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**EARLY CHRISTIAN WOMEN WRITERS:
THE INTERESTING LIVES AND WORKS OF
FALTONIA BETITIA PROBA AND ATHENAIS-EUDOCIA**

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Early Christian Women Writers: Faltonia Betitia Proba and Athenais-Eudocia

In the past two decades scholarship regarding the participation of women in the formation of Christian religion has witnessed an almost complete revision. As women historians have entered the field in record numbers, new perspectives and questions have been brought to the forefront. At the same time, the continuous exploration for evidence of women's presence in previously neglected texts, have resulted in exciting new findings. For example, up to recent years only a few names were synonymous with this topic: Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, his disciple and the first witness to the resurrection, as well as Mary and Martha, the sisters who offered him hospitality in Bethany.¹ Today, primary sources along with historiography, have unveiled that women, despite facing restrictive opportunities to exercise their intellectual and literal skills, have bequeathed the church with a respectable literary and intellectual legacy.

Religion transgressed the rigid boundaries enshrined by sex roles, thus permitting women to take interest, study, and most importantly participate in Christian theology. Under the guise of religion, women were able to preserve their chastity, impart or manage finances, and affirm their opinions, consequently changing and shaping Christian doctrines. The profundity of such participation manifested itself not only directly, in ancient society, through these women's literal and charitable works, but also indirectly through secondary sources and the eyes of their male counterparts. With reference to the literal contributions of women, this essay will examine the lives and works of two women in particular, *Faltonia Betitia Proba* and *Athenais-Eudocia*, and discuss how these women changed not only religious doctrine but the society they lived in as well.

Although the volume of theological works produced by males far outnumbered those produced by females, there have been capable Christian women who have been

¹ Dray Stephen, *Women in the History of the Church: an examination of pre-Reformation Convictions and Practice*, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 9.

rather productive with the pen. Of these women, a rather unique contribution to Christian literature comes from Faltonia Betitia Proba.²

Faltonia Betitia Proba (c.320-370 AD)

Although little is known of the childhood and personal life of Faltonia Betitia Proba, her works have allowed scholars to date her birth and chronologically piece together parts of her life. Born to an aristocratic pagan family, in fourth century Rome, Faltonia Betitia Proba, lived the majority of her youth a pagan before converting to Christianity. A highly literate woman, she was extremely well versed in Greek and Latin languages, and well educated in classical writers, especially Virgil, whose works she admired, emulated and often memorized. Lines, ideas, meter and verse schemes from Virgil's *Bucolics*, the *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid*, for example, are often intertwined with her own works, with such precision that academia has trouble discerning the two authors. This fact however, should not be perceived as a lack of knowledge or originality, but rather as an indication of a highly cultured individual, and more importantly, as an uncommonly literate woman. In contrast, the synthesis of works, so to speak, fashionable at the time, was a stylistic method frequently used by Proba and her contemporaries. Seen most frequently in poetic works, *centos*, as John Piper explains had been composed since at least 100 CE and were produced "by piecing together lines from the works of another poet, resulting in an innovative poem with new content and a distinct theme".³ Proba wrote several works following this scheme including a Homeric cento, with verses taken from Homer, and her most notable, the cento *Virgilianus*.

The cento *Virgilianus* presents the Biblical story from creation up to the coming of the Holy Spirit. An avid aficionado of Virgil, Proba wrote the work borrowing from

² Lisa Bellan Boyer, "Conspicuous in their absence: Women in Early Christianity", *Cross Currents* Association for Religion and Intellectual Life: Vol. 53, Spring 2003, p. 48.

