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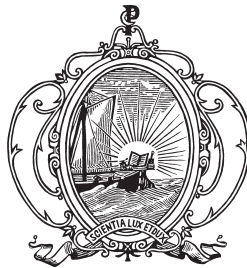
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MARKUS VINZENT

Volume 21:
The Fourth Century
Cappadocian Writers



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Basil of Caesarea and the *Praise of the City**

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with Basil's use of the rhetorical form of the *encômion poleôs* ('praise of city'). In his *Homily on the Martyr Gordius*, the Cappadocian Father built Gordius the genuine hero of Caesarea. On that occasion, Basil criticises the traditional way of praising a city. His emphasis on the qualities of the Saint leads him to reject the classical rules of urban rhetorics, according to which Greek rhetors needed to review the natural settings of a city, its history, including its mythical roots, its institutions and its buildings. However, Basil's construction of the sainthood of Gordius reveals the ambivalence of Christian authors toward their local and terrestrial fatherland. On the one hand, they criticise that a city's material goods could be a source of glory and, more generally, they refuse to praise a place symbolising earthly sins. On the other hand, Basil's discourse on the Caesarean martyr extolling the virtues of a local character betrays his civic patriotism and pride.

In Late Antiquity, urban rhetorics still played an important role in shaping civic identities. Describing the city's landscape, history and buildings was, as in past centuries, a means for rhetors to present to their audiences an ideal city. As such, Libanius' review of Antioch's monuments overlooked religious buildings, temples and churches.¹ This was a way to claim that the fourth-century city was a space belonging to a secular sphere that could be shared by pagan and Christian Antiochenes alike.² Some years later, his fellow citizen John Chrysostomus used the same rhetorical rules to show that, on the contrary, the traditional places linked to urban life, such as the agora, were places devoted to sins, which good Christians should not attend, in contrast to churches,

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¹ Lib., *Antioch*. § 196-229.

² Maria Francesio, *L'idea di Città in Libanio* (Stuttgart, 2004), 78-85 ; Catherine Saliou, 'Antioche décrite par Libanios: La rhétorique de l'espace urbain et ses enjeux au milieu du quatrième siècle', in Eugenio Amato (ed.), *Approches de la troisième sophistique: Hommages à Jacques Schamp* (Brussels, 2006), 273-85; Isabella Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity. Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Cambridge, 2007), 160-9.

presented as the only places where Christian Antiochene citizens could live their community life.³

This article deals with the way Basil of Caesarea referred to the classical *topoi* of a specific literary genre, the *Praise of the City* (*encômion poleôs*), in his attempt to christianise his mother city. I will focus on the *Homily on Martyr Gordius*, a panegyric sermon delivered by the Cappadocian Father in Caesarea between 370 and 379, during the time he was bishop of the city.⁴ The text recalls the life and sufferings of a certain Gordios, native of Caesarea, killed for having refused to give up his faith. Basil made his speech on the occasion of the annual *panëguris* at the martyr's shrine, located outside – though not far from – the city's walls (see *infra*). Whilst he mentioned that some people in the audience may have had some remembrance of what happened,⁵ Basil admitted that he was himself short on facts about this martyr and that he allowed himself to alter and magnify information circulated by an obscure rumour (*ἀμυδρά ... τις φήμη*).⁶ It is worth noting that historical accuracy was not, in any case, the homilist's primary concern, nor was it expected by his audience. The deliverance of this praise was the climax of the celebrations of the anniversary of the local martyr's passing. In front of his people, the prominent bishop produced a free reconstruction of the life of the local martyr wearing a name typical in Cappadocia.⁷ Gordios is said to have been a centurion who abandoned city life during a persecution and took refuge in the mountains, where he lived a secluded life. Gordios came back, looking like a savage,

³ For example, J. Chrys., *Homily on Statues* 15 (PG 49, 134-9). See Luke Lavan, 'The agorai of Antioch and Constantinople as seen by John Chrysostom', in John Drinkwater, Benet Salway (eds), *Wolf Liebeschuetz Reflected: Essays Presented by Colleagues, Friends, & Pupils* (London, 2007), 157-67.

