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Drusiana, Cleopatra, and Some Other Women in the

*Acts of John*

by

JAN. N. BREMMER

At the beginning of the 1980s, feminism began to influence the study of the *Apocryphal Acts of Apostles* (AAA).¹ Stevan Davies suggested that the AAA were conceived and read by a community of Christian women; Dennis MacDonald attributed the origin of the *Acta Pauli* to oral traditions deriving from women opposed to the ruling patriarchal order; and Virginia Burrus stated that the AAA were originally oral stories told by women in female communities, while the focus on chastity reflected their desired or experienced liberation from the patriarchal order.² But towards the end of the decade a reaction set in. While in principle approving of this sociological approach, Jean-Daniel Kaestli argued strongly that the AAA are unlikely to have an oral background or origin in a female community, and Peter Dunn has seriously questioned the degree of liberation that the AAA offered to women.³

Considering these differences in opinion it is hard to disagree with Kaestli that we now need a study of each of the individual treatises in order to appreciate their contribution as a

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whole to our knowledge of ancient Christianity and to understand the role women played in that movement. It is the aim of this paper to contribute to the current debate through a detailed study of the place of women in the Acts of John (AJ), which was probably written in Southwestern Asia Minor (§ 2) around 150 C.E.

1. Lycomedes and Cleopatra (19-29)

The beginning of AJ has been lost, and our text starts in medias res with the information that John, prompted by a vision, hurried to Ephesus. His companions only with difficulty prevail upon him to rest one day in Miletus. These companions are mentioned by name, except for ‘the wife of Marcellus’. Neither Marcellus himself nor his wife play a role in the surviving parts of the Acts, but the particular reference might indicate that previous chapters described her conversion or a miracle performed by John on her behalf. It is interesting to note that we find both males and females among these companions. This is already an indication of the importance of women in the spread of early Christianity. In the Greek novel the world of the women is highly limited, and the only friends of a female protagonist are usually slaves. The situation is different in the AAA, where women and men regularly mingle. Admittedly, one could think that this is only a fictional reality, but there are abundant testimonies that leading Christians males

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taught, mixed and corresponded with upper-class women, just like their Gnostic counterparts.

Unfortunately, we are unable to reconstruct the precise route of the apostle. Yet his journey from Miletus via Ephesus to Smyrna, and subsequently via Laodicea (58-59) back to Ephesus, suggests that he first toured the coastal cities before visiting those inland, just like the Roman governor on his yearly visits to the assize districts. However, the focal point of the surviving part of AJ is clearly Ephesus and all non-Ephesian parts have been lost. When John and his followers approach Ephesus, they are met by a certain Lycomedes, who requests the apostle to come to his house and to heal his paralyzed wife Cleopatra. Lycomedes is still young and one of the Ephesian strategoi, a member of the executive council of Ephesus. Moreover, he is ‘a wealthy man’: the reader is not left with any uncertainty about his importance. Cleopatra is equally young and although according to her husband she is now ‘a withered beauty,’ she had once been so beautiful that the whole of Ephesus had been ecstatic about her. It is not difficult to recognize in these descriptions topoi of the Greek novel, which also regularly details the youth, beauty, and noble birth of the hero and heroine.

After this appeal John immediately goes to his house, where Lycomedes kneels before him and begins to lament his fate. He blames his wife’s illness on the evil eye of his enemies and, as often happens in pagan novels, he announces his suicide—a frequently

