Lavinia Cerioni*

Whispers of Knowledge: notes on the "other side" of knowledge production and dissemination in early Christianity

The field of knowledge –whether in teaching, authorship, literary patronage, education– has been dominated by men until only a few decades ago. If men have so thoroughly dominated this field, what sense does it lie in studying the relationship between women and knowledge in early Christianity? Is researching the story of women and knowledge a mere search for exceptions? Are women in knowledge production nothing more than "glitches" in a male-dominated world?

This article seeks to address these research questions by looking at women teachers in the first three centuries of Christianity, while also challenging the so-called "myth of the golden age" that has long shaped scholarship on women in early Christianity.[1] Early

* *Università di Roma La Sapienza, Italy*
lavinia.cerioni@uniroma1.it; ORCID 0009-0002-7336-3681

1 Such a tendency has already been identified by Kathleen Corley, *Women & the Historical Jesus. Feminist Myths of Christian Origins*, Santa Rosa, CA, Polebridge Press, 2002, who has discussed at length the role played by feminist ideologies in reading the first Christian literary sources, like the Pauline corpus and the gospels. This topic has also been addressed by Gabriella Aragione, *La ricezione della scrittura nei discorsi sulle donne nei secoli I-II*, in Kari Elisabeth Børresen, Emanuela Prinzivalli (eds.), *Le donne nello sguardo degli antichi autori cristiani*, Trapani, Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, 2013, pp. 13-60. Her contribution examines in great detail and with remarkable precision the theoretical models of womanhood proposed by early Christian authors, and the ways in which Scripture was employed to legitimize these models. She contextualizes Christian women within Greco-Roman and Jewish social practices, thus acknowledging both continuity and rupture with previous traditions. Unlike her work, the present study does not focus on idealized models of femininity

Storia delle Donne, 21 (2025) <https://oaj.fupress.net/index.php/sdd/>
DOI: 10.36253/sd-19551 - CC BY 4.0 IT,

studies in this field often constructed a narrative suggesting that women enjoyed a high degree of emancipation in the communities of Jesus' time, only to see their freedom and active participation gradually curtailed. According to this perspective, women were eventually excluded from ecclesiastical offices and from meaningful intellectual engagement in theology, a process generally dated as early as the second and third centuries and often associated with the emergence of so-called "proto-orthodox" ecclesiastical structures.[2] This scholarly paradigm has already been challenged by scholars of Late Antiquity, who have demonstrated the profound involvement of Christian women in the intellectual life of the fourth and fifth century.[3] However, few have ventured to make similar claims regarding women's participation in Christian knowledge production during the second and third centuries.[4] This has occurred, on the one

but rather on actual historical figures, while also emphasizing the importance of transcending traditional disciplinary boundaries—particularly the divide between so-called heretical and orthodox movements.

2 See Adolf Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, vol. 2 transl. by James Moffatt, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons 1908, pp. 217-231; Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*, London, Penguin, 1990; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History*, Berkley, University of California Press, 2005; Hans Küng, *Women in Christianity*, New York, A&C Black, 2005.

3 In the fourth century, for example, women experienced a period of visibility within ascetic and monastic communities. In these settings, they served as teachers of other women, leaders of Christian groups, and models of sanctity for both men and women. This was also the era when Christian pilgrimage began to flourish, and imperial women assumed a significant theological-political role in the spread of Christianity. Unfortunately, these fascinating topics extend beyond the scope of this article's already ambitious chronological arch, and I must thus refer readers to the many studies that have explored them in depth, see Jostein Børtnes, *Sorelle nella verginità: Gorgonia e Macrina commemorate dai loro fratelli*, in Kari Elisabeth Børresen, Prinzivalli (eds.), *Le donne nello sguardo*, pp. 97-116; Carla Sunberg, *The Cappadocian Mothers: Deification Exemplified in the Writings of Basil, Gregory, and Gregory*, Cambridge, James Clarke & Co, 2018; Julia Hillner, *Helena Augusta. Mother of the Empire*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022; Tessa Canella, *La costruzione della memoria di Elena Augusta fra propaganda politico-religiosa ed esigenze devozionali*, in *La memoria. Forme e finalità del ricordare nel cristianesimo antico* Firenze, Nerbini, 2023, pp. 337-348.

4 For instance, Nicola Denzey Lewis «Women and Independent Religious Specialists in Second-Century Rome» in Ulla Tervahauta (ed.), *Women and Knowledge in Early Christianity*, New York, Brill, 2017 argues against the vulgate that women enjoyed a greater degree of emancipation and intellectual involvement in the theological developments of the community, concluding that women in Gnostic circles were as marginalised as in so-called orthodox circles. A similar approach is also visible in Sara Parks, '*The Brooten Phenomenon.' Moving Women from the Margins in Second-Temple and New Testament Scholarship*, in Kathy Ehrensperger, Shayna Sheinfeld

hand, because of a lingering reluctance to smudge the boundaries between so-called orthodox and heterodox Christian movements, as most women –though not all, as I will illustrate shortly– were affiliated to somewhat non-mainstream Christian churches.[5] On the other hand, scholars have often failed to acknowledge that the history of knowledge production in early Christianity is gendered. Early Christian women have "whispered" their knowledge and we ought to challenge our preconceived assumptions about where and how knowledge production and dissemination happened in the first three centuries of Christianity in order to pay due attention to their contributions.

Through a survey of literary and epigraphical evidence from the first three centuries of Christianity in several geographical contexts, this article will present few significant case studies about historical women –or figures who can reasonably be regarded as such– who were known for their roles as teachers and instructors during the first three centuries of Christianity. Although not exhaustive, this survey aims to illuminate the contexts in which women contributed to the production and dissemination of knowledge, while also shedding light on related roles they assumed in knowledge production, such as serving as intellectual partners of male theologians, procuring

(eds.), *Gender and Second-Temple Judaism*, Minneapolis, Fortress Academic, 2020, pp. 23-44. Parks shows that women's scholarly contributions are often ignored, sidelined, or dismissed. The accidental and/or deliberate exclusion of women from knowledge production has a historical legacy that continues to be felt in contemporary scholarship.

5 Particularly neat in working within the orthodox/heretics paradigm is the article by Markus Vinzent, «More 'Holy Women' in Early Christianity: The Gospels of Mary and Marcion» in Joan Taylor, Ilaria Ramelli (eds.), *Patterns of Women's Leadership in Early Christianity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 130-150. In this study, Vinzent identifies a shift from women's to men's authoritative roles already in the transition from the *Gospel of Marcion* to the *Gospel of Luke*. Such a position both reinforces the "myth of the golden age", as he claims that Marcion is the first Christian gospel, and perpetrates the claim – often suggested by scholars perpetrating the "myth of the golden age" – that heretical movements were more welcoming to women teachers. Vinzent's conclusions are challenged by some recent studies on women and heresy that have shown how the difference between different Christian circles when it comes to women's involvement in intellectual life and their emancipation from gendered Greaco-Roman roles was very limited; see, for instance, Silke Petersen, «Women" and "Heresy" in Patristic Discourses and Modern Studies» in Tervahauta (ed.), *Women and Knowledge*, pp. 187-205.

books, working as copyists and calligraphists, and acting as patrons of the arts.

