

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

### ABOUT THE SIXTH HOUR.

It is always regrettable when a controversy between two scholars ends in an irreconcilable difference about a matter of fact—as to matters of opinion people will always differ—and that seems to be the case in the controversy between Dr. Sanday and Dr. Dods in *THE EXPOSITOR*, IV., pp. 233, 396. As some interesting problems of biblical antiquities are connected with the point in dispute, it may be useful to attempt to determine what are the facts; and this attempt is all the more required because of the very inaccurate account of the reckoning of hours in the day given in most handbooks; see *e.g.* the latest edition of Smith's *Dictionary of Antiquities*, in the article "Hora."

In much that has been written on the subject, obscurity and even error have been caused by confusion between the two senses of the word *day*:<sup>1</sup> (1) What the Romans called the civil Day, including a day and a night; (2) the natural day as distinguished from the night, viz., the period that extends between sunrise and sunset. We shall distinguish the two senses of the word by using the capital letter for the civil Day.

In the first century of our era, the day was divided, in popular language, into 12 equal parts or hours, which varied in length according to the season, being about 75 minutes long in midsummer, 60 minutes long at the equinoxes, and 45 minutes long in midwinter. The time of day was expressed by mentioning the nearest complete hour; and only in rare and exceptional cases do we find any attempt to indicate time more precisely. The expression,

<sup>1</sup> Bilfinger, who has done so much to clear up the subject, has fallen a victim to this confusion; and has used facts concerning the one day as evidence about the other kind of day.

“the first hour,” indicated the time when the shadow on the dial reached the mark which showed that one-twelfth of the day had elapsed; and the expression, “the sixth hour,” indicated the time when the shadow on the dial reached the mark which showed that six-twelfths of the day had elapsed. The “sixth hour,” then, indicated mid-day at all seasons of the year. This point is most important, and is misstated in almost every handbook (*e.g.*, in a newly published Latin grammar, which reached me as I am writing). The hours were indicated to the eye on the sun-dial, and also to the ear by various devices, as, for example, in Trimalchio’s house by a trumpeter; and common language adapted itself to these well-marked periods. Even in countries where few dials or other devices for measuring time existed, usage followed the established custom. Similarly, at the present day, in some remote Turkish village where not a single clock or watch exists, all the people reckon by hours of the clock; but the reckoning is very rough, and the ancient popular reckoning was also very rough. Mid-day was the best marked period, when the sun is in mid-heaven; and “the sixth hour” in common usage indicated in a vague way the time when the sun is near the zenith. Still more elastic, of course, was the expression, “about the sixth hour,” which, except where the circumstances of the speaker imply better opportunity for precise reckoning, cannot be interpreted more accurately than somewhere between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. In this rough, popular language, little attempt was made to reckon any other hour except “the third” and “the ninth hour,” which meant a time when the sun was fairly well up in the heavens. This may seem to us intolerably loose; but it serves very well in practice in a country where there are no trains to catch.<sup>1</sup> To the Oriental mind, the question between the third hour and the

<sup>1</sup> Even where there are trains in Turkey, the ordinary native comes at sunrise to the station, and waits patiently till the train is ready, perhaps at noon.

sixth is not more important than the doubt between 12.5 and 12.10 p.m. is to us.

A discrepancy between two witnesses, one of whom declares that an event occurred at the sixth hour (when the sun was in mid-heaven), while the other asserts that it took place at the third hour (when the sun was half-way up), may be illustrated by a doubt that sometimes occurs in Ogham inscriptions. A line perpendicular to the central dividing line means I, while one inclined about  $45^\circ$  means R; but what is to be made of one which, through careless engraving, is inclined about  $75^\circ$ ? Opinions will differ, and some distinguished scholars will be found to assert positively that the stone reads I, while others will assert equally positively that it reads R. So it was formerly with the hours in ancient times: ordinary people had not the means of distinguishing accurately, and differed in opinion accordingly. Godet's remark that the Apostles had no watches has been called flippant; but it touches the critical point. The Apostles had no means of avoiding the difficulty as to whether it was the third or the sixth hour when the sun was near mid-heaven, and they cared very little about the point.

