



Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* VIII.9.6-8 and 11.1-2

The martyrdom of Christians holding prominent positions within Roman authority

Name of the author: Eusebius of Caesarea

Date: 313 CE to 325 CE

Place: Caesarea Maritima

Language: Greek

Category: Greek

Literary genre: History

Title of work: *Ecclesiastical History*

Reference: VIII.9.6-6 and XI.1-2

Commentary:

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

In these extracts from Eusebius's description of the Diocletianic persecution, we read about various Christians who hold positions of honour or high status within the Roman government, in addition to others noted for their duty to the state. The presence of Christians in prominent positions is alluded to in other places in the *Ecclesiastical History* as well, such as the mention of Christian governors who are apparently granted subtle freedom by the authorities not to sacrifice when performing public duties, and even the imperial family having Christian tendencies (see VI.34; VI.21.3-4; VIII.1.2). Eusebius introduces such individuals as being even greater than other martyrs, owing to the fact that despite holding positions of great distinction and wealth, they nonetheless prioritised their faith.

Concerning the first two individuals, we also possess the *Acts of Phileas*, which are generally considered to be authentic (see C. Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity*, p. 98). Eusebius does not specify the precise role that Philomus (literally "Roman lover") has in the imperial government; we are just told that he is responsible in some way for the administration of justice (????????, *anakrin?*), and that his rank afforded him a military guard (the *Acts* claim that he was a tribune; see Timothy Barnes, "Early Christian Hagiography," p. 145). It is clear that Phileas, the bishop of Thmuis (<https://pleiades.stoa.org/places/727249>), a significant town in lower Egypt, is notable among the martyrs of the Diocletianic persecution. He is mentioned on more than one occasion by Eusebius, and also by Jerome. In VIII.10 of the *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius notes Phileas's "high reputation for secular learning," and quotes from a letter written by the bishop to his diocese describing the sufferings of the martyrs in Alexandria. Jerome, in his *On Illustrious Men* LXXVIII, also refers to what appears to be the same epistle. In addition, Eusebius notes Phileas's reputation for "philosophic learning," a quality echoed when the pair are brought before the Roman judge: "with manly (????????, *andreios*) and philosophic (????????, *philosophos*) minds, or rather with pious (????????, *euseb?s*) and God-loving (????????, *philotheos*) souls, they persevered against all the threats and insults of the judge" (verse 8). It is made clear, however, that their education and intelligence takes a secondary position in the end to their piety. Phileas is also recognised, Eusebius claims, for his patriotic service to his country. The term used, ????????? (*leitourgia*) implies that these actions were in addition to the pastoral roles he carried out as bishop, and perhaps involved the use of his own wealth to carry out some sort of public service.

Chapter 11 begins by describing the slaughter of Christians in a small town in Phrygia. Eusebius claims that the town was sieged by a group of Roman soldiers, who set the entire populace on fire. Twice it is emphasised that the entire population (????, *d?mos*) of the town was Christian, including the Roman authorities who presided over it. Lactantius, when speaking of persecutions of Christians more generally, states that an "entire people" (*universum populum*) was burnt in Phrygia together with their place of worship (*Divine Institutes* V.11). This likely refers to the same incident as Eusebius here. However, we must allow for the possibility that Eusebius likely exaggerates when he claims that the town was inhabited entirely by Christians (although the term ?????, *polichn?*, does imply only a small fort/township), and so Lactantius's words are perhaps better understood as referring simply to an entire Christian congregation, rather than a whole town. The final example in our extracts is that of a man named Adauctus, from a noble Italian family, and whom we learn had progressed through the ranks of duty under the emperor, finally coming to hold the position of finance minister when he died.

Arguably, these descriptions function for Eusebius more than simply as proof that Christianity had now spread into



all sections of Roman society. On the one hand, it could be claimed that such individuals exemplify the incompatibility of Christianity and Rome, as their stories suggest that true loyalty can only lie with one: when forced to choose, these Christians ultimately abandoned the advantages afforded to them by Rome, and refused to yield to the state's commands to sacrifice. However, the opposite could also be argued. By emphasising the important roles that these individuals held in the imperial system, Eusebius is able to show that were it not for the present persecution—and as the commentary on [VIII.1.7-2.2](#) discusses, he does not view this simply as unwarranted oppression by a tyrannical regime—, Christianity and the Roman state could in theory operate successfully alongside one another (for this suggestion, see VIII.13.9 and VIII.14.8). The individuals in these extracts are noted for their piety and devotion to God, but it should not be ignored that they are also described as having risen through the Roman ranks, and their deaths result in loss for the state of capable and valued men (for a recent argument which emphasises Eusebius's intention to highlight the ability of his martyrs to better fulfil the roles of the Roman authorities, see James Corke-Webster, "Author and Authority," p. 77). We are reminded of this fact, for instance, when Eusebius re-emphasises that Adautus was still in office when he was martyred. The conflict between duty to Rome and duty to God was something that Christian authors had long concerned themselves with in their writings (for instance, there are numerous discussions of the compatibility of Christianity with military service; for one notable example, see Tertullian, [On the Military Garland](#)). However, when considered in relation to Eusebius's broader aims in the *Ecclesiastical History*, whereby he is partly concerned with showing that Rome and Christianity are not thoroughly incompatible, passages such as those above must be considered on a deeper level.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:



- [Alexandria](#)
- [bishop](#)
- [education](#)
- [finance minister](#)
- [governor](#)
- [honour](#)
- [judge](#)
- [magistrate](#)
- [martyr](#)
- [nobility](#)
- [philosophy](#)
- [Phrygia](#)
- [piety](#)
- [Roman dignity](#)
- [Roman government](#)
- [Roman soldiers](#)
- [siege](#)
- [wealth](#)

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A Christian soldier is imprisoned because he refuses to wear the laurel crown

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Text

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