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11 As is observed by L. van Kampen, Apostelverhalen (Diss. Utrecht, 1990: Merweboek) 101.
12 Unfortunately, the discussion by W. Schwahn, RE Suppl. 6 (1954) 1112-3 is totally out of date, cf. the index of the Inschriften von Ephesos (Bonn, 1979-84: Habelt).
occurring narrative ploy designed to enhance the dramatic character of the situation.\textsuperscript{14} Despite the exhortations of the apostle to control himself, Lycomedes falls to the ground and dies. The apostle then heals Cleopatra who in turn resurrects her husband, as converts do more often in the \textit{AAA}.\textsuperscript{15} After Lycomedes recovers, he charges a painter with making a portrait of John, which he installs in his bedroom in front of an altar, surrounded by candles and wreathed with garlands. Irenaeus, a contemporary of \textit{AJ}’s author, informs us that Carpocratian gnostics wreathed and worshiped portraits of Jesus, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers (\textit{Adv. haer.} 1.25.6). According to Augustine, a certain Marcella from the same sect worshiped Homer, Pythagoras, and Jesus as well as burned incense in front of their images (\textit{De haer.} 7).\textsuperscript{16} Lycomedes’s altar will have served a similar purpose.

In this episode the difference in behavior between husband and wife is striking. Lycomedes is weak, grovels at the feet of the apostle, and dies from grief. On the other hand, Cleopatra is firm, and the apostle sees her ‘neither raging from grief nor being outside herself,’ although she also grieves for her partner. In fact, it is explicitly said that because of her controlled behavior the apostle had pity on Cleopatra and prayed to Christ on her behalf. Moreover, he allowed her to resurrect her own husband,\textsuperscript{17} and she did not relapse into pagan practices. Clearly, the author of \textit{AJ} pictures Cleopatra both as more in control of herself and as a firmer follower of Christ than her husband. In this episode, then, we see the reflection of the development that ‘the ability passively to hold out, often in the hope of better, became the cardinal virtue of Christians under threat’.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{15} In addition to this passage see also \textit{Acts of John} 24, 47, 82-3; \textit{Acts of Andrew (Latin version)} 19; \textit{Acts of Thomas} 54.


\textsuperscript{17} P. Schneider, \textit{The Mystery of the Acts of John} (San Francisco, 1991: Mellen Research University Press) 24 curiously states that ‘Lykomedes had only fainted’. This contradicts the explicit testimony of the text that he had died (23: \textit{nenekroménon}).

\textsuperscript{18} See the excellent discussion by B. Shaw, ‘Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs’, \textit{J.
Fortunately, the chapters about the relationship between Lycomedes and Cleopatra have survived almost completely, unlike those about Andronicus and Drusiana, the other married couple who appear as protagonists in the Acts of John.

2. Andronicus and Drusiana (63-86)

When John returns to Ephesus for the last time, he is accompanied by Andronicus and Drusiana, Aristobula, ‘who had learnt that her husband Tertullus had died in the Way (of Christ),’ Aristippe and Xenophon, and the ‘chaste prostitute’ (59). Allusions in later literature strongly suggest that they all played a role in the original AJ, but only some episodes about Andronicus and Drusiana survived the abbreviations and censorship of previous centuries. As Gregory of Tours’ Latin edition of the Acts of Andrew shows, succeeding centuries cut out speeches considered to be too long or tedious, but why certain episodes have disappeared from our text but others not remains totally unclear.

The introduction of Drusiana has been lost, but we may assume that she, like Cleopatra, was a young woman, since Callimachus, who has fallen in love with her (below), is described as a young man (71, 73, 76); love for an older woman is hardly probable in these novels. Andronicus’s age is not mentioned, but he is described as a strategos, like Lycomedes, and he is ‘pròtos of the Ephesians at that time’ (31). Junod and Kaestli translate this qualification with ‘un notable,’ but this insufficiently brings out the agonistic flavour of the term: Andronicus is a ‘leading citizen’ (Schäferdiek) of the town. The terminology of ‘the first’ or ‘the first of the city (fatherland)’ as an aristocratic self-designation is typical of Aphrodisias and Northern Lycia. In addition, it is found in Eastern Phrygia, Bithynia, and Pisidia where Antiocchene Jews stirred up ‘the first of the city’ against the apostle Paul (Acts 13.50). It was clearly in this area, then, that the AJ

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21 For an excellent discussion of the problem of the size of the original AJ and the extent of our losses see Lalleman, Acts of John, 5-24.
22 For this designation see my ‘The Novel and the Apocryphal Acts’.
was probably written.