1. The earliest evidence: missionary teachers and house-churches leaders

Women's earliest and most significant engagement with knowledge was through their role as teachers of Christian doctrines. The role of teachers in early Christianity is extremely difficult – if not impossible– to define. Their position and influence within Christian communities varied significantly across different centuries and geographical contexts. In his recent study, Alessandro Falcetta concludes that «the influence of teachers was controversial and never became strong enough to ensure their survival as an office in the history of the Christian churches.» He further argues that the role of teachers was already overshadowed by that of presbyters and bishops as early as the second century.[6] This ambiguity surrounding the role of Christian teachers was likely advantageous for women, as it allowed them to develop forms of teaching that were more compatible with the social and cultural boundaries of their gender.

The first evidence of women in this capacity appears in the New Testament, with perhaps the clearest reference being the mention of Priscilla and Aquila in Acts: «He [Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately».[7] This passage is particularly noteworthy as it suggests that missionary couples jointly instructed converts in Christian doctrine. While it is often assumed that women taught only other women –especially in light of passages such as 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and Tit. 2:3-5 that prohibited women to speak in public assemblies[8]– the

6 Alessandro Falcetta, *Early Christian Teachers*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2020, p. 259. The book discusses a substantial body of evidence and reaches well-documented conclusions. However, it does not consider the case of female teachers, as it explicitly limits its investigation to those referred to by the term διδάσκαλος, and Christian women from the first three centuries were never described using this designation.

7 Acts 18:26: οὗτός τε ἤρξατο παρρησιάζεσθαι ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ· ἀκούσαντες δὲ αὐτοῦ πρίσκιλλα καὶ ἀκύλας προσελάβοντο αὐτὸν καὶ ἀκριβέστερον αὐτῷ ἐξέθεντο τὴν ὁδὸν [τοῦ θεοῦ].

8 The existence of such a practice is also compatible with Paul's reprimand about teaching in public spaces, as this type of teaching happened in private. For an insightful analysis of Paul's position, see Lone Fatum, *Immagine di Dio e gloria dell'uomo: le donne nelle comunità paoline*, in Kari Elisabeth Børresen, *A immagine di Dio. Modelli di genere nella tradizione guidaica e cristiana*, Roma, Carocci, 2001, pp. 63-144.

example of Priscilla and Aquila suggests that women also taught men, at least within the more intimate setting of the household. If so, this could have been the case also of others missionary couples, like Junia and Andronicus (Rm 16:7); Philologos and Julia; Nereus and Olympias (Rm. 16:15).[9] In this regard, the famous case of Junia –described by Paul as «outstanding among the apostles»– is exemplary of how women's contribution could be lost in the midst of time.[10] Sometime in the thirteenth century, a medieval copyist changed the feminine name Ἰουνία to the masculine Ἰουνιᾶς, despite early commentators of Romans clearly read the feminine Junia.[11] Junia had disappeared from history and resurfaced only in 1977 when Bernadette Brooten first drew attention to this intentionally misleading transliteration.[12]

As for the evidence about women in the earliest Christian communities, Priscilla's example remains unique, with no comparable cases available at this stage in the chronology for her teaching activity in the aftermath of Jesus' death and in the earliest Christian communities.

The possibility that women may have instructed men in private settings has also led some scholars to consider whether women who served as leaders of house-churches might likewise have undertaken teaching responsibilities in the gatherings held in them.[13] Indeed,

9 This is indeed the most accredited scholarly interpretation, see the articles by Joan Taylor, *Male–Female Missionary Pairings among Jesus' Disciples. Some Further Considerations,* in Joan Taylor, Ilaria Ramelli (eds.), *Patterns of Women's Leadership*, pp. 11-25; Ilaria Ramelli, *Colleagues of Apostles, Presbyters, and Bishops: Women Syzygoi in Ancient Christian Communities*, in Joan Taylor, Ilaria Ramelli (eds.), *Patterns of Women's Leadership,* pp. 26-58.

10 Romans 16:7: ἀσπάσασθε Ἀνδρόνικον καὶ Ἰουνίαν τοὺς συγγενεῖς μου καὶ συναιχμαλώτους μου, οἵτινές εἰσιν ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις, οἳ καὶ πρὸ ἐμοῦ γέγοναν ἐν Χριστῷ.

11 For a detailed story of the interpretation of this figure, see Andrea Hartmann, *Junia–A Woman Lost in Translation: The Name IOYNIAN in Romans 16:7 and Its History of Interpretation*, «Open Theology» 6, 2020, n. 1, pp. 646-660.

12 Bernadette Brooten, *Junia… Outstanding among the Apostles' (Romans 16:7)*, in Leonard Swidler, Arlene Swidler (eds.), *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, New York, Paulist Press, 1977, pp. 141-1444. As follow up study, see Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005.

13 On the intersection between the roles of deaconesses and house-church leaders, see Susan Hylan, *Women διάκονοι and Gendered Norms of Leadership*, «Journal of Biblical Literature» 138, 2019, n. 3, pp. 687-702. Hylan argues that the reference to γυναῖκες in 1 Tim 3:11 likely refers to female deacons, not merely to wives, suggesting that early readers would have understood the qualifications for διάκονοι

several early Christian texts provide examples of women acting as leaders of house-churches, yet they offer far less evidence concerning the precise nature of their duties. Most of these women are named in the sources, but we do not have specifics about their roles. To name a few, Chloe was the leader of a group in Corinth (1 Cor 1:11); Mary, the mother of John, welcomed many in her home (Acts 12:12); Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth, supported financially Christian groups (Acts 16:11-15).[14] Drawing a comparison with pagan households, it seems reasonable to assume that the domestic sphere provided a relatively safe context for women to instruct young children and other women –daughters, younger sisters, as well as servants and slaves. Children, especially girls, often received their basic education at home from their parents; in addition, girls were customarily trained in household management and child-rearing, and in some cases were also introduced to more advanced subjects such as poetry, rhetoric, and philosophy. By contrast, boys' education typically took place in Hellenistic schools. Later on, when these institutions were criticized by Christian authors such as Tertullian, homeschooling became a more common option for Christian families.[15]

Early Christian theologians from the second and third centuries did not interpret women's roles within missionary communities and house-churches as if they were allowed to teach both men and women. Clement of Alexandria, for instance, offers the following observations about women in Christian communities at the times of Paul:

> «But on the other hand, these [i.e., the apostles], appropriately to the ministry, devoted themselves to preaching without distraction;

(deacons) as applying to both men and women. While women in the Roman world were socially and legally considered inferior to men, they still exercised authority and leadership within accepted cultural boundaries—an ambivalence reflected in 1 Timothy's portrayal of women's roles.

14 For a comprehensive survey and analysis of the evidence, see Carolyn Osiek, *The Patronage of Women in Early Christianity*, in Amy-Jill Levine, Maria Mayo Robbins (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature*, London, T&T Clark, 2008, pp. 173-192.

15 For children's education in the Graeco-Roman world, see Marietta Horster, *Primary Education*, in Michael Peachin (ed.), T*he Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 84-100. For children's education in Christian households, see Margaret MacDonald, *The Power of Children: The Construction of Christian Families in the Greco-Roman World*, Waco, Baylor University Press, 2014; Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, pp. 156-173.

