

Gordius

Gordius was born at the end of the 3rd century CE in the city of Caesarea of Cappadocia into a Christian family (→ Basil of Caesarea, *In Gordium martyrem*; PG 31.493B: “He was raised in this city”). When he came of age, he enlisted as a soldier in the army, occupying a prominent position such that he was entrusted with the leadership – because of his valor and military skill – of a *centuria* (*In Gordium martyrem*; PG 31.493B–493C).

During the → persecution of Christians at the beginning of the 4th century CE, as → Diocletian issued his edict against the church in 303 CE, despising glory, wealth, family, and friends, he retired into the desert, where he lived in fasting and prayer – in the manner of zealot Elias – to prepare himself for the good deed of confessing the name of Christ (→ Christ, Jesus, 01: Survey). There he spent many years, but his zeal for Christ gave him no rest. The churches in Caesarea had been destroyed, the clergy was scattered, and many Christians had fallen away from the faith rather than lose their lives. The desire of shedding his blood for Christ stirred in the soul of Gordius, urging him to return to his native city. Gordius openly appeared before the prefect where chariot races in honor of Mars were being held and identified himself as a Christian, while the people of that city were assembled in the amphitheater to solemnize. Basil relates that the entire people was gathered there, no Jew absent, no Greek absent. A relevant crowd of Christians was mixed with them as spectators of galloping horses and experienced charioteers. Everyone was present at the spectacle, all the slaves were free to watch the competitions, the boys had been given holiday from school for the same purpose. Suddenly, during the race, a man appeared in rags, with squalid hair and matted lock: every eye was directed upon that savage-looking man, his emaciated body, long beard and hair, and ragged clothes; his face and arms were burned by the exposure to the sun, and shriveled with long → fasting. He was immediately carried off to the magistrate, and, being interrogated – relates Basil – cried aloud (*In Gordium martyrem*; PG 31.500A–500B): “I am here, demonstrating by my action both my contempt of your orders and my faith in God, in whom I have

placed my hope.” Offered the chance to conform, he denied and, therefore, as sentenced to death.

Then, continues Basil (*In Gordium martyrem*; PG 31.501B–501C), the whole crowd poured from the theatre towards the place of judgment, and whoever of the inhabitants was left poured out in front of the wall. The city was deserted. Like a great river, the inhabitants flowed together to the spot of martyrdom; houses were unprotected, merchants’ shops were unlocked, and in the market place, goods lay here and there neglected. Servants threw up their occupations, and ran off to see the spectacle, and the entire rabble was present in that place to see the man. Maidens forgot their bashfulness and shame of being looked at by men, even sick people and old men were outside the wall. The roar of the theatre, like a wind rushing through the air, rose above the horse race. When the crier had made silence, all the pipes, trumpets, and were hushed, Gordius was led before the seat of the governor, who was present, and was asked, blandly, who he was and whence he came. Then he related, in order, what were his country, and family, and the rank he had held, and why he had thrown up his office and fled away. “I am returned,” said he, “to shew openly that I care naught for your edicts, but that I place my hope and confidence in Jesus Christ alone.” (*In Gordium martyrem*; PG 31.500A–500B).

The governor, being exceedingly exasperated at the interruption in the competitions, and the open defiance cast in his face by the deserter, ordered him, before the whole city, to be tortured at once.

Signing himself with the cross, he cheerfully underwent the torments of leaded scourges, the little horse, fire and knife, being finally beheaded.

Tradition

The tradition about his life is due mostly to Basil’s, panegyric, read on the occasion of the martyr’s *dies natalis*. He gave its account inside the shrine (*martyrium*) in Caesarea, outside the city wall, on the anniversary of his martyrdom, which, he affirmed, was then recent.

About this speech, much has been said, though the tradition about it remains still quite obscure. The original Greek *Passio*, at a certain time mistaken

with that of Hesychius of Antioch (*BHG* 703b), was lost.

On the other side, the Armenian version, considered the truthful translation of the original one (Esbroek, 1976, 357–358), casts a light on the possible source of Basil's panegyric. The latter is contained entirely in this version, not earlier than the 5th century CE, and showing its direct relationship with Basil's text (Declerck, 1986, 742). The comparison between both texts shows the possibility of the lack of an archetypical source, so that they have perhaps recollected the notices about Gordius' life from an oral background, a collective past, the memory ($\mu\eta\mu\eta$).

Historiography

The date of Gordius' martyrdom remains uncertain. Following the main source, in Basil's panegyric it is argued that several members of the audience had been eyewitnesses of the martyr's triumph (*In Gordium martyrem*; PG 31.497B: "He shouted up these words, which some people hear up today").

J. Bernardi (1968, 80) states that the speech would have been delivered in 373 CE, whereas the question of the chronology of his *dies natalis* is still a matter of discussion. He thinks, on the strength of Basil's words, that the speech was held in spring, as the martyr "has changed winter grieve into spring joy." Nevertheless, historical notices are scarce. Gordius' martyrdom should have taken place during Licinius' persecution (Girardi, 1990, 98), as the Byzantine *Sinaxaria* and the Armenian translation attest. The mention of January in the *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanum* and the *Martyrologium Romanum* of the saint's *dies natalis* on Jan 3 is attested in Theodore Prodromos and Christopher of Mytilene, who collocate it on the Jan 3, whereas the Armenian version of the *Passio* places it on Jan 2.

In the *Martyrologium Hieronimianum* (pp. 121–122) and, thereby, in the *Breviarium Syriacum* (p. 54) appears the date of Mar 2. This date seems to be the most plausible one, especially due to Basil's panegyric clear reference to the *Equirria*, the Roman festival of chariot racing in honor of Mars (Bennet Pascal, 1981, 261–263). The same chronological reference appears in → Gregory of Nyssa (*Mart. II* 159.4–10).

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