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# The Roman Games

## Historical Sources in Translation

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chains were worn on them like some lovely ornament . . . but the others were dejected, downcast . . . the pagans taunted them . . . their resistance was stiffened and those who were arrested straightway confessed their faith without one thought for the Devil's suggestions . . . Maturus, then, Sanctus, Blandina, and Artalus were led into the amphitheater to be exposed to the beasts and to give a public spectacle of the pagans' inhumanity, for a day of gladiatorial games was expressly arranged for our sake. Once again in the amphitheater Maturus and Sanctus went through the whole gamut of suffering as though they had never experienced it at all before – or rather as though they had defeated their opponent in many contests and were now fighting for the victor's crown. Once again they ran the gauntlet of whips (according to the local custom), the mauling by animals, and anything else that the mad mob from different places shouted for and demanded. And to crown all they were put in the iron seat, from which their roasted flesh filled the audience with its savour. But that was not enough for them, and they continued to rage in their desire to break down the martyrs' resistance. But from Sanctus all they would hear was what he had repeated from the beginning, his confession of faith.

Though their spirits endured much throughout the long contests, they were in the end sacrificed, after being made all the day long a spectacle to the world to replace the varied entertainment of the gladiatorial combat. Blandina was hung on a post and exposed as bait for the wild animals that were let loose on her. She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross, and by her fervent prayer she aroused intense enthusiasm in those who were undergoing their ordeal, for in their torment with their physical eyes they saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them, that he might convince all who believe in him that all who suffer for Christ's glory will have eternal fellowship in the living God.

But none of the animals had touched her, and so she was taken down from the post and brought back to the prison to be preserved for another ordeal . . . tiny, weak, and insignificant as she was she would give inspiration to her brothers, for she had put on Christ, that mighty and invincible athlete and had overcome the Adversary in many contests, and through her conflict had won the crown of immortality.

Now it was the emperor's order that these should be beheaded, but that those who had denied their faith should be released. Thus at the outset of the festival<sup>30</sup> here (and it was one that was crowded with people who had come to it from all countries) the governor brought the blessed martyrs before the tribunal to make a show and a spectacle of them before the crowds. This was the reason why he had them questioned once again, and all those who were thought to possess Roman citizenship he had beheaded; the rest he condemned to the animals. . . .

Finally, on the last day of the gladiatorial games, they brought back Blandina again, this time with a boy of fifteen named Ponticus. Every day they had been brought in to watch the torture of the others, while attempts were made to force them to swear by the pagan idols. And because they persevered and condemned their persecutors, the crowd grew angry with them, so that they had little pity

for the child's age and no respect for the woman. Instead, they subjected them to every atrocity and led them through every torture in turn, constantly trying to force them to swear, but to no avail.

Ponticus, after being encouraged by his sister in Christ so that even the pagans realized that she was urging him on and strengthening him, and after nobly enduring every torment, gave up his spirit. The blessed Blandina was last of all: like a noble mother encouraging her children, she sent them before her in triumph to the King, and then, after duplicating in her own body all her children's sufferings, she hastened to rejoin them, rejoicing and glorying in her death as though she had been invited to a bridal banquet instead of being a victim of the beasts. After the scourges, the animals, and the hot griddle, she was at last tossed into a net and exposed to a bull. After being tossed a good deal by the animal, she no longer perceived what was happening because of the hope and possession of all she believed in and because of her intimacy with Christ. Thus she too was offered in sacrifice, while the pagans themselves admitted that no woman had ever suffered so much in their experience.

Perpetua is one of the best-known among early Christian martyrs, due to the wide circulation of the account of her trial and execution in 202 CE at Carthage. It is also valuable in that so much of it comes from Perpetua herself, written or dictated while she was in prison; little female-authored material survives from the ancient Mediterranean. This also offers us a first-person perspective on the experience of martyrdom and the anticipation of the arena. The Act follows the pattern of arrest, trial and spectacular execution, with sprinklings of the typical Christian interpretation of these events. Some distinctive features should be noted: first, the strong presence of Perpetua's family, especially her father, who is much more an opposing force to her confession of belief than the Roman authorities. This reflects the power of the *paterfamilias* in Roman society, the fact that, as a woman, Perpetua was much more likely to have her daily choices circumscribed by her father than by Roman administrators. Her conversion is a rebellion more against the domestic power structure than the emperor; she has redirected her family loyalties toward the family of Christian believers. The removal of her baby becomes a small miracle, demonstrating the worthiness of her choice. Unusual here as well is the sequence of elaborate visions Perpetua had in prison, which become expressions of her sanctity and power as a confessor-martyr. The form these visions take is interesting; near-cinematic in their imagery, they present tangible (and spectacle-oriented) metaphors for sanctity and they feature an extremely dynamic heroine who transcends gender boundaries and works for the salvation of herself and those around her. Her interactions with the military tribune demonstrate her social power as well; despite the fact that she has been condemned and, by Roman law, is now *serva poenae*, she argues for better treatment and gets it.

