



Summary :

Bishop of Antioch during Trajan's reign. He took measures to organize the city's Christian community. He was arrested and brought to Rome, where he met his death as a martyr in c.107 AD. On his way to Rome he sent epistles to the Christian communities of the cities of Asia Minor. The texts of these epistles have survived and the teachings contained therein constitute the foundation of the theological school of Antioch.

Other Names

Ignatius Theophorus

Date and Place of Birth

Late 1st c. AD

Date and Place of Death

107 AD (?)

Main Role

Bishop, saint

1. Biography

According to [Eusebius of Caesarea](#), Ignatius was the second bishop of Antioch after the establishment of a church there by Apostle Peter.¹ He lived in the late 1st and early 2nd cent. AD. The information on his life is scanty. We know he was arrested during [Trajan](#)'s reign and brought to Rome, where, according to Eusebius, he was martyred in 107 AD.² On his way to Rome the vigorous bishop composed, always according to Eusebius,³ six epistles to the Christian communities of [Smyrna](#), [Philadelphia](#), [Ephesus](#), [Magnesia on the Maeander](#), [Tralleis](#), Rome and another epistle to the bishop [Polycarpus of Smyrna](#).⁴

Ignatius' epistles are his testament to Christians and are considered among the earliest Christian theological testimonies. More specifically, in his epistles, he urges Christians to combat heresy, which at this time was beginning to emerge as a serious threat to the empire's religious and political life for the centuries to come. The Apostolic teaching must remain the ultimate source of the Christian faith, and believers have to converge around it. Ignatius entrusted the care of his flock to Polycarpus of Smyrna, while he implored the faithful of Rome not to take action towards his acquittal and release, for he deeply craved martyrdom.⁵

He continued his journey along the Via Egnatia passing through Macedonia; he probably made a stop at the city of Philippi, and made his way to Dyrrachium, where he boarded a ship for Italy. Polycarpus of Smyrna wrote yet another epistle to the Christians of Philippi; this letter survives and refers to Ignatius and his teachings.

2. Activity

Apart from his part in founding and organizing the church of [Antioch](#), the seven aforementioned epistles of Ignatius arguably represent his most important achievement, constituting a distillation of his theological thought. The authenticity of these epistles was challenged by theologians and philologists of the 18th and 19th centuries, mainly because of the differences in their different surviving variations preserved in other texts apart from Eusebius – some even survive as independent texts. However, exhaustive studies by theologians and historians⁶ in the late 19th century have shown that out of the numerous versions, the so-called 'middle-dimension' version is authentic and preserves Ignatius' true teachings.⁷

These epistles reflect the belief that Christian thinking and faith, i.e. theoretical pursuits, should not diverge from the Christian way of



life. With respect to his theological beliefs, Ignatius declared the unity of God and the incarnation of Christ who pre-existed. Answering to the first heretical formulations of his time, which were bound to multiply and become more intense in the centuries to come, he declared the inseparability of Christ's human and divine nature, which the faithful were not supposed to doubt. All those aspiring to become united with Christ were obliged to emulate Him; this emulation could bring a martyr's death to those most determined to follow His example. However, personal union with the Lord was not enough. Christians ought to be united amongst them and reject heretical thinking and dissension.

On the basis of these epistles, which appear to have been written by a person whose care extended over all the Christian communities, Ignatius is considered the founder of the theological school of Antioch. On the other hand, the letters are an important source for the historical dimension of the early Christian community of Antioch, for through them one can discern the author's concern over the problems that had emerged among the Christians of this city shortly before his arrest. More specifically, in the first three epistles, composed in Smyrna, Ignatius' anxiety over the unity of the church of Antioch is manifest, and for this reason he implores the other hierarchs to take care of his flock.

In the remaining four epistles, composed probably during his stay in the [Troad](#), after receiving a delegation which had reassured him that the situation in Antioch had been normalized, the impression is given that Ignatius believed in the superiority of the church of Antioch and strove to secure its primacy, at least vis-à-vis the churches of other cities in Syria and Asia Minor.

3. Influence of the epistles and appraisal of his work

The radiance of Ignatius' personality and teachings prompted many to publish spurious works under his name. Thus, apart from the six epistles which are nowadays attributed to him with certainty, six more appeared under his name, addressed to other persons and believers in other cities⁸. We also have two epistles of 'Ignatius' to Apostle John and the Virgin Mary, respectively, as well as the account of his martyrdom, the so-called Martyrium Colbertinum.

During the following centuries, when heresies begun to dismember the body of the Church, the local ecclesiastical institutions, or more correctly some of their representatives, Ignatius was often used as their point of reference in order to establish the need to remain faithful to the sacred texts and the Apostolic teachings. However, his arguments and exhortations did not succeed in preventing sectarian division, not even in the church of Antioch, which, especially during the 4th century, experienced an endless succession of bishops, each being replaced for dogmatic reasons.

1. Euseb., *Hist. eccl.* 3.22.1. According to Camelot, P.T., *Ignace d'Antioche: Lettres* (Paris 1945), Eusebius had access to the episcopal lists of Antioch, included in the work of Julius Africanus.

2. As Eusebius often simplifies things through his dating, modern scholars believe that it is more likely Ignatius was arrested and executed late in Trajan's rule, and more specifically in the period 110-117; they adduce, however, no conclusive proofs to this. For a synopsis of the theories regarding the dating, see Corwin, V., *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch* (Yale 1960), pp. 3-30, and Hacking, R.D., *Ignatius of Antioch, martyr-bishop* (1997).

3. Euseb., *Hist. eccl.* 3.36.3ff.

4. More precisely, the epistles are addressed to the respective bishops and priests of the cities: Onesimus of Ephesus, Damasius of Magnesia, Polybius of Tralles and Polycarpus of Smyrna, who visited him during his stay at Smyrna.

5. Many of the first Christians did not resist their arrest and willingly proceeded to the place of their martyrdom, for it was believed that this was the shortest route to the Kingdom of Heavens.



6. See. Lightfoot, J.B., *The Apostolic Fathers* ²(1883-1889); Harnack, A.von, *Die Zeit des Ignatius und die Chronologie der antiochenischen Bischöfe bis Tyrannus* (Leipzig 1878), *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten n. Chr.* ⁴(Leipzig 1924).

7. On the contrary, the shorter version is in all likelihood a compilation, while the larger one is a later creation, with additions arranged around a central core.

8. Rathke, H., *Ignatius von Antiochien und die Paulusbriefe* (Berlin 1967), p. 4. These are the epistles from and to Maria Kassompola and the epistles to the Tarsians, Philippians, Antiocheans and the deacon Heron of Antioch.

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