

Wealth and contra-culture in the *Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*

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Abstract

The prison diary ascribed to Vibia Perpetua, who presumably died a martyr's death in Carthage in 203, contains the tenets of an early North African Christian identity. The article investigates this identity as the formation of a culture contrary to the wealth and values of Carthage. This contra-culture valued communion higher than the purple and gold for which Carthage was known, and replaced the child sacrifice practised in Carthage with mutual care between people of faith. It is argued that the notion of "communion as wealth" is conveyed in the text, with "food" and "body" as intertext. The cheese received by Perpetua from heavenly hands counters the blood and meat culture of Carthage. This value is highlighted by her bloodless victory over the Egyptian in the fourth vision. The celebration of her body as that of a nursing mother is posed as contra-culture to the sacrificing of children in Carthage.

Introduction

Aim and background

The aim of this article is to retrieve early North African tenets of Christian identity and contra-culture from the prison diary of Vibia Perpetua, with special reference to the concept of "wealth". Emphasis will be on "communion" as contra-cultural to the Carthaginian concept of wealth as purple and gold, for which the goodwill of the gods was to be obtained through child sacrifice. It will be indicated that this newly formulated concept of "communion as wealth" is conveyed in the diary through "food" and "body", that is, through countering "blood and meat" with "bloodless food", and the "body as despicable material" with "resurrectable body".

Perpetua, a woman of high birth, was presumably martyred in the amphitheatre in Carthage in Africa Proconsularis with a slave woman, Felicitas, and four men. According to tradition, the date was 7 March 203. The prison diary attributed to her, the *Passio SS. Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, consists of an introduction by a redactor (par 1-2), a description of life in prison and the four visions she experienced while incarcerated, allegedly written by Perpetua herself (par 3-10), the description of another vision by Saturus, a co-martyr (par 11-13), and concluding descriptions of the actual martyrdom by a redactor (par 14-21). If the main part of the *Passio* was indeed written by Perpetua, this would be the oldest extant text written by a Christian woman (as is accepted by prominent feminist historians such as Anne Jensen 1992:200).

However, this author agrees with Kraemer and Lander (2000:1051-1058) who, on both internal and external evidence, reject the authenticity of Perpetua's authorship and ascribe the *Passio* to a hagiographical tradition in Northern Africa that developed during the third century. Kraemer and Lander furthermore envisage that the real author of the *Passio* would be somebody "who looks for the fulfilment of biblical prophecies in the details of historical experience", these biblical prophecies being contained in Joel 2:28-9 (Acts 2:17-18): "After this I shall pour out my spirit on all mankind; your sons and daughters will prophesy ... I shall pour out my spirit in those days, even on slaves and slave-girls."

This makes the *Passio* ideal for realising the aim of this article, that is, to study the early tenets of the formation of a Christian identity in North Africa as a contra-culture to Carthaginian values, here with special reference to wealth. However, this article will argue that this identity does not centre around biblical fulfilment and the early development of dogmatics – but around redefined relationships, that is, the embodied relationship with one's own sexuality, with God, co-believers, and the sick and suffering, as expressed in the part of the *Passio* allegedly written in prison by Perpetua herself (par 3-10). The *Passio* is indeed a document in which "the body of the martyr is viewed as a text and the memory of bodily experiences is transmitted through texts as pertaining to religious memory" (Naguib 1994:223).

The focus of this article, as said above, will be on the communion amongst Christian formed by these redefined relationships as the new wealth, and as contra-culture to existing concepts of wealth in North Africa that focus on purple, gold and child sacrifice.

The text that will be used is that of Herbert Musurillo in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (1972:106-131), which is an adaptation of the critical edition of CJMJ van Beek, *Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (1936:1-62).

Contra-culture

The article, then, presupposes that early Christian identity was formed within the process of establishing a contra-culture to indigenous religious and social values pertaining to wealth – and that this identity was formed by a refilling of symbols and a redefinition of familial relationships. Allen Brent (1999:15) explains the construction of contra-culture amongst early Christianity simply, but aptly, as follows: “(T)he values of the dominant culture are reversed, and members of that contra-culture achieve a status denied them by wider society.”

