

PUDENS, *OPTIO CARCERIS*: ROMAN MILITARY FIGURES AND THEIR NARRATIVE FUNCTION IN THE *PASSION OF PERPETUA AND FELICITAS**

ABSTRACT

The lion's share of attention given to the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas has focussed—not unreasonably—on Perpetua, the eponymous heroine, and on the ways in which her voice and character have been manipulated. But she is not the only figure in this text who is made to sing a tune. This article concentrates on the two military characters mentioned in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas—Pudens, optio carceris, and the unnamed tribune—to suggest that we should pay more attention to the deployment and characterization of minor martyrological characters. An examination of Pudens and the tribune reveals previously understudied facets of the text, such as the anonymous Editor's hand in attempting to stitch together Perpetua's diary with his own concluding narrative, and the anxiety of the Carthaginian Christian community to be positively recognized by Roman authority figures. Finally, this examination contributes to previous debates over the text's original language and date of composition, suggesting that the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas was written in Latin in the early third century—against a recent charge that the text is a late antique forgery.

Keywords: Perpetua; martyrs; Pudens; soldiers; Roman authority; apology; justice; persecution

In spite of its brevity, the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is a dazzlingly rich text.¹ It dangles in front of us a view onto early Christian attitudes to the afterlife,² their condition of persecution,³ and their belief in the Holy Spirit's ongoing revelation.⁴ It

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¹ I have principally used the texts presented in H.A. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford, 1972) and T.J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (Oxford, 2012), supplemented by Bastiaensen in A.A.R. Bastiaensen et al., *Atti e passioni dei martiri* (Milan, 2014⁷) and J. Amat, *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité suivie des Actes* (Paris, 1996). When referring to passages in the text, I use the title *Passio*.

² E. Gonzalez, *The Fate of the Dead in Early Third Century North African Christianity: The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas and Tertullian* (Tübingen, 2014).

³ e.g. by P. Keresztes, 'The Emperor Septimius Severus: a precursor of Decius', *Historia* 19 (1970), 565–78; J. Amat, 'Les persecutions contre les Chrétiens et l'hostilité populaire dans la première moitié du III^e siècle en Afrique', *Euphrosyne* 26 (1998), 293–300; W. Kinzig (transl. M. Bockmuehl), *Christian Persecution in Antiquity* (Waco, 2021), 70–1.

⁴ C. Marksches, 'The *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* and Montanism?', in J.N. Bremmer and M. Formisano (edd.), *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Oxford, 2012), 276–90.

gives us a first-person insight into the experience of Roman justice.⁵ The reception of the story provides a powerful case-study of the cult of the martyrs which continued long after persecution was nothing but a historical memory.⁶ Its style and form have been pored over, particularly regarding the ‘prison diary’ segment, and the vexed question of whether we really have here direct access to the words of a third-century female martyr.⁷

The lion’s share of previous scholarship has approached these issues, and more, through the figure of the text’s protagonist: Perpetua. Studies have explored the preservation of Perpetua’s voice,⁸ her gender *Selbstverständnis*,⁹ and the attempt of the anonymous, (presumably) male, Editor to control it.¹⁰ She is the principal case-study for explorations of the presentation of female characters and bodies in early Christian literature.¹¹

Recently, more attention has been granted to the cast of supporting characters.¹² Here, I wish to further this agenda by focussing on two interrelated figures: Pudens, the *optio carceris* (the military prison administrator), and the unnamed military tribune. Both have been discussed before but primarily from a technical, rather than narratological, point of view. Pudens appears both in Perpetua’s ‘prison diary’ narrative and then extensively in the conclusion written by the anonymous Editor.¹³ The tribune—who shares important

⁵ B.D. Shaw, ‘Judicial nightmares and Christian memory’, *JECS* 11 (2003), 533–63 uses the text as a key case-study of the impact of Roman justice on provincial observers.

⁶ The Basilica Maiorum at Carthage was the find-spot for a late antique fragmentary inscription recording *hic sunt* the martyrs Perpetua and companions: Y. Duval, *Loca sanctorum Africae: Le culte des martyrs en Afrique du IV^e au VII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1982), 1.13–16. On Perpetua in Augustine, see *Serm.* 280–2 (Migne, *PL* 38.128) with D.E. von der Osten, ‘Perpetua Felicitas: Die Predigten des Augustinus zur *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (s. 280–2)’, in T. Fuhrer (ed.), *Die christlich-philosophischen Diskurse der Spätantike: Texte, Personen und Institutionen* (Stuttgart, 2008), 275–98; and for a recently discovered sermon of Augustine which also suggests knowledge of the later *Acts of Perpetua*, see I. Schiller, D. Weber and C. Weidmann, ‘Sechs neue Augustinuspredigten: Teil 1 mit Edition dreier Sermones’, *WS* 121 (2008), 227–84, at 251–64. For Perpetua’s continuing significance in the Middle Ages, see M. Cotter-Lynch, *Saint Perpetua across the Middle Ages: Mother, Gladiator, Saint* (New York, 2016).

⁷ J.W. Halporn, ‘Literary history and generic expectations in the *Passio* and *Acta Perpetuae*’, *VChr* 45 (1991), 223–41; T.J. Heffernan, ‘Philology and authorship in the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*’, *Traditio* 50 (1995), 315–25; J. Amat, ‘Le latin de la *Passio* de Perpétue et de Félicité’, in L. Callebaut (ed.), *Latin vulgaire, latin tardif IV* (Hildesheim, 1995), 445–54; V. Hunink, ‘Did Perpetua write her prison account?’, *Listy filologické* 133 (2010), 147–55; B.K. Gold, *Perpetua: Athlete of God* (Oxford, 2018), 9–22.

⁸ K. Cooper, ‘The voice of the victim: gender, representation and early Christian martyrdom’, *BRL* 80 (1998), 147–58.

⁹ B.K. Gold, ‘“And I became a man”: gender fluidity and closure in Perpetua’s prison narrative’, in D. Lateiner, B.K. Gold and J. Perkins (edd.), *Roman Literature, Gender and Reception: Domina Illustris* (London, 2013), 153–65; cf. C. Williams, ‘Perpetua’s gender: a Latinist reads the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*’, in J.N. Bremmer and M. Formisano (edd.), *Perpetua’s Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis** (Oxford, 2012), 54–77.

¹⁰ B.D. Shaw, ‘The *Passio of Perpetua*’, *P&P* 139 (1993), 3–45. I refer to ‘the Editor’ as a proper name throughout.

¹¹ B.D. Shaw, ‘Body/power/identity: passions of the martyrs’, *JECS* 4 (1996), 269–312; S. Parkhouse, ‘The fetishization of female *exempla*: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas’, *NTS* 63 (2017), 567–87; D. Frankfurter, ‘Martyrology and the prurient gaze’, *JECS* 17 (2009), 215–45; B.K. Gold, ‘Transgender saints: Perpetua’s legacy’, in K.R. Moore (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Reception of Ancient Greek and Roman Gender and Sexuality* (London, 2022), 558–71.

¹² L.S. Cobb, ‘The other woman: Felicitas in Late Antiquity’, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 15 (2022), 1–27 focusses on Felicitas and her reception in later texts, arguing that she has been overshadowed by Perpetua.

¹³ There are three separate ‘hands’ at play. First, we are given a lectionary-style introduction to the story by the anonymous Editor (*Passio* 1); then follows Perpetua’s ‘prison diary’ segment, supposedly in her own hand, recounting her experiences and visions (3–10); a shorter section purporting to

characteristics with Pudens—appears only in this latter section. Both characters are presented as recognizing the virtue of the martyrs, and by the narrative's conclusion Pudens has converted to Christianity. They fit into a wider, and largely overlooked, pattern of apologetic and pro-Roman elements embedded in the 'authentic' martyr narratives. Moreover, viewed together, these characters give us an insight into the Editor's attempt to connect the threads of Perpetua's story and his own. Pudens, in particular, constitutes an attempted conduit between Perpetua, the Editor and the audience; and his presence as the implied witness upon whom the Editor depends represents a key aspect of his claim to authenticity.