From allusions in the *Manichaean Coptic Psalter* it appears that after Drusiana’s conversion Andronicus had locked her up together with John in a tomb. After two weeks they are released, the husband also converts, and the couple start to live together as brother and sister (63). Does this relationship to some extent reflect contemporary events? It is clear that an ascetic trait runs through all of the *Acts*, but contemporary notices about ascetic couples are unfortunately lacking. The negative influence of conversion on pagan-Christian marriages, however, can be paralleled in real life: Justin relates the story of an anonymous Roman *matrona* who after her conversion divorced her husband for his ‘sinful’ life and whose Christian teacher was subsequently executed (*Ap.* 2.2).

In the surviving parts of *AJ* we are told that Callimachus, also a ‘pròtos of the Ephesians,’ falls in love with Drusiana. But as he does not succeed in winning her favors, he lapses into a state of melancholy. This distresses Drusiana to such an extent that she becomes ill and, rather improbably, dies ‘because of the bruising of the soul of that man.’ Andronicus also grieves too much, if not to the same degree as Lycomedes. He regularly bursts into tears in the company of others so that John repeatedly has to silence him.

After her burial, Drusiana is not yet free from her ‘lover.’ On the contrary, together with Fortunatus, the corrupt steward of Andronicus, Callimachus breaks into her tomb in order to commit necrophilia. They are on the point of removing the last garment, the rather expensive *dikrossion,* when suddenly a huge snake appears, fatally bites the steward, and remains on Callimachus after he falls to the ground. The next day Andronicus, John, and some other brothers go to the tomb. As they had forgotten the keys, the apostle opens the doors by a simple order. The motif of automatically opening doors derives from pagan

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A.S. Hall (Ankara, 1998: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara) no. 1; *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 31.1316 (Lycian Xanthus); 41.1343, 1345-6, 1353 (Lycian Balboura); 42.1215 (Pisidian Etuna); 46.1524 (Lydian Sardis).


26 The discussion by Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 258-9 has now to be corrected in the light of the very full collection of references to this type of garment by F.R. Adrados (ed.), *Diccionario Griego-Español* V (Madrid, 1997: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto "Antonio de Nebrija") s.v. *dikrossion* and *dikrossos.*
literature, as does another detail in this scene. When they enter the tomb, they see an attractive, smiling young man. The same smiling figure is also encountered both in the Acts of Paul, where a smiling youth of great beauty loosens Paul’s bonds (7), and in the Acts of Peter, where Jesus appears smiling to Peter in his prison (16). The motif is well known from pagan epiphanies where the god traditionally smiles to reassure anxious mortals. 

Erik Peterson has argued that when Christ appears as a youth, he appears as the child Adam was before the Fall. This explanation, however, is hardly persuasive, and the motif deserves further attention.

Andronicus considers Fortunatus unworthy of being saved but asks John to resurrect Callimachus in order that he should confess exactly what had happened, not—we may observe—so that he should convert. But Drusiana generously asks the apostle to resurrect Fortunatus as well, even though Callimachus opposes her request. When John charges her to do so she performs the resurrection with enthusiasm, but not before uttering a prayer in which she mentions Andronicus’s earlier violence towards her. As in the case of Cleopatra, then, Drusiana is represented in a more favorable light than her husband.

3. Old women and widows (30-37)

In addition to the two couples we have discussed, the surviving part of AJ also depicts John actively engaged on behalf of old women. He orders Verus to bring to him all the old women of Ephesus in order that he might care for them. When he hears how many of them are in ill health, he instructs Verus to bring them to the theatre so that he could heal them there and thus also convert some of the spectators through these healings.

