

Wrestling on Behalf of God: Perpetua's *Agon* and Opponent

The text of the *Passio Perpetuae* straddles two paradigms of classical sport, the virtuous Hellenic *agon* and punitive Roman blood-sport. Both paradigms provide the same opponent, the Devil, appearing to Perpetua in various guises throughout her days and nightly visions. This article reframes the narrative of cosmic warfare in early martyrdoms as a cosmic *agon*, played out in Rome's mass entertainment and athletic facilities.

The most notable appearance of the cosmic *agon* occurs in Perpetua's final vision, just before she is executed for the emperor Geta's birthday festivities. She dreams of being clothed, oiled, and attended as a gladiator, competing for the prize of a golden branch against an ugly Egyptian. The Egyptians already had a reputation for laziness and idolatry from the time of Octavian and Cleopatra, and both gladiators and condemned prisoners were often dressed up in ethnic costumes to fight. Perpetua transforms into a man, moving closer to an athlete's role than a convict, and quickly overtakes her opponent with divine support, levitation, and a well-planted kick. Upon awaking, Perpetua recognizes her opponent as the Devil and claims that she will encounter him again the next morning, in Carthage's amphitheater arena.

The Devil also appears in Perpetua's first dream, where she steps on the snake's head to ascend the ladder to heaven in a reference to the beast in Revelations, in the beasts used for punitive *damnatio ad bestia* in the amphitheater, and even in Perpetua's father. Perpetua describes her interactions with her father as remarkably combative, with athletic verbs like *evertere* and *deicere* and a final description of her father as *victus cum argumentis Diaboli*.