The search for the new identity and contra-culture towards which the *Passio* expressed itself, simultaneously needs to be accompanied by the identification of the culture(s) in which early North African Christianity, and specifically the *Passio*'s spirituality, developed.

Herbert Musurillo (1972:xxv,xxvi) represents one strand of identifying the *Passio*'s contra-culture as culturally both African and proto-Montanist:

The whole document is a vivid witness to the youth and vigour of the growing African church of the late second century ... The visions of Perpetua and Saturus while in prison provide a vivid insight into the beliefs of the African community; and the author's stress on the 'power of the Spirit' (1.3), on 'new prophecies' and 'new visions' (1.5), would suggest that the *passio* is ultimately a proto-Montanist document.

But what is meant by “African”? Wilhite (2007:5), representing a second strand of contextualisation, warns firstly that “historians too often assumed that the entire region of the Mediterranean was Graeco-Roman”, neglecting the notion of resistance amongst the colonised. Secondly Wilhite (2007:8) points to the variety of local cultures: “After challenging certain Carthaginian toga wearers who criticized his refusal to wear the Roman garb, Tertullian mocks the Punic, that is African, audience for forgetting that his pallium is Carthaginian!” Latin was the lingua franca, but even after three Punic wards, inscriptions left by natives under Roman occupation reveal that comparatively few North Africans gave up their own language, cults, and customs to become Roman (Wilhite 2007:28). And even the first Christians, Wilhite (2007:32) notes, came about because of either Jewish influence or Greek missions, with early evidence of local Christian conflict with Rome to which not only the *Passio* testifies, but also the *Passio sanctorum Scillitanorum* – a document of 17 lines from the late second century on seven men and five women who were beheaded on the order of the proconsul of Africa.

A third strand in contextualising Perpetua and her times emphasises precisely this – the culture of resistance amongst the early Christians. Sullivan (1997:63) claims that the formation of an identity of resistance was an integral part of early Christianity, and that the new reality was distinguished by the belief in the inherent equality of all persons in Christ, “in whom such signifiers as race, social standing, and gender were rendered anew”. In this regard Sullivan (1997:64) singles out resistance against the Roman political and social order, and female resistance against male dominance. Rader (1981:2, 3) sees in the *Passio*

one of the earliest portrayals of Christian martyrdom as a powerful symbol of human liberation and self-fulfillment ..., the emergence within the church of a prophetic movement in which women assumed leadership roles indicative of a degree of male/female equality unknown in later periods of Christian history.

The author of this exposition takes on a dialogical position between the above points of view vis-à-vis the culture(s) with which Perpetua had negotiated features of contra-culture.

Firstly, Perpetua's context is African only in the sense that her *Passio* may display features of Christian identity that, from internal evidence, might have been unique to one of the developing Christian identities in Africa Proconsularis.

Secondly, Perpetua and her co-martyrs are proto-Montanist, in the words of Tabbernee (2005:424), only as far as “they may have had sympathies with the main tenets of the New Prophecy

which may have been in its earliest stages of being promoted in and around Carthage at about the time of the martyrdoms”.

Thirdly, the *Passio* is feminist only in that Perpetua celebrates the human body as one not associated with disgust and shame as it was regarded in Greco-Roman thinking, but as one worthy of resurrection. In this regard, Perkins’s (2007:315) research is relevant:

In their insistence on Christ’s bodily, material and fleshly nature, including the fully material nature of the human resurrected body, Christians resisted the traditional Greco-Roman denigration of the body and the social hierarchies erected upon this denigration.

In the *Passio*, then, the body is redefined not in terms of gender struggles, but “negotiated in the tension field between private and public life, and executed by means of symbols that established Christianity in the public sphere” (Perkins 2007:317).

Fourthly, Perpetua only exists as a historical figure in as far as she had been proclaimed historical by communities of believers in the third and consecutive centuries.