³ John Piper, Wayne A. Grudem, *Recovering biblical manhood and womanhood: a response to Evangelical feminism*, Good news publishers, 1991, p. 250.

the poet's *Aeneid*.⁴ Comprising an entire 694 lines, the first half of Proba's cento is allotted to the beginning of the Old Testament, or more precisely to the creation, the fall, the flood, and the exodus, while the second half retells the gospel story of Jesus. Through these works Proba's political, religious, and personal views are forcefully asserted. In the preface for example, satire is utilized to specify social grievances and her personal denunciation of Constantius. Although the first two lines seem pro-Constantinian: *iamdudum temerasse duces pia foedera pacis, regnandi miseros tenuit quos dira cupido*, a closer examination as R. P. H. Green indicates, reveals that the 'duces' have violated a state of peace and so look like the usurping forces.⁵ These subtle comparisons would have been easily recognizable in her day, as Constantius was known to have conspired and aligned with Magnentius, the murderer and usurper of the former Italian emperor.⁶ In addition to this bold and hostile comparison, triumph and prosperity was alluded to only in conjunction with Constantius' death, which suggested once again her disdain for the emperor. Such bold political statements not only contradicted social and gender norms, but could also jeopardize one's life. Proba and her candid allusions were seen both as a threat and as a powerful force. Reverberating through pagan and Christian society alike, the *cento* was carefully scrutinized and later declared apocryphal by Pope Gelasius I, for its criticism of the Italian emperor. Although it was not considered heretic, the poem was forbidden from public readings, attesting once again to its public sway.

More significant and courageous than Proba's candid criticism of her political superior in these allusions, was her attempt to promote a religion that had been under severe spasmodic persecution for over 250 years.⁷ From the preface alone, Proba vested herself as prophet, a function employed only by men, declared her religious affiliations, and consequently promoted Christianity by criticizing the wrongs of her godless ruler and pagan society:

*Once I wrote of leaders violating sacred tracts,
of those who cling to their terrible thirst for power;
of so many slaughters, the cruel campaigns of Kings,*

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 268.

⁵ R.P.H. Green, Proba's Cento: its date, purpose and reception. *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series. Vol. 45, No. 2, London, 1995, pp. 551-563.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

*of blood-brothers at battle, illustrious shields spattered
with kindred gore, trophies taken from would-be allies,
cities widowed once again of their countless peoples:
of these, I confess, I once wrote.
It is enough to record such evil.
Now, all-powerful God, take, I pray, my sacred song,
loosen the voices of your eternal, seven-fold
Spirit; unlock the innermost chambers of my heart,
that I, Proba, the prophet, might reveal its secrets.
Now I spurn the nectar of Olympus, find no joy
in calling down the Muses from their high mountain haunts;
not for me to spread the idle boast that rocks can speak,
or pursue the theme of laurelled tripods, voided vows,
the brawling gods of princes, vanquished votive idols:
Nor do I seek to extend my glory through mere words
or court their petty praise in the vain pursuits of men.
But baptised, like the blest, in the Castalian font -
I, who in my thirst have drunk libations of the Light -
now begin my song: be at my side, Lord, set my thoughts
straight, as I tell how Virgil sang the offices of Christ.⁸*

The preface as well as the 697-line *Cento*, are frank regarding the aristocrat's Christian inclination, notoriously elevating Christianity by depicting Jesus as the epic hero. Constructed entirely from lines of Virgil's verse the *Cento Vergilianus de laudibus Christi*, furnishes the heroic model after Aeneas. Much in the same manner in which Virgil appropriated the Homeric tradition for his own needs, so Proba adopts the Virgilian model of the hero in shaping her picture of Jesus. Renouncing the hostile themes of earlier epics, with horses, arms and wars, Proba invokes the Muses, and selects Jesus as protagonist, praising his *pietas*, while at the same time depicting the emperor as Christ's nemesis and stripping him of his supremacy. The crucifixion scene, particularly

⁸ <http://home.infionline.net/~ddisse/proba.html> , translated by Josephine Balmer; the Latin original is also given.

