was written by her.¹³

7 Among scholars, there are some who argue against the autobiographical status of the diary. See Thomas J. Heffernan, "Philology and Authorship in the 'Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae Et Felicitatis'", *Traditio* 50 (1995): 323-24. We tend to accept the diary as an autobiographical work, since we believe that most of the sections in which Perpetua narrates her experiences and feelings in the first person were written by Perpetua herself.

8 Robinson, *The Passion of S. Perpetua*,

9 Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language & Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965).

10 Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Passion of Perpetua: A Psychological Interpretation of Her Visions*, ed. Darly Sharp (Toronto: Inner City Books, 2004).

11 Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua († 203) to Marguerite Porete († 1310)*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

12 *Passio* I.1-2.

13 *Passio* II. 3.

Perpetua started her diary by narrating a dialogue she had with her father. The father, who was a pagan unlike his daughter, visited his daughter while she was under house arrest and asked her to abandon Christianity. In response to this request, Perpetua showed her father the vase or jug-like object lying on the table and asked if it was possible to call this object by another name. When she received a “No” answer from her father, she compared herself to this object and said, “Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.” Hearing these words, the father became angry and walked towards his daughter as if he wanted to gouge out her eyes. The father managed to control his anger and left his daughter without attacking her in any way.¹⁴

The similarity of this dialogue between Perpetua and her father to the discussion on the nature of objects in Plato’s *Cratylus Dialogue* is striking. In the *Cratylus Dialogue*, Plato said that the names we use to describe objects are not coincidental and are related to their nature. When Perpetua told her father that “I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian,” she meant that this belief was something in her nature and that it was not possible for her to give it up. There is no doubt that Perpetua was inspired by Plato when giving this example. This is a clear indication that she is interested in philosophy. This coincides with the adjective the editor used to describe her as “well-educated”.¹⁵

Although Perpetua attributes the reason for her father’s anger to her faith, the reason underlying his anger may be related to a different issue. To determine this, it would be appropriate to take a look at the Roman state and social order of the period. The Roman state was built on a patriarchal structure and the law was regulated accordingly. According to this, the father, who is the head of the family (*pater familias*), has absolute authority over all members of the family. He is the only authority in making decisions on behalf of the family. Depending on the type

14 *Passio* III. 1-3.

15 Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 38-39; Paul McKechnie, “St. Perpetua and Roman Education in A.D. 200”, *L’Antiquité Classique* 63/1 (1994): 282, <https://doi.org/10.3406/antiqu.1994.1203>.

of marriage, the father can use this authority even for married daughters¹⁶. Based on all this, it is possible to say that Perpetua's defiance of her father's will is a challenge not only to the father's authority but also to the existing social order that provides this authority to the father. Perpetua, a woman and daughter, ignored the rules of an order based on gender discrimination by not following it. Perpetua continued this rebellious attitude until her death.

After this argument, her father did not visit Perpetua for a while. During this time, Perpetua and her friends were baptised, and then the group was transferred to the prison. Perpetua is horrified by what she sees here. Because the heat caused by overcrowding is unbearable and the soldiers use force on the prisoners. Additionally, because Perpetua was in prison, she was separated from her baby. Shortly after the group was transferred to the prison, deacons Tertius and Pomponius,¹⁷ whom Perpetua described as blessed deacons, visited the group in prison and met their needs. They also transferred the group to a better part of the prison by bribing the soldiers. In the following days, her mother and brother brought her baby to Perpetua. Perpetua also received permission from the authorities for her son to stay in prison with her. This situation caused her to be free from all worries. So much so that she described the prison she was in as a palace and said that she did not want to be anywhere else.¹⁸

Then her brother said to Perpetua that she was in a privileged position and asked her to have a dream about what her fate would be.¹⁹ Perpetua accepted her brother's request and told him to come back tomorrow. After his brother left her,

16 Whether Roman women who got married would remain under the control of their father or come under the control of their husband was determined by the concept called *manus* in Roman law. In *cum manu* marriages, the woman was under the control of her husband, while in *sine manu* marriages, the woman remained under the control of her father. For detailed information, see Andrew T. Bierkan, Charles P. Sherman and Emile Stocquart, "Marriage in Roman Law", *The Yale Law Journal* 16/5 (1907): 303-27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/785389>; Judith Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood* (London-New York: Routledge, 2002), 20-23; Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law & Society* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 11-14.

