

Acts of the Martyrs

In a strict sense the Acts of the Martyrs are the official records of the trials of early Christian martyrs made by the notaries of the court. In a wider sense, however, the title is applied to all the narratives of the martyrs' trial and death. In the latter sense, they may be classified as follows:

(1) Official reports of the interrogatories (*acta, gesta*). Those extant, like the "Acta Proconsulis" are few in number and have only come down to us in editions prepared with a view to the edification of the faithful. The "Passio Cypriani" and "Acta Martyrum Scillitanorum" are typical of this class. Of these the former is a composite work of three separate documents showing the minimum of editorial additions in a few connecting phrases. The first document gives an account of the trial of Cyprian in 257, the second, his arrest and trial in 258, the third, of his martyrdom.

(2) Non-official records made by eye-witnesses or at least by contemporaries recording the testimony of eye-witnesses. Such are the "Martyrium S. Polycarpi", admitting though it does much that may be due to the pious fancy of the eye-witnesses. The "Acta SS. Perpetuæ et Felicitatis" is perhaps of all extant Acta the most beautiful and famous, for it includes the autograph notes of Perpetua and Saturus and an eye-witness's account of the martyrdom. And to these must be added the "Epistola Ecclesiarum Viennensis et Lugdunensis", telling the story of the martyrs of Lyons, and other Acta not so famous.

(3) Documents of a later date than the martyrdom based on Acta of the first or second class, and therefore subjected to editorial manipulation of various kinds. It is this class which affords the critic the greatest scope for his discernment. What distinguishes these Acta from the subsequent classes is their literary basis. The editor was not constructing a story to suit oral tradition or to explain a monument. He was editing a literary document according to his own taste and purpose. The class is numerous and its contents highly debatable, for though additional study may raise any particular Acta to a higher class, it is far more likely as a rule to reduce it.

Besides these, there are other literary documents concerning the life and death of the martyrs such as the Calendaria were lists of martyrs celebrated by the different Churches according to their different dates. The Martyrologies represent collections of different Calendaria and sometimes add details of the martyrdom. The writings of the Fathers of the Church also embody many references to the martyrs, as, for instance, the sermons of St. Basil, Chrysostom, Augustine, Peter Chrysologus, and John Damascene. Finally there are to be considered the collections of Lives, intended for public and private reading. Most important of all are the "Historia Ecclesiastica" of Eusebius (265-340), and his "De Martyribus Palestinæ"; but unfortunately his *martyron synagoge* or Collection of Acts of the Martyrs, to which he refers in the preface of the fifth book of his "Historia Ecclesiastica", is no longer extant. The fourteen poems of Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, published in 404 as the "Persitephanon liber", celebrated the praises of the martyrs of Spain and Italy.