In summary, this author presupposes that the *Passio* in its final analysis should not be analysed primarily as pro-Montanist, African or feminist. It should be analysed as the expression of an early Christian contra-culture to the wealth and values prevalent in Carthage and its surroundings. In this regard, the author is informed by the work of Karmous, Ayed, Fantar and Wouters (1996) on the role of purple dyes in the Carthaginian economy, and the prominent role of Carthage in the Mediterranean commerce of the time that was based on gold and silver, as described by Wells (1920). For the occurrence of child sacrifice at Carthage to please the gods towards bestowing material wealth, the author is dependent on the work of Stager (1980) and Stager and Wolff (1984). Since the sacrifice of one’s own child was required, this practice called for the rich to buy poor and slave children to be sacrificed in the place of their own. Against this, the *Passio* establishes a contra-culture of care, communion and nurture, as will be argued in the next sub-section.

The body as intertext for posing a contra-culture to the existing culture of wealth

In the *Passio Perpetuae*, when Perpetua starts telling her story (par 3), it commences as a story of her relationship with her family, that is, her father, her mother, her brother and, above all, her baby. Her husband is not mentioned. Perpetua tells how her father tried to persuade her to dissociate herself from her fellow-Christians, but that she in no uncertain terms told him: *Non, sic et ego aliud me dicere non possum nisi quod sum, Christiana*. Her baby was brought to her through the intervention of her new family, the two deacons Tertius and Pomponius. She nursed the baby, comforted her mother and brother about her coming martyrdom, and gave the baby in their care. Later, presumably also with the help of her new Christian brothers, she got permission for her baby to stay with her in prison. She thus recovered her health, was relieved from her anxiety over the baby, and the prison became a palace for her and her baby.

Perpetua here is depicted as caring and motherly, as a woman with a body, not suppressing her motherly feelings towards her baby – yet, as one who has also invited new members into her family, that is, the Christian deacons who are part of a family that are already caring deeply for one another, hence their intercession for her.

This author distances herself from authors like Cardman (1988:150) who comments on Perpetua’s story by saying that “the making of a martyr meant the unmaking of the body”. Streete (2006:89) also points out the fact that it was not the authors of the *Passio*, but later Christians who identified martyrdom with masculine values, thereby giving women martyrs access to heaven, but not to earthly institutional authority.

This author furthermore feels uncomfortable with exclusively symbolical interpretations of Perpetua feeding her baby. Acknowledging that symbols such as “sacrifice” and “milk” might already have been highly developed in Christian thinking and practice at this time, Young (in Perkins 2007:328) may be going too far in calling Perpetua’s death a “highly public sacrificial liturgy, which offered a recapitulation of the sacrifice of Christ”. Mazzone, too (2005:37), may be overlooking the sheer enjoyment and appreciation of the body in this mother-baby scene by overemphasising the otherworldliness of Perpetua feeding her baby: “Having fed milk to the one who depended on her for survival, Perpetua is given a more adult version of milk – cheese – so that she too will live beyond her earthly demise.”

Important for our thesis is Streete’s observation (2006:190) that Perpetua is transgressing boundaries in this very first paragraph of her *Passio*, displaying “a new, uniquely Christian identity that belongs to a new family and that is neither male nor female while simultaneously both”.

A second point of importance is that, here, the natural processes of the body, such as breeding and eating and feeding the young, are not treated with disgust and contempt as in contemporary Greco-Roman and later Christian writings. This is part of the contra-culture formed by early Christians against the Greco-Roman rejection of the material body, and in favour of the fleshly nature of the human body which is worthy of resurrection, as was that of Christ.

The final point of importance on the body as intertext for constructing a contra-culture to the existing culture of wealth, is the obvious portrayal in the *Passio* of Perpetua nurturing her baby, as opposed to the practice of child sacrifice for which Carthage was (in)famous, with wealthy people buying slave and poor children to substitute for their own. Over against this practice, a contra-culture is established in the *Passio* that reflects care, nurture, the dignity and worth of the human body, and the equality of all bodies.

In sum, the *Passio* counters, on the one hand, the sacrificing of bodies for material wealth. On the other hand, the broader philosophical rejection of the body as materially corrupt is undermined and replaced with the body as a site of nurture and resurrection.