Source: *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* 2, 4-6, 10, 16-18, 20-21.<sup>31</sup>

A number of young catechumens were arrested, Revocatus and his fellow slave Felicitas, Saturninus and Secundulus, and with them Vibia Perpetua, a newly married woman of good family and upbringing. Her mother and father were still alive and one of her two brothers was a catechumen like herself and she had an infant son at the breast. She was about twenty-two years old. From this point she herself told the whole story of her martyrdom and left an account written by her own hand and with her interpretation.

... Then my brother said to me: "Dear sister, you are greatly privileged; surely you might ask for a vision to be shown whether you are to suffer or to be freed." And I faithfully promised that I would, for I knew that I could speak with the Lord, whose great blessings I had come to experience. And so I said: "I shall tell you tomorrow." Then I made my request and this is the vision I had.

I saw a ladder of tremendous height made of bronze, reaching all the way to the heavens, but it was so narrow that only one person could climb up at a time. To the sides of the ladder were attached all sorts of metal weapons: there were *gladii*, *lanceae*, hooks, *machaerae*, and spikes; so that if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled and his flesh would adhere to the weapons.

At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them into not climbing. And Saturus was the first to go up, he who was later to hand himself over of his own accord. He had been the builder of our strength, although he was not present when we were arrested. And he arrived at the top of the staircase and he looked back and said to me: "Perpetua, I am waiting for you. But watch out and don't let the dragon bite you."

"He will not harm me," I said, "in the name of Jesus Christ."

Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Then using his head as my first step, I stepped on it and climbed up.

Then I saw an immense garden, and in it a grey-haired man sat in the clothes of a shepherd, a tall man, milking sheep. And standing around him were many thousands of people dressed in white. He raised his head, looked at me, and said: "I am glad you have come, my child."

He called me over to him and gave me, as it were, a mouthful of the milk he was drawing; and I took it into my cupped hands and drank it. And all those who stood around said: "Amen!" At the sound of this word I came to, with the taste of something sweet still in my mouth. I at once told this to my brother, and we realized that we would have to suffer, and that from now on we would no longer have any hope in this life.

A few days later a rumor made the rounds that we would be given a hearing. My father also arrived from the city, worn out with worry, and he came up to me in order to persuade me, saying: "Daughter, have pity on my gray head, have pity on your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have raised you with these hands to this prime of life, if I have favored you over your brothers; do not abandon me to the reproach of men. Think of your brothers,

think of your mother and your aunt, think of your son, who will not be able to live after your death. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us! None of us will ever be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you."

This was the way my father spoke out of family feeling for me, kissing my hands and throwing himself at my feet, and, weeping, he called on me now not as his daughter but as a woman. I was sorry for my father's sake, because he alone of all my kin would be unhappy to see me suffer.

I tried to comfort him, saying "It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills; for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power."

And he left me in great sorrow.

One day while we were eating breakfast we were suddenly taken off for a hearing. We arrived at the forum, and immediately the rumor went around the neighborhood of the forum and a huge crowd gathered. We walked up to the prisoner's dock. All the others when questioned confessed. Then, when it came my turn, my father appeared with my son and dragged me down from the step saying, "Make the sacrifice! Have pity on your baby!"

Hilarius the procurator, who as the successor to the late proconsul Minucius Timinianus had received his judicial powers, said to me: "Have pity on your father's gray head; have pity on your baby son. Make the sacrifice for the health of the emperors."

"I won't do it," I responded.

"Are you a Christian?" said Hilarius.

"I am a Christian." I said.

And when my father continued trying to persuade me, Hilarius ordered him to be thrown down and beaten with a stick, and I felt sorry for my father, as if I had been beaten. I felt sorry for his wretched old age.

Then Hilarius passed sentence on all of us; we were condemned to the beasts, and we returned to prison happily. But my baby had gotten used to being nursed at the breast and to staying with me in prison. So I sent the deacon Pomponius immediately to my father to ask for the baby. But father refused to give me the baby. And as God willed, the baby had no further desire for the breast nor did I suffer from any anxiety for my child and any discomfort in my breasts.

The day before we were to fight with the beasts I saw the following vision: Pomponius the deacon came to the prison gates and began to knock violently. I went out and opened the gate for him. He was dressed in an unbelted white tunic, wearing elaborate sandals. And he said to me: "Perpetua, we are waiting for you; come."

Then he took my hand and we began to walk through rough and broken country. At last we came to the amphitheater out of breath, and he led me into the center of the arena and said to me: "Do not be afraid. I am here with you and struggle alongside you." And he left.