In the highly organised life of Rome and a few other great cities there was more accurate reckoning; but their reckoning was by hours, where we reckon by minutes. No one ever thought of, or had any term to express, minuter divisions of time than the hour; and, in Latin idiom, "in the lapse of an hour" (*horæ momento*) is used where we should now say "in a second." But the highly civilized inhabitant of Rome was as much superior in accuracy to the ruder peoples as a modern business man is to an ancient Roman, or an astronomer to a business man.

The night was, in popular language, not divided into hours, but into watches: some rare examples of the use of hours of the night may be neglected. The division of the

day into hours sprang from the use of the sun-dial, and its peculiar character, *i.e.*, the varying length of the hours, was conditioned by its origin: hours of the night could be measured only by water-glass, or some similar means, which would give divisions of equal length during all seasons of the year, and not varying hours like those of the day.

The civil Day was not divided into hours; it was a purely religious, legal, and scientific entity, and did not affect in any way popular division of time. Among the Greeks and the Jews it began at sunset; among the Romans it began at midnight. The fact that the Christian Day began at sunset is significant as to the Eastern, and not Roman, origin of all those forms into which the idea enters. There was no device practised by the ancients for dividing the civil Day into parts; and such a division could never in any way come to affect ordinary thought or habits. Where water-glasses (*clepsydræ*), which indicated hours of unvarying length, were employed to measure hours of the natural day, some device was applied in order to make them show hours of varying length at different seasons of the year.

Such expressions as "the first hour," "the sixth hour," have then only one meaning. An overwhelming mass of authority proves this usage; any exception to it must be established on its own merits. But the usage was not specially Roman. It was learned by the Romans from the Greeks, along with the sun-dial, the water-glass, and other scientific instruments. Dr. Sanday therefore was right in criticising Dr. Dod's use of the term, "the Roman reckoning" to indicate this usage of speech; and Dr. Dod's could only defend it as a rough way of expressing the fact that this usage was practically universal in the Græco-Roman world. But we cannot allow that Dr. Sanday is right in saying "the Romans had two methods of reckoning the

hours of the day"; he was more careful at first, when he said, "the evidence perhaps does not permit us to say the *hours*, but the *day*"; but even this is not quite right. He should say, "the Romans used the term *day* in two different senses, but reckoned the hours only by one *day*."

This supposed second method of reckoning the hours is a mere fiction, constructed as a refuge of despairing harmonisers,<sup>1</sup> and not a jot of evidence for it has ever been given that will bear scrutiny. The stock example is that of Polycarp's death at the eighth hour: it is argued that martyrdoms regularly took place before noon, and that the time must in this case be stated according to a reckoning from midnight.<sup>2</sup> I quite admit that, in ordinary practice, executions took place in the forenoon; but this arose merely from the fact that the early morning hours were the time for work, and that the fifth hour, or at latest noon, brought the day's business to an end, so far as judicial and legal duties and all that arose out of them were concerned.<sup>3</sup> But there sometimes occurred cases in which circumstances caused the execution to linger on until the afternoon, and Polycarp's trial is one of these cases. Several excellent authorities have declared that the hour of Polycarp's death may quite fairly be taken as "the eighth hour" in the ordinary sense, about 2 p.m.; but I do not know that the case has ever been quite rightly put: the tale shows clearly that Polycarp died after noon.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Sanday, much as he would evidently like it, rightly accepts the conclusion that there is not evidence to justify it. It is of course impossible and unnecessary to prove that a second method of reckoning did not exist. It can only be shown that no evidence for it exists, and that it is not consistent with the method of reckoning and thinking customary among the ancients.

<sup>2</sup> In discussing this question I have in view particularly the paper of Rev. J. A. Cross on the subject, and the questions which he proposes as needing solution, as to the hour of executions, etc. See *Classical Review*, June, 1891.

<sup>3</sup> This statement is made especially about the Greek provinces, but it is not very inaccurate even if applied to Rome under the Empire.

At a first glance it certainly seems as if Polycarp, having been arrested the previous evening and conducted to Smyrna, was tried before the pro-consul sitting in the stadium in the morning and executed immediately afterwards, owing to the hurry of the people. Thus his execution would take place about 8 or 9 a.m. But on closer inspection we see that, when Polycarp was tried, the sports were already over,<sup>1</sup> and the president declared it was not legal for him to reopen them and give Polycarp to the beasts.<sup>2</sup> We can hardly suppose that the sports concluded much before mid-day, and the recorded facts afford a perhaps unique piece of evidence as to the Asian custom in these shows.

