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Felicity

(1,809 words)

Felicity (Felicitas; c. 181–203 CE) was a young martyr of the early North African church. She died in Carthage on Mar 7, 203 CE, along with a group of other young Christians, the most famous of whom was Perpetua. Felicity's memory was recorded in the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, one of the earliest Christian texts written in Latin (see Amat, 1996; Heffernan, 2012).

Name and Life

The name Felicitas was fairly common in Roman [Africa](#), both for freeborn women and for slaves (see Bremmer, 2012, 36). In later times, Christians did not fail to see the spiritual significance of the names Felicitas and Perpetua (see Reception below).

All biographical information about Felicity relies on the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. The year of her birth, here estimated at 181 CE, is based on the assumption that Felicity was of roughly the same age as Perpetua, who is said to have been 22 at the moment of her arrest (*Mart. Perp.* 2). The facts that Felicity is described as a catechumen and as pregnant (see below) both seem to confirm a relatively young age, but no definite proof can be given.

Felicity was arrested some weeks before her execution, along with Revocatus, Saturninus, Secundulus, and most importantly Vibia Perpetua. Unlike Perpetua, who is called *honeste nata, liberaliter instituta, matronaliter nupta* (well born, well educated, honorably married; *Mart. Perp.* 2, trans. Farrell & Williams, 2012), Felicity was a slave, much as Revocatus, as she is called *conserva eius*, "his fellow slave" (see also Identity below).

After this initial mention of Felicity, the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* focuses on Perpetua, her stay in prison, and her extensive and influential visions (on which see Hunink, 2012). More details about Felicity emerge only in *Mart. Perp.* 15, 18, and 20, which deal with her martyrdom.

According to the 5th-century CE author [Victor of Vita](#) (*Hist.* 1.3.9), Perpetua and Felicity were eventually buried in the Basilica Maiorum in Carthage, where an inscription with their names and those of their fellow martyrs has been found (see Bremmer, 2012, with references).

Martyrdom

In *Mart. Perp.* 15, the second place in the text where Felicity is mentioned, it appears that she was pregnant at the time of her arrest, and that meanwhile, shortly before the execution, she is in her eight month. Since pregnant women could not be put on public display in the arena, as is explicitly reported in the text, Felicity fears that her execution will be postponed and that she will have to shed her blood along with those who are not her fellow Christians: *ne inter alios postea sceleratos sanctum et innocentem sanguinem funderet* "that she would pour out her holy and innocent blood at a later time together with other [real] criminals." Her companions share her fear, and together they pray to the Lord, two days before the planned execution. This prayer has immediate effect: she is beset by pains and suffers greatly. In reply to a prison guard, who provokingly asks her what she will do in front of the wild beasts, as she is in such pains already now, she is quoted as saying,

Modo ego patior quod patior, illic autem alius erit in me qui patietur pro me, quia et ego pro illo passura sum ("Now I am the one suffering what I suffer, but then another inside me will suffer for me, since I will also be suffering for him"; *Mart. Perp.* 15).

She then gives birth to a girl, who will be raised by *quaedam soror* (one of the sisters).

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In *Mart. Perp.* 18, Felicity is finally about to enter the amphitheater together with Perpetua and others. Just like her fellow martyrs, who are excited and joyful, Felicity is described as being quite happy:

item Felicitas, saluam se peperisse gaudens ut ad bestias pugnaret, a sanguine ad sanguinem, ab obstetrice ad retiarium, lotura post partum baptismo secundo (“and Felicity too, rejoicing to have survived childbirth so that she might battle against the beasts, going from one blood-sport to the next, from midwife to gladiator, to bathe after childbirth in her second baptism”; *Mart. Perp.* 18).

The women are forced to dress up as priestesses of Ceres, but Perpetua strongly refuses this. The martyrs enter the arena uttering threats to the magistrates and the audience, but nothing specific is said about Felicity, who may therefore have entered silently. Likewise, when several martyrs express their preferred method of execution (*Mart. Perp.* 19), no mention is made of Felicity.

The anonymous author describes an unusual punishment for the young women, devised “by the *devil*”: undressed and covered in nets, they are exposed to a ferocious heifer (*ferocissimam uaccam*). The audience, quite surprisingly, feels horror at the sight of the women, one young and tender, the other (obviously Felicity) “with dripping breasts” (*a partu recentem stillantibus mammis*). Accordingly, they are called back and dressed in loose clothes. Perpetua is thrown to the ground, and as she sees Felicity, who has equally been cast down, she gets up, walks toward her, gives her hand, and raises her up. The last words we read about Felicity are these:

et ambae pariter steterunt. et populi duritia deuicta, reuocatae sunt in portam Sanaiuiariam (And they both stood together. And after winning over the people’s hard-heartedness they were called back into the Gate of Life and Health; *Mart. Perp.* 20).

