

**KATARZYNA MARIA DŹWIGAŁA<sup>1</sup>**

Instytut Historii

Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie

ORCID 0000-0002-8548-3923

## DEATH OF THE FORTY MARTYRS OF SEBASTE

### Śmierć czterdziestu męczenników z Sebastei

#### Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest odpowiedź na pytanie, co na temat śmierci czterdziestu męczenników z Sebastei mówią najwcześniejsze greckie źródła. Artykuł omawia każde spośród tych źródeł wraz z podaniem kontekstu jego powstania, o ile jest to możliwe. Przedstawiona zostaje analiza relacji tych źródeł o tym, w jaki sposób zginęli męczennicy: czy poprzez zanurzenie w wodzie, czy od wystawienia na działanie mrozu. Artykuł prezentuje powstanie dwóch osobnych tradycji dotyczących tego, jak zmarli męczennicy, wraz z oceną ich wiarygodności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Czterdziestu Męczenników z Sebastei, prześladowania chrześcijan, Licyniusz, męczennicy chrześcijańscy, kult męczenników

#### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to answer the question of what the earliest Greek sources say about how the forty martyrs of Sebaste died. The article discusses each of these sources together with the context of their origin, if possible. The presented analysis concerns the sources' accounts on the manner of the martyrs' death: whether by immersion in water or by exposure to frost. The article presents the emergence of two different traditions about the way the martyrs died along with an assessment of their credibility.

**Keywords:** Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, persecutions of Christians, Licinius, Christian martyrs, cult of the martyrs

<sup>1</sup> Katarzyna Maria Dźwigąła is an assistant professor in the Institute of History at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. She received PhD from the University of Warsaw in 2019. Her research interest is Late Antiquity, especially the times of emperor Constantine. Email: [k.dzwigala@uksw.edu.pl](mailto:k.dzwigala@uksw.edu.pl).

The Forty (XL) Martyrs of Sebaste<sup>2</sup> are among the most popular saints in late antiquity. According to Procopius, these were to be Roman soldiers from the Legio XII Fulminata,<sup>3</sup> but this information is questioned recently.<sup>4</sup> Their death was to take place during the persecution of Licinius, i.e., after 319 and before 324.<sup>5</sup> Such information is provided, among others, by the Greek *Passio*<sup>6</sup> and Sozomen,<sup>7</sup> but now it is considered doubtful<sup>8</sup> and there is a hypothesis that the martyrdom could have happened earlier, at the end of the 4th century.<sup>9</sup> The feast of the martyrs was celebrated on March 9.<sup>10</sup>

The tradition of dating the death of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste to the reign of Licinius is questioned, because it is not clear whether there existed any bloody persecution under the reign of this emperor.<sup>11</sup> Researchers do not agree on this point. Eusebius of Caesarea presents Licinius as a persecutor,<sup>12</sup> but H.A. Drake states that Eusebius wanted to justify the war between Licinius and Constantine, in which the latter was presented as a liberator of the persecuted Christians.<sup>13</sup> But there is also evidence of the death of Christian bishops under the reign of Licinius,<sup>14</sup> therefore the reign of Licinius can also be the time when the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste died.

The question of how the martyrs of Sebaste died appeared in various ways as early as in the 4th century when their cult was intensively developing. Some sources say that the martyrs were exposed to frost, while according to others, they were submerged in a lake. The purpose of this article is to present and critically analyze what the earliest Greek sources say about the XL's death.<sup>15</sup> These are the following texts:

- Greek *Passio*<sup>16</sup>
- Basil's Homily<sup>17</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is today's Sivas in Turkey, cf. *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*, ed. O. Nicholson, vol. 2, Oxford 2018, pp. 1349-1350.

<sup>3</sup> *De aedificiis* I, 7, 3, Greek text Procopius, *De Aedificiis Libri VI*, ed. J. Haury, Lipsiae 1964, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. P. Karlin-Hayter, *Passio of the XL Martyrs of Sebasteia. The Greek tradition: the earliest account (BHG 1201)*, "Analecta Bollandiana," 109/1991, pp. 296-298.