17 There is no explanation in the text why Tertius and Pomponius, who were Christians like Perpetua and her friends, were not taken into custody. Although this situation makes one think that the trials were carried out only against the catechumens, it will be seen in the following pages that her brother, who is a catechumen just like Perpetua, was not subjected to any trials.

18 *Passio* III. 4-9.

19 In early Christianity, people who confessed their faith and were likely to be martyred were believed to have extraordinary powers. According to this belief, martyr candidates who confessed their faith and awaited death could contact God through dreams before being killed. Moreover, they could intercede with God to forgive the sins of sinful servants.

she slept and had a dream. The dream confirms Perpetua's privileged position. In her dream, she saw a long but narrow staircase reaching up to the sky. The staircase was made of bronze and cutting and piercing weapons were hung on both sides. At the foot of the stairs was a huge snake that attacked people trying to climb up. Even though Perpetua wanted to climb the ladder, she could not do so because she was afraid. At that moment, her religious teacher, Saturus, entered the dream. Saturus somehow managed to climb the ladder and encouraged Perpetua to do the same. With the encouragement of Saturus, Perpetua found strength in herself and managed to reach the ladder by stepping on the snake's head. Climbing the steps of the stairs, Perpetua found a vast garden in front of her when she reached the top. In the garden, there was a tall man with grey hair, wearing a shepherd's outfit and milking a sheep. Thousands of people dressed in white clothes were walking around. The grey-haired man said to Perpetua, "Welcome, my child" and handed her a piece of cheese. Thereupon, the people standing around said "Amen" together. Immediately afterwards, Perpetua woke up "with the taste of something sweet" in her mouth. One day later, Perpetua told her dream to her brother, and the two agreed that this dream meant that Perpetua would leave this world.²⁰

A few days after this dream, her father visited Perpetua in prison and begged his daughter to give up her stubbornness. He even fell at his daughter's feet to convince her. Although Perpetua was saddened by her father's situation, she did not even think of giving up her faith. She tried to console her father by telling him that everything that happens is God's will. Thereupon, his father left the prison in great sadness.²¹

The next day, Perpetua and her friends were sent to court, and the group's case began to be heard by Hilarianus. Several people were questioned before Perpetua, and each of them confessed that they were Christian. When it was Perpetua's turn, her father appeared with Perpetua's baby in his arms and told her to make the necessary sacrifice. Hilarianus said similar things to Perpetua like her father and asked her to sacrifice for the well-being of the emperor. When Perpetua said that she would not do this, Hilarianus asked her if she was a Christian and she replied, "Yes, I am." Perpetua, who had previously said that she would not identify herself with any name other than Christian, made this very clear in court. Moreover, by not accepting his demands in court, she challenged the authority of Hilarianus, another representative of the patriarchal social order.²² Towards the end of the

20 *Passio* IV. 1-10.

21 *Passio* V. 1-6.

22 Patricia Cox Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 168.

interrogation, her father made a final move and tried to persuade Perpetua. Enraged by this situation, Hilarianus ordered the father to be beaten. Although Perpetua was saddened by her father's situation, she never thought of giving up her faith. Ultimately, Hilarianus settled the case and sentenced all members of the group to death by being thrown to the wild animals. Hearing this decision, the group members returned to the prison cheerfully.²³

Sometime after Perpetua returned to prison, she sent deacon Pomponius to take her baby, who was with her father at that time, but her father refused to give the baby. Thereupon, a miracle occurred that was considered by Perpetua as the will of God: Perpetua was weaned but did not feel any pain in her breast. Moreover, the baby's need for breast milk has disappeared.²⁴ Some researchers have seen this situation as a result of Perpetua's weakening of ties with the material world and her family, as she was sentenced to death.²⁵ We think that the editor intervened in this part of the diary, and we will discuss this in the following pages.

