



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

# PROBA THE PROPHET

*Studies in the Christian Virgilian Cento  
of Faltonia Betitia Proba*

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Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i litteraturvetenskap  
vid Göteborgs universitet, som med tillstånd från Humanistiska fakulteten  
kommer att offentligt försvaras fredagen den 30 november 2012 kl. 13.15 i  
Lilla hörsalen, Institutionen för litteratur, idéhistoria, och religion,  
Renströmsgatan 6, Göteborg.

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## ABSTRACT

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*Proba the Prophet: Studies in the Christian Virgilian Cento of Faltonia*

PhD dissertation at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 2012

Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion

Language: English

The present study aims to deepen the critical understanding of the fourth century poet Faltonia Betita Proba's *Cento* and its reception, a text of considerable historical and cultural importance. Not only is it one of few extant Latin texts from antiquity by a woman writer, but it is also one of our oldest Christian Latin poems; it is an early example of cultural amalgamation of the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman exegetical and literary traditions in that it is almost exclusively composed with verses from Virgil's *Aeneid*, *Georgics*, and *Eclogues*, but narrates key episodes from the Old and New Testament.

The first part of the dissertation examines the various constructions of the author 'Proba' and their relationships to the reception of the poem. It was not really until the twentieth century that the medieval and early modern representations of the centonist as a learned poet or even as a divinely inspired Sibyl were replaced by a general notion of her as a failed and scorned poet. This metamorphosis corresponds to changing attitudes to her poem in general. The large number of textual testimonies from the eighth to the seventeenth century, and the predominantly positive responses to the *Cento* during this period, were followed by harsh condemnations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the poem ceased to be regarded as proper literature. A pessimistic narrative emerged, based on speculation rather than historical evidence, saying that 'the early readers' rejected the *Cento*. Strategies to 'save' Proba were devised, and she was not seldom presented as a mother, wife and pious Christian. Despite the pervasive polyphonic and ambivalent qualities of her text, it was used as a source to reconstruct the feelings and intentions of the historical person Proba.

Readings of this kind are further problematized in the second part of the dissertation, where a series of new interpretations of the *Cento* are offered. The first chapter of this part explores the configurations of the fictive narrator, whose authorial voice is fashioned as that of a prophet and a confessing believer in the preface, interludes and epilogue. In these 'extradiegetic' sections of the narrative, the Virgilian verses and voices are recycled as to form a new Christian confessional and poetic language. The last two chapters explore the hermeneutics that characterize her use of the Virgilian and biblical texts, focusing above all on the typological connections that are established. At one level, the *Cento* features reenactments of biblical typologies with Old Testament 'types' prefiguring New Testament 'antitypes.' But it also displays semi-biblical typologies, where characters and events from the Virgilian 'hypotext' prefigure the biblical ones represented in the *Cento*, and these connections are heavily exploited to produce foreshadowing within the narrative.

Keywords: Proba, *Cento*, Virgil, early Christian poetry, Bible epic, *querelle des femmes*, author, reception, typology, hypotextuality.

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