> they took women not as wives but as sisters, fellow ministers to the households of women. Through them, the Lord's teaching came also into the women's quarters without scandal. For we also know much concerning the ministry of women which the noble Paul himself taught in the other letter to Timothy».[16]

A similar opinion seems held by Origen of Alexandria, who writes the following in his *Commentary to the Romans*:

> «Greet Mary, who has labored much among you.» He (Paul) is teaching even in this that women likewise ought to labor for the churches of God. For they labor both when they teach young women to be modest, to love their husbands, to raise children, to be pure and chaste, to govern their homes well, to be kind, to be submissive to their husbands, to receive in hospitality, to wash the feet of the saints, and all the other things written that are recorded concerning the services of women to do with all purity».[17]

Both Clement and Origen appear to interpret the role of women as teachers in distinctly gendered terms: women accompanied the apostles to instruct other women who could not, or would not, attend mixed Christian gatherings.[18] Origen is even more detailed than

16 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3, 6, 53: ἀλλ' οὗτοι μὲν οἰκείως τῇ διακονίᾳ, ἀπερισπάστως τῷ κηρύγματι προσανέχοντες, οὐχ ὡς γαμετάς, ἀλλ' ὡς ἀδελφὰς περιῆγον τὰς γυναῖκας συνδιακόνους ἐσομένας πρὸς τὰς οἰκουροὺς γυναῖκας, δι' ὧν καὶ εἰς τὴν γυναικωνῖτιν ἀδιαβλήτως παρεισεδύετο ἡ τοῦ κυρίου διδασκαλία. ἴσμεν γὰρ καὶ ὅσα περὶ διακόνων γυναικῶν ἐν τῇ ἑτέρᾳ πρὸς Τιμόθεον ἐπιστολῇ ὁ γενναῖος διατάσσεται Παῦλος. For the Greek text, see Claude Mondésert, Maurice Casterm (eds.), *Clément d'Alexandrie, Les Stromates, Livre III*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1961. For the English translation, see John Ferguson (ed.), *Clement of Alexandria. Stromateis. Books One to Three*, Washingtion, DC, Catholic University of America Press, 1991.

17 Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 10, 20-21: *«"Salutate Mariam quae multum laborauit in uobis." Docet et in hoc debere etiam feminas laborare pro ecclesiis Dei. Nam et laborant cum docent adulescentulas sobrias esse diligere uiros filios enutrire pudicas esse castas domum bene regentes benignas subditas uiris suis hospitio recipere sanctorum pedes lauare et cetera omnia quae de officiis mulierum scripta referuntur in omnia genere castitate.*» For the Latin text, see Caroline Hammond Bamme (ed.), *Origen. Commentaire sur l'Épître aux Romains*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2009. For the English translation, see Thomas Scheck (ed.), *Origen. Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 6-10*, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, 2012, p. 293.

18 It is widely acknowledged that early Christian gatherings were open to both men and women, as well as to individuals from diverse social classes and geographical backgrounds. Nevertheless, it is likely that women faced greater difficulties than men in attending such meetings. This was especially true for women whose husbands or legal guardians were pagans or Jews and disapproved of their

Clement in outlining the subjects that were acceptable for women to teach –that is, instructions on the moral and ethical requirements to be a Christian woman.[19] It is likely that both Clement and Origen commented on Paul's passages in light of their own experience of women's teaching activity in Alexandria at the end of the second and the beginning of the third century,[20] which tells little to nothing

wives', daughters', mothers', or sisters' participation in these assemblies. For the role that family ties played in Christian's women lives and their involvement in the Christian communities, see Carolyn Osiek, David Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, pp. 91-222.

19 Their position corresponds with what affirmed in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a collection of church orders likely redacted in Syria sometime in the third century. *Didascalia Apostolorum* 3,6, reads as follows: «It is neither right nor necessary therefore that women should be teachers, and especially concerning the name of Christ and the redemption of his passion. For you have not been appointed to this, O women, and especially widows, that you should teach, but that you should pray and entreat the Lord God. For he the Lord God, Jesus Christ our teacher, sent us the Twelve to instruct the people and the gentiles; and there were with us women disciples, Mary Magdalene and Mary the daughter of James and the other Mary; but he did not send them to instruct the people with us. For if it were required that women should teach, our Master himself would have commanded these to give instruction with us.» Similar injunctions against women's authority and teaching can be also read in the *Didascalia apostolorum* 14-15. For the English translation, see Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, 31. It is noteworthy that the arguments against women's teaching and leadership within Christian churches today are largely unchanged, see Carolyn Osiek, *The Ministry and Ordination of Women According to the Early Church Fathers*, in Carroll Stuhlmueller (ed.), *Women and Priesthood: Future Directions*, Collegeville, The Liturgical Press 1984, pp. 59-68.

20 For a detailed discussion of women's teaching in Origen, see Maria Munkholt, "*Teachers of Good Things": Origen on Women as Teachers*, in Lavinia Cerioni (ed.), *Gendered Allegories: Origen of Alexandria and the Representation of the Feminine in Patristic Literature*, «Open Theology» 10, 2024, n.1. She concludes that Origen was indeed a supporter only of women-for-women teaching, but this role did not exceed what was proper according to Graeco-Roman customs, as the more "theological" aspects of Christian doctrine were taught only by men. Thus, Origen discouraged women from speaking publicly and teaching Christian men. A different conclusion is reached by Ilaria Ramelli in two articles: Ilaria Ramelli, *Constructions of Gender in Origen of Alexandria*, in Shayna Sheinfeld, Juni Hoppe, Kathy Ehrensperger (eds.), *Constructions of Gender in Late Antiquity*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing 2024, pp. 115-160; Ead., *Theosebia: A Presbyter of the Catholic Church*, «Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion» 26, 2010, n.2, pp. 79–102. Ramelli argues that Origen envisioned a form of gendered presbyterial ministry, in which women—whom he referred to as πρεσβυτίδες (translated as *ministrae* in Origen's Latin versions)—served as teachers for other women, though they were likely also permitted to perform certain presbyterial functions, such as administering the sacraments, to both men and women. To reconcile Origen's problematic statements about women remaining silent in churches (such as his readings of 1 Tim 2:11–15) with her view of his somewhat progressive stance on women's ecclesiastical leadership, Ramelli suggests

about the situation in early Christian communities, but testifies to the continuing "domestic" teaching activities of women in later centuries in Christian circles. Teaching household women and children, however, differs substantially from the opportunity to teach in a Christian assembly. At the moment, we simply do not have sufficient evidence to affirm with certainty whether or not women taught publicly in Christian gatherings in house-churches.[21]

The slim evidence concerning women's teaching activities –both within missionary couples and in domestic settings such as house churches– should, I suggest, encourage greater caution among modern scholars when claiming that women enjoyed a wider freedom of speech and action in the earliest Christian communities than in later centuries. As I will show below, the documentation for female teachers in subsequent periods is, in fact, somewhat more substantial.

Before turning to evidence of female teachers operating beyond the domestic sphere, one further observation is in order. While women's teaching activities were seldom tolerated and often viewed with suspicion by male Christian teachers and church officials, a different attitude emerges concerning women's Christian education. In fact, it appears that some Christian teachers took pride in instructing women as well as men, and that Christians were often accused of paying too much attention to the women's education.[22] As early as the second century, the apologist Tatian felt compelled to defend this practice in his *Address to the Greeks*:

> «My object in referring to these women is that you may not regard as something strange what you find among us, and that, comparing the statues which are before your eyes, you may not treat with scorn the women who pursue philosophy among us. This Sappho

to read these passages allegorically, since Origen frequently employed allegory as a theological device. Despite the merits of her analysis, Ramelli's conclusions reflect a somewhat optimistic reading of Origen's ecclesiology, as his theological allegories rarely apply to socio-ecclesiastical realities.

21 The detailed and well-documented study by Y. MacDonald, and Janet Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2006, pp. 244-250 reached the same conclusions: the offices of presiding and teaching in house churches were distinct, and presiding over a house-church did not necessarily entail assuming the role of spiritual or doctrinal leader, whether for men or for women.