⁴ Basil, *A homily on Martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 489-508) (CPG 2862, BHG 703). On the date, see Johan Leemans, 'Martyr, Monk and Victor over Paganism. An Analysis of Basil of Caesarea's Panegyric Sermon on Gordius', in Johan Leemans (ed.), *More than a Memory. The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity* (Leuven, 2005), 45-79, 48-9. There is no room here to discuss whether the speech can be dated more precisely in 373, see Pauline Allen, 'Basil of Caesarea', in Johan Leemans, Wendy Mayer, Pauline Allen and Boudewijn Dehandschutter (eds), *'Let us Die that we may live'. Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria (c. AD 350- AD 450)* (London, New York, 2003), 55-77, 77 n. 9, with previous bibliography.

⁵ Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 497).

⁶ Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 493).

⁷ I share R. Van Dam's scepticism about the historicity of Basil's martyrdom: Raymond Van Dam, *Becoming Christian. The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia, 2003), 90: 'At Caesarea Basil celebrated the festivals of two rather obscure local saints, the centurion Gordius and the shepherd Mamas. In his commemorative panegyrics he hardly knew what to say about them. Since their names were apparently traditional indigenous names, perhaps he was simply trying to embellish some local traditions into full Christian cults'. On the name Gordios, see Sophie Métivier, *La Cappadoce (IV^e-VI^e siècle). Une histoire provinciale de l'Empire romain d'Orient* (Paris, 2005), 310 n. 401.

when the entire city was gathered in the stadion to attend horse races. The appearance of Gordios there created quite a stir. He was brought before a judge and condemned to death, and as a consequence all inhabitants of Caesarea turned their back on the hippodrome and rushed to attend the spectacle of his execution.

J. Leemans produced a thorough study of this *Homily*, aiming to show that this sermon contributed to the construction of a Christian identity.⁸ All in all, Basil succeeded in presenting to the people of Caesarea a Gordios capable of functioning as an example of Christian virtue. Leemans showed that the sermon was developed along three axes, which present Gordios as a martyr, a monk and the victor over paganism.

This article aims at showing that this praise also painted the local celebrity as an iconic citizen of Caesarea. The civic dimension of the homily was made explicit when Basil said that ‘he (Gordios) was born in this city, which is why we love him more, because he is our own ornament of the city’⁹ and that he ‘gives the enjoyment of his own fruit of piety to the land which produced and reared him’.¹⁰ In the words of Basil, the saint was, or should be, a source of pride for the inhabitants of Caesarea. The idea that a city is glorified by its great men is a *topos* inherited from classical rhetoric, and widely utilized in hagiography.¹¹ In form and content, the *Homily in Praise of Gordius* also contributed to the promotion of Basil’s ideal of the city.

The influence of Greek rhetors on the Cappadocian Father is well-known, as well as his ambivalence towards the manner in which Christians could use and refer to classical *paideia*.¹² As such, this panegyric is a good illustration of his twofold attitude: on the one hand, Basil resorted to classical stylistic features such as ecphrasis, hyperbole, monologues and dialogues¹³ as well as followed the rules of epideictic rhetoric, as systematised by authors of the Second Sophistic; on the other hand, in the peroration he rejected the rules advocated for praising a man. According to him, ‘divine teaching, therefore, does not recognise the rule of encomia, but counts the witness of the exploits rather than

⁸ J. Leemans, ‘Martyr, Monk and Victor’ (2005).

⁹ Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 493): Οἷτος ἐφυ μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς πόλεως ταύτης, ὅθεν καὶ μᾶλλον αὐτὸν ἀγαπῶμεν, διότι οἰκεῖος ἡμῖν ὁ κόσμος ἐστίν. All quotations are translated following P. Allen, ‘Basil of Caesarea’ (2003), 57-67.

¹⁰ Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 493): ... ἐνεγκούση καὶ θρεψαμένη τῶν οἰκείων τῆς εὐσεβείας καρπῶν τὴν ἀπόλαυσιν ἐχαρίσατο.

¹¹ See Helen Saradi, ‘The Kallos of the Byzantine City: The Development of a Rhetorical Topos and Historical Reality’, *Gesta* 34 (1995), 37-56, 43.

¹² See James Marshall Campbell, *The Influence of the Second Sophistic on the Style of the Sermons of St. Basil the Great* (Washington, D.C., 1922).