I looked at the huge crowd who watched in astonishment. I was surprised that no beasts were let loose on me; for I knew that I was condemned to die by the beasts. Then out came an Egyptian to fight against me, of vicious appearance, with his supporting fighters. And some handsome young men came up to me

as my supporters. My clothes were stripped off and I was made into a man. My supporters began to rub me down with oil, as they do before a contest. Then I saw the Egyptian on the other side rolling in the dust. Next a man of amazing size came out, so large that he rose above the top of the amphitheater. He was dressed in a beltless purple tunic with two stripes, one on either side, running down the middle of his chest. He wore sandals that were extravagantly made of gold and silver, and carried a rod like a *lanista* and a green branch on which there were golden apples. And he asked for silence and said "This Egyptian, if he defeats her, will kill her with the sword. But she, if she defeats him, will receive this branch." Then he went out.

We drew close to one another and began to let loose with punches. He wanted to get hold of my feet, but I kept kicking him in the face with my heels. Then I was raised up into the air and I began to strike him without as it were touching the ground. Then when I noticed there was a lull, I put my two hands together, joining the fingers of one with the other and I grabbed his head. He fell onto his face and I stepped on his head.

The crowd began to shout and my seconds to sing psalms. Then I walked up to the *lanista* and took the branch. He kissed me and said to me: "Daughter, peace be with you." And I began to walk in glory to the Gates of Life. And I woke up. And I realized it was not against beasts but against the devil that I would be fighting, but I knew the victory would be mine. So much for what I did up until the eve of the contest. . . [Perpetua's first-person account ends here; the story of what happened in the arena is given by the witness-editor of the Martyr Act.<sup>32</sup>]

. . . The military tribune had treated them with extraordinary severity because, due to the warnings of certain very foolish people, he became afraid that they would be spirited out of the prison by magical incantations. Perpetua spoke to him directly. "Why can you not even allow us to refresh ourselves properly? For we are the most distinguished of the condemned prisoners, as we belong to Caesar, and will fight on his birthday. Would it not be to your credit if we were brought forth on the day in a healthier condition?" The tribune was disturbed and turned red. And so he gave the order that they were to be treated more humanely. . .

On the day before, when they had their last meal, which is called the free banquet, they celebrated not a free banquet but the love feast.<sup>33</sup> They spoke to the populace with the same steadfastness, warned them of God's judgment, stressing the joy they would have in their suffering, and ridiculing the curiosity of those who came to see them. . .

The day of their victory dawned, and they processed from the prison into the amphitheater happily as if they were going into heaven, with calm faces, trembling with joy not fear. Perpetua followed with bright face and calm step, as the wife of Christ, as the darling of God, putting down everyone's stare with her own intense gaze. With them also was Felicitas, glad that she had safely given birth so that now she could fight the beasts, going from one bloodbath to another, from the midwife to the *retiarius*, ready to wash after childbirth with a second baptism.

They were then led up to the gates and were forced to put on outfits, clothing of the priests of Saturn for the men, of the priestesses of Ceres for the women. But the noble Perpetua strenuously resisted this to the end.

She said: "We came to this of our own free will, that our freedom should not be violated. We agreed to pledge our lives in order not to do such a thing. We agreed upon this with you."

Even injustice recognized justice. The military tribune agreed. They were to be brought into the arena just as they were. Perpetua then began to sing a psalm: she was already stepping on the head of the Egyptian. Revocatus, Saturninus, and Satorus began to give dire warnings to the crowd of spectators. Then when they came within sight of Hilarianus, they began to say with motions and gestures to Hilarianus: "You have condemned us, but God will condemn you," they were saying. At this, the crowd became enraged and demanded that they be beaten with whips by a group of *venatores*. And they were happy at this, that they be able to copy the sufferings of the Lord. . . .

For the young women, however, the devil had prepared a ferocious cow. This was an unusual animal, but it was chosen so that their sex might be matched with that of the beast.<sup>34</sup> So they were stripped naked, placed in nets and brought out. The crowd was horrified<sup>35</sup> when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other had recently given birth and had breasts dripping milk. And so they recalled them and dressed them in unbelted tunics. First Perpetua was thrown by the cow and fell on her back. And when she sat up, she pulled down the tunic that had been torn on the side to cover up her thigh, more mindful of her modesty than of her pain. Then she asked for a pin to fasten her disordered hair: for it was not appropriate that a martyr die with dishevelled hair, lest she seem to be in mourning at the moment of her glory. Then she got up and when she saw that Felicitas had been trampled, she went over to her and gave her a hand and lifted her up. Then the two stood side by side. But the cruelty of the audience was by now appeased, so they were called back through the Gates of Life. There Perpetua was stopped by a certain catechumen named Rusticus who at that time was keeping close to her, and she woke up as if from sleep, so intensely was she in spirit and in ecstasy, and she began to look around her and to the amazement of all said: "When are we going to be thrown to that cow or whatever?" and when she heard that it had already happened, she refused to believe it until she noticed the marks of her rough experience on her body and her dress. Then she called for her brother and that catechumen and addressed them, saying "Stand fast in the faith and all love one another and do not be scandalized by our suffering."

. . . And so the martyrs got up and went to the place the crowd wanted them to go to, and kissing one another they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual of peace. The others took the sword in silence and without moving. . . Perpetua, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone and then took the trembling hand of the novice gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be killed unless she herself were willing.