

The Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza

Translated by William Cole, Mike Gormally, Seanna Leath, Alice Lyons, Zack Siegel, and Ken Wolf, based on the edition in: Hippolyte Delehaye, "Passio Sanctorum Sexaginta Martyrum," Analecta Bollandiana 23 (1904), 289-307. The best study of the two versions of this text: David Woods, "The 60 Martyrs of Gaza and the Martyrdom of Bishop Sophronius of Jerusalem," in M. Bonner (ed.), Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times. The Formation of the Classical Islamic World, 8 (Aldershot, 2004), 429-450.

The two extant versions of this passio survive only in Latin but it is clear that at least the earlier version (the first of the two translated below) represents a rather poor translation of a now lost Greek text. The later recension (the second of the texts translated below) is clearly more elaborate than the earlier one and that suggests a later date of composition. But, as Woods points out in his article, there are aspects of the latter recension that are more accurate than corresponding parts of the former, suggesting to him that it was not based on the earlier recension, but on an independent version of the account that is no longer extant.

Here begins the passion of the sixty martyrs who died at the hands of the Saracens on the 17th day of the month of December [638].¹

1. The martyrdom of the sixty holy soldiers of Christ who were captured by the impious Saracens in Gaza, that city beloved of Christ, with our Lord Jesus Christ reigning, in the twenty-seventh year of the emperor Heraclius,² crowned by God. It happened in that time with regard to the atheist Saracens that they besieged Gaza, that city beloved of Christ, and the city, forced by necessity, asked for terms. This was done. The Saracens granted terms to [the city], but without [including] the soldiers who were captured in the city. Entering the city and seizing these most Christian soldiers, they confined them to prison. The following day Ambrus³ ordered the holy Christian soldiers to be summoned. When they were brought to him, he [tried to] compel them to recede from the confession of Christ and from the precious, life-giving cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. When they would not agree to do this, Ambrus ordered their wives and children and arms to be separated from them and sent them again to prison. After they were in prison for thirty days, he ordered them, shackled, to be taken to a city called Eleutheropolis⁴ and there again he sent them to prison for two months. Also sending Saracens, he sent them...shackled to Theropolis.⁵ Being held there for another three months, the aforementioned impious Ambrus, sending Saracens, brought them from prison and led them into the Holy City⁶ to be sent again to prison. Learning of this, the most

¹ Woods makes a case for these execution happening in 639. "The 60 Martyrs of Gaza," p. 134.

² Heraclius (610-641)

³ Probably a reference to 'Amr ibn al'As, the Arab conqueror of Egypt.

⁴ Eleutheropolis ("City of the Free") lies on the road to Gaza 53 kilometers southwest of Jerusalem.

⁵ There being no known city bearing this name, Delehaye assumes this is a truncated form of [Eleu]theropolis. But David Woods interprets it as a misreading of "Theopolis," Greek for "City of God," a euphemism for Jerusalem. Woods, "The 60 Martyrs of Gaza," p. 131.

⁶ That is, Jerusalem.

holy patriarch Sophronius⁷ went to them at night, admonishing and begging that they not recede from the confession of Christ, who died for us; and that not one of them be separated with regard to the faith of our Lord Christ. In a similar manner, the first of the holy martyrs of Christ by the name of Callinicus, admonished and begged them every day that they be imitators of the forty holy martyrs.⁸ But ten months later the devil, again threatening Ambrus, hateful to God, wrote to Ammira,⁹ who was the commander in the Holy City, telling him, with regard to the holy martyrs, that he go to them in prison and tell them to deny their faith; and if they agreed to deny Christ, [he should] take off their shackles and release them with great honor; but if they did not want to consent, [he should] decapitate the first of them¹⁰ along with nine others in front of the others, so that the others seeing this, led by fear, might deny their faith.

