



[Tertullian, On the Military Garland I.1-4](#)

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

Name of the author: Tertullian

Date: 211 CE

Place: Carthage

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: On the Military Garland

Reference:

I.1-4

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Tertullian, please see the commentary on [Apology V](#).

The passage above opens Tertullian's treatise entitled *On the Military Garland*. He uses the story narrated in this first chapter as a basis from which to discuss Christian participation in pagan customs. In *On Idolatry*, which some have argued post-dates the present treatise due to the apparently more intolerant attitude to the Roman military (see the discussion and counter arguments in Jan Waszink and Jacobus van Winden, *Tertullianus, De Idololatria*, p. 10-13), Tertullian advises Christians on how to distance themselves from aspects of Graeco-Roman life which conflict with their beliefs – namely those involving idolatry. In [On Idolatry XIX](#) the Roman military is specifically discussed, and partly because of the potential for exposure to pagan religious practices, Christians are discouraged from enrolling. In the present passage, Tertullian defends the conduct of a Christian soldier whose Christianity had become apparent when he refused to put on the laurel crown during a *donativum* (a gift of money given to soldiers; in this case perhaps that given upon the death of Septimius Severus). Some have taken this event as historical, while others hold it to be invention (see Timothy Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 132, n. 4 for the bibliography; Barnes himself argues that the scene probably took place at the military camp in Carthage).

Tertullian vividly describes the scene following the soldier's refusal to wear the garland. There is murmuring among the ranks, and the soldier is brought before the tribune, to whom he confesses his faith when questioned regarding his actions. He is subsequently taken to the commanding officers and thrown in prison. Tertullian narrates the soldier's disrobing of his military attire in some detail (verse 3), with the offending laurel crown being the final item to drop the floor. The soldier is then symbolically re-furnished with "the sharper word of God," the "apostles' armour," and a "white crown of martyrdom" (symbolising the purity of his faith). Tertullian contrasts the *liberalitas* (gift) of the emperor with the *donativum* of Christ (translated above as "largess," meaning a measure of bounty or generosity, in this case given as a reward), which unlike that which the army have received in money, the Christian soldier will receive in glory following his martyrdom (verses 1 and 3). The soldier, we are told, attracted criticism from some for what was perceived to be a rash willingness to be martyred over what was a trivial matter of dress. However, in Tertullian's mind, the issue is not trivial at all, and the soldier's steadfastness marks him out as the only true Christian among all the other "soldier-brethren" claiming to share in his faith. It is these weaker individuals who have attempted to "serve two masters" (i.e. Caesar and God; see also *On Idolatry XIX.2*).

The rest of *On the Military Garland* expounds the reasons why wearing the laurel crown is inappropriate for Christians due to its associations with idolatry (see, for instance, chapters VII; IX, X, XI; Tertullian notes crowns worn by priests, and those used to adorn idols or sacrificial victims, for instance), and in this sense is simply another example of an area of life which Christians should distance themselves from, which is also addressed at length in *On Idolatry*. Given that the crown was essentially honorific, however, his position is quite extreme. Tertullian's attitude to the military in general has been much discussed. From his other writings, it seems that Tertullian is happy in principle with Christians praying for the Roman army to continue to expand and protect the empire (see



[Apology XXX.4](#)), thereby reaping the benefits of the security the empire brings (Tertullian credits the empire with staving off the eschaton; see [Apology XXXII](#)). However, while Christians can support the army with prayer from a distance, Tertullian is less keen on them directly participating in the military. The issue of the laurel crown represents one of the major problems with this – the potential for encountering idolatrous practices. However, this is not the only objection which Tertullian has. In the present passage and *On Idolatry* XIX, the issue of serving both God and Caesar is raised (verse 2), with the argument being that this is impossible. The Roman army was a strong symbol of Rome's power and authority, and under the ultimate command of the emperor. By joining the military, even if they were not themselves physically participating in war or having to perform sacrifices as part of their official duties, Christians still had to swear the military oath, pledging their allegiance to carry out what the emperor commanded. While Tertullian asserts elsewhere Christianity's strong support for the emperor and the empire, it seems that in his thinking, there is a difference between the more passive endorsement Christians provide (according to Tertullian) through prayer and respect for Caesar, and direct involvement in its institutions.

Keywords in the original language:

- [apostolus](#)
- [armatus](#)
- [Christianus](#)
- [commilito](#)
- [corona](#)
- [dominus](#)
- [donativum](#)
- [ethnicus](#)
- [evangelium](#)
- [frater](#)
- [gloriosus](#)
- [imperator](#)
- [laureatus](#)
- [liberalitas](#)
- [martyrium](#)
- [miles](#)
- [praefectus](#)
- [tribunus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [donative](#)
- [laurel crown](#)
- [martyrdom](#)
- [military dress](#)
- [military tribune](#)
- [Roman army](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [soldier](#)
- [subversion](#)

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