Martyr texts are often presented as if they have a coherent set of aims: the valorization of their titular characters and, relatedly, the fortification of the audience's strength in the face of hostility.¹⁴ The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is no exception, and most modern approaches interpret it as a narrative of resistance against Roman authority and culture.¹⁵ However, a greater sensitivity to the characterization and deployment of 'minor' martyrological characters reveals a wider, and not always congruent, spread of perspectives and hopes. This is not to say that martyr texts cannot be read as narratives of resistance. Rather, they are not *exclusively* resistance narratives, and such frameworks should not have a monopoly on their interpretation. Roman military figures in the martyr acts may suggest a greater complexity in the way in which these stories approach Roman power than has generally been recognized, constituting expressions of adherence to existing political power structures normally considered characteristic of apologetic literature. By directing our attention further down the billing order, we can excavate a wider range of early Christian attitudes concerning their place in the Roman empire.

This study proceeds through four sections. The first three are narratological in focus, exploring how the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*—and, above all, the Editor—mobilizes the figures of Pudens (Section I) and the unnamed tribune (Section II). This is then placed in a wider context of soldier characters in Christian texts (Section III). Finally, I turn to more historical concerns, identifying the unit in which Pudens is described as serving, and suggesting that the technical precision shown by the Editor here implies that he was indeed writing in third-century Carthage, against a recent description of the text as a late antique forgery (Section IV).

I. PUDENS

The importance of the narrative role which Pudens, the military prison commander, plays in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* has not been recognized. He appears first in Perpetua's 'prison diary' section, which the Editor tells us was written in her own hand (*Passio* 2.3).

represent a first-hand account of another vision by Saturus then follows (11–13); finally, the Editor returns to complete the story of the martyrs' death in the Carthaginian arena (14–21).

¹⁴ M.A. Tilley, 'The ascetic body and the (un)making of the world of the martyr', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (1991), 467–79; J. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era* (London, 2009) assumes a congruency between martyrological perspectives and the view of the subaltern *humilior*.

¹⁵ e.g. C. Mertens, 'Les premiers martyrs et leurs rêves: cohésion de histoire et des rêves dans quelques *Passions* latines de l'Afrique du nord', *RHE* 81 (1986), 5–46; J. Perkins, 'The *Passion of Perpetua*: a narrative of empowerment', *Latomus* 53 (1994), 837–47; K. Cooper, 'A father, a daughter and a procurator: authority and resistance in the prison memoir of Perpetua of Carthage', *Gender & History* 23 (2011), 685–702.

Perpetua recounts the period after her arrest in Carthage, a first incarceration in a municipal prison and her trial before the stand-in governor Hilarianus. After her condemnation to death, Perpetua relates that she and her fellow-prisoners were transferred to a military prison (*Passio* 7.9).¹⁶ In this second jail, she mentions someone who showed the prisoners kindness: Pudens.¹⁷ She calls him *miles optio, praepositus carceris*: the soldier placed in charge of the prison. *optio* is a Roman military rank, most often encountered as executive officers of centuries (*optio centuriae*); the *optio carceris* is a lower grade of *optio*, one of a number of postings charged with overseeing specific technical or administrative tasks.¹⁸ The technical precision here locates this prison within a military camp in Carthage, likely that of the urban cohort.¹⁹ Perpetua writes that Pudens ‘began to revere us’ (*nos magnificare coepit*), recognizing (*intelligens*) that there was ‘a great power within us’ (*magnam uirtutem esse in nobis*).²⁰ He ‘admitted many to see us’ (*multos ad nos admittebat*), so we could refresh each other (*et nos et illi inuicem refrigeraremus*)’ (*Passio* 9.1).

This is the only point at which Pudens is mentioned by Perpetua herself, but his role is significant. In allowing visitors to be freely admitted, he improves their condition. Previously, in the municipal prison, the deacons bribed the guards to achieve the same result (*Passio* 3.7).²¹ Significantly, he is the only non-Christian character who shows any positive interest in their plight, or who recognizes their virtue. Finally, he is the only male authority figure—in contrast to her father and the governor—who does not deal in an adversarial matter with Perpetua.²²

Perpetua’s own words shortly come to an end, following a vision of her spiritual victory in the arena (*Passio* 10). She ends this passage with a notice that she is writing on the eve of her execution, and with an invitation: ‘about what happened at the games themselves, if someone wishes, let them write it’ (*Passio* 10.15). The anonymous Editor obliged, appending first an account of a vision by Perpetua’s fellow-martyr Saturus (*Passio* 11–13) and then his own narrative describing the deaths of the martyrs.

Pudens makes two further appearances in this concluding narrative. In the first, the Editor tells us that ‘the *optio carceris* was himself now a believer’ (*iam et ipso optione carceris credente*, 16.4).²³ Finally, Pudens appears again in chapter 21.²⁴ The prisoners

¹⁶ A *carcer castrensis* was recently identified archaeologically at Lambaesis, the base of the *Legio III Augusta* in Africa: M. Letteney and M.D.C. Larsen, ‘A Roman military prison at Lambaesis’, *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5 (2021), 65–102, discussing the *Passio of Perpetua and Felicitas* at 94–5.

¹⁷ E. Ronsse, ‘Rhetoric of martyrs: listening to Saints Perpetua and Felicitas’, *JECS* 14 (2006), 283–327, at 304 counts Pudens as a ‘suggestive name’ related to ‘notions of chaste and humble modesty’.

¹⁸ e.g. the *optio ualeudinarii*, who administered the camp infirmary. Most likely, they were on one-and-a-half pay, so a low-ranking *principalis*; see D.J. Breeze, ‘A note on the use of the titles *optio* and *magister* below the centurionate during the Principate’, *Britannia* 7 (1976), 127–33.

¹⁹ See Section IV below.

²⁰ Perpetua does not specify what exactly led to this recognition; Perkins (n. 15), 842 considers it ‘suggestive’ that the recognition comes after Perpetua’s account of her dream in which her dead brother, Dinocrates, is healed of his facial cancer (*Passio* 7.1–8.4). Perhaps the martyrs’ intercessory power is thus being emphasized.

²¹ In the previous line Perpetua had complained of the ‘extortion of the soldiers’ (*concussurae militum*) (*Passio* 3.6).

²² B. Sowers, ‘*Pudor et dedecus*: rhetoric of honor and shame in Perpetua’s *Passio*’, *JECS* 23 (2015), 363–88, at 383–7 characterized Perpetua’s dealings with authority figures in the texts as adversarial *agōnes*; see likewise Cooper (n. 15). Pudens is an important exception.

²³ *iam* could also have the force here of ‘even’: ‘even the *optio carceris* himself was now a believer!’

²⁴ Strangely, both Heffernan (n. 1), 357, 360 and M.K.K. Ng, ‘The urban cohorts’ (Diss., Royal Holloway, 2008), 219 consider the Pudens of Perpetua’s hand (9.1) and the Editor’s Pudens

are in the midst of their passion in the arena. Saturus and Pudens ‘the soldier’ (*Pudentem militem*) are standing within one of the arena gates, and the martyr exhorts the soldier to greater faith and courage. Saturus tells Pudens that everything is occurring as foretold: and that he must believe now ‘with all your heart (*de toto corde credas*) that I will go out there and be felled by a single leopard’s bite’ (*Passio* 21.1). As predicted, Saturus is then mortally wounded by the leopard; before he succumbs, the martyr speaks again to *Pudens miles*: ‘Farewell, and remember the faith and me (*memento fidei et mei*); and may these things not disturb you (*haec te non conturbent*), but strengthen you (*sed confirmet*)’ (*Passio* 21.4). The Editor then narrates (*Passio* 21.5):

At the same time, he asked for the ring from Pudens’ finger, and having dipped it in his own wound (*uulneri suo mersam*), he handed it back to him as a legacy (*hereditatem*), leaving it to him as a pledge (*pignus*) and a blood memory (*memoriam sanguinis*).