2. Hearing this, the most holy patriarch Sophronius did not rest that night, begging with tears and admonishing each one concerning the faith of Christ. When this had been done, Ammira came to them, released them from prison and read to them what Ambrus had written [to him]. But the holy martyrs of Christ did not consent to the orders of that one, all of them together confessing faith of our Lord Christ. Then Ammira, angry, cast the saints outside of the city before the gates and ordered their leader decapitated along with nine others. Gathering up [their bodies], the most holy patriarch Sophronius buried them in one place where he also established an oratory of St. Stephen the protomartyr. The names of the saints who died in the holy city of God, were: from the unit¹¹ of the *Scythi*: Callidicus, Imerius, Illustius, Theodore, Stephan; from the unit of the *Voluntarii*: Peter, Paul, Theodore, John, and another John. These martyrs of Christ were killed in the month of November on the eleventh day in the thirteenth indiction.¹²

3. The rest of the saints were led back to prison. Ammira sent to Ambrus, saying: "I acted in accordance with your orders: I condemned to death those soldiers who would not consent; the rest I sent back to prison. Write us back as to what seems [best to do now]. After thirty days the devil again put seeds in the heart of Ambrus. He ordered Ammira to send him the rest of the saints shackled. And [then] the martyrs of Christ, all chained together, stood before Ambrus. Ambrus ordered their wives and children to be brought before them. When they had been brought before them, Ambrus said to the holy martyrs of Christ: "How long will you remain with stiff necks, refusing to consent to our ceremonies? If you consent to us, behold, you will have your wives and children, and you will be like us, and you will have honor just like one of us. If not, you will suffer what your fellow soldiers suffered. Then

⁷ Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem (634-638).

⁸ A reference to the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia in Armenia, Roman soldiers who were martyred (c. 320, under Constantine's rival Licinius) by being exposed naked on a frozen lake.

⁹ This is probably a misinterpretation of the Arabic title *amir* or emir. The "name" also appears as "Ammirans" and "Ammiras."

¹⁰ That is, their leader.

¹¹ The word for "unit" is *devandus*. See Woods, p. 129.

¹² That is, November 11, 638. According to Delehay, this is a mistake because the thirteenth indiction does not match the 27th year of Heraclius' reign.

the holy martyrs responded with one voice to Ambrus, saying: "No one is capable of separating us from the love of Christ, not wives, not children, not all of the things of this world; we are servants of the living God and we are prepared to die for him who died and was resurrected for us." Hearing this, the most cruel Ambrus, full of rage, his face unchanged, ordered the holy martyrs of Christ to be surrounded by the multitude of Saracens and thus he impiously killed them on account of their faith of Christ. There were some beloved men of Christ who came upon the saints after they had died this way and purchased their bodies, giving 3,000 *solidi* for them. And they buried the martyrs of Christ with great honor in Eleutheropolis, building a church there in which is adored the holy, life-giving, consubstantial Trinity.

4. These are the names of the saints killed for the sake of the faith of Christ: from the unit of the *Scythi*: John, Paul, and another John, Paul, Fotinus, Zitas, Eugenius, Musilius, John, Stephan, Theodore, the father John and his son Theodore, George, Theopantus, George, Sergius, George, Theodore, Quiriacus, John, Zitas and John, Philoxenus, George, John, George; from the unit of the *voluntarii*: Theodore, Epiphanius, John, Theodore, Sergius, George, Thomas, Stephan, Conon, Theodorus, Paulus, John, Georgius, John, and John, Paulinus, Galumas, Habramius, Mermicius, and Marinus. The martyrs of Christ died on the seventeenth day of December, on the fifth ferial, at the sixth hour, of the thirteenth indiction, with the emperor Heraclius ruling in his twenty-seventh year,¹³ with our Lord Jesus Christ reigning, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ages of ages. Amen.

This is the legend of S. Florianus and his companions, which has been recovered from most ancient and approved writings

1. To the praise of God Omnipotent. As is learned from ancient codices, these sixty glorious martyrs suffered and died steadfastly in the name of Christ. For when these soldiers were most vigorous, they resolutely confessed Christ among the Saracens, swearing to defend the Christian faith everywhere and not to fear at all dying for Christ and his faith. After they had defended, with their arms and their counsel, many towns and cities of the Christians that were being besieged by the impious Saracens, the Saracens pursued them with obvious hatred to the point that they swore that if anyone captured them he would receive great honors and riches; and that [the soldiers] would either deny the faith of Christ or die a cruel death. When these soldiers of Christ became aware of this, they were not terrified but made braver. Arming themselves with the power of Christ and with the efficacious sign of the cross, all sixty of these soldiers of Christ, fortified with their brave hearts, made for that city, faithful and beloved to Christ, called Gaza, when it was being besieged by the impious Saracens, so that they might defend all of the faithful of Christ who were present. This was done with our Lord ruling in the twenty-seventh year of the Emperor Heraclius, crowned by God. When the Saracens realized that these Christian soldiers were in the aforementioned city, they gathered a much stronger army so that they would be able to leave under no