When the masses of Ephesus hear of John’s plan, they queue up during the night in order not to miss the spectacle. In the AAA the ‘crowd’ is a recurrent topos in descriptions of miracles and serves to enhance the dramatic character of many scenes. Yet these crowds are not only a literary phenomenon; they also reflect contemporary behaviour, as is

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28 Many parallels: O. Weinreich, Antike Heilungswunder (Giessen, 1909: Töpelmann) 3 note 2; M. Puelma, Museum Helveticum 17 (1960) 149.
29 E. Peterson, Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis (Freiburg, 1959: Herder) 189-96.
30 For the place of the crowd see G. Theissen, Urchristliche Wundergeschichten (Гütersloh,
well illustrated by a scene in the Martyrdom of Pionius. When Pionius and his fellow Christians, wearing chains, are led off after their arrest, ‘quickly, as if for an unexpected spectacle, a crowd rushed up so that they jostled one another. And when they arrived at the Agora, at the eastern Stoa and the double gate, the whole of the Agora and the upper porticoes were filled with Greeks and Jews, and even women.’ Söder has drawn attention to the prominence of the theatre in these descriptions. This motif, too, reflects a contemporary phenomenon, viz. the enormous popularity of the theatre in Imperial times which gradually replaced the agora as the public meeting place.

When the old women and the crowd are assembled, John harangues his audience with a long sermon, in which he threatens them with the last judgment. The threat was apparently such a stock-in-trade of early Christian preaching that even Celsus notes that Christians ‘threaten others with these punishments’ (C. Cels. 8.48). According to Lane Fox, ‘there was an ample place...for plain fear in Christian conversions, and Christian authors did not neglect it: their martyrs’ words on hell and the coming Judgment were believed to be an advertisement every bit as effective as their example at the stake.’ Although Lane Fox is probably right that the threat was intended to support the plea for conversion, he provides not a single example to support his statement that the threat actually worked. Yet there can be no doubt that the early Christians internalized the fear of the last judgment to an extent unthinkable today, as the following example may illustrate. The Carthaginian group of martyrs around Perpetua threatened those pagans who had come to their prison to jeer at them ‘with God’s judgement, stressing the joy they would have in their own suffering, and ridiculing the curiosity of those that came to see them.’ John’s words, then, clearly reflect contemporary Christian thinking in this respect.

34 P. Perp. 17; see also Mart. Pol. 11.2; Mart. Ptolemaei et Lucii 2; Mart. Lugd. 26; Mart. Agape etc. 4.
Finishing his sermon, the apostle heals the illnessess, but, unfortunately, the conclusion of the episode has been lost. Presumably, the old women and many spectators accept the new faith. Curiously, Junod and Kaestli pay no attention to the fact that the apostle cures old women, although this is a most remarkable feature of the episode. Old women had joined the Christian movement from the very beginning, as the pseudo-Pauline Letter to Titus shows (2.3), but in Greek and Roman society old women were in many ways at the bottom of the social scale. They were the butt of Attic comic mockery; Hellenistic sculptors frequently represented them as drunks; and Romans typically represented witches as old women. In concentrating on old women, then, the early Christians showed compassion for a social category which was despised and which must have often been in dire circumstances. Even contemporary pagans note this concern for old women. In a book written ca. 165 C.E. about the self-immolation of the philosopher Peregrinus, the satirist Lucian mentions ‘old crones’ among his visitors in prison (12). Lucian clearly satirized their prominent position among the Christians, but he did not realize that he was witnessing a revolution in the ancient value-system.

Old women also play a small role in an episode of AJ that has only recently been recovered from an Old Irish text. According to the fourteenth-century Liber Flavus Fergusiorum, ‘very many pious nuns, widows, and such holy persons following John’ lived on the alms the apostle received from his fellow Christians. When they complained continuously about their small portions and accused the apostle of embezzling charitable donations, he changed hay into gold that he subsequently threw into the sea. In this way he showed the ‘hypocritical widows’ that he did not need any wealth and had given them every penny of the alms he had received.

