

Article

From Martyr to Military Martyr: Cult Formation in Late Antique Christianity

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the emergence of the “military martyr” figure in late antique Christianity, not through the hagiographical narratives alone, but along the axes of cult formation, ritual practice, relic circulation, and public space. Modern scholarship has tended to focus either on whether early Christians served in the Roman army or on the later development of military saint iconography. This study reframes the question, asking instead through what processes the military martyr became a distinct cultic category. At the center of the analysis are two key figures in the fourth-century preaching tradition of Cappadocia: Theodore the Recruit and the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste. The texts attributed to Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa construct these figures not merely as witnesses of faith, but as agents who protect communities and intercede and whose sacred power circulates through relics, martyrial spaces, and liturgical practices. When epigraphic evidence, transitional spaces, networks of mobility and lodging, and early visual transformations are considered together, the “military martyr” emerges not as a fixed identity, but as a model of sanctity that intensifies across different regional contexts. Military identity thus becomes embedded within a late antique Christian discourse shaped around protection, mobility, and belonging.

Keywords: soldier martyr; military martyr; warrior saint; military saint; soldier saint; late antiquity; Christianity

1. Introduction

Modern scholarship has long recognized the prominence of military saints in Byzantine devotion, especially in the middle and late Byzantine periods when iconography, liturgy, and material culture provide dense evidence. Yet the earliest stage of this tradition—the moment when “soldier martyrs” first become a legible category in Christian discourse—has received comparatively less sustained attention (Değerli 2023, pp. 374–76).

Hippolyte Delehaye, writing from within the Bollandist scholarly tradition, remains the crucial starting point. In *Les Légendes grecques des saints militaires* (Delehaye 1909), he offered a wide-ranging survey of major soldier saints “états-majors” and the Greek martyrdom texts associated with them, while also modeling a critical method for hagiographic materials. Subsequent discussion took a different turn. Instead of asking how cults formed and spread, many studies re-centered the question of whether Christians could serve in the Roman army, and whether early Christian moral reasoning was compatible with military life—debates now classically associated with figures such as Bigelmair (Bigelmair 1902) and Harnack (Harnack 1905) on the one hand, and Cadoux (Cadoux 1919) on the other (Shean 2010, pp. 1–30).

That ethical and social-historical problem remains important. But it has also produced a familiar impasse: arguments about “Christian soldiers” in the second and third centuries



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often rest primarily on Christian texts and later retrospective memory, while independent corroboration is limited. For the purposes of this article, I therefore bracket the question “how many Christians served?” and focus instead on a problem that the evidence allows us to track more closely: how a cultic type—the military martyr—emerges in late antique preaching, relic practice, and local devotion.

Part of the difficulty in this field is terminological. “Military saint,” “warrior saint,” “holy warrior,” and “soldier martyr” are frequently used as if they were interchangeable (White 2013, p. 3). Yet the evidence suggests that these labels do not always point to the same thing, and the slippage matters. A figure, such as Procopius, might be venerated as a soldier in later tradition even when early martyrdom narratives do not foreground military identity (Walter 2003b, p. 94); conversely, fourth-century hagiographical corpora can build a military martyr as protector and intercessor through cultic discourse even when historical details remain thin (Walter 2003b, pp. 68–76). In light of these various designations, in the late antique context, the “military martyr” is not merely a narrative type, but a cultic category constituted through preaching, relics, spatial settings, patterns of circulation, and forms of public visibility.

To address this confusion, I distinguish two layers:

1. Military martyr (cultic-historical sense): a martyr remembered and celebrated as a soldier whose veneration is publicly articulated in preaching and ritual, and whose power is anchored materially through relics, shrines, and acts of intercession—often framed as protection of community and place.
2. Warrior saint (representational later sense): the expanded medieval and Byzantine figure shaped by iconographic conventions (holy rider, dragon-slayer) (Pancaroglu 2004, pp. 151–60; Walter 2003a; Franek 2025, pp. 100–8) and by later narrative elaboration, sometimes far beyond the earliest testimonies.