¹³ December 17, 638.

pact; and while the Christian martyrs struggled day and night, they killed many of the Saracens without interruption. But this city, after it had been besieged for a long time, was forced by necessity because it had nothing more to eat, and so came to an agreement with the Saracens, though reluctantly, lest they destroy the city and kill the citizens. With the city captured, along with all the soldiers of Christ, the Saracens sent all the soldiers of Christ shackled to prison. They incessantly committed themselves to God, praying that they would be strong in faith and in the love of Christ, and that God would deign to concede to them grace from heaven.

2. An angel appeared to them with the greatest light, comforting them and admonishing them lest they recede from the love of Christ by the threats and torments of Ambrus, because Christ had prepared for them unwithering crowns for their labors. Encouraged, they begged the angel to tell blessed Florianus,¹⁴ who was their leader, what was [happening] to them so that they might see him before they died, hoping that as a result of his salutary admonitions they would sustain the torments more steadfastly in the name of Christ. When the angel had brought all of this about, blessed Florianus said to the angel: "Am I not able to become a soldier of Christ when I am prepared to do and suffer everything on his behalf?" And the angel said to him: "A greater fight is due to be led by you, so that afterwards you might receive a more glorious crown and the reward of a triumph. These ones will precede you; you will follow them." Once the angel had gone away, Florianus, who was in Jerusalem at that time, prayed on bended knee with tears to Christ that he grant him such wisdom and grace, that these soldiers confess with great courage Christ, the only begotten son of God and the redeemer of mankind, and, withstanding the torments of the Saracens on behalf of Christ's, possess eternal blessedness by dying. His prayer completed, the sixty young martyrs appeared to him most resplendent with crowns of gold, adorned with precious gems. One of whom, who was in front of the others, called out in a most sweet voice: "Most blessed Florianus, you deserve to be our leader and, by your merits, we have been crowned with these crowns by our Lord Jesus Christ." Having seen and heard this, the holy man immediately understood what God wanted to accomplish through him. Suddenly kindled with the love of God, he decided at that moment to do whatever he might be able to do for the sake of Christ's honor.

3. The following day Ambrus ordered the soldiers of Christ to be brought to him, and he promised copious riches and honors to them if they were willing to deny Christ and no longer adore his cross. When they refused, paying no attention to his riches or honors, they blessed Christ more and more and confessed him to be the true God. Then Ambrus ordered them, chained, to be thrust into a harsher prison for thirty days so that he might see if they would desist from their intention. When the thirty days had passed and they remained most firm in their faith, he ordered

¹⁴ Woods believes that "Florianus" is a corruption of "Sophronius." This would account for the fact that Sophronius is only mentioned in the earlier redaction and that the "Florianus" of the later redaction plays much the same role as the patriarch played in the early version. "The 60 Martyrs of Gaza," pp. 437-440. It would also be a unique reference to Sophronius' death being a martyrdom at the hands of the Muslim authorities in the wake of the collapse of the mosque, an event that might have emboldened some Christians, believing that God was on their side after all.

them led to the city of Eutropolis and put into a most disgusting prison for two months. In this prison, when they [realized there] was darkness and putrefaction and the most disgusting and horrible animals, they thought that they would not be able to tolerate it and that they would die there in a very short time. Still they prayed God that, before they died, they might merit seeing blessed Florianus. He immediately appeared to them as a most vigorous and splendid soldier, saying to them: "Do not be afraid: I am Florianus, whom you, with such desire, wished to see. Our Lord Jesus Christ sent me to you in order to show you how you will be after this fight, if you patiently and freely withstand all of these torments for him, and by which crowns you will be crowned in heaven where you will reign with our king Jesus Christ forever." And then and there, sixty youths who looked like them--the ones whom blessed Florianus had seen before--immediately appeared to them. Encouraged in Christ, they said: "We are prepared to suffer anything and to die for Christ."