Shortly after these events, Perpetua had two more dreams in which her brother Dinocrates, who died of facial cancer when he was 7 years old, was present. In the first dream, Dinocrates emerged from a dark void, wearing dirty clothes and exhausted from thirst. The wound on his face when he died remains the same. Although Dinocrates tries to drink water from the pool next to him to quench his thirst, he cannot do so because the edge of the pool is too high. Perpetua wants to help her brother, but she cannot do so because there is a gulf between the two siblings. Perpetua was horrified by what she saw and woke up from her dream in a fit of rage. She then thought that her brother was suffering in the afterlife and that she could help him with her privileged position. For this reason, she prayed to God for her brother. Meanwhile, Perpetua and her friends were transferred to a military prison to fight wild animals in the games to be held for Geta Caesar's birthday.²⁶ Under these circumstances, Perpetua had another dream in which Dinocrates was present. But Dinocrates' situation is very different this time. The wound on his face has healed and his clothes have been renewed. Moreover, the edge of the nearby pool has also been lowered. Next to the pool there is a golden bowl whose water never runs out. Dinocrates drank water from this bowl until his thirst was quenched and then he started playing with water. Perpetua woke up happily from her sleep

23 *Passio* VI. 1-6.

24 (*Passio* VI. 7-8).

25 Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 10; Tilley, "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity", 840.

26 *Passio* VII. 1-9.

and was very relieved to be able to relieve her brother's pain.²⁷

Her father visited Perpetua for the last time shortly before the day of the game and repeated his request. However, there was no change in Perpetua's attitude, and she repeated once again that she would not give up her belief.²⁸

On the eve of her martyrdom, that is, on March 6, Perpetua had her fourth and last dream. In this dream, she saw that she was brought to the amphitheatre by Pomponius, where she fought with an evil-looking Egyptian. While preparing for the fight, Perpetua, who suddenly turned into a man, managed to knock down her opponent and exited through the door called the Gate of Life, just like the victorious gladiators did. At that moment, she woke up in her dream and wrote the following words in her diary: "I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew that I would win the victory. So much for what I did up until the eve of the contest. About what happened at the contest itself, let him write of it who will".²⁹

What Perpetua recorded in her diary after her fourth dream were the last words she wrote. However, the editor fulfilled her request and conveyed to the reader what happened in the amphitheatre on March 7. According to the editor, Perpetua and her friends proceeded to the amphitheatre joyfully. Here the editor first described the appearance of Perpetua and Felicitas. Accordingly, Perpetua, who steps confidently into the amphitheatre, appears to be the beloved of God and the wife of Christ. Felicitas, who gave birth two days before the games, is extremely happy even though she will die soon. In order to humiliate Perpetua and her friends, the official responsible for organizing the play asked them to enter the amphitheatre wearing pagan clothes. He commanded that men should dress like priests of Saturn and women should dress like priestesses of Ceres. However, Perpetua continued her rebellious attitude throughout the narrative and declared that they would not wear these clothes. Seeing that Perpetua was determined, the official had to take a step back against this attitude. When the group arrived at the amphitheatre, the men were first taken to the stage and wild animals such as bears and leopards were released on them. The injured men were taken aside, then Perpetua and Felicitas were brought onto the stage.³⁰ However, unlike men, heifer were preferred to attack women instead of predators such as bears or leopards. The authorities made this

27 *Passio* VII. 1-4.

28 *Passio* IX. 2-3.

29 *Passio* X. 1-15.

30 *Passio* XIX. 1-6.

choice to humiliate Perpetua and Felicitas.³¹ In addition, the authorities ordered the women to be stripped of their clothes, again to humiliate them. However, this image of two new mothers disturbed the crowd, and as a result, they were allowed to wear tunics. Then the heifer was released, and it attacked Perpetua first. Falling on her back, Perpetua slowly stood up and, thinking of her chastity rather than her pain, adjusted her dress to cover the visible parts of her body.³² Afterwards, she went to Felicitas, whom she saw on the ground at that time, and helped her to stand up. After all this, the authorities decided to take the two injured women aside. When these two came to the edge, Perpetua, as if in a state of ecstasy, asked those around her when the bull would attack them. Although she heard that this had already happened, she refused to believe it until she saw the scars on her body. Meanwhile, she called her brother, who was also a catechumen like her, and said, “You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through”.³³ Afterwards, all members of the group were brought to the middle of the amphitheatre to be killed by gladiators. Except for Perpetua, the others died with a single sword blow. Perpetua took the sword blow to her collarbone and pointed the sword at her own throat so that the gladiator, whose hands were shaking, could finish her off. The editor ended the story of the martyrs by saying that Perpetua would not have been killed by someone else if she did not want it. Then, he concluded the work by writing a conclusion.³⁴