This article concentrates on the first layer: the emergence of the military martyr as a cultic category in the fourth century. The argument thus shifts away from the often-rehearsed debate over the Christian participation in the Roman military structures in the first three centuries. This article does not seek to determine whether early Christians actually served in the army. Instead, it examines how the figure of the military martyr was constructed as a public and cultic presence. At the same time, it creates space to reconsider a cult usually subsumed under the general rubric of martyr veneration, allowing it instead to be read as a self-contained and internally unified soldier-martyr tradition. It does so through two cases that function as early anchors for the tradition—Theodore the Recruit and the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste—because both are central in Cappadocian preaching (Allen 2003b, pp. 55–110; Leemans 2013, pp. 193–96) and because their cults can be traced outward across regions through texts and material practices.

At the same time, this study is informed by a broader survey of late antique evidence across Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Syriac traditions. To make that wider landscape visible, I provide a digital map on Christian soldier martyrs in late antiquity that plots early textual attestations, martyrdom locations, cult centers, and shrines for a larger corpus of military martyrs (Degerli 2024). Rather than attempting a full catalogue in this article, I use the digital map as a supporting visualization while the argument is built through close readings of the two principal cases.

2. Earliest Textual Records

2.1. On Theodore the Recruit

Among late antique soldier martyrs, Theodore the Recruit is a plausible “archetype,” (Walter 1999) above all because he appears early and because the surviving evidence already presents him as both martyr and protector. In Gregory of Nyssa’s *Encomion* (c. 370–380),

Theodore is associated with Euchaita in Pontus (Cavarnos 1990, p. 67; Haldon 2018, pp. 212–21), and the narrative places him in the context of persecution under Maximian (286–305). The story's core is well known: Theodore refuses to renounce his faith, burns a pagan temple associated with the Mother of the Gods (Cybele), endures interrogation and torture, and is condemned to death by fire (Delehay 1909, pp. 127–35).

What matters for the emergence of the “military-martyr” category is not simply the plot, but the way Gregory frames Theodore's identity and cult. Gregory explicitly calls him both a soldier (στρατιώτης) (Cavarnos 1990, pp. 61, 64–67, 70) martyr (μάρτυς) (Cavarnos 1990, pp. 61–63) and “the great martyr” (ἡ μεγαλομάρτυς). Gregory presents Theodore not only as an exemplar of steadfast faith but also as an active protector of the community. He credits the martyr with defending the region, that is Amaseia (modern Amasya) against “savage Scythian incursions” (Cavarnos 1990, p. 61) and concludes the homily by asking Theodore to continue safeguarding the faithful against external enemies, heresy, and pagan resurgence. In other words, the soldier's virtue is not merely moral; it is socially effective. Theodore becomes a patron whose power remains available to the community through intercession, pilgrimage, and contact with his shrine.

This cultic logic is anchored materially. Gregory describes the martyr's body as different in kind from ordinary bodies, speaks of it as a precious treasure, and treats the shrine as sacred space. He encourages the faithful to approach the relics for intercession and even extends sanctity to substances and objects associated with the grave—earth, dust, and contact relics that pilgrims can carry away as blessings. In this framing, the soldier's martyrdom is not only an exemplary death but also a source of ongoing power distributed through material practices.

A later fifth-century martyrdom narrative of Theodore (preserved in the BHG tradition and often linked to Chrysippus) (Sigalas 1921) appears to share themes with Gregory while expanding the story in ways typical of hagiographic genre. The point here is not to adjudicate every textual dependency, but to note how quickly the Theodore dossier begins to accumulate: festival preaching, martyrdom narrative traditions, and cross-linguistic echoes (including Coptic homiletic fragments) (Chapman and Depuydt 1993, pp. 1–19). Together these materials show a cult forming in which Theodore's soldierly identity is not incidental; it is part of what makes him a usable protector and a recognizable type (Jalabert et al. 1955, p. 241).