Bearing in mind the text’s claim to material authenticity (that is, that the text preserves words written by Perpetua’s own hand), Pudens’ role is implicitly central to the existence of the narrative. As scholars have noted, Perpetua’s ‘prison diary’ is not a diary—it is not a day-by-day account of her ordeal, but a narrative, written at a single point in time, recounting her experience in a coherent thread up to that point.²⁵ She tells us herself that the narrative was written on the eve of the martyrs’ exhibition and execution in the arena (10.15). Whether the audience is supposed to imagine Perpetua physically writing her tale, or dictating it to someone, or simply recounting it to a visitor who then later recorded it in writing, the very existence of the narrative presupposes that at this point—shortly prior to her execution—there existed a line of communication between Perpetua and the outside world. It was Pudens who allowed this, admitting visitors to see the martyrs (9.1). As noted above, Perpetua mentions that deacons had previously been able to reach her by bribing the guards of the first prison in which she was held (3.7), but at that point Perpetua had not written her story. Once tried and condemned by the governor, they were moved to a new prison—the *carcer castrensis*, the ‘camp prison’ (7.9)—and the visitors’ access was cut off. It is Pudens who re-establishes the link. Following the internal logic of the text, there could be no *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* without him.²⁶

This implicit role as facilitator of the circulation of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* continues in the section written by the anonymous Editor, in which Pudens serves as a silent witness. This is particularly evident in his final appearance in chapter 21: his private exchange with the dying Saturus. Who else but Pudens witnessed this to report Saturus’ words? Who else but Pudens could have known, and relayed, that Saturus had given him a relic to keep? The very fact that Pudens received this gift—and that it

(16.4, 21.1, 21.4–5) to be different men. All references are clearly to the same character. Perpetua calls him *miles optio, praepositus carceris* (9.1). At 16.4, the Editor—though he does not use Pudens’ name—calls him *optio carceris*, a more technically precise formula than Perpetua’s usage (see Section IV below). We are told here that he is ‘now’, *iam*, a believer—showing that we are already supposed to have met the character. In chapter 21, he is called *Pudens miles* (again corresponding to Perpetua’s reference at 9.1), and he is characterized as a recent convert. Heffernan (n. 1) in fact elsewhere (52, 244) does seem to suggest that the same character is meant. Bastiaensen in Bastiaensen et al. (n. 1), 442 and Amat (n. 1), 248, 258 note the progressive stages of his Christian conviction during his multiple appearances.

²⁵ See the discussion at Heffernan (n. 7).

²⁶ As part of her attack on the authenticity of the text, E. Muehlberger, ‘Perpetual adjustment: the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* and the entailments of authenticity’, *J ECS* 30 (2022), 313–42, at 329 asks: ‘How were the things she wrote preserved during her confinement and smuggled out and copied?’ This misses the implicit role of Pudens. There was no need to smuggle anything: the prison commander had granted visitor access.

was explicitly to be a ‘pledge’ (*pignus*)²⁷ and an object of remembrance (*memoria*)—implies that Pudens would now become one of the members of the Carthaginian Christian community: the same community which produced and circulated the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* itself.

I am not arguing, necessarily, that Pudens ‘really’ witnessed these things, and ‘really’ became a member of the Carthaginian Christian community. Whether or not his role here was invented by the Editor cannot be determined with our current evidence. Rather, this is how his character is mobilized in the text. Not only does he receive a pledge, but his very presence is a pledge of the veracity of the narrative the Editor reports. He is an eyewitness of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* who spoke with the martyrs at the very end, and who saw things which nobody but he would be able to report. In his mute acceptance of Satorus’ advice, he is also a stand-in for the audience, modelling the response which the Editor wishes from those who hear the story.²⁸ Do not be confounded by these things, but be strengthened; remember the martyrs. This is Satorus speaking to Pudens, but also the Editor speaking to the audience—as he does in very similar terms in his proem (*Passio* 1.5–6).²⁹ Tellingly, it bears close resemblance to the way in which he presents the baton being passed from Perpetua to himself, thus legitimating his continuation of the narrative: ‘we shall carry out the decree (*mandatum*) of the most sacred Perpetua, indeed her bequest (*fideicommissum*)’ (16.1); the same legally inflected language of legacies and commitments is used for Satorus’ final interaction with Pudens (*reddidit ei hereditatem, pignus relinquens illi et memoriam sanguinis*) (21.5).

This apparently minor character, then, plays a major narrative role. He allows Perpetua’s words to be heard; he witnesses the deaths of the martyrs and guarantees the truth of the final account; and he represents the audience in hearing and remembering the martyrs’ passion, described in language which coheres with the Editor’s characterization of his *own* mission.

This also suggests the Editor’s efforts to make his contribution mesh with Perpetua’s. Pudens’ persistence across the varied textures of the narrative—from the moving authenticity of Perpetua’s ‘own’ hand to the novelistic continuation of the Editor—suggests an attempt to weave them together and provide a sense of continuity, as if the Editor is leveraging aspects of Perpetua’s narrative for his own authorial credibility. If the Editor was worried that his audience might find his section less convincing than Perpetua’s, then the re-emergence of Pudens—a character whom Perpetua had introduced and vouched for—and his implicit role as witness may have been calibrated to assuage this. Just as Perpetua’s character was picked up and developed by the Editor, so was Pudens’; he is part of the attempt to lend this textual hodgepodge coherence. Pudens’ mobilization gives us a glimpse into the process of fitting the story together.

²⁷ A *pignus* is a legally binding pledge, usually financial, often a security for a loan (*Dig.* 13.7). Tertullian sometimes uses it as part of his characteristic application of Roman legal terms to Christian matters, e.g. *De carn.* 6.5, 51.2.

²⁸ On the liturgical contexts of *Passiones*, see R. Darling Young, *In Procession before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity* (Milwaukee, 2001).

²⁹ He presents his narrative for the benefit of those who are suffering from weakness or hopelessness in their faith (*imbecillitas aut desperatio fidei*), so that those of the audience who were present at the martyrdom may remember God’s glory (*qui interfuistis rememoremini gloriae Domini*), and those who are just now hearing it may enter *communio* with the martyrs.

II. THE TRIBUNE

There is another military figure in the narrative: the *tribunus* mentioned twice in the Editor's conclusion (and nowhere else). His presence is plausible as the commander of the urban cohort garrisoned in Carthage (see Section IV)—and thus the commandant of the camp which contained the *carcer castrensis*, as well as Pudens' superior.

Upon taking over the narrative, the Editor tells us that the tribune 'dealt with [the martyrs] more harshly' (*castigatius eos castigaret*), since, on the advice of 'very empty-headed men' (*homines uanissimi*), he had developed the fear that they would be whisked out of the prison by magic.³⁰ Perpetua addressed this outrage 'to his face' (*in faciem*) (*Passio* 16.3):

Why do you not allow us—undoubtedly the most noble prisoners, that is, prisoners of Caesar, who are to fight in the arena on his birthday—to refresh ourselves (*refrigerare*)? Would it not increase your renown (*aut non tua gloria est*) if we were exhibited there in a better condition (*pinguiore*)?

The tribune was 'horrified and embarrassed' (*horruit et erubuit*), and ordered that they should be better treated, and that 'their brothers and others' should have the opportunity of entering the prison and refreshing themselves with them (*facultas . . . introeundi et refrigerandi cum eis*). It is at the end of this passage that the Editor tells us that the *optio carceris* is now a believer (16.4).

The Editor pairs the tribune and Pudens here, both by mentioning them in proximity and by making it clear that the rights which the tribune revoked—and then reinstated—were those which Pudens had granted the martyrs previously. Both Perpetua (9.1) and the Editor (16.3–4) use the verb *refrigero* to describe the better treatment the martyrs are seeking. Second, though the tribune's actions are cruel, the Editor is careful to blame the advice he has received.³¹ Importantly, the tribune reverses his actions, and feels shame. Like Pudens, he gains a higher opinion of Perpetua through interaction with her, and unlike the other male authority figures in the story—Perpetua's father and the governor—he responds to her bold words with reflection and flexibility.³²

A similar episode occurs a few chapters later, when the condemned are lined up outside the arena. Mockery is added to the martyrs' execution: the men are dressed as priests of Saturn, the women as priestesses of Ceres (*Passio* 18.4).³³ Perpetua again opposes the tribune. Her spirit resisted to the end (*in finem . . . repugnauit*): 'We came here by our own volition, on the condition that our freedom (*libertas*) not be abolished; and we handed over our lives (*animam nostram*) that we would not be made to do anything of this sort' (*Passio* 18.5). Once again, the tribune caves: 'injustice recognized justice (*agnouit iniustitia iustitiam*): the tribune agreed (*concessit tribunus*); they were to be brought in dressed simply, just as they were' (*Passio* 18.6).