The bodies of Perpetua and her friends were buried in the church cemetery called *Basilica Maiorum*, located on the Mcidfa plateau of Carthage. It was announced to the world in April 1907 that the graves of Perpetua, Felicitas and other martyrs were discovered during the archaeological excavations carried out in this region under the leadership of Alfred Louis Delattre. Although there are some exceptions today, most researchers agree that this is indeed the tomb of Perpetua and her friends.³⁵

31 According to Roman law, women who committed adultery were taken to the amphitheatre to fight the heifer.

32 There is no doubt that the editor is concerned about the message in this section. Through Perpetua's actions, he revealed that a chaste Christian woman should pay attention to her dressing and appearance.

33 *Passio* XX. 1-10.

34 *Passio* XXI. 7-10.

35 William Farina, *Perpetua of Carthage: Portrait of a Third-Century Martyr*. (Jefferson, N.C, London: McFarland & Company, 2009), 112; Johannes Divjak and Wolfgang Wischmeyer, “‘Perpetua felicitate’ oder Perpetua und Felicitas? Zu ICKarth 2, 1”, *Wiener Studien* 114 (2001): 613-27

2. Comments and Evaluations About Perpetua's Dreams

Perpetua's diary, which was written by a woman and a martyr in ancient times and is a rare work due to these features, has been examined by researchers from different disciplines. Among these researchers, the dreams that Perpetua recorded in her diary have particularly been the subject of debate. Some claimed that Perpetua was influenced by the Bible in these dreams, some claimed that she was influenced by classical texts and mythology, and some claimed that her psychological state caused these dreams.

In this context, researchers who examined Perpetua's first dream on a theological basis said that the staircase in the dream is related to the staircase seen in the dream of the Prophet Jacob in Genesis 28:12.³⁶ They stated that Perpetua's fight with the snake is connected to the passage in Genesis 3:15 in which the enmity of the woman and the snake is described and to the Shepherd of Hermas, an early Christian text.³⁷ They claimed that the garden in the dream was heaven, the white-clothed people in the garden were martyrs, and the shepherd in the garden was the Good Shepherd mentioned in the Old Testament.³⁸ In addition to all this, they associated Perpetua's eating of cheese with the Eucharist.³⁹

Researchers who reject the influence of the Bible and early Christian texts on Perpetua's dreams have claimed that the inspiration for the images in this dream is classical texts and mythology. For example, Peter Dronke emphasized that Perpetua was an educated woman and claimed that she must have been familiar with mythology and classical Greco-Roman texts since her childhood, and that it was more likely that she was influenced by these texts in her dreams. In this context, he stated that it is more likely that the bronze ladder and snake that Perpetua saw in her dream are related to Ancient Near Eastern mythology and the Roman classic *Aeneid*. He drew attention to the similarity between the scene in which Perpetua eats cheese in her dream and the analogy established by Aristotle between cheese and the birth process and stated that this scene has nothing to do with the Eucharist ritual.⁴⁰ E. R. Dodds also made parallel comments with Peter Dronke. E.R. Dodds suggested that the ladder that Perpetua saw in her dream was related to Mithraism

36 Robinson, *The Passion of S. Perpetua*, 26.

37 Farina, *Perpetua of Carthage*, 119; Tilley, "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity", 838.

38 Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 169; Tertullian, "On the Soul 55", in *Fathers of the Church*, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann. vol. 10. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1950).

39 Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 103.