Polycarp perished at the eighth hour, two hours after midday. The events leading up to his death, though performed with great rapidity (as is expressly mentioned) must have taken some little time. Suitable wood had to be found and brought to the stadium. There were eager agents to run and fetch it; yet it needed some time for them to leave their places in the vast auditorium, to go out and get the wood, to bring it back, to pile the pyre, to fix the upright stake, to bind Polycarp to it after discussing whether or not they should, according to the usual custom, nail him to it, and to light the wood. The fire did not easily reach the martyr, being blown by the wind; and thus some time elapsed before his death took place. For the trial itself some time must be allowed; the regular forms of procedure must have been gone through by a punctilious

<sup>1</sup> We can naturally understand that the sports would not be interrupted in order to permit the trial to take place. We note also that the search for Polycarp was made in accordance with the shouts of the crowd at the close of the *venatio* on the Friday.

<sup>2</sup> I used formerly to understand the president to mean that the sports finished on the preceding day; but this is not correct. The people's demand for the beasts implies that the beasts had been shown immediately before and were still at hand.

Roman official, although, as usual, many of them are omitted in the narrative; they began from the constituting of the court, and the formal identification of the prisoner, and finished with the formal writing out of the sentence, which was then read by the proconsul himself. I quite allow that the impatience of the crowd hurried the procedure; but Roman officials were methodical, and the proconsul was personally inclined to postpone the decision, and to hear the prisoner defend his views at length. It is clear then that Polycarp was not introduced until the sports were over for the day; and, as the whole scene must have taken between two and three hours, we may fairly suppose that the fifth hour was the conclusion of the sports.

Scrutinizing the narrative of Polycarp's arrest, we notice that he was arrested near sunset on the Friday; and that the place was a villa at some distance from the city (whither Polycarp had gone from the villa near the city to which he first retired). He was allowed to pray for two hours. After this, "when the hour for departure arrived," he was conducted to Smyrna on the Saturday. The hour for departure is distinguished from the end of the prayer; and it is clear that the departure was postponed till next morning. It would take place at a very early hour on Saturday; but we see that, owing to the distance, he did not reach Smyrna till the games had begun. When they were over, Polycarp was brought before the proconsul; and the whole crowd waited to hear the result. The trial thus began somewhere about half an hour before noon.

Incidentally, this explanation furnishes also the explanation of what has always seemed to me the great difficulty in accepting the narrative as minutely correct. How could Jews on a Sabbath, and a Sabbath of unusual sanctity, be present at games in the stadium? I have consulted many authorities on this point, without finding any satisfactory explanation; yet the conviction always remained in my



mind that the explanation would be found hereafter. It is that the Jews were not present at the games, but came to the trial; and learning the situation from the eager ministers who rushed to the baths and the shops to fetch fuel, they joined in the execution, which was perfectly lawful for them.

May we not infer from this that the fifth hour was ordinarily the end of such sports on the Ionian coast? The idea is widespread that the sports lasted through the whole day; but, in a luxurious and rather lazy country, it is not probable that they made a toil of a pleasure; and those who try it will find that, when (as was then usual) the day's duties begin before sunrise, no pleasure is to be obtained by prolonging exhibitions even in February at Smyrna beyond noon at latest.

Further, when we remember that in Acts xix., according to *Codex Bezae*, Paul preached in the school of Tyrannus at Ephesus from the fifth to the tenth hour, may we not connect this with the fact that ordinary duties ceased an hour before noon, and that the school then became vacant, and Paul could use it during the hours which were ordinarily devoted to rest?

Pionius died at Smyrna at the tenth hour. We may explain the lateness of the hour by supposing, (1) that his trial was not first on the list for the day; (2) that it took a considerable time, being protracted by the torture inflicted on him; (3) that the preparations for burning him took longer time than in the case of Polycarp; (4) that he had to be conducted from the court to the place of execution.

In the case of martyrdom by wild beasts in the sports, it is obvious from the preceding remarks that they occurred in the early hours of the day.

W. M. RAMSAY.