

Imaging Roman Africa

Professor Laura Leibman

Hum 110: 4/18/2008

A. Outline

- I. Introduction
- II. The Cathedral Eufrasiana
- III. Three Hypotheses about the Mysterious Representation of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas
 - a. Were Perpetua and Felicitas were actually Roman/white?
 - b. Were either Perpetua or Felicitas African, but Race was not a marked category in Late Antiquity and hence the mosaicist didn't record it?
 - c. Were either Perpetua or Felicitas African, and Race was a marked category in Late Antiquity? If so, were they "lightened" because being white/Roman was considered "superior"?
- IV. Redefining Late Antiquity

B. Images of the Saints (<https://cdm.reed.edu/cdm4/classics/>)

Saints Perpetua and Felicitas. 6th Century CE Mosaics. Cathedral Eufrasiana (Poreč, Croatia)

Saints Perpetua and Felicitas. Mosaics ca. 494 CE. Archiepiscopal Chapel (Ravenna, Italy)

Sts. Perpetua and Felicity. Robert Lentz (1946-), American painter. Reproduction can be found in *Christ in the Margins*, 72.

D. Timeline

c. 1000 BC	Phoenicians found ports in North Africa
c. 814 BC	Traditional date of the foundation of Carthage by Dido the Phoenician
509 BC	Foundation of Roman Republic: first Roman-Carthage Trade Agreement
149-146 BC	Third Punic War: destruction of Carthage by Scipio. Africa Proconsularis founded
46 BC	Caesar conquers rivals. Roman territory is expanded to include Africa Nova
36 BC	Augustus becomes the uncontested master of Africa; the Romanization of Africa begins.
CE Mid 1st C	Beginning of prosperity for Roman Africa
CE 170	Apuleius writes <i>The Golden Ass</i>
CE 180	First known Christian martyrs of Africa executed
CE 193	Septimus Severus becomes the first African Emperor
CE 203	Martyrdom of St. Perpetua and her companions at Carthage
CE 311	Constantine becomes emperor (312 CE converts)
CE 397	St. Augustine writes his <i>Confessions</i>
CE 410	Sack of Rome by Visigoths; Rome renounces Britain
CE 429-39	Invasion of Africa by Vandals; Vandals seize Carthage
CE ca. 494-95	Mosaics of Felicitas and Perpetua from the Archiepiscopal Chapel
CE 6 th century	Mosaics of Felicitas and Perpetua from the Cathedral Eufrasiana

E. Quotes

1. Brown argues that as part of the "new mood" of Late Antiquity "the individual had a growing sense of possessing something in himself that was infinitely valuable and yet painfully unregulated to the outside world" (*World of Late Antiquity*, 51); "Finding a sudden reserve of perfection or inspiration inside oneself went hand in hand with a need for a God with whom one could be alone: a God whose 'charge,' as it were, had remained concentrated and personal rather than being diffused in benign but profoundly impersonal ministrations to the universe at large" (*World of Late Antiquity*, 51-52).
2. Saints served as "invisible friends." From the fourth century onwards, men and women "turned with increasingly explicitness [to saints] for friendship, inspiration and protection in this life and beyond the grave" (Brown *Cult of Saints*, 50). Saints were both "invisible beings" and "fellow humans...whom they could invest with the precise and palpable features" (Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 50).
3. "[N]othing comparable to the virulent color prejudice of modern times existed in the ancient world...the ancients did not fall into the error of biological racism; black skin color was not a sign of inferiority; Greeks and Romans did not establish color as an obstacle to integration in society; and ancient society was one that for all its faults and failures never made color the basis for judging man." (Snowden 63)