40 Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 8-9.

and the dreams of the Greek orator Aristides.⁴¹

Marie-Louise Von Franz made a psychological analysis of the four dreams Perpetua had and considered these dreams as representations of a developmental process. According to Marie-Louise Von Franz, as a result of this process, Perpetua will reach a higher level of consciousness, that is, martyrdom. During this process, the things that Perpetua identified with paganism in her inner world tried to prevent her from reaching this level of consciousness. Based on this, she said that the ladder was a tool that would enable Perpetua to reach a higher level of consciousness (martyrdom), and that the weapons hanging on the ladder indicated the difficulty of the journey. She stated that the snake that prevented Perpetua from climbing the ladder was a symbol of paganism. She interpreted Saturus encouraging Perpetua to climb the ladder as a representation of the fanatic Christian in Perpetua's inner world.⁴²

These differences of opinion among researchers also manifested themselves in dreams in which Dinocrates was present. Researchers examining Perpetua's dreams in a theological context have suggested that the dark void from which Dinocrates emerged was the purgatory where those who committed sins after being baptised were sent to suffer their punishment.⁴³ They also claimed that the rift between Perpetua and Dinocrates was related to the rift in Luke 16:26.⁴⁴ In addition to all these, they claimed that the golden bowl from which Dinocrates drank water was reminiscent of the rite of baptism and the golden bowl mentioned in Revelation 5:8.⁴⁵

However, some researchers are of the opinion that Perpetua was influenced by mythology and classical texts in both of her dreams. Peter Dronke drew attention to the similarity between Dinocrates' thirst and the situation of Tantalus, who could never drink water due to the punishment he received from the gods, even though he was at the edge of the lake. In addition, he said that the cries of dead babies heard during Aeneas' journey on the Styx River, which connects this world and the afterlife,

41 E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 51-52.

42 Von Franz, *The Passion of Perpetua*, 25-46.

43 Augustine, "De natura et origine animae 1.10.12", in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Answer to the Pelagians*, 1.23. trans. Roland J. Teske, (NY: New York City Press, 1997).

44 Jan N. Bremmer, "Perpetua and Her Diary: Authenticity, Family and Visions", in *Martyrer und Martyrerakten*, ed. Walter Ameling (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2002), 108; Tilley, "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity", 841; Bremmer, "Perpetua and Her Diary "Perpetua and Her Diary: Authenticity, Family and Visions", 108.

45 Stephen E. Potthoff, *The Afterlife in Early Christian Carthage: Near-Death Experiences, Ancestor Cult, and the Archaeology of Paradise*, 1st edition. (London, New York: Routledge, 2019), 43.

reminded us of Dinocrates' situation.⁴⁶ E. R. Dodds, on the other hand, stated that the pagan tradition, in which it was believed that those who died at a young age, suffered in the afterlife, was effective in Perpetua's dream of seeing Dinocrates suffering.⁴⁷

Marie-Louise Von Franz, on the other hand, saw Dinocrates, who could not reach water, as the representation of Perpetua's pagan past before her baptism, and stated that in these dreams, Perpetua continued her struggle with paganism in her inner world.⁴⁸

The main debate among researchers about the fourth dream was about why Perpetua saw an Egyptian as a devil in her dream and why she turned into a man during the fight. Pointing out that Egyptians were the most hated and despised race in the Roman world, Brent D. Shaw suggested that Perpetua's dream of seeing an Egyptian as a devil was related to this racist thought that was dominant at that time.⁴⁹ Gay L. Byron, who examined early Christian texts and found that Egyptians, Ethiopians and black-skinned people were equated with the devil, made similar comments to Brent D. Shaw.⁵⁰

Peter Dronke attributes Perpetua's transformation into a man just before her fight with the Egyptian to her desire to get rid of the weaknesses in her nature.⁵¹ There is no doubt that the view that female nature was weak and flawed in antiquity and early Christianity formed the basis of Peter Dronke's interpretation. In the mentioned period, terms such as strength and virtue were associated with masculinity, and those who did not have these qualities were not accepted as men, even if their gender was so. On the other hand, those who have these qualities are considered men even if they are women. For example, using the Old Testament as a source, St. Augustine attributed the reason for man's expulsion from heaven to Eve being deceived by the snake and said that female nature was weak. He praised Perpetua, who won against the snake in the first dream, stating that she achieved this by overcoming the weakness in her nature and that Perpetua acted like a man by not giving up her faith.⁵²

Joyce E. Salisbury interpreted Perpetua's transformation into a man in her dream as a metaphor for her transition from paganism to Christianity. Perpetua

46 Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 11-12.

47 Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, 52.

48 Von Franz, *The Passion of Perpetua*, 47.

49 Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua", 28.