2.2. On the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste

The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste offer a different but equally important case. Here “soldier martyrdom” is collective rather than individual, yet the cultic mechanisms are strikingly similar. In the basic storyline, forty Christian soldiers refuse to sacrifice, are condemned to freeze on a lake near Sebaste (modern Sivas) and die in the cold. The narrative's emotional center is the famous moment of temptation (the warm bath), the defection of one martyr, and the conversion of a guard who joins the forty—an episode that dramatizes steadfastness, imitation, and the contagious power of witness (Gebhardt 1902).

For the early history of the cult, the key texts again include Cappadocian festival preaching: Basil's homily and Gregory of Nyssa's paired sermons (Heil et al. 1990a, 1990b, 1990c), likely composed in the 370s (Mühlenberg 2018, p. 115; Leemans 2003, pp. 91–93). Later texts, including the Testament of the Forty, add names and narrative elaboration (Martyrer 2015, pp. 299–300; Musurillo 1972, pp. 360–61); debates over dating and textual relationships remain, but one point is clear: Basil and Gregory are crucial for establishing the Forty Martyrs as a widely transmissible cult in the late fourth century.

Basil's rhetoric is strikingly military even when discussing martyrdom. The Forty are described as a “phalanx of soldiers” (στρατιωτῶν φάλαγξ) and a collective body animated

by “one soul” (μία ψυχὴ ἐν πολλοῖς σώμασιν) and “one endurance” (ὁμόψυχοι) (Migne 1857, p. 508; Allen 2003a, p. 68). The discipline and solidarity expected of an imperial unit are transferred into a Christian framework, where unity is directed toward fidelity to Christ rather than loyalty to the emperor. Gregory’s treatment of the Forty extends beyond commemoration. At the conclusion of the sermon, he asks the martyrs collectively to intercede for peace, protect the churches, and join the apostles in safeguarding Christian communities. The Forty therefore operate not simply as remembered victims of persecution but as an active heavenly body whose collective power continues to benefit the faithful (Heil et al. 1990a, 1990b, 1990c).

Here too, relics and material practices drive the cult forward. The story ends with attempts to destroy the bodies—burning and dispersal—followed by Christian recovery and veneration of remains. The martyr cult does not require a single fixed authoritative text. Indeed, the diversity of versions may have helped the Forty travel: the tradition could adapt to local settings precisely because it was not constrained by one rigid narrative.

The cult’s ability to diversify is visible across languages and regions. Syriac traditions, for example, sometimes connect figures such as Mar Qorios (Kyrion/Qorios) to the Forty Martyrs in ways that later intersect with the tradition of Merkourios—whether through philological convergence, local cult dynamics, or both (Sokoloff 2017, p. 365; Teja and Acerbi 2011). Even when such links remain debated, they point to the same larger pattern: the Forty Martyrs function as a generative cult that produces new affiliations and new local meanings while retaining its soldier-martyr core. Ultimately, these two martyr exempla point to the formation and shaping of the broader theological, military and religious cult through preaching, sacred relics, geography, networks of circulation, and forms of public visibility.

3. Spread of the Cult

Late antique martyr cults were never purely literary. They were performed, visited, touched, carried, and distributed. The soldier-martyr cult is no exception. In both Theodore and the Forty, the early evidence already assumes pilgrimage, festival gatherings, and a relic economy that turns the martyr’s presence into a resource for ordinary life—protection, healing, and intercession.

The geographic trajectories of these cults also matter. The earliest strong evidence clusters in Anatolia and then spreads outward into Syria, Egypt, Armenia, Georgia, the Balkans, and beyond. Theodore’s diffusion is especially well attested in Egypt, where non-literary evidence points to multiple sites of veneration. The Forty likewise travel quickly, moving through Asia Minor into Constantinople and the wider Mediterranean, and eventually developing a robust presence in the Latin West as well—relic transfer traditions (such as Gaudentius of Brescia receiving relics in Cappadocia) illustrate how quickly the cult becomes portable.

