The Apocryphal Acts Of Thomas
Hilhorst, A.; Bremmer, J.N.; Bolyki, J.; Adamik, T.; Luttikhuizen, G.P.

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2001

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):
XI. The Apocryphal Acts: Authors, Place, Time and Readership

JAN N. BREMMER

As this volume is the last in our series of discussions of the five major *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (AAA), it seems appropriate to conclude our study with a new discussion of the authors, time and place of composition, and the readership of the major AAA. The following analysis hopes to demonstrate that such a discussion is especially fruitful when carried out in dialogue with students of the ancient novel. The idea is not totally new, since in 1932 Rosa Soder already pointed to a number of similarities between the ancient novel and the AAA. However, later students of the novel have not displayed the same interest. Tomas Hagg and Niklas Holzberg pay some attention to the AAA in their well known introductions to the ancient novel, but they are clearly happy to pass on to more congenial subjects. The three recent collections by Jim Tatum, John Morgan and Richard Stoneman, and Gareth Schmeling contain between them only

---

1 This chapter is the abbreviated but updated and somewhat revised version of my 'The Novel and the Apocryphal Acts: Place, Time and Readership', in H. Hofmann and M. Zimmerman (eds), *Groningen Colloquia on the Novel IX* (Groningen, 1998) 157-180. For information and comments on the various versions I am grateful to Glen Bowersock, Ewen Bowie, Ken Dowden, who also skillfully corrected my English, Danielle van Mal-Maedler, Peter van Minnen and Klaas Worp. Kind as always, Egbert Forsten immediately granted my request to reprint this piece.


two, not quite satisfactory contributions on the AAA\textsuperscript{4}. It is only Kate Cooper, in \textit{The Virgin and the Bride}, who has once again discussed both the ancient novel and the AAA as manifestations of the same literary genre\textsuperscript{5}. Yet a comparison between the AAA and the ancient novel can be rewarding as we hope to show in the following discussion of the authorship (§1), chronology and place of composition (§2), and readership (§3) of the AAA.

\textit{1. Authorship, text and message}

What can we say about the authors of the ancient novel and the AAA? In an important study on the sociology, production and reception of the ancient novel, John Morgan has observed that the few references to the novel in ancient literature are not very complimentary. Typical is the Emperor Julian's commentary that 'as for those fictions in the form of history that have been narrated alongside events of the past, we should renounce them, love stories and all that sort of stuff' (\textit{Epist. 89.301b}, tr. Morgan). Morgan persuasively concludes from these and similar comments that it is likely that 'the whole exercise of writing and reading novels was somewhat ambiguous, even ever so slightly illicit'\textsuperscript{6}. He draws no further consequences from his conclusion, but it fits his characterisation that until now it has been impossible to demonstrate that one author has written more than one novel. It very much looks as if the novel was a one time only affair, which the author did not want to repeat. This impression is supported by the AAA, each of which has been written by a separate author. It also may explain the relative obscurity of the authors of the novel, about whom we mostly know very little, often next to nothing, apart from the information supplied by the novels themselves. Even


\textsuperscript{5} K. Cooper, \textit{The Virgin and the Bride} (CambridgeMass., 1996).

Tertullian, who possessed detailed information about the author of the Acts of Paul (§3), does not mention any name.

This relative anonymity of the author may be partly responsible for a striking characteristic of the text of the novel and the AAA. Papyri and the study of manuscript traditions have shown that the texts of various novels, in particular those of the Alexander Romance and Joseph and Asenath, display a surprising fluidity in variants and scenes. The same situation, even more pronounced, can be found among the AAA. The martyrdom of the apostles soon started to circulate independently, large interpolations occurred within decades, and later authors recycled portions of the text into new stories about apostles or other saints. To a certain extent one may perhaps compare the ‘translation’ by Apuleius of his Greek model, the Metamorphoseis of ‘Lucius of Patrai’. Apuleius not only happily inserts stories, like the famous Amor and Psyche, new episodes and typically Roman details, but in numerous passages he also makes many small changes. Such fluidity was not the case with every ancient text. Alexandrian philologists protected prominent literary authors, and the texts of important philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, were initially zealously guarded by their followers. The text of the Old Testament, another one-time pluriform text as the Dead Sea scrolls have shown, was even declared sacrosanct, as soon as the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the priests who had always preserved some kind of fixity of the text had disappeared. Admittedly, the textual fluidity of some novels and the AAA cannot be ascribed only to the anonymity of the authors: the enormous popularity of some texts must have played a role as well. On the other hand, novels were no bestsellers, and the anonymity of the authors may thus have been a contributing factor to the fluidity of their texts.