¹³ J. Leemans, ‘Martyr, Monk and Victor’ (2005), 56-8; Mattia C. Chiriatti, ‘ἀγών/θέα-θέαμα and στάδιον/θέατρον: A Reviewed ἐκφρασις of the Spectacle in Basil’s *In Gordium martyrem*’, in this volume, pp. 189-199.

encomia, on the grounds that it is quite sufficient in order to praise the saints, and enough to profit those striving for virtue'.¹⁴

Then, Basil criticised that a man usually draws his glory from the particularities of the city: 'For the rule of encomia is to examine the fatherland, and investigate pedigree, and discourse on education, but our rule, silencing mention of the people around them, fills the witness of each from their individual deeds'.¹⁵ Thus, according to Basil, intrinsic virtues alone must suffice to praise a prominent Christian.¹⁶

The evocation of the *topos* of the fatherland led the author to make a digression aiming at underlining the vanity conveyed by traditional discourses. Basil questioned his audience:

'For why am I more august on this account, if the city which once bore the burden of grievous and huge struggles sets up glorious trophies over its enemies? Why [am I more august] if it enjoys a favourable location such that it is comfortable in both winter and summer? But if it both produces men, and is suitable for raising cattle, what benefit do I have from that? But also with regard to the herds of horses it outdoes any city under the sun. How, then, can these facts make us better with regard to human virtue? Or even if we were to discourse on the peaks of the neighboring mountain, [saying] both how they are above the clouds and how much they protrude into the sky, shall we deceive ourselves, on the grounds that we have piled up praise for these men on account of these facts?'¹⁷

Through its use of anaphora, the tirade accumulated rhetorical questions in order to denigrate material sources of pride.¹⁸ In his critique, Basil listed the topics of the *encômiôn poleôds*. In this passage, the author scrupulously followed

¹⁴ Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 492): Οὐκ οἶδεν οὖν ἐγκωμίων νόμον τὸ θεῖον διδασκαλεῖον, ἀλλὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν τῶν πεπραγμένων ἀντ' ἐγκωμίων λογίζεται, ὡς καὶ τοῖς ἁγίοις ἐξαρκοῦσαν πρὸς ἔπαινον, καὶ τοῖς ὄρμημένοις πρὸς ἀρετὴν αὐτάρκη οὐσαν εἰς ὠφέλειαν.

¹⁵ Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 492): Ἐγκωμίων μὲν γὰρ νόμος πατρίδα διερευνεῖσθαι, καὶ γένος ἀναζητεῖν, καὶ ἀγωγὴν διηγεῖσθαι· ὁ δὲ ἡμέτερος νόμος, τοὺς τῶν γειτόνων λόγους κατασιγάσας, ἀπὸ τῶν ἰδίων ἐκάστου τὴν μαρτυρίαν πληροῖ.

¹⁶ The same critics are expressed in Basil's *Homily on martyr Mamas* (PG 31, 592).

¹⁷ Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 492): Τί γὰρ ἐγὼ παρὰ τοῦτο σεμνότερος, εἰ ἡ πόλις ποτὲ χαλεποὺς καὶ μεγάλους ἀγῶνας διενεγκοῦσα, λαμπρὰ κατὰ τῶν πολεμίων ἀνέστησε τρόπαια; τί δὲ, εἰ θέσεως εὐκαίρως ἔχει, ὡς πρὸς χειμῶνά τε εἶναι καὶ θέρος ἐπιτηδείαν; Εἰ δὲ καὶ ἡ αὐτὴ ἀνδρῶν τέ ἐστιν εὐφορος, καὶ βοσκήματα τρέφειν αὐτάρκης, τί μοι ἐκ τούτων ὄφελος; Ἀλλὰ καὶ ταῖς τῶν ἵππων ἀγέλαις τῆς ὑφ' ἡλίου κρατεῖ. Τί οὖν ἡμᾶς δύναται ταῦτα τὴν ἀνθρωπιάν ἀρετὴν βελτίους ποιῆσαι; Ἡ ποῦ καὶ τὰς τοῦ γείτονος ὄρους κορυφὰς διηγούμενοι, ὡς ὑπερνεφεῖς τέ εἰσι καὶ ἐπὶ πολὺ τοῦ ἀέρος διανεστήκασιν, ἑαυτοὺς ἀπατήσομεν ὡς τοῖς ἀνδράσι διὰ τούτων ἐκπληροῦντες τὸν ἔπαινον;

¹⁸ Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 492): Πάντων ἐστὶ καταγελαστότατον, ὄλου τοῦ κόσμου παρὰ τῶν δικαίων ὑπεροφθέντος, ἡμᾶς ἐξ ὀλίγων τῶν ἀτιμασθέντων πληροῦν αὐτοῖς τὰ ἐγκώμια. ('Most ridiculous of all, when the entire world was disdained by the just, is that we should piled up encomia to them from the paltry objects which they despised').

