

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joyce Salisbury. *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997. 228 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-91836-7.

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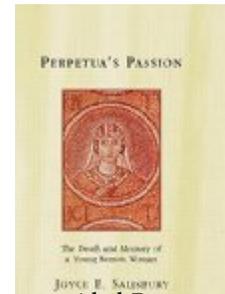
In lively and straightforward language, Salisbury evokes "the mentality that would allow someone to walk confidently into an arena knowing that he or she would die violently" (pp. 1-2) in third-century Roman Carthage. *Perpetua's Passion* has the potential to introduce a wide audience to the ardor of North African martyrs. It fails, however, to introduce its audience to the complexities of researching the ancient world or early Christianity. This "failure" may be a deliberate, editorial decision meant to avoid bogging the reader down in pedantry. Yet without more explanation of minutia, the book's arguments cannot persuade professional historians and might not satisfy curious amateurs.

Perpetua, one of the early Christian martyrs, is remembered in large part because she chronicled her experiences, dreams, and visions while in prison. Because the only documentation of her life comes from her own account of her imprisonment and a description of her martyrdom written by an observer, Salisbury's book is not a biography. Instead, "the structure of ... [her] book is the study of the prevailing ideas in ever-narrowing circles until they finally collide in the person of Perpetua as she faces the beasts in the arena" (p. 3). That is, Perpetua's martyrdom is the foil for an exploration of religious mentalities in the Empire, especially among Christians.

Chapter One—"Rome"—details what is known about the upbringing of well-to-do Roman girls in general, examines the religious rituals most commonly practiced by Roman women, and considers the religious background of Septimius Severus, the emperor in whose son's name Perpetua was sacrificed. It explains that third-century Romans generally experienced a "longing for the divine" that prompted them to join mystery religions of all kinds, not just Christianity. Salisbury suggests that novels de-

scribing adolescent women may have provided Perpetua and other young Roman women important models for heroism. Since very little can be known about Septimius Severus' religious beliefs and nothing at all about Perpetua's childhood, the chapter can only suggest that the background it presents on Roman North Africa probably is the background of Perpetua's life.

"Carthage," the second chapter, is more speculative. The "fact" of pre-Roman Carthage's history of human sacrifice (attested to only in the writings of their enemies and in burial urns containing notes with the names of children in them) provides the basis for much of the chapter. Salisbury speculates that the history of human sacrifice in Carthage 350 years previously may have contributed to North Africans' greater fascination with executions by wild beasts in the arena. She suggests that the willingness of early North African Christian martyrs to die might have stemmed partly from the old, no longer practiced cultural belief in joyful, voluntary human sacrifice. For Salisbury's argument to have force, it is only necessary that Carthaginians have believed their ancestors had committed human sacrifice, not that they actually did. She does not, however, make this distinction clear: instead, the reader is left with the impression that human sacrifice was indisputably part of ancient, pre-Roman Carthaginian practice. Further, Salisbury ignores the importance of voluntary human sacrifice in Roman culture in general, though she cites elsewhere Barton's stunning work on the gladiatorial ideal of voluntary and total bodily self-sacrifice.[1] Surely the then-living Roman tradition of deliberate renunciation of rights to bodily security is just as relevant to the mentality of martyrdom as Carthage's reputation for having committed human sacrifice hundreds of years previously.



“The Christian Community” in Carthage is much better documented than Perpetua’s life or early Carthaginian history. Members of the community itself wrote for each other and for the wider public. Salisbury highlights the importance of speaking in tongues and prophesizing for Christian claims that God was indeed present at their ceremonies. She details initiation rites and describes the way the Christian community interacted with authority. Christians seem to have been attracted by the prospect of martyrdom, and some courted attention from the authorities. One of the men arrested with Perpetua actually stepped forward to identify himself as Christian and to go to prison with the others. Salisbury suggests Perpetua may also have stepped forward, because her brother—also a Christian catechumen—was not arrested.

Once Perpetua was in “Prison” she began to write down her own experiences. Salisbury offers a new interpretation of Perpetua’s visions and demonstrates the authority of martyrs in the early church. Unlike previous interpreters of Perpetua’s visions, Salisbury focuses on their probable origin in church literature, in Perpetua’s need to resolve her relationship with the father who begged her to leave prison, and in her almost certain familiarity with fighting traditions in the arena.

In the “Arena,” we learn about the Roman fascination with violent death and about the difficulty attendant upon persuading wild beasts to attack people. Perpetua and her companions were sentenced to execution by wild beasts, a particularly inefficient method of killing prisoners. Apparently it was common for authorities to have to try several different animals and for the actual execution to take place afterward, at the hands of armed men outside the arena.

Finally, Salisbury considers the “Aftermath” of the executions. How did the Christian community use Perpetua’s death to inspire them? How was her sacrifice interpreted? Over the years, the Church became more authoritarian and bishops came to hold more power in the community than the writings of Christian martyrs. Perpetua’s narrative proved problematic, mentioning as it did her refusal to obey her father’s requests, her relinquishment of her baby, and her authority to speak for the group of martyrs. As the martyr with the highest social status, Perpetua had been the “natural” leader, and it was she who convinced the authorities to make concessions to the Christians in the manner of their execution. Salisbury finds that church authorities “spun” Perpetua’s renunciation of her family into a narrative of filial duty

and ignored or explained away her leadership. Hagiographers and literary scholars will find the process by which the memory of Perpetua’s life was re-written to adapt to changing circumstances particularly interesting.

The book is aimed at the widest possible audience and could be useful not only to teach freshman and sophomore undergraduates but also for adult Sunday School classes and for the general reader interested in the history of early Christianity. Salisbury has taken pains to refer readers to English translations of primary texts where those are available. She assumes virtually no familiarity with Roman history and chooses not to trouble the reader with discussions of its controversial areas. Her hundreds of notes—relegated to the end of the book where they cannot detract from the narrative—waste almost no space on explaining why Salisbury chooses one controversial interpretation of the evidence over any other controversial interpretation, instead merely pointing the reader to the page number of her source. This all makes the book highly readable—this reviewer finished it in three hours, even taking marginal notes and discussing it with a colleague. On the other hand, the brevity of the notes makes it impossible for the professional historian interested in following up Salisbury’s interpretations to know why she chose one possible interpretation over another: thus one can’t decide whether her more contentious assertions are plausible. Though nothing she suggests or asserts is entirely beyond the pale, much that is original is less than fully explained.

Even for the general audience, I think the decision to avoid discussing difficulties of interpretation and differences of opinion was a mistake. In ancient history, the available documentation and archaeological remains are usually so scant that taking almost any stance involves debate. The primary sources are fraught with pitfalls, so that the typical historian can provide an argument only tissue-thin. It is far more important to explain this to the general reader than to the professional historian. Non-historians who study early church history often do so precisely because they’re interested in sifting through speculation and myth to arrive at the truth: as a group they are likely to be interested in and in need of some guidance with respect to the problems sources present. These, at least, are my thoughts.

Perhaps I am mistaken, however. Professor Salisbury’s experience of interested amateurs may be different (and is almost certainly broader with respect to late Roman history) than mine. Perhaps *Perpetua’s Passion* is arranged in the best way to interest the non-professional.

The H-Net forum gives us the chance to discuss this as a group. We should seize the opportunity to debate the best ways to appeal to amateur readers while presenting new academic research. It is my hope that Professor Salisbury will take a moment to explain the editorial process that prompted her approach, and that H-Women readers will respond with their own thoughts on how to attract readers outside the profession.

Note

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1. Carlin A. Barton. *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

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