4. When two months had passed, that most impious Ambrus, urged on by a demon, ordered those holy soldiers, bound, to be led to the holy city Jerusalem, and wrote in these words to Amira, that he should examine the soldiers, and, if they denied Christ, release them; but if they would not, he was to cruelly decapitate their leader, by the name of Climacus, and nine others, while the rest watched. When they all steadfastly confessed Christ and said that they did not fear any of the torments as long they had Christ as their helper, they were immediately killed. The rest of the soldiers were shut up in a very harsh prison until Ambrus commanded something else concerning them. After thirty days, Ambrus wrote to Amira that he was to send him the men in chains. Then he said, to those standing before him: "Until now you have been stubborn, not consenting to us. If you do our will, you will become great lords in our kingdom; but if you do not consent, you will suffer most harshly." Then they all shouted at the same time: "Indeed no one will be able to separate us from our love of Christ and our faith in Christ. Not wives, not children, not the hissing of this world. We are servants of Christ, sons of God, and we are prepared to live and die on account of his love, because he died and then rose again for us." When these things were said and heard by Ambrus, they were led with fury outside of the city and were most cruelly killed with various tortures. Suddenly many doves appeared in the sky, as many as there were dead men. And one angel preceding them ascended with them to heaven. Blessed Florianus had their bodies buried in the city of Eutropolis where a church was built in honor of the most holy Trinity.

5. Ambrus, hearing that blessed Florianus was their leader, a kind of patriarch; and that [the sixty soldiers] had stood firm in their faith in Christ because of his admonitions; and that he had buried their bodies with honor, summoned Florianus, asking if he was himself willing to deny Christ and worship his gods. Blessed Florianus responded: "I marvel how you think yourself wise, and yet you ignore how much I love my Lord Christ and you don't understand the stupidity and the imposition of your idols." When Ambrus heard this and impatiently sustained it, he ordered him pierced to death with darts and arrows. Blessed Florianus, with hands raised to heaven, prayed with tears to Christ, and his prayer was so vehement that [Ambrus'] attendants were unable to see him--even though he was there in their

very midst--or touch him with any blow. Each one raged against another thinking it to be Florianus and thus a good 200 of them were killed. Seeing all of this, Ambrus attributed this not to divine justice but to the art of magic. He ordered him to be led to the temple of the gods¹⁵ so that he might see their might and their power. Then the blessed Florianus, having devoutly made a prayer to Christ, said: "O Ambrus, do you not hear the great movement of the earth and voices shouting?" Listening in the direction of the temple, Ambrus heard its great collapse and terrible voices shouting in the sky. When messengers had been sent, he later came to learn that the entire temple and the idols had been reduced to dust.¹⁶ After this Ambrus, not knowing what to do, ordered Florianus to be bound most tightly and thrown into a most horrible prison. When he had been put there, all at once a great light appeared along with the sweetest aroma, with many flowers of various types and colors scattered here and there. When those who brought him there saw this, they fell at his feet seeking forgiveness and asking to be baptized by him. Hearing this Ambrus ordered them decapitated.

6. Blessed Florianus encouraged them and thus, blessed in Christ,¹⁷ they were killed. Ambrus arranged for blessed Florianus to be beheaded the following day so that first he could be led through the entire city naked and cruelly bound in a cart, so that everyone could make fun of him and strike him with rods and knotted ropes, and afterward his body could be given to the dogs. That night an angel appeared to Florianus and revealed to him the sentence of his passion and death, encouraging him to freely sustain everything bravely on behalf of the name of Christ, because incomparable glory had been prepared for him by God on account of his passion and shame. And thus he showed him how all of the soldiers had been glorified in heaven; and the twenty attendants whom he had baptized were also shown to him shining brightly. With this vision complete, he was thoroughly encouraged by Christ and longed for the hour of his passion to come. When he arrived at the place of his passion, the blessed Florianus fell to his knees and, lifting his hands and eyes to heaven, praising Christ, because he had made him worthy of such a death for the sake of his love. He saw Christ with a great army of saints and heard a voice saying: "Come, Florianus, come, because today you will gather the abundant fruit of your flowers and receive the crown of the eternal kingdom in recompense for the glory of your passion." To the praise of omnipotent God. Amen.

¹⁵ Given the context, this would seem to be a reference to a mosque.

¹⁶ As Woods notes, this is likely a reference to the problems (attested to by other Christian sources including Theophanes) the Muslims had when they began erecting the first mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. "The 60 Martyrs of Gaza," pp. 134-136.

¹⁷ That is, they were baptized.