Gregory’s letters and sermons provide a vivid window into this devotional world. His description of a martyr shrine (in correspondence with Amphilochius) offers a rare verbal architecture of a martyrrium, showing how space, material, and ritual were designed to host the presence of the martyrs (Silvas 2006, p. 199). Elsewhere, Gregory narrates healings at a shrine of the Forty—most memorably, a soldier healed of a debilitating condition after spending the night in the martyrrium (Heil et al. 1990c, pp. 167–68). The soldier martyrs are not distant heroes; they are active patrons who make themselves felt in local landscapes.

Even later echoes can preserve traces of early cult centers. Traditions associated with Sareim/Sarim, for instance, suggest an early martyrrium connected with the Forty. Whatever one concludes about the precise historical relationship between text and place,

the point is that the Forty's cult is remembered and localized in ways that continue to shape regional memory (Metzler 1920).

4. The Military Cult

In the late antique period, the emergence of a cult that may be described as that of the “military martyr” cannot be accounted for solely through the internal logic of hagiographical narratives. Such an approach, while not without value, remains insufficient. The available evidence instead points to a far more layered and dynamic process of formation. Textual traditions, ritual practices, material culture, spatial configurations, and regionally specific adaptations all participate in—and continually reshape—this development. Seen from this perspective, the figure of the soldier martyr is not simply the memorial residue of a discrete historical moment. It is better understood as a cultic type: a construct that is repeatedly rearticulated across shifting contexts, mobilized for different communal needs, and endowed with new meanings as it circulates.

The broader evidence discussed below is not introduced as an independent case study. Rather, it serves to illuminate patterns already visible in the cults of Theodore and the Forty Martyrs. In this context, the fourth-century homiletic corpus associated with Cappadocia (notably the sermons attributed to Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea) stands out as the earliest textual stratum to articulate the figure of the soldier martyr in a clear and systematic manner (Allen 2003a, pp. 55–77; Migne 2018, pp. 31–46, 87–112; Leemans 2003, pp. 78–110). Yet even these texts cannot be treated as an absolute point of origin. The figure they delineate does not emerge *ex nihilo*; rather, it gives conceptual shape to a model of sanctity that was already, to some extent, in circulation. What these sermons accomplish is less the invention of a new religious type than its consolidation. They stabilize, name, and render legible a set of practices and expectations that had previously operated in more diffuse forms. For this reason, the formation of the military martyr cult is best understood at the intersection of textual articulation and lived, material experience.

4.1. Public Visibility and Epigraphic Presence

One of the most striking features of the military martyr cult is that its contours can be traced across different kinds of evidence even before it is explicitly formulated in hagiographical narratives. The textual record, in other words, does not mark the beginning of the phenomenon. Epigraphical data, in particular, offer crucial insight into its earlier phases and complicate any attempt to anchor the cult in a purely literary origin. Early inscriptions associated with George (other saintly figures as well) “George and the saints with him” (Γεώργιος καὶ οἱ σὺν αὐτῷ ἅγιοι) (Meimaris et al. 1992, p. 326) are especially revealing in this regard. They do not yet present them under the more specific designation of a military martyr, but refer to them in broader terms simply as martyrs (Grégoire 1908, pp. 277–81). It suggests that the more sharply defined identity, with its particular connotations, had not yet fully crystallized. The military dimension of the figure is not a fixed attribute from the outset; instead, it suggests a gradual process of attachment, taking shape as the cult developed and accrued new layers of meaning.