Food as intertext for posing a contra-culture to the existing culture of wealth

The fourth paragraph of the *Passio Perpetuae* relates Perpetua's first vision, a vision she requested from God after having been advised thus by her "brother" in Christ. She sees a huge ladder reaching up to heaven. Giving her first step on the dragon's head, she follows Saturus up the ladder into an immense garden where a tall, grey-haired man in shepherd's garb is milking sheep amidst thousands of people in white garments. He welcomes her and gives her cheese to eat while everybody says "Amen". She wakes up with a sweet taste in her mouth, and she knows she and her "brother" will suffer martyrdom.

This first vision of Perpetua has invited many scholarly interpretations in terms of its Scriptural, liturgical and symbolical references. Firstly, scholars have seen the vision as a collation of Biblical references, reflecting the stance of Scriptural authority in the early North African church, while establishing Biblical symbols as contra-cultural entities over and against contextual ones. Miller (1986:158) points out that Perpetua's dream refers to the ladder in the dream of Jacob at Bethel (Genesis 28:11-22) and consequently to Christ as the ladder upon which the angels move (John 1:51). It furthermore recalls the enmity between woman and serpent and the bruising of the latter's head (Genesis 3:15). The scene also refers to Revelations 12, where a woman newly with child (as Perpetua) escapes confrontation with a dragon and is nourished in a wilderness. It also reminds us of Job 10:10: "Didst thou not pour me out like milk, and curdle me like cheese?" According to Munoa (2002:317), this vision testifies not only to an evolving Christian understanding of Daniel 7 (Acts 7 and Revelations 4-5), but also to the continuing mystical interests of early Christianity, and specifically *merkavah* mysticism, which envisioned God on His throne. According to Robinson (1891/2004:34-35), Perpetua's visions show affinity with those of the Shepherd of Hermas in its depiction of the Lord as Shepherd with white hair. This "shows that the African martyrs had the Shepherd of Hermas in their hands, and confirms the theory that the Shepherd of Hermas was included as the last book of the African Bible at the end of the second century".

A second line of interpretation identifies the cheese given to Perpetua as an element of the Eucharistic meal (see McGowan 1999:95), as it was slightly later used by the Artotyritae (the "bread-and-cheesers"), who allegedly were Montanists. As such, it not only symbolises belonging, but also growth and spiritual maturity. In her exceptional book, *The women in God's kitchen*, Cristina Mazzoni (2005) points to cheese as a distinctly feminine symbol, and to a history of food that binds women and God together: "Holy women were fed, personally, by God" (Mazzoni 2005:4). Cheese that thickens is "frequently understood in history to be akin to the bodily secrets of growth and generation and to the reproductive body of women: a body that also puffs up even as, within it, bodily fluids thicken into a child" (see also Dronke 1984:9). Perpetua, who fed her baby the previous day, is now being fed by God the Lactator.

The acts of milking and of making cheese are fused into a single moment ... Mysteriously, the milk that has just been obtained from the sheep, for this divine shepherd, instantly becomes cheese to be handed out in a morsel to his beloved, who cups her hands (Mazzoni 2005:35).

Here, for Mazzoni (2005:37), the cheese does not only take up its symbolic meaning in the Eucharist, but also in Baptism:

Not just any morsel, furthermore, but rather a sacred one – Eucharistic, maybe, or baptismal: Christians in Carthage consecrated and distributed milk and cheese along with wine and bread, and the newly baptized, for their First Communion, drank honeyed milk – symbolic of the flavours of heaven. (See also Habermehl 2004:100.)

This author favours a third interpretational option (see McGowan 1999:97) that sees the reference to the cheese in this vision as expressing opposition to sacrifice and bloodshed as exercised in the dominant culture. The cheese scene emphasises that “the vulnerable body’s claim is for sustenance, not violence” (Perkins 2007:327), with milk and cheese being appropriate alternatives to blood and meat (McGowan 1999:100). Shaw (2008:76), writing about vegetarianism in late ancient Christianity (second and third century AD), says that “a diet free of meat is associated with angels, biblical and ascetic heroes, the life in paradise before the fall, and the food of immortality”.