50 Gay Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, 1st edition. (London: Routledge, 2002), 44-45.

51 Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 14.

52 Augustine, "Sermon 280,281", in *The Works of Saint Augustine, Sermons, (273-305A) on the Saints*, 3.8. trans. Edmund Hill, (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1994).

came to the arena under the leadership of deacon Pomponius and fought for what she believed in. As a result, she got rid of her pagan past and became her new self, that is, Christianity.⁵³ According to Petr Kitzler, Perpetua's transformation into a man in her dream is a phenomenon that occurs as a result of her not complying with gender roles (daughter, mother, woman).⁵⁴

Marie-Louise Von Franz evaluated this dream as the final stage in Perpetua's attainment of a higher consciousness. He stated that Perpetua, just like in the first two dreams (the snake and Dinocrates), fought with a figure associated with paganism (the Egyptian), and that she was victorious in this fight, so she was now ready for martyrdom.⁵⁵

Our opinion on this subject is that what Perpetua sees in her dreams is influenced by what she experiences in real life. The most important clue for us in this regard is the fact that in every dream she has, there is someone she is familiar with in real life (Saturus, Dinocrates, Pomponius). In this context, it is highly probable that the first dream is related to Perpetua's baptism. In biblical symbolism, milk is associated with starting a new life and developing spiritually. For example, in his letter to new Christians, St. Peter wrote, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation". St. Peter here emphasised that new believers should grow spiritually by feeding on the word of God, just as babies grow physically by being fed with milk; and in doing so, he used the metaphor of milk. From this point of view, it is possible to say that Perpetua's dream of drinking milk points to baptism, which symbolises rebirth and spiritual growth. Considering that baptism represents the purification of the person from sins, it can be thought that the serpent Perpetua saw in her dream also represents sin and evil. The next two dreams also show the effect of losing her brother to a bad disease on Perpetua. The first dream in which she sees Dinocrates wounded, thirsty and suffering is a manifestation of the trauma caused by her brother's illness on Perpetua. The gulf in this dream is a symbol of the helplessness and weakness felt by Perpetua, who cannot help her brother in the face of his illness. In the second dream, Dinocrates playing with water in a clean and happy way indicates that Perpetua subconsciously remembers Dinocrates with his healthy, childish joy and misses his peaceful state before the illness. As for the last dream, the interpretation that Perpetua was affected by the event called *Pythicus agon*,

53 Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 108-9.

54 Petr Kitzler, "Passio Perpetuae and Acta Perpetuae: Between Tradition and Innovation", *Listy Filologicke* 130 (2007): 11.

55 Von Franz, *The Passion of Perpetua*, 62.

where various competitions were staged, has been expressed by some researchers.⁵⁶ We are of the same opinion and share the belief that in the fourth dream, Perpetua was influenced by a wrestling match she watched at this event.

3. Comments and Evaluations About the Reality of Perpetua's Diary

Although the editor states that the diary was written by Perpetua, it is worth noting that there is some controversy about this. Some scholars tend to accept that what is written in this section was indeed written by Perpetua.⁵⁷ Others are of the opinion that at least the dreams were written by Perpetua, if not the diary as a whole.⁵⁸ Still others accept that the diary was written by a person to whom Perpetua verbally told what happened to her.⁵⁹ However, there are also scholars who dispute that the writing style of the diary indicates a woman, and even suggest that the diary could have been written by a man, and thus question Perpetua's authorship.⁶⁰ We believe that the diary was written by Perpetua, but that the editor intervened in the diary, and that Felicitas and Saturus were also included in the story by the editor.

As will be noted, Perpetua never mentioned Felicitas in her diary. Her story is told in a chapter written by the editor. Accordingly, Felicitas was eight months pregnant at the time of her arrest. Since it was forbidden to execute pregnant women according to Roman law, it was not possible for her to be martyred alongside their friends. Felicitas and her friends were very upset about this situation and prayed together for the birth to occur earlier on March 5. Thereupon, Felicitas' labour pains began, and she gave birth to a daughter. A guard who saw that Felicitas was in a lot of pain during birth made fun of her by saying, "You are crying even now, what will you do when you encounter wild animals?" Felicitas responded to the guard by saying that when that day comes, there will be someone else inside who will suffer along with her. Then, the girl Felicitas gave birth to was delivered to a Christian woman outside the prison.⁶¹

56 Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, 163.