---


If Erwin Rohde (1845-1898) in his classic study still depreciated the novel, in the late 1920s there appeared a book by a Hungarian author, Karl Kerényi (1897-1973), which postulated a connection between the novel and religion, especially Egyptian religion. Kerényi dedicated his book to the memory of Franz Boll (1867-1924), a learned classicist, who had analysed the last book of the New Testament, Revelation. The ancient novels, however, are no apocalypses, books par excellence to be decoded, and Kerényi’s approach was immediately rejected by Arthur Darby Nock (1902-1963). This connection with religion became even more strongly argued by Reinhold Merkelbach, who suggested that the true sense of the novels was accessible only to initiates of the mysteries, but his approach has been equally generally rejected. Even if the specific theses of Kerényi and Merkelbach are not accepted, the importance of religion in the novels cannot be denied. Can it be that this religious element had made it easier for the authors of the AAA to model their writings partly on the novel? I find it hard to answer the question, but at least it has to be raised.

2. The chronology and place of origin of the AAA

The authoritative translation of the New Testament apocrypha suggests the following dates and places of composition regarding the five major AAA: the Acts of Andrew (AA) were published in perhaps Alexandria about AD 150, the Acts of Peter (APt) perhaps in Rome.

---


12 R. Merkelbach, Roman und Mysterium in der Antike (Munich, 1962) repeated in his Isis regina—Zeus Sarapis (Stuttgart, 1995) 335-484. His thesis was rejected by Kerényi. Der antike Roman (Darmstadt. 1971) 9 (‘all zu vereinfachte Vorstellung’).
in the decade 180-190, the *Acts of Paul (AP)* in Asia Minor in the period between 185 and 195, the *Acts of John (AJ)* in East Syria in the first half of the third century, and the *Acts of Thomas (ATh)* also in East Syria at the beginning of the third century.13

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to reach a satisfactory relative, let alone absolute, chronology of the AAA. Only in few cases do we have clear indications for an absolute chronology. Tertullian comments on the AP around AD 200, and the mention of Falconilla, the daughter of Queen Tryphaena in the AP, supplies a *terminus post quem* of about AD 160. This rare name is most likely derived from Pompeia Sosia Falconilla, the wife of the Roman consul of AD 169 (M. Pontius Laelianus), who is known from various contemporary inscriptions.14 Moreover, both the interest of the ATh in India and the clear influence by Bardaisan point to a time of composition in the 220s or 230s.15 Finally, the AJ must have been written in the second half of the second century, witness its pre-Valentinian Gnostic tendency and specific docetic Christology.16

A second approach to the chronology is the study of the dependence of individual AAA on the ancient novel. Although none of the AAA has come down to us in its original form, the AJ and AP seem to have been closest to the ancient novel, since they have protagonists from the social elite, in addition to the traditional motifs outlined below (§3). This seems to indicate an early date for these two Acts. In addition to these limited indications, we can also look at the mutual interdependency of the AAA, since they regularly display

---

15 Bremmer, this volume, Ch. VI.
signs of intertextuality, just like the ancient novels17. It is clear that great care is required in this respect, since mistakes made in determining the dependency of one novel on another have been spectacular. One only needs to read again the relevant pages in Rohde’s pioneering work on the novel in order to see that arguments can be often used either way”. However, we can be reasonably certain that the APt has used the AJ, including the latter’s well known interpolation of cc.79-102 about the Cross, and probably even the AP19, as we can see from its less successful version of the famous Quo vadis? scene which also occurs in the AP20. This suggests a somewhat later period for the APt, which indeed is generally considered to date from the end of the second century21. The AA too must have been written around the same time, since they are theologically related to the Syrian Tatian and oppose military service, an opposition that in Christian circles only becomes manifest at the end of the second century22. Thus we may provisionally infer the following order: AJ, AP, APt, AA and ATh within a period stretching from about AD 150-230.

Some parts of the original APt, the AA and, via a later Irish translation, also of the AJ have been preserved only because of a Latin translation of the major five Acts. Can we say when this translation was made? The best evidence for determining the date of a text is often an institutional detail23. In this case, too, there is a passage in

17 For the pagan novel this is stressed by S. Stephens, 'Fragments of Lost Novels', in Schmeling, The Novel, 655-83 at 683.
18 E. Rohde, Der Griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer (Berlin, 19143).
23 For another example from Late Antiquity see my dating of the vision of Dorotheus: 'An Imperial Palace Guard in Heaven: The Date of the Vision of Dorotheus', ZPE 75 (1987) 82-8, reprinted in my The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife (London and New York, 2002) 128-33, 184-6.
the Latin translation of the *APt* that has not yet received the interest it deserves. When a demon had kicked a marble statue in his atrium to pieces, the senator Marcellus called out: *Magnum flagitium factum est: si enim hoc innotuerit Caesari per aliquem de curiosis, magnis poenis nos adfliget* (II). Schneemelcher translates as follows: 'A great crime has been committed; if Caesar hears of this through some busybody, he will punish us severely'24. However, his translation overlooks the fact that the *curiosi* were not 'busybodies', but a nickname for the *agentes in rebus*, a kind of imperial secret police25. It is only from AD 359 onwards that they reported directly to the emperor and, therefore, became feared as spies26. Consequently, the *APt* was translated into Latin after that date. And indeed, knowledge of the Latin translation is not attested before St Augustine's *Contra Adimantum* (17) of AD 394 and its adoption in Priscillianist circles27. The Latin version of the *AJ* is also attested first in late fourth-century Africa in Manichaean and Priscillianist circles28, just as usage of the

24 Schneemelcher, in *NTA II*, 297.
25 As was pointed out by Th. Pekáry, *Das römische Kaiserbildnis* (Berlin, 1985) 139 note 66.
complete Latin version of the AP is only attested for the so-called \textit{Cena Cypriani}, which dates from about AD 400\textsuperscript{29}. The Latin translation of the \textit{AA} appears first in Philaster of Brescia’s \textit{Diversarum haereseon liber} (88.6: about AD 390) and was also used by the Priscillianists\textsuperscript{30}. The \textit{ATH} survived only in a later, abbreviated \textit{Passio Thomae} and a \textit{Liber de miraculis beati Thomae apostoli}\textsuperscript{31}, but the analogy with the other translated AAA suggests that Augustine still knew a complete Latin translation, since he is its first witness\textsuperscript{32}.

Around AD 400 both Faustus of Milevis and Philaster refer to a collection of the five major AAA by a certain Leucius Charinus, a Manichaean\textsuperscript{33}. We therefore conclude that the five major AAA were translated together by a Manichaean in Africa and immediately adopted in Priscillianist circles. The mention of the \textit{curiosi} in the \textit{AP} establishes a \textit{terminus post quem} of AD 359 for this collection, but we can narrow down its period of origin even more, as Priscillian himself already showed acquaintance with the AAA in his so-called \textit{Würzburg tractates}\textsuperscript{34}. Since he was executed in AD 385, the five major AAA must, consequently, have been translated into Latin between that year and AD 359.

\textsuperscript{29} For text, translation, date and AP see C. Modesto, \textit{Studien zur Cena Cypriani und zu deren Rezeption} (Tübingen. 1992).
\textsuperscript{30} Prieur, in \textit{NTA} II, 103.
\textsuperscript{31} For a fragment of the original Latin translation see now P. Bernard, ‘Un passage perdu dans \textit{Acta Thomae latins conservé dans une anaphore mérovingienne’}, \textit{Revue Bénédicte}ine 107 (1997) 24-39.
\textsuperscript{34} H. Chadwick, \textit{Priscillian of Avila} (Oxford. 1976) 77f.
The chronology proposed for the original AAA is supported by its close coincidence with the heyday of the ancient novel. This must have been the second half of the second century, to judge by chronological tables of the papyrological fragments. The overall chronology supports the dating of Heliodorus to the third century, since it would mean that the genre had run its course around AD 230; a sudden reappearance in the later fourth century would be hard to explain. It is true that the first AAA continued to be 'recycled' in the next centuries, but the creativity and freshness of the first major five was virtually never regained except, to a certain extent, in the fourth-century Acts of Philip.

Do we find a similar coincidence regarding the location of the AAA? The heartland of the ancient novel was Western Asia Minor, where we probably have to locate Xenophon of Ephesus, Longus, Lollianus and Achilles Tatius (below). Within this area the most important centre was Aphrodisias, where certainly Chariton's Callirhoe but also, albeit with various degrees of probability, Ninus, Chione, Parthenope, and Antonius Diogenes' Wonders beyond Thule were written. This concentration suggests we should look at Aphrodisias and that region for a potential place of birth of the AAA. Do we have any indications in that direction?

---


38 Bowie, 'The Readership', 450-2 and 'The Ancient Readers', 90-1; Bowersock, Fiction as History, 38-41 (Antonius Diogenes); Stephens, 'Fragments', 660-1 (Chione); Swain, Hellenism and Empire, 424-25 (for a first-century date of Ninus and Parthenope); for the Parthenope see now
More recently, the origin of the AJ has been looked for in East Syria (above) and Egypt, and in the past I myself have endorsed Egypt as place of composition. The most important arguments for Egypt are the theological resemblances between the AJ and Clement of Alexandria and Origen, but such later parallels cannot be decisive. We move onto much firmer ground, when we look at the social terminology of the AJ. Of the protagonists, both Andronicus (31) and Callimachus (73) are called a 'first of the Ephesians' (31), and Antipater is 'a first of the Smyrnaeans' (56). The terminology recurs in other early AAA. In the AP Thecla's fiancée Thamyris is called 'a first of the city' (11), her suitor Alexander 'a first of the Antiochenes' (26) and she herself 'a first of the Iconians' (26) and in the AA, which have survived only very fragmentarily, we find 'Demetrius, a first of the Amasaeans' (3).

The terminology is not unique. In a number of Greek cities a member of the elite within the elite called himself or herself (or was called) prōtos (prôte) tēs poleōs, ek tōn prōteuontōn or ek tou prōtou tagmatos. Now we are fortunate in having a relatively large corpus of Ephesian and Smyrnaean inscriptions, which show that this terminology was not at home in either Ephesus or Smyrna. Although these terms occasionally occur elsewhere in the Greek world, the centre of this aristocratic self-designation was Aphrodisias and Northern Lycia. In addition, it is found in Eastern Phrygia, Bithynia, and Pisidia where Antiochene Jews stirred up 'the first of the city' against the apostle Paul (Acts 13.50); on the other hand, the related


terminology of *pròtopolitès* is exclusively found in Syria, Palestine and Egypt\textsuperscript{41}. The conclusion seems inevitable that the very first *AAA*, *AJ* and *AP*, were written in this particular region, the *AP* perhaps in Iconium\textsuperscript{42}. Unfortunately, Aphrodisias does not enter into consideration, since Christianity was a latecomer to Caria in general and Aphrodisias in particular\textsuperscript{43}.

The place of composition of two of the later *AAA*, the *APt* and *AA*, is perhaps to be looked for in Bithynia. Bithynians receive special attention in the *APt*, and the *AA* starts off in Northern Anatolia. Moreover, a Bithynian origin for the *AA* is supported by the mention of the wife of the pro-consul Lesbios and her estate manager together in the bath (*AA* (23)). Although it was perfectly normal for a Roman pro-consul to take his wife with him to his province\textsuperscript{44}, it is totally improbable that she would have taken along his steward. On the other hand, an estate manager (*oikonomos* or *pragmateutès*) of wealthy Greek women is epigraphically well attested, especially in areas with large estates such as Central Anatolia and Bithynia. They must have even been sufficiently recognisable for the author of the *Historia Apollonii regis Tyrii* (31 RA, RB) to introduce one into his novel\textsuperscript{45}.

---

\textit{Epigraphica Anatolica} 27 (1996) 127-42; N.P. Milner, *An Epigraphical Survey in the Kibyra-Obasa Region Conducted by A.S. Hall* (Ankara, 1998) no. 1; SEG 31.1316 (Lycian Xanthus); 41.1343, 1345-6, 1353 (Lycian Balboura); 42.1215 (Pisidian Etenna); 44.1162 (Boubon); 46.1524 (Lydian Sardis).


3. Readership

Having looked at the authorship, dates and places of origin of the 
AAA, let us now turn to the vexed question of the readership of these 
 writings via a reconsideration of the readership of the ancient novel. 
The latter problem has roused deserved interest in recent times. In the 
last five years we have had even five contributions on the readership 
of the ancient novel: one by Hagg, Morgan, and Stephens, and three 
by Bowie**. As we all accept that most upper class male Greeks and 
Romans could read and write, the problem mainly boils down to the 
women. I see here three related questions in particular. First, can we 
suppose that a reasonable amount of women could read? Secondly, 
can we presuppose such a potential reading public in Asia Minor and 
Egypt and, finally, do we have any evidence for female readers of the 
 novel, pagan or Christian?

Let us start with the problem of the reading women. In the last 
two decades we have had various studies devoted to this problem**. 
They clearly show an enormous range of reading women, who have 
now turned up even in Vindolanda, near Hadrian's wall48. None of 
these general studies, however, pays any attention to Christian read-
ning women49. It is as if the ancient world suddenly stops at some

---


invisible Iron Curtain behind which one is not allowed to peep. However, in one of the visions in his mid second-century *Shepherd*, Hermes has to make a copy of a book and give it to a woman, Grapte\(^50\), 'to admonish the widows and orphans' (*Vis.* II.4.2); the second-century Dionysius of Corinth wrote a theological letter to Chrysopeira, 'a most faithful sister'; the famous gnostic Valentinus had female followers with poetic pretensions; his pupil Marcus wrote a presewn letter to the rich woman Flora; Hippolytus evidently presupposed that women and maidens could read his work; Origen had many female pupils, and a very recently published fourth-century papyrus reads as follows: 'To my dearest lady sister, greetings in the Lord. Lend the Ezra, since I lent you the little Genesis. Farewell in God from us'\(^5^1\). It seems as if reading and intellectually interested women immediately become visible, as soon as we have more information about a leading Christian or Gnostic figure. It is therefore not surprising that in the early fourth-century *Martyrdom of Agape*, Irene and Chione the Roman governor asked these women without further ado: 'Do you have in your possession any treatises, parchments or books of the impious Christians' (4.2)\(^5^2\).

This Christian evidence may also make us more reticent in putting into doubt Antonius Diogenes' dedication of his *Wonders* to

---

\(^{50}\) The name Grapte was rare in Greece and Asia Minor but 'one of the favourite names in slave and libertine circles of Rome', where *Shepherd* was written, cf. M. Ricl, _The Inscriptions of Alexandreia Troas_ (Bonn, 1997) 124.


his sister Isidora (Photius, Bihl. 111a-b). She must have been an educated woman and it seems a bit far-fetched that Antonius would have liked us to see his very own sister to stand for, in the words of Bowie, 'the avid but gullible reader'. Actually, if we accept the persuasive identification of PSI 117 as a fragment of his Wonders, Antonius does even mention a reading woman within his own novel53.

Unfortunately, we cannot always trace the social position of reading women, but the papyrological evidence of Oxyrhynchus and Vindolanda strongly suggests that the skill of reading was not limited to upper-class women54. A handicap in our research is that the owners of literary papyri are very rarely known, but we may note that recently Roger Bagnall has identified a wealthy, third-century lady from Oxyrhynchus, Aurelia Ptolemais, who owned a Sikyonika, the Iliad and Julius Africanus' Kestoi. Even if she inherited these books from her father, she, surely, was a potential reader of the novel or the AAA55. We are much less informed about Asia Minor from literary sources, but archaeology has at least furnished us with an ever increasing stream of names of women who occupied a leading, sometimes the leading, position in their community. Highpriestesses, agonothetae, gymnasiarchs, demiourgoi, eponymous magistrates or members of boule and gerousia: there can be no doubt that in the heartland of the novel there was a wealthy and well-educated female public available which in principle could have read and appreciated the various romances56. But did they actually do so?

53 Contra Bowie, 'The Readership', 437-8 and 'The Ancient Readers', 103, who follows up a suggestion by S. Stephens and J. Winkler, Ancient Greek Novels: the fragments (Princeton, 1995) 102-03; PSI 117 has now been re-edited by Stephens and Winkler, 148-53. The supposed attitude of Antonius also hardly squares with the general impression we have of the brother-sister relationship in Greek culture, see my 'Why did Medea kill her brother Apsyrtus?', in J. Clauss and S.I. Johnston (eds), Medea (Princeton, 1997) 83-100.


56 See, most recently, the informative discussions by J. Nollé, 'Frauen wie Omphale', in M. Dettenhofer (ed), Reine Mannersache? (Cologne, 1994)
The problems and evidence at stake have now been admirably set out by Bowie, partially in reaction to Hagg, who in turn had reacted to Bowie’s contribution to the 1989 Dartmouth conference. Bowie usefully distinguishes between intended and actual readership, but his discussion also makes clear that we have very little information about the gender and social status of his actual readers. As the lack of evidence for female readers of the novel has often been pointed out, it is good to realise that there is also very little information about males as readers of the novel, as Hagg has stressed. It is possible, though, to add a few male readers to Bowie’s collection, since he draws insufficient attention to the intertextuality of the novels themselves. Admittedly, this aspect of the readership of the novels may not have seemed central to his argument, but it must nevertheless be spelled out to present the full picture of ancient readership. As I have argued in the original version of this chapter, Apuleius, Lucian, Lollianus and Achilles Tatius all had read ‘Lucius of Patrai’s’ Metamorphoseis. It is also clear that Chariton was read by Xenophon of Ephesus; the so-called Protagoras novel (Klaus Alpers’ splendid recent ‘discovery’) by Longus; Xenophon of Ephesus by Achilles Tatius and, probably, by the Antheia fragment and


See the literature mentioned in note 46.

60 J. N. O’Sullivan, Xenophon of Ephesus. His compositional technique and the birth of the novel (Berlin and New York, 1994) does not seem to me to have proved the reverse, however informative the book is on Xenophon’s literary technique; cf. the review by M. Weissenberger, Gott. Gel. Anz. 248 (1996) 176-91.

the *Historia Apollonii*; Longus by Heliodorus; and Achilles Tatius by Bardaisan, the author of the *ATH*, and Heliodorus. Finally, the author of the elusive *Grundschrift* of the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and Recognitions had read Chariton, Xenophon of Ephesus and, most likely, Heliodorus.

A few more readers can be detected if we take into account the AAA, a genre surprisingly neglected by Hagg and Bowie in their discussions of the readership of the novel. As we have seen, Rosa Soder collected motifs shared by the novel and the AAA, but she explicitly denied dependence of the latter on the former. Instead, she suggested that the AAA derived from 'Zeugen alter im Volke lebender Erzählungen von den Abenteuern, Wundertaten und Liebesaffaren grosser Männer'. There is not a shred of evidence for this view. In fact, the intertextuality of the AAA with the novel cannot be doubted, if we look at the cumulation of similar motifs, as collected by Soder: shipwrecks, brigands, sale into slavery, putting girls in brothels, unruly crowds, travel around the empire, thinking of suicide, sending messages, corrupting a servant, trials, locking up in tombs, endless journeys and loving couples (Platonic or not).

We may add that, as in the novel, young elite couples are the protagonists in the earliest of the AAA, the AJ and AP (§2). In the AJ the apostle John is met by Lycomedes, an Ephesian *stratēgos*, who

---


65 Bremmer, 'Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus'.


67 Compare, e.g., AJ 19f and 49 with Chariton 1.4.7 and 3.1.1; for a discussion of this theme, S. MacAlister, *Dreams & Suicides. The Greek Novel from Antiquity to the Byzantine Empire* (London, 1996).
tells him about the paralysis of his wife Cleopatra, who was, he says, a beauty 'at which all Ephesus was amazed' (20). As for a second elite couple, Andronicus and Drusiana, the wife is so beautiful that Callimachus, a young 'first of the city', tries to commit necrophilia and strips her of her clothes until he arrives at the undergarment, at which point he is fortunately threatened by a snake (70-1). In the AP, the immediate infatuation of Thecla with the apostle Paul is described in stock novelistic terms by her mother to Thecla's fiancée, Thamyris: 'For indeed for three days and three nights Thecla has not risen from the window either to eat or to drink, but gazing steadily as if on some joyful spectacle she so devotes herself to a strange man... (she) sticks to the window like a spider, is (moved) by his words (and) gripped by a new desire and a fearful passion' (7, tr. W. Schneemelcher). Sometimes an author of the AAA even borrowed a less common motif, as when in both Chariton (1.4.12-5.1) and the AJ (48) a kick produces a loss of voice. The conclusion is inevitable: the authors of the AJ and AP, at least, had read the contemporary novels and taken from them part of their inspiration.

Of course, the similarities should not blind us to the differences. The AAA centre on the martyrdom of an apostle, and chastity is the happy end, not marriage. Moreover, unlike most ancient novels, the AAA happily admit the Romans and their world into the fictional world, sometimes even in a humiliating manner, as when the AA depicts the Roman proconsul with an attack of diarrhoea (13). Taking such differences into account, Christine Thomas has well formulated the relationship between the ancient novel and the AAA: 'though motifs do not a genre make, the ideal romances and the Acts are speaking the same narrative language'.

But who were the authors of the AAA and who were their intended or actual readers? The authors of the AJ, APt, AA and ATh are unknown, but a presbyter from Asia Minor wrote the AP, as

---

68. See the discussion of the similarities in Junod and Kaestli, Acta Iohannis, 517-20, 547-51, where they conclude: 'La fréquence et l'étroitesse de ces parallèles confirment de manière décisive que notre auteur connaît la production romanesque de son époque' (550); add now P.J. Lalleman, 'Classical Echoes (Callimachus, Charito) in the Acta Iohannis?', ZPE 116 (1997)66.

69. Thomas, 'Stories Without Texts', 278.
Tertullian informs us:\(^70\): a clear case, then, of another male reader of the ancient novel. Tertullian's notice also supplies another, very valuable, piece of information. He tells us that the Christian women of Carthage based claims for teaching and baptizing on the AP. As Carthage contained a substantial number of Greek-speaking inhabitants', the conclusion suggests itself that women were actual readers of the AAA. Now we certainly know that fourth-century Christian women must have read the adventures of Thecla\(^72\), but we may perhaps also identify an earlier reader. The young upper-class woman Perpetua prayed for her brother Deinocrates (Passio Perpetuae 7-8), just as in the AP Thecla prayed for the deceased daughter of Queen Tryphaena (29), the only two such known cases in the first Christian centuries\(^73\). Moreover, before her martyrdom Perpetua saw in a dream a black Egyptian (10), just as in the Ap\(^t\) (22) the Roman senator Marcellus saw an awful black woman before Peter's confrontation with Simon Magus. In both cases the black person is killed and thus predicts the favourable outcome of the forthcoming battle. The parallelism is so close that it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Perpetua had also read the Ap\(^t\).

If women, then, were actual readers of the AAA, were they also intended readers? There can be little doubt that this was indeed the case. First, both in the AJ and AP women (virgins, widows and old women) dominate the scene, but it is upper-class women who are the most prominent ones. Both Acts display various couples, such as Lycomedes and Cleopatra or Andronicus and Drusiana in the AJ, and Thecla and Thamyris in the AP, but in both cases women are the heroines and clearly the examples to be followed\(^74\). Secondly, from


\(^{72}\) Cooper, The Virgin and the Bride, 70, 112.


Adolf von Harnack to Robin Lane Fox, scholars of early Christianity have continuously observed that until Constantine women by far constituted the majority of early Christians. Thirdly, whereas we do not hear of the Christians or other religious groups targeting upper-class men, there is plenty of evidence that the early Christians, just like Jews and Gnostics, were popular among wealthy Greek and Roman women, not least because they took women seriously on an intellectual level.

It has never been disputed, I think, that at least some of the authors of the AAA meant their novels to have a 'missionary' effect. In the upper-class of Asia Minor, their most obvious targets were women; the conversion of upper-class males, on the other hand, would take much longer and did not take off before the conversion of Constantine. This female focus is supported by the fact that in the AAA women are never executed for their adhesion to the new faith; in the case of Thecla she did not even have to cut her hair. The conclusion seems inescapable: women must have constituted an important part, perhaps the largest part, of the intended and actual readership of the AAA.

This is not the position of Keith Hopkins, who has argued that there were very few Christians until the end of the second century and, consequently, very few reading women. Both Hopkins and Rodney Stark agree that one could postulate about 7,500 Christians around AD 100 by assuming 1,000 Christians in AD 40 and an annual growing rate of 40%. In fact, Hopkins even assumes that around AD 100 most Christian communities did not have 'among them a single sophisticated reader or writer'. Yet such an assumption would hardly explain the familiarity with Christians in Nero's Rome and the fact that Pliny (Ep. 10.96) already finds a worrying number of Christians in Bithynia around AD 110. Moreover, it seems hard to accept that early Christianity spread at an amazing rate despite the fact that most Christian communities were unable to read

---

76 For examples see Bremmer, 'Why did Christianity', 39-40.
78 Hopkins, 'Christian Number', 213.
a single Christian treatise. Surely, Hopkins takes too little into account that the heavy Jewish contribution to early Christianity must have positively influenced the level of early Christian literacy\textsuperscript{79}.

My own idea would be that the feverish atmosphere in Palestine in the decades after Jesus' execution must have been even more favourable to the spread of his messianic message than modern quantifications seem to realise. Consequently, I would assume more Christians around AD 160 than the about 60,000 which both Stark and Hopkins suggest, and thus more reading women. It is of course true, as Hopkins argues, that there will have been far less reading women than men. Yet, given the female superiority in numbers in the earlier Christian churches (above) and the fact that upper-class women could become Christian with less cost to their career than upper-class males, a number of Christian communities in Asia Minor must have certainly had a small but significant section of reading women. In any case, we are so used to mass circulation of books that most scholars hardly seem to realise that in antiquity authors, like for example Galen\textsuperscript{80}, sometimes wrote only for their friends or immediate circle. This could also have been the case with the AAA, which need not have been intended for a widespread circulation in the beginning.

Unfortunately, we know nothing about the original Sitz im Leben of the AAA. In addition to being intended for the immediate environment of the author, one may wonder whether they were perhaps read in the context of worship, like some of the letters of St Paul. Or did the author first give a 'public reading' in his congregation or religious group before publishing them? The latter possibility seems perfectly likely, given the conventions of the time\textsuperscript{81}. Yet, even if such cases of oral presentation took place, the majority of the audience would still have been female given the composition of the earliest Christian communities.

Having considered the female readership of the AAA, we are now in a better position to solve the problem of women as possible readers of the ancient novel. Whereas Rohde inferred female readers from the

\textsuperscript{81} Gamble, \textit{Books and Readers}, 82-143.
triviality of the novel, modern scholars think female readers unlikely on the basis of its sophistication: in both cases, male prejudice is evident despite the change in appreciation. There are at least three questions that need attention. Firstly, do the novels themselves indicate reading women? Secondly, do we know of actual female readers? And thirdly, does the nature of the protagonists say anything about intended readers?

In an important study, Brigitte Egger has given persuasive answers to all of these questions. She shows that in the second-century novel – Chariton, Xenophon of Ephesus and Longus – women were represented as literate without any thematisation of that aspect. In an eleventh-century Persian romance, which is an important source for our knowledge of Parthenope, the heroine is even depicted as a youthful genius. She started studying at the age of two, became an astronomer and a capable scribe at seven, and in her teens, when her father (Polycrates of Samos) 'examined her in the arts, he found the key of eloquence and the treasures of virtue. In deliberation the cultured child became without need of the instruction of the learned'.

Unfortunately, the only attested female reader is the already mentioned sister of Antonius Diogenes, Isidora, but as we have seen, male readers are not attested in abundance either.

As regards the protagonists, it is hard to disagree with Hagg when he states: 'Women are the real heroes of the early novels: Callirhoe, Parthenope, Anthia. They are sympathetically drawn and altogether more alive than their pale husbands and lovers. A partly, some would say predominantly female audience thus remains a fair assumption. This remains true, even if one agrees with Egger that the female protagonists, although 'immensely emotionally powerful and erotically ravishing', at the same time appear as socially 'restricted and disempowered'; the latter characteristics may well

---

82 Cf. B. Egger, 'Looking at Chariton's Callirhoe', in Morgan and Stone-man, Greek Fiction, 31-48 at 32-33 (with bibliography).
84 Hagg, 'Orality', 56, quoting from the as yet unpublished translation by Bo Utas.
85 Hagg, 'Orality', 59.
86 B. Egger, 'Women and Marriage in the Greek Novels', in Tatum, The Search, 260-80 at 272f.
have made them more palatable for the male readers (or their authors). Admittedly, Morgan has defended the paleness of the protagonists: 'The colourless heroes are perhaps blank screens onto which the reader can project himself more easily than on to a more individualised character'. But if this extremely weak argument were valid, surely the most popular works of literature, or of the cinema for that matter, would abound with colourless heroes!

None of the recent contributors to the debate on female readership of the novel has taken the AAA into account. Yet, the result of our discussion strongly supports the case for the defence, since it immediately raises an important question. Why would Christian male authors think that women would suddenly become interested in a genre in which they had not been previously interested? It seems much more natural to accept that these authors had noticed the contemporary interest of women in the novel. I stress the word 'contemporary'. There is no need to think that the novel was 'invented' for women. The examples of the Iolaus or the so-called Protagoras novel (above) clearly militate against such a view. But nothing prevents us from accepting that, with the emergence in the first and second century of the wealthy female upper-class in Asia Minor, a new audience had developed which comprised males and females, for whom some novelists introduced female protagonists instead of male ones. The female protagonists of the contemporary AAA and their female readership strongly support this view.

87 Morgan, 'The Greek Novel', 145