³⁰ See J. Bremmer, *Maidens, Magic and Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Tübingen, 2017), 435–6 for a discussion of magical prison escapes in ancient literature.

³¹ This is a rhetorical tactic employed in antiquity when a ruler's actions are criticized without wishing to offend the ruler; see P.S. Davies, 'The origin and purpose of the persecution of AD 303', *JThS* 40 (1989), 66–94, at 85–6 for the Judaeo-Christian mobilization of the motif.

³² These episodes have been interpreted largely as 'victories' for Perpetua over the vanquished tribune (e.g. Sowers [n. 22], 384–5 followed by Gold [n. 7], 43, 118, 148), but the malleable attitude of the tribune deserves comment, as noted by Heffernan (n. 1), 311.

³³ On this practice, see the classic study of K. Coleman, 'Fatal charades: Roman executions staged as mythological enactments', *JRS* 80 (1990), 44–73.

We should not let the characterization of the tribune as ‘injustice’ (*iniustitia*) for the sake of a wordplay³⁴ obscure the fact that, again, the Editor has shown us this Roman officer agreeing with Perpetua’s demand. The Editor here wants to narrate Perpetua’s bravery and *parrhēsia* in his own words, as he had earlier in chapter 16. Naturally, this is the main focus of these two passages: Perpetua speaks *in faciem* of the tribune, she resists *in finem*, she is *generosa illa* (‘that noble woman’), she defends her *libertas* and that of her fellow-prisoners.³⁵ But, as before, the nameless tribune has a part to play, acquiescing to her demands in a way nobody else in the story has.

Another parallel between the tribune and Pudens is the use of a verb of recognition. In 9.1, Pudens is described as recognizing—*intelligens*—the martyrs’ virtue. Here, the tribune recognized—*agnouit*—Perpetua’s justice, *iustitia*. For the Editor, Pudens and the tribune are clearly a pair. They perform similar functions, both symbols of Roman authority who are won over by Perpetua. Arguably, it is another attempt by the Editor to interlink Perpetua’s text and his own.³⁶

III. RECOGNITION

Official Roman recognition of Christian virtue is a common feature of early Christian literature. Governors are sometimes presented in this way, most notably Pontius Pilate.³⁷ There is a limit to how far the presentation of friendly governors can be taken in the martyr narratives—with a fully sympathetic governor, there would be no martyrs. However, more junior Roman officials, typically soldiers, could be deployed in this way without threatening the core requirement that the martyrs actually be martyred.

Laurie Brink has argued that in the New Testament—and particularly in the apologetically minded Luke-Acts—Roman officers are presented as ideal disciples who perceive Christ’s power and justice.³⁸ Perpetua’s tribune recalls Claudius Lysias, another tribune (χιλίαρχος) who is commander of the Jerusalem garrison in Acts. He takes Paul into protective custody and, like the *tribunus* of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, initially seems an antagonist, ordering his men to flog Paul. However, he becomes afraid (έφοβήθη) after realizing (έπιγινούς) that Paul is a Roman citizen (Acts 22:29). This leads him to wish to know (βουλόμενος γινώναι) why the Jews want to kill Paul (22:30), and he redoubles his protective efforts. When he is informed of a plot against Paul, he orders a large contingent of troops to ‘safely deliver’ (διασώσωσι) Paul to Felix, the governor

³⁴ Bastiaensen in Bastiaensen et al. (n. 1), 445 focusses on the wordplay here and on how the contrast justifies Perpetua’s demand, rather than on what is actually being communicated—the flexibility of a Roman officer. Bremmer (n. 30), 414–15 reads this phrase (*agnouit iniustitia iustitiam*) as an example of the Editor’s ‘epigrammatic style’.

³⁵ For the contemporary adoption of traditional Roman virtues by Christian martyrs—also in a Carthaginian context—see Tertullian’s *To the Martyrs*, with B. Kolbeck, ‘Doing justice? Christians, courts, and constructions of empire’ (Diss., King’s College London, 2022), 95–6. Tertullian was traditionally thought to be the Editor of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*; consensus is now against this proposition.

³⁶ Ronse (n. 17), 302 appears similarly sceptical about the motivations behind the Editor’s continuation.

³⁷ B. Kolbeck, ‘Pontius’ conscience: Pilate’s afterlives and apology for empire in John Chrysostom’s Antioch’, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 17 (2024), 3–34.

³⁸ L. Brink, *Soldiers in Luke-Acts: Engaging, Contradicting, and Transcending Stereotypes* (Tübingen, 2014).

(23:19–25).³⁹ While his actions are partly self-interested, being afraid of the repercussions for abusing a Roman citizen, Luke presents this as merely the initiation of Lysias' progressively increasing regard for Paul, rather than his sole motivation. By the end of the process he is so convinced by Paul's case that he sends a letter to Felix affirming that Paul has done nothing deserving death or incarceration (23:26–30).⁴⁰ His actions conform with those of the centurions Cornelius (Acts 10:1–8, 23–48) and Julius (27:43), who show regard for Christian faith and figures.

Such examples proliferate in later texts. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the Jews of Smyrna petition the governor not to release the body of the martyr, physically resisting Christian attempts to retrieve it (*Mart. Pol.* 17). But a centurion (ὁ ἑκατοντάρχης in Eusebius' quotation of the *Martyrdom* in *Hist. eccl.* 4.15.42–3, and ὁ κεντυρίων in manuscripts of the text itself), 'having recognized the Jews' love of strife' (ἰδὼν ... τὴν τῶν Ἰουδαίων γενομένην φιλονεικίαν), brought the body out publicly (θεὶς αὐτὸν ἐν μέσῳ) and had him cremated (ἔκαυσεν, *Mart. Pol.* 18). This allows the Christians to recover the martyr's remains, enabling them in turn to 'celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom' (ἡμέρα γενέθλιος) (*Mart. Pol.* 19). This centurion (likely a *regionarius*) is another perceptive officer—again characterized with a verb of perception, ὁράω—who, like Pudens in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, plays a role in facilitating the cultivation of the martyrs' memory.

In Pontius' *Life of Cyprian*, a soldier is said to have previously been a Christian and to have offered the condemned bishop a change of clothes; Pontius suggests that he wished to possess Cyprian's dirty garments as a relic (16.6), recalling Pudens' role in preserving blood mementos of the earlier martyrdom (Pontius had read the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*).⁴¹ Pontius also praises the 'gentle custody' (*custodia delicata*) of a military officer with whom Cyprian was lodged (*Vit. Cypr.* 15.5; cf. the parallel passage in *Acta Cypriani* 2.2–4). The *Martyrdom of Bishop Fructuosus and the Deacons Augurius and Eulogius*—another African martyr text describing the Valerianic persecution—specifies that Fructuosus' speech before his death in the amphitheatre was made so that the *beneficiarii*, the soldier police who had arrested him, could also hear (*Mart. Fruct.* 4.1). Like Pudens, they are presented as witnesses of Christian virtue; the author strengthens the value of their witness by reminding the reader that the opening of the text recorded their names (*Mart. Fruct.* 1.2). In Dionysius of Alexandria's letters about the Decian persecution in his city, a soldier named Besas opposes the hostility of the pagan mob towards the martyrs being paraded through the streets (Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.15), and a group or unit of soldiers (τι σὺνταγμα στρατιωτικόν) disrupt a trial when they see a Christian wavering before the tribunal (*Hist. eccl.* 6.41.22–3). Eusebius preserves a similar story in his own words about another soldier, Basilides, who protects the Alexandrian martyr Potamiaena (*Hist. eccl.* 6.5.2–4). In the Latin recension of the *Acts of Phileas*, a tribune named Philoromus castigates the crowd attempting to turn the bishop

³⁹ On Lysias, see C.H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Macon, 2005), 187–97 and Brink (n. 38), 118.