22 To name few examples, see Origen, *Against Celsus* 3, 44; Lucian of Samosata, *The Death of Peregrinus* 12-13; Minucio Felice, *Octavius* 8, 4; Porfirio, *Against Christians* fr. 4, 58, 97.

> is a lewd, love-sick female, and sings her own wantonness; but all our women are chaste, and the maidens at their distaffs sing of divine things more nobly than that damsel of yours. Wherefore be ashamed, you who are professed disciples of women yet scoff at those of the sex who hold our doctrine, as well as at the solemn assemblies they frequent».[23]

That women were interested in philosophy is certainly not a unicum of the Christian faith. Recent studies have emphasised how women attended Neoplatonic schools,[24] and some of the most accredited female authors in Antiquity were Neophytagorean women instructing other women.[25] Christians too, then, were instructing women in Christian doctrine and philosophy, often with the aim of encouraging moral virtues such as chastity, obedience to their husbands, and piety toward their families. These anti-Christian accusations –if indeed accurate– must therefore be understood within the broader trend of employing women's education as a literary *topos* in polemical discourses. Notably, Christians themselves made use of the very same *topos* in intra-Christian debates, including disputes between mainstream communities and those labelled heretical.[26]

23 Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 33: Ταύτας δ' εἰπεῖν προὐθυμήθην, ἵνα μηδὲ παρ' ἡμῖν ξένον τι πράττεσθαι νομίζητε καὶ συγκρίναντες τὰ ὑπ' ὄψιν <ὑμῖν πίπτοντ'ἐπιτηδεύματα μὴ χλευάζητε τὰς παρ' ἡμῖν φιλοσοφούσας. Καὶ ἡ μὲν (19) Σαπφὼ γύναιον πορνικὸν ἐρωτομανές, καὶ τὴν ἑαυτῆς ἀσέλγειαν ᾄδει· πᾶσαι δὲ αἱ παρ' ἡμῖν σωφρονοῦσι, καὶ περὶ τὰς ἠλακάτας αἱ παρθένοι τὰ κατὰ θεὸν λαλοῦσιν ἐκφωνήματα, σπουδαιότερον τῆς παρ' ὑμῖν παιδός. Τούτου χάριν αἰδέσθητε, μαθηταὶ μὲν ὑμεῖς τῶν γυναίων εὑρισκόμενοι, τὰς δὲ σὺν ἡμῖν πολιτευομένας σὺν τῇ μετ' αὐτῶν ὁμηγύρει χλευάζοντες. For the Greek text, see Miroslav Marcovich (ed.), *Tatiani Oratio ad Graecos*, Berlin - New York, De Gruyter, 1995, pp. 7-75. For the English translation, see J.E. Ryland (ed.), *From Ante-Nicene Fathers. Vol. 2*, Buffalo, Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.

24 For excellent studies on the topic, see Schultz Jana, Wilberding James (eds.), *Women and the Female in Neoplatonism*, New York, Brill, 2022.

25 For a detailed study, see Sarah Pomeroy, *Pythagorean Women: Their History and Writings*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

26 The accusation of deceiving ingenuous women is one of the main literary tropes of intra-Christian polemics between mainstream Christianity and perceived "heretical" groups. To bring few examples, see Irenaeus' polemics against Marcus the Valentinian teacher in *Adversus haereses* 1, 13, 21; Epiphanius' polemics against the Fibionites in *Panarion* 26, 17, 4; in first half of the fifth century during the Pelagian controversy, Augustine still reported Epiphanius', Tertullian's and Eusebius' accusations against the Nicolaites of seducing immoral women in his *Against the Heretics* 5. On the everlasting connection between women and heresy, see Virginia Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy*, Berckley, University of California Press, 1995.

The women who engaged in Christian education were far from the simple-minded figures depicted by Christian detractors. Epigraphic, literary, and material evidence indicates that women from various social strata were drawn to Christianity. As with men, however, most of the evidence we possess concerns wealthy or aristocratic matrons who participated in the vibrant intellectual circles surrounding prominent theologians of the earliest centuries of Christianity. To name only a few examples: epigraphic evidence records that Flavia Sophe and Ioulia Evaresta were members of the Valentinian community on the Via Latina in second century Rome –very likely an educated and philosophically inclined circle of Christians.[27] Around the same period in Rome, women were attested among the converts and interlocutors of Justin Martyr, such as the Roman matron who sought to divorce her licentious husband.[28] Comparable accounts of intellectual women appear in connection with Origen.

It is precisely the attention that early Christian teachers devoted to women's education that lends later accounts of female teachers greater credibility and historical plausibility. By acknowledging women as capable recipients –and at times transmitters– of theological instruction, they laid the groundwork for more reliable portrayals of women's intellectual and spiritual authority in subsequent Christian centuries.

2. Deaconesses: "official" teachers of women

With regard to women taking on teaching roles beyond the confines of the household, we are aware of one case of a woman instructor in the first two centuries, a deaconess in Rome. The earliest evidence of a woman teaching publicly –specifically other women and orphans– comes from the figure of Grapte in the *Sheperd of Hermas*, an apocalyptic text dated in the first half of the second century.[29] She was likely an ordained woman, perhaps a deaconess,

27 See the study by Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Women and Independent Religious Specialists in Second-Century Rome*, in Ulla Tervahauta (ed.) *Women and Knowledge*, pp. 21-38.

28 Justin, *2 Apology* 2.1-9, see the study of Robert Grant, *A Woman of Rome: The Matron in Justin, 2 Apology 2.1-9*, «Church History» 54, 1985, n.4, 461–472.

29 For more information on this text, see Manlio Simonetti, Emanuela Prinzivalli (eds.), *Seguendo Gesù. Volume 2*, Milano, Mondadori, 2015, pp. 179-218; Angela Kim Harkins, Harry Maier (eds.), *Experiencing the Shepherd of Hermas*, Berlin,

in the church of Rome, although her exact office remains uncertain. The evidence concerning the role of deaconesses in the second century are regrettably limited and there is often confusion between the roles attributed specifically to deaconesses and widows. What can be discerned, however, suggests that the office of deaconesses was distinctly gendered: they assisted in liturgical functions such as the baptism of women, oversaw the lives of female members of the community, and provided instruction in Christian doctrine to other women.[30] All jobs that Grapte seems to perform in her community. The testimony of her office is particularly significant, since recent scholarship has uncovered a considerable body of evidence for deaconesses in the Eastern churches, whereas attestations of their presence in the West remain scarce until the fifth century and their office never took a clear shape.[31] About Grapte, the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* writes:

> «But when I finish all the words, all the elects will then become acquainted with them through you. You will write therefore two books, and you will send the one to Clemens and the other to Grapte. And Clemens will send his to foreign countries, for permission has been granted to him to do so. And Grapte will admonish the widows and the orphans. But you will read the words in this city, along with the presbyters who preside over the Church».[32]

The wording of the texts suggests that Clement and Grapte occupied comparable offices within the Christian community, as

De Gruyter, 2022; Luca Arcari, *Vedere Dio: le apocalissi giudaiche e protocristiane (4. sec. a. C.-2. sec. d. C.)*, Roma, Carocci, 2020. It is important to underline that the role of women in apocalyptic texts is also visible at the level of powerful literary female images and visions, see Lynn Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation*, London, T & T Clark 2015.

30 For a complete documentary history of deaconesses, see Kevin Madigan, Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011, pp. 203-207.

31 *Ibidem*, pp. 148.