<sup>5</sup> On the persecution under Licinius, Ch. M. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, New York 2010, pp. 170-174; H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops. The Politics of Intolerance*, Baltimore-London 2000, pp. 236-237.

<sup>6</sup> Greek text, O. von Gebhardt, *Acta martyrum selecta*, Berlin 1902, p. 171.

<sup>7</sup> Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* IX.2, Sozomenus, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. J. Bidez, Berlin 1995, "Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller," vol. 4, p. 392.

<sup>8</sup> R. Van Dam, *Becoming Christian: The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia*, Philadelphia 2003, p. 134.

<sup>9</sup> P. Karlin-Hayter, op. cit., pp. 273-274.

<sup>10</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. A.P. Kazhdan, A.-M. Talbot, A. Cutler et al., vol. 2, New York-Oxford 1991, pp. 799-800.

<sup>11</sup> H.A. Drake, op. cit., p. 235-237.

<sup>12</sup> *Historia Ecclesiastica* 10, 8, Greek text Eusebius z Cezarei, *Historia kościelna*, Kraków 2013, pp. 692-698; *Vita Constantini* 1, 49-54, 1, Greek text Eusebius, *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, ed. F. Winkelmann, Berlin-New York 1991, "Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte," pp. 40-43.

<sup>13</sup> H.A. Drake, op. cit., pp. 235-237.

<sup>14</sup> T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and the Eusebius*, Cambridge, Massachusetts-London 1981, pp. 71-72.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. P. Karlin-Hayter, op. cit., pp. 251-253.

<sup>16</sup> O. von Gebhardt, op. cit., pp. 171-181.

<sup>17</sup> Basiliius Caesariensis, *In quadraginta martyres Sebastenses*, PG 31, 508-525.

- Letter from Gregory of Nyssa<sup>18</sup>
- 3 Homilies by Gregory of Nyssa: Ia<sup>19</sup>, Ib<sup>20</sup> and II<sup>21</sup>
- Greek homily attributed to Ephrem the Syrian.<sup>22</sup>

An essential source concerning the XL Martyrs of Sebaste is also the *Testament*<sup>23</sup> they allegedly wrote, but it does not mention the manner of death.

### Greek *Passio*

The most extensive description of the XL's martyrdom as well as the legend of the discovery of their relics can be found in Greek *Passio*. However, it is a highly interpolated text, containing numerous additions and bearing traces of many editors' interference<sup>24</sup>, therefore, it is difficult to recreate the earliest state of the text and date it. P. Karlin-Hayter believes, however, that it is possible, based on a detailed analysis of *Passio*, to reach the original account of the martyrdom of the XL, proposing in her article ways to separate legends and interpolations from historical elements.<sup>25</sup> R. Van Dam refers to the article by Karlin-Hayter to state that the goal of finding the original account of the XL is doomed to failure from the very beginning.<sup>26</sup> He believes that the accounts of the XL should not be analyzed in terms of their historicity, as this will not bring any meaningful results, but instead, conclusions can be drawn from the texts about the context of their creation.<sup>27</sup>

*Passio* is divided into 13 chapters, which first tell about the XL's struggle with Roman officials, then about their martyrdom, death, and finally, about the discovery of the relics. The text is full of biblical quotes and dialogues as well as descriptions of miracles. The existence of long and elaborate biblical passages suggests that perhaps *Passio* was used in the liturgy on the feast of the martyrs.<sup>28</sup>

According to *Passio*, the XL's martyrdom took place at the time of Licinius, when Christians were ordered to offer sacrifices to pagan gods.<sup>29</sup> The saints were to be soldiers stationed in Cappadocia (“ἦσαν οὖν στρατιῶται ἐκ τῆς Καππαδοκῶν χώρας”).<sup>30</sup> The text also lists their names. The martyrs are interrogated and induced to sacrifice to the pagan gods by a Roman official described as the hegemon Agrikolaos (“Ἀγρικόλαος ὁ ἡγεμῶν”),<sup>31</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *Epistula 37 = Saint Basil: The Letters*, vol. 4, ed. R.J. Deferrari, London–Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1934, “Loeb Classical Library,” vol. 270, pp. 346-350.