⁴⁰ Cf. the similar language of Pilate on Jesus' non-guilt at Luke 23:4, 14 and especially 22.

⁴¹ C. Mohrmann and A.A.R. Bastiaensen, *Vite dei Santi: Vita di Cipriano, Vita di Ambrogio, Vita di Agostino* (Milan, 1972), xvi–xviii; E. Jurissevich, 'Le prologue de la *Vita Cypriani* versus le prologue de la *Passio Perpetuae*', in A. D'Anna and C. Zamagni (edd.), *Cristianesimi nell'antichità: fonti, istituzioni, ideologie a confronto* (Hildesheim, 2007), 131–48. Blood is an important aspect of both accounts: Saturus handed Pudens a ring dipped in his blood as a *memoria sanguinis*, and Pontius says that the ex-Christian *tesserarius* 'wished ... to possess the bloody sweat (*sudores* ... *sanguineos possideret*) of the martyr' (text Mohrmann and Bastiaensen [this note]).

from the path to martyrdom, and is executed (*Act. Phil.* 7.1–10).⁴² Finally, in the *Passion of St Athenogenes*,⁴³ soldiers in the service of the governor of Cappadocia refuse to arrest Athenogenes after he feeds them. Athenogenes commands them to do as they have been ordered, asking only that they wait until he is beyond the borders of his town before fettering him (*Pass. Ath.* 17–18). Their reaction to the martyr's steadfastness and kindness in the face of persecution and their offer to set him free contrast with the governor Agricolanus' increasing frustration when faced with those same characteristics (34–6). This catalogue is not exhaustive but demonstrates that such inserts are not uncommon.⁴⁴

Soldier characters such as Pudens are therefore used in martyr texts to confer 'external' validation on Christians, and to undercut the social stigma implied by persecutorial narratives. This may be placed alongside similar tactics, such as the framing of several Christian martyr narratives as Roman court documents. That early Christian apologetic literature regularly tries to find Roman support for the Christian cause, and to suggest an essential congruence between Roman and Christian identities, has been well explored;⁴⁵ this tendency is most fulsomely on display in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*.⁴⁶ It is less well recognized that these elements appear in the martyr literature as well, which is usually regarded as anti-imperial or anti-Roman. In fact, placing these tactics within a broader context allows us to see that they correspond to a widespread desire in early Christian literature to be positively recognized by Roman authority. The fact that we can see this process in martyr texts—which are pitched as intended for 'internal' Christian consumption—shows that it corresponds to the identity needs and anxieties of the authors and the audience of the texts themselves. In other words, this is not a cynical attempt to make Christianity palatable to outsiders. Carthage, of course, was a Roman colony; the Editor and his congregation were Romans as well as Christians. Moreover, soldiers likely represented the most visible representatives of the state. Christians of this period could not imagine a Christian emperor;⁴⁷ but characters such as Pudens represented a hope that persecution might not be inevitable.

Their use in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, particularly by the Editor (who betrays more concern for issues of social status than does Perpetua herself), may also represent a riposte to criticisms that Christians felt they were open to, perhaps specifically concerning characters such as Perpetua. In contemporary texts, Christians are characterized as death-mad, deluded, low-class and associated with magic.⁴⁸

⁴² In some manuscripts, he is called a *uir quidam agens turmam militum Romanorum*, which establishes that by *tribunus* a military tribune is meant. The corresponding section of the Greek papyrus is missing, but the reference to the episode by Eusebius—who calls Philoromus an imperial officer possessing a military guard—confirms the tradition (*Hist. eccl.* 8.9.7).

⁴³ The dramatic date is Diocletianic (303/4) and A. Laniado, 'Hilarios Pyrrhachas et la *Passion de Saint Athénogène de Pédachthoé* (BHG 197b)', *Revue des Études Byzantines* 53 (1995), 279–84 argues that it was written relatively shortly after the events described. For the text: P. Maraval, *La Passion inédite de S. Athénogène de Pédachthoé en Cappadoce* (BHG 197b) (Brussels, 1990).

⁴⁴ The military martyrs could be considered here too, but their overriding status as Christian saints places them in a different category, and there is no space to do them justice in this article.

⁴⁵ e.g. Kolbeck (n. 35), *passim*.

⁴⁶ See J. Corke-Webster, *Eusebius and Empire: Constructing Church and Rome in the Ecclesiastical History* (Cambridge, 2019).

⁴⁷ Tert. *Apol.* 21.24.

⁴⁸ J. Engberg, 'Condemnation, criticism and consternation: contemporary pagan authors' assessment of Christians and Christianity', in J. Engberg, A.-C. Jacobsen and J. Ulrich (edd.), *In Defence of Christianity: Early Christian Apologists* (Frankfurt am Main, 2014), 201–27 for a summary. On death-madness, see Marcus Aurelius, *Med.* 11.3. Lucian presents Christians as easily

The highlighted position of women in early Christian stories did not escape notice either and, considering magical associations, could lead to imputations of witchcraft.⁴⁹ Though the reaction of some Christian authors and editors to this criticism was to accept the charge that theirs was a religion which appealed to the have-nots and required no sophistry to understand,⁵⁰ others attempted to refute the suggestion. For example, various elements of the Pastoral epistles exhort female Christians to comport themselves respectably. The Editor of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* also engages with this control of female Christian reputations, seeking to excise some of the more risqué gender and status connotations of Perpetua's text, while maintaining her as an exemplar of traditionally male virtues. He does this by insisting on her education, social status and good marriage (*Passio* 2.1)—despite the absence of a husband from Perpetua's text and other suggestions of a lower status⁵¹—and through emphasizing her feminine modesty and female body in the arena in graphic detail (*Passio* 20.1–2, 4–5) in contrast to Perpetua's own disregard for styling herself as a *matrona*.⁵²

The same impulse can be seen in the Editor's presentation of the confrontations between Perpetua and the tribune. He presents the suggestion of Perpetua's magical competence as ridiculous, a fear kindled in the tribune's heart by the intercession of *homines uanissimi* (*Passio* 16.2)—decisively disproved by the fact that the tribune, an equestrian,⁵³ sees the sense of her objection and dismisses the idea. Moreover, the language of nobility is deployed to characterize Perpetua in both of her debates with the tribune: in the first, she claims that the martyrs should be regarded as 'the most noble of the condemned' (*noxii nobilissimi*, *Passio* 16.3) since their executions are intended for the celebration of the emperor's birthday, and in the second, the Editor calls Perpetua *generosa* (ἡ εὐγενεστάτη in the Greek translation), 'well-born', 'noble' (*Passio* 18.4).

manipulated at *Peregr.* 11–16. For magic, see M. Kahlos, 'The Early Church', in D.J. Collins, S.J. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West* (Cambridge, 2015), 148–82. On the negative associations of Christianity (including magic) which are potentially reflected by Apuleius, see V. Schmidt, 'Reaktionen auf das Christentum in den *Metamorphosen* des Apuleius', *VChr* 51 (1997), 51–71.

⁴⁹ See, in general, M.Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of Hysterical Women* (Cambridge, 1996). Women often appear in negative pagan images of Christianity: see, for example, Schmidt (n. 48), identifying the miller's wife in Book 9 of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* as a Christian; cf. also J.-M. Demarolle, 'Les femmes chrétiennes vues par Porphyre', *JbAC* 13 (1970), 42–7.

⁵⁰ e.g. the acceptance of the appellation 'barbarian' found in the Greek apologists (S.E. Anatova, *Barbarian or Greek? The Charge of Barbarism in Early Christian Apologetics* [Leiden, 2018]) and the self-presentation as uneducated (A. Hilton, *Unlettered Apostles: Uneducated Early Christians* [London, 2018]).

⁵¹ e.g. Hilarius ordering that Perpetua's father be beaten at *Passio* 6.5, which, if he were really a member of the local elite and thus a *honestior* (he has often been described as a decurion), would be a transgression. Some scholars have struggled to explain this; the easiest solution is that Perpetua's family was not as well-to-do as the Editor claims. The same has happened with the missing husband, including the suggestions that Perpetua was a widow (Bremmer [n. 30], 358) and that Satorius was her husband (C. Osiek, 'Perpetua's husband', *JECs* 10 [2002], 287–90). Cooper (n. 15), 686, 688–90 points out that these are indications of lower status than is claimed by the Editor.