More importantly, these inscriptions are typically situated in public and transitional spaces—city gates, church entrances, and along routes of circulation. A sixth-century example from Nessana in the Negev illustrates this phenomenon particularly well. The site appears to have combined military, religious, and pilgrimage functions, and literary evidence associates a *xenodochium* of St. George with a castrum located along a major desert route frequented by pilgrims and travelers (Whately 2006, p. 132). The placement of the saint's cult within such a transit zone suggests that soldier saints were encountered precisely at points of movement, entry, and passage, where their protective presence

could be publicly enacted within the everyday movement of urban life. Such inscriptional evidence underscores that the military martyr cult should not be reduced to a purely theological construct. It took shape, rather, as a spatial and social practice. Its presence was inscribed onto the built environment (Buresch 1898, pp. 108–9), encountered in moments of passage (Jalabert et al. 1955, p. 357), and woven into patterns of communal interaction. In this sense, the cult's formation unfolded not only in discourse but also across lived space, where meaning was both displayed and continually negotiated.

4.2. Mobility, Relics, and the Portability of Sanctity

A similar pattern emerges in the case of Theodore the Recruit and his companions. Evidence associated with μετάτον (*metaton*)—plural μετάτα (*metata*) and related structures such as ξενεών (*xeneōn*)—plural ξενεῶνες (*xeneōnes*)—sites of military lodging, transit, and logistical coordination—indicates that these figures are closely embedded within networks of mobility (Figueras 2007, pp. 509–26; Mouterde 1949, p. 38). Rather than being tied to fixed or localized settings, their significance unfolds along routes of movement, where circulation, passage, and infrastructural support shape both their presence and their function (Figueras 1995, p. 439). The emphasis falls less on the battlefield than on the infrastructures that sustain circulation (Di Segni 1995, p. 316). Within this framework, the military martyr is not primarily configured through scenes of combat. Instead, the figure is aligned with experiences of passage, protection, and liminality. Thresholds, routes, and zones of transfer become the key arenas in which his significance is articulated (Ward 2015, p. 120).

This pattern suggests that the military identity at stake is redefined away from the conventional image of the warrior and toward that of a celestial protector responsible for safeguarding communities in motion. Authority here is not anchored in acts of combat alone, but in the capacity to oversee movement, ensure protection, and maintain order across shifting terrains. Accordingly, the military martyr cult derives its meaning less from the event of war itself than from the broader experiential fields of security, travel, and the negotiation of boundaries. It is within these domains—where vulnerability, passage, and protection intersect—that the figure acquires both coherence and enduring significance.

One of the most decisive factors in the formation of the military martyr cult lies in the circulation of relics and the material and ritual networks generated through that movement. As the cases of Theodore and the Forty make particularly clear, martyrdom does not terminate in death. It persists—and indeed is reactivated—through the continued transmission and translation of relics (Allen 2003b, pp. 5–14; Maraval 1999, pp. 193–211). The holy remnants function here as more than commemorative objects. They operate as a medium through which presence is extended, authority is relayed, and memory is made operative within new contexts. As these items pass from hand to hand, they bind together dispersed communities, structuring a network that is at once material and devotional.

The distribution, transfer, and dispersal of relics across different regions constitute one of the principal mechanisms through which the cult expands geographically. This process is not merely a matter of physical diffusion. It entails, more fundamentally, a fragmentation that enables the multiplication of sanctity itself, allowing it to be reproduced across dispersed settings (Duval 1982, pp. 543–81, 663–65). In Gregory's accounts concerning Theodore, particular emphasis is placed on the relics as objects that can be touched and carried (Cavarnos 1990, pp. 63, 69–70). This emphasis is revealing. It signals a shift in the logic of sacred presence: holiness is no longer confined to a fixed locus, but becomes mobile, capable of circulation, and available through contact. In this way, the cult's reach is extended not only through narrative transmission, but through the tangible movement of objects that render sanctity portable and repeatedly accessible.

Martyria (shrines associated with the cult of martyrs) that emerge in association with these relics come to function as key points of spatial anchoring within the cult. Their significance is not exhausted by their monumental presence. They are, above all, operative sites—centers in which practices of healing, purification, prayer, and communal formation are enacted and sustained. Through these spaces, the cult acquires a durable institutional and experiential framework (Grabar 1946, pp. 1943–46). The soldier martyr, accordingly, is not confined to the status of a figure belonging to the past. He is encountered as an active presence, one that continues to intervene, to mediate, and to be engaged within the rhythms of lived religious life. Gregory's interest lies in Theodore's cult. He lingers over the shrine, the martyr's remains, and the gathering of pilgrims. The saint's body is presented as a sacred treasure whose presence transforms the surrounding space into a locus of blessing and protection. The cult therefore operates through both narrative memory and material encounter.

4.3. *Ritual, Image, and the Formation of Collective Identity*

Liturgical practice likewise plays a decisive role in the diffusion of the soldier martyr cult. As the case of the Forty Martyrs clearly demonstrates, commemorations are observed on different feast days across various regions, indicating that the cult does not adhere to a single, centralized calendar (Allen 2003b, p. 66; Garitte 1958). Instead, it adjusts to local temporal frameworks. This variability is significant. It points to a mode of expansion that privileges adaptability over uniformity. Rather than imposing a fixed liturgical structure, the cult becomes embedded within existing ritual rhythms, allowing it to take root in diverse settings. In this way, its spread is facilitated not by standardization, but by a capacity to align itself with the temporal sensibilities of different communities.

This situation yields two closely related consequences. First, the cult does not operate as a structure governed from a single center; it expands instead through a plurality of local variations. Its coherence lies in circulation rather than control. Second, the figure of the soldier martyr is continually reinterpreted by different communities in accordance with their particular needs and expectations, acquiring new emphases as it moves across contexts. Within this process, liturgical narratives—whether in the form of encomia or homilies—do more than simply recount. They participate in shaping the community itself. In the texts of Theodore and the Forty Martyrs, the soldier martyrs are not presented merely as figures of a distant past, but as paradigms to be emulated. Their lives are framed in ways that invite imitation, discipline, and ethical alignment.

Iconographic transformation occupies a distinct and revealing place in the formation of the military martyr cult. The evolution of the so-called “Holy Rider” motif offers one of the most striking illustrations of this process. In its earlier attestations, the figure appears primarily within an apotropaic and quasi-magical register, functioning as a protective image embedded in broader visual traditions (Franek 2025, pp. 162–64, 175–77, 202, 225–26; Vikan 1984; Flourentzos 2002, pp. 365–67). Over time, however, this motif is reinterpreted within a Christian framework and gradually aligned with figures such as Theodore and George. This is not a simple case of visual borrowing. The transformation entails a resemanticization and recontextualization, through which an inherited image is endowed with new narrative and devotional significance. As a result, the motif is drawn into the orbit of the military martyr cult, where it no longer operates merely as a generalized protective sign, but becomes associated with specific exemplars of sanctity.

This transformation makes clear that military identity is not constructed through textual discourse alone (Delehay 1909, p. 127), but is equally forged within the visual field (Jaussen et al. 1905, pp. 77–81). The figure of the saint who kills the dragon, while symbolizing the struggle against paganism or, more broadly, against forces of evil, simultaneously

assumes a protective function. The iconography does not merely illustrate a preexisting idea; it participates in shaping how that idea is understood and experienced. In this sense, visual representation operates not only as a site of depiction, but as a domain of production. It frames the terms through which sanctity becomes perceptible, directing modes of engagement and recognition (Köroğlu 2016, pp. 147–48). At the same time, it translates military identity into a theological idiom, recasting authority, conflict, and protection in symbolic forms that are both legible and affectively charged within the cultic imagination.

One of the most notable features of the military martyr cult is its capacity to move beyond local contexts and contribute to the formation of a broader, more encompassing Christian identity. What begins, in Theodore's case, within the regional setting of Amaseia does not remain confined there. The cult spreads rapidly, extending across a wide geographical range while acquiring new inflections as it is taken up in diverse settings (Papaconstantinou 2001, pp. 96–100). A comparable dynamic can be observed in the case of the Forty Martyrs (Papaconstantinou 2001, pp. 197–98). Originating in Cappadocia, their cult expands both eastward and westward, embedding itself within diverse regional landscapes. Throughout this process, the figure of the martyr undergoes a significant reconfiguration. Elements drawn from local pagan and military traditions are not simply displaced, but reworked and integrated, giving rise to new layers of meaning.

In this respect, the military cult is not merely a religious phenomenon but a mechanism through which collective identity is actively constructed. It does more than express belief; it reorganizes the very terms through which authority, belonging, and legitimacy are understood. Within this framework, earlier pagan Roman conceptions of military victory undergo a marked reversal. What had once been associated with conquest, sovereignty, and visible dominance is recast in a different register. Victory is no longer located in the outcome of physical conflict. Instead, it is redefined as an ethical achievement grounded in steadfastness and fidelity. The decisive act is not to overcome an enemy on the battlefield, but to endure, to resist, and, if necessary, to suffer for the sake of faith. As a result, the military martyr emerges not as a conventional warrior figure, but as a bearer of a transformed ideal of power. Authority is no longer measured through domination, but through the capacity for disciplined resistance. In this reconfiguration, the military context is translated into a theological idiom, and victory itself is reimaged as an expression of faithful endurance.

Taken together, these observations make it clear that the formation of the military martyr cult does not follow a linear or sequential trajectory. Its earliest traces emerge within epigraphical and spatial practices, only later to be articulated in biographical narratives, disseminated through liturgical and ritual frameworks, rendered visible in iconographic forms, and materially extended through the circulation of relics. Each of these domains contributes to the cult's development, not in isolation but through ongoing interaction. For this reason, the military martyr cannot be understood as a fixed or stable identity. It is, rather, a category continually produced and reconfigured across shifting contexts. As the case of George illustrates, military dimensions may initially remain indistinct, yet over time they accumulate, intensify, and come to occupy a central place within the figure's meaning. The cult, then, is not the product of a single narrative tradition but a dynamic formation arising at the intersection of diverse practices. In the late antique Christian world, it functions as a site in which sanctity is intertwined with evolving conceptions of power, protection, and communal belonging.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the “military martyr” category attains its most clearly articulated form in late antique Christianity, particularly within the fourth-century preach-

ing tradition of Cappadocia. The cases of Theodore the Recruit and the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste show that these figures are constructed not merely as martyrs of soldier origin, but as agents who protect communities and intercede and whose sacred power becomes operative through relics, martyrial spaces, and ritual practices. In this context, military identity moves beyond a biographical attribute and becomes a layer of meaning that acquires function within public worship, spatial organization, and material culture. The military martyr thus emerges less as the remembrance of specific historical individuals than as a cultic type continually reconfigured in response to collective needs.

These findings suggest that the phenomenon of military martyrdom cannot be reduced to a single point of origin, nor can it be explained solely through the internal dynamics of hagiographical narratives. When epigraphical evidence, patterns of spatial organization in public settings, networks of circulation, and the transfer of relics are considered together, the cult appears to have begun taking shape prior to its textual articulation and to have intensified gradually across different contexts. Within this process, military identity does not initially function as a defining essence; rather, it emerges as a layer that becomes attached and gains meaning over time. This, in turn, indicates that the figure of the military martyr is reconfigured less around the practice of warfare than around mobility, protection, and experiences of the frontier.

Within this framework, the “military martyr” does not denote a fixed or pre-defined identity; rather, it points to a model of sanctity continually reconstituted at the intersection of diverse practices. Owing to its capacity to adapt to local contexts, this model was able to spread across wide geographical settings, while also becoming a key reference point through which later late antique Christian communities reconfigured their understandings of power, belonging, and protection. In this light, military identity ceases to function merely as a historical backdrop and instead becomes one of the central elements shaping how sanctity is experienced and rendered visible in public space.

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