<sup>19</sup> *Gregorii Nysseni Sermones*, ed. G. Heil, J.P. Cavarnos, O. Lendle, part. 2, Leiden–New York–København–Köln 1990, pp. 135-142.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 143-156.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 157-169.

<sup>22</sup> *Τοῦ ἐν ἀγίοις πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου τὰ εὐρισκόμενα πάντα*, ed. Assemani, vol. 2, Roma 1743, pp. 341-356.

<sup>23</sup> H. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford 1972, pp. 354-361.

<sup>24</sup> P. Karlin-Hayter, *op. cit.*, pp. 256-257, 264.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 249.

<sup>26</sup> R. Van Dam, *op. cit.*, p. 133, n. 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 132-133.

<sup>28</sup> P. Karlin-Hayter, *op. cit.*, p. 269; R. Van Dam, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>29</sup> *Passio* I, p. 171.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

and later also by a dux who came from Caesarea (ὁ δούξ).<sup>32</sup> The text presents dialogues between the XL's representatives and those who judge them. During one of the interrogations, a miracle occurs – the dux orders the soldiers to beat the martyrs in the eyes, but the soldiers hit each other instead.<sup>33</sup> Between meetings with representatives of the authorities, the XL are thrown into prison, where they console each other, pray, and Jesus appears to them twice.

Finally, the decision is made to condemn the martyrs to death. The circumstances of the martyrdom are described in *Passio* as follows: “The Hegemon then ordered the martyrs to be bound and their necks tied with a rope, and then to be led together to the lake. There was a lake at Sebaste with a lot of water. And at that time, when the saints were martyred, it was freezing. After they led them, they set them naked in the middle of the lake. And the air was frosty, and the time of the day was coldest, for it was almost evening”.<sup>34</sup> “ἐκέλευσεν δὲ ὁ ἡγεμὼν δεθέντας αὐτοὺς καὶ σχοινισθέντας εἰς τοὺς τραχήλους ἄγεσθαι πάντας ὁμοῦ ἐπὶ τὴν λίμνην. ἔστιν δὲ ἐν τῇ Σεβαστείᾳ λίμνη ἔχουσα ὕδωρ πολὺ· κατὰ δὲ τὸν καιρὸν ἐκεῖνον, ὅτε οἱ ἄγιοι ἐμαρτύρησαν, εἶχεν κρύος μέγα. ἀγαγόντες δὲ αὐτοὺς ἔστησαν ἐν μέσῳ τῆς λίμνης γυμνοῦς. ἦν γὰρ καὶ ὁ ἀπὸ χειμέριος καὶ ἡ ὥρα δριμυτάτη, πρὸς ἑσπέραν γὰρ ἦν ἦδε ἡ ἡμέρα.”<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, the text clarifies that the XL were sentenced to death by immersion in the lake in the wintertime. However, the explanation in the text that there was a lake in Sebaste indicates that the preserved version was intended for an audience outside the place, unfamiliar with its geography.<sup>36</sup> Undoubtedly, the location of the martyrdom scene in the lake is an interpolation, especially since the March temperatures suggest that the lake was most likely frozen.<sup>37</sup> Basil and Gregory of Nyssa mention the fact that the lake was frozen on the day of the XL's death, which will be discussed in the following parts of the article.

According to *Passio*, the martyrs spend the whole night in the water, praying. However, one of them recants his faith and comes out of the lake to warm himself in a nearby bath, which was supposed to tempt the XL. However, as soon as he enters it, he dies of heat. Then a miracle takes place – the sun appears, warming the water, wreaths descend for the martyrs. One of XL's guardians, mentioned as *καπικλάριος* (a prison guard), seeing the miracle, converts and takes the place of the one who escaped to the bath.