important in this respect, eradicates the image of 'the meek Jesus'. The Messiah's crucifixion is deplored by the *Cento*, while humanity's involvement in the act is threatened with retribution. The death of Jesus, no longer rendered sacrificial, mirrors the death of Aeneas, Virgil's classical hero, with Christ's wrath and threats of vengeance. Proba intentionally ended her *Cento* not with words of forgiveness, but rather with threats for the oppression the hero had endured. Through this simple gesture, Proba was clearly taking a political stand. Although the aristocrat could have easily praised the emperor's triumph, like most contemporaries of her time, she chose instead to undermine the ruler's power. As implacable threats loom and overshadow the scene, the monarch's sway is subjugated, his omnipotence stripped and thus, he is no longer the one to be feared. Aligning her work with biblical convictions, Proba reminds the audience that no man is to be placed above God, irrespective of the political office he holds. Such radical claims, clearly supported her credence and religious passion, without giving too much consideration to the potential peril her words attracted. As indicated by historical recordings, female punishment for religious stands was both popular and fierce, so it is unlikely that the young poet was unaware of the self threats her actions posed. The painful deaths of martyr women such as Perpetua and Felicity served as warnings, and attested to the torture, shame, and horror women suffered for contradicting their superiors and the social norms assigned to them by society. Through the juxtaposition of pagan vs pious, virtuous vs corrupt, and Jesus vs villain, Proba's cento bravely contradicted both.

These contrasts however, are not the sole place where political contradiction and religious support exist. Classic in form but Christian in content, the *cento* was pronounced a tool of grammatical instruction, a "Virgil without Gods".⁹ As centos seemed to have started as short school exercises, frequently humorous, sometimes off-color, they were popular and unthreatening. As such, a Christian like Proba could use their form to 'teach' without too blatantly seeming to preach. This elusiveness was increasingly more and more significant, as attempts were made to censor Christianity and its instruction within schools.

⁹ Sivan Hagith, *Ancient Women*, "The Cento of Proba and Aristocratic conversion in the Fourth Century", *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 47, No. 2, Brill Academic Publishers, 1993, p. 147.

During the reign of Emperor Julian and consequently during the chronology of Proba's time, Christians were assailed on three fronts: their mobility, their churches, and their freedom of worship. Christian contact with main stream society was policed, while pagan centers of worship were erected to rival those of the Christian populace. In addition legislation attempted to disenfranchise Christians both by taking away special exemptions and by prosecuting them for actively advocating their beliefs.

Subsections of the *Theodosian Code*¹⁰, for example, questioned the moral character of Christian teachers, while the words of Julian sternly denounced religious instruction "let them [Christians] go to the churches of the Galileans to expound Matthew and Luke".¹¹ By laying claim exclusively to grammar, diction, and style, Proba's *Cento* successfully and clandestinely excerpted the Bible, all the while evading and penetrating a stringently regulated educational system. Perceived as less rational, less informed and less persuasive, the *Cento*, despite its richness in Christian allusions, was permitted circulation in schools while other works similar in content were prohibited. In fact, the popularity and frequent use of Proba's *Cento* is attested to not only by manuscript records but also by the catalogues of numerous monastic libraries.¹² What seems imperative and bitter sweet to note, according to these records, is that not even Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, viewed as the blueprint for religious instruction, was as frequently used or cited in schools and social circles as Proba's *Cento*. The work's unpretentious diction and Virgilian style made it more accessible, while misogynistic views of the general public were, ironically, more tolerant towards her. Engaging in the stereotype of 'meek' female, her work was perceived as less of a threat than that of other male theologians, and as a result was granted circulation.

Through the cento and her literary skills, Proba contributed and altered conditions in her society more than most historians recognize. As the grammatical pretext of the cento glossed over religion, the blow emperor Julian intended for the Christian populace was evaded. Christian teachers remained in schools and astutely instructed students in their religious principles. Further, by creating a text that was geared specifically for

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Theodosianus, last update 01 March 2008

¹¹ R. P. H. Green, *op. cit.*, p. 556.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 557.

schools, Proba was ensuring that Christian dogma would be instilled in children, that a religious class would be preserved, and that new individuals would come to the forefront to protect the religion she attempted so desperately to guard.

However, one should not assume this woman's ideas, opinions and convictions went unchallenged. More often than not, emperor, scholars, and men within the religious realm went out of their way to eradicate her contributions and attempts to engage in spiritual debates. Most vehemently criticized by Jerome, in his letters to Paulinus of Nola, the Christian apologist and author of the *Vulgate*, strongly criticized the female writer. In fact, criticism of her works continued even into the fifth century when Proba's *Cento* was added to the Gelasian decretal, *Of books to be received and not to be received*.¹³ As can be imagined, both reasons for critique were an attempt to discourage the public from reading her works. Such strong denunciations were attempts, by male literates, to suppress, change and denounce her work and influence. However, despite such efforts, her sway in regard to Christian preservation and education is unmistakable. The force of her words is noticed from such efforts, while her sway was seen, simply, with the fact that her works, even after her death, were revered and imitated by poets and priests.