⁵² Most obviously, her dream in which she becomes a man: *Passio* 10.7.

⁵³ As demonstrated below (Section IV), this man is a tribune of the *cohors I urbana* in Carthage. An inscription from Rome records an early-third-century *tribunus cohortis I urbanae*, set up by his brother, an equestrian. Tribunes of the urban cohorts in Rome drew a salary of 25,000 *denarii* and were regularly promoted to the tribunate of the praetorian cohorts: H. Freis, *Die cohortes urbanae* (Cologne and Graz, 1967), 81–4. One tribune of the cohort stationed in Carthage in the first century—C. Velius Rufus—later became *procurator provinciae Pannoniae* (*AE* 1903, 368 = *ILS* 9200). Similarly, Cn. Pompeius Proculus, who was tribune of the *cohors I urbana* in the late first or early second century went on to be *procurator Ponti et Bithyniae* (*CIL* 6.1627).

In presenting Perpetua as a noblewoman who earns the respect of high-status Romans (Pudens, too, would become a *honestior* on discharge),⁵⁴ the narrative implicitly disproves accusations that Christianity was a religion of easily led, low-class women and magicians. Along similar lines, it is suggestive how often the soldier characters surveyed here are presented as protecting Christians from public humiliation, undercutting the social ostracism involved in this historically attested Roman penal practice.⁵⁵

This does not mean that the text should be read as ‘apology’ in the narrow sense, that is, directed to an external audience to disprove charges against Christianity. Rather, again, it gives us an insight into an insecurity—the Editor’s insecurity that these sorts of claims made about his religion were plausible.

IV. AUTHENTICITY

In this final section, I wish to move on from the world that the text creates, and towards the context of early-third-century Carthage with which the text engages. I suggest that with these military characters the text makes specific references to units and ranks that would have been recognizable to an early-third-century Carthaginian audience. As above, this should not be read as a claim about the historicity of Pudens (or the tribune) as described in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. Instead, it first fleshes out and concretizes the suggestions made above about the use of these characters as witnesses for Christianity in general and for the text’s narrative in particular. These are not just *any* Roman officials who recognized the power and justice of the Christian martyrs: they held offices which the text’s primary audience would themselves likely recognize. Second, this rhetorical manoeuvre and the specific local knowledge with which it is accomplished suggest that the text was indeed composed when and where it claims to be: in third-century Carthage.

The term used by the Editor to refer to Pudens—*optio carceris*—was a rank apparently restricted in use to the cities of Rome, Lyon (Lugdunum) and Carthage. Moreover, chronologically, it seems to have been used during the Principate but not in Late Antiquity.

I have found eleven inscriptions which use the term *optio carceris*,⁵⁶ and another two which instead use *optio custodiarum*. The two *optiones custodiarum* are legionary soldiers: one from the late first century A.D. in the *Legio I Adiutrix* (CIL 13.6739 = ILS 2436 = AE 1945, 86) and one from A.D. 201 in the *Legio XIII Gemina* (CIL 3.15191).⁵⁷ All of the *optiones carceris*, on the other hand, belong to the praetorian cohorts, the urban cohorts or the *uigiles*. We know of five praetorian *optiones carceris* (CIL 6.39455 =

⁵⁴ See Arrius Menander, *Dig.* 49.18.1 and Marcian, *Dig.* 49.18.3 *ueteranis et liberis ueteranorum idem honor habetur, qui et decurionibus*. On status distinctions under the Principate, see P. Garnsey, ‘Legal privilege in the Roman empire’, *P&P* 41 (1968), 3–24.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of humiliation as part of Roman penal practice, including the *tribunus* in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, see M. Peachin, ‘Attacken und Erniedrigungen als alltägliche Elemente der kaiserzeitlichen Regierungspraxis’, in R. Haensch and J. Heindrichs (edd.), *Herrschen und Verwalten. Der Alltag der römischen Administration in der Hohen Kaiserzeit* (Vienna, 2007), 117–25.

⁵⁶ These eleven inscriptions record a total of eighteen, probably nineteen, individuals: five praetorian soldiers, at least ten (but probably eleven) among the *uigiles*, and three men of the urban cohorts.

⁵⁷ A. von Domaszewski and B. Dobson, *Die Rangordnung des römischen Heeres* (Bonn, 1967²), 46.

AE 1914, 253; CIL 9.8448 = ILS 9069 = AE 1894, 33; AE 1983, 48; *Corpus des inscriptions grecques et latines de Philippos* 2.1.7.4; ZPE 71, 177 = AE 1990, 896 [*optio ad carcerem*]);⁵⁸ at least ten, and likely eleven, *optiones carceris* from the cohort roll-call lists of the *uigiles* at Rome (CIL 6.1056 = 3777 = 4320 = ILS 2156; CIL 6.1057 = 31234 = ILS 2157; likely CIL 6.2406);⁵⁹ and finally three *optiones carceris* from the urban cohorts—two who seemed to have served at Rome (CIL 6.531 = ILS 3739; CIL 9.1617 = ILS 2117)⁶⁰ and one from the *cohors XIII urbana* when it was stationed in Lyon from the second century (CIL 13.1833 = ILS 2126).⁶¹ This suggests that *optio carceris* was not simply a historically plausible rank used by Roman units contemporary with the dramatic date of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. Rather, it was apparently a rank *exclusively* used by the bodies of troops which had policing functions at Rome—the praetorians, the *uigiles* and the urban cohorts.⁶² This rank was therefore also used by the urban cohorts which were stationed in provincial cities, as the inscription from Lyon shows.

Carthage was provided with one of these urban cohorts, an ‘honour’ it shared only with Lyon as a provincial city.⁶³ The *cohors XIII urbana* was stationed at Carthage in the first and early second centuries A.D., while the *cohors I urbana* was barracked at Lyon. These cohorts swapped positions in the first half of the second century, and from that point the *cohors I* called Carthage its home.⁶⁴

While most authorities have assumed that Pudens was a member of the urban cohort,⁶⁵ this could not previously be stated conclusively since Carthage was also garrisoned by a detached cohort of the *Legio III Augusta* whose main base was at

⁵⁸ On this rank among the praetorians, see M. Durry, *Les cohortes prétoriennes* (Rome, 1968²), 103, who places them below regular *optiones*.

⁵⁹ These are early-third-century inscriptions. CIL 6.1056 is a roll-call of the first cohort of the *uigiles*, while CIL 6.1057 is of the fifth. CIL 6.2406 is a fragment and the unit is not preserved. On this rank amongst the *uigiles*, see R. Sablayrolles, *Libertinus miles: Les cohortes de vigiles* (Rome, 1996), 225–6, arguing for three *optiones carceris* and three *carcerarii* as assistants in each cohort. The rank is placed between *secutor tribuni* and *beneficiarius tribuni*, and below *optio* proper.

⁶⁰ This second man, C. Luccius Sabinus, though later adlected to the service of the urban prefect under Hadrian, initially served in the *cohors I urbana*, either in Lyon or in Carthage. Ng (n. 24), 62 thinks Carthage, while Freis (n. 53), 71 thinks Lyon.

⁶¹ Freis (n. 53), 86. As above, the man described at CIL 9.1617 may also have been at Lyon when he was *optio carceris*.

⁶² Pace Letteney and Larsen (n. 16), 95, misled by the assumption of R. Cagnat, *L'Armée romaine d'Afrique et l'occupation militaire de l'Afrique sous les empereurs* (Paris, 1913), 168–9 that *optio carceris* was the general term for the prison commander. Similarly, Bastiaensen in Bastiaensen et al. (n. 1), 430 presents both *optio carceris* and *optio custodiarum* as analogous terms for prison commandants without distinguishing between different kinds of units. However, Breeze (n. 18) notes the restriction of the term to the Roman garrisons, as does C. Bruun, ‘*Caligatus, tubicen, optio carceris*, and the centurions’ positions; some remarks on an inscription in ZPE 71’, *Arctos* 22 (1988), 23–40, at 30–1.