In the morning, Roman officials reappear and learn what happened during the night. They order the martyrs to be pulled ashore and have their legs broken. The mother of the youngest of them, Meliton, comes up to him and encourages him to persevere with the others. Eventually, the martyrs die praying the words of a psalm. The hegemon and dux command that the bodies shall be placed in a cart and burned. When Meliton also dies, his mother places his body with the others. The relics are thrown into the river to prevent the Christians from taking them. The martyrs, however, miraculously reveal themselves to the Bishop of Sebaste, Peter, pointing to the place where their remains gathered. The bishop goes to the river at night and finds the relics glowing in the dark.

<sup>32</sup> *Passio* IV, p. 174.

<sup>33</sup> *Passio* V, p. 175.

<sup>34</sup> The author of the article translated the passages from Greek *Passio*.

<sup>35</sup> *Passio* VII, p. 177.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. P. Karlin-Hayter, op. cit., p. 267.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 265-266.

It is difficult to separate the legendary from the history in Greek *Passio*, and therefore, the historical value of this text as a source on the martyrdom of the XL martyrs is questionable. What is more, according to *Passio*, the martyrs were to die by immersion in the lake, which is undoubtedly an interpolation, and in addition, such a version of the events is impossible due to the climate of this place and is contrary to the accounts of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa. However, this shows that the interpolation was introduced by an author unfamiliar with Sebaste's geography, and it was intended for an audience outside the place. Otherwise, there would be no need to explain a lake in the city.

### **Basil's Homily**

Basil's Homily on the XL martyrs of Sebaste was delivered in 373, most probably on March 9, their feast day, at the XL's martyrdom in Caesarea.<sup>38</sup> The sanctuary may have been built to mark the arrival of the relics of the Forty in the city.<sup>39</sup> In his homily, Basil draws a lot from *Passio*, which was probably his source.<sup>40</sup> Also, on several occasions, he emphasizes the unity of the XL in death and states that in each of their relics, there are all forty, even if divided into a hundred.<sup>41</sup> Such an assurance suggests that he probably knew the *Testament*, as in the *Testament* the martyrs ask not to separate their remains after death, but to bury them together.<sup>42</sup>

In his homily, Basil describes the martyrdom of the XL in a highly rhetorical way, expanding his story so that it strongly stimulates the audience's imagination. He states that condemning martyrs to death by freezing was an idea of a Roman official resulting from cruelty.<sup>43</sup> According to Basil, officials were to be exposed naked to the cold "in the middle of the city" ("ἐν μέσῃ τῆ πόλει").<sup>44</sup> Basil also describes what happens to the body of a freezing man to emphasize the cruelty of the death to which XL were sentenced. To make the audience aware of the harsh weather at the time of the XL's death, Basil also mentions a frozen lake: "So, on that occasion, they were condemned to spend the night in the open air when the lake, around which the city had been built, on which the holy men were engaged in this suffering, was like a plain for chariots because the ice had changed it."<sup>45</sup> "Τότε τοίνυν αἰθριοὶ διανυκτερεύειν κατεδικάσθησαν, ὅτε λίμνη μὲν, περὶ ἣν ἡ πόλις κατῴκισται, ἐν ἧ ταῦτα διήθλουν οἱ ἄγιοι, οἷόν τι πεδίον ἰππήλατον ἦν, μεταποιήσαντος αὐτὴν τοῦ κρυστάλλου."<sup>46</sup>

According to Basil's account, the lake was in the centre of the city, there the martyrs were to spend the night exposed to frost. Thus, Basil's account wholly excludes the possibility of immersing the martyrs in water.

<sup>38</sup> J. Leemans, W. Mayer, P. Allen, B. Dehandshutter, 'Let us die that we may live.' *Greek homilies on Christian martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria (c. AD 350-AD 450)*, London 2003, p. 67.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>40</sup> P. Karlin-Hayter, op. cit., p. 263.

<sup>41</sup> PG 31, 521B.

<sup>42</sup> P. Karlin-Hayter, op. cit., p. 289.