In the fourth and even the fifth century the education and works of individuals such as Paulinus, Prudentius, and Damasus, are often linked to Proba. In the case of Damasus, for example, many of the ideas expressed by his works echo those of Proba. As Green indicates, "Lucan phrases" and logic are found in both Proba and Damasus's works, however, when examining chronological data and the stylistic modes of writing, it becomes obvious that Proba would have been familiar with them, while Damasus, who would have read or remembered little of classical authors, would be unfamiliar with such concepts, indicating his imitation of Proba's works and thoughts.¹⁴ Even centuries after her death, Giovanni Boccaccio reminds the fourteenth century of Proba's cultural contributions. In one of his works, *De mulieribus claris* (1362), the literal sway Proba held over her culture, contemporaries and social circles, is recognized as she is closely associated with books and knowledge, writing at her desk, and in his later works pictured with a pointer teaching the world its history.

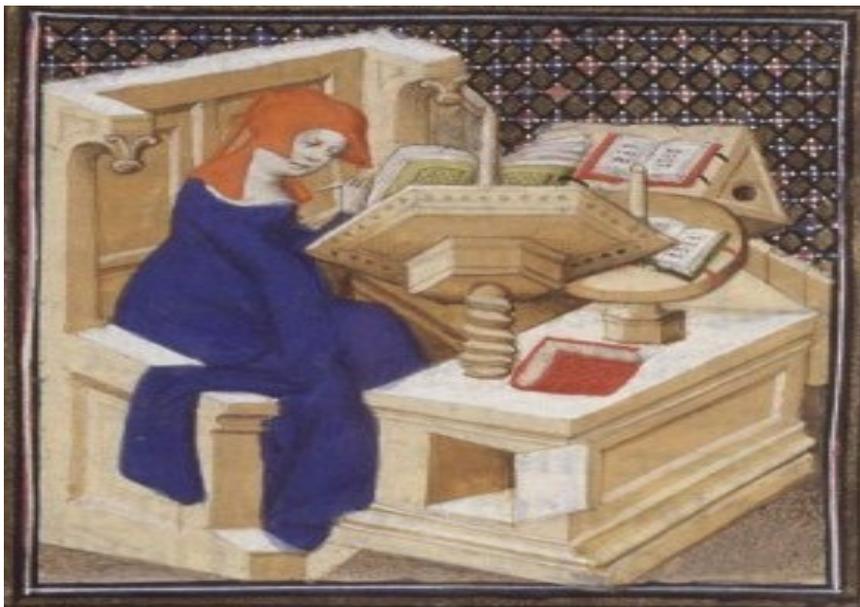
¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 567.

¹⁴ R. P. H. Green, *op. cit.*, p. 564.

Proba's *Cento* is a symbiosis of Christian religion and classical works, which is demonstrated in her poems, through her knowledge and skill of manipulation. The cultural contributions made by Proba surpass the typical, in terms of gender and accomplishments, and as such stand the test of time.



These two figures, from Boccaccio's epoch, are representation of Proba. In the above she is seen instructing the world, while the image below reveals the scholar she really was.¹⁵



¹⁵ Sivan Hagith, *Ancient Women*, p. 149.

The Empress Eudocia /Athenais-Eudocia /Aelia Eudokia (c.400-460 AD)

Springing from the Homeric side, in eastern Byzantium, another poet used her linguistic skill to engage in traditionally masculine forms of political and public expression. Proving that a great degree of congruence still existed –in subject matter and concern- amongst female authors of various times and regions, Eudocia’s works, much like those of her predecessor Proba, continued to challenge social conventions, particularly in terms of religious convictions and gender stereotypes.