⁶³ On the role and history of this unit, see Freis (n. 53), 33–6; Ng (n. 24), 132–54; C. Ricci, ‘*In custodiam urbis*: notes on the *cohortes urbanae* (1968–2010)’, *Historia* 60 (2011), 484–508, at 494–5. An inscription suggests that there may have been a detachment of *uigiles* stationed in Carthage too: Z.B. Ben Abdallah-Liliane Ennabli, ‘Listes militaires découvertes dans la basilique de Carthagenna’, *Epigraphica* 60 (1998), 135–64.

⁶⁴ Y. Le Bohec, N. Duval and S. Lancel, ‘Études sur la garnison de Carthage’, *Bulletin du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques* 1979–80 (1984), 33–89. See also E. Echols, ‘The provincial urban cohorts’, *CJ* 57 (1961), 25–8, who dates the swap to the period under Hadrian.

⁶⁵ e.g. Heffernan (n. 1), 52; G. Lopuszanski, ‘La police romaine et les Chrétiens’, *AC* 20 (1951), 5–46, at 41.

Lambaesis.⁶⁶ Now we can say with certainty: Pudens is presented as a member of the *cohors I urbana* then stationed in Carthage, and the tribune mentioned by the Editor was the cohort's commander.⁶⁷ Tantalizingly, a fragmentary third-century discharge list of the *cohors I urbana* from Carthage gives Pudens as the name of a soldier who began service in A.D. 200, three years prior to the dramatic date of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (CIL 8.12549).⁶⁸ Only his cognomen survives. He is described as *pr(inceps)*, which should normally mean *centurio princeps*, a centurion who served as chief-of-operations for his unit.⁶⁹

Thus, the use of *optio carceris* represents a mobilization of specific local knowledge. The Editor is the most precise here, but Perpetua's own words—*miles optio, praepositus carceris*—likewise show an awareness of Pudens' specific role. In a city such as Carthage, where the urban cohort had a major role in policing operations, it can be expected that the *optio carceris* was a visible and well-recognized element of the criminal justice system: anyone wishing to visit a prisoner in the *carcer castrensis* would have had to deal with him. Likewise, along with the proconsul, procurator and quaestor, the *tribunus* of the urban cohort would have been one of the highest-ranking Roman officials present in the city. The choice of these two figures as authenticating Perpetua's power and justice can therefore be read as a strategy of 'localization' in which the worldview of the text's audience is legitimated by authority figures they would themselves recognize.

Naturally, those with a high opinion of the text's historicity may view this as evidence that Pudens and the tribune are historical figures. Although I cannot rule this out, it is not necessary for my argument. However, this discussion does have implications for the text's authenticity because of the local knowledge displayed. The debate around this point has recently been energized by Ellen Muehlberger's fulsome attack on the scholarly assumptions of historicity from which most approaches begin.⁷⁰ She suggests that the text was produced in Late Antiquity—in the late fourth or fifth century—and not in the early third.

As the discussion in the earlier sections implies, I consider that the 'prison diary' segment and the Editor's conclusion were written by different people, and that the Editor believed the 'prison diary' segment to be genuine. This militates against the idea that the text is a wholesale late antique forgery. Moreover, many of the individual objections made by Muehlberger's article—for example her dismissal of the identification of the proconsul 'Timinianus' in the Latin text and of 'Oppianus' in the Greek with Minucius Opimianus,⁷¹ while at the same time passing over the identification of his replacement

⁶⁶ Le Bohec, Duval and Lancel (n. 64), 42, 50. Indeed, Amat (n. 1), 217 thought that Perpetua's *carcer castrensis* was administered by this unit.

⁶⁷ Pace R. Freudenberger, 'Der Anlass zu Tertullians Schrift *De corona militis*', *Historia* 19 (1970), 579–92, who at 587–8 considers the tribune the commander of the detached cohort of the *Legio III Augusta*; see likewise Amat (n. 1), 217.

⁶⁸ Freis (n. 53), 118, who dates the inscription to A.D. 220 (and names troops who began their service some twenty years prior); see also Le Bohec, Duval and Lancel (n. 64), 43–4. The potential connection to Pudens of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is noted at 57–8.

⁶⁹ M.P. Speidel, 'Princeps as title for *ad hoc* commanders', *Britannia* 12 (1981), 7–13. Pudens is a common name among soldiers, but it would be entirely plausible that a man who found himself *optio carceris* in the first few years of his service might retire two decades later a senior *centurio*. But without more information this must be left as the slenderest (if tantalizing) of historical connections.

⁷⁰ Muehlberger (n. 26).

⁷¹ While Muehlberger (n. 26) is justified in criticizing the reflex defence of authenticity which characterizes much scholarship on Perpetua, her dismissal of previous attempts to date the text appears equally predetermined. For example at 324 she writes: 'There is not a Minucius Timinianus or Oppianus or Opianus to be found in the relevant prosopography, but there was an Opimianus.'

Hilarianus with P. Aelius Hilarianus, attested as *procurator ducenarius* in Spain in the 190s⁷²—are unconvincing.

The use of the term *optio carceris* would seem to place the text not only in Carthage but in third-century Carthage. The urban cohorts, both at Rome and in Carthage, likely did not survive the reign of Constantine (the *cohors XIII* at Lyon had probably already been destroyed in the civil wars of 197).⁷³ When Constantine captured Rome in 312, he cashiered the praetorian guard for siding with Maxentius, and the Roman urban cohorts were likely included in this too, for when we do find references to urban cohorts or prefects in later evidence they have been transformed to civilian institutions.⁷⁴ The same is likely to have happened at Carthage, and the last we hear of the *cohors I urbana* is from an inscription under Constantine (*CIL* 8.24561); it is not listed in the fourth-century *Notitia Dignitatum*.⁷⁵ Nor did the *uigiles* survive the administrative upheavals of the early fourth century.⁷⁶ Finally, the term *optio* itself became antiquated and was overtaken by the equivalent term *magister* during the third century.⁷⁷

It seems unlikely that an author in the late fourth or fifth century, attempting to produce an authentic image of early-third-century Carthage, would have alighted upon the precise technical detail of the rank *optio carceris*—a rank restricted to that period, not used in Late Antiquity, exclusively employed by the urban garrisons of Rome with policing functions, and exported to a pair of provincial capitals. When late antique compositions attempt to evoke the Principate, they use either anachronistic or generalized administrative terms. The local knowledge presupposed by the use of *optio carceris*, on the other hand, seems to place the text in the period from which it claims to hail. To be sure, this is not a smoking gun but another internal indication of authenticity to be read alongside others, such as prosopographical considerations. That is not to say that the text

By conflating this person with the name mentioned in the *Passion*, Heffernan finds a historical handle to which the text can be tethered.’ The connection between Oppianus and Opimianus was made well before Heffernan’s study, and is based on a) the known governors of Africa in the early 200s, b) Tertullian’s reference to Perpetua, showing that the story’s dramatic date should be fixed in the same period (*De an.* 55.4), and c) the likely corruptions in the manuscript tradition(s), rather than on the speculative flight of fancy it appears here.

⁷² Tertullian mentions Hilarianus at *Ad Scap.* 3.1 amongst a catalogue of governors mostly associated with Africa, cementing the chronological inference. On Hilarianus, see A.R. Birley, ‘Persecutors and martyrs in Tertullian’s Africa’, in D.F. Clark, M.M. Roxan and J.J. Wilkes (edd.), *The Later Roman Empire Today* (London, 1993), 37–68, at 48–9; J. Rives, ‘The piety of a persecutor’, *J ECS* 4 (1996), 1–25; Bremmer (n. 30), 362; and Heffernan (n. 1), 49–50. Muehlberger (n. 26), 324 writes that Hilarianus ‘is one of six known elsewhere prosopographically’—thus implying any specific identification is speculative or insecure—with no references or attempt to control by chronology or rank. There are in fact five Hilariani listed in *PIR*: the Hilarianus from the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*; the procurator P. Aelius Hilarianus, generally regarded as the same man; a descendant of the same name who is not recorded as holding public office (*CIG* 2792–3); a Hilarianus who was an imperial freedman; and a P. Sicius Pescennius Hilarianus from an Utican inscription (*AE* 1905, 1), a *candidatus* of the addressee (this usually means that the addressee has put the dedicant forward for a post, commonly the centurionate—he is thus unlikely to have risen as far as ‘our’ Hilarianus). The entries for the Hilariani who held public posts in *PLRE* are all fourth century or later. An exploration of the possibilities shows that the identification is securer than the initial presentation implies.