4. "Inhabitants of the cold [and wet] north...were broadly stereotyped as characterized by excessive tallness, lank blond or red hair worn long, light-blue eyes, upturned snub noses, large bones, obesity, huge bellies, simple-mindedness, dullness of wit and lack of intelligence, hastiness of temper, excitability, proneness to quick depression, lack of judgment, incapacity for reasoned and disciplined behavior, courage, savagery, recklessness, drunkenness, laziness, and a tendency towards gambling and boasting" (Thompson 104-05).
5. "Southern" characteristics included "black or swarthy skin, black and curly or wooly hair, black eyes, small bones, slim ankles, quickness of intelligence, sagacity, cowardice, rashness, untrustworthiness, craftiness, greed, mendacity, thievishness, love of pleasure, a powerful sexual urge, fickleness, and frivolousness" (Thompson 105).
6. "The River Niger has the same nature as the Nile. It produces seeds, papyrus and the same animals, and rises at the same seasons. Some place the Atlas tribe in the middle of the desert and next to them the half-animal Goat-Pans, the Blemmyae, Gaphasantes, Satyrs and Strapfeet. The Atlas tribe is primitive, and subhuman, if we believe what we hear; they do not call each other by names. When they observe the rising and setting sun they utter terrible curses against it, as the cause of disaster to themselves and their fields. Nor do they have dreams in their sleep like the rest of mankind. The Cave-dwellers hollow out caves which are their houses; their food is snake meat. They have no voice but make a shrill noise, thus lacking any communication by speech. The Garmantes do not marry but live promiscuously with their women. The Augilae worship only the gods of the lower world. The Gamphasantes wear no clothes, do not fight and do not associate with any foreigner. The Blemmyae are reported as being without heads; their mouth and eyes are attached to their chest.I cannot think of any more to record about Africa" (Pliny *Natural History* 57-58:).
7. Racial prejudice "rests on **ideological perception** of the individual as **necessarily possessing** particular desirable or undesirable qualities **by virtue of his or her membership of a given socially defined group**, in a social context in which **the individual can do nothing to alter the basic situation 'either for himself or for his descendents'**" (Thompson 18).
8. Third-century pagan epitaph of a black slave from Antinoe in Roman Egypt: "**Among the living I was** very black, [his gravestone proclaims] darkened by the rays of the sun. But beauty is less important than nobility of the soul; and my soul, ever blooming with the whiteness of flowers, attracted the goodwill of my prudent master and embellished the blackness of my physical appearance" (Thompson 41).
9. Account of Abba Moses, "an old *Aethiops* monk and fourth-century 'Desert Father': "**It is said of Father** Moses that, when he was invested with the long white priest's robe upon his ordination as a member of the clergy, the Archbishop said to him, "See, Father Moses, you have become completely white." The old man replied, "Outwardly, Lord and Father. But am I also white inwardly?" Wishing to test him, the Archbishop said to the other priests, "Whenever Father Moses comes into the sanctuary, drive him out and follow him in order to observe his reaction." The old man came in and they abused him and drove him out, saying, "Get out, Blackface!" As he was going he said to himself, "They have treated you properly, you sooty-skinned one, you black one! Since you are not human, why should you have entered the company of men?" (Thompson 41 quotes *Patrologiae cursus completus: serie Graeca* LXV.284).
10. The physical and spiritual ideal: "a pale-brown 'Mediterranean' complexion (...slightly red and tawny whiteness...), brown hair, [a] straight (but not 'long') nose, and the moderate Mediterranean tallness" (Thompson 133).

F. Selected Bibliography:

- Blanchard-Lemée, Michèle, *et. al.* *Mosaics of Roman Africa*. NY: George Braziller, 1995.
- Brown, Peter. *The Cult of Saints*. Chicago: U of Chicago P., 1981.
- Frothingham, A. L., Jr. "Notes on Christian Mosaics. III. The Lost Mosaics of the East," *The American Journal of Archaeology and of the History of the Fine Arts*, Vol. 4, No. 2. (Jun., 1888): 127-148.
- Lentz, Robert and Edwina Gateley. *Christ in the Margins*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003
- L'Orange and P.J. Nordhagen. *Mosaics*, tr. Ann Keep. London: Methusen, 1966.
- Raven, Susan. *Rome in Africa*, 3rd ed. NY: Routledge, 1993.
- Salisbury, Joyce E. *Perpetua's Passion*. NY: Routledge, 1997.
- Snowden, Frank Jr. *Before Color Prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983.
- Terry, Ann, "The 'Opus Sectile' in the Eufasius Cathedral at Poreč," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 40. (1986): 147-164.
- Thompson, Lloyd A. *Romans and Blacks*. Norman: Oklahoma UP, 1989.
- Wilson, R. J. A. "Roman Mosaics in Sicily: The African Connection," *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 86, No. 3. (Jul., 1982): 413-428.