Born in Athens at the end of the Roman Empire, c. 400 AD, Eudocia is one of the best attested women writers of antiquity.¹⁶ Originally named Athenais, after her place of birth, Eudocia received her formal education from her famous philosopher father, Leontius, who instructed her in philosophy, astronomy, mathematics and literature.¹⁷ Brimming with potential, Eudocia’s assertive and independent nature manifested itself from an early age, especially to her pagan father who, upon death, confidently left her 100 pieces of gold, explaining that the small sum would suffice as “her luck was greater than that of all women”.¹⁸

Author of her own fortune, Eudocia bravely left Athens for Constantinople, in order to dispute her father’s will. However, rather than securing her intended portion of Leontius’s assets, the young aristocrat secured a husband instead. Noticed by Pulcheria, the older sister of emperor Theodosius II, Eudocia was quickly introduced to the emperor and instructed in the comportment expected of an empress.¹⁹

Despite having adopted the associated responsibilities and the title of wife in 421, her independent temperament never subsided, remaining the same before as after her marriage. This boldness was especially noticeable in her works, which naturally mirrored her own experiences, her Christian beliefs and her struggle for the eradication of sexism and social intolerance.

¹⁶ Michael I. Plant, *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: An Anthology*, University of Oklahoma Press, 2004, p. 200.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

¹⁸ Josephine Balmer, *Classical Women Poets*, Bloodaxe Books, Glasgow, 1996, p. 115.

¹⁹ Alan Cameron, “The empress and the poet: paganism and politics at the court of Theodosius II”, *Yale Classical Studies*, 1982, 27: 217-89.

Although several of Eudocia's works have been lost, three of her poems have survived and avidly reflect the above mentioned pursuits; one of these is a brief fragment of a poem recited at a dedication, while two of her longer works are the *Martyrdom of St. Cyprian of Antioch* and the *Homerocentones* (Homeric centos).

The eight hundred-line poem, entitled *The Martyrdom of St. Cyprian*, was originally made up of three books which tell the tale of a magician named Cyprian, and his failed attempts at seducing a desired maiden.²⁰ Book one is a third person account of Cyprian's plots and of his shameful conversion to Christianity. The plot concludes with Justa, the subject of desire, maintaining her chastity and becoming a deaconess, taking on her new name, Justina. Although books two and three are incomplete, because of missing pieces and omissions, book two recounts Cyprian's earlier years, while the third book describes the martyrdom of Justina and Cyprian. What is most noteworthy in Eudocia's work is her use of religion as the means through which Justina becomes protagonist and is endowed center stage in the unfolding drama. A clear attempt by Eudocia to surmount gender stereotypes, Justa's social standing is closely tied to her own person and beliefs rather than her marital or domestic status.

The fact that Eudocia herself received the imperial title of Aelia Eudocia Augusta, only after the birth of her first child speaks volumes on the marginal status of women in ancient society, and of the values assigned to them. If anything this would suggest a close association of female worth with childbearing potential and her marital status. As Eudocia's Justa contrasted this ascribed value-system, and was made to gain her worth through the disengagement and renouncement of gender stereotypes, Eudocia managed to divorce the two associations, while simultaneously establishing the worth of a woman based solely on her person, rather than her ability to uphold domestic and personal responsibilities such as wife, mother and daughter.

In the *Martyrdom of St. Cyprian* for example, religion grants the heroine a claim to individuality. The monster sent after the young maiden returns to Cyprian after his shameful failure and is described by Eudocia in the following manner:

*After she prayed like this, at once the demon
fled with shame, disgraced because of her courage.*

²⁰ Josephine Balmer, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

*He came and stood before the magician, and Cyprian
asked, 'Demon, where is she, the virgin whom I told you
to bring to me?' And he replied, 'She defeated me
with a mighty sign, which, when I looked upon it,
made me shudder completely, was overwhelming and would not yield.'*²¹

In the following lines, and in contrast to the image of defeated ambition and meek masculinity, Justa is described as victorious, relentless and decisive in thought and action:

*The young maiden, who was a great beauty upon the earth,
Was singing about the good God at the third hour of the evening.
But when the girl was shaken to her very core,
She recognized in her heart the blind folly of the demon...
Quickly she thought of the lord and prayed to him.
[...] I want to stay continually a blessed virgin...
[...] After having declared these things she immediately
armed her body with the sign of God, and at once
she drove away the horrible demon through the name of Christ.
And drove away the creature which had no honor at all.*²²

Though the poem expressed the essential concerns of ancient women's lives, such as marriage and the fears of being overpowered by the masculine, it refused to comply with the expected gender norms.