57 Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, 52; Eliezer Gonzalez, *The Fate of the Dead in Early Third Century North African Christianity: The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas and Tertullian* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 18.

58 Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 6; Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua", 26.

59 Heffernan, "Philology and Authorship in the 'Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae Et Felicitatis'", 323-24.

60 Ross S. Kraemer and Shira L. Lander, "Perpetua and Felicitas", in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip F. Esler, vol. 2 (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), 1054-58.

61 *Passio XV*.

Notably, Perpetua never mentions Felicitas, a character important enough to be mentioned in the work's title. Considering that only these two people in the group are women and mothers, they are expected to have a close relationship. Researchers have made various comments on this subject. Brent D. Shaw said that the reason why Perpetua does not mention Felicitas in her diary may be related to the fact that she only wants to tell things about herself in her diary.⁶² Judith Perkins, on the other hand, reminded that motherhood was considered sacred in the early periods of Christianity and questioned the authenticity of the work due to the emphasis on motherhood in *Passio*.⁶³ She stated that even if the work is accepted as real, it is extremely unlikely that Felicitas, one of the names mentioned in the work, is a historical person.⁶⁴ We also think that Felicitas was included in the story by the editor, but that addition was possibly made for ideological reasons. When one analyses the political and religious atmosphere of the time, one can better understand why the editor felt the need for such an addition. Before and after the date when the work was written, Christians were constantly subjected to persecution by the state. This situation undoubtedly made Christians worried about the future of this religion. That is why the believers of this religion wanted to bring new people to Christianity. Considering the large slave population in ancient times, it is not unreasonable that the target audience was slaves.⁶⁵ Therefore, it is highly probable that the editor of *Passio* wanted to show his target audience through Felicitas that a slave woman who could not earn any material or moral income within the patriarchal social order could reach a high level such as martyrdom in Christianity and be highly respected. The editor may have planned to spread Christianity among the masses.

Another person that Perpetua never mentions in her diary is her husband. Researchers have expressed different opinions about the reason for this: Some

62 Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua", 25.

63 Judith Perkins, "The Rhetoric of the Maternal Book-Body in the Passion of Perpetua", in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, eds. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 324.

64 Judith Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2008), 167-68.

65 From the earliest times, slaves and those of lower social status were already the target audience of Christianity. For this reason, the Bible and the works of early Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Ignatius of Antioch included expressions that would make these masses sympathetic to Christianity. However, the literacy rate among these masses was very low. For this reason, the Church and other religious communities tried to convey their messages to these people by reading the Bible and early Christian texts aloud in public places or preaching sermons. For detailed information, see Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

claim that Perpetua did not mention her husband because he was dead,⁶⁶ some because he was not in Carthage during the trial,⁶⁷ and some because they were at odds because she chose Christianity.⁶⁸ Some even suggested that Saturus was Perpetua's husband.⁶⁹ We claim that the sections where Perpetua mentions her husband were removed from the diary by the editor. The starting point of our claim is the word "respectable" used by the editor when describing Perpetua's marriage in the first chapter and the analogy "like the wife of Christ" used when describing Perpetua in the amphitheatre. The editor considered Perpetua to be such a sacred person that he thought she could only be a worthy wife of Christ. In this regard, he removed the person who could pose an obstacle to her, that is, Perpetua's husband, from the diary. It is possible to come across a similar example in a work titled *Cento Vergilianus de laudibus Christi* by Faltonia Betitia Proba, one of the 4th-century women writers. In this work, in which Proba rewrote the Bible with the verses of Virgil, she removed Mary's husband Joseph from the narrative in order to attribute sanctity to Christ and Mary.⁷⁰ The editor of *Passio* may have had a similar intention. The editor attributed sacred qualities to Perpetua to show that she was a worthy wife of Christ. For example, while Perpetua does not hesitate to say that the prison conditions are very difficult for her or that being separated from her baby makes her very sad, we do not see Perpetua experiencing emotions such as fear and sadness in the sections written by the editor. When attacked by a heifer, she does not suffer and does not even realize that she is being attacked. When a gladiator tries to kill him on the day of the game, he cannot do so without her approval. The editor wanted to attribute similar qualities to Perpetua's baby. As you may remember, when Perpetua was separated from her baby, the baby's need for breast milk disappeared, and Perpetua, in turn, was weaned. Considering that such a situation is contrary to the ordinary course of life, it is possible to say that the editor endeavoured to show that Perpetua's baby also had sacred characteristics. The editor may have even wanted to connect the baby directly to Christ by doing this.

