

Forty Martyrs of Sebaste

History

The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste or Քարաժանուկ Մանուկ [Ka-ra-soun Ma-nouk] in Armenian were a group of Roman soldiers in the Legio XII Fulminata whose martyrdom in 320 for the Christian faith is recounted in traditional martyrologies.

They were killed near the city of Sebaste (present-day Sivas in Turkey), in Lesser Armenia, victims of the persecutions of Licinius, who after 316, persecuted the Christians of the East. The earliest account of their existence and martyrdom is given by Bishop Basil of Caesarea (370–379) in a homily he delivered on their feast day.[1] The Feast of the Forty Martyrs is thus older than Basil himself, who eulogised them only fifty or sixty years after their deaths.

Martyrdom

According to Basil, forty soldiers who had openly confessed themselves Christians were condemned by the prefect to be exposed naked upon a frozen pond near Sebaste on a bitterly cold night, that they might freeze to death. Among the confessors, one yielded and, leaving his companions, sought the warm baths near the lake which had been prepared for any who might prove inconstant. One of the guards set to keep watch over the martyrs beheld at this moment a supernatural brilliancy overshadowing them and at once proclaimed himself a Christian, threw off his garments, and joined the remaining thirty-nine. Thus the number of forty remained complete. At daybreak, the stiffened bodies of the confessors, which still showed signs of life, were burned and the ashes cast into a river. Christians, however, collected the precious remains, and the relics were distributed throughout many cities; in this way, veneration of the Forty Martyrs became widespread, and numerous churches were erected in their honour.

At the night service celebrating the 40 Martyrs of Sebaste, the faithful bring oil to the Church. Metal or glass basin filled with water is placed in a prominent place in the Church, where 40 oil lamps get lit, floating in the water in remembrance of the miraculous and heroic act.