Moreover, through the religious the work managed to invert conventional literary heroic genres. The males become secondary characters, and in the process, are stripped of the associated traits representative of the male sex. Correspondingly, the vocabulary used to describe Justa is that attributed to the classical hero, and thus uplifts the maiden to heroic status. As described, the young woman is virtuous, and with the aid of the celestial, maintains her integrity, 'arms her body' and although seemingly improbable, defeats the plot's villain. In the process of gender trait redistribution, the woman is no longer esteemed for being a vehicle of procreation, but rather for following her own

²¹ Michael I. Plant, *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome*, p. 202.

²² *Ibidem*.

desires, traveling and preaching- all actions that bequeath her agency and free will. By associating female independence with the liberty demanded by an accepted religion, Eudocia encouraged equality amongst the sexes, and made the public involvement of women more socially acceptable.

While religion granted women free will, Eudocia genuinely encouraged it in her works and emulated it in her life. Far from passive and inanimate, Eudocia like Justa, forsakes her traditional marital and matron responsibilities in favor of her own religious and personal desires. In 444 Eudocia left the court permanently, separating from her husband and relocating in Jerusalem, where she spent the rest of her life building churches and monasteries until her death in 460.²³ Although claims of sexual misconduct and a falling out of favour at court, have been given as explanations for her sudden retrieval from her regal home, it could also be very probable that Eudocia's desired freedom and religious convictions were much more appealing than the demands of her domestic duties. Her involvement in the community of Jerusalem seems to support the latter explanation, as recent excavations at the ruins of the baths at Hammat Gader in Israel, have uncovered a hexameter verse written by the poetess, indicating that her involvement in the community never subsided. As the poem was engraved on a plaque of marble, displayed in full view for all visitors to read, it is a testament to Eudocia's political and public presence, as well as to the recognition she must have enjoyed. Resembling her poetic works, the plaque reminds the reader that the women of antiquity, like those of modernity, were both products and producers of their own lives.

The constant references and invocations of pagan and Christian imagery in the poem's stanzas are also worth mentioning as they are good indicators of communal involvement:

*I have seen many infinite wonders in my lifetime
but who, O noble Furnace, could in so many tongues describe
your vigour since at birth, one is but a mortal and a nobody. Yet rather,
justice demands that you be called a new Ocean of Heat
or Paeon (the Healer), a begetter and donor of sweet streams.*

²³ McIntosh Jane Snyder, *The Women and the Lyre. Women writers in classical Greece and Rome*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1989, p. 140.

*From you, is born a countless wave both on this side and on that -
on the one, hot - on the other, cold - and also a medium one -
pouring forth your beauty into four fourfold springs.
Behold an Indian and her matron, Repentinus, Saint Elias,
Behold Antoninus Pius, Fresh Galatia - and she herself,
Good Health. Behold, a large luke-warm pool and a small one,
as well as a very pearl, the old Furnace, and one more Indian
and her matron, the Steadfast Monastery and the Patriarch's ...
By your strong vigour the sick ...(are cured?)
But I will sing of the God who is famed for his skill....
for the benefit of men.²⁴*

The amalgam of the two conflicting images is crucial as it reflects her cultural sensitivities. As an ambassador of social equality, Eudocia fought for egalitarianism in terms of gender, religious freedom and ability to practice. Inhabiting a culture that now promoted Christianity at the expense of pagans and Jews, Eudocia took pains to be politically correct, and consciously attempted to employ aspects of various beliefs in her works as well as charitable foundations. These efforts were attempts by the lyricist to depict the futility of persecution and discrimination. This religiously discriminative attitude was especially noticeable towards the Jewish community. Following the reign of Julian the Apostate, anti-Jewish legislation had intensified, manifesting itself with attacks on social and civil rights, as well as with signs of physical aggression and assaults on private properties such as homes and synagogues within the empire.²⁵

In contrast to the social majority, Eudocia continued to display a positive attitude towards Jerusalem's Jewish population. She funded and aided in building Jerusalem's southern wall, while at the same time extending the area of the city southward to encompass Mount Zion and the spring of Siloam. Further, she was also responsible for ensuring that the Jewish community of Palestine was able to continue fulfilling their religious obligations, by permitting them to renew their pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the

²⁴di Segni, *op. cit.* pp. 228-233; trans. M. Luz

<http://research.haifa.ac.il/~mluz/gadara.folder/gadara2.html#EUDOC>

²⁵ McIntosh Jane Snyder, *The Women and the Lyre. Women writers in classical Greece and Rome*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1989, p. 143.