Here then, cheese is a symbol of eschatological abundance, “constructed in imitation of a primordial peace prior to bloodshed and sacrifice” (McGowan 1999:140,141). It represents values which are contra-cultural to the values and practices of the dominant culture. In Carthage, as in the rest of the Roman world, meat and wine were only accessible to rich people. The gods were pleased by sacrifice. And the powerful entertained the masses with the blood of the martyrs. In this notion of a contra-culture, the cheese refers to an alternative wealth that entertains nurturing, bloodlessness and abundance of communion.

The wealth of communion

The *Passio Perpetuae* explores the contra-cultural values of wealth in four further relationships – those of Perpetua and her autocratic father, and Perpetua and her deceased but to-be-healed brother; and then there is Perpetua in the bloodless fight with the Egyptian, and Perpetua being honoured by one like a *lanista*, that is, receiving credit for her contra-culture by one greater than Carthage.

New family values and power relationships

In no less than four scenes in the *Passio Perpetuae*, Perpetua's father appears to persuade her to sacrifice to the gods for the welfare of the emperors. Firstly (par 3.1), her father visits her in prison as the *angry father*, wanting to pluck out the eyes of his disobedient daughter. The second time (par 5.1) he comes as the *pleading father*, kissing her – although it was *basians*, a basic kiss on the hand, and not the *osculatus est me* with which the Christians later kissed each other in the arena on the mouth (par 10.13). He cries, and calls her *domina* and no longer *filia*. On a third occasion (par 6.2), her father appears with her son at the hearing, as a *father instilling guilt*, asking her to have mercy on the infant. Finally (par 9.2), the *sad father* visits Perpetua in prison when the day of contest is approaching. He is overcome with sorrow. He tears hairs from his beard. He throws himself on the ground. He has lost his dignity and his manhood.

Perpetua's handling of the situation points to two more tenets of the contra-culture expressed in the *Passio*.

Firstly, Perpetua's reactions to her father indicate the beginning of "the dismantling of the patriarchal household" (Cardman 1988:147). The martyrs' bond to their parents and offspring is extended to their co-Christians, with whom they share a communion that does distinguish between blood family and family through the blood of a new commitment and identity. In this community, the distinction between patriarch and daughter, male and female, female servants and their mistresses, is overturned. There is a contra-culture based on equality, mutual respect and, indeed, a newly found happiness. Or, in the words of Kramer and Lander (2000:1060): "(T)he interactions between father and daughter function as an apt expression of the Christian critique and inversion of Roman power relations."

Secondly, Perpetua's contra-cultural relationship with her father reveals a new relationship between God and believer. Dronke (1984:5) shows that "the figure of her father returns transformed several times in Perpetua's dreams", *inter alia* as the white-haired old shepherd who gives her cheese to nurture her. The tormented father is replaced with God the Caretaker, whose children are the Christians. This notion of God loving his children, and them loving God is contra-cultural to Roman religiosity, in which the gods were not to be loved, but pleased. "It would be absurd if someone were to say that he loves Zeus" (Bremmer 2002:62). However, the *Passio Perpetuae* presents a contra-culture of love between believers, and between believers and God as a culture of wealth.

Visions of healing

As was said earlier, the *Passio Perpetuae* points towards dignity and human worthiness playing an important role as tenets in the formation of early Christian contra-culture, forming part of the newly found wealth of early Christians in North Africa. This is again illustrated by Perpetua's second and third visions (par 7-8) of her "brother in the flesh", Dinocrates. He died of a facial skin cancer when he was seven. However, after praying for him, Perpetua sees him healed and refreshed, drinking from the pool of water which he could not reach previously. The family money could not save him, but her prayers can. His death brought shame to the family, but through her prayers his dignity and worthiness are restored. His death brought shame to the family, but her death will not.

This is not the place to argue for faith healing as a tenet of early Christian identity in North Africa. Suffice is to say that these visions reflect a relationship between God and believer that is based, on the one hand, on the divine acknowledgment of human dignity and worth, and on the other on suffering not being punishment from God, but the preparation for resurrection.

The bloodless fight with the Egyptian

In her fourth and final vision, Perpetua was led to the arena, not by her Roman incarcerators, but voluntarily by the deacon Pomponius (par 10). In the arena she faces "the Egyptian", rolling in the dust. The battle commences with flying fists, and then proceeds with each trying to get hold of the other's feet. Perpetua strikes the Egyptian repeatedly in the face with the heels of her feet. He lifts her into the air, and she locks the fingers of her two hands to get hold of his head. He falls on his face, and she steps on his head.

Rich in symbolism, this scene is open to a variety of interpretations. It reminds of the first vision in which Perpetua steps on the head of the dragon, thereby overcoming the power of the devil. Here, with the emphasis on "feet", it may point to Perpetua conquering the final temptation, that of the flesh and sexual desire. However, this interpretation may not be in line with previous observations that Perpetua rejoices in the body and the resurrectability of the body.

The Egyptian, rather, symbolically takes the place of her father. Perpetua conquers not only his patriarchal masculinity, but also his persistence in anti-Christian sentiments. Egypt being the "Biblical" symbol of slavery and the worshipping of the wrong gods, this interpretation complements the formation of a contra-culture in the *Passio Perpetuae*.

In line with the focus of this article, which is on the wealth of the contra-culture that rejects the blood and cruel deaths of the dominant culture, replacing it with a contra-culture of cheese and nurturing, this author notes the *bloodlessness* of this vision as its most outstanding characteristic. The Egyptian is conquered without blood being spilt, and he is not put to death. The violent and bloody death waiting for Perpetua will be very different.

Honoured by one like a lanista

The fourth vision introduces another figure, whose actions are of paramount significance to the theme of contra-cultural wealth discussed in the present article. He does not have a name or a designation, but he looks and acts like a *lanista*, a trainer of athletes, an instructor (par 10.8ff). He appears from nowhere, just before Perpetua has to fight the Egyptian. Noteworthy is not only that he is miraculously tall, but that he is dressed in the riches of Carthage. He is clad in a purple tunic. Carthage was famous for making the extremely valuable dye Tyrian Purple. One of the most highly valued commodities in the ancient Mediterranean, it was worth fifteen to twenty times its weight in gold, as Karmous et al (1996:3) tell us. Even the highest Roman officials could only afford togas with a small stripe of it. And yet, the one that is like a *lanista* wears a tunic fully made out of purple. And he wears even more manifestations of Carthage's wealth: his sandals are of gold and silver.

The one like a *lanista* is taller than the amphitheatre. He is richer than Carthage. He is the contra-culture. And as such, he carries a green branch, and offers this symbol of new life and new values to Perpetua if she would conquer the Egyptian.

After the defeat of the Egyptian, the one taller and richer than the dominant culture, gives Perpetua a (Christian) kiss and wishes her peace, calling her his "daughter". The validity of the contra-culture is acknowledged. A new family has been formed. Its values are publicly displayed and its victory is proclaimed. The crowd sings psalms.

Conclusion

The next day Perpetua dies. The men and women martyrs kiss each other. A mad cow was sent out against Perpetua, leaving her bloodied, but without her body humiliated. Eventually she is killed by the sword, holding hands with her slave, Felicitas.

However, her contra-culture – according to the *Passio Perpetuae* – lives on. It lives on in the wealth of the embryonic food given to her by God self. It survives in the wealth of new rituals, psalms and kisses that are regenerating and bloodless. It perpetuates in the wealth of new relationships between people of different classes and genders. It grows in the wealth of nurturing and the celebration of the resurrectable body.

The wealth described in the *Passio Perpetuae*, reflecting the tenets of an early Christian contra-culture in North Africa, is not a wealth of gold and purple, as it was in Carthage, but the wealth of equal relationships, brother- and sisterhood, and care, played out in the rich symbolic and ritual world on the interface of context and transcendence.

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