32 *Pastor of Hermas*, Vision 2, 4: ὅταν οὖν ἀποτελέσω τὰ ῥήματα πάντα, διὰ σοῦ γνωρισθήσεται τοῖς ἐκλεκτοῖς πᾶσιν. γράφεις οὖν δύο βιβλαρίδια καὶ πέμφεις ἓν Κλήμεντι καὶ ἓν Γραπτῇ. πέμφει οὖν Κλήμης εἰς τὰς ἔξω πόλεις, ἐκείνῳ γὰρ ἐπιτέτραπται. Γραπτὴ δὲ νουθετήσει τὰς χήρας καὶ τοὺς ὀρφανούς. σὺ δὲ ἀναγνώσῃ εἰς ταύτην τὴν πόλιν μετὰ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων τῶν προϊσταμένων τῆς ἐκκλησίας. For the Greek edition, see K. Holl, *Epiphanius, Bände 1-3: Ancoratus und Panarion*, Leipzig, Hinrichs, 1915; for the English translation, see Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Alexander Cleveland Coxe (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 2*, Buffalo, NY, Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.

both were entrusted with instructing others in the meaning of the visions. In Grapte's case, her responsibility was to teach women and orphans– the assumption being that children would ordinarily have been instructed by their parents, while orphans received guidance from her as an appointed representative of the Christian community charged with their care. The term used to describe Grapte's mandate, νουθετέω, is not a technical term for teaching –hence its translation as "admonish"– but it nonetheless conveys the role of instructing others in the teachings delivered by Hermas.

Given the highly speculative, visionary, and allegorical nature of this apocalypse, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that all the characters in the *Shepherd of Hermas* –including both Clement and Grapte– are purely literary creations. Even so, however, one important testimony remains: the author of the *Shepherd* regarded Grapte as a plausible and realistic figure, which strongly suggests that women could have held such a role within the Roman Christian community in the second century.

This passage also provides an early glimpse into women's participation in the transmission of books, a crucial avenue through which they contributed to the circulation of knowledge. In Grapte's case, a copy of the *Shepherd* was commissioned specifically for her teaching, implying that she already possessed, or at least had access to, a selection of texts for instructing those entrusted to her.[33]

3. Teaching men and women: the cases of Marcellina and prophetesses of the New Prophecy

A few decades after Grapte, in the second half of the second century, we hear of another woman teaching publicly in Rome. According to Irenaeus, a certain Marcellina was active there during the pontificate of Anicetus (mid-second century), instructing adherents in a variant of Carpocrates' doctrines:

33 Women did circulate books in antiquity, sometimes even commissioned them specifically to their authors. For more information, see Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000. Haines-Eitzen focuses particularly on Marcella's correspondence with Jerome (as described in Jerome's *Epistles* 47 and 49) and on Juliana's pursuit of Symmachus' translation, as recounted in Origen's biography by Eusebius (*The History of the Church* 6, 17). I would add, however, that Grapte provides a similarly significant and highly relevant example of book circulation among early Christian women.

> «Others of them [Carpocratians] employ outward marks, branding their disciples inside the lobe of the right ear. From among these also arose Marcellina, who came to Rome under [the episcopate of] Anicetus, and, holding these doctrines, she led multitudes astray. They style themselves Gnostics. They also possess images, some of them painted, and others formed from different kinds of material; while they maintain that a likeness of Christ was made by Pilate at that time when Jesus lived among them. They crown these images and set them up along with the images of the philosophers of the world that is to say, with the images of Pythagoras, and Plato, and Aristotle, and the rest. They have also other modes of honouring these images, after the same manner of the Gentiles».[34]

Irenaeus does not dwell on biographical elements about Marcellina.[35] The available evidence is so limited that it remains uncertain whether the information should be attributed to the Carpocratians in general or more specifically to Marcellina's group. What can be stated with confidence is that Marcellina's teachings enjoyed a notable degree of success in Rome, enabling her to gather a substantial following. Irenaeus is not explicit about whether she taught both men and women, as he merely states –using a distinctly disparaging expression– that she led many/moltitudes astray («*multos exterminavit*»). Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that if her teaching had been directed exclusively toward women, Irenaeus would have emphasized this detail, since such a circumstance would have been unusual among Gnostic teachers. Moreover, both literary and epigraphic evidence indicate that Gnostic groups in second-century Rome –not only the Carpocratians but also the

34 Ireneaus, *Adversus haereses* 1, 25, 6: *Alii vero ex ipsis signant, cauteriantes suos discipulos in posterioribus partibus exstantiae dexterae auris. Unde et Marcellina, quae Romam sub Aniceto venit, cum esset huius doctrinae, multos exterminavit. Gnosticos se autem vocant; etiam imagines, quasdam quidem depictas, quasdam autem et de reliqua materia fabricatas habent, dicentes formam Christi factam a Pilato, ilio in tempore quo fuit Iesus cum hominibus. Et has coronant et proponunt eas cum imaginibus mundi philosophorum, videlicet cum imagine Pythagorae et Platonis et Aristotelis et reliquorum; et reliquam observationem circa eas similiter ut gentes faciunt*. For the Latin texts, see Adelin Rousseau, Louis Doutreleau (eds.), *Irénée de Lyon, Contre les hérésies, Livre I*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1979. For the English translation, see Alexander Roberts, William Rambaut (eds.), *From Ante-Nicene Fathers. Vol. 1*, Buffalo, NY, Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.

35 The literature on Marcellina is not particularly extensive, but all scholars agree on her historicity. For more information, see Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Women in Gnosticism*, in Joan Taylor, Ilaria Ramelli (eds.), *Patterns of Women's Leadership,* 109-129; David Litwa, *Carpocrates, Marcellina, and Epiphanes: Three Early Christian Teachers of Alexandria and Rome*, Milton Park, Abingdon-on-Thames, Routledge, 2022.

Valentinians– welcomed women into their intellectual Christian circles.[36] The practice of venerating both Christian and pagan images is particularly striking, as it finds no parallel in other reports of the Carpocratians and may therefore represent a feature unique to her circle. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that the information about Marcellina does not appear in Pseudo-Hippolytus, who consulted and made use of *Against the Heretics* in composing his own polemical work,[37] whereas it reappears in Epiphanius's *Panarion*.[38] On this basis, Gregory Snyder has argued that Irenaeus's note on Marcellina was a later addition to his own work. According to Snyder's reconstruction, Pseudo-Hippolytus would have known an earlier redaction of Irenaeus'*Against the Heretics*, one that lacked the reference to Marcellina, while Epiphanius would have known the revised version. Snyder therefore regards the report as historically reliable.[39] Such an appeal to a *lectio difficilior* seems unconvincing, since there is no independent evidence to suggest the existence of two versions of Irenaeus' *Against the Heretics*. It seems to me far more likely that Pseudo-Hippolytus simply did not consider the information on Marcellina particularly significant and therefore omitted it from his account of the Carpocratian group.

Marcellina's teaching activity is also attested by Celsus, most likely independently of Irenaeus:

> «He says that some are also Sibyllists, perhaps because he misunderstood some who were criticizing people who think the Sibyl a prophetess, and called the latter Sibyllists. Then he pours on us a heap of names, saying that he knows of some also who are Simonians, who reverence as teacher Helena or Helenus and are called Helenians, […] Celsus knows also of Marcellians who follow

36 Evidence for the presence and participation of Gnostic women in second-century Rome appears in a few fragmentary yet significant epigraphical sources. Among these, Flavia Sophe and Ioulia Evaresta are noteworthy, suggesting that women of social standing held roles as initiates within Gnostic communities. Both women are commemorated in funerary inscriptions from the Via Latina. For a more detailed study, see Margherita Guarducci, *Valentiniani a Roma: ricerche epigrafiche ed archeologiche,* «Römische Abteilung» 80, 1973, pp. 169-189; Gregory Snyder, *A Second-Century Christian Inscription from the Via Latina*, «Journal of Early Christian Studies» 19:2, 2011, pp. 157-195.