Sukkot festival. During this time, Eudocia admirably continued to work and even initiated the construction of the basilica at the Pool of Siloam and the St. Stephen's Church, demonstrating religious toleration and the genuine ability of practicing her own religion while respecting that of another.

Her other literal works such as her *Homerocentones*, for example, were written during this time and are thus a reflection of her open minded persona, her culturally pluralistic reality and the religious mosaic she inhabited. The *Cento*, which mirrors Proba's in construction, uses Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in retelling the preparation for and life of Christ. Although the Grecian poetess frequently reverted back to pagan imagery throughout the poem's 2300 lines, her Christian beliefs remain intact. As she states in the last stanza of the *Cento*'s preface:

*Hear me countless tribes of neighboring men,
All who are mortal and eat food on earth
And all who dwell towards the east and the sunrise
And all who dwell down towards the murky darkness,
When I say what my spirit in my breast tells me,
So you may know well both God and man.*²⁶

Although she intends to educate the reader on 'God', the preface, unlike the epigram at the baths and the *Martyrdom of St. Cyprian*, directly addresses the 'countless tribes', acknowledging the audience's diversity, while at the same time uniting and equating this diversity through the listeners' proximity, mortality and human condition. Through such claims, Eudocia manages to restate the fact that although seemingly different, in essence we are all the same.

Moreover, the female narrative voice Eudocia employs, repeats this assertion and as a result manages to equate the sexes. Despite belonging to the presumed 'weaker sex', the voice is austere involved in her cultural surroundings and aware of the associated sensitivities. At the same time, she is politically implicated in the public sphere, taking on an instructive role, and unimposing when preaching her religious beliefs. Although the narrator belongs to the Christian majority, she is also affiliated and representative of a

²⁶ Michael I. Plant, *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome*, p. 207.

marginalized minority. Due to her gender and its corresponding socially imposed limitations, the speaker is able to better understand and relate to the struggles of other oppressed minorities, while simultaneously understanding the need for promoting an egalitarian society.

Eudocia was not only a woman of significant importance in terms of her literal accomplishments, but also in terms of her charitable works. Her projects held important economic connotations providing a livelihood for many of the city's inhabitants, as well as a social mark of visibility, representation and solidarity for those oppressed.

Conclusion

In the case of Proba and Eudocia, the words of Tillie Olsen's dictum, 'we who write are survivors', takes on material and metaphorical significance.²⁷ Through their writings, these women established a centrally female discourse in a male-dominated cursive tradition. Their words have become a testament to their collective consciousness, and political participation, that have been for too long neglected and reshaped by male perceptions and assumptions.

It is only through their words that their neglected struggles and contributions are brought to the forefront. The women presented in this essay call for a re-examination of historical recordings, by shedding light on various subjects. Their description of the church and Christianity, in complete contrast from the often history-book patriarchal depiction, suggests that Christianity was a movement in flux, in which self-appointed male guides and ambitious women worked together, and sometimes in opposition, in order to strengthen and shape religious dogma. Female agency and involvement in theological, political and social debate, although not prevalent, was very much present in Christian antiquity. Assuming otherwise would not only reinforce prejudicial gender stereotypes of female inferiority, but would also blatantly deny the power of their actions and with particular reference to this case, their words.

²⁷ Josephine Balmer, *Classical Women Poets*, p. 9.

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Note on the Writers

The members of this group were attracted to this topic because of their love of history. Researching the time period along with the contributions made by these women to the religious, social, and political plank was of great interest. Further, the prospect of examining and utilizing primary sources from such a distant time was also an exciting attraction, as the majority of the class work load pertains to contemporary times, issues and policies.