



[Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History VI.41.16](#)

A Roman soldier, Besas, defends Christian martyrs in Alexandria

Name of the author: Eusebius of Caesarea

Date: 313 CE to 325 CE

Place: Caesarea Maritima

Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: History

Title of work: Ecclesiastical History

Reference: VI.41.16

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Eusebius and the *Ecclesiastical History*, please see the commentary on [I.6.6-11](#).

The context of the present short extract is Eusebius's recounting of Dionysius of Alexandria's description of the Decian persecution, and those who were martyred in Alexandria during this time. Here, Eusebius relays the story of a "sympathetic soldier-convert" who attempts to protect Christian martyrs from the verbal attacks of the onlooking crowd, and as a result is himself beheaded, as Roman citizens generally were when executed. As Candida Moss acknowledges, following a similar formula to numerous other accounts of Roman soldiers in martyrdom accounts who express Christian sympathies, he is brought to trial just as the Christians he defends (see, for example, the discussion of Basilides, another such example, below; Moss, *The Other Christs*, p. 70).

In describing the bravery of Besas on behalf of the Alexandrian Christians, the militaristic language of war (???????, *polemos*) is intermingled with that of piety (????????, *eusebeia*). He is described as a "warrior of God" who undergoes a "great contest for piety" (see Moss, *The Other Christs*, p. 70). In Christian martyrdom accounts, allusions to athletic contests and battles between the spirit and flesh were extremely common (see, for example, the commentaries on [The Letter of Ignatius to the Romans 5.1-3](#) and the [Martyrdom of Polycarp](#), just to name sources dealt with in the context of this project). In this instance, this battle theme gains an added layer of complexity. Rather than describing a Christian enduring a physically torturous battle in the arena from which they will ultimately emerge triumphant as an imitator of Christ, we have here a member of the Roman army whom Eusebius describes as displaying his virtuousness, his masculine courage (????????, *andreios*), something which was highly valued in Roman society, not in the context of a war, but rather as a tool for justice, in defence of Christians suffering the insults of their pagan neighbours. A member of the Roman military has stepped in, utilising the qualities which would mark him out as a good Roman man, and a good Roman soldier, and through his noble defence of those in his custody, revealed himself to be a true warrior for God.

The glowing account given here of the soldier Besas can be compared with that of a soldier named Basilides in VI.5, who similarly defends a woman in his custody, Potamiaena, from the jibes and sneers of those who watched him lead her to her death. Observing his courage and good nature, Potamiaena promises him that she will keep him in her prayers. Subsequently, when asked by his fellow soldiers to swear an oath, Basilides declines claiming that he is a Christian, made so by a vision of Potamiaena at his side for three days following her martyrdom (on Basilides, see Moss, *The Other Christs*, p. 71). In this story, Eusebius goes on to state that many people were converted to Christianity in this manner, with the martyrs acting as phenomenal witnesses. Stories such as these can be interpreted entirely as polemical indulgence, rather than historical events. They serve to send a clear message not only that Christianity cannot be quashed by its followers being put to death, but also that Rome's authority (in these cases represented by its soldiers) is not immune to the Christian message.

Keywords in the original language:

- [????????](#)
- [????????](#)



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- [??????????](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [martyr](#)
- [persecution](#)
- [piety](#)
- [Roman authorities](#)
- [Roman masculinity](#)
- [Roman soldier](#)

Bibliographical references: Bardy, Gustave, [Eusèbe de Césarée: Histoire ecclésiastique, Livres V-VII, tome 2](#) (Sources chre?tiennes 41; Paris: E?ditions du Cerf, 1955)

Lawlor, Hugh J. , Oulton, John E. L., [Eusebius: Ecclesiastical History and Martyrs of Palestine: Translated with Introduction and Notes, 2 Volumes](#) (London: SPCK, 1927)

Moss, Candida R., [The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[The Letter of Ignatius to the Romans 5.1-3](#)

Desire for martyrdom

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