<sup>43</sup> PG 31, 513C-D.

<sup>44</sup> PG 31, 516A.

<sup>45</sup> Translation, J. Leemans, W. Mayer, P. Allen, B. Dehandshutter, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>46</sup> PG 31, 516B.

### Gregory of Nyssa's letter

How the XL martyrs of Sebaste died is mentioned in a letter included initially in the body of the letters of Basil of Caesarea. However, the authorship of the letter was considered doubtful.<sup>47</sup> A.M. Silvas proves that the text is most likely Gregory of Nyssa's letter written in the spring of 370 or in 364.<sup>48</sup> In the collection containing the translation of Gregory of Nyssa's letters, she placed the letter under number 37. Still, the addressee of the letter remains unknown.<sup>49</sup>

At the beginning of the letter, Gregory talks about the catastrophe due to the flood that hit the area where he was staying.<sup>50</sup> He describes the circumstances of this event: there was heavy snowfall, suddenly a warm wind came, and it rained. This thawed streams that joined the nearby Halys River, causing the flooding. The river, in turn, begins in Lake Sebasteians, where the XL martyrs froze: "This is the neighbouring river that is our lot, gushing out of Armenia and taking its source in the most sacred lake of the Sebasteians, upon which the so-called 'Forty' noble soldiers of Christ were frozen during the blast of a fierce north wind."<sup>51</sup> "οὗτος ὁ λαχὼν ἡμῖν γείτων ποταμός· ἐκβλύζων μὲν ἐκ τῆς τῶν Ἀρμενίων, ἐμβιβαζόμενος δὲ ἐν τῇ ἱερωτάτῃ λίμνῃ τῶν Σεβαστηνῶν, εἰς ἣν οἱ φερόνυμοι καὶ γενναῖοι τεσσαράκοντα τοῦ Χριστοῦ στρατιῶται βορέου δεινοῦ πνεύσαντος ἐνεπάρησαν."<sup>52</sup>

According to the translator, Gregory writes clearly that the martyrs froze from the cold wind, standing on the surface of the ice-bound lake. However, the editor of Basil's letters, R.J. Deferrari, believes that there is a contradiction here with the information about the death of the martyrs in Basil's homily, according to which the soldiers were placed on the surface of a frozen lake and exposed to death by the cold wind.<sup>53</sup> Thus he understands the text so that the martyrs were immersed in the lake. Silvas explains that even if we take the lesson of ἐνεπάρησαν, it is possible to translate this place as that the XL froze on the lake, not in it.<sup>54</sup> Silvas, however, proposes the conjecture of ἐνεπάγησαν, which will allow for an even more certain meaning of the text that XL froze on the lake.<sup>55</sup> The letter, probably written by Gregory of Nyssa, is, therefore, another source confirming that the XL died due to exposure to the cold wind.

### Gregory of Nyssa's homilies

Gregory of Nyssa gave three homilies in honour of the XL martyrs of Sebaste. The first two (Ia and Ib) are sometimes considered to be one homily and are entitled *First Homily on*

<sup>47</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Letters*, Introduction, Translation and Commentary A.M. Silvas, Leiden–Boston 2007, "Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae," vol. 83, pp. 263-264.

<sup>48</sup> On the letter's authorship and possible dating, Gregory of Nyssa, *The Letters*, op. cit., pp. 263-269.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, pp. 268-269.

<sup>50</sup> It appears from the letter that the author is in Caesarea Cappadocia, cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Letters*, op. cit., p. 264.

<sup>51</sup> Translation, Gregory of Nyssa, *The Letters*, op. cit., p. 269.

<sup>52</sup> *Saint Basil: The Letters*, op. cit., pp. 346-348.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, pp. 346-347.

