

The 'Body' of Christ: Docetic Christology in Proba's *Cento Vergilianus de Laudibus Christi*

In the fourth century CE, a Roman noblewoman by the name of Proba wrote the Latin poem *Cento Vergilianus de laudibus Christi*, a 694-line *cento* detailing the creation of the world, the fall of man from the Garden of Eden, and the life of Jesus Christ. Proba's *Cento* is peculiar in that she tells Christian stories using verses primarily from Vergil, presumably in an attempt both to claim Vergil for the Christian community and to provide Christian communities with their own prestigious literature amongst the Roman elites. Most scholarship has focused on who Proba was and when exactly she was writing; Barnes (2006) attributes the *Cento* to Faltonia Betitia Proba in the mid-fourth century CE, dating the poem with evidence from her husband's life and, in particular, a now-lost inscription. Green (1995, 1997) discusses the potentially didactic purpose of the *Cento*, as well as refuting the case made by Shanzer (1986, 1994), who twice argues for a date later in the fourth century, and a younger Proba, Anicia Faltonia. Others have focused on the narrative structure of the *Cento*; Kyriakidis (1992) investigates Proba's portrayal of the female gender and her differences between Eve and Mary, and Watson (2024) also focuses on gender, instead pointing out Proba's apparent alignment of the Holy Trinity with female Vergilian characters. Finally, Clark and Hatch (1981) discuss Proba's alignment of Jesus with the model of an epic hero.

However, little scholarship has considered how Proba and her *Cento* fit into the backdrop of fourth-century early Christianity in Rome, a period rife with debates over Christology, the branch of theology related to the nature of Christ. Ermini briefly mentions that she warns against the heretical beliefs of Arianism (1909, 18), but the discussion ends there. This paper, therefore, seeks to explore Proba's Christological claims and to analyze her strategic use of Vergilian

archetypes, such as gods in disguise. It compares her work to the New Testament as well as to non-canonical, semi-Christian texts and the writings of the Church Fathers in order to make the suggestion that Proba's Christology bears the tendencies of Docetism, a branch of Christology popular in the fourth century CE involving a denial of the incarnation and passion of Christ.

To do so, this paper will begin with a brief introduction to Docetism, before turning to an in-depth discussion of the presence of Docetic principles in Proba's work, finally suggesting how these findings might contribute to the debate about when Proba was writing and consequently, who she was.

References

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