⁷³ Ricci (n. 63), 493; Ng (n. 24), 142.

⁷⁴ Ng (n. 24), 204–10; W.G. Sinnigen, *The Officium of the Urban Prefecture during the Later Roman Empire* (Rome, 1957), 91–2, 100; Freis (n. 53), 19–22; P. Henman and M. Fenger, ‘Urban administration’, in B. Lancon (ed.), *Rome in Late Antiquity: Everyday Life and Urban Change* (Edinburgh, 2000), 45–56, at 46; A.M.H. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: 284–602, A Social and Economic Survey*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1964), 2.693.

⁷⁵ Ng (n. 24), 142–3; Freis (n. 53), 36.

⁷⁶ See J.S. Rainbird, ‘The *uigiles* of imperial Rome’ (Diss., Durham University, 1976), 453–6.

⁷⁷ Breeze (n. 18), 132.

is honest, or that we ‘really’ have access to Perpetua’s words. But, if it is a *Fälschung*, it seems to be one from third-century Carthage.

The final contribution of this discussion is another piece of evidence for the Latin priority of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* over its Greek counterpart. Most consider Latin the original language of composition,⁷⁸ although Louis Robert preferred the Greek owing to its greater technical precision when evoking a *pankration* in Perpetua’s final dream.⁷⁹ When it comes to Roman institutions, however, the Latin text is more precise,⁸⁰ and this includes references to Pudens and the tribune. The Greek author does not transliterate *optio carceris*, instead writing Πούδης τις στρατιώτης, ὁ τῆς φυλακῆς προϊστάμενος (*Passio* 9.1) and ὁ τῆς φυλακῆς προεστώς (16.4).⁸¹ Heffernan suggests that this was because the Greek author was translating the Latin and that, being removed from its original context, he did not know, or did not expect his audience to know, what an *optio* was.⁸² This is convincing, and is strengthened by the discussion above regarding the geographical and chronological limits of the term *optio carceris*. Indeed, the lack of interest or knowledge by the Greek translator in this detail of the Latin text (particularly, when he could have simply transliterated it) underscores the argument I made in this section—namely, that in the use of *optio carceris* we can glimpse the mobilization of local knowledge.

The Greek Editor’s references to the tribune (χiliάρχος) may also suggest posteriority. At *Passio* 7.9 we are told in the Latin text *transiimus in carcerem castrensem*, ‘We were transferred to the military prison’, while the Greek has κατήχθημεν εἰς τὴν ἄλλην φυλακὴν τὴν τοῦ χιλιάρχου, ‘We were transferred to another prison, that of the tribune.’ Heffernan suggests that the Greek is mistaken here, having confused the characters of Pudens and the tribune.⁸³ Strictly speaking, this is not a mistake. As above, Pudens should be understood as a member of the *cohors I urbana*, and the tribune as that cohort’s commander. He is therefore Pudens’ superior, ultimately in charge of the prison (and the rest of the camp) and the Greek Editor has correctly understood the text in rendering ‘military prison’ as ‘the prison of the tribune’. However, this insertion is metatextual: in the Latin narrative, the tribune has not yet been met: he does not appear in Perpetua’s ‘prison diary’ section, but is only mentioned by the Editor’s continuation. In calling the prison ‘that of the tribune’, then, the Greek translator is betraying that he has already read the entire text—which would not be possible if the Greek were the original. This agrees with the findings of linguistic studies which have suggested that, while the different sections of the Latin text were composed by different hands (that is, the Editor, Perpetua and Satorius), the Greek recension is the product of a single author.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ P. Franchi de’ Cavalieri, ‘La *Passio SS. Perpetuae et Felicitatis*’, in *Scritti agiografici, Vol. I: 1893–1900* (Vatican City, 1962), 41–155; Amat (n. 1), 51–66; Bremmer (n. 30), 353; C. Mazzucco, ‘Il rapporto tra la versione greca e la versione latina della *Passio Perpetuae*’, in V. Milazzo and F. Scorza Barvellona (edd.), *Bilinguismo e scritture agiografiche: Raccolta di studi* (Rome, 2018), 17–75, at 17–28; B.D. Shaw, ‘Doing it in Greek: translating Perpetua’, *Studies in Late Antiquity* 4 (2020), 309–45.

⁷⁹ L. Robert, ‘Une vision de Perpétue martyre à Carthage en 203’, *CRAI* 126 (1982), 228–76, at 254–6.

⁸⁰ e.g. Franchi de’ Cavalieri (n. 78), 59.

⁸¹ *optio* is met elsewhere in Greek transliteration in documentary evidence (*P.Oxy.* 4.735, 47.3366; *SEG* 31.1116) and literary texts (Plut. *Vit. Galb.* 24.1; Lydus, *Mag.* 1.46; Procop. *Vand.* 1.17).

⁸² Heffernan (n. 1), 88. Similarly, for Amat (n. 1), 60 this is a ‘traduction vague’, which suggests Latin priority.

⁸³ Heffernan (n. 1), 89.

⁸⁴ W.H. Shewring, ‘Prose rhythm in the *Passio S. Perpetuae*’, *JThS* 30 (1928), 56–7; Å. Fridh, *Le problème de la passion des saintes Perpétue et Félicité* (Gothenburg, 1968), 15–30; Gold (n. 7), 16.

Perpetua continued to be celebrated in Late Antiquity;⁸⁵ her jailer may also have been remembered. Though he is not mentioned in the later *Acts of Perpetua*, the sixth-century martyrological calendar of Carthage lists *III Kalendas Maias* as the feast day of *martyr Pudens* (Migne, *PL* 13.1219). Could this be our man? If so, there was once more to his story than our present vantage can reveal.

In any case, this study of two ‘supporting’ characters has suggested much about the conditions, interests and anxieties which lie behind the composition of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. These cohere around a fundamental concern with authenticity. Through his development of characters and themes introduced in Perpetua’s ‘prison diary’, we can trace the attempt of the Editor to authenticate his own narrative, and legitimize his continuation of a story which he considered worthy of veneration alongside scripture (*Passio* 1). Moreover, through the specific figures used, and the ways in which they are mobilized, we can see the attempt to demonstrate the idea that Christian martyrs were exemplars of spiritual power and justice: the truth of these claims about the martyrs was authenticated by Roman authority figures who would have been recognizable to the text’s Carthaginian audience. In turn, this suggests that we should be wary of assuming that martyr narratives are uniformly interested in narrating resistant or anti-Roman narratives. As I have shown here, they are often—counterintuitively—interested in narrativizing Roman support for Christianity, elements normally taken to be characteristic of apologetic literature.

Finally, and somewhat ironically, the fact that these strategies of authentication seem to rely on local knowledge suggests that the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is ‘authentic’ in so far as it was likely produced in third-century Carthage. The restriction of the term *optio carceris* to a handful of cities during the Principate—one of which is the setting for the narrative—has emerged as a vote of confidence in the traditional attribution of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* in terms of place and chronology. Naturally, not all will agree with this: debate over the narrative’s historicity and authenticity has excited equal passion in those who oppose the text’s claims (did Perpetua really write the ‘prison diary’?) as in those who accept them. Perhaps it is a mark of the success of the author(s) of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* in setting the agenda that, when we discuss this text, it is so often authenticity—a concept with which the text itself is so concerned—that emerges as the key interest.

Perpetua is a character, and a voice, so compelling that she threatens to overshadow the rest. But the minor and even the mute have a role to play in articulating this text’s meaning.

The University of Cambridge

BEN KOLBECK
bgrk2@cam.ac.uk

⁸⁵ See now L.S. Cobb and A.S. Jacobs, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas in Late Antiquity* (Oakland, 2021).