The rest of the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* deals with the executions of others, notably Perpetua. The exact manner in which Felicity dies is not specified, but it seems she ends more or less anonymously, as part of a group of victims to which Saturus, the leader of the group, is joined after handing over his ring to a soldier named Pudens:

exinde iam exanimis prosternitur cum ceteris ad iugulationem solito loco (“then, practically dead, he was thrown together with the rest in the usual place for the final thrust”; *Mart. Perp.* 21)

In a final move, the martyrs manage to get up, walk to the middle of the arena, kiss one another, and receive the sword.

Identity

The full title of the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* refers to the names of both Perpetua and Felicity, which suggests that Felicity was considered to be somehow relevant and important. However, although the text gives some strikingly personal information about Felicity’s fate, notably her pregnancy, her sense of fear to be isolated from her group, and her joy to meet death, as a character she clearly stands back behind Perpetua, the shining star of the text. Even the scanty biographical details that the text seems to offer seem questionable.

First, Felicity’s status as a slave now seems certain, but fairly recently still, the renowned scholar T. Bastiaensen proposed to interpret *conserua* (*Mart. Perp.* 2) as “fellow slave,” that is, as fellow servant in Christ (discussion in Bremmer, 2012, 37). Assuming that she did have the social status of a slave, whose slave was she? Often it is tacitly or explicitly assumed that Perpetua was her mistress, but the text does not allow one to draw such a conclusion. Moreover, whose child was Felicity carrying in her womb? It may seem natural to think of Revocatus as the father of her child and, perhaps, her partner, but no definite proof for this can be given. Or how about the group of Christians she was part of? Were they all catechumens, and if so, had they been converted at the same time? Were they attending Christian instruction together, and if so, where and when? The text invites all such questions, without answering them.

Likewise, some doubts may be cast on the story of Felicity’s captivity and martyrdom. Various details could well be explained as the result of idealizing by a devoted admirer rather than as hard evidence: Felicity’s fear of remaining alive as the only one in the group, the “sister” who takes care of her baby, her *bon mot* addressed to the soldier, the detail of her “dripping breasts,” the final moments: regarding such matters it is surely wise to allow for some literary stylizing, as in the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* as a whole (see also Bremmer, 2012, 48–49).

On the other hand, while not the protagonist of the text, Felicity may well have been described more or less faithfully. By all means, it seems a promising approach for scholars to focus on minor characters in the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. Recent scholarship accordingly shows some increased attention to Felicity (see most prominently Bremmer, 2012, and Heffernan, 2012, 17–20, on Felicity, and Heffernan, 2012, 3–59, on all *personae* in the text; further Amat, 1996, 34–36).

Reception

In late antiquity, several additional, short *Acta* referring to Perpetua and Felicitas were composed, in two basic versions dating from the 4th or 5th century CE (see Amat, 1996, 263–303; further Kitzler, 2007; Heffernan, 2012, 442–443). Various details are different here. As to Felicity, she is called the sister of Revocatus (*Acta* 1.1.1) or of Perpetua

(*Acta* 2.1.1), and she engages in a dialogue with the Roman consul, in which she despises her “plebeian” husband (*Acta* 1.5.1–8; 2.5.1–5) and otherwise poses as a strong young woman much like Perpetua (for the dialogue with Felicity in the *Acta*, see Bremmer, 2012, 41). In the end, Felicity dies by a leopard (*Acta* 1.9.4; 2.9.4). Texts such as the *Acta* obviously respond to public demand for additional detail.

The martyrs’ “birthday,” that is, the day of their martyrdom and death, was celebrated in Africa for centuries to come. Saint [Augustine of Hippo](#) preached on the martyrs’ day every year during a long period. Three short sermons of his on Perpetua and Felicity have been transmitted (Aug. *Serm.* 280–282; recently, a fuller version of *Serm.* 282 has come to light; see Bremmer 2012, 38, with references). These cannot be properly dated and do not offer any new factual information about Felicity. The sermons rather resume elements such as Felicity’s pregnancy (*Serm.* 282.3) and improvise on spiritual and rhetorical motifs, notably *perpetua felicitas* (everlasting happiness), the felicitous phrase that results from their combined names.

[Vincent Hunink](#)

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