<sup>54</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Letters*, op. cit., p. 267.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem.

the *Forty of Sebaste*, although they are separate homilies.<sup>56</sup> The homily Ib is a continuation of the homily Ia, which had to be interrupted due to noise from the audience. The homily Ia was delivered on the XL feast of March 9 in the martyrdom of Sebaste, and Ib the next day in the church in that city.<sup>57</sup> The homilies Ia and Ib were most likely written around 375 at the latest.<sup>58</sup>

In his homily Ib, Gregory of Nyssa describes the weather in Sebaste on the day of the martyrs' death and the atmosphere of this place. According to Gregory, "it was icy cold that day"<sup>59</sup> ("κρυμὸς ἦν κατὰ τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην")<sup>60</sup>. Since the homily is delivered in Sebaste itself, Gregory also mentions that there is no need to describe the coldness of this place in detail to his audience.<sup>61</sup> He also mentions, however, that the nearby lake, on the surface of which it was possible to ride horses at that time, was frozen in winter.<sup>62</sup> According to Gregory of Nyssa's homily, the martyrs were sentenced to be exposed to frost, and the mention of the lake is only intended to illustrate the atmosphere of Sebaste.

*The second homily on the XL martyrs of Sebaste* (II) was probably delivered on March 10, 379, at Caesarea in Cappadocia.<sup>63</sup> This text confirms that the martyrs were condemned to death because of their exposure to frost.<sup>64</sup> Gregory also describes in detail the frosty climate of Sebaste to make the listeners from another region understand what the weather was like on the day of the martyrs' death. He says: "It was winter, and Armenia, the neighbouring country, as you know, has a cold climate."<sup>65</sup> "ὁ μὲν γὰρ καιρὸς ἦν χειμῶν· ὁ δὲ τόπος Ἀρμενία, ἡ πρόσοικος χώρα, ὡς ἴστε, δυσχείμερος."<sup>66</sup>

There is, therefore, a clear difference between the homily at Sebaste and the homily at Caesarea because Gregory of Nyssa addresses a different audience. In Sebaste, he did not have to describe the climate in detail.

### Greek homily attributed to Ephrem the Syrian

Another source mentioning the manner of death of the XL martyrs of Sebaste is the Greek homily attributed to Ephrem the Syrian (the so-called Ephraem Syrus Graecus). Still, it is difficult to determine the actual authorship of this work as well as the time of its creation.<sup>67</sup> However, the author of the homily likely knew both the account of Basil and Gregory

<sup>56</sup> J. Leemans, W. Mayer, P. Allen, B. Dehandshutter, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, p. 92.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p. 93; J. Leemans, *On the Date of Gregory of Nyssa's First Homilies on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (Ia and Ib)*, "Journal of Theological Studies," 52/2001, nr 1, p. 97. However, scholars also proposed 383 as the date of the homily Ia and Ib, cf. R. Van Dam, op. cit., p. 141, n. 17.

<sup>59</sup> Translation, J. Leemans, W. Mayer, P. Allen, B. Dehandshutter, op. cit., p. 104.

<sup>60</sup> *Gregorii Nysseni Sermones*, part II, pp. 152, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, pp. 152, 15-20.

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, pp. 152, 20.

<sup>63</sup> R. Van Dam, op. cit., p. 141, n. 17.

<sup>64</sup> Greek text, *Gregorii Nysseni Sermones*, part II, 777 M., p. 161.

<sup>65</sup> The author of the article translated the passage from *The second homily on the XL martyrs of Sebaste* (II).

<sup>66</sup> *Gregorii Nysseni Sermones*, part II, 777 M., p. 161.

<sup>67</sup> F. de' Cavalieri, *I santi quaranta martiri di Sebastia*, in: *Note agiografiche*, vol. 7, Vatican 1928, "Studi e Testi," vol. 49, p. 159.

of Nyssa and Greek *Passio*.<sup>68</sup> The knowledge of Basil's homily is confirmed by the Greek *Homily on St. Basil* preserved under the name of Ephrem. Its author states that he learned about the history of the XL martyrs from Basil.<sup>69</sup>