the main *topoi* prescribed by the third century AD handbooks attributed to Menander Rhetor, such as the past military exploits, the situation of the city (*thesis*), its geographical features, its climate and the goods produced by its country.¹⁹ This sharp use of these *topoi* of epideictic rhetoric is what Louis Robert called a 'contre-éloge', mirroring the traditional praises in order to better criticise their aims.²⁰ Both Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom made similar ironic uses of the *encômion poleôs* in their critiques of the classical city.²¹

Basil's detailed evocation of the fatherland, uncommon in praises for men, should not be seen as a mere oratory demonstration nor as what H. Delehaye called a 'sham independence'.²² More fundamentally, this piece of rhetoric can be analysed as being part of Basil's promotion of a new model for the Caesarean city.

At the time Basil delivered this homily, he was bishop of his mother city. This was a time of crisis for Caesarea, as Emperor Valens had decided in 371-372 to divide the province of Cappadocia into two smaller provinces, Cappadocia I and II, which caused the desertion of the *curiales* of Caesarea.²³ Basil, as citizen of the metropole of Cappadocia, deplored this fact and tried on several occasions to improve this disastrous situation. In the same years, we know that the bishop initiated to build in the suburbs an entire new district dedicated to the care of the poor, including a church, a clerical residence, hospitals and houses.²⁴ This famous foundation was successful to the extent that it was considered as a 'new city',²⁵ which would be named 'Basiliās', after its founder.²⁶

The form and content of the panegyric in honour of Gordios takes a new meaning if we read it in connection with these contemporary events, both the critical situation of Caesarea and the creation of the city of charity. Let us consider the place where the homily celebrating Gordios' victory over his persecutors was delivered, that is to say the martyr's shrine. According to Basil,

¹⁹ Menander Rhetor I 347-52. See Laurent Pernot, *La rhétorique de l'éloge dans le monde gréco-romain* (Paris, 1993), 178-216; *id.*, *Epideictic Rhetoric. Questioning the Stakes of Ancient Praise* (Austin, 2015), 42-5.

²⁰ Louis Robert, 'Les Kordakia de Nicée, le combustible de Synnada et les poissons-sciés. Sur des lettres d'un métropolitain de Phrygie au X^e siècle. Philologie et réalités, 1', *Journal des Savants* 3 (1961), 97-166, 151.

²¹ *E.g.*, Greg. Naz., *Or.* 33. 6-7; J. Chrys., *Hom. de Stat.* 17 (PG 49, 176). For Gregory's dependence upon Menander, see Laurent Pernot, 'Grégoire de Nazianze (*or.* XXXIII, 6-7) et l'éloge rhétorique des cités', *Euphrosyne* 31 (2003), 271-86.

²² Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les Passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires* (Brussels, 1921), 193.

²³ See Thomas A. Kopecek, 'The Cappadocian Fathers and Civic Patriotism', *Church History* 43 (1974), 293-303, 298-303; Raymond Van Dam, *Kingdom of Snow. Roman Rule and Greek Culture in Cappadocia* (Philadelphia, 2002), 28-38; S. Métivier, *La Cappadoce* (2005), 24, 67-8.

²⁴ Basil, *Ep.* 94.

²⁵ Greg. Naz., *Or.* 43, 63.

²⁶ Firmus, *Ep.* 43; Sozom., *Hist. eccl.* VI 34,9.

Gordios' martyrion was located at the outskirts of the city, as the bishop said that his audience had reached 'the ornate [shrine] outside the city'.²⁷ It is worth noting that the bishop made a clear parallel between the people hastening to attend Gordios' execution and the people coming to celebrate the martyr's festival and listen to his deeds. A passage pointed out that the spectacle of the martyr's death could be followed from the city walls,²⁸ thus not far from the city.