Charity towards widows was an important activity in second-century Christianity. In

the *Acts of Peter* we hear of a certain Marcellus who was the ‘refuge’ of all the widows in town (8). Peter heals some blind, old widows (21), and after he resurrects the son of a senator and the mother decides to distribute some of her property to her newly freed slaves, the apostle tells her to distribute the remainder among the widows (28). In the *Acts of Paul* a father sold his possessions and ‘brought the price to the widows’ after Paul had resurrected his son (4). In Rome in the first half of the second century some Christians even tried to profit from this charity: Hermas saw in his visions a mountain with snakes and other wild animals meant for those deacons who embezzled money destined for widows: some of the deacons, who did the day-to-day work of charity while the bishop had the final responsibility, clearly lived in style at the expense of the congregational funds. In fact, charity must have been reasonably ‘big business’ since around 250 Bishop Cornelius proudly mentioned that the congregation supported 1500 widows and other needy persons. In fact, the organization involved in charity must have been an important factor in the overall strength of the early Church.\(^{40}\)

Not every Christian, though, was pleased with the special treatment of widows, which so strongly contradicted prevailing values. The anonymous author of the popular *Apocalypse of Peter*, which perhaps originated in Egypt about 135, understood this negative feeling well and therefore included in his description of Hell the following warning:

> In another place situated near them, on the stone a pillar of fire (?), and the pillar is sharper than words—men and women who are clad in rags and filthy garments, and they are cast upon it, to suffer the judgment of unceasing torture. These are they who

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trusted in their riches and despised widows and the woman (with) orphans...in the sight of God. (9)

The wealthy that despised widows were not alone in their contempt. As in the case of the old women (above), Lucian also mentions, presumably with a sneer, the presence of widows among the visitors to Peregrinus. It seems not improbable that the above mentioned scene from the Irish Liber Flavus also reflects something of the ambivalence upper-class Christians must have felt towards the prominence of widows in the early Church.

4. Conclusion

What have we learned, then, about the place of women in the production, reception, and text of AJ? It would not be impossible for a woman to have been the author, since many women in the Roman period could read and write,\(^{41}\) but very few women in antiquity are known to have written prose fiction.\(^ {42}\) The simple fact of a sympathetic treatment of women in a piece of writing does not necessarily make the author a woman.\(^ {43}\) Moreover, the treatment of women in AJ is rather varied. Whereas upper-class women play an active role, old women are only an object of the apostle’s actions, and widows are even severely reproached. Clearly, AJ reflects in this respect the normal hierarchical views of the Greco-Roman upper classes and, thus, can hardly be the product of a community of egalitarian ‘sisters.’ Similarly, Burrus’s idea of an oral background for some of the stories in AJ, notably that about Drusiana, will not stand a critical test, since the stories are too poorly informed about Ephesus for such an origin to be credible.\(^ {44}\)

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If female authorship, then, is not immediately probable, what about readership?\textsuperscript{45} In the study of the Greek novel, the thesis of female readership has lost much of its earlier popularity.\textsuperscript{46} Yet female readership cannot be excluded, since throughout the Greek novel women are represented as literate and, for example, in Chariton’s Callirhoe they also form part of the internal audience.\textsuperscript{47} In the case of \textit{AJ} a female readership certainly seems to have been one of the author’s target audiences,\textsuperscript{48} if only since the readership of the \textit{Acts of Paul} included women (below). But there are other indications as well. In \textit{AJ} the two heroines are clearly depicted as far superior to their husbands: Cleopatra, unlike Lycomedes, does not relapse into pagan practices, and Drusiana is not only more in control of herself but also resurrects her husband, not \textit{vice versa}. \textit{AJ}, then, allows upper-class women clear possibilities for identification, and this strongly points to female readership; considering the nature of Greco-Roman literacy, such readers were by definition members of the middle and upper classes.\textsuperscript{49} Indeed, it would be strange if it had been otherwise, since in the first centuries women seem to have constituted the majority of Christian membership.\textsuperscript{50}

Did \textit{AJ} also suggest a ‘liberated’ life-style to women?\textsuperscript{51} Whereas Cleopatra and Lycomedes presumably lead a normal married life, Drusiana and Andronicus renounce sexuality. Apparently, the author leaves both possibilities open to married couples. In this connection there is a further scene we should consider (48-55). Before he departs Ephesus for Smyrna, John meets a young man who had fallen in love with his neighbor’s wife.\textsuperscript{52}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{45} For a much fuller discussion of the readership of the ancient novel and the AAA see now Bremmer, ‘The Novel’, 171-78, of which an updated and slightly expanded version will appear in Bremmer, \textit{Acts of Thomas} (note 1).
  \item \textsuperscript{48} As was already observed long ago for the AAA in general by F. Pfister, in E. Hennecke (ed), \textit{Neutestamentliche Apokryphen} (Tübingen, 1924\textsuperscript{2}; Mohr) 169.
  \item \textsuperscript{49} \textit{Contra} P. Lampe, \textit{Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten} (Tübingen, 1989\textsuperscript{2}; Mohr) 102.
  \item \textsuperscript{50} A. von Harnack, \textit{Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums}, 1902\textsuperscript{1} (Leipzig, 1924\textsuperscript{4}; Hinrich) 589-611; Lane Fox, \textit{Pagans and Christians}, 310.
  \item \textsuperscript{52} Considering the hostile attitude towards the country in most Greek novels, we may notice that the young man is explicitly described as coming from the \textit{chôra} (48), cf. E. Bowie, ‘The
Irritated by his father’s warning against this liaison, the young man kicks him to death. Junod and Kaestli insufficiently bring out the evil character of this deed. For Greeks and Romans parricide was the most appalling crime imaginable—witness the myth of Oedipus, whose parricide led to incest with his mother.\(^53\) The story therefore has a strong moralistic flavor. Moreover, the parricide subsequently leads to the self-castration of the young man, since after John resurrects the father the man cuts off his testicles and throws them before his former girlfriend.\(^54\) Although John disapproves of this act, nevertheless he does not heal the youth but accepts him as he is. In other words, if \textit{AJ} offers an alternative life style to women, it also suggests a life of continence for men.

Finally, the prominent position of the women will also have had a certain missionary appeal among Greek and Roman women. It is important to stress the inclusion of the latter in \textit{AJ}, since in the Greek novel the Roman world is mostly carefully eliminated. \textit{AJ}, however, mentions a proconsul (31) and contains a number of Roman names: Marcellus, Tertullus, Fortunatus, and Drusiana, a most unusual but unmistakably Roman name.\(^55\) In the earliest stages of Christianity, these women could occupy influential positions to a degree unheard of in contemporary pagan religions or Judaism,\(^56\) as still sometimes today in modern Africa,\(^57\) although a reaction against this more active role set in at an early

\(^{54}\) For the connection between youth and castration see Nock, \textit{Essays I}, 476f.
\(^{55}\) I have been able to find only one other instance of this name, viz. Drusiana, the daughter of M. Flavius Drusianus (\textit{CIL} 6.1414: c. 200 AD). Dio Cassius 57.13.1 mentions that the sharpest swords were called ‘Drusiana’, but this does not seem relevant in our case. Note, however, its frequent occurrence in Manichaean circles as a testimony to the success of the \textit{AJ} in those circles: I. Gardner et al., \textit{Coptic Documentary Texts from Kellis I} (Oxford, 1999: Oxbow) no. 19.62,73; 21.20; 28.31.
If we can trust the transmitted text of Tertullian’s *De baptismo* (17.5), certain Carthaginian women invoked the *Acts of Paul* to claim the right to instruct and to baptize. A certain ‘liberating’ effect of the AAA thus cannot be denied.