The *homily on XL martyrs* attributed to Ephrem is a highly rhetorized work and rather a florid eulogy of martyrs abounding in references to biblical events than a detailed description of the martyrdom. The lot of the martyrs of Sebaste is presented with numerous comparisons to the Old and New Testament motifs. However, in the passage compiling the circumstances of the XL's death, there is a mention of immersing the martyrs in water: "There the sea was turned into dry land, lest Israel drown as it passed; here the martyrs, immersed in water, did not drown."<sup>70</sup> "Ἐκεῖ μὲν γὰρ ἡ θάλασσα μετηλλάχθη εἰς ξηρὰν, ἵνα μὴ ὁ Ἰσραὴλ βαδίζων καταποθῆ· ἐνθάδε μάρτυρες, ἔνδοθεν τῶν ὑδάτων ἐνθαλαμεύομενοι<sup>71</sup>, οὐ κατεποντίσθησαν."<sup>72</sup>

Then the homily narrator also mentions the lake: "Do you see how many miracles greater than the Red Sea happened in the lake thanks to the winners?" "Εἶδες πόσα θαύματα γέγονεν κρείττονα τῆς ἐρυθρᾶς ἐν τῇ λίμνῃ διὰ τῶν ἀθλοφόρων."<sup>73</sup>

Therefore, the issue of immersion in the lake is at odds with the accounts of Gregory of Nyssa and Basil, even though the homily contains many elements in common with their accounts. The immersion of the martyrs in the lake is apparently inspired by another account of the XL's martyrdom, perhaps by Greek *Passio*. Most likely, the homily attributed to Ephrem is a representative of a later tradition than the texts of the Cappadocian Fathers. The author of the homily compiled elements from different traditions.

## Conclusions

The earliest Greek sources do not agree on how the XL martyrs of Sebaste perished. According to Greek *Passio* and the Greek homily attributed to Ephrem the Syrian, martyrs died because of their immersion in the lake in winter. However, this version of events is certainly the result of interpolation, as it is unlikely given the place's climate. In addition, the text analysis shows that the author of *Passio* did not know Sebaste's geography and the work was intended for audiences outside of this region.

According to the homily by Basil the Great and the letter and homily by Gregory of Nyssa, the martyrs were exposed to the frosty air. These authors mention the existence of a lake in Sebaste but add that it was frozen on the day of the martyrs' death, which shows the audience how harsh winter was in this place. Gregory of Nyssa's account of the XL's martyrdom also has the value that he himself was associated with Sebaste and knew the place very well, which adds credibility to the information he provided about the geography of this place.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, pp. 159-162; P. Karlin-Hayter, op. cit., p. 252-253.

<sup>69</sup> *Encomium in magnum Basilium*, in: *S. Ephraem Syri opera*, ed. S.G. Mercati, I 1, Roma 1915, p. 160; cf. F. de' Cavalieri, op. cit., p. 159.

<sup>70</sup> The author of the article translated the passages from Ephrem's homily.

<sup>71</sup> There is a word ἐνθαλαμεύομενοι in the edition of the text, but most likely it is the publisher's error, so I corrected the word.

<sup>72</sup> *Τοῦ ἐν ἀγίοις πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου τὰ εὕρισκόμενα πάντα*, op. cit., p. 348B.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p. 348D.



The martyrdom of the XL martyrs of Sebaste is an example of how an alternative version emerged in an account of historical events which became popular. An example of the popularity of the version about the immersion of martyrs in the lake are the two preserved kontakia of Roman Melodos about the XL martyrs.<sup>74</sup> The author mentions several times that the martyrs were immersed in the lake's waters. At the same time, the kontakia are the only original hymns of this author of a hagiographic character, which is a testimony to the popularity of the cult of the XL martyrs of Sebaste. Also, in iconography, these saints were depicted as immersed in water.<sup>75</sup>