There is no contraindication to suppose that the hippodrome where the martyr was allegedly condemned was the place where people considered that Gordios died and was buried. Modern scholars usually consider that this hippodrome was located *intra muros*, thus, at some distance from the place where he was martyred.²⁹ However, Anastasios Levides could still see at the end of the 19th century the ruins of a stadium outside the town at the foot of the walls,³⁰ precisely where literary evidence proclaims the martyrion was located. The proximity between the hippodrome and the place of burial makes it even more significant why Basil named Gordios' martyrion as 'the revered and very beautiful stadium of the martyrs'³¹ and 'the stadium of that crowned man'.³² At the end of the fourth century, the hippodrome of Caesarea was in all likelihood still in use and spectacles organised there in honor of the tutelary gods still gathered the whole Caesarean community, including pagans, Jews and Christians.³³ Therefore, telling the episode of Gordios' martyrdom at this very place, regardless of the historicity of the story, was a means to christianise one of the nerve centres of civic life by transforming it into a place of Christian memory, where virtue won over impiety.³⁴ Basil's vivid depiction of the crowd abandoning the city empty to see Gordios' heroic execution symbolised the shift the bishop wanted to establish between pagan and Christian Caesarea. This transfer was replayed at

²⁷ Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 489): τὸν προπόλεον κόσμον.

²⁸ Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 501).

²⁹ E.g. S. Métivier, *La Cappadoce* (2005), 92-3 n. 45, 310; J. Leemans, 'Martyr, Monk and Victor' (2005), 50.

³⁰ Anastasios M. Levidis, *Ai en monolithois monai tes Kappadokias kai Lykaonias* (Constantinople, 1899), 46, quoted by Gregorios Bernardakis, 'Notes sur la topographie de Césarée de Cappadoce', *Échos d'Orient* 11 (1908), 22-7, 26, *pace* S. Métivier, *La Cappadoce* (2005), 92-3 n. 45.

³¹ Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 489): τὸ σεμνὸν τοῦτο καὶ πάγκαλον τῶν μαρτύρων στάδιον, πανδημει κατελήφασιν.

³² Basil, *A homily on martyr Gordius* (PG 31, 507-8): Τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ στάδιον ἐκείνου τοῦ στεφανίτου.

³³ See S. Métivier, *La Cappadoce* (2005), 91; R. Van Dam, *Becoming Christian* (2002), 116; Johan Leemans, 'The Cult of Mars in Late Antique Caesarea according to the Panegyrics of the Cappadocians', *SP* 39 (2007), 71-7.

³⁴ On the same process in Antioch, see Catherine Saliou, 'Les lieux du polythéisme dans l'espace urbain et le paysage mémoriel d'Antioche-sur-l'Oronte, de Libanios à Malalas (IV^e-VI^e s.)', in Aude Busine (ed.), *Religious Practices and Christianization of the Late Antique City (4th-7th cent.)*, (Leiden, Boston, 2015), 38-70.

the occasion of the yearly procession leading the people to the martyrion. The location, just outside the city walls on the road to the new suburbs, was highly strategic, as it constituted a link between the old heathen town and the new one, in accordance with Christian values and practices.

In this context, the sophisticated recusation of the *topoi* as advocated by the classical rules of a *Praise of the city*, takes a new dimension. When he condemned the vainglorious and extrinsic reasons for praising a city, Basil condemned what old-fashioned praises of Caesarea looked like, in form and content. Many of his rhetorical questions actually targeted what had always constituted a source of civic pride in the metropole of Cappadocia. For example, Caesarea (and Cappadocia in general) was known for breeding horses and cattle³⁵ and the quality of its horses was still highlighted in at the end of the fourth century.³⁶ The high peak Basil mentioned in his tirade referred to Mount Argaeus, the highest mountain of the region, which dominates the city. Mount Argaeus, sometimes worshipped as a protecting god, was the symbol of Caesarea on many coins in the imperial period.³⁷ These regional assets were in all likelihood items invoked by local orators willing to extol the qualities of the Cappadocian metropole.

All in all, the construction of Gordios' life allowed the bishop of Caesarea to provide a new model for the city. Basil's Gordios was not only a new hero capable of embodying the Christian ideal, but the evocation of this local martyr also allowed the bishop to provide both a new civic history, in which past military victories were replaced by the acts of a prominent local figure, and a new topography, wherein Christian processions connected together the old and new loci of the city. The story of this man having left the vanities of civic life to hide in the mountains answered the form of the homily, resorting to epideictic rhetoric, in order to criticise the classical ways of praising a city. As such, Basil's rejection of the classical rules of *encomia* also contributed to shaping a new civic identity for Christian Caesarea.

³⁵ See J. Eric Cooper, Michael J. Decker, *Life and Society in Byzantine Cappadocia* (New York, 2012), 76-94.

³⁶ E.g., Greg. Naz., *Or.* 43. 3-4.

³⁷ See, e.g., Nicole Thierry, *La Cappadoce de l'Antiquité au Moyen Âge* (Turnhout, 2002), 48-9.

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