The dream written by Saturus also confirms this sanctity attributed to Perpetua. In his dream, Saturus saw that after their martyrdom, the angels carried him and

66 A. R. Birley, "Persecutors and Martyrs in Tertullian's Africa", *University of London Institute of Archaeology Bulletin* 29 (1992): 46.

67 Tilley, "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity", 843.

68 Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua", 25.

69 Carolyn Osiek, "Perpetua's Husband", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10/2 (2002): 287-90, <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2002.0023>.

70 Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed, *Proba the Prophet: The Christian Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba*, (Leiden Boston: Brill, 2015), 164-65.

Perpetua to heaven, where they fell at Perpetua's feet to reconcile a quarreling priest and bishop.⁷¹ There are many researchers who accept that this dream, which is said to have been recorded by Saturus, was written by the editor and that Saturus is not a historical person.⁷² These researchers have produced different theories about the reason why Saturus was added to the narrative. In our opinion, the reason why Saturus was added to the narrative is the message that Perpetua's holiness should be accepted by all church authorities. Because it is clear that there can be no other explanation to say that two clergy fell at the feet of a martyr who was lower than them in the church hierarchy.

The reason behind the editor sanctifying Perpetua in this way is the same as the reason why he added Felicitas to the narrative. With these additions, the editor wanted to show that women, who do not have the opportunity to prove themselves especially within the patriarchal social order, can be respected figures within Christianity. However, this time, the target audience is not the slaves, who are powerless despite being in the majority, but the aristocrats who hold power despite being few in number.

Conclusion

Perpetua's diary is an extremely important text from a historical and cultural perspective. Because this diary is one of the few texts written by a woman in ancient times, and it is even the first autobiography written by a woman in history. Unlike the texts of its time, it had the opportunity to reach large audiences because it was written in a plain and sincere language. The African Church also tried to take advantage of the diary's popularity and used the diary to attract pagans to Christianity. In other words, Perpetua's diary turned into a propaganda tool over time. As a result, Christianity spread especially among women and slaves. With the encouragement of the church, these Christians accepted Perpetua as a role model. It is possible to understand the impact of Perpetua's diary on these masses from the sermon in which St. Augustine criticized those who equated Perpetua's diary with the Bible. Perpetua's diary also motivated these people who converted to Christianity to resist during the subsequent periods of investigation and persecution. During the trials held in the time of Emperors Decius (249-251), Valerian (253-260) and Diocletian (284-305), the majority of Christians remained loyal to their faith at the expense of their lives, and as a result, stories similar to Perpetua's emerged in different parts of the empire. With this brave attitude, Christians showed the

71 *Passio* XI-XIII.

72 Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua", 32.

emperors that they would not cower in the face of any such cruelty and brutality. Ultimately, they gained freedom of worship with the Edict of Milan signed in 313, and then made Christianity the official religion of the empire. Based on this, it would not be an unreasonable claim to say that Perpetua's diary served as a catalyst for the Roman Empire to adopt Christianity as the official religion.

Due to these features, various studies and evaluations have been made focusing on the diary. Theologians, philologists and psychologists have researched the diary and made various evaluations. In this context, the source of inspiration for Perpetua's dreams has become a topic of focus among researchers. However, since each researcher evaluated the diary from their perspective, it was not possible to reach a consensus among these researchers.

Despite all its importance and value, it would be a mistake to think that Perpetua's diary is a purely historical document. Because it is highly probable that the diary was falsified by the editor for ideological reasons. The purpose of this distortion is to spread Christianity to all segments of society. The fact that Christianity has attained a universal identity today and that Perpetua and her slave Felicitas are respected as "saints" by the Eastern and Western Churches clearly shows that the distortion has achieved its purpose.

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