## Bibliography

### Sources

- Basilius Caesariensis, *In quadraginta martyres Sebastenses*, PG 31, 508-525.
- Ephraem Syrus Graecus, *Encomium in magnum Basilium, S. Ephraem Syri opera*, ed. S.G. Mercati, I 1, Roma 1915, pp. 145-178.
- Ephraem Syrus Graecus, *In sanctos XL. martires, Τοῦ ἐν ἁγίοις πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου τὰ εὐρισκόμενα πάντα*, ed. Assemani, vol. 2, Roma 1743.
- Eusebius Caesariensis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Eusebiusz z Cezarei, *Historia kościelna*, Kraków 2013.
- Eusebius Caesariensis, *Vita Constantini*, Eusebius, *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, ed. F. Winkelmann, Berlin–New York 1991, “Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte,” vol. 7.
- Gregorius Nyssenus, *Epistula 37 = Saint Basil: The Letters*, vol. 4, ed. R.J. Deferrari, London–Cambridge, Massachusetts 1934, “Loeb Classical Library,” vol. 270.
- Gregorius Nyssenus, *Homilia in quadraginta martyres Ia, Ib and II, Gregorii Nysseni Sermones*, ed. G. Heil, J.P. Cavarinos, O. Lendle, part. 2, Leiden–New York–København–Köln 1990.
- Gulowsen K., *The Genesis of the Martyrdom of the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia as Iconographical Theme*, in: *Ecclesiae Urbis. Atti del Congresso Internazionale di studi sulle chiese di Roma*, Vatican 2002, “Studi di antichità cristiana,” vol. 59, pp. 1863-1871.
- Passio quadraginta martyres*, O. von Gebhardt, *Acta martyrum selecta*, Berlin 1902.
- Procopius, *De Aedificiis Libri VI*, ed. J. Haury, Lipsiae 1964.
- Romanos Melodos, *Kontakion 57 and 58, Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica. Cantica of Genuina*, ed. P. Maas, C.A. Trypanis, Oxford 1963.
- Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica*, Sozomenus, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. J Bidez, Berlin 1995, “Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller,” vol. 4.
- Testamentum quadraginta martyres*, H. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford 1972.

### Secondary literature

- Barnes T.D., *Constantine and the Eusebius*, Cambridge, Massachusetts–London 1981.
- de'Cavalieri F., *Isanti quaranta martiri di Sebastia*, in: *Note agiografiche*, vol. 7, Vatican 1928, “Studi e Testi,” vol. 49, pp. 155-184.
- Drake H.A., *Constantine and the Bishops. The Politics of Intolerance*, Baltimore–London 2000.
- Karlin-Hayter P., *Passio of the XL Martyrs of Sebasteia. The Greek tradition: the earliest account (BHG 120I)*, “Analecta Bollandiana,” 109/1991, pp. 249-304.

<sup>74</sup> Roman Melodos, *Kontakion 57 and 58, Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica. Cantica of Genuina*, ed. P. Maas, C.A. Trypanis, Oxford 1963, pp. 487-505.

<sup>75</sup> K. Gulowsen, *The Genesis of the Martyrdom of the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia as Iconographical Theme*, in: *Ecclesiae Urbis. Atti del Congresso Internazionale di studi sulle chiese di Roma*, Vatican 2002, “Studi di antichità cristiana,” vol. 59, pp. 1863-1871.

- Leemans J., Mayer W., Allen P., Dehandshutter B., *'Let us die that we may live.'* *Greek homilies on Christian martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria (c. AD 350–AD 450)*, London 2003.
- Leemans J., *On the Date of Gregory of Nyssa's First Homilies on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (Ia and Ib)*, "Journal of Theological Studies," 52/2001, nr 1, pp. 93-97.
- Odahl Ch. M., *Constantine and the Christian Empire*, New York 2010.
- Silvas A.M., *Letter 37 To the Great*, in: Gregory of Nyssa, *The Letters*, Introduction, Translation and Commentary A.M. Silvas, Leiden–Boston 2007, "Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae," vol. 83, pp. 263-269.
- The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. A.P. Kazhdan, A.-M. Talbot, A. Cutler et al., vol. 2, New York–Oxford 1991.
- The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*, ed. O. Nicholson, vol. 2, Oxford 2018.
- Van Dam R., *Becoming Christian: The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia*, Philadelphia 2003.