37 Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 7, 32, 8.

38 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 27, 6, 1 and 27, 6, 8-11.

39 Gregory Snyder, *"She Destroyed Multitudes": Marcellina's Group in Rome*, in Ulla Tervahauta (ed.), *Women and Knowledge*, pp. 39-61.

> Marcellina, and Harpocratians who follow Salome, and others who follow Mariamme, and others who follow Martha».[40]

According to Origen, Celsus was aware of several Christian groups founded by women and listed six: the Helenians, the Marcellinians, the Sibyllists, the Harpocratians, and the followers of Mary and Martha. Celsus does not specify whether he had direct knowledge of these groups or merely read about their existence, and Origen himself claims to have long searched for evidence of their existence without success. Apart from Marcellina, none of the women-led Christian groups mentioned by Celsus are attested in other extant sources.[41]

In the second century we also hear of women prophesying –and likely teaching publicly and writing– during Christian gatherings attended by both men and women. The movement known as the New Prophecy, generally regarded as having originated in Asia Minor with Montanus (and therefore also referred to as Montanism), counted among its leaders two prominent prophetesses, Priscilla and Maximilla. A third figure, Quintilla, is often included among the major leaders, though most scholars agree that her ministry took place several decades later than that of the other two.[42] Most of

40 Origen, *Against Celsus* V, 61-62: Εἶπε δέ τινας εἶναι καὶ Σιβυλλιστάς, τάχα παρακούσας τινῶν ἐγκαλούντων τοῖς οἰομένοις προφῆτιν γεγονέναι τὴν Σίβυλλαν καὶ Σιβυλλιστὰς τοὺς τοιούτους καλεσάντων. Εἶτα σωρὸν καταχέων ἡμῶν ὀνομάτων φησὶν εἰδέναι τινὰς καὶ Σιμωνιανούς, οἳ τὴν Ἑλένην ἤτοι διδάσκαλον Ἕλενον σέβοντες Ἑλενιανοὶ λέγονται. […] Κέλσος μὲν οὖν οἵδε καὶ Μαρκελλιανοὺς ἀπὸ Μαρκελλίνας καὶ Ἀρποκρατιανοὺς ἀπὸ Σαλώμης καὶ ἄλλους ἀπὸ Μαριάμμης καὶ ἄλλους ἀπὸ Μάρθας. For the Greek text, see Marcel Borret, *Origène. Contre Celse (tome III)*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf 1969. For the English translation, see Origen, *Contra Celsum*, transl. by Henry Chadwick, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

41 For more information on these women, see the forthcoming publication of Lavinia Cerioni, *Donne gnostiche: tra mito e realtà*, Atti del convegno *Poetesse, patrone, lettrici, sante. Donne e testi nel mondo mediterraneo antico*, Alma Mater Studiorum — Università di Bologna, 10-12 settembre 2025.

42 The link between leadership and prophecy is object of lively debate in recent scholarship, especially in the case of women. To explore further this topic, see Luca Arcari, *A Male Colonization of a Female Visionary Body: The "Montanist" Prophetess in Tertullian's On the Soul 9,4*, in Maria Dell'Isola (ed.) *Female Authority and Holiness in Early and Medieval Christianity*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2025, pp. 29-41; Ead., *"In forma di donna venne a me Cristo e mi instillò la sapienza" (Epiph., haer. 49, 1, 3): leadership femminile e gerarchia ecclesiastica nella letteratura eresiologica*, in *Masculum et feminam creavit eos (Gen. 1, 27): paradigmi del maschile e femminile nel cristianesimo antico*, Roma, Nerbini, 2019, pp. 209-2016; Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

the information on these women comes from Tertullian's writings,[43] where he reports some of their sayings and teachings; additional information, as is often the case, comes from their opponents.[44] All sources generally agree that both women began to prophesy in the same frenetic manner as Montanus, and that their prophetic charisma manifested through ecstatic trances accompanied by short statements. As in the case of Marcellina, nothing in their teachings suggests that they are gendered and/or envisioned for women alone, suggesting a mixed audience for their prophecies. The central theological and ethical themes that shaped Priscilla and Maximilla's oracles were moral rigor, ecstatic revelation, eschatological expectation, and the prophets' self-legitimation as instruments of divine speech. Priscilla's oracles emphasize ascetic purity and visionary experience as prerequisites for receiving divine revelation. Her sayings announce the descent of the New Jerusalem at Pepuza –a key Montanist eschatological motif. Maximilla's oracles, by contrast, focus on defining and defending her prophetic authority. Through legitimizing formulas such as «Hear not me, but hear Christ!»,[45] she presents herself as a vessel of divine utterance thus legitimizing her prophetic charisma.[46] Her speeches express both a defensive response to accusations of false prophecy and the dramatic eschatological claim that, with her death, prophecy itself will cease and the end will come.[47]

43 Information about Priscilla's and Maximilla's teachings is scattered in many of his works, see Tertullian, *On the resurrection of the flesh* 11, 2 and id., *Exhortation to chastity* 10, 5.

44 Origen, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, fragment 74; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 8, 12 e 8, 19; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49; Eusebius, *History of the Church* 5, 16, 7-10. For a detailed study of the opponents of Montanism, see William Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy and Polluted Sacraments: Ecclesiastical and Imperial Reactions to Montanism*, New York, Brill, 2007.

45 Ephiphanius, *Panarion* 48,12,4: μοῦ μὴ ἀκούσητε, ἀλλὰ Χριστοῦ ἀκούσατε. For the Greek text, see Karl Holl (ed.), *Epiphanius, Panarion*, Leipzig, J. C. Hinrichs, 1915–1933. The translation is mine.

46 This prophetic formula is fairly frequent in prophetic movements and functions as a "legitimization formula," serving to authenticate prophetic authority through the assertion that the divinity communicates directly through the prophet, see David Edward Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1983, pp. 70-71.

47 For a complete list and detailed analysis of the Prisca's and Maximilla's oracles, see Maria Dell'Isola, *L'ultima profezia. La crisi montanista nel cristianesimo antico*, Trapani, Il pozzo di Giacobbe, 2020, pp. 51-73. Dell'Isola thus interprets their combined teachings as articulating a coherent Montanist theology centered on ascetic purity, divine inspiration through ecstatic experience, and the expectation

Priscilla's and Maximilla's prophetic charisma was not outright denied by their opponents, who appeared more concerned with the manner in which their prophecies were delivered than with their actual capacity to prophesy. For instance, Origen regarded their role as public instructors –rather than as prophetesses– as improper for women:

> «For insofar as all speak and can speak if a revelation should come to them (1 Cor 14:30–31), he [Paul] says: "Let the women be silent in the churches" (1 Cor 14:34). But the disciples of the women, who were instructed by Priscilla and Maximilla, not by Christ the husband of the bride (John 3:29), were not obedient to this command. […] Therefore, even though a woman be granted to be a prophetess by a prophetic sign, nevertheless she is not permitted to speak in church. When Mariam the prophetess spoke, she was leading some women».[48]

It is noteworthy that Origen regarded the prophetic gift as belonging equally to women and men, yet he carefully distinguished this function from that of the teacher or presbyter –offices he considered reserved for men authorized to speak publicly in Christian assemblies. Although Origen clearly affirmed the equal spiritual worth, intellectual capacity, and dignity of women, and counted many women among those he deeply respected, he nonetheless did not endorse their exercise of public leadership over men.[49]

of imminent eschatological fulfilment.

48 Origen, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, fragment 74: Ὡς γὰρ πάντων λεγόντων καὶ δυναμένων λέγειν, ἐὰν ἀποκάλυψις αὐτοῖς γένηται, φησὶν Αἱ γυναῖκες ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις σιγάτωσαν. ταύτης δὲ τῆς ἐντολῆς οὐκ ἦσαν οἱ τῶν γυναικῶν μαθηταί, οἱ μαθητευθέντες Πρισκίλλῃ καὶ Μαξιμίλλῃ, οὐ Χριστοῦ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς τῆς νύμφης […] . ἵνα οὖν καὶ δοθῇ ἐκ σημείου προφητικοῦ εἶναι προφῆτις γυνή, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐπιτρέπεται ταύτῃ λαλεῖν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ. ὅτε ἐλάλησε Μαριὰμ ἡ προφῆτις ἄρχουσα ἦν τινων γυναικῶν·. For the Greek text, see Claude Jenkins, *Documents: Origen on I Corinthians*, «Journal of Theological Studies» 1908, pp. 9-10s. For the English translation, see Patricia Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, p. 36.

49 For more accurate representations of Origen's female theological anthropology, see Emanuela Prinzivalli, *La donna, il femminile e la Scrittura nella tradizione origeniana*, in Kari Elisabeth Børresen, Emanuela Prinzivalli (eds.), *Le donne nello sguardo degli antichi autori cristiani*, 77-96; Lavinia Cerioni, *Origen, Valentinianism and Women's Role*, «Patristica Nordica Annuaria» 38, 2023, pp. 79–95 and Monnica Klöckener, *The Samaritan Woman in Origen's Commentary on John Seen from a Modern Perspective of Human Dignity*, in Alfons Fürst (ed.), *Perspectives on Origen and the History of his Reception*, Münster, Aschendorff 2021, pp. 67–80. For a biographical reconstruction of the women in Origen's life and the roles they held, see Lavinia Cerioni, *Patrons, Students, Intellectuals, and Martyrs: Women in Origen's Life and Eusebius'*

Moving beyond Origen's account, other historical sources suggests that women belonging to the New Prophecy movements also held ecclesiastical offices, such as serving as deaconesses, participating in baptism, and even holding presbyterial offices.[50] According to a widely accepted scholarly view, a woman named Ammion –known from an inscription dated around the third century–[51] was ordained as a presbyter in Carthage, where distinctions between proto-Catholic and Montanist communities were far from clear. A similar case is that of the "unnamed woman from Cappadocia," denounced by Firmilian in his letter to Cyprian of Carthage for engaging in priestly activity.[52]

Another interesting aspect of Prisca and Maximilla's teaching regards the fact that their sayings were likely written down, copied, and circulated among their disciples. This is, for example, the charge levelled against them by the anonymous fourth century author of the *Debate of a Montanist and an Orthodox Christian*:

> «The Montanist: "Is it because Priscilla and Maximilla composed books that you do not receive them?" The Orthodox: "It is not only for this, but also because they were false prophetesses with their leader Montanus"».[53]

Biography, «Open Theology» 11:1, 2025.

50 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49, 2, 5-6 contests explicitly this practice among Montanist communities. For more information on women leaders in Montanism, see William Tabbernee, *Women Office Holders in Montanism*, in Joan Taylor, Ilaria Ramelli (eds.), *Patterns of Leadership*, pp. 151-179, where he surveys previously disregarded epigraphical evidence.

51 Kevin Madigan, Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women*, pp. 169-70.

52 Firmilian, *Letter to Cyprian of Carthage* 75, 10: «And that woman (from Cappadocia) who earlier, through the tricks and deceits of the devil, was attempting many things for the deception of the faithful, among other things by which she had deceived very many also frequently dared this, that, with an invocation not considered invalid, she pretended to sanctify the bread and to celebrate the Eucharist and she offered the Sacrifice to the Lord, not without the rite of the customary commendation; usurping the accustomed and lawful words of interrogation, she also baptized many that nothing might seem to differ from ecclesiastical rule.» See Kevin Madigan, Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women*, pp. 181-183.

53 Anonymus, *Debate of a Montanist and an Orthodox Christian* V, 9: Μ. Διὰ τί δὲ καὶ τὰς ἁγίας Μαξίμιλλαν καὶ Πρίσκιλλαν ἀποστρέφεσθε καὶ λέγετε μὴ ἐξὸν εἶναι προφητεύειν γυναιξίν; Ο. Οὐ διὰ τοῦτο μόνον, ἀλλ' ὅτι καὶ ψευδοπροφήτιδες γεγόνασι μετὰ τοῦ ἐξάρχου αὐτῶν Μοντανοῦ. For the Greek texts, see Gerhard Ficker, *Widerlegung eines Montanisten,* «Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte» 26, 1905, pp. 449-458. For the English translation, see Patricia Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, p. 38.

This represents a unique case of female teachings being transmitted in a written form, as instances of women's authorship in early Christianity are exceedingly rare. In the first five centuries of Christianity, we have only three attested cases: the *Passio* of Perpetua and Felicitas,[54] the pilgrimage account of Egeria of Spain in the late fourth century; and, from roughly the same period, the *Cento* of Faltonia Betitia Proba, who reinterpreted Scripture by weaving it together with verses from Virgil's *Aeneid*, *Georgics*, and *Eclogues*.[55]

Despite all the opposition, Montanist women appear to have publicly instructed their disciples concerning their visions in a period that spans between the second to the fourth century. In doing so, they seem to have moved beyond the customary restriction of women teaching only other women.

4. Conclusion

The limited yet significant evidence for women's participation in the production and transmission of knowledge during the first centuries of Christianity reveals a far more complex reality than traditionally assumed. The evidence available suggests that, unlike the case of men, women's knowledge production was expressed also

54 The question of Perpetua's authorship is particularly intriguing, as her work would represent the earliest known Christian text written by a woman. Perpetua was likely a Montanist martyr—though her affiliation has been contested—whose narrative is interwoven with a series of prophetic visions. Her figure has generated extensive scholarly debate, especially regarding her position within the Carthaginian community and whether she truly authored her own account or whether her supposed authorship served as a rhetorical device employed by the anonymous Montanist editor of the *Passio*. Despite clear evidence of editorial intervention, the text retains distinctive features that set it apart from martyrdom narratives composed by men. Notably, the *Passio* offers sustained reflection on motherhood, yet in a way that resists the traditional ideal of the virtuous mother; it explicitly addresses breastfeeding and portrays women's bodies as transformed through pregnancy. Taken together, these elements strongly suggest that Perpetua herself was indeed the author. On the complex redactional history of the *Passio*, see Petr Kitzler, *From Passio Perpetuae to Acta Perpetuae: Recontextualizing a Martyr Story in the Literature of the Early Church*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2015; Stephanie Cobb and Andrew Jacobs, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas in Late Antiquity*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2021.

55 For a detailed analysis of these women's authorship and discussion of previous scholarship, see Robin Darling Young, *The Lady Advances: The Voices of Women in Early Christianity*, «Journal of Early Christian Studies» 31, 2023, n. 3, pp. 263–282. For the praxes related to female writing, see Kim Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest: Women, Writing, and Representation in Early Christianity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

in private contexts: where men taught in city squares and schools, women taught in houses and intimate gatherings, where men sought to leave a written record for posterity, women relied heavily on oral transmission of information; and where men signed their works to claim recognition and accountability, women concealed or mystified their authorship (or it was done so by other male authors). Women engaged in Christian life through avenues distinct from those dominated by men, particularly in the Christian movement's formative period. Their restricted access to teaching positions and leadership roles was not uniquely Christian but reflected the broader Graeco-Roman patriarchal norms that Christian leaders largely adopted and reinforced.

In the first century, women's spaces –domestic gatherings, women-only assemblies, and household churches– were centers of lively intellectual and spiritual activity. Within these contexts, women contributed to the formation and spread of Christian teaching: they instructed children and other women, led and financed house churches, and, in some cases, studied in catechetical schools. Women of the upper classes, about whom we have more evidence, often possessed sufficient education to engage in theological debates, even if primarily as auditors or interlocutors of male teachers. Educated matrons, for instance, are known to have conversed with thinkers such as Valentinus, Justin, and Origen.

By the second and third centuries, alongside "patriarchally compatible" forms of participation such as domestic teaching –which continued in other "private" women-only spaces–[56] we encounter women who operated at or beyond the boundaries prescribed by their culture. Figures such as Grapte in the *Pastor of Hermas* –likely a deaconess with an official teaching role in the Roman community– suggest that some women exercised recognized authority outside the domestic sphere. Others, like the Carpocratian teacher Marcellina and the prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla of the New Prophecy, publicly instructed both men and women, gathered substantial followings, and wielded considerable spiritual influence.

The evidence presented here calls for a critical reassessment of the so-called "myth of the golden age," which envisions women

56 Particularly significant are the cases discussed by Nicola Denzey Lewis, *The Bone Gatherers. The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2007, which concern women-only spaces in the Roman catacombs of the fourth century.

in the earliest Christian communities as uniquely active and later silenced. Instead, it invites us to recognize a more continuous, if often obscured, tradition of female intellectual and spiritual agency one that compels a rethinking of long-standing paradigms about gender, authority, and knowledge transmission in early Christianity.

Abstract: This article proposes an overview of the role of women in the production, transmission, and reception of knowledge during the first three centuries of Christianity. Challenging scholarship that frames early Christianity as a "golden age" of women's emancipation, my research shows that women's engagement with knowledge formed a parallel, often concealed and underground network of learning and teaching across the first three centuries. Drawing on literary, epigraphic, and material sources, the study examines female figures such as Priscilla, Grapte, Marcellina, and the prophetesses of the New Prophecy. It highlights how women taught primarily within domestic or female-only contexts, yet occasionally transgressed gendered boundaries by teaching men and authoring theological texts. The article also considers women's roles as patrons, copyists, and intellectual interlocutors in Christian communities. By reconstructing these fragmented traces, the study reveals that early Christian women contributed significantly to the shaping and dissemination of theological and philosophical knowledge, despite patriarchal constraints that sought to marginalize their voices. Ultimately, it argues for recognizing women's intellectual agency as integral to the broader history of Christian thought.

L'articolo propone una visione d'insieme del ruolo delle donne nella produzione, trasmissione e ricezione del sapere nei primi tre secoli del cristianesimo. Mettendo in discussione una linea interpretativa che individua un "mito dell'età dell'oro" nel cristianesimo delle origini – secondo la quale le donne avrebbero goduto di un grado di emancipazione maggiore rispetto ai secoli successivi – l'articolo sostiene che l'impegno femminile nei confronti del sapere costituì una rete parallela, spesso nascosta in contesti privati, di apprendimento e insegnamento lungo tutto l'arco dei tre secoli. Basandosi su fonti letterarie, epigrafiche e materiali, lo studio analizza figure femminili come Priscilla, Grapte, Marcellina e le profetesse della Nuova Profezia. Si rileva che, sebbene l'insegnamento femminile avvenisse prevalentemente in spazi domestici o tra donne, non mancarono casi in cui esse insegnarono agli uomini ed elaborarono testi teologici. L'articolo considera inoltre i ruoli delle donne come patronesse, copiste e interlocutrici intellettuali all'interno delle comunità cristiane. Attraverso la ricostruzione di queste tracce frammentarie, lo studio mostra come le donne cristiane dei primi secoli abbiano contribuito in modo significativo alla formazione e alla diffusione del sapere teologico e filosofico, nonostante i vincoli patriarcali che cercarono di emarginarne le voci. In conclusione, si afferma che il contributo delle donne alla formazione e alla diffusione del pensiero cristiano meriti pieno riconoscimento storiografico della sua specificità.

Keywords: early Christianity; women's teaching; Grapte; Marcellina; New Prophecy; cristianesimo primitivo; insegnamento femminile; Grapte; Marcellina; Nuova Profezia.

Biodata: Lavinia Cerioni is a Tenure-track Assistant Professor (RTT) at Sapienza University of Rome, in the Department of History, Anthropology, Religions, Art, and Performing Arts (SARAS). Her research focuses on ancient Christianity, with specific

expertise in biblical exegesis, the history of women, and the Alexandrian tradition. She has directed and is directing several national and international projects: she held a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship for the project Origen on Gender (OriGen) and an AUFF Nova Fellowship for the project Early Christian Metaphors at Aarhus University (Denmark). She is currently Principal Investigator of a FIS Starting Grant FEMALE – Feminine Metaphors and Allegories: Uncovering Layers of Meaning in Early Christianity at Sapienza University of Rome (FEMALE– Macrosettore SH – Social Sciences and Humanities - Schema di finanziamento "Starting Grant" Codice Progetto FIS-2023-02153- CUP B53C24009690001). Her most recent contributions to women's history include a monograph *Revealing Women. Feminine Imagery in Gnostic-Christian Texts* (Brepols, 2021) and the edition of the collective journal special issue *Gendered Allegories. Origen of Alexandria and the Representation of the Feminine in Patristic Literature* (Open Theology, 2024).

Lavinia Cerioni è ricercatrice in tenure track (RTT) presso l'Università "La Sapienza" di Roma, nel Dipartimento di Storia, Antropologia, Religioni, Arte e Spettacolo (SARAS). Le sue ricerche si concentrano sul cristianesimo antico, con una specifica competenza in esegesi biblica, storia delle donne e tradizione alessandrina. Ha diretto e dirige diversi progetti nazionali e internazionali: ha ottenuto una Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship per il progetto Origen on Gender (OriGen) e una AUFF Nova Fellowship per il progetto Early Christian Metaphors presso l'Università di Aarhus (Danimarca). Attualmente è Principal Investigator di un FIS Starting Grant, FEMALE – Feminine Metaphors and Allegories: Uncovering Layers of Meaning in Early Christianity, presso Sapienza Università di Roma (FEMALE– Macrosettore SH – Social Sciences and Humanities - Schema di finanziamento "Starting Grant" Codice Progetto FIS-2023-02153- CUP B53C24009690001). Tra i suoi più recenti contributi alla storia delle donne si segnalano la monografia *Revealing Women. Feminine Imagery in Gnostic-Christian Texts* (Brepols, 2021) e la curatela del volume collettaneo *Gendered Allegories. Origen of Alexandria and the Representation of the Feminine in Patristic Literature* (Open Theology, 2024).