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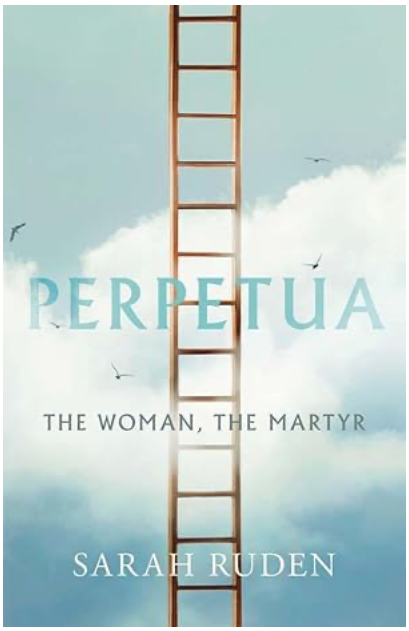

Sarah Ruden

Perpetua: The Woman, the Martyr

Ancient Lives

Yale University Press, 2025. Pp. xiv + 191. Hardcover. $28.00. ISBN 9780300273717.

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Sarah Ruden offers a biography of the early third-century martyr Perpetua with a new translation of the Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis. The book is part of Yale's Ancient Lives series, which aims to add psychological depth to characters from the ancient world: "Readers will come to know these figures in fully human dimensions, complete with foibles and flaws, and will see that the issues they faced—political conflicts, constraints based in gender or race, tensions between the private and public self—have changed very little over the course of millenia." The book's footnotes point to the ancient sources, and it contains only a brief bibliography for each chapter. Thus, the volume seems to be aimed at a more popular level rather than as an in-depth engagement with scholarship. Ruden organizes her chapters topically around aspects of Perpetua's character.

After a brief introduction, chapter 1, "Born, Educated, Married," introduces Perpetua within the social context of early third-century Carthage. Ruden analyzes hints from the text of Perpetua's social status and experience: her name, education, family of origin, marriage, and so forth. Ruden addresses many of the text's conflicting signals: for example, Perpetua has been or is married, but her husband is never mentioned; her family has considerable social standing, yet her father is beaten by the magistrate. Ruden presents her as both pampered yet also constrained by social norms of the time.

Chapter 2, "Converging Forces," ranges widely over topics such as the position of women in Roman life (and within Christianity), marriage, celibacy, martyrdom, and practices of imprisonment, torture, and games. Ruden presents Perpetua as drawn to Christianity because the culture's roles for women were so limited (33), while at the same time portraying Christianity as deeply misogynistic (e.g., 35). Ruden describes the impetus toward martyrdom in relation to the gendered constraints of the time: "Perpetua, I submit, went into the arena in part because she had nowhere else to go" (40).

In chapter 3, "Her Own Hand, Her Own Impressions," Ruden describes the literary styles of the sources within the Passio in comparison to other literary works of the time. She sees Perpetua's portion of the work as skillfully written, though not refined. The writing is straightforward and lacks pretension. Ruden is well versed in Latin literature and gives a skillful analysis of this somewhat unusual text.

Perpetua's four visions take center stage in chapter 4, "I Knew I Spoke with the Master." Ruden's interest in the visions is psychological. She writes, "I will go through the dreams in order to show what they suggest about the dreamer" (84). She reads Perpetua's dreams as working through the terror and grief of her situation (103). In contrast to many scholars, Ruden does not understand Perpetua's vision of herself as a man to be "deeply meaningful" in what it says about gender, arguing only that it "protects her modesty while letting her engage in the ultimate masculine sport" (96).

Chapter 5, "Fattened for a Sacrifice to Caesar," addresses the historical context of the Roman games and the narration of the martyrs' deaths in the arena. Ruden discusses Christian motivations for martyrdom as well as those of the Roman authorities in putting them to death. Her approach is largely psychologizing. Martyrdom had "practical benefits" for Christians, who were frustrated that Christ had not yet come and that Christianity was not spreading widely (115). Perpetua is in denial that she will really die in the arena, insisting that she is heading to eternal life (122). That Perpetua is last to be executed suggests that she is "faltering" (131).

Ruden treats the reception of Perpetua in chapter 6, "A Picture with the Face Torn Out." Unlike the other chapters, this one does not contribute to the historical portrait of Perpetua. Ruden asserts that later interpreters misunderstood Perpetua: "she seldom is allowed to appear as anything like her believable self" (145). Augustine meets special criticism for misinterpreting Perpetua's story. In particular, he emphasizes Perpetua's manliness (a feature of the story Ruden downplays, as noted above). Ruden portrays Augustine as insincere in his praise of Perpetua, since he likely would not praise other, living women for similar acts (142–43). The works treated in this chapter span the centuries, including recent publications.

Perpetua closes with Ruden's translation of the Passio, which she titles "The Suffering of the Holy Perpetua and Felicitas." This is a strong translation. The simplicity of Perpetua's style of writing, which Ruden emphasized in chapter 3, comes to the fore, perhaps especially in contrast to the narrator's opening lines, whose convoluted syntax Ruden has not tried to soften.

Ruden has done a remarkable job with such a small amount of source material to draw out what might have been Perpetua's character. Ruden states her awareness of the difficulty of writing a biography about a figure for whom there is so little information (e.g., 108–9). Much of the time, she draws on social-historical methods to elaborate the apparent gaps for modern readers trying to understand Perpetua's story. How should we interpret clues about Perpetua's status and education? Compared to other texts, what does Perpetua's writing style convey about her? What were the games for, and how did they typically proceed? All of these are questions the historian can speak to. Ruden draws on her understanding of Roman culture to help the modern reader understand features of the text.

My strongest objections to Ruden's portrait are methodological. Her frequent use of modern psychological theory to analyze the writing sits uncomfortably alongside social-historical methods. Ruden's analysis of Perpetua's motivations seems to make her into a suburban housewife of the 1950s, tragically drawn into a cult. The insistence on modern psychology seems especially odd, because the same social-historical methods could have been employed as a means to consider the motivations for self-sacrifice. Stories of noble deaths abound in Greek and Roman literature of the time, as individuals who, out of devotion to their gods, cities, and families (or all three of these), thought death a nobler and better outcome than life. Ruden mentions none of these and in overlooking them misses an opportunity to understand Perpetua's story. Like the Passio, many of those other stories praise the individual's ability, at the risk of death, to pursue a larger "good" that was threatened by circumstances.

Also like the Passio, many of these other stories praised the central character, regardless of gender, for their "manliness." Ruden's avoidance of this characteristic in describing Perpetua (and her criticism of Augustine for picking it up) is perplexing, given the frequency of the ideal in ancient literature. Central to manliness (*virtus* in Latin; *andreia* in Greek) in this period was the virtue of self-control. Manly behavior is relevant to Perpetua's story not simply because she imagines herself as a man but because she faces her death without fear. Early Christians were attracted to this same set of virtues, cultivating self-control in a variety of ways. When martyrdom died out after the religion became licit, the rigors of monastic practice became the new way to practice the same manliness of the martyrs. Again, both men and women pursued this goal.

In her description of women's roles within Roman culture, Ruden is overreliant upon literary sources, whose statements of the gendered hierarchy of the time are well known, yet that sit

uncomfortably alongside the evidence of material culture. She seems to take the voices of elite men preserved in literature as descriptive of the reality of women's lives, despite evidence even within the Passio that Perpetua speaks with authority, is educated, and serves a leadership role among the Christ followers. The book does not seem aware of more recent trends in classical and biblical studies to complicate an older picture of women's capacities in the early Roman period.

Although not a book aimed at scholars per se, Perpetua is valuable in its excellent new translation. Ruden's description of the Passio's literary features vis-à-vis other writings of the time also makes a meaningful contribution to scholarship.