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From *Passio Perpetuae* to *Acta Perpetuae*. Recontextualizing a Martyr  
Story in the Literature of the Early Church

Komise pro obhajoby doktorských disertací v oboru: filozofie

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## Introduction: Aims and Structure

Amongst the earliest reports on Christian martyrs, one that occupies a central place in the literature is that of the passion and death of Vibia Perpetua, an educated 22-year old woman from Carthage in North Africa, who died in the early third century A.D. (ca. 204) together with another young woman, Felicity, and several men during combat against wild beasts in the Carthaginian amphitheatre. The literary representation of these events, the famous *Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity* (*Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*) is a work which resonates to this day with the urgency of the voice of the young Christian wife, mother and martyr with a power that belies the almost two millennia between her times and the present day.

Being one of the most famous early Christian writings, it has been extensively examined in previous research. Therefore, this book primarily focuses on an area that has so far been somewhat marginalized or even overlooked by modern interpreters: the recontextualizing of the *Passio Perpetuae* in the subsequent reception of this text in the literature of the early Church, from the time of its composition in the early decades of the 3rd century up to the 5th century, when the interest in this narrative culminated, inasfar as this can be judged from the extant sources. The outer limit of our investigation, the fifth century, closely associated with the figure of Augustine, delimits a symbolic point of break after which the memories of Perpetua, Felicity, and their fellow martyrs start to fade in the literary memory, only to re-emerge in the early Middle Ages, changed and reshaped, not only in various martyrologies, but also later in Jacobus de Voragine's the *Golden Legend*.

The aim of this book is thus to shed light on the origins and subsequent fate of one of the most famous hagiographic texts of the early Christian era and to illuminate the road of reinterpretation that the Christian martyrs, the brave *athletae Christi*, had to travel in the centuries to come before finding their place in the post-Constantine society and Church. At a more general level, this book may be understood as a case-study of the ways in which the concept of sainthood evolved over time alongside the changing historical and religious climate, and of the strategies by which the church authorities responded to these changes. As a result, I try to present not only the first complex investigation of the reception of the *Passio Perpetuae* in the Christian Antiquity but also to unravel the motivation behind the later reinterpretations which find their consummation in the mid-fifth century reworking of the original known as *Acta Perpetuae* whose genesis and purpose is newly interpreted.

The book is divided into three main parts. In the first part, I examine the *Passio Perpetuae* from a philological and literary-historical

perspective and attempt to investigate the questions that the work raises in these respects. After positioning the narrative in the context of the earliest literature of martyrdom, the subsequent chapters deal with dating issues, authorship, surviving versions of the text, and finally its theological background.

The second part of the book, comprising four subsections, looks at the innovative aspects of the *Passio Perpetuae* that set it apart from other martyr texts and to which its renown may arguably be attributed. Allowing for some simplification, these innovative aspects may be divided into three categories. The first of these is the subversion of the existing social and gender hierarchies that placed women in a position of invariable subordination to men and emphasized the social roles that the standards of antiquity obliged women to fulfil. The second is the attribution to Perpetua of qualities that in antiquity were traditionally the domain of men. The third is the accentuation of the exceptional spiritual power of martyrs – again predominantly of Perpetua – in the community of believers: a power which rivalled the authority of the bishops.

The final part, forming the very core of the book, examines the impact and life of the *Passio Perpetuae* from the time of its writing up to the time of Augustine. In its chapters, I aim to demonstrate how the account of the death of Perpetua and her comrades was recontextualized in the subsequent literary tradition of the early Church. A special emphasis is placed on the way the initial revolutionary potential of the text came to be gradually weakened or appropriated for the theological purposes of later centuries. In chronological order, I analyse all relevant texts in which Perpetua and her comrades are mentioned or that quote or refer to the record of their martyrdom, and attempt to demonstrate the ways in which these texts strive to normalize the innovative aspects of the *Passio Perpetuae*.

### **Part I. *Fortissimi martyres* – *The Passio Perpetuae* as a pre-text**

The first part of this book begins with an outline of the historical context of the earliest martyr literature and then examines the *Passio Perpetuae* as the pre-text for its later adaptations, recapitulating the individual stages in the evolving understanding and interpretation of the text as these unfolded in the scholarship of the last century.

1) The *Passio Perpetuae* was written shortly after the events it recounts, perhaps between 203 and 205.

2) The text is made up of three linguistically and stylistically distinct parts. This in principle seems to confirm the claim of the anonymous editor that the narrative contains the very words of the martyrs Perpetua

and Saturus, complemented by an account written by the editor himself. Although it is certain that the wording of the text as we have it now was modified by the anonymous editor and hence hardly contains the authentic *ipsissima verba* of the two martyrs as they wrote them down “in their own hand”, based on the evidence available to us, we cannot consider the text to be fictitious or forged. The visions in Perpetua’s and Saturus’ sections of the narrative also appear to be authentic.

3) The anonymous editor, who probably eyewitnessed the events, was not Tertullian of Carthage. That fact that the editor was an eyewitness does not necessarily imply that his passages of the text correspond verbatim to the actual events.

4) Of the two Greek and Latin versions that have survived, the Latin version is to be considered primary, and the Greek one to be a translation, which probably existed by the end of the third century already and may have not been based on the particular Latin version that is available to us today.

5) The *Passio Perpetuae* is not a Montanist document and cannot therefore be viewed through the lens of the subsequent schematic categorization into “orthodox” and “heretic” (Montanist).

## **Part II. *Nova documenta fidei*: The *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* and its innovative features**

The *Passio Perpetuae* contains a number of elements which defied the contemporary social, gender, and theological hierarchies, and these potentially subversive features are dealt with in the second part of this book. In the text, Perpetua is accorded social and spiritual (theological) authority that on the one hand radically challenged the traditional status a young woman of that time would have had, as well as her anchoring in the network of social and familial bonds, especially as far as *patria potestas* was concerned. On the other hand, Perpetua exemplified the extraordinary power martyrs had within the still unrigid hierarchy of the Church on its way to becoming institutionalized. Although similar examples of this power of martyrs can be found in the extant early Christian martyr narratives, and is also attested by several references in Tertullian’s works, in the *Passio Perpetuae* these examples appear both to an exceptional extent and are given a very clear articulation.

The gamut of these spiritual gifts goes far beyond the charismata known from the previous tradition (prophetic visions; the presence of Christ in the martyrs and their close contact with him; or martyrs’ intercessory powers through which believers beg for the forgiveness of their own sins), and some of the aspects can be described as

unprecedented. This applies not only to Perpetua's implicitly indicated power to settle disputes between high Church dignitaries, but above all to the fact that through the power of her intercessory prayers she was able to commute the posthumous punishment of her late pagan brother.

The *Passio Perpetuae* thus simultaneously incorporated potentially revolutionary aspects from two areas. In the social realm, the *Passio* clearly articulated a Christian identity (*Christianus sum*), defining it at the same time through a radical repudiation of its non-Christian or earthly correlate, which essentially comprised all the traditional familial and social bonds that had to be dissolved if the Christian believer were to embrace the family of God's faithful. Perpetua's case also demonstrated that the heretofore strictly defined, society-imposed roles were no longer applicable to this community of believers in which death by martyrdom is seen as a rebirth into the true life. This reversal of traditional values is reflected in the realm of gender as well: a woman honoured by God with the crown of martyrdom could not act in a purely feminine fashion, i.e. as the standards of antiquity saw femininity, but through her actions such a heroine takes on characteristics traditionally thought to be male in the world of antiquity. Ultimately, it is the martyr herself who steers and controls her own life and acquires power over others, albeit this restoration of self-autonomy and self-definition comes at the cost of sacrificing her own life in the imitation of Christ.

In the theological realm, the *Passio Perpetuae* asserted the special authority and power of God's witnesses, proving that the active presence of the Holy Spirit was not confined to biblical times but was very much alive even then, distributing spiritual gifts, including those which seemed new and unusual. To believers, the *Passio* further served as proof of the posthumous fate of those who kept their faith till the end, as well as proof of the glory that awaits them in heaven after their martyrdom, by the right side of Christ himself. It was in the *Passio Perpetuae* that the popular concept of the martyr who becomes *alter Christus* and whose spiritual power is superior to the institutional authority of churchmen found its clear articulation. Just as Perpetua was able to change the posthumous fate of her dead brother through her prayers, so can Christians, who regularly commemorate her passion during liturgy when her story is read, hope to receive similar grace through an imitation of her life and martyrdom, which is itself an imitation of the passion of Christ (*imitatio Christi*).

### **Part III. From *exemplum fidei* to *admirandum, non imitandum*: The *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* and its later interpreters**

The revolutionary potential of the *Passio Perpetuae* with its implied subversion of the social, gender, and theological patterns did not go unnoticed by the readers or listeners. This is apparent from the lengths to which the later interpreters, to whom the last part of this book is dedicated, went to demonstrate to the Christian believers how to understand the text “correctly”.

The reinterpretation of the original *Passio* was a natural consequence of the changing times, and the end of the persecution of Christians was of course a fundamental milestone in this respect. “The time when a martyr’s death ceased to be a real life choice for the orthodox Christian called for heroes of a new kind, who had deserved their laurel ‘wreath of justice’ (*corona iustitiae*) not through a single act of self-sacrifice but rather through daily martyrdom (*martyrium cottidianum*) that consisted in strict asceticism,” as Jiří Šubr has succinctly noted. This gradual shift can be seen rather clearly in the first phase of the reception of the *Passio Perpetuae*, which occurred as early as the Decian, Valerian, and Gallienus persecutions of Christians around the middle of the 3rd century.

#### **a) The first stage of reception: *Admiratio et imitatio* (Tertullian and North African passions of martyrs)**

This was a time when Tertullian’s doctrine asserting that a martyr’s death is the pinnacle and consummation of a Christian’s life and that his or her soul will directly enter heaven after martyrdom still resonated strongly – a doctrine that Tertullian also defends on the basis of the *Passio Perpetuae*. During this period, the *Passio Perpetuae* played a key role, at least in the history of North African hagiography.

The extent of the influence and veneration our text enjoyed some fifty years after it was composed is indicated by the *Passio Montani et Lucii* and the *Passio Mariani et Iacobi*. Though these martyr accounts acknowledge the original text only *tacite*, they nevertheless follow the *Passio Perpetuae* closely in terms of their structure, content, and lexicon. However, this was also a time when we first hear voices trying to frame the cult of the martyrs in an institutional setting within the still-forming Church hierarchy. Without (yet) addressing anyone in particular, these voices tried to regulate the veneration in which the believers held Perpetua and her story. In his *Vita Cypriani*, Pontius firmly clings to the principle formulated by Cyprian himself, namely that a bishop is superior to martyrs within the Church hierarchy, particularly in consideration of the

fact that Perpetua and the other Christians in whose honour the *Passio Perpetuae* was written were mere catechumens.

### **b) The second stage: Spreading the cult in the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> centuries**

There were hardly any mentions of the *Passio Perpetuae* in the contemporary literature between the end of the 3rd and the end of the 4th centuries but we know for certain that the cult of Perpetua and Felicity was successfully spreading during this time.

In the 4th century, we find clearly visible traces of the cult of Perpetua and Felicity in Rome and Spain, where it has spread from Carthage, the cradle of their worship. First, both martyrs were included in the Roman *Depositio martyrum*, a sort of liturgical calendar that is contained in the Roman *Chronography of 354* and records the dates of feast days of martyrs venerated within the Roman Church. There are two points that need to be stressed: the *Depositio martyrum* is a purely local document; and Perpetua and Felicity are, together with Cyprian (whose cult was generally more wide-spread in late antiquity), the only “foreign” saints who were included. From approximately the same time, we have evidence of the dissemination of the cult in Hispania which also indicates a direct knowledge of the text of the *Passio*: a sarcophagus discovered near modern-day Burgos in Spain (Quintana de Bureba, forty kilometers northeast of Burgos) depicts a scene from Perpetua’s first vision: her ascent of the ladder.

Perpetua and Felicity are mentioned in the 5th century by Prosper Tiro of Aquitaine, and the anonymous author of the homily delivered in honour of the martyr Polyeuctus (*BHG* 1566) in one of the Eastern Churches, probably around 363, provides us with a literary piece of evidence proving that the knowledge of Perpetua’s story continued to spread farther afield during that time.

The knowledge of Perpetua’s story in the Greek East, evidenced by *Passio Polyeucti*, goes hand in hand with the rooting of its cult here. Perpetua (mentioned together with Saturninus) has her entry in the early fifth-century *Martyrologium Syriacum*, which is known to be a translation of a Greek compilation written around 360 (and thus roughly contemporaneous with the text of *Passio Polyeucti*). The direct allusion to Perpetua’s vision in Greek *Passio Polyeucti* thus seems to indicate that by the mid-fourth century the Greek translation of the *Passio Perpetuae* circulated in the East and was used both by the hagiographer of Polyeuctus and by the compilers of Greek martyrologia. We may hypothesize even further: given the fact that Perpetua and Felicity appear

in the Roman *Depositio martyrum* some 150 years after their martyr death (ca. 203), and their occurrence in Greek martyrologia is datable to approximately the same time (ca. 360), there is perhaps no need to suppose a long interval between the composition of the Latin original of the *Passio Perpetuae* and its Greek translation.

The circulation of the Greek translation of the *Passio Perpetuae* in the fourth century seems to be confirmed also by other sources. The opening section of the Greek version of the prologue of *Passio Perpetuae* appears verbatim in one of the recensions of the *passio* of Procopius of Scythopolis. Finally, *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*, being slightly later than the Greek source of the *Martyrologium Syriacum* on which it partly drew while adding new material as well, has entry on Perpetua and other martyrs.

The evidence mentioned here does not allow us to glimpse any reinterpretation of the story of Perpetua, Felicity and their fellow martyrs. On the contrary, these sources confirm that the cult of Perpetua and Felicity spread successfully during this time. Furthermore, it seems that in the Greek speaking East at least there was not felt any need at large to smooth over the problematic aspects of *Passio Perpetuae*. Probably the “canonic” status of their *passio* which the text acquired during the third century when martyrs were considered perfect Christians had still its bearing.

### **c) The third stage: *Admiranda, non imitanda* (Augustine and his followers)**

While in the Greek East the esteem of both Perpetua, Felicity and their story in the fourth and early fifth centuries is clearly witnessed by the successful spreading of their cult (bolstered also by the existence of Greek translation of their martyrdom) without any traceable need to reinterpret their *passio*, the change that the cult of martyrs underwent in the Latin West following the Constantinian turn is best exemplified in that phase of the reception of the *Passio Perpetuae* which is associated with Augustine and his successors. The chief issue for the Hipponian bishop is the fact that martyrdom is at this point no longer the perfect consummation of the life of a Christian believer (particularly in view of the Donatist martyrs), but the tradition of martyrdom of the first three centuries is still very much alive, as it is continually re-presented at regular liturgical readings of the martyrs’ *acta*, and commemorated on the feast days of the martyrs. The original exemplary function of martyr narratives, however, had become counterproductive by Augustine’s times. Perpetua’s subversion of the traditional hierarchies was at that



time no less valid and in many ways even more strictly defined or codified, and hence the “message” of the text called for a reinterpretation that would make it conform to the new era and its changed ideal of sainthood.

Augustine himself is troubled by two problematic and potentially subversive aspects of the *Passio Perpetuae*. These are Perpetua’s spiritual power, which allows her to intervene effectively on behalf of the dead, and her rejection of most standard social norms. Whereas the first aspect is, at least in Augustine’s understanding, a matter of subtle theological speculation (even though it touches on the more general theme of the relationship between an individual lay person and authority / Church), the second aspect is one that primarily concerns ordinary believers.

That is why in his erudite tract, Augustine, by means of a speculative interpretation of the relevant passage, tries to ward off the theological threat implied in Perpetua’s proclaimed power to change the posthumous fate of her dead brother. In his *Sermones ad populum*, on the other hand, he concerns himself with the normalization of the social issues of the *Passio*, and this subject area also provides him with a much wider scope for his reinterpretations. Though his sermons do not lack a polemic settling of scores with the Pelagians and Donatists, his chief aim is to remove martyrdom from the realm of the personal experience of a believer who is exceptionally close to God, to the more universal realm of theology, where it is of little relevance what special gifts this or that martyr was endowed with, but rather that this endowment happened in Christ and for his glory. Martyrdom was to Augustine a closed chapter of history, and the martyrs themselves are presented as peerless titans from a bygone era, whose acts the rest of us in our insignificance cannot emulate – all we can do is wonder in amazement and adore the martyrs’ acts from afar, for in these acts the power of Christ came to be manifested in extraordinary ways.

Augustine’s authority influenced his North African disciples, who essentially reiterate the motifs Augustine had introduced in their own sermons dedicated to Perpetua and her fellow martyrs.

#### **d) The final stage of reception and the consummation of recontextualizing (*Acta Perpetuae*)**

This path of reinterpretation that the *Passio* travelled over nearly three centuries culminates in the text that is traditionally designated as the *Acta Perpetuae*, which has survived in two different versions. This text has not so far been systematically examined, and its function and the circumstances of its writing have been veiled in many unknowns. In the

final chapters of this book, I tried to offer a possible approach to this text, as well as some answers to the questions above. The function of the *Acta Perpetuae* is, I believe, best illuminated in the course of a systematic examination of the literary reflection of the *Passio Perpetuae*. The individual texts that directly or indirectly reflect and acknowledge the *Passio Perpetuae* are, in my opinion, to be understood as partial stages of a dynamic process that is itself predominantly shaped by changes in historical and theological paradigms that these partial stages, in turn, try to mirror. The aim of each of these stages then was to present to the contemporary audiences a text that would not only meet their horizon of expectation but also conform to the ideal of sainthood at that time. From this perspective, the *Acta Perpetuae* can be seen as the culmination of these efforts, and its purpose as the integration of all previous attempts at reinterpretation or normalization of the *Passio Perpetuae*.

Given that fact that the *Acta Perpetuae* were cleansed of all the aspects which were already deemed problematic by Augustine, and also given that they contained certain formulations which also appear in Augustine's sermons, we may hypothesize that the *Acta Perpetuae* (at least recension A, which is certainly older than recension B) were written by a disciple or follower of Augustine, well acquainted with his mentor's interpretation of the *Passio Perpetuae*, around the middle of the 5th century. The principal incentive behind such an adaptation was to produce a text conforming to the theological and social standards of its time – and to consign the story of Perpetua, Felicity, and their fellow martyrs once and for all to the realm of *admiranda, non imitanda*.

## Shrnutí

Mezi nejstaršími zprávami o křesťanských mučednicích zaujímá nepřehlédnutelné místo tzv. *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, zápis o umučení dvaadvacetileté vzdělané ženy ze severoafrického Kartága, Vibie Perpetuy, jež na počátku třetího křesťanského století zemřela společně s Felicitou a několika muži v boji s divokými šelmami v kartáginském amfiteátru.

Jakožto jeden z nejslavnějších raně křesťanských mučednických textů byla *Passio Perpetuae* podrobena zevrubnému zkoumání z mnoha aspektů. Tato kniha je však v první řadě věnována oblasti, která dosud stála spíše stranou pozornosti moderních interpretů, a tou je recepce *Passio Perpetuae* v literatuře rané církve od doby jejího sepsání na počátku 3. století po století páté, kdy zájem o toto vyprávění, nakolik můžeme soudit ze zachovaných pramenů, vrcholí. Právě 5. století, spjaté

pevně se jménem Augustinovým, představuje symbolický bod zlomu, po němž se vzpomínky na Perpetuu, Felicitu a její druhy začínají z literární paměti pomalu vytrácet, aby se nově proměněny a přetvořeny znovu objevily v raném středověku nejen v nejrůznějších martyrologiích, ale později i ve *Zlaté legendě* Jakuba z Voragine.

Cílem této knihy je tak osvětlit další osudy jednoho z nejpozoruhodnějších raně křesťanských hagiografických textů a spolu s tím i reinterpretační cestu, kterou raně křesťavští mučedníci museli v následujících staletích urazit, aby našli své místo v pokonstantinovské společnosti i církvi. Na obecné úrovni ji lze chápat rovněž jako sondu do způsobu, jak se v průběhu doby měnil koncept svatosti ruku v ruce se změněnou nábožensko-historickou situací a jak na tuto změnu reagovaly církevní autority. Ve výsledku se tak snažím předložit nejn první systematické pojednání o recepci *Passio Perpetuae* v křesťanském starověku, ale především odhalit motivace jejích pozdějších přepracování, která vrcholí v pozdější verzi textu z poloviny 5. století známého pod označením *Acta Perpetuae*. Nová interpretace geneze a účelu *Acta Perpetuae* je tak dalším výsledkem této práce.

Knihy je rozdělena do tří hlavních částí. V první části se nejprve zaměřuji na *Passio Perpetuae* z filologicko-literárně-historického hlediska a snažím se prozkoumat všechny otázky, jež se k ní v těchto ohledech vážou. Po jejím stručném zasazení do kontextu nejstarší literatury o mučednících následují kapitoly shrnující problematiku datace textu, jeho autorství, dochovaných verzí a konečně teologického naladění.

Druhá část je zaměřena na ty inovativní rysy *Passio Perpetuae*, jimiž se odlišovala od ostatní mučednické literatury a díky nimž patrně získala svou proslulost. Při určitém zjednodušení je lze shrnout do tří oblastí: první je převrácení stávajících socio-genderových hierarchií, které ženám přisuzovaly pozici vždy podřízenou muži a kladly důraz na plnění sociálních rolí, jež podle antických standardů ženám náležely; druhou je obdaření Perpetuy jakožto hlavní postavy charakteristikami, jež v antice tradičně příslušely mužům; a konečně třetí je akcent na mimořádnou duchovní moc mučedníků (v tomto případě opět především Perpetuy) v rámci společenství věřících, jež konkurovala kněžské autoritě.

Třetí část, jež tvoří jádro celé knihy, zkoumá působnost a životnost *Passio Perpetuae* v době od jejího sepsání po dobu Augustinovu. V dílčích kapitolách se snažím ukázat, jak vyprávění o smrti Perpetuy a jejích druhů ovlivnilo pozdější literární tradici rané církve, a především jak byl jeho původně revoluční potenciál oslabován či přizpůsobován teologickým cílům pozdějších staletí. V chronologickém pořádku analyzuji všechny relevantní texty, jež se o Perpetue a jejích družích

zmiňují, citují zápis o jejich umučení či na něj narážejí, a pokouším se ukázat, jakým způsobem se snaží normalizovat jeho inovativní rysy. Tyto snahy, které započínají již s anonymním redaktorem textu a pokračují přes Tertulliana, severoafrické *passiones* 3. století po Kr. až po Augustina a jeho následovníky, vrcholí v anonymních *Acta Perpetuae*, která představují pokus o radikální přepsání původního vyprávění a jeho nahrazení očištěným textem odpovídajícím